

The Joy of Reading

A Short Comedy by

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CAST:

HARLAN, any age or gender as long as the performer portrays Harlan as VERY uptight!

SYNOPSIS

HARLAN, a well-meaning volunteer reader for the blind, is put into the position of reading a book with, um, dirty words. Harlan's "solution" seems to work – for a while.

(Lights up on a Formica desk stage center. On it are a microphone and a set of headphones, both wired into the desk. A mousy-looking person in glasses enters, carrying a large hard-backed book. Harlan sits primly behind the desk, dons the headphones carefully and opens the book to a marked page. Harlan does a few quick mouth-stretching exercises, then looks up and out at the "control booth" and waves and nods. Once ready, Harlan begins to speak in careful, modulated tones into the microphone.)

HARLAN

Welcome to the Sound for Sightless radio station, a service to our blind and vision-impaired community. As you probably can tell, I am not your usual reader for Book of the Week. Deirdre Swann-Blumenthal is unavailable today, as she has jury duty. Oh. I'm probably not supposed to say that on air. I'm so sorry, Deirdre. Oh. She can't be listening. They sequester you when it's a murder tri--.

(Clears throat:) I'm Harlan Mead, your volunteer reader. You may recognize me from my usual Sound for Sightless *(he uses air quotes:)* "gig" – oh, I just used air quotes when I said "gig" – you may recognize me as the host of "From Tennyson to Swinburne: Poems to Dream By." I find it encouraging that our service recognizes the need to present the classics of Victorian England to all of you. If you've never tuned in, I invite you to join me every Sunday from 2 to 3 a.m.

But now, on to the business at hand. Today we present Chapter Six of our Best-Seller of the Month, *Chilblains* by Tonette Bryce-Thomas—there seem to be a lot of our young women choosing to hyphenate these days—oh, well, so long as they're fulfilled...

(Harlan begins to read, more than a little in the style of a second-grade teacher :)

"Chapter Six. The pools of rain dripping on the windowsill of Ginger's room flashed red from the tap-room sign across the street, like bloodstains that flow, at once vivid and then pale, morphing in one moment into indifferent plasma.

(Considers this and then moves on.) Ginger lay where she had lain so many nights – in the thrall of Thunder Man's arms.

"Oh, Thunder Man," she whispered. "Why make me hot like this and then leave me?"

Thunder Man raised himself away from her, crooking his powerful arm and laying his bull-like head in the veined juncture of his elbow.

"That's why they call me Thunder Man," he drawled huskily— *(Harlan stops and tries that line again, attempting a husky drawl:)* "That's why they call me Thunder Man," he drawled huskily. "I make the earth shake for my lady, then I leave while the pavements are still wet and the gutters are runnin'," he continued, as he stroked her thigh.

(Harlan's eyes widen as the meaning of this last passage finally sinks in. The symbolism is not lost on our Harlan. But, regaining composure, Harlan presses on, determined to retain a dispassionate approach:)

"Shut up and fu- *(Harlan stops. This is too much. The F Word! Harlan ponders this moral dilemma – should I retain the author's intent or cling to my own moral integrity? The author loses. Harlan has an inspiration:)*

"Shut up and, um, ...get back to the business of earth-shaking," she moaned tightly.
(Harlan smiles in satisfaction at this poetic substitution. But, scanning the page, trouble lies ahead. Harlan thinks quickly, then proceeds:)

"I'll earth-shake you fast, I'll earth-shake you slow, I'll earth-shake you into Sunday. I'll do anything I...earth-shaking well please."

(All these substitutions are beginning to fluster our Harlan.)

"When Thunder Man earth-shakes you, you stay earth-shaked, er, earth-shook, shaken, uh...shit! *(Shock!! How could this word have slipped out?! Harlan takes a deep breath, tries to get over this on-the-air humiliation and continues, shaken:)*

And so the night progressed, alternating powerful bouts of lust with spent silences – bland and empty, as the windowsill pulsed red and white.

(Harlan is a bit more relaxed, realizing that the worst has passed, and explains the next passage with relative assurance:)

There are now three asterisks, indicating a passage of time.

(Harlan turns the page – Horrors!! It's that word again! Blurts out in exasperation:)

"Earth-shake!!" Thunder Man growled as he noticed the time on the tiny alarm clock. He hastily threw on his clothes and bolted from the room as Ginger, her breasts heaving with confusion, screamed, "Thunder Man! Thunder Man!! Thunder Man!!! *(Harlan by now is screaming, carried away by the drama of the scene. Looks up at the control booth. Harlan has obviously deafened the sound engineer and mouths "Sorry" to the engineer and indicates that it won't happen again. Continuing in a whisper:)*

Ginger sobbed into the grimy pillow, working herself slowly into a frenzied hysteria of repetitive shrieks as her drowsiness abated and the true terror of her loneliness broke through. She wrenched herself from the tumbled bedclothes and spun around the room, crashing into furniture, throwing ashtrays and ending in a rage by beating the door savagely in total despair. *(Unlike Ginger, Harlan is extremely cool. Thunder Man and his awful language have gone. Confidently, Harlan quickly turns the page and continues briskly :)*

"Stop that fucking racket!" a voice cried from downst— (*Oh, no! In shock, we watch the slowly lowering head of a humiliated Harlan onto the desktop in utter capitulation as the lights fade.*)

BLACKOUT