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The Affair Of an E-mail Gone Wild

Novelist Tells All Of His Wife's Fling With Ted Turner

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Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist Robert Olen Butler has never sold a lot of books, but his startling e-mail about his divorce is getting the kind of buzz writers dream about, though perhaps not for the reason its author intended.

Butler writes literary novels, and most them sell about 3,500 copies. He won the Pulitzer in 1993 for "A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain," a set of short stories about Vietnamese immigrants. He was married to fellow novelist Elizabeth Dewberry, whom he met at a writers' gathering and married at Tavern on the Green in New York's Central Park in front of a crowd of more or less famous literati.

Heretofore, not many people outside the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference felt they needed to know more.

But since sending out an e-mail recently to his colleagues at Florida State University about Dewberry's apparent romance with former media mogul Ted Turner, the professorial 62-year-old Butler has been the lead item on the New York Post's gossipy Page Six ("Writer Dumps Hubby for Ted") and an Internet sensation (Gawker.com, which first posted the full story Tuesday, labeled his missive "The Insanest E-mail Ever"). National Public Radio calls it the "e-mail of the week, if not the year."

When your beautiful blond spouse, 18 years your junior, leaves you for a rich guy even older than you are, a rich old guy known for his high-octane lifestyle, maybe some of this is inevitable. But then there's a college professor using a mass e-mail to blurt out excruciatingly personal details of his beloved's emotional, psychological and sexual intimacies to "clarify the issues for any of your fellow grad students who ask" and note that "you can feel free to use any part or all of this email" to accomplish that task.

And yet we still fear that we have not prepared you for the paragraphs to come.

Butler begins the details of his missive: "Put down your cup of coffee or you might spill it. Elizabeth is leaving me for Ted Turner."

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This is clear, if a little dramatic, and if it had ended here, as a means of conveying sad but relevant news to close friends, then all would be fine.

But, um, there's more.

He then tells readers that, as Dewberry has spoken about publicly, she had been sexually abused by her grandfather and that the abuse was "tacitly condoned by her radically Evangelical Christian parents." He says he was able to help her for a few years: "She says I saved her life." Still, she had issues, mainly that she was never able to "step out of the shadow" of his Pulitzer, even though "everyone has heard me proclaim my sincere high regard for her as an artist."

Then, he goes on to say, Dewberry "nearly died from an intestinal blockage in [Argentina](#) while on a trip with Ted" in March. This uncomfortable experience led her to leave him for said media mogul, he writes, perhaps because "it is very common for a woman to be drawn to men who remind them of their childhood abusers. Ted is such a man, though fortunately, he is far from being abusive. From all that I can tell, he is kind to her, loyal, considerate, and devoted to his family, and perhaps, therefore, he can redeem some things for her."

(The thrice-divorced Turner has long been reported to have a vital and varied love life.)

In case -- and this is hard to believe -- his readers *still* wanted to know more, he let them know that "she will not be Ted's only girlfriend. Ted is permanently and avowedly non-monogamous. But though he has several girlfriends, it is a very small number, and he does not take them up lightly and he gives them his absolute support when he does. And Elizabeth's leaving me is as much about the three weeks a month she is alone as it is about the week a month she is with Ted. She will find her own space and her own light in which to create the great works of art she is destined to create."

He writes: "I will keep my house. I will keep my dogs and cats. I will keep virtually everything."

He says, "I ask you not to think ill of her in any way."

Here, we can only pause.

Pause.

We understand that writers are notorious gossips. We understand the bitterness of divorce. We understand that the modern media age, with its proliferation of cable television, radio talk shows and personal Web sites, has led to vast amounts of self-absorption and over-sharing. But the main thing we understand is that rarely has being one of Ted Turner's girlfriends looked so good.

"It's kind of gothic, isn't it?" asks Choire Sicha, managing editor of the Gawker Web site, who got a nasty e-mail from Butler for printing the note. "I feel like she's a character in his writing."

The man at the center of this self-made storm is embarrassed and unhappy about his e-mail being aired publicly, but again, not for the reasons you might think.

Butler says in a telephone interview that the note is "full of love and compassion," was sent to perhaps 10 friends and graduate students, and was intended to spare his ex (the divorce was final Monday) any sort of criticism for, you know, leaving him to join a billionaire's harem. He says that he unveiled no secrets, that she both knew and approved of the message and was even grateful to him for sending it out.

"If I'd said nothing, the rumor mill would have devastated Elizabeth," he says. "If I'd played the outraged husband, that would have been devastating to her. . . . This was done in a dignified and compassionate way."

Further, he says, Dewberry has written and spoken publicly about all the issues involved. (Well, maybe not about the intestinal blockage.) The media sensation over the note is, he says, that of petty, mean-spirited people making fun of personal tragedy.

"I now know and understand why celebrities punch photographers and sue tabloids," he says.

David Kirby, a poet, fellow professor and family friend, was a recipient of a slightly different version of the e-mail when it was initially sent out six weeks ago. He says it was not taken as any sort of attack.

"This was not a settling of a score on Bob's part," Kirby says in a telephone interview.

Dewberry has published four literary novels, the sales of which are apparently slightly less than her former husband's. She declined to talk to NPR yesterday, but the network says she told it that she had read but not approved the e-mail, and that it contained inaccuracies.

We sent an e-mail requesting clarification to Dewberry's personal account yesterday. It was answered by Phillip A. Evans Jr., vice president and chief communications officer for Turner Enterprises Inc.

"I will have to respectfully decline comment on her behalf," he wrote.

What to make of it all?

Dewberry apparently did have issues with being the spouse of a famous man (although it's hard to understand how this situation will improve by dating Turner).

Her most recent novel is "His Lovely Wife." Here's how she introduces herself and her book on [Amazon.com's](#) author profile page:

" 'His Lovely Wife' is my fourth novel, the second one written since I married Robert Olen Butler in 1995. He's much more well-known than I am, and often, especially in the early years of our marriage, we were introduced as, 'Pulitzer-prize-winning author, Robert Olen Butler,' now a slight pause, and the volume goes down a notch, then, 'and his lovely wife, Elizabeth Dewberry.' In the beginning I sort of liked it . . . but after a while, I started feeling irritated by it. I hated that I found myself wanting to tell complete strangers whom I'd just met that I, too, was an author, but I felt like I was disappearing."

In 2000, Butler had what turned out to be a prophetic interview with Powells.com, a book-selling Web site:


"My work has been tending toward this inextricable mixture of comedy and tragedy, the pop culture and high culture, it's just how I see the world now."

He probably was thinking more about his novels than about his personal e-mail correspondence. But, as all fiction writers know, truth is always stranger.

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