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Cheerful Ode to Lemons of Literature

By LOLA OGUNNAIKE

Celebrating clunky sentences and mixed metaphors, self-indulgent prose and just plain old bad writing, Lit Lite, a weekly literary series, invites performers to select and read from their favorite bad books. And so one evening last week at the Chelsea restaurant Elmo, Greg Walloch, a stand-up comic, chose to deliver passages from two novels by the actor Ethan Hawke, "The Hottest State" and "Ash Wednesday."

"Man, when I first met Christy - and this is no joke, a cliché but no joke - it was like my heart was literally stuck on my esophagus," Mr. Walloch read from "Ash Wednesday" as an audience of more than 40 groaned and giggled. It was soon revealed that Christy is a woman with a posterior so "dynamite," that, "if you looked at her from the back you'd swear she was a black chick." Mr. Walloch, who is white, deadpanned, "That happens to me all the time."

Since the series began in February, more than 40 books have been skewered. A \$5 cover charge is imposed and, because of the subject matter, heavy drinking is encouraged. Each session tackles a different subject, from sex to self help. At one event the ballet dancer Robert La Fosse poked fun at his autobiography, "Nothing to Hide." Earlier this month, in keeping with the theme "Women's Problems," performers read excerpts from Rosie O'Donnell's free-verse poetry blog (onceadored.blogspot.com), "Yvonne: An Autobiography," by the actress Yvonne De Carlo, who played Lily Munster in the television series "The Munsters," and Eve Ensler's "Good Body." Tonight, under the banner "Difficult People," Jodi Lennon, a comedy writer, will present "Hold My Gold," a hip-hop how-to guide for white girls.

Lit Lite is the brainchild of Kevin Malony and Grady Hendrix, both of whom stage productions for the Off Off Broadway theater company Tweed. Mr. Hendrix began the evening with a recitation from "Mission Compromised," Oliver North's military thriller.

"I am unfortunately one of those lonely sad people that reads a lot," said Mr. Hendrix in an interview, "and I've always been drawn to bad books." Asked why he prefers cringe-inducing texts to works from the literary canon Mr. Hendrix said, "Good literature is a little bit boring and precious." He pointed to Jonathan Franzen's "Corrections" and the works of David Foster Wallace to illustrate his point, saying he would rather curl up with "I Was a White Slave in Harlem," the autobiography of the drag queen Margo Howard-Howard. Speaking of slavery and drag queens. Originally, Flotilla DeBarge, a statuesque drag queen who bears more than a passing resemblance to the talk show host Star Jones, was to read that evening from "Swan," a novel by the model Naomi Campbell. Ms. DeBarge and Mr. Hendrix decided that while Ms. Campbell's book was awful, it was

not gripping; instead they opted for Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Resplendent in a mud-cloth tunic, miniskirt and heavy makeup, Ms. DeBarge struggled through her opening. "Sorry you all," she said, "my eyelashes are giving me some trouble." She rallied and read passages about Topsy, the incorrigible slave child. But it was the maudlin chapter in which little Eva, in all her golden blond glory, dies of consumption that really had the crowd in stitches. "I want to give you something that, when you look at, you shall always remember me," Ms. DeBarge said, delivering lines in a syrupy voice reminiscent of Scarlet O'Hara: "I'm going to give all of you a curl of my hair; and when you look at it, think that I am in heaven and that I want to see you all there." Not to be outdone by Ms. DeBarge, Sweetie, another man partial to women's clothing, sauntered to the stage sporting a red-sequined dress and a blond bouffant that would easily put Marge Simpson's to shame. Sweetie had chosen to share bits from "Sarah," J. T. LeRoy's disturbing novel about a 12-year-old transvestite hooker who plies his trade at truck stops.

Reveling in the tale that features a toothless pimp, a pedophile and a call girl named Pooh ("not like the bear," Mr. LeRoy writes), Sweetie continued to gleefully flip through "Sarah" long past her allotted 20 minutes.

Florent Morellet, owner of the popular meatpacking district diner Florent laughed through much of the show. "You know we could be doing this for centuries," he said, "There are so many bad books - it's an endless gold mine."

Mr. Walloch said that his next reading will be from the Abercrombie & Fitch catalog. "Everyone just looks at the clothes and the models, but have you read that thing?"

Mr. Hendrix, who helps choose many of the featured texts, said organizing the event has been harder than he expected. "To pick something that's bad and bad enough to be entertaining is really a lot of work."

A Lit Lite reading takes place tonight at the lounge at Elmo, 156 Seventh Avenue, between 19th and 20th Streets, Chelsea, (212) 337-8000.