

Note & Query:

A Curious Parenthetical Remark in *The Dominion of Wyley McFadden*

Scott Gardiner's debuting novel, *The Dominion of Wyley McFadden* (Random House Canada, 2000), is the road-trip story of a disgraced ex-fertility doctor on a mission to reintroduce breeding stocks of rats to Alberta, Canada's singularly rat-free province. McFadden picks up a female hitchhiker and each eventually opens up to the other with a personal tale of woe. McFadden's account of his own downfall also serves a didactic purpose: a goodly amount of factual information about sperm banking, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, and fertility disorders and their treatment generally, is skillfully interwoven with the personal events.

The anomaly that I wish to draw attention to concerns the attitude of the character McFadden toward the newest fertility technologies. The original in vitro technology, McFadden says,

was designed to get around blocked Fallopian tubes. If the egg couldn't make it through, you just went in and removed one so it could be fertilized outside. It was still a question of healthy sperm meeting healthy egg – still *arguably natural*. (p. 266, my emphasis).

McFadden goes on to suggest that the newest technologies have gone too far:

Then we started being able to take unhealthy sperm, cells that never would have had a chance in nature, and enhance them so now they could be combined with the ova in vitro....

...Now, they can take sperm that's so badly deformed it can't penetrate the egg even after the shell's been punctured to make the entry easier ... and inject it into the egg. Did I tell you that only about one sperm in every million is strong enough to make it all the way to the egg under natural conditions? One in a million! That's how rigorous the process of natural selection is meant to be . . . But now they can retrieve a sperm that's so badly misshapen it doesn't even manage to get itself ejaculated – it can be salvaged from urine, for God's sake, after retrograde emissions – and they can take that sperm, which in the world outside the lab was never meant to spread its DNA, and make it fertilize a living ovum. You have to wonder what kind of people a procedure like that is going to end up making. (pp. 266-7)

However, McFadden's parenthetical remark that "it can be salvaged from urine, for God's sake, after retrograde emissions", is not true to character, as far as I can make out. The apparent outrage specifically at salvage from urine makes no sense, since there is no prior indication of an antipathy to urine or other bodily wastes and in any case it is very unlikely that one could even become a physician, never mind a fertility specialist, if one could not face urinary matters with equanimity. Moreover, recovery of sperm from urine

is one of the common techniques of the older technology that the character McFadden regards as “still arguably natural”.

The fact that sperm may have to be recovered from urine does not in itself indicate anything about the health of the sperm. During normal ejaculation, the sphincter of the bladder contracts and the sperm goes to the urethra; with retrograde ejaculation, the sphincter does not function properly and thus the sperm does not go forward through the urethra but is forced backward into the bladder. Retrograde ejaculation can be caused temporarily by (e.g.) certain medications such as tranquilizers or hypertension medication or permanently by (e.g.) spinal cord injuries or nerve damage due to colorectal or anal surgery. Sufferers from this affliction are more often than not men with normal healthy sperm, and given the fact that urine is a hostile environment for sperm, one might even plausibly suppose that it is the healthiest spermatozoa that survive extraction from urine.

Presumably the author, Scott Gardiner, is well acquainted with all these facts of retrograde ejaculation, since he gratefully acknowledges the assistance with research that he received from the director of the Infertility Network (Toronto). So there are two possibilities for the odd parenthetical remark he has put into the mouth of his character, Wyley McFadden. The first possibility is that it is the author himself who is taken aback by the idea of sperm recovery from *urine*; he has merely and momentarily lost his distance from the fictional character he has created and let his own distaste peek through. The second possibility is that, despite everything I have said, McFadden’s parenthetical remark is not out of character after all and can be accounted for, given a more subtle or thorough reading of the character (or indeed of the novel) than mine. So I close this note with the query: is there such a reading?

KARL PFEIFER

University of Saskatchewan