

Sunrooms, Starbucks, and Salmon Steak: Academic Nonsense and Domestic Sensibility in Lev Raphael's Nick Hoffman Mysteries

Katja Hawlitschka

At the beginning of *Little Miss Evil*, Nick Hoffman, the first-person narrator and amateur sleuth of Lev Raphael's campus mysteries, asks his partner Stefan, "Do you think we spend too much time on food?" Puzzled, Stefan, replies, "'What do you mean?'" just having finished dicing leeks and shallots for a potato lasagna with wild mushrooms and a celery herb sauce. Taking a sip of Delicieux de Noix, a walnut aperitif, Nick explains, "Well, we talk about it, we read food magazines, restaurant reviews, sometimes even plan vacations around where we're going to eat." Nick goes on to point out all the kitchen remodeling they just completed that summer: "'Gray-blue granite countertops and backsplashes, antiqued, glass-doored cabinetry; and appliance garages that reduced the clutter'" (1). Stefan is not convinced, and when Nick suggests, tentatively, that "maybe we should eat more simply," Stefan concludes that "'you've been reading too many of those Janet Evanovich books'" (2). The bottom line: Stefan needs to cook in order to be able to relax, and for both Stefan and Nick, food is an important part of their domestic comfort zone: a safe haven to survive, refuel, and help solve the crimes of their often deadly academic surroundings. As Stefan asks, "'How else could you deal with working in a department of psychopaths?'" (*LME* 5).

Stefan and Nick both teach in the English, American Studies, and Rhetoric department of the State University of Michigan, Stefan as the writer-in-residence, and Nick as an untenured composition professor and Edith Wharton specialist. As in most academic novels, both their department and the entire university are snake pits of deadly rivalries, "administrative idiocy," and an all-around weirdness that makes "*Alice in Wonderland* look like a documentary" (*BDTH* 22). The building that houses the EAR department is a dilapidated dump with "enormous, inhumanly high ceilings and windows; sagging, heavy floors; exposed piping; more than occasional bats; and lots of dark and smelly corners" (*LGC* 47); and Nick's colleagues are a collection of "braggarts, egotists, careerists, and no-talents" (*DCL* 245), split into rival comp and literature camps. The rhetoric professors are "surly, querulous, and under-qualified...their offices...smaller, their schedules less convenient, and their complaints ignored" (*EWM* 2). The rest of the faculty "despised them." The administration, of course, is a nightmare, "a small-potatoes version of Russia's current kleptocracy...[existing] solely to enrich a small group of people: upper-level administrators, the president, and the sports staff" (*BDTH* 9), while test-marketing the mission, "Students are important." Often, Nick's

pessimism also extends to academia in general: “People tell me that academia isn’t the real world, but what could be more real than envy, hypocrisy, back-stabbing, overblown rhetoric, cruelty, obsession with reputation, and the steady shredding of other people’s dignity?” (*LME* 5).

In addition to all the regular lethality, SUM has been plagued by a string of murders and murder attempts, all somehow related to Nick and his department. The victims include his office mate in *Let’s Get Criminal*, two English majors, and two lesbian writers at an Edith Wharton conference (a conference designed to improve SUM’s reputation in the area of women’s issues). In the light of all this mayhem, it’s no surprise that Nick—worried about his constantly wavering tenure chances, but also simply a nice and sensitive guy—needs to find refuge, sustenance, and refueling energy away from academic politics. Teaching and research often help, but even more important is the comfort he finds in domestic pleasures: quiet hours with Stefan, their remodeled home (“a pretty center-hall Colonial on the kind of green and quiet street you often see in thrillers like Face/Off, in which ordinary people’s lives explode with improbabilities” [*LME* 39]); their garden, sunroom, and state-of-the-art kitchen—and, of course, good food and drink: leisurely Sunday breakfasts with designer omelets and the *New York Times*; coffee, tea, and wine selections to match all moods and occasions; stress-relief Haagen Dazs; and, often twice daily, home-cooked meals from what seems straight (or gay) out of *Bon Appetit*.

What I find interesting here are the gendered dimensions of high and low social categories, and how they function in the case of a gay male academic mystery. Murder, scandal, and violence in academia constitute a mix of high and low categories: higher education and elitism with low violence and sexual and political intrigue. The combination of high and low, especially when the high fall low, tends to produce a combination of disgust and fascination. Many people hold the upper or more educated classes up to higher standards, and are repulsed if they fall by engaging in “low” pursuits; yet they are also

fascinated and often secretly satisfied when the “high” slide from their pedestals. When gender enters the trajectory of high and low, various possibilities result: on the one hand, the feminine is traditionally associated with the low, the physical and trivial, even the grotesque (in the case of women’s bodies). On the other hand, it is also often coded as “high”—especially when juxtaposed with low masculine physicality, instinct, and violence (when women play the role of “civilizing men,” for example).

As some critics and commentators have noted, the growth of the middle and upper-middle class and the development of an increasingly consumerist society have often been linked with the “feminization” of America: the move from production (considered masculine) to consumption (traditionally seen as feminine). Men with office jobs, marriages, minivans, and a home in the suburbs are often perceived as less masculine than the “real” men of the past or the lower class: cowboys, truck drivers, construction workers. In that way, the high/civilized is linked with the feminine and feminized, the domesticated—and therefore, interestingly, also becomes more trivial, frivolous, and therefore “low.” And gay men too (traditionally “fairies” rather than real men) are linked with the feminine and frivolous (the low), but also, in turn, with the high/civilized because of their association with the “finer pleasures” of life (opera, fashion, dance, etc.). Gay cuisine, if there is such a thing, is always coded as high/yuppie/middle class/feminine, rather than down to earth, Super Bowl-grub masculine.

In Raphael’s novels, the juxtaposition of low public violence with high, private domestic detail made me think of a text with a similar—yet also entirely different—combination of high and low discourses: Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*, whose publication in 1991 ignited a firestorm of debate about misogynist violence, censorship, art versus obscenity, yuppie consumerism, and 80s capitalism. In this novel, a young Wall Street banker with expertise in “feminine” pursuits such as fashion, etiquette, health, restaurants, exercise, hygiene, and interior decorating, is also—privately—a serial killer whose rampages seem to be

triggered by anger about the very details that signify his success: the trivial, insignificant, feminized nature of his job and leisure time. The omnipresence of the trivial is so stifling and infuriating, so all-engulfing, that the protagonist feels the need to react in the most opposite way he can imagine: by killing it—in the displaced form of women and other “low”/feminine Others. Whether coded as high or low, what he kills is the feminine. On the one hand, his killings are “low” because they are grotesquely and graphically violent (a reaction to the high mannered femininity of his life); on the other hand, they are “high” because he perceives them as significant, perhaps even regenerative and sublime. But in either case, it is the feminine which is the object of his rage. Raphael’s novels also mix murder and violence with a lot of attention to domestic, upper-middle class, and feminized detail: the kitchen (cooking, baking, looking for recipes, even loading the dishwasher), interior and semi-interior decorating (the enclosed sunroom/porch), fashion, gardening, and home-focused magazine subscriptions. Like Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, Nick is an expert in clothing brand names, perfume, fine wines, and upscale catalogue items; but of course, entirely unlike *AP*, these domestic pleasures are affirmed as healthy balances to his career, rather than portrayed as neurotic obsessions. In *American Psycho*, the Wall Street workplace feminizes the protagonist, causing him to suffer a life of trivial insignificance that can only be countered with excessive, masculine violence. By contrast, in Raphael’s novels, the campus environment is described as harsh and violent (even many of the women are “castrating”), and while it often feminizes Nick into fear or helplessness, he doesn’t counter this feminization with violence. Rather, his home and domestic pleasures function as sanctuaries, and his “feminine” areas of expertise help him cope with and solve the violent mysteries at work. As a gay man at ease with his sexuality, and capable of making fun of himself and whatever youth and masculinity he might be lacking, he embraces the feminine as a source of comfort that largely soothes, rather than produces, anxiety (at least until his obsession with

Juno in the latest novel, *Burning Down the House*). One might argue that both gay and straight upper-middle class men can deal with the feminine only when packaged in a higher-class status. But Nick doesn’t go for just anything upscale; again in contrast to Bateman, he prefers the more warmly decorated homes and kitchens to what he calls the “severity” of black leather and chrome.

The outside world in Raphael’s mysteries is one of ugly rivalries, intrigues, and hierarchies. In a way, it is a world on the boundaries between high and low: higher education and prestige mix with low human motives that frequently lead to violence. It is the “low” part of this combination that Nick usually wants to escape from—the murders, of course, but also the “low” academic developments that seem to help cause the violence. Prominently among these are tenure disputes, publishing jealousies, and new annual recruitment strategies, from the idea of student consumers and sales clerk professors to the decision to institute a “Whiteness studies” program. Like most professors, Nick has little patience for this low, financially motivated consumer approach to higher education. And like most English professors, he also laments anti-intellectualism and the general decline of English skills (the “chat room” trend that “has convinced the average person he has something to say” [DCL 106]). Not that academics fare any better: Academia is a freak show, Nick thinks, and “society should be thankful that colleges and universities are keeping all these faculty members out of circulation. Can you imagine the kind of harm they could do if they were actually out in the world, working?” (DCL 98).

Nick also mocks the mix of high pretensions with low inclinations in academia (such as when high theory is applied to low culture). In *EWM*, he invites both Edith Wharton societies to his conference, knowing that they loathe each other, and generally despising both in return. The two societies are “just like gang-bangers, only they dress marginally better and they don’t have drive-by shootings—they try to destroy each other with sarcastic footnotes” (*EWM* 67). While the more

traditional of the two societies regards Wharton as a quaint but useless “lady writer” (68), the second group is “wild, way beyond feminism, deconstructionism, or postmodernism... they’re desperate to say something new at any cost, no matter how crazy” (69). The other society considers them “literary terrorists” (139). Ironically, the two sides end their war by the end of the conference, newly united by their common combination of disgust and fascination with “the low”: with the Hollywood adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*, screened at the conference; with the bestselling writer Nick chose as the keynote speaker; and of course, with that writer’s later murder and the mystery surrounding it: “Instead of casting a pall on the conference, Chloe’s death had jazzed everyone up” (116). Nick is widely praised for putting on such a “wonderful” conference. (Maybe the food helped, too; with Nick in charge, it was three multi-course, semi-upscale meals a day, qualitatively somewhere in between his home-cooked meals and the usual Midwestern conference fare).

While himself often fascinated by the academic high/low spectacles around him, Nick is more worried than amused by violence, and by its trivialization on the part of both (high) academics and (low) popular media. What’s wrong with academia, he thinks, is both its trivialization of the serious, and its overvaluation of the ridiculous. When Nick’s chair offers him a mystery course no one wants to teach, she says that his “low status would make it hard to give [him] a plum.” Nick’s reaction: “A plum that nobody wanted! That’s the kind of place EAR was: bald men arguing over a comb” (*DCL* 121). The murders, of course, are the most extreme examples of terror caused by pettiness. Nick’s battle with the “low” forces of evil takes two main forms: escape and engagement. He always gets involved in detective work, but he also always tries to find a way out. His escape routes and sanctuaries are plentiful, usually functioning in high and feminine ways to counter the low masculine violence of the world around him. On campus, his only refuge is his office, which he tends to flee to after meetings, especially pre-tenure meetings with his department chair.

However, his office is only a poor excuse for a refuge, with its cracked walls that no number of Matisse posters can conceal. During particularly draining days, he escapes with naps and day-dreams about Santa Fe, and sometimes he and Stefan take the occasional trip to their lakeside cabin North of Michiganapolis (usually after a crime is solved, when both reward and regeneration are sorely needed). Good friends’ homes are sometimes sanctuaries, as is Nick’s study at home—for research, writing, or when things get bad between him and Stefan. But none of these is finally as important and reliable as the combination of home, food, and Stefan’s companionship.

Driving home after the meeting that “sealed his fate” as the unwilling organizer of the Wharton conference, Nick feels “a slight easing of tension pulling up to our house, which always reassured me ... it seemed to offer so much stability, from the pillars flanking the front door to the large and airy rooms filled with our comfortable, overstuffed furniture” (*EWM* 9). He is happy to find Stefan back from a short visit with his father and is cheered up by his loving question: “They asked you to run a conference? Don’t they know how scattered you are?” He feels even better watching Stefan cook pasta putanesca, wondering if there is “anything better than a good meal prepared by a loving chef” (10).

Later, after Chloe’s murder at the conference, Nick feels almost “too tired to feel a sense of relief” when coming home, and yet he is “still able to take some dim pleasure from our tree-lined street and our lovely house” (108). Seeing Stefan asleep on the couch, he begins to recuperate, “marveling at [his] fortune in having found not just a lover or partner twelve years ago, but a soul mate” (109). When he suspects Stefan thinks he’s silly for describing the police detective as an alien, he finds Stefan’s answer oddly comforting: “Nick, you’re beyond silly. There’s no word to describe what you are” (109). With the help of Mandarin Napoleon tonics, Nick and Stefan stay up long into the night to discuss the murder case.

Halfway through the next day of the conference, Nick is so exhausted that he escapes home for a while, happy to find vases of clematis

around the house, and feeling as if he is entering a sanctuary. A long hug from Stefan, a slice of his favorite appetizer, Crabmeat Mousse, a glass of Kendall Jackson Reserve Chardonnay in the sunroom ("where the conference, and the world, seemed very far away"), and then a nap help restore some of his energy. While falling asleep, he imagines fleeing four hours north with Stefan, in order to have a "simple" dinner of "cherry wine soaked chicken breast with Michigan cherries" at a historic inn (144). When he wakes up, Stefan pours him a mug of Sumatra coffee, and a little later they get ready for a light Shabbat dinner, a ceremony they both rely on every Friday as a retreat from the world and toward each other. Only after all that are they ready to face more of the outside world.

In *DCL*, a similar combination of domestic comforts helps Nick recover from the shock of finding the body of a graduate student. After the police finally let him go home, Stefan proposes pills, a drink, or a bath as solutions, puts on the soundtrack of *How to Make an American Quilt*, and then has Shabbat dinner ready in case Nick finds himself hungry after his nap. Indeed, when he wakes up, he is surprised to feel relaxed, hungry, soothed by the "fragrant kitchen" and flickering candles, and ready to "dig into the gnocchi with broccoli, sundried tomatoes, lots of garlic, and shrimp" (193). After the ceremony, and accompanied by a freshly brewed cup of Kona decaf, he is ready to listen to his messages and discuss the case with Stefan.

Interestingly, in such examples, Nick plays more of a childlike than a feminine role, with the home functioning like a return to the womb, or at least the imaginary. And Stefan plays a motherly role at the same time as he is a masculine protector. But the comfort of home also strengthens Nick into a more masculine position, readying him for further perils and investigations.

Of course, home isn't always the perfect sanctuary, though Nick certainly wants it to be. He is annoyed whenever Polly, a nosy new-age neighbor, interrupts their peaceful Sunday mornings, and feels guilty about bringing bad news back home. When he tells Stefan about anti-

Semitic postcards in the sunroom one evening, "it struck me as an incongruous setting for an ugly little story." When Stefan invites an ex-lover for dinner in *Let's Get Criminal*, Nick reflects, "The thought of Perry in our wonderful house absolutely sickened me... Imagining [him] in this haven was like discovering scale on an orchid" (44). And his encounters with murder often make him think whether their home would ever again "feel untouched by the darkness that had contaminated our lives" (*DCL* 262).

Mostly, however, the home functions as a nurturing, warm, and feminine place for Stefan and Nick, a place that strengthens them to resume their outside battles. This seems like a rather traditional image—with home, food, and love as shelter to restore power to the battle-weary soldier whose undoubted masculinity can afford a bit of mothering without running the risk of feminization. But of course, both sexual orientation and "high" social status make a crucial difference here. There is no woman/wife/mother to take care of the restoration process; instead, they both take care of each other without replicating gendered stereotypes. While Stefan is often more nurturing and performs more "feminine" functions such as cooking, he is also more masculine in other ways, both physically and emotionally. In addition, there is no disavowal, especially on Nick's part, of the need for domestic pleasures and comforts. Describing domestic pleasures, especially food, seems genuinely enjoyable—almost sensual—to Nick. While some of these descriptions are self-consciously ironic, others are almost unabashedly romantic or sensually indulgent, as when Nick describes Stefan's black silk robe and the way he "crossed his bare legs at the ankle, his high-arched feet as beautiful as an angel's in a Renaissance fresco" (*EWM* 114).

The lightly ironic indulgences in domestic detail account for much of the humor in the novel, while also playing the important role of combating the low/deadly with the light-heartedly domestic and trivial. When Nick talks to his cousin about her hearing problems in *DCL*, he asks, "Is there something you can take for

hearing? You're not sure? Because there's a supplement for everything else. Stefan and I take Echinacea for general health, vitamin E for our prostates, mega-men multivitamins, aspirin for our hearts, Gingko biloba for memory. I don't think I can handle any more pills in the morning" (*DCL* 239). During a lunch preparation of grilled chicken and Caesar salad, "Stefan was in charge of the washing, drying, and tearing the romaine and preparing the chicken, while I handled the dressing, mashing anchovies into olive oil, adding crushed garlic, lemon juice, and Worcestershire sauce, and whisking it all together. We broke out the small hoard of garlic croutons I'd actually made myself one recent afternoon in a fit of Martha Stewart madness. These moments were like time portals opening up in a sci-fi film: captivating, but unpredictable and potentially dangerous. They could also lead to unbridled wallpapering" (*DCL* 222).

Occasionally, the novels ironically juxtapose upscale food detail with the "low" dangers of the outside world, in part to emphasize their incongruity. In such cases, violence either interrupts the peaceful pleasure of good food, or the food helps to cushion bad news. In the beginning of *DCL*, Nick braves the bad memory of an earlier murder and takes his lunch close to the bridge where his former office mate was killed. When he starts to hear the aggressive voice of a campus Bible seller (an incident that later leads to murder), he tries to "block out the noise and the image of that angry, pimpled face so that I could enjoy my thermos of Kenyan coffee and my smoked turkey breast on focaccia" (10). The morning after the second student murder, Nick still feels shaken, and Stefan brings him breakfast in bed: "Omelette aux fines herbes with chevre... peppered bacon, grapefruit juice, and green tea" (200). "That's it? No choices?" Nick asks jokingly, before going on to "appreciatively consume" his breakfast, making sure Stefan "heard each and every yummy sound." Only the food helps him deal with the news in the morning paper.

As long as outside events are not too serious, eating well is always at least equal in priority. During one conference lunch in *EWM*, Nick is

thinking about the murders when a colleague asks him how he likes his food. Nick muses, "I had been eating chicken breast stuffed with spinach and fontina and only at that moment did I realize it was very good. It was as if my taste buds had gone completely off-line while I mused about Joanne and Chloe" (135). (This would probably seem normal to many of us.) Even when things get bad, food is never ignored, meals are never left out. In fact, the more stressed out and involved they are with murder investigations, the more meals there seem to be (and almost all their food is meals). The Friday and Sunday of the Edith Wharton conference are perfect examples. Friday, Nick begins the day with breakfast at the conference: two generous helpings of buckwheat waffles with orange juice (he is surprised how hungry he is). Lunch is the stuffed chicken mentioned above, preceded by salad and a cream of broccoli soup. (Nick's comment: "I ate it with surprising gusto" [*EWM* 34]). That Friday was also the day described above, when Nick escapes home shortly after lunch to be comforted by Stefan and his crabmeat mousse and wine. After his nap, they have their early Shabbat dinner of pasta primavera with grilled salmon ("Stefan made something light since we'd be eating again soon"), so as to be ready for the 7 p.m. conference dinner, preceded by a cocktail half-hour. The three meals Nick has already had that day don't seem to make a big difference. He "enjoyed the fish stew," and for dessert a mocha cake, "which was surprisingly tasty" (156). The next day begins innocently, with vanilla hazelnut coffee, and a surprisingly unspecific breakfast. For lunch, Nick only picks at the conference spinach quiche, but makes up for it at a later strategy lunch with Stefan and Angie: shrimp in a tangy sesame seed and orange sauce, and shredded lamb sautéed with scallions at a Vietnamese restaurant. Nick's comment: "We were talking about death and a body—the body of a friend—but I ate as if I hadn't eaten all week" (183). After the three break up for individual investigations, Nick feels an immediate drain of energy, and drags himself into the nearest cappuccino place for a double mocha and white chocolate cheesecake brownie. He contemplates

another one on his way out, but resists and begins to investigate the victim's neighbors instead, one of whom invites him in to talk. Nick's comment on her refreshment offer: "Even though I was full, I savored the shortbread [and]... helped myself to more" (194). Probably no more than a couple of hours later, dinner at the conference was salad, gumbo, and "a vegetarian lasagna with real kick to it" (214). Surprisingly, Nick skips dessert—he's distracted by the mystery revelations that follow the dinner.

Food thus seems to function in both masculine and feminine ways for Stefan and Nick. They never worry about dieting, overeating, stomach aches, or indigestion; but they always plan and think about food, rather than subordinating it to more significant/public/masculine pursuits. Sometimes masculine and feminine, high and low, work in interesting, complex ways for them. In *DCL*, they are humiliated and kicked out of Dean Bullerschmidt's house after asking him a few questions (the dean can't believe an untenured faculty member dares harass him at home on the weekend); back home in their kitchen (which, interestingly, Nick refers to as their command and control center), they "did the only sensible thing: we each had a bowl of Haagen Dazs Vanilla Swiss Almond Ice Cream with some Pepperidge Farm Bordeaux cookies" (221). Well aware of their humorously pathetic compensation for feminization, they choose a stereotypically female comfort food (the 90s signifier of female sexual frustration) to regroup and keep evil at bay.

Also quite interesting is an event in *LGC*, when Stefan not only asks an ex-lover home for dinner, but also asks Nick to do the cooking. Nick's cousin tells him to get revenge—and he likes the idea: "God, you're right! Dinner should be outrageous, eight courses of baroque splendor: Truffles on a Tambourine, Pheasant under Tiffany glass" (46). Sharon's advice: "No. I'd go the other way. Make macaroni and cheese. Tater tots, franks" (146)—in order to show he doesn't feel threatened. Nick's compromise decision is pretty much their normal fare, though perhaps a bit more upscale: a marinated Brie and tomato salad, followed by braised leeks with a pink peppercorn mayonnaise, an entrée of pasta shells stuffed with

escargots, prosciutto, spinach, cream, parmesan, white wine, garlic, and Pernod—and for dessert, his trademark cheesecake of "wonderful colors and textures" (47). Reinforced by a lot of rhapsodizing about Stefan and their relationship ("We have a very full life... We're very happy. We're thinking about adopting" [*LGC* 53]), his strategy works: Stefan says he acted like a jerk. However, unlike Perry, he was real: "'Perry's so bland... but you're—you're *various*'" (54). Perhaps relying on the tried and true was a natural instinct for Nick. Why shouldn't their usual comfort/defense food work in the case of an unwelcome intruder into their relationship?

In conclusion, food and other domestic detail—in Raphael both coded as "high" and "feminine"—function in various ways to combat the "low masculine" violence around the protagonists, including for comfort and as strength restoration strategy. While in *American Psycho*, detailed and graphic masculine violence counters the omnipresence of the trivial and feminized, in Raphael violence is never graphic, but is countered with plenty of everyday domestic description. While this indulgence in the seemingly trivial can represent escape into safety and protection, it also restores energy to continue the murder investigation, and, even more important, helps solve the mystery and convict the perpetrators. In *American Psycho*, Bateman's knowledge of the trivial is a signifier of both material success and feminization, with the latter as the cause for his murderous rages. In Raphael, Nick's expertise in "high" cultural and/or feminine detail helps solve the mysteries and combat low violence. Nick's knowledge of literature allows him to read clues missed by the police, and his careful "readings" of people's demeanor, words, gestures, and clothing (like Bateman, he knows both male and female fashion and perfume) often allow him to make progress or even figure out the solutions to the mysteries. In *LME*, where violence hits closest to home, he enlists Stefan and Sharon in preparing their house for the final showdown: a get-together of suspects to find and expose the guilty. The brave invitation of evil into their home is successful: Nick applies his domestic and

academic expertise (both of which are “high” and feminine), identifies the perpetrators, and thus exorcises danger from their lives and homes.

Not unlike many female academic sleuths, the feminine—perhaps even the Lacanian realm of the imaginary?—plays an important role in both challenging the injustices and upholding the laws of the symbolic order. And food and nurture, finally, play the most important role: they represent life, and they keep death at bay—at least until the next mystery.

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