

A story by BillJustBill

Word count: 3,893

People read books. But what if there was

A Book That Reads People?

Who knows what earth-shaking events might have occurred if it had fallen into the hands of a king, a president, a Dalai Lama? It could have become some nation's national treasure. It might have caused re-evaluations of the Bible, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, influencing the beliefs of millions.

But that's not what happened.

Lord, oh Lord, everything was so hard for Erma — getting up and getting going, then changing into her bathing suit, it was getting so darn tight, and then there was the usual hassle maneuvering the scooter through the door. Once outside it was a lovely afternoon, the sun bright in a cloudless sky.

She breezed down the sidewalk thinking about those butterscotch cookies that would be waiting for her when she came home.

At the community pool she pulled up beside “her” lounge chair, the one with the stretched out vinyl straps. China. Everything was made in China and all of it was junk that wouldn't hold up. No wonder the economy was the pits, all the crap from China either falling apart or poisoning children.

She parked next to the lounge chair so she could slide from one to the other with a mini-

mum of effort.

There were only a few people at the pool, three teenagers nearby, a boy in baggy trunks, two slender girls in tiny bikinis, and at the far end two women and a man, about her age. She knew the adults and stared, waiting for one of them to look her way so she could wave. But they didn't look her way. Wasn't that just typical. Ignore the disabled person.

Oh, well. One more burden, but a small one compared to everything else. The jingle ran through her head: It's not easy being me.

Stuck on themselves. They were proud probably because they were thin. Well, maybe not thin, exactly, but normal. Normal regular people who thought they were special just because of that. Well they weren't so special. Since when did normal become special?

She rummaged through the beach bag, pulling out her towel and with it came a book, dropping out of the folds. Now what? Where had that come from? She didn't remember putting a book in there, but now that she had it she was pleased. That's exactly what she needed, a good book. Books were better than people.

She folded the towel and put it behind her head, settled back, propped the book up on her stomach. She should have brought those butterscotch cookies along to the pool, then everything would have been perfect. She turned to the first page.

*She was fat. No, she wasn't just fat. She was obese. No, not just obese. She was morbidly obese, with immense breasts, great slabs of sagging flesh on her trunk, her arms and legs, more than two hundred extra pounds, the doctor had told her. And when she lay in the lounge chair at the pool, the vinyl straps stretched, sagging almost to the concrete, as she lay there in her too-tight black bathing suit, looking like a hippo hoping for a tummy rub.*

Erma felt her skin crawl, her hands began to shake. What? What the hell was this? A

book about someone just like her, doing just what she was doing right then? What kind of book was this?

She flipped it over, looked at the cover. There was a photograph of her! Naked! Oh, God no. She didn't want to look! That's exactly why she didn't have any full-length mirrors in her condo!

She put her hand over the photo. Above the picture there was the name of the book in big red type. "Erma Enright, The Fat Lady's Pathetic Life."

And that was her name! But she'd never said a single word to anyone who could possibly have written such a book. She felt dizzy, her face flushed. She looked around. The young people were tossing a beach ball back and forth in a careless way, the stuck-up people at the other end of the pool seemed deep in conversation. The day, the clouds, a little breeze ruffling the leaves of the trees over there, it was all normal, completely normal.

Wait a second. Was that what she had really read in the book? She was having some kind of mental something. It couldn't really have said what she thought. She opened it and re-read that first paragraph. Yes, that's what it said all right. Then she went on to the second paragraph:

*Because of all the weight she carried, the huge, bulking embarrassment of it all, she thought of herself as an injured party, a helpless victim of a cruel metabolic destiny that left her weak and vulnerable in the face of so many good things to eat. Right at this moment she was thinking of the package of butterscotch cookies waiting for her at home. She wished she had them right now.*

Erma felt her gorge rising, a sickness in her stomach and a hate, a pure loathing for whoever had played this trick on her, whoever had put this vile book in her beach bag. She couldn't stand it, wouldn't stand for this cruel prank!

She threw the book, wanting it as far away from her as possible. It flew tumbling

through the air, pages ruffling like a frightened bird, landing on the pool deck near the teenagers, skidding on open pages, spine flat.

The boy looked at the book, then at Erma, confused. “Hey, lady, your... your book.”

“It’s a damn filthy book!” she cried out. “It’s a hateful, filthy book! It’s a... a...” she struggled for words, “it’s a *travesty!*”

The adults at the other end of the pool were certainly looking at her now. Erma knew it, could feel their eyes on her, she didn’t need to look. She struggled up from the lounge, puffing, short of breath, and clambered onto the scooter. Thank God for the scooter. She almost started away without her beach bag, then remembering grabbed it and slung it into the carrier. She ran the scooter at full speed, away from the pool, up the sidewalk, back toward the safety of her apartment, the four walls that shielded her from a spiteful world.

“Jesus,” Denny said, looking down at the splayed volume on the concrete at his feet. “What the hell was that all about?”

“I bet it’s hot,” Lauren said. “It probably has a bunch of porn and the old tub of lard couldn’t handle it.” She was seventeen, a pretty girl with long dark hair. She knew she looked really good in her bikini and she wondered if someday she and Denny would ever get around to, well, you know, hooking up, getting it on.

The other girl, Crissy, had an agile, inquiring mind. She said, “Travesty is like that old guy, that actor, John Travolta, in that old time movie where it was all about disco and screwing and Scientology stuff.”

Denny picked up the book. Curious, the girls moved close on either side of him. He dusted the pages that had been face-down, closed the book and turned it so they were looking at the cover.

What happened next took place in seconds.

“Holy crap!” Crissy said.

“Omigod!” Lauren exclaimed.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Denny said.

The cover photo showed three naked teenagers, two girls on either side of a boy, all staring down at the boy’s immense boner, an enormous exaggerated erection standing up at what seemed to the girls like an impossible angle.

Denny took in the focal point of the photograph in an instant, then his gaze moved to the images on either side of the boy, the blonde’s sparse dusting of public hair at the top of her thighs, her slender hips and pink nipples. And on the other side the thick bush, shaved bikini line and the gap at top of the brunette’s thighs, her succulent breasts.

“Oh, shit,” Denny said, feeling his penis unfold, lengthen, become rigid, straining at the fabric of his trunks.

The last thing Denny looked at in the photo were the faces of the three figures and the book’s title. Crissy and Lauren saw the same thing at the same time, so the recognition came to all three almost instantaneously. The faces in the photo were theirs. The title, in red print:

“Crissy, Lauren and Denny, Yearning to Fuck.”

“Gimme that!” Lauren said in a low, intense voice, grabbing at the book.

“I’m taking it home!” Crissy said, pulling on Denny’s arm with one hand and taking hold of the back cover of the book and a sheaf of pages with the other. She pulled hard.

Denny’s sweaty hands had loosed their grip on the book as his penis ballooned. His face became pale, he felt light-headed, as if every drop of blood in his body had rushed to his groin, as if his prick, which he never thought of as particularly outsize — though at certain times he did consider pretty damn good — was bulging, inflating, distending to mammoth proportions, God, it felt as if it were getting as big as the one in the picture, which was clearly a total and

complete physical impossibility! So he couldn't help but drop his hands to the front of his trunks to try to shield from view what was going on down there, an incredibly embarrassing medical condition of some kind, like those four-hour hard-ons they were always talking about on TV, except his was even worse because it was turning into a stupendous, gigantic dick! And what if it was permanent! And then an even worse terror blazed through his mind: what if it exploded? A picture flashed before him, a ragged, tattered exploded penis, its flaccid shreds forever useless for anything!

He turned his face to the sky, yelping in a strangled voice, "Oh God help me!"

The book had torn apart down the spine, Lauren coming away with the cover and a bunch of pages, Crissy with the rest.

Lauren had an almost uncontrollable urge to turn to the first page and start reading. But she knew from experience that authors, those cruel, vindictive bastards, often on purpose buried the really sexy scenes in the back of a book, a mean-spirited commercial conspiracy, holding out on the good parts so you couldn't just stand in the aisle at Barnes and Noble, rubbing against a low shelf and get your rocks off, you had to buy the damn thing or tell a bunch of lies to your mother, how you had to have it for school or something so she would buy the damn thing and you could get it home and explore it at leisure. So she resisted the urge to start reading and looked over at Crissy, who held the back pages of the book, and who was staring back at her with the same kind of sexual frustration and covetousness that she herself was feeling.

"Gimme that!" Lauren said, trying to grab the treasure out of Crissy's hands.

But Crissy was quick, pulling her hand back, fending Lauren off.

Stepping to her left in an athletic move, Crissy made her own reach for the part of the book Lauren was holding, saying, "Fuck you, bitch, you gimme *that!*"

Crissy was quicker than Lauren, and Lauren had not expected a counter move, so Crissy

was successful in tearing some of the pages out of Lauren's hand, but not the whole thing.

Lauren was enraged both at her loss and at being bested by this little flat-chested twat who up to a few seconds before she had considered one of her very best friends.

In a frenzy of wanton desire, fueled by the sexual excitement of the moment, their minds a boiling torrent of horniness, lust, intense salaciousness, the two girls flew at each other, grabbing, scratching, hitting, pushing, pulling — and when they got close enough, biting — screaming curses and maledictions, until, panting with the effort of their epic battle, locked together, clumsy and off balance, they stumbled across the deck and toppled together into the swimming pool, the tattered and torn fragments of the book scattered around them on the surface of the water.

The two women and man, seated around an umbrella table at the far end of the pool, Gordon Frankenheimer, his wife Linda and their friend Carol from unit 617, had turned at Erma's shouts and book-throwing, and then watched as the fat lady clambered awkwardly aboard her scooter and hummed away, stone-faced, up the sidewalk.

"Well," Carol said, she was the out-spoken one, a still reasonably attractive single woman of fifty-seven, "Well," she said, "what's got her panties in such a wad? And it must be one hell of a big wad. Oh, God, I'm sorry I said that. I don't even want to think it."

With Erma gone from sight, the three of them turned to watch the bizarre antics of the teenagers, the boy begging for Divine intercession — who the hell knew for what, for at this distance and this angle they could not see the tent pole effect of his swim trunks — and then they watched, mesmerized, the cat fight erupting between the two girls.

"Here, now!" Gordon called out, not too loudly and not at all effectively, thinking he should do something but not knowing quite what. But when the two girls and the book they seemed to be fighting over went into the swimming pool, with the fragments of the book float-

ing around, Gordon Frankenheimer, who was second vice-president of the condo association, knew that the moment for firm adult intervention had arrived. A torn-up book like that could expensively clog up the pool's filtering system. Similar things had happened in the past, and he wasn't about to abrogate his fiduciary responsibility as an officer of the condo association by allowing it to happen again.

"Not on my watch, by God," he muttered as he stood and marched down the deck.

"Now stop it!" he said, loudly and firmly.

The girls, struggling with each other in the water, competing to capture the floating pages, ignored him. Gordon felt like an old fool, an old *white* fool, which was even worse. Gordon wished he could be one of those Negro athletes he saw on television, a towering basketball player with massive shoulders and prodigious arms glistening with sweat, rows of white teeth in a grinning mouth, powerful, untamed men, getting sucked off by blonde cheerleaders every time they went into the locker room.

But he wasn't any of that. He was just old White Man Gordon. He glanced at the boy, wishing he would help with this. But the kid was just standing there, frozen in place, his hands over his crotch, a stricken look on his face.

Gordon took another tack, one he had developed during the years his own children were teenagers. He walked up to the pool edge. "Goddammit!" he screamed, his face reddening, "you little assholes knock it the fuck off before I come in there and beat the shit out of you!"

This seemed to jerk Lauren and Crissy out of their single-minded obsession. The old guy didn't really look dangerous with his skinny arms and pot belly, but he was old and male like their fathers and he was clearly pretty seriously pissed. They were unsure what he might be capable of.

And the book, the book was clearly ruined.

With repeated exchanges of “Fuck you, bitch!” and “No, fuck *you* bitch!” the girls made their way to the ladder and climbed out of the pool, leaving the ragged pieces of paper floating behind. Lauren picked up her towel and beach bag and grabbed Denny by the arm. “You’re coming with me,” she said. “I want to see that Goddamned thing, and I want to see it *now!*”

A step or two behind, Crissy snatched up her own belongings and skipped up to take Denny’s other arm. “You’re not seeing it without me there seeing the Goddamned thing too!”

Gordon Frankenheimer watched them depart. “Crazy teenagers,” he said under his breath. He thought about the culture of youth, as he sometimes did as he flicked the channel changer through MTV, and felt a hopeless kind of sadness at the inevitable slide of everything America stood for, a downward spiraling slither into an unimaginably vulgar chaos of pointless anarchy, crime, drugs and sex that would come to pass when these children grew up to run the country. But Gordon was basically an optimistic, forward-looking person of cheerful demeanor. His happy, out-going approach had sold one hell of a lot of collateralized debt obligations and auction rate securities in his time. And if he was anything, he was a realist. “Fuck it,” he said, “why should I give a shit? I’ll be dead and buried.”

With that he turned his head and shouted up into the sky: “Ramon! Ramon! Goddamnit, Ramon, we got a problem here!”

Ramon had not seen any of the events at the pool, but while he trimmed the nearby hedges he had heard all of it and he had glimpsed Senora Erma’s arrival and departure on her wonderful little machine. She was so fortunate to have a machine like that, but then she deserved it, she was such a nice person and her situation was so difficult. And he had listened to the young people cursing each other. One of Ramon’s favorite television programs was Cesar Millan, *The Dog Whisperer*. He liked Cesar because he was Latino, a countryman so to speak. But also because the man’s thinking was clear, his reasoning direct. But the most interesting part

of the TV show was the almost unbelievable stupidity of the Anglos, many of them movie stars. They did not even know how to raise a puppy. If they could not raise their puppies, how could they possibly know how to train their children? It was an endless source of interest and amazement to Ramon how a race of people as incredibly stupid as the Anglos had ever managed to create a country as marvelous as America.

And here was another example. As he came around the hedge into the pool area, Ramon took in the situation at a glance and knew what was required. Stepping to the side of the pool house, he flipped the switch that turned off the filter. He took the long-handled net from its hooks and walked down the deck to where Senor Gordon waited, wringing his hands.

“Look, Ramon, look what those little bastards did!”

“Is okay, Senor Gordon, I take care of it.” Ramon smiled at him.

Ramon’s smile had much the same reassuring effect on Gordon Frankenhimer as Cesar Millan’s had on fretful pet owners. Feeling as though the situation was well in-hand, Gordon retreated back to his place at the umbrella table.

In a few minutes Ramon had the remnants of the book spooned out of the pool, the filter back on and had returned to his work. He tossed the sopping pages onto the top of the can of clippings from the hedge, climbed into the old golf cart and drove back to the utility shed. He had come to work at five that morning, as he always did, and now at two it was quitting time. He would be home about the same time his three children arrived from school, in time to see his wife for a few minutes before she left for work.

Plant cuttings went in one bin, waste in another, so Ramon picked up the damp book pages and was about to toss them when glancing down at the topmost page he saw it was in Spanish. The pages seemed to be drying out quickly so he set them aside and when he left the shed a few minutes later, carefully locking it behind him, he took the book with him, putting it

on the warm seat of his pickup truck.

When he arrived home he took the book into the house and put it down on the dining room table. He had a brief conversation with his wife, kissed her goodbye and, as he did each weekday, called his three children to come to the dining room table to do their homework. His oldest son was entering a rebellious phase, said he didn't want to do homework, so it was necessary for Ramon to explain, clearly and directly, in a manner not unlike that of Cesar Millan, the available choices: either the boy did his homework or he could go out into the yard, Ramon's beautiful yard, and do eight hours of landscaping work, missing dinner. If neither of these choices was appealing, then Ramon would be happy to take off his belt and whip his son's ass until his son was persuaded to choose one of the other alternatives.

The children quiet, their heads bent to their work, Ramon picked up the book. Somehow it seemed to have dried out and restored itself. Ramon didn't think much about how that might have happened because his attention was caught by the photograph on the cover. It was a Hispanic man with a strong, resolute, smiling face. The man looked something like Ramon, but was much better looking. Amazingly, this man had the same name as Ramon, and he was pleasantly surprised upon opening the book to find that the man's story was so similar to Ramon's. This man, too, was from El Salvador, had been orphaned when young and at the age of fourteen had wrangled his way aboard a freighter to San Pedro, California. The man had then, just like Ramon, lived on the streets of Los Angeles for eighteen months before catching a fulltime job with a landscaping company.

Ramon read the book for two hours that day, smiling, nodding, saying to himself yes, that's the way it was. The book refreshed him, left him feeling stronger and more sure of himself. He put it carefully on the highest of the bookshelves that lined one wall of the dining room.

In the years that followed Ramon would from time-to-time take the book down and read

some passages. He never seemed to quite finish it, there was always something new occurring in the man's life. And though the man was certainly an admirable person — in this he was much different from Ramon — he was far from perfect and sometimes made mistakes. In this it was possible for Ramon to see and understand errors he was making in his own life, and sometimes to correct them.

And then after quite a number of years had passed, and Ramon had come to a time when he seldom left the house, he took down the book and read a part toward the end that talked about how the man knew of his approaching demise, the things that remained for him to do and to say to those closest to him.

As to the precious book, perhaps his children or someday his grandchildren would come across it.

Or perhaps not.

All he knew was that he had put his heart into whatever task was at hand and done his best. And he believed that was all a man can do.

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