

Robert Reeves

Author of DOUBTING THOMAS

"Funny, disturbing
and brilliant..."

Another delectable mystery."

San Francisco Chronicle

PEEPING THOMAS

A Novel

**A Boston professor
gets a hard-core
education in dirty movies,
dirty dealing,
and death...-**



0779-3 (Canada \$4.99) U.S. \$3.99

PEEPING



Robert Reeves

Ivy Books

Published by Ballantine Books

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 90-32478

ISBN 0-8041-0779-3

This edition published by arrangement with Crown Publishers, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: October 1991

“IRRESISTIBLE.”
The Kirkus Reviews

“Brisk, delirious dialogue; meticulously placed wit; and a lively spin on the by now jaded academic mystery angle. Thomas is just the kind of professor you wish you’d had.”

Booklist

“Just when readers think they know the score and interest begins to peak, a plot twist changes the whole picture and lifts this detective thriller into the realm of biting political-social satire. . . . Features snappy send-ups of academia and the porn industry, as well as some deep meditations on eros and on pornography’s dehumanizing effects.”

Publishers Weekly

Also by Robert Reeves:

DOUBTING THOMAS

For Mother, Linda, and Christine

Part I



**Hard-Core
Classics**

1

Early one Saturday morning in late summer, Emma Pierce, a feminist historian, political activist, and new head of the women's studies department at Wesley College, surprised me with a telephone call. She asked me an odd question.

"Professor Theron, have you ever heard of the First Amendment?"

At least that's what I *thought* she said. Her call had roused me from the oblivion of a bourbon-induced slumber, not to mention the more general oblivion of my first academic sabbatical. My brain slowly surfaced from the depths. What came from my lips wasn't speech, but an unintelligible croak.

"I apologize if I woke you," Emma Pierce said, once again identifying herself. "Please understand, I wouldn't call if this wasn't important."

"Excuse me," I finally wheezed, "Professor Pierce? I . . . uh, could you just give me a minute?"

I staggered into the bathroom, cupped my hand under the faucet, and drank until I was breathless. Through gummed eyelids, I squinted in the mirror and groaned. Sallow, bleary-eyed, two days' growth of beard. Brain parched, eyeballs scorched, as if some macabre spirit of the night had marinated my entire head in alcohol, then served it flambé. I tapped four aspirin into my palm and stared at them with-

out much hope; the cure for a headache of this magnitude wasn't aspirin but general anesthetic.

In a moment I stumbled back to the phone, searching my memory, wondering who in the hell's free speech I'd suppressed. The First Amendment? Emma Pierce? Easy, Thomas, I told myself, easy. Don't be so defensive. She's probably making a courtesy call. Wants to say hello to a junior colleague. Ask a few questions about the Bill of Rights.

"Professor Pierce, hello, good morning. Just what can I do for you?"

"The First Amendment," she repeated. "You know where it is, correct?"

"Where?"

Had I finally lost one brain cell too many? I said, "The free exchange of ideas, the ACLU, Nazis in Skokie, *that* First Amendment?"

"We don't seem to be on the same wavelength this morning, Professor," she replied. "The First Amendment is the name of a bookstore. Alleged bookstore. They sell pornography."

"I see," I said slowly, not seeing at all.

"I was under the impression that you'd be familiar with it."

"You have the impression I frequent porn shops?"

"Nothing personal, Professor Theron, but your reputation precedes you. There's a consensus among your colleagues that, however fine a teacher you may be, your true calling is . . . slumming?"

I gently massaged my eyelids. So that was it. It wasn't much of a reputation, I supposed, and it was a little out of date, but it was all mine. Not so long ago, whenever the narrow walls of academia threatened to imprison me, I'd escaped into the seamy underworld of Boston life, feeling very much like an explorer of old, priding myself on an unhealthy curiosity about anything unspeakable, unthinkable, or unprintable. There were consequences, of course, not the least of which were a lingering reputation for mar-

ginal behavior and a résumé unlikely to appear in *Who's Who at American Universities*: Thomas Carlyle Theron, professor of American civilization, habitué of seedy bars, chronic horseplayer and railbird, furtive patron of strip clubs, devotee of professional wrestling, perpetual enthusiast of the spiritually exotic. For better or worse, I possessed the heart and soul of a Peeping Thomas.

"It's not slumming," I corrected her affably. "Think of me as a Diane Arbus who doesn't take photographs."

"I assure you, Professor, this is a friendly call. I'm trying to ask a favor. I know I'm popping this on you out of the blue," she continued, "but would it be convenient for you to meet me here, say, within the hour?"

"Meet you where?"

"In the Combat Zone. I'm calling from a phone booth just across the street from the First Amendment."

I sat on the edge of the bed, trying to concentrate despite the rhythmic throbbing in my head. Professor Emma Pierce, author of half a dozen works of significant historical scholarship, not to mention the virtual best-seller *Phallacies*, a celebrity academic who'd been lured to Wesley by the prospect of heading the first women's studies department in the Ivy League, a woman with whom I'd exchanged no more than two dozen words of formal introduction at the faculty club, wanted me to meet her at a porn shop in the Combat Zone?

I said, "Professor Pierce, is everything okay? You're not in some kind of trouble, are you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I suppose I'm in trouble, yes, but only in the sense that we're all in trouble. What I have to ask you may sound a little odd."

"It already sounds odd."

"I imagine that it does. But I'd be grateful if you'd just drop by and hear me out. I can't fully explain over the phone. There's something I want to show you."

"Yes?"

She said, "A pornographic movie. More than one, as a matter of fact."

With that, I decided not to ask any more questions. I poked around in the ashtray on the floor next to the bed. I found a fair-size butt, lit it, inhaled. When I stopped coughing, Emma Pierce said, "The First Amendment, Twenty-three LaGrange Street, between Tremont and—"

"It's been a while," I said, "but I'll find it."

"Splendid. You can't miss us. We'll be on the sidewalk right in front."

"Us?" I said. "We?"

But she'd already hung up. So I heaved myself out of bed again, pulled on a pair of jeans and a white shirt, gulped two more glasses of water, and headed for the door. It wasn't until I stood on the T platform in Wesley Square that I began to have second thoughts. Had I dreamed the entire conversation? Hallucinations had never been a side effect of my drinking before, but there was always a first time.

A minute later the train eased into the station, and I boarded it, deciding, no, the telephone call couldn't have been a dream. Not even my subconscious could conjure a renowned feminist inviting me to the sleazy part of town to watch dirty movies.

2

The Incredible Shrinking Combat Zone.

In its heyday, the Zone was a thriving adult-entertainment district, a small area of downtown Boston set aside in the sixties for X-rated theaters, strip clubs, porn shops, and quasilegal prostitution. I hadn't been here in over two years, and coming back felt a little strange. It wasn't exactly like visiting the old neighborhood, but I did feel a twinge of something. Mostly, I was startled to see how dramatic the decline, how absolute the transformation brought on by VCRs and AIDS and surging real-estate values. The Zone hadn't changed so much as it had . . . well, disappeared. What remained of it had an air of obsolescence, almost of antiquity. I half expected to see anthropologists poking around, hoping to discover the secrets of an earlier age.

I had exited the T beneath Filene's and walked down past the buildings on lower Washington Street, two city blocks at some preliminary stage of transition from tenderloin district to urban shopping mall. A couple of strip clubs were still open for business, and even at this time of morning a few men were going in, their faces grim and careworn.

One thing hadn't changed: the grimness. There'd always been a certain joylessness among the pleasure-seekers in the Zone, a moroseness that sometimes puzzled me. I finally decided that the burden was New England itself, the twin

strains of Puritan and Yankee surfacing even here in a pervasive melancholia. The Puritan unable to enjoy sin, and the Yankee unable to enjoy anything that didn't represent a good value for the dollar.

LaGrange was a narrow, dirty side street, and when I turned the corner, Emma Pierce's telephone call began to make more sense. About fifteen women were picketing the sidewalk in front of the First Amendment, carrying signs and handing out leaflets in support of Proposition Six. PORN TERRORIZES WOMEN. PORN = HATE. VOTE YES ON #6. COALITION OF WOMEN AGAINST PORNOGRAPHY.

I paused on the curb across the street. The sight of an unshaven man squinting expectantly in their direction caused a couple of protestors to pause, eyeing me warily. I must have looked as if I harbored some plot to duck past them, slip through the door, and buy the latest issue of *Big Bottom*.

"Hello! Thomas!" Emma called out when she spotted me. "It was good of you to come on such short notice. I hope my call didn't offend you."

"That's the good thing about slummers, Professor Pierce. We're not easily offended."

She clasped my hand warmly and insisted that I call her Emma. She couldn't have been much taller than five feet, or much younger than sixty, but she radiated energy. Brisk, full of purpose, conspicuously in charge. She was wearing beige corduroy slacks and a strawberry crewneck sweater. Her face was open, friendly, deeply lined, and deeply tanned. She possessed the most intense blue eyes I'd ever seen.

"So," I said, "Proposition Six. You're picketing the First Amendment."

"You're damn right we are."

"Does this mean I'll have to cancel my subscription to *Corsets and Trusses*?"

"My, my, our cynical young professor. I've heard about that. Some of your colleagues told me not to bother. They

warned me that I wouldn't be able to enlist your help." She laughed with a kind of gruff pleasure, and her eyes sparkled. "They said your idea of a pressing civic issue is whether or not to register to vote."

"It's always gratifying," I said, "to enjoy the esteem of one's colleagues."

"Well, you're here, and I'm glad. I was hoping you might give us the benefit of your expertise. Volunteer work, you might say."

"On the phone you mentioned something about, ah, dirty movies?"

She'd been carrying a padded manila envelope under her arm, which she now held up before me. "I'd like you to take a look at something I received in the mail. It's a video-cassette, and"—a nod toward the door of the porn shop—"there're two more inside."

I frowned and lit a cigarette in cupped hands, aware that my head once again had begun to pound. "Emma, I don't want to disappoint you. All false modesty aside, I'm not an expert on pornography. Reports of my moral death have been greatly exaggerated."

She smiled patiently. I rambled on.

"I've spent a certain amount of time in the seedier parts of Boston, yes—call it slumming, whatever—but that was a long time ago, at least it seems like a long time—"

"Relax, Thomas," she soothed. "Just come inside and have a look. Hear me out. You may be intrigued."

A young woman wearing a Gertrude Stein T-shirt stepped between us and spoke to Emma. Something about the Channel Four News unit not showing up until later in the day.

Emma turned back to me, somber now, her eyes betraying a hint of resignation, but her voice determined. "We've set up picket lines here because the news media will always run another story on the Combat Zone, and we need every bit of publicity we can get. People have no idea how bad things are. They hear that the Zone is dead, so they think that maybe pornography isn't a problem anymore. Well, the

Combat Zone may be dying, but what's taking its place is infinitely worse. We're being saturated. There's a miniature Combat Zone in every neighborhood video rental store in the country. Aisles of movies, action adventures, comedies, mysteries, dramas, and in the back, women getting fucked. What if there were an aisle where the Ku Klux Klan could rent movies about humiliating black men, or Nazis could rent movies depicting the torturing of Jews? No one would stand for it, and we're not going to stand for this either. This isn't a free-speech issue. Proposition Six isn't about sex. What it's about is the wholesale promotion of hatred of women, hatred that promotes violence."

I'd been following the story in the papers, and judging by what I'd read, she was facing an uphill battle. Proposition Six was an anti-pornography ordinance, one of several city ordinances scheduled for an upcoming citywide election, and by far the most controversial. Designed to evade the futility of defining obscenity, the ordinance attacked pornography in civil rather than criminal court. Plaintiffs would be obliged to prove only that they had been harmed by pornography, not to define the precise nature of what had harmed them. The prospect of sympathetic juries and huge monetary awards against the producers of pornography, supporters argued, would have a chilling effect on the porn industry far beyond the city limits of Boston. Such a law promised dramatic results never achieved by the old obscenity laws. Opponents insisted that it was unconstitutional; a similar ordinance had passed in Madison, Wisconsin, only to be struck down in the courts.

The issue had polarized Boston's large community of activists. Bizarre political alliances had been forged, and traditional alliances broken. On one side, clergymen attended rallies with radical lesbians; on the other, civil-rights veterans planned legal strategy with the Adult Video Association. Adding to the political confusion, nearly a dozen national organizations and societies had descended upon the city, each with an ax to grind, plus a multitude of more

obscure sects with more obscure agendas. Thus far, the only clear winners were the local tabloids and TV stations. Emma was right; the media always could be counted on to run another story on the Zone, especially if the topic was pornography. Porn sold newspapers, and it boosted Neilsons. Even though the referendum was still several weeks away, stories about the "Porn Prop" or "Proposition Sex" were appearing daily.

A lot of talk, but not all talk. Beneath the political exchange, subterranean passions had bubbled to the surface. In the past two months, firebombs had gutted two X-rated movie houses and a strip club, all within four blocks of where we were now standing. There were no injuries—the buildings were boarded up, abandoned—and there were no claims of responsibility. In a sense, the expression of violence seemed largely symbolic, a case of beating a dead horse. Many of the huge old movie houses and clubs of the Zone were now vacant, offering relatively innocuous targets for protest; torching them simply hastened the demise of the Zone, destroying buildings doomed to be razed anyway. But arson, like porn, was prime media turf, and the papers played the story to the hilt, sounding the obligatory alarms. **TERRORIST BOMBINGS MAR PROPOSITION SIX DEBATE! COMBAT ZONE: NO LONGER A FIGURE OF SPEECH!** "Not for the first time in its history," a dour columnist wrote, "Boston has become a stage for a volatile psycho-politico-sexual drama of censorship."

Emma and I remained at the curb, looking up at the facade of the First Amendment. An arrangement of stroboscopic lights pulsed huge triple X's in the bleak morning light. She placed the manila envelope under her arm, crossed the sidewalk to the entrance, and held open the door for me.

"So, Thomas, how would you feel about a brief dalliance with social action?"

Smiling, wrinkling my shoulders diffidently, I went inside. "You may be in luck," I said. "Brief dalliances are my specialty."