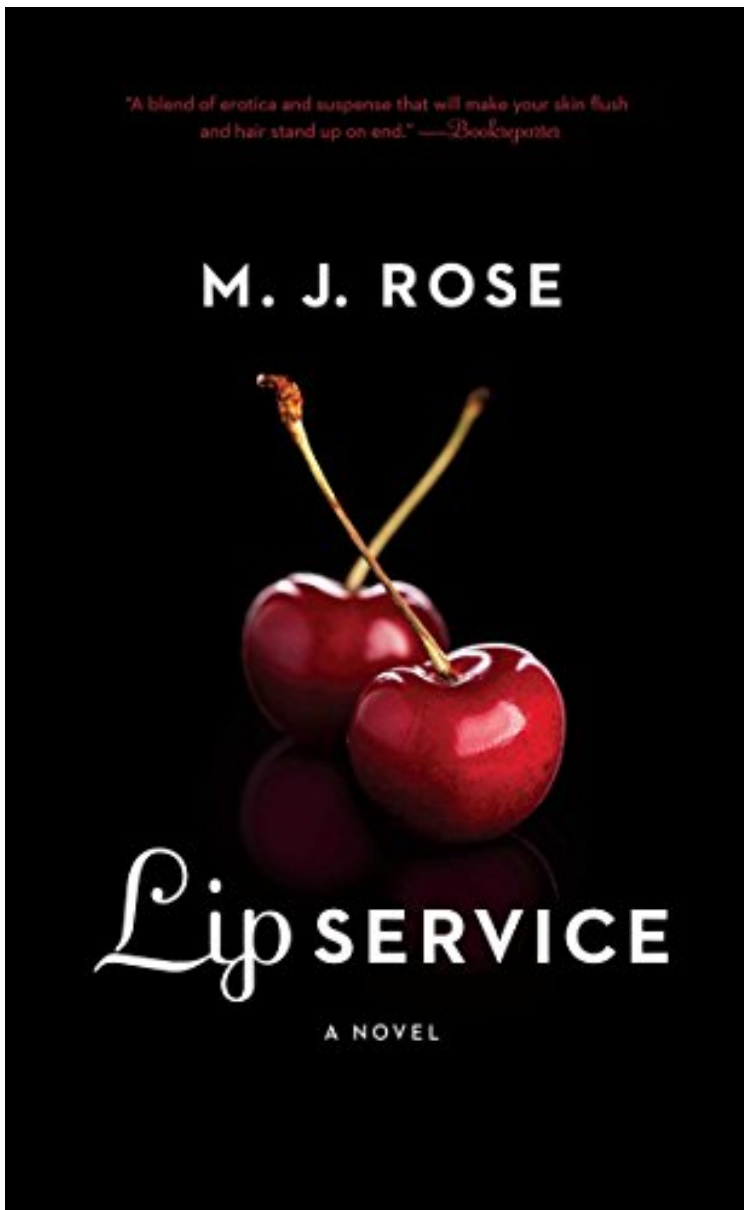


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Lip Service: A Novel (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Lip Service is the prequel to M.J. Rose's Bestselling Butterfield Institute Series which includes three novels - The Halo Effect, The Delilah Complex, The Venus Fix- and the short story collection In Session. Lip Service probes the secret world of phone sex and one woman who becomes empowered by what she discovers there. Not since Erica Jong's Fear of Flying has a novel so masterfully examined the relationship between sexuality and identity. On the surface, Julia Sterling's life seems blessed. Married to a renowned psychiatrist, living on Manhattan's tony Upper East Side, Julia deeply loves her stepson, and is forging a career as a journalist. When a writing job at The Butterfield Institute - a sex

therapy clinic - exposes her to the world of phone sex, Julia glimpses a world that stirs her erotic fantasies but threatens her carefully constructed reality. As she explores her emotional and sexual connections to the men she knows and several she will never meet, she confronts evil, perversity, and her own passions. Tracing the currents of desire, illusion, and psychological manipulation, *Lip Service* is an astonishingly vivid glimpse into one woman's inner life. At the same time, this electrifying thriller grips the reader as it builds toward a battering climax.

Chapter One
September 23, 1996
FIVE WEEKS EARLIER

Like most visitors to the New York Botanical Garden, I'd always seen them during the day in sunshine when the colors of the flowers and foliage were bright and their groomed perfection was obvious. But that evening, as we rode up the winding road that led through the gardens, the brilliance of the gardens was concealed by the encroaching twilight. Rather than the cultivated postcard I was familiar with, I found I preferred the mystery that loomed before me now as the shadows deepened. What was hiding in the old branches of the tall elm? In the twisted limbs of the maple? What was it that made the needles of the spruce quiver? Why did the forest seem more spirited in this dusky light? Then we rounded a turn and the illuminated conservatory blossomed out of the darker greenery surrounding it. Our car pulled to a stop. Photographers waiting in front of the building started shooting as soon as the chauffeur opened the limo door. I have a grainy photo of us clipped from that weekend's New York Times roundup of charitable events. Judging from the composition of the shot, the photographers were obviously favoring my husband, who was charming them with his wide smile and sparkling eyes. The wind had blown his thick hair -- black, streaked with gray -- and he boyishly reached up to brush it back. He was so good at performing for the camera, he did it effortlessly. There is much that is telling about the photograph. At first it seems no more than a snapshot for the society pages. The caption: "Dr. Paul Sterling, director of FIT, and his wife, Julia, arriving at Thursday night's fete with the honoree, basketball coach Bob Wilcox." But Bob, who should have been featured (he was, after all, the celebrity and guest of honor), is slightly out of focus and to Paul's left. I am behind my husband, in his shadow. All of us are well dressed; the two tall men in tuxedos, I in a floor-length, pale gray, long-sleeved column of crepe de chine by Armani. A ghost in the background -- which was how I often felt at my husband's fund-raising events. That night, my straight blond hair was pulled back and twisted into a slick chignon, a style Paul preferred. Earlier, he'd been looking at himself in the hallway mirror, removing a speck of dust off his lapel, when I came out of the bedroom. He nodded his approval. "You look elegant. The gray of the dress is the same color as your eyes," he said to my image in the mirror. It occurred to me his polished voice was too smooth. My husband, who long before had abandoned his Jewish, middle-class background and Long Island accent, appreciated style more than beauty, believing it to be one of the few indications of true class. He turned to me and touched my hand lightly with his. Not sexually, but as if I were a touchstone. Now, as I look at the photograph from that night, I seem absent. Smoke about to evaporate in the much more vibrant presence of my husband. His eyes are engaged. Mine are vacant. His smile seems genuine; mine seems pasted on for the cameras. He is there in mind and body, I only in body. And not for long at that. He had been looking forward to the event; I had been looking forward to its being over. I had no sense that the evening would be a pivotal one, setting certain events in motion that we would be powerless to reverse. There are moments like that -- impossible to sense when they are upon us -- their importance conceivable only in hindsight. Even if we weren't aware of it, Paul and I, and to a lesser degree our son, Max, were ready for what was to come. We had already changed directions. The time had come to acknowledge it. Was that why I had such a strong desire to be somewhere -- anywhere -- else that night? Or was it just that playing hostess to Paul's host at charity dinners was wearing on me? Disliking the fawning status seekers, the celebrity mongers, the socialites, and the small talk, I was unnerved by my role. I survived evenings like that by putting on a mask and becoming a gracious character, agreeable and amiable. Paul and Bob Wilcox walked ahead of me, up toward the elaborate gingerbread conservatory where the party was under way. Around us were miles of late summer gardens that looked so much more inviting than the crowds. How much would anyone miss me if I disappeared and went off exploring the tended paths I knew so well? "Julia?" Paul's voice implored me as if I were a recalcitrant child. He'd stopped about twenty feet ahead and was waiting for me, his fingers drumming against his thigh -- the only outward manifestation of his impatience. "It's just so lush at this time of year," I offered as a way of explanation. "It's almost a shame to go inside." "She's right," Bob said in his Southwest drawl, "Let's all play hooky -- have ourselves a picnic in the woods." Well over six feet tall, he looked down and out past the party at the gardens darkened but not yet diminished by the twilight. "Oh no, I'm not going to lose both of you to the wilds of the Botanical Garden. C'mon, Julia, don't tempt the guest of honor." My husband sounded perfectly affable but his fingers were still drumming. A

renowned psychiatrist, Paul had closed his practice four years earlier to become the director of FIT (an acronym for a nonprofit agency called Fathers in Trouble). Now, he navigated the politics of the New York City government as well as the upper echelons of society in his never-ending quest for operating funds.

Convincing, seducing, impressing, he catapulted his agency (and himself) into the limelight. FIT had become the charity of the moment. I rejoined the two men and together we walked up the steps toward the glass building. As usual, I was aware of how much attention Paul attracted. Certainly, a fair share of guests acknowledged Bob, but they stared at Paul, their eyes lingering. There's something hypnotic about my husband's looks; he has the charismatic gleam of either a politician or an actor. And in a way, he's both. The first time I saw Paul Sterling -- at a party my father was giving in our home for some of his associates in the psychiatric community -- I was leaning against a wall sipping a glass of something ice-cold, not knowing what to do with myself. The only thing I had in common with any of these people was that I was in therapy and they were all therapists. Hearing some laughter, I searched for its source and saw Paul at the center of a group. He stood out. His hair was blacker than anyone else's, his eyes bluer. It was as if there were a spotlight on him. As I thought about edging closer to discover what it was about him that could hold those people so enthralled, he looked up, caught my eye, and grinned. "You look lost," he said, when he finally managed to get through the crowd and over to me. "Can I help you find the bar, some food, a bathroom?" "No," I laughed, already half in love with his easy confidence. "I live here." But that wasn't what I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him that I really was lost and ask him how he'd known it. I never would have guessed he was lost too. We had just exchanged names and only begun to talk when someone walked over, interrupting, wanting to speak to Paul. And then someone else. Until, soon, he was in the center of another crowd and I just slipped away. "You got lost again," he said, when he found me a few minutes later. His hand was determined as it surrounded mine and pulled me over to the piano. "Sit next to me, Julia. There's only room for the two of us here," he said. He began to improvise a jazz riff. I was alone beside him only a moment before a new crowd gathered. Paul always drew an audience. It wasn't his mastery of the piano. It was his assuredness, his attractiveness, his ease. I slid as close to him as I could without our bodies touching. He must have sensed my shifting, because he turned to me -- his fingers poised above the ivory and black keys -- and looked at me, searching my face to see if I was all right, if I was enjoying this as much as he was. And then he smiled -- that intimate, engaging smile. Around us, people were watching, noting our silent exchange, but I didn't care, and when his fingers came down again, the sounds of his music went through me, conducted up my spine at the same time the others only heard it. A star, he shined on me. And I wanted to remain in the gleam of his cool blue light forever. That night, at the Botanical Garden, I was still in my husband's light. But it no longer burned quite so bright. Inside the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory's cultivated jungle, the huge fronds of green oversize palms hung down in graceful arcs that led the way through the entrance. Giant elephant ears and fragile ferns, four and five feet across, flanked the steps. I breathed in deeply. The smell was dark and fresh, a combination of earth and humidity, a scent I knew well but usually associated with my own most peaceful moments. Yet there I was, amidst a throng of guests for whom I was supposed to play hostess. Following Paul and Bob, I stopped at the bar, where Bob's wife, Lanni, who had come ahead, was waiting. A public relations guru who handled both her husband's press as well as FIT's, Lanni was responsible for the guest list that night. Lanni, in navy sequins, also by Armani, caught my eye and winked. When we'd first met, I hadn't trusted her. Used to cosmopolitan New Yorkers, I found Lanni too amicable, too Texas-friendly. As I got to know her, I discovered behind the drawl was a sensitive, supportive woman I had come to admire. Immediately, we were surrounded by people, and the evening's work on behalf of FIT began. Certainly, FIT is a worthwhile program. A revolutionary idea created by Paul and a businessman named Mike Menken, the agency's goal is to train and then find work for the many thousands of jobless divorced and unmarried fathers delinquent in their child support payments. By training these men and getting them work, FIT is responsible for removing thousands of women and children from welfare rolls. The New York City program is so successful, there are now branches in eight other major cities in the country. Becoming the agency's director fit my husband's image of himself: powerful, successful, and recognized. He mixed and mingled with the top levels of the city's political infrastructure as well as the city's social strata. Paul had mastered the art of garnering attention for his charity and himself; events like this evening's was a perfect example. In fact, making Bob Wilcox FIT's spokesperson had added a new dimension to the charity's prominence. For one thing, Paul now had a supply of front-row tickets to any home game played in Madison Square Garden. He offered those seats to the charity's major donors, who never seemed to tire of seeing themselves on the eleven o'clock news, seated beside the likes of JFK Jr., John McEnroe, or

Spike Lee. Bob's involvement with FIT also enhanced my husband's wardrobe. An ambassador for Giorgio Armani, Bob was part of an exclusive group of highly visible people given free access to the designer's Madison Avenue boutique. Through Bob, Paul was offered a twenty-five-thousand-dollar-a-year clothes budget, which he shared with me. At first, it was awkward to go into the Armani boutique, be fussed over, fitted, and then not given a bill. But the simplicity of the designer's style had always appealed to me. The deceptively austere clothes are secretly seductive. Wearing Armani, my need for complicated accessories or flamboyant jewels disappears. But that night I looked underdressed compared with some of the women whose gowns and jewels were so extravagant, they seemed to be competing with the flowers. I shook hands, kissed cheeks, complimented women on their clothes and their hair, remembered children's names and spouses' job descriptions and recent ailments. Too soon, the vodka I had been sipping was gone. I wanted another but allowed myself only one cocktail before dinner and one glass of wine with dinner; relaxing was not as important as remaining aware of conversational nuances. A few feet away from me, Paul was talking to a group who were all listening intently to him. My husband's posture, including the position of his arms, was calculated to put people at ease. He'd taught me to mimic these movements. "Sending the wrong signals can cost money. A mistaken inflection can create a bad impression," he'd instructed. I couldn't be myself at Paul's events, couldn't take a chance of saying or doing the wrong thing. Everyone there was either a donor, a potential donor, a city politician who needed to be coddled, or a celebrity whose status raised the status of the charity. My concerns weren't due to my own anxiety -- I had almost lost a major donor the year before. We'd been at a small anniversary dinner for friends at an East Side restaurant when, halfway through our meal, Paul noticed Dominick Gray, a donor, and his wife, Sally, seated across the room. For several months Paul had been unsuccessfully trying to woo the Grays, but each time dinner plans had been made the Grays canceled them. In fact, we were supposed to have been taking them out the next evening, but that morning Dominick Gray had called Paul and said Sally was having some stitches removed and dinner might be too much for her. At Paul's urging, I followed him across the restaurant to say hello to the Grays. "I'm so sorry you won't be able to join us tomorrow," I said to Sally. "So am I, but I have this thing with the doctor and Dominick thinks I should take it easy." "Well, I'm sure you'll be fine. I hope we can reschedule soon," I answered. An ordinary conversation. Except it wasn't. Dominick called Paul the next morning and demanded an apology. How dare I insinuate his wife would be fine? How did I know her visit to the doctor wasn't a serious problem? How could I be so flip? Paul explained I'd only used a figure of speech, that I was an optimist, sometimes overzealous in my positivity. Eventually he placated Gray, but when Paul came home that night, he used the incident to prove a point. "I defended you, Julia. But now you understand why I warn you to be so careful. Even the most innocent comment can be misconstrued." And so I was careful. Probably to the point that many of Paul's associates must have thought at times that I was too quiet -- boring, even. I learned to ask questions and interview the people seated on either side of me at dinner parties. I censored my thoughts so that telling smiles or smirks never gave me away. I would go home at night with my face frozen into a mask like the masks I collected and hung on my bedroom walls. Features forever pasted in one position -- a sincere smile and intelligent gaze. Composed. Interested. Not curious. Not flirting. Not judgmental. Not any of the things I was. Finally escaping the cocktail crowd, I made my way to the ladies' room. Inside a stall, I lit a cigarette and reminded myself that this too would pass. I have gotten through too many situations saying that. This too shall pass. My mother used to repeat it to me when I was a child and scared of something. This too shall pass, she would say and hug me close, and I would smell her Shalimar perfume and feel, for the moment, so very safe. And she was right; whatever it was I was apprehensive about eventually did pass. After I had my nervous breakdown in college, I found myself chanting it like a mantra. This too shall pass. This too shall pass. And except for a few scars, it did. I dropped the cigarette butt in the toilet, flushed, then walked outside. Normally I don't smoke, but I gave myself a treat whenever my presence was required at one of Paul's fund-raisers: a cigarette for being good, for behaving. I stood at the mirrored vanity and reapplied my lipstick, inspecting my face for smudges, for stray eyelashes, for anything that didn't belong there, including the look I always feared seeing: the wanton, dissatisfied look. The bad Julia's face. It never appeared, but still, I apprehensively watched for its unwelcome return. Coming out of the ladies' room, I found myself caught up in the throng of people moving through the greenhouse. Could I be the only one looking up at the elaborate domed ceiling? At the flowers? The plants? No one else seemed aware of their surroundings as they chatted to each other and moved about. No matter how often I went there -- to take gardening classes or wander around the grounds -- I always found myself inside this building, staring up and out the glass roof, into the sky. This conservatory had become one of my refuges; I resented

having it disrupted. Continuing to follow the crowd, I reached the dining room. The air was redolent with the scent of roses so heavy, full, and fat their voluptuousness embarrassed me. Just as it had been so hard for me to refrain from leaving the party to roam the gardens outside, it was difficult for me to refrain from burying my face in the roses, to keep my fingers from touching their silken petals, to avoid the lure of engaging in some kind of communion with them. Finally, I found our table in the middle of the room. Bob and Lanni Wilcox were already there talking to Mike Menken and his wife, Georgia, who was on the board of the Botanical Garden. As I tried to make my way over to Lanni, Paul sidetracked me. "Julia, come meet the Foleys." I had been briefed in the limousine ride: Tom and Jill Foley -- he was in publishing -- were involved in a half-dozen causes and had recently decided to consolidate their philanthropic efforts to one or two charities. Paul was campaigning for FIT. Tom and Jill looked alike in that way a married couple can. Both of them were tall, angular, and stoic and resembled a sophisticated version of Grant Wood's American Gothic. I was polite, interested, and flattering, making good eye contact during the short conversation we had while we waited for the rest of the table to arrive. And then we all went to find our seats. Tom Foley was on my right. Sam Butterfield was on my left. "Good evening, Julia," Sam said, his round eyes twinkling, his full lips curving in a smile. A short, compact man in his sixties, his silver hair fell in waves to his shoulders, longer than was currently popular. Instead of a formal white shirt, he wore a rebellious faded blue chambray work shirt with his tuxedo. As had happened the few other times we had met, I took a slight step backward -- leery of getting too close. After Paul made the introductions around the table, Sam's gaze came to rest on me, his dark blue eyes searching mine as if he were trying to unearth me. "You don't look anything like the Julia who I used to see at the institute," Sam said. His voice was rough, as if it had been rubbed with sandpaper. The month before I had done a small freelance job, writing a four-page brochure about the institute for Sam and his wife, Nina. I hadn't gotten to know Sam well, but I'd liked and was impressed by Nina. Since she'd moved up to Harvard to teach for the fall semester, she couldn't be at the fund-raiser that night and I was sorry. She would have made the evening more palatable. "No, I suppose not," I said. "But how could I work dressed up like this?" "Hell, I don't mean your clothes." He gestured with his hands, his thick fingers moving in the air. "It's your whole damn persona." "Does every psychiatrist feel it's acceptable to unabashedly delve into other people's lives?" I asked. "You tell me." He laughed, and all his features dissolved into each other. "Well, my father -- who's a shrink -- does, and my husband does...all his associates do." "I hate to be lumped in with all his associates," Sam teased. From the right, a waiter served warm mushroom tarts and I used the distraction to attend to Tom Foley. "So Julia, are you involved in your husband's endeavor?" Tom eventually asked. "Just as a hostess," I said. "Demanding job. I see Jill doing it and feel pity for her. Not too rewarding, is it?" "Actually, I think it is." I had my mask on. "Bullshit," Sam whispered on my other side and then joined in our conversation. "C'mon. How rewarding can it be for you to meet and greet and make polite conversation with strangers night after night?" Devil's advocate was a role he was well suited to. "I get to know them, and then they're not strangers; they become our friends." It wasn't the answer I wanted to give but the one I was required to give. "Look around this room and tell me honestly how many people here are your friends," Sam demanded, but before I could even come up with an answer, he answered for me. "Four. If you're lucky." He turned back to his tart and I checked on Tom, who was now engaged with the woman to his right. "You're good at this -- being someone you're not, aren't you?" Sam asked. "I don't know what you mean," I said, hedging. "Bullshit. You know exactly what I mean. I'm talking about inventing a persona and hiding behind it. Don't bother to refute me. I know the signs; I've studied people my whole life." Rather than continue the discussion, I glanced past Sam to Jill Foley, who was staring off into space, and drew her into a conversation. For a few minutes, everything went smoothly until Sam made a reference to the institute. "What institute is that?" Jill Foley asked. "My wife and I run the Butterfield Institute," Sam said. "The sex clinic?" Jill frowned. "Yes. Have you heard of it?" Sam asked. "It's hard not to. Every time I open a magazine, it seems you or your wife are being quoted. It's impossible to avoid your radical theories." From her tone, she obviously disapproved. Sam examined her pinched face for a long moment before responding. "We need air to breathe, food to eat, a roof over our heads. And we need sex. It's a primal urge, not an intellectual decision, although our Judeo-Christian ethic has done everything in its power to make it one, screwing up people along the way." He shook his head for emphasis and his white hair flew around him like a lion's mane. "Someone has to undo some of that damage. That's what the institute's for." Jill Foley clasped her hands together as if she were praying. "We're already far too open as a society," she argued. Sam enjoyed defending his position. "We're not open at all. We may allow movies, television, and books to depict explicit sex, but shit, as human beings, we're still uptight and puritanical." "I can't agree. We're much too

permissive and altogether too tolerant of deviant behavior. Our whole value system is corrupt." Jill was adamant. "C'mon, is it deviant or dangerous when two animals mate? Of course not. It's the church, in its effort to control people, that has created these arbitrary boundaries and rules to corral our sexual appetites. They've made us ashamed and guilty about our genitalia because they're too close to the part of the body that produces waste. In our culture, we're fucked by the time we're toilet trained." "Do you mean to imply other cultures with a different relationship to sex are better off?" she asked contemptuously. It was well past the time for me to interrupt and change the subject. Jill had become belligerent and Sam, argumentative, but I was too curious. I wanted to hear Sam's response. "Well, yes. Certain eastern cultures see sexuality not as a fall from grace but as a way to ascend to a state of grace, to a state of self-realization. Achieving transcendental knowledge is their goal; their means is through the body." Even though he'd been answering Jill's question, Sam had been looking at me. So now Jill was insulted as well as indignant. Across the table, Paul noticed no one was talking to Tom Foley and, excusing himself from Georgia Menken, he walked around to our side. Not knowing what had transpired, Paul couldn't have avoided what followed. "Jill, Tom, I wanted to make sure you two got a chance to talk to Sam Butterfield. He's one of our most fervent supporters. Over the last three years, he's employed several of our graduates." Jill remained aloof, but Tom was interested. "In fact, we just promoted one of your graduates to be our assistant librarian," Sam said. "There's great satisfaction in active participation," Tom said. "Anyone can just write a check. What kind of company do you have, Sam?" Assuming Tom and his wife shared similar prejudices, I tried to warn Paul to intervene, but my husband wasn't paying attention to me -- he was absorbed in getting the two men to bond. "Sam is the founder of the Butterfield Institute," Paul boasted, adding, "In the psychiatric community, it's considered the finest clinic of its kind." "The Butterfield Institute? Sorry, I don't think I'm aware of it," Tom said. "It's that progressive sex clinic, Tom," Jill said, as if she'd just eaten spoiled food. Immediately, Paul changed the subject back to FIT and they continued conversing about the charity until the waiter interrupted with the next course. "Oh well, I suppose that will put an end to Paul's trotting me out to impress new devotees for a while," Sam said to me in a low voice once Paul had returned to his seat. Jill had turned her full attention to the man on her left and Tom was busy with the dinner partner on his right. "Perhaps we should play it safe and talk about something innocuous in case anyone's eavesdropping," I joked. "All right. What do you know about poetry?" Sam asked. "Sorry -- I haven't read any since college." "Did you ever hear of the poet Robert Herrick?" I sipped some wine and tried to remember. "I think so. Was he a nineteenth-century English poet?" "Seventeenth. He had a mistress to whom he wrote reams of poetry." Sam paused. "Her name was Julia. One of the better-known poems is called "Upon Julia's Clothes." Do you know it?" "No." Sam shut his eyes and let his head fall back a bit. Slightly too suggestive for the time and place. I looked over at Paul, but he was engrossed in conversation. "Whenas in silks my Julia goes,/Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows/That liquefaction of her clothes./Next when I cast mine eyes, and see/That brave vibration each way free,/O how that glittering taketh me!" Sam opened his eyes and looked at me, awaiting a response. "That was beautiful," I whispered, half enthralled, half embarrassed by his expansiveness. "You mean you never had a lover read that to you?" I shook my head no. "Fucking shame. It was written over three hundred years ago, but it fits you -- especially tonight. There's a beautiful tradition in quoting love poetry. It's a powerful and underrated aphrodisiac." The setting for Sam's sentiment was perfect. Victorian conservatories had often been used as trysting places where lovers met and read poetry to express emotions both were too shy to speak directly. But considering the occasion, Sam's comments were inappropriate. Because I was on my best behavior, I was able to appear composed. But his flirting had unnerved me. I reminded myself that a good therapist has the ability to instantly connect to a patient. It was a gift I'd seen firsthand with my father, with Dr. Maggie Stone, who was my therapist, and with my husband. Now, I tried to convince myself that that was all Sam had done with me. But when he'd recited those lines I'd become aware of the thin fabric of my dress against my body. I'd felt my skin flush; my nipples harden. How long had it been since a man had made me aware of myself? As the waiter refilled our wineglasses, I realized that while we'd been talking, I'd finished my wine. Usually I was able to make one glass last all evening. It was time to turn my attention to Tom Foley, so it wasn't until after the main course that I spoke with Sam again. "I've been watching you, Julia. You're damn good at deflecting questions. Too many secrets?" he asked, as the waiter cleared our plates. "No. None at all," I said. "How sad," he said, feigning a sorrowful smile. Obviously he didn't believe me. I wanted to turn his question back on him, trade him one of my secrets for one of his, but he didn't give me a chance. "I've been thinking that all those radical things we're doing at the institute deserve to be written up in a big, fat book. Would you be interested?" Sam asked. "Yes, I'd love

to read it," I answered. "Fuck no. I want to know if you'd be interested in writing it." While I listened in dazed silence, Sam went into more detail including what he'd expect to pay me if I agreed to take on the project. Before I got a chance to respond, Paul, circulating again, came up behind me. Sam wasn't shy about telling Paul how much he was enjoying my company. "Yes, Julia's very special," Paul said, as if I weren't there. "I'm very proud of her." "Please, Paul," I said, blushing. "You're embarrassing me." Ignoring me, my husband continued. "When I first told her I'd been offered the directorship of FIT, I warned her my working for a nonprofit would mean us making sacrifices, but Julia never complained. She rolled up her sleeves and started taking as many freelance jobs as she could get to make up the difference and she hasn't slowed down since." "Well, she's done a damn good job for us and I'm hoping our association will continue with a book I've been thinking about. I think we both could get a lot out of it." Beside me I saw Tom Foley's head swing around. Paul noticed it too. "A book?" Tom asked. "I thought I heard someone talking about a book. Who's writing this book?" For reasons I didn't understand until later, Paul deflected the question and got Tom talking about his publishing company's newest offerings. "Is Paul supportive?" Sam asked, once my husband had returned to his seat. "You heard him bragging." "Yeah, but he was saying what he wanted me to hear. What I'm asking you is how he really treats you." "Why would you think he wasn't being straight with you?" I asked. "You didn't answer my question," he said. "What was your question?" I'd used the therapist's old trick of answering a question with a question and hoped Sam would be polite enough to back off, but he didn't.

The truth was, Paul supported my efforts when it suited his purposes; the rest of the time, he worried I pushed myself too hard. "You should know better than to try that with me," Sam said. "And you should know better than to pry." We both laughed. Across the table, Paul was deep in conversation with Georgia Menken, leaning close to her, listening intently, a smile poised on his mouth for the moment it would be appropriate. Unconditional attention. Nonjudgmental responses. It was his good-father role, his sales spiel, practiced so often it was second nature to him by now. Well coached by Paul not to reveal anything personal or controversial with his business associates or donors, I changed the subject as the waiter poured coffee. "Sam, how is Nina liking Harvard?" I asked. "She's having a ball, but that's typical. She loves new situations. At heart she's an adventuress." "You must..." I fumbled over my words and started again. "It must be exciting to be married to someone like that." "Exciting and at times dangerous." "What makes it dangerous?" I asked. "Well, Nina and I are both explorers, so sometimes we wind up in uncharted territory." "Explorers of what?" "We really believe all that stuff we spout at the institute. We believe that in order for people to survive in a relationship, they have to open themselves up to each other without fearing the outcome or the ramifications. They need to explore their sexual selves with each other, without holding back or worrying how things will look to anyone outside the union." "You've really managed that?" I asked. "Your question leads me to believe you haven't," Sam said as the waiter put a dessert plate down in front of me. I inspected the hard chocolate shell filled with ruffles of chocolate mousse, and rather than respond to Sam's question, I spooned some of the mousse into my mouth, letting the chocolate dissolve on my tongue, concentrating on the bittersweet taste. Suddenly, Sam had ceased to be interesting or eccentric. Probing too deeply, getting too near those parts of myself that I'd long ago closed off, he had become intimidating. Copyright 1998 by M.J.

RoseRevue de presse "Four stars...highly sensuous...intelligent and well-crafted." Romantic Times "Lip Service should be savored bit by bit." Buzz News