

FOR THE LOVE OF READING

Oh Reader

THE READING SLUMP
RED FLAG

THE REFORMATION OF A
LITERARY SNOB

DINING WITH
NANCY DREW



Spring 2022. Display until June 7th 2022.

\$8.99US \$9.99CAN

11>



ISSUE 007

The Penis Mouse and the Motorcycle

My Childhood Search for the Secrets of Sex

BY JOHANNA GOHMANN

Discovering the meaning of sex through books can be enlightening, but not before it's very confusing.

A DELL



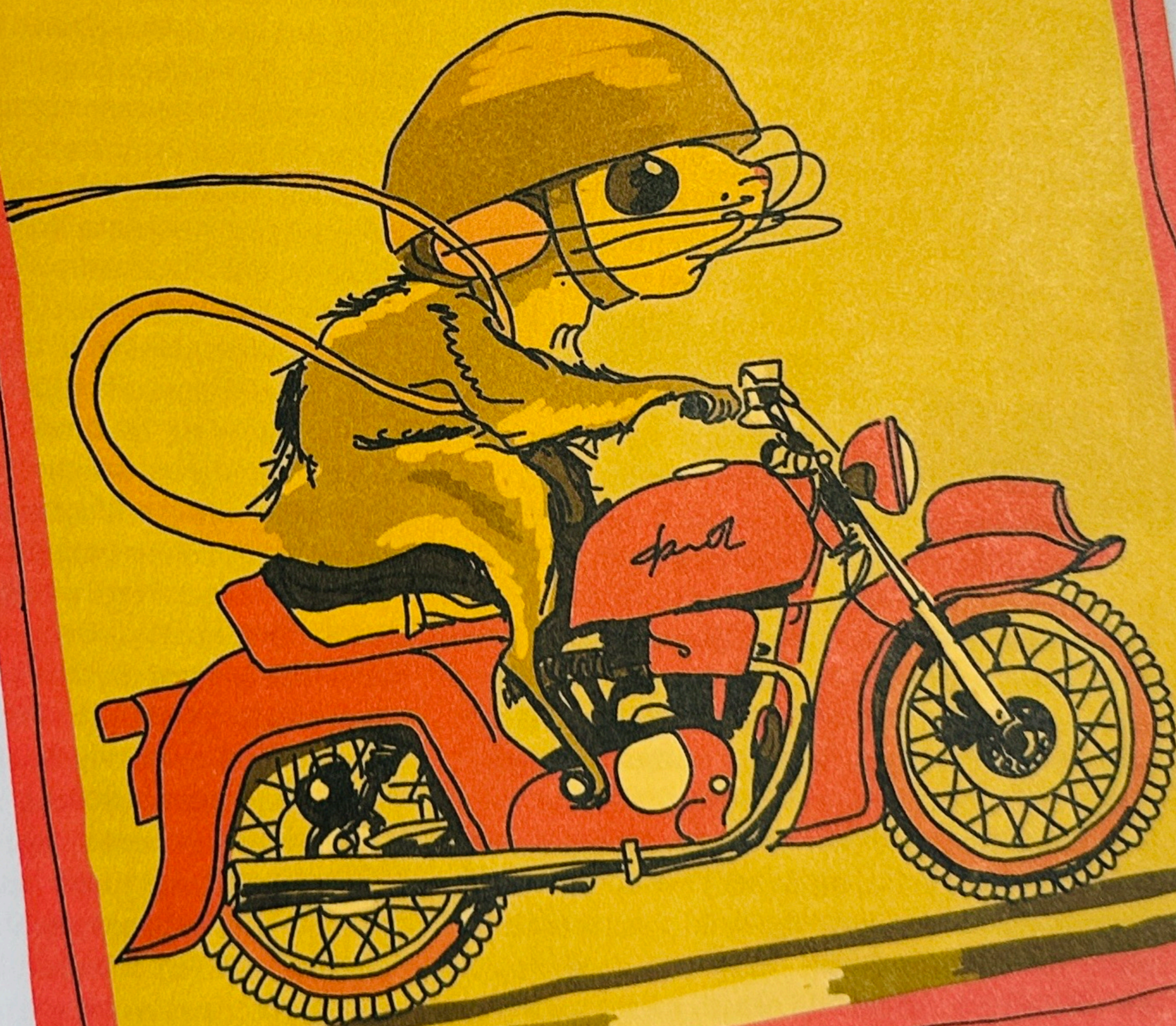
YEARLING BOOK

76075 • 2.50

Speed, fun—and daredevil escapades!

Beverly Cleary

The Mouse and the Motorcycle



I CAN RECALL ONE evening as a kid, during the usual clatter and clang of dinner, when my sister turned to my mother and held aloft her middle finger.

"Mom," she said. "What does 'fuck' mean?"

My mother, no doubt exhausted from preparing a tanker of spaghetti for my six brothers, my father, my sister and myself, simply sighed and swiped the offending finger away.

"It means... Jesus loves the devil. Now, who wants a Twinkie?"

This explanation—that fucking was somehow inherently tied to Satan—sounded pretty legit to me at the time, as I was spending my days at Catholic school with glowering nuns who preached that sexual thoughts "fouled the mind and the spirit"—as though merely thinking about sex caused one's soul to defecate in its pants.

At home, my parents were also trying to keep our thoughts pure—partly by distracting us with Hostess snacks, and partly by pretending that sex didn't exist. While they were obviously big fans of procreating and probably possessed the raw knowledge to open their own wing at the Kinsey, their parenting strategy with regards to sex education was largely distraction and denial.

My first real glimpses of sex came via horror films, a genre beloved by my whole family. Many a weekend was spent gathered in the living room with cans of Mug root beer, watching Jason Voorhees ruin summer camp, or Damien Thorn ruin a birthday party. My parents had an oddly laissez-faire relationship with the MPAA rating system, and freely let us watch all manner of massacre. My guess is that they were simply happy to have a moment of peace, even if came via chainsaw. The only problem, of course, was that scary movies tend to have quite a bit of sex. To manage this, my father developed a system wherein whenever nudity appeared onscreen, he would shout over and over: "Keep 'em closed keep 'em closed keep 'em closed!", which meant we were to cover our eyes until the offending buttocks had left the screen. It was a flawed plan, but the general idea was to teach us to avert our eyes from nipples, much as we would a solar eclipse.

Naturally, all of this secrecy and talk of sin one hundred percent backfired, and only succeeded in making me that much more curious. I knew full well the story of Adam and Eve, having read it many times

in my Children's Bible. But I remember peering at the bright, cheerful illustrations depicting humankind's most tragic tale of produce, and struggling to grasp the moral. Why was it wrong that Eve wanted to taste the apple? Wasn't knowledge a good thing?

I thus decided that if ten-year-old me couldn't freely watch films featuring nubile teens tearing off their clothes pre-machete attack, then I would need to seek out other media.

Unfortunately, this was 1980s Indiana. There was no Barnes and Noble with educational titles like *Sex, Puberty, and All That Stuff!* There was no Barnes and Noble, period. Clearly, I was going to have to make do with whatever I could get my nail-bitten, preadolescent hands on.

While I was able to glean a few insightful snippets from my older sister's issues of *Cosmopolitan*, she would generally become enraged when she found me touching anything on her side of the room. And, ultimately, the risk of my sister's wrath didn't seem worth a quick glimpse of articles like "A Girl's Guide to Sex in Soho." Especially when I wasn't entirely clear on what "Soho" was. (A location? A position?)

I continued my search. On trips to the comic book store, I would carefully slide a *True Romance* comic into the pile of my brothers' *True Horror*, hoping my mother wouldn't notice the big-bosomed women popping out of their blouses mixed in with the screaming skeletons popping out of their skin.

Once home, I'd retire to my room, my fingers flicking through the newsprint pages. It was here that I first learned that the word "rapture" does not always apply to Jehovah's Witnesses, and can mean something else entirely. Something that—to me—sounded almost as exciting as the return of Christ.

But while the comics were useful for generating confusing feelings in my nether regions, they were also incredibly dated, and therefore confusing in general, with lots of crazed-looking men in fedoras, and distracting ads for sea monkeys.

When I learned through schoolyard whispers of a mysterious, scandalous young adult book called *Forever*, by Judy Blume, I was intrigued—and shocked when I spied it on the shelf at my Catholic school library. Didn't the nuns know what this "moving tale of the end of innocence" was about? Or was its placement merely to tempt us—a way to ferret out all the fourth-grade sex fiends? It was unclear. But my

unstoppable quest to learn what “ejaculate” meant made me bold. And one day, while a nun was busy stamping library cards, I slipped the book under the pinafore of my plaid school uniform and carted it out of the room, my little heart pounding against the paperback. I took it home and pored over Katherine’s love affair with the mole-cheeked Michael.

While it was indeed quite informative, like everything else it also felt... confusing. I hadn’t moved on that long ago from reading Beverly Cleary’s *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, so the connection between Katherine’s boyfriend’s penis, which she called “Ralph,” and the cyclist enthusiast vermin from Cleary’s book—also known as Ralph—were inextricably linked in my mind; as if Katherine would slide her hand into her boyfriend’s pants and be greeted by a high-pitched squeak. Or the tiny motorcycle whizzing down the hallways of the Mountain View Inn would be powered by a phallus sporting its own fleshy helmet.

I did, of course, explore my mother’s own bookshelves at home. Back then, they were mainly lined with cookbooks and Erma Bombeck, but a deep dive into some cabinets led to the discovery of a romance novel tucked behind a pile of Christmas crafting manuals. While I remember little of the plot, my lasting impression was of how the author repeatedly wrote of couples “bucking against one another.” This both titillated and puzzled me, as it conjured images of reindeer. And, due to its positioning behind the Christmas books, led to thoughts of Rudolph, which felt both cheering and... wrong?

Recently, my husband was pondering how much our formative years may have influenced our desires, and I thought of all the things likely rolling around in my subconscious every time we rolled around in bed together: The Rapture, and penis mice on motorcycles, and Jason Voorhees, and reindeer bucking sexily through the sky. It’s a wonder I don’t



have any deeply complicated kinks, and don’t want my husband to do any role-play clad in a Santa beard. Or hockey mask. Or—God forbid—both.

But I find I feel weirdly grateful that “my innocence” was lost in this incremental way: partly through images, partly through fragments of words. Nowadays, I would have had the Internet, and my innocence would have been decimated by a single Google search. But to puzzle out the mysteries of sex in bits and pieces—to take tiny nibbles of the apple rather than swallowing it whole—feels somewhat gentler. Even if it did involve machetes. ■

Johanna Gohmann has written for *The New Yorker*, *The Cut*, *Jezebel*, and *McSweeney’s*. She makes her home with her husband and son beside a toxic canal in Brooklyn. You can read more of her work at JohannaGohmann.com.