

**An absurd comedy with a rapturous soul  
by Ellen K. Graham**

**STUDY GUIDE**

**prepared by Wendy Franz, Taylor Gonda, and Christopher Wink**



## SYNOPSIS

In 2005 Paragon commissioned Denver playwright, Ellen K. Graham to write a new play and workshop the piece with Paragon's creative ensemble. Over the last two years that collaboration has evolved into a unique and fascinating play that explores the draw of religious fanaticism, the struggle of a woman returning home from a war zone and the universal human desire to transcend limitations.

In *How We May Know Him*, a charismatic zealot sows unrest among residents of a high-end gated community. A dark, funny, and surreal exploration of mistaken identities, fickle rhinoplasties and rapture, *How We May Know Him* deftly questions our assumptions about ourselves, our lovers, and our neighbors.

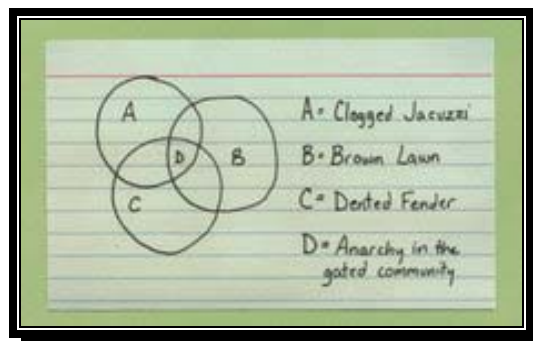
Nicola has just returned from 6 months abroad working a detail as a diplomatic decoy for a private military contractor. Having been literally shot at, her views of life and the things she used to take for granted like music are now finding it hard to wend their way back into her life. She wants nothing more than to return home to reconnect with Wren, her lover, and pick up where things left off, however Wren has met someone else.

Val, a religious zealot and charismatic guru has moved in next door to Wren and Nicola's to work as a housekeeper

for local television celebrity, Simone Highgrove. A passionate proponent of her self-fashioned religion, Val has captured Wren's rapt attention. Through a series of clandestine meetings under Simone's porch, Val has been indoctrinating Wren with her special brand of religious fervor.

Meanwhile, Simone is struggling to maintain her grip on reality as she strives to ward off aging and the evidence of her past in an industry obsessed by looks. Simone spends most of her time and money on improving her physical features only to find that she is left feeling empty and alone. The introduction of Val into Simone's household upsets Simone's fragile sense of identity and Simone careens toward a full-blown nervous breakdown.

In the end Nicola and Val meet face to face for a final showdown between the reason that Nicola represents and the chaos that Val is convinced will eventually swallow up the earth. Nicola asserts what she knows to be true, in spite of the "miracles" Val can supposedly work and in the action of asserting herself, Nicola affirms her own sanity and rightful place in her corner of the world.



## **SOME QUESTIONS FOR ELLEN K. GRAHAM**

**PARAGON:**

How did you start the process of writing this play? What, if anything was your inspiration?

**ELLEN K. GRAHAM:**

About three years ago Paragon asked if I would be interested in working on a new play with them. I was told the only rule was there were no rules, but if I could incorporate members of Paragon's ensemble that would be great. I think it's the wave of the future to create new pieces specifically for theatre companies based on their resources. I initially drew my inspiration from the Neil Young song *Revolution Blues* from the *On The Beach* album. The character narrating the song is a guru-type who is diametrically opposed to a world of fakery. I also read the book *Making The Body Beautiful* by my college professor Sander L. Gilman. It inspired the question: Can you truly know someone? That became a main theme of the play for me.

**PARAGON:**

Where does the title, *How We May Know Him*, come from? How does it relate to the play?

**ELLEN K. GRAHAM:**

The title *How We May Know Him* comes from a Nazi propaganda poster. It was meant to reveal characteristics of a Jewish person, not unlike, say a field guide to birds. At first the question of how we may know him refers to seeking out the enemy, but at the end of the play it refers to identifying with God.

**PARAGON:**

Each of your characters is distinct in their behavior and personality traits. Did you draw your inspiration for them from real life, or are they creations of your imagination?

**ELLEN K. GRAHAM:**

Each of the characters are definitely creations of my imagination. I use pieces of conversation or situations I hear out in the world, but I don't do it consciously or I do it in a very conservative way. I knew someone had who had the name of his ex-wife, Val, tattooed on his arm. The name Val took on this weird sinister resonance, and that's how Val got her name.

**PARAGON:**

Have you ever had a conversion experience? Do you think that most people can be converted given the right circumstances?

**ELLEN K. GRAHAM:**

Recently while I was visiting my in-laws in Texas we went to a gospel brunch. The music brought me to tears. It really moved me. I thought to myself what if it really is this simple? What if you could just listen to the music and enjoy it and that was what it means to believe? But it's not that simple. The song ends and you realize there are strings attached, there are rules. It's not all about being swept up in the emotions of one moment. That said, I think given the context and circumstances everyone is susceptible to a conversion experience. Faith speaks to the most elemental part of human beings. You can't fake it. I think there are people who just want the ability to believe so desperately and can't, no matter how hard they try.

## **ELLEN K. GRAHAM BIOGRAPHY**

Ellen K. Graham is a Denver native and a graduate of the University of Chicago. A Chameleon Stage member playwright since 1997, Ellen has worked with many local theatres, including Paragon, Industrial Arts, the Changing Scene, the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Denver Center Theatre Company, where she was a member of the Playwrights Unit from 2001-2003. She is the co-founder of and head screenwriter for Shocking Beyond Belief! Films, an independent film production company. Ellen's play *The Night Season* was read in Paragon's 2002 Trench Play Reading Series.

**“Revolution Blues”  
from the *On The Beach* album  
Lyrics by Neil Young**

Well, we live in a trailer at the edge of town  
You never see us cause we dont come around.  
We got twenty five rifles just to keep the population down.  
But we need you now, and thats why Im hangin round.  
So you be good to me and Ill be good to you,  
And in this land of conditions Im not above suspicion  
I wont attack you, but I wont back you.

Well, its so good to be here, asleep on your lawn.  
Remember your guard dog? well, Im afraid that hes gone.  
It was such a drag to hear him whining all night long.  
Yes, that was me with the doves, setting them free near the factory  
Where you built your computer, love.  
I hope you get the connection, cause I cant take the rejection  
I wont deceive you, I just dont believe you.

Well, Im a barrel of laughs, with my carbine on  
I keep em hoppin, till my ammunitions gone.  
But Im still not happy, I feel like theres something wrong.  
I got the revolution blues, I see bloody fountains,  
And ten million dune buggies comin down the mountains.  
Well, I hear that laurel canyon is full of famous stars,  
But I hate them worse than lepers and Ill kill them in their cars.

**GATED COMMUNITIES**

*How We May Know Him* takes place in a present-day gated community on the high plains – we can infer in Colorado. The housing business is booming currently, and there are more and more residential communities popping up across the country every day, many surrounded by protective gates. The emergence of these communities and the broader social implications of their popularity lend context and insight to the play.

“In Southern California like everywhere else in the southern and western metropolitan areas, gated communities are developing very fast and have become an important trend for both the real-estate industry and the prospective homebuyer. But the question recurs: in this security-oriented development, what are the residents trying to escape behind their fences? And what kind of community are they willing to build?”

“The gating, acting as a territorial boundary, can then be analyzed as a border between two systems: the public realm of the city as a whole versus the [private] territory of the gated enclave... It would be... accurate to qualify gated communities as predators of public resources.”

**- Le Goix, Renaud. “The Suburban Paradise of the Parceling of Cities? – An analysis of discourses, fears and facts about the sprawl of gated communities in Southern California.”**  
**July 2003. 6 Mar. 2007.**  
**<http://www.international.ucla.edu/print.asp?parentid=4664>**

(Felicia lives in a gated community in San Antonio)  
“Felicia, however, thinks that [the gated community] has a flip side in that it produces a false sense of safety... [which] could potentially leave [residents]

more vulnerable. ‘You don’t rely on your own resources so much.’” (Low 8)

“Individual freedom and ease of access for residents must be limited in order to achieve greater privacy and social control for the community as a whole.” (Low 11)

“At a time when government can’t spend any dollars, community is being created privately.” (Low 57)

(In an interview, a gated community resident says she has a concern with “newcomers” and “transients.”)  
“Within this ostensibly moral scheme, newcomers and transients are suspect because of their lack of commitment to the neighborhood, their instability, and other associated characterizations... [They]... are also... symbolically liminal. That is, they fall in between accepted suburban categories of stable, long-term homeowner and nonresident or stranger. They are the tricksters or changelings of the suburban myth, marginalized and unqualified to be members of the valued categories. Transients are never desirable, because it is not clear what their status is, and they therefore become targets for negative feelings and scapegoats for any problem that arises.”

**- Low, Setha M. Behind the gates : life, security, and the pursuit of happiness in fortress America.**  
**New York: Routledge, 2003.**

The character of Simone has a complication with her rhinoplasty during the course of the show. Her vanity and self-obsession become part of broader themes in the play. Cosmetic surgery serves as a tool to explore self-perception, social norms, and our image conscious society. The questions are implied: Why is plastic surgery becoming more and more acceptable? What does its use mean to those who partake in it, and how does the trend reflect the current state of society?

“Cosmetic surgery, more than any medical specialty, brings together doctor and patient speaking different languages. The cosmetic surgeon – “a psychiatrist with a scalpel,” as one doctor charitably characterized it – is first and last a technician, trying to determine if the desired procedure can be done, and done well. The patient, meanwhile, wants to know if she or he will look- and hence feel-better. Yes, they’re both ostensibly concerned with aesthetics, but in the same way the federal government is ostensibly concerned with a balanced budget.”

- **Postman, Andrew. “Mirror, Mirror: Plastic surgery and the temptation of an endless search for perfection.” GOOD Magazine Dec. 2006.**

“When surgery enters your experience, the mirror becomes a kind of blueprint on which you project and plan the future of your body.” (Blum 4)

“You go to sleep one way and wake up another. It is the stuff of fairy tales. How different, ultimately, is cosmetic surgery from the story of, say, Sleeping Beauty, who goes to sleep a young, isolated maiden and wakes up to love and perfect happiness forever after? This is what you want at the end of the surgeon’s wand.”

“[Plastic surgeons] don’t consider that [the patient] might want nothing. Better still, what if the surgeon were to say, ‘Your nose is really fine; it suits your face.’ None of the surgeons [I interviewed] told me this story. I was hoping for just one. But this isn’t what surgeons do. They see the defect from the other side of the room. The defect (or deformity, as they term it) hails them, flags them down, implores their assistance.

They see, in other words, the need for surgery.” (Blum 6)

“Regarding younger face lift interventions, a surgeon tells me, ‘I don’t want to do a surgery that the patient won’t notice. There has to be a noticeable difference in order to make it worthwhile.’ [The doctor shows the interviewer what a face-lift would look like on her] ‘You see that?’ he asked me. He glowed. ‘Well, then, you would be a candidate for a face-lift. If you can see it, it means you would be pleased with the result.’

This was the point he was trying to make to me – that the surgeon is dependant on what the patient ‘sees,’ what the patient thinks is worth the surgical price in all senses of the term.” (Blum 29)

- **Blum, Virginia L. Flesh wounds : the culture of cosmetic surgery. Berkeley : University of California Press, 2003.**

“Real life and real appearance are not enough when the goal is to live in a travel poster with a beautiful person at your side and in your flesh. If only we were more stylish, if only we had more money, if only we had accomplished something more remarkable, if only we were really beautiful, then life could begin.

But, as it is, we know we are too flawed to deserve it – yet. Meanwhile, we wait, buying the props if we can afford them, trying to turn ourselves into closer approximations of the beautiful. We wait, aware that beautiful people are not old. (Chapkis 140)

- **Chapkis, Wendy. Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance. Boston: South End Press, 1986.**

## **PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES**

More and more, the United States government is using the resources provided by private military companies and defense contractors to assist the federal military in its missions. The character of Nicola has just returned home from six months as an employee of one of these companies. The secrecy surrounding her work is reflective of current blurring of public and private companies involved in government service. She is also a product of the integrated modern army in which women and men work side by side, often with detrimental results.

“Private military companies are sometimes grouped into the general category of defense contractors. However, most defense contractors supply specialized hardware and perhaps also personnel to support and service that hardware, whereas PMCs supply personnel with specialized operational and tactical skills, which often include combat experience.”

- **“Private Military Company,” Wikipedia, 9 Mar. 2007. 12 Mar. 2007.**  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private\\_military\\_company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_military_company)>

“What [contractors] discovered in Iraq... was something new in the history of warfare: a privatized crusade.”

- **Halpern, Dan. “Death of a Contractor.” Rolling Stone Mar. 2007.**

In reference to Nicola’s military experience: “Many of the women I spoke with said they felt the burden of having to represent their sex – to defy stereotypes about women somehow being too weak for military duty in a war zone by displaying more resiliency and

showing less emotion than they otherwise might. There appears to have been little, too, in the way of female bonding in the war zone: most reported that they avoided friendships with other women during the deployment, in part because of the ridicule that came with having a close friend. ‘You’re one of three things in the military – a bitch, a whore or a dyke,’ says Abbie Pickett, who is 24 and a combat-support specialist with the Wisconsin Army National Guard. ‘As a female, you get classified pretty quickly.’” (Corbett 6)

“Research has shown that exposure to trauma has the potential to alter brain chemistry, affecting among other things the way memories are processed and stored. To vastly simplify a complex bit of neurology: If the brain can’t make sense of a traumatic experience, it may be unable to process it and experience it as a long-term memory. Traumas tend to persist as emotional – or unconscious – memories, encoded by the amygdala, the brain’s fear center.” (Corbett 10)

- **Corbett, Sara. “The Women’s War,” The New York Times. 18 Mar. 2007. 21 Mar. 2007.**  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/18/magazine/18cover.html>>

## GURUS and CONVERTS

Two of the characters in *How We May Know Him* become followers of a unique and commanding spiritual leader named Val. She appears to be building a substantial worship base, which may soon develop into a full-blown cult. The occurrences of cults and gurus throughout history offer fascinating insights into the human mind. What makes people choose to give themselves over so fully to an authoritative figure? How does one become such a figure? In addition, are these conversion experiences unique to a certain type of person, or are they possible for all of us given the right circumstances?

"[Apocalyptic Millenarianism] seeks to link a past golden age with a future promise of a world governed by a sinless elect under the benevolence of the savior himself." (Kaplan xiii)

**- Kaplan, Jeffrey. Radial Religion in America: millenarian movements from the far right to the Children of Noah. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997.**

"Those who seek a guru may find it difficult to distinguish... saints from madmen and crooks." (Storr xii)

"Communities... which are isolated from normal sources of information become more dependent on whatever information is given them by their leaders, and are less able to question what they are told. Research into so-called 'sensory deprivation' has shown that individuals who are cut off from most varieties of sensory input by being placed in sound-proof, light-proof rooms become more suggestible, and tend to be less critical of any information which is fed to them. The same is true of isolated communities." (Storr 18-19)

"We must consider the possibility that the conviction expressed by gurus is less absolute than it appears in that their apparent confidence needs boosting by the response of followers." (Storr xv)

"... before dismissing gurus as madmen, it is salutary to recall that so-called normal people also have holistic experiences in which conflict and distress temporarily disappear. Ecstasies are one variety of experience; being in love is another. Both resemble delusions in

that they are not susceptible to rational argument or criticism. Some of the most deeply felt, important human experiences are entirely irrational." (Storr 194)

"Gurus have often been isolated as children, and tend to be introverted, narcissistic, and more interested in what goes on in their own minds than in relationships with others. These traits of personality encourage the development of phantasies. Imagination flourishes best in solitude... If [gurus] ideas had been discussed with others and critically examined at an early stage, they could not have been sustained. As it was, their ideas became grandiose delusions which could be described as private faiths. It is not surprising that such faiths are not open to argument. If self-esteem entirely depends upon a private faith or upon a delusional system, that faith or system is so precious that it must not be shaken." (Storr 201)

"What distinguishes gurus from more orthodox teachers is not their manic-depressive mood swings, not their thought disorders, not their delusional beliefs, not their hallucinatory visions, not their mystical state of ecstasy: it is their narcissism." (Storr 210)

**- Storr, Anthony. Feet of Clay: saints, sinners, and madmen: a study of gurus. New York: Free Press, 1996.**

"Almost by definition, charismatic leaders are unpredictable, for they are bound by neither tradition nor rules; they are not answerable to other human beings."

- Barker, Eileen. Making of a Moonie: Choice or

Brainwashing?. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1984.

## **TERMINOLOGY**

### **- Satan/Crowbar**

These are quotes from various religious books and websites:

"In this sermon, Pastor Kilpatrick brings fresh revelation and understanding of how Satan coordinates a satanic attack. We often think that an attack comes after a blessing when actually it's just the opposite. Satan cannot stop your blessing, but he will do his best to spoil it. Pastor Kilpatrick openly shares about how he has almost missed some of his greatest blessings. Satan's plan and "Crowbar" is all about trying to pry you out of your position to freely receive God's blessing."

"Some call Satan a crowbar because he separates people from loved ones, family, other humans and God"

"In tempting us, Satan pries away at our weaknesses, at our flesh as you would pry open something with a crowbar."

"Satan has been called 'the crow-bar' because he pries people apart".

### **- kudzu:**

Kudzu, *Pueraria lobata* (syn. *P. montana*, *P. thunbergiana*), is one of about 20 species in the genus *Pueraria* in the pea family Fabaceae, subfamily Faboideae. It is native to southern Japan and southeast China in eastern Asia. The name comes from the Japanese word for this plant, kudzu. The other species of *Pueraria* occur in southeast Asia, further south. Kudzu is sometimes referred to as "the plant that ate the South," a reference to how kudzu's explosive growth has been most prolific in the southeastern United States due to nearly ideal growing conditions. Significant sums of money and effort are spent each growing season to prevent kudzu from taking over roads, bridges, power lines, and local vegetation.

### **teletype:**

Teleprinter (wiki)

A teleprinter (teletypewriter, teletype or TTY for TeleTYpe/TeleTYpewriter) is a now largely obsolete electro-mechanical typewriter which can be used to communicate typed messages from point to point through a simple electrical communications channel, often just a pair of wires.

### **- Dealing with Military Deployment: Books/Resources Wren Might Have Read**

<http://cinchouse.com>

*Today's Military Wife: Meeting the Challenges of Service Life (Today's Military Wife)* by Lydia Sloan Cline

*Separated By Duty, United In Love* by Shellie Vandevor

*Surviving Deployment: A Guide for Military Families* by Karen M. Pavlicin

*Medals Above My Heart: The Rewards Of Being A Military Wife* by Brenda Pace

*Married to the Military: A Survival Guide for Military Wives, Girlfriends, and Women in Uniform*

by Meredith Leyva

*Solo-Ops: A Survival Guide for Military Wives* by Hilary Martin

*Military Wives 101* by Tynisa Gaines

### **- Wren:**

The wrens are passerine birds in the mainly New World family Troglodytidae. There are about 80 species of true wrens in 20 genera, though the name is also ascribed to other unrelated birds throughout the world.

Troglodyte means "cave-dweller," and the wrens get their scientific name from the tendency of some species to forage in dark crevices. They are mainly small and inconspicuous except for their loud songs. These birds have short wings and a thin down-turned bill. Several species often hold their tails upright. All are insectivorous.

Only one species occurs in the Old World, where it is commonly known simply as the "Wren."; it is called Winter Wren in North America.

## **- Electric Shock**

electric shock can occur upon contact of a human or animal body with any source of voltage high enough to cause sufficient current flow through the muscles or nerves. The minimum current a human can feel is thought to be about 1 milliampere (mA). The current may cause tissue damage or heart fibrillation if it is sufficiently high. A fatal electric shock is referred to as electrocution.

### Physiological effects

Burns - Tissue heating due to resistance can cause extensive and deep burns. High-voltage (> 500 to 1000 V) shocks tend to cause internal burns due to the large energy (which is proportional to the square of the voltage) available from the source. Damage due to current is through tissue heating. In some cases 16 volts might be fatal to a human being when the electricity passes through organs such as heart.

Ventricular fibrillation - A low-voltage (110 to 220 V), 50 or 60-Hz AC current traveling through the chest for a fraction of a second may induce ventricular fibrillation at currents as low as 60mA. With DC, 300 to 500 mA is required. If the current has a direct pathway to the heart (e.g., via a cardiac catheter or other electrodes), a much lower current of less than 1 mA, (AC or DC) can cause fibrillation. Fibrillations are usually lethal because all the heart muscle cells move independently. Above 200mA, muscle contractions are so strong that the heart muscles cannot move at all.

Neurological effects - Current can cause interference with nervous control, especially over the heart and lungs.

When the current path is through the head, it appears that, with sufficient current, loss of consciousness almost always occurs swiftly. (This is borne out by some limited self-experimentation by early designers of the electric chair and by research from the field of animal husbandry, where electric stunning has been extensively studied) [1].

### **- what it feels like to get shot:**

What's it like to ... get shot! - Health FastTrack; account from Carlos Esconada - Brief Article - Interview Men's Fitness, Feb, 2004 by Seth Bilax

Ever wonder what it's like to get tagged? Thirty-three-year-old former gang-banger Carlos Esconada took a bullet so you don't have to.

How'd the lead start flying?

I'd just come out of a party. We were looking for the car when I heard the shots. I never even saw the guy, but it doesn't matter ... he got me twice in the stomach.

What did it feel like?

It was a cold and dull pain, but it grew by the second. I dropped to the ground, and while I waited for the ambulance, that's when I started to feel it. It didn't feel good ... not at all.

But can you describe the pain?

You know what it's like to get punched in the arm? You know that throbbing when they get you right on the bone? That's what it was like. It ached so badly, I couldn't breathe. I felt a weight on my chest. I'm afraid of doctors--I mean really scared. I don't like anyone touching me, not even doctors. But by the time the medics came, I was willing to do just about anything to get it over.

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