

The Atlantic Monthly, NPR, and Nancy Andreasen: Summer shame, 2014

On July 25 I sent the following letter to a music list I belong to, which is composed of 450 international jazz scholars, authors, players, educators, critics, and historians, all of whom are far more likely to honor creativity than to tear it apart.

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Dear all,

I just wanted to hip you to an old slander about creativity that has recently acquired new and dismaying life.

In the past several weeks, various media outlets have been hyping the alleged creativity/madness connection because of some supposed "new research" that supports it. This includes (formerly) reputable entities like the *Atlantic Monthly* and NPR's *Leonard Lopate Show*.

They've been ballyhooing Iowa psychiatrist Nancy Andreasen, who hasn't published a book or paper in 13 years, but has recently been interviewing celebrities like filmmaker George Lucas about their alleged mental distress, and that of their families, in her attempt to "prove" what everybody has always "known": that great creativity requires commensurate psychopathology.

Because her investigation has included brain scans, journalists have gotten all excited about the apparent "scientific" nature of this work (it doesn't matter that these scans are actually unrelated to her thesis - any reference to brain testing is impressive enough).

The coverage exhumes Andreasen's 1987 study, where she also hand-picked and single-handedly interviewed 30 writers at the Iowa Writers Workshop (taking 15 years to do so), and finally declared that 80% of them were depressed. Her written admission that her data never achieved statistical significance disappears in the reporting, since she actually proved nothing at all.

Today, she introduces her new effort by disclosing details of the supposed mental illness of Kurt Vonnegut and his family. He was one of her original subjects at Iowa, which is known as a place where burned-out writers can restore themselves with the adulation of students (not hard to find depression there). Now that Vonnegut's dead, she can safely breach all of his dark confidences, while claiming how much she loved him.

As many of you know, I've spent decades fighting the insidious "mad genius" myth and all the sloppy research that "supports" it, including Andreasen's. This led to **The Insanity Hoax**, numerous articles in magazines and psychology journals, and to invited participation in the upcoming "state-of-the-field" text, **Creativity and Mental Illness**, due in September 2014 from *Cambridge University Press* (my part is called "Building on Sand: The Cautionary Chapter").

But I got a new understanding of the myth's longevity as I watched the breathless public gulping of Andreasen's latest horse..., um, radish. She's just feeding the ongoing and insatiable cultural appetite for celebrity schadenfreude - the same thing that is supplied on a daily basis by places like *TMZ.com*, which reports which film/TV/music star/politico screwed up, acted out, fell down, and/or needed psychiatric attention.

Such sources are elevated and legitimized by our local news radio stations like *WCBS* and *WINS*, who both tap *TMZ*, nearly verbatim, for their hourly "entertainment reports."

And the underlying question is always this: whose personal flaw and humiliation can we gloat over today, especially since it neutralizes any envy of what we ourselves don't have, or can't do?

It hit me -- with a resounding Homer Simpson DUH--that Andreasen et al are simply expressing the same low impulse, painted over in pseudoscientific semi-gloss. When she talks about driving Lucas around her "40-acre nature preserve" and then sharing a bottle of red "from her cellar" so they "can relax and get to know each other" before she starts her questions and scans, we are not talking about objective scientific research, or anything remotely like it.

She's little more than a starstruck fan who wants to get up close, using her "expert" power to pry into the lives and minds of her icons, and force a special intimacy between them, in which she is moreover the superior judge of their inner selves. Brain, shmain!!

Funny: I was recently interviewed by a reporter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about Andreasen's activities. When he told me he was going to speak with Andreasen next, he actually wrote, "What should I ask her?"

I suggested this: what humanitarian or scientific purpose does it serve to insist that our greatest creative minds are all disturbed? I thought psychiatrists like her, and psychologists like me, are supposed to alleviate human suffering - not invent it.

Anyway. Don't get snookered, folks.

I wish a summer full of lazy afternoons to all.

Judith Schlesinger