

This time, a size 8 was out of proportion

Book Break columnist Mona Grigg is on vacation. Filling in for her is fiction author Julia Grice.

By Julia Grice

special writer

I LOVE costume parties. I also love book parties. A while back I got to combine both when I was invited to attend the 10th anniversary of my literary agency, Writer's House, which was to be held at the Harkness Mansion in New York City. "Come dressed as your favorite literary character," instructed the invitation.

Well, to be told to garb oneself as a literary character isn't as easy as it might sound. If you are female and want to look devastating for untemperamented authors and influential editors, all of whom will surely be milling about in expensive rented costumes of Broadway-show caliber, I mean, something made of sheets and whipped up on my Singer just would not do.

I went to several local costumers and demanded to try on fluffy crinoline gowns a la Scarlett O'Hara. (I read "Gone With the Wind" nine times since third grade and I felt she qualified as a "favorite.") In the fitting room I struggled to zip a period dress, but somehow I kept popping out. By the ninth crinoline, I faced the brutal truth: Scarlett O'Hara was a size eight. Every costume was a



book break
Mona Grigg

size eight. I was not.

Back home, I paced the floor, wondering what to do now. Most of my second-best favorite characters also were period costumes and were size eight, too. I always liked witches (one of my little-known talents is a wild, witchy cackle), but I shrank from the idea of presenting myself to the New York literary world with green gunk all over my face.

I BOUGHT MY plane tickets, started packing my bag, and I still didn't know what to wear. Then, driving to my dance class, the idea hit me like a tap shoe over the head. Salome!

Well, the Bible is considered literature, and Salome has been immortalized in other books and poems. I had taken belly dancing classes, the costume would fit, and if I hurried I could make it to a costume store I knew of on Groesbeck.

At home with the costume in a paper bag (it included a coin bra that went jingle, and a big, glittery paste jewel to hang in the middle of my forehead), I knew I wasn't finished.

Using an old Halloween mask for a base, I constructed the severed

head of John the Baptist, adding marble eyeballs, a frowny gray mustache and wig glinting with a suggestion of blood. When my boyfriend recoiled at the sight of "John" grinning on his plastic platter, I knew I had the perfect outfit. There would be something ugly and outrageous about the costume but it would not be me.

A FRIEND IN New York also attending the party picked me up in front of my hotel near Central Park, instructing me to "stand right there at the door because the traffic is so heavy and I can't park."

Carrying "John" in a paper sack, I followed her instructions, nervously hoping that she would hurry. People (OK, men) were staring at my lavish eye makeup, the jewel in the middle of my forehead, the gauze "veil"

dangling from the hem of my trench coat.

I was afraid the doorman would think I was a Lady of the Evening and shoo me away, but he ignored me, apparently for New York I was nothing unusual.

Bam! arrived, waving frantically at me from her jeep to cross to the other side so she wouldn't have to turn around. I made the crossing as cars honked and traffic blurred. Suddenly I felt a presence near me, something breathing. I jumped and turned. From two feet away one of the Central Park carriage horses was leering at me, eyeing my costume as if deciding whether or not to munch it.

The party was everything I had dreamed of. A clown on 6-foot stilts leaned against a wall and made small talk from on high. Al Zuckerman, my agent, was a Sultan, his wife Scheherazade, and they had rented a basket full of live spider monkeys all gaily caparisoned. (They had considered renting a baby elephant but were worried there might be housekeeping problems.)

TWO COOKBOOK AUTHORS ar-

rived dressed as lobsters. Novelist Ken Follett strolled past dressed as the randy nun from the Decameron, pausing to flash me a skinny leg embellished with a red garter.

Talk of floor bids and subsidiary rights and contracts sweetened the air.

I wandered around, introducing myself to Tinker Bell and Friar Tuck and Robin Hood and "The Spirit of the West Wind." John the Baptist, grinning evilly from his platter, was a huge success. Women took one look at him and said "Oh, how horrible!" I smiled, thanked them, and shimmied the five pounds of coins I wore.

The men pretended that "John" was a plate of hors d'oeuvres and mimed selecting his eyes as a snack.

But the center of the evening were the Scarlett O'Haras. Five of them.

Five people wearing the exact costume I had coveted, waist cinchers and hoop skirts, flounces, tucks, ruffles and lace. One of the Scarlett was six feet tall and boasted a plunging neckline that displayed a bony clavicle, and a frizzy mat of black

chest hair. "She" was really a he.

On the crowded dance floor, the Scarlett were an event. They probably didn't do rock dances at Tara. Each hoop skirt took up about 25 square feet of space, buffeting other dancers, shimmying wildly, hems knocking over the drinks in plastic cups that people had set on the floor near the wall because there was a shortage of tables.

By 1 a.m. there were puddles of spilled wine everywhere.

The clown had come down from his stilts, the monkeys were back in their basket, and the four female Scarlett had loosened their stays. The male Scarlett had taken off his wig to reveal a black crew-cut, and was jovially blitzed.

I put "John" back in his sack and waited to be driven back to my hotel, feeling pleasantly literary, and glad, for maybe the only time, that I'd been too big to fit into a size eight.

Julia Grice is the author of 11 historical romance novels and two non-fiction books. Her latest, "What Makes a Woman Very Sexy," published by Dodd Mead, is currently in bookstores.

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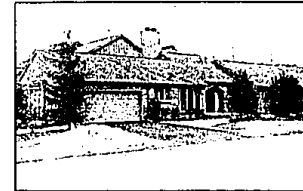
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