

# Carol, Rooney! Smoking? Gun

*“Entertainment” is an unsatisfactory word for all that Carol makes possible*

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## ***A friend (not!), Ken, writes —***

I have a ridiculous friend. I don't know why I go to the movies with him. *Carol*—the closing credits haven't even started rolling and he says, not whispers, “Why didn't they dilate her pupils?”

“Whose pupils?”

“Rooney Mara—Therese's. She's supposed to be sexually attracted to Cate Blanchett—Carol—and her pupils are pinpricks, BB pellets. Is everybody these days so caught up in making movies and watching movies they don't know how a human body reacts when it's attracted to another person? They couldn't have done a little Photoshopping or put some drops in her eyes like at the eye doctor's?”

A beefy man leans over from the row behind us. His wife isn't happy. Could we please shut up?

That sort of thing only makes Steven, my friend, raise his voice, as if his questions were for the whole audience—people who, instead of fielding questions, are eager to applaud, thanking Hollywood for this wonderful film.

Steve, incorrigible: “There's so much chemistry in the script, there was none left for the actors or the make-up department? They had layered dust and water spots on the car's windshield for god's sake. It's not like they weren't paying attention to detail.”

“Maybe there was a clause in Mara's contract: no drops,” I whisper. “Maybe her agent said, ‘You can play a lesbian. You *should* play a lesbian. But you can't give male viewers

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the impression that you might, in fact, be attracted to women. Maybe there *was* Photoshopping—to get those pinpricks.”

“OK, then. So—in the sex scene—we see *her breasts*. Were those her real breasts?”

The beefy man claps one hand on Steve’s shoulder and another on mine. It’s as if he wants to crush us, but what he says is: “Those were very nice breasts.”

Steven twists in his seat to face him. “Yes, sure, of course, very nice breasts, and discreet nipples, should we call them?”

The man is shaking his head and pushing his wife quickly ahead of him down the aisle away from us. Steven’s words are bouncing off the man’s distressed suede jacket. “But when was the last time you saw ‘not nice breasts’—whatever they may be—in a Hollywood movie?”

Target gone, Steve turns back to me. “Every Hollywood producer knows, Ken, that if you’re going to show breasts, they need to be a certain size and shape. The specifics vary decade to decade, but what doesn’t vary is that the producers have files full of nice breasts, complete with prices and how easy they are to work with.”

“So go home and watch some of Mara’s previous movies. See how they compare. The breasts, I mean.”

“Unless,” he says—

“What, another clause in her contract—you have to use the same breasts they used for me in my previous pictures?”

“You have to admit it makes sense,” he says. And I am pleased that we’ve made it out to the street, to the fresh air, and without someone backing us up against a wall, putting a hand to Steve’s throat.

Not that he has run out of questions. “So why didn’t we get to see Blanchett’s breasts? In the theater, watching the scene, I was thinking, well, she’s getting a bit long in the tooth—

“Don’ tell me—there’s a clause in her contract.”

“Well, maybe there is. But then I’m thinking, if Rooney gets to use *her* regular body double, surely Cate can use hers. And when she goes down on Rooney—head diving between her legs—all we see is her wig, so there’s no problem there. Just put that wig on someone else’s head, or on some kind of mechanical appendage that pulls the wig along the double’s abdomen and between her legs. Reduce labor costs and sanitation concerns, avoid lawsuits.”

**I**t doesn’t take us 15 minutes to walk across town to a trendy restaurant, and already, right in front of us before the hostess’s station, there’s a young woman wearing a coat

just like one of Carol's and with her hair given the same highlights and curls. "You've got five minutes to find out if she's a lesbian," my ridiculous friend says, as he withdraws back toward the doorway. "And if she is, is she as attracted to Rooney Mara as I am."

"And where are you going?"

"See if I can cadge a cigarette."

"I thought you quit five years ago."

"I did, but *Carol* made it all so glamorous again—hotel restaurants, fur coats and martinis, divorce, wealthy suburbs, chain smoking. I have to hold up the moviegoers' end of the bargain."

I can feel it coming on—one of Steven's speeches about product placement or product integration, and George W.S. Trow. "Entertainment' is an unsatisfactory word for what it"—the entertainment industry—"makes possible."

"Everybody drank and smoked back then," I note, leaving the woman with Cate Blanchett's hair and following Steve out onto the sidewalk. "Everybody drinks and smokes now, just different things. Now you're progressive if you fill your lungs with cannabis smoke and backward if it's nicotine."

"Yes, and half a century ago our wonderful *Carol* would have been a B movie about an evil lesbian sexual predator, and now—if only it had been Carol's husband using his wealth and age to pick up a struggling shop girl and take her to a series of motels—it could have been a Grade A movie about an evil male, heterosexual predator."

"So then the bottom line," I say, and this while noticing that the blonded woman is also coming out onto the sidewalk, "the bottom line is: nothing changes. The cars were too big then, they're too big now. Liquor and cigarette companies used to pay Hollywood to make drinking and smoking look glamorous, and now liquor and cigarette companies pay Hollywood to make drinking and smoking look glamorous."

He's smiling and only in part because he's gotten me to agree with him. Sensing an audience or hungry for this particular one, he raises his voice. "They even got into the *Carol* script a few lines about how great smoking was and how only stodgy, puritanical people objected to it. I wonder how much the industry paid to have Cate Blanchett say on screen: 'Just when you think things couldn't get any worse, you run out of cigarettes?'"

"What a bunch of cynics," the woman—less Hollywood than *Big Bang Theory*—butts in. "You want to put down a movie because the stars play lesbians—no interest in men, even successful ones."

She extracts from her purse a pack of American Spirit cigarettes ("organic tobacco and no additives does not mean a safer cigarette"). She offers us each one. "You missed the whole point of the movie. Do you realize what they were up against back then? Because of who she was—naturally—Carol loses her child. She's judged unfit as a mother. When

Patricia Highsmith wrote the story—*her own story*—she had to publish it under a pseudonym. Now it's a 'major motion picture.' You have to admit that's incredible progress."

"What about the gun?" Steve says.

I have to admit it seemed a little odd—that for a cross-country road trip with Therese, Carol put a gun in her suitcase.

"How do you think that gun got there?" Steve presses.

"You tell me," the woman says. "A stagehand put it there?"

I lean toward her. "He's going to tell you the NRA paid a fee or that it was in Blanchett's contract—I get to hold a gun.' Do you think it could be some lesbian thing?"

"Don't be silly, Ken," Steve butts in, and just when I'm trying to do some information gathering for him. "You just saw the movie. Figure it out. They're driving across country, stopping in motel after motel, and not having sex. One of the characters is a photographer. Neither is a conversationalist."

"So?" the woman and I both say (nice smiles at one another afterward).

"So," Steve leaps to his next rock, "of course I'm not an 'insider,' but it went something like this. They screened the first cut for the backers, the money men, and during Carol and Therese's road trip one or more of the money men fell asleep or walked out of the room to go to take a piss with his cellphone. What were 'they'—the producer, the director, Mara's people, Blanchett's people—gonna do? Cut the road trip, have Cate go down on Rooney in the very first motel they come to, or . . . ?

"Or?"

"You gotta know that producers have another file: scriptwriters who know how to juice up a movie at the last minute and without too much fuss or expense. Someone was called in. He or she came up with the gun idea. It just meant filming one new scene for the discovery of the gun and re-filming the discovery of the tape-recording scene so that the gun could be fired. Of course Blanchett couldn't actually shoot anyone. She couldn't hit the private detective even though he was just a few feet away. Never mind that this might or might not have been out of character—if she actually wings a human being, the whole last half hour of the movie would have to be re-shot.

"The big debate was: Should there be 'real' bullets in the gun, and she simply misses? Or should she have neglected to put bullets in the gun? Or even better, had it not occurred to her that guns take bullets? You have to admit it was a win-win, the entire movie was a win-win. Here's Blanchett, the big-shouldered dame made up like a drag queen and with voice and clothes like Lauren Bacall, and she's also that everlasting staple of vaudeville, Broadway and Hollywood: the dumb broad. Too stupid to know how to shoot a gun or to put bullets in it."

“The bottom line, if you ask me,” the young woman says, “is that you don’t like movies. You missed the plot, the love affair, the battle with her husband for custody of their child.”

“No, I saw all that,” Steve says, “but so much more, too. You had a movie for lesbians and gays to come celebrate being able to be out of the closet after so many, very hard decades or centuries. And you had a movie for straight men who want nothing more than to have Rooney Mara and her double breasts whisper, ‘Take me to bed.’ You had a movie for the liquor, cigarette and big-car companies, for the department stores, the cosmetics and perfume sellers, for Chicago’s Drake Hotel. What did the Democrat Party used to call it—the Rainbow Coalition?”

The hostess and our new woman friend’s woman friend are poking their heads out of the plastic, anti-winter-drafts doorway. Our tables are ready. And they are right next to one another. The hostess is ready and willing to push them together.

Now, finally, Steven is whispering. “I think the answer to my question may be no!”

He’s talking about the young woman’s sexual orientation. “So you’re happy now,” I say, skipping over another thing I’ve picked up: she’s going to be sitting next to me.

But at least for the moment, he’s calm—or, rather, grinning. “This is what I like most about American movies,” he says. “Love always wins out in the end.”

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