

The Litreactor Years 2014-2023

by Peter Derk

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9 Great Poop Reads: Taking Literary Structures From Classroom To Bathroom



My junior high English teacher measured reading assignments in something he called Poop Reads.

I had an interesting education. Ask me about it sometime. Buy me a drink first and you'll hear some stuff. There's a story about a speech and debate teacher's pregnancy that's still hard to tell without slipping back into the voice of an embarrassed 8th grader.

Poop Reads. A Poop Read is the unit of reading done in one toilet trip. The number of toilet trips it takes to finish a given piece of literature is a book's Poop Read score. A regular novel, maybe *The Great Gatsby*, might be several dozen Poop Reads. A *Calvin & Hobbes* comic is something like .25 Poop Reads.

This junior high teacher, he would assign homework, and when the classed groaned he would say, "C'mon guys. It's like three Poop Reads. Max."

In addition to discovering things about the English language, I spent a good deal of junior high learning about the toilet habits of this teacher. Or maybe his reading speed. How long three Poop Reads was for him. I would categorize his reading speed as very fast. And his bowel movements as infrequent but lengthy.

It's a fascinating measure in that it's dynamic, based on the individual. My Poop Read may not be the same as yours. However, Poop Reads are a great answer to the question of how long it takes to read something. It takes different people different lengths of time. It is in the Poop Read that we've finally

discovered a useful measurement.

Just because you're reading on the toilet doesn't mean you have to read books that belong IN the toilet. You can read good stuff. Great stuff.

I also suspect Poop Reads might be the hidden factor when it comes to Soul Mates, that your Soul Mate will have a similar Poop Read time. But the research is ongoing. I'll let you know when I find either my Soul Mate or someone whose Poop Read times sync with my own. It's a dubious start, Soul Mates based on fecal matter, but god knows I've gone off of less.

At this point I'm sure I've lost some readers already. The people who do not read on the toilet. Who don't iPad on the toilet. The high and mighty of the world who never wind up on the toilet with a melting lime popsicle, wondering where life all went wrong.

Must be nice to live so refined.

Bad news, though. You who sit with empty hands and an empty head, waiting for the magic? You're in the minority.

My day job is in a public library, so I see the books go out, and I see the books come in. In the last decade I've seen some interesting bookmark choices. A hundred dollar bill. An endless parade of kid pictures, one which I keep with me. It's a beautiful baby girl with the thickest unibrow I've seen in my entire life.

The most consistent bookmark, hands-down, is a swatch of toilet paper. Thin stuff, two-ply. Torn in neat squares or ripped in animal fashion. Any way that toilet paper can be separated from the roll and placed between pages, it's happened. At a library near you.

If you need something less anecdotal, **this study says** that just over half the population is reading on the toilet. Look to the person on your left. Look to the person on your right. Now imagine one of those people cracking the spine on *Moby Dick* while the exhaust fan hums from above.

Face facts. People are reading on the toilet. This is science. This is happening.

When something like this is happening, when reading on the toilet is the hottest trend sweeping the nation, you have two options. Embrace or reject.

I embrace you, brothers and sisters of the porcelain. Right after you wash your hands, I embrace you. Wherever you feel the need to read, let's make it happen. Not to mention that just because you're reading on the toilet doesn't mean you have to read books that belong IN the toilet. You can read good stuff. Great stuff. Let the masters of structure put on a clinic in your bathroom. Read their words and watch how they break apart and fit back together. There are so many great reads that are broken up into short sections, perfect to enjoy during...let's just leave it at During. Take a look at some of these options, pick whatever's best for you. Each title on the list is a good read and has something to teach any writer about short forms.

It's okay to look over the list even if you're not a toilet reader. Your uptight lifestyle can be a secret

Just because you're reading on the toilet doesn't mean you have to read books that belong IN the toilet. You can read good stuff. Great stuff.

between you and me.

I've also included some approximate Poop Read (PR) numbers for scale and, you know, just in case one of you readers out there just might be my PR soulmate.

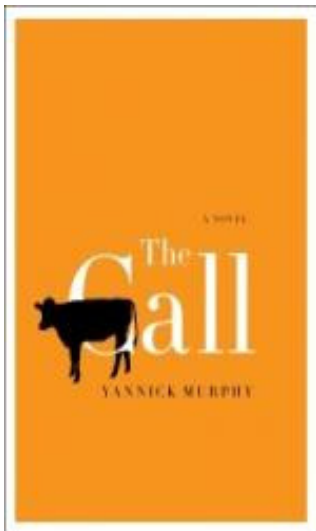


The Lover by Marguerite Duras

Approximately 12.88 PR

I can't overstate how funny it is to read something with real gravitas on the toilet. There's nothing better. I giggle. I wish I was the kind of man who laughed, but no. I'm a giggler reading classic literature on the toilet.

The Lover is a classic that's at home in just about any big time literature class. A great piece of minimalism with that capital-L Literature feel, this one will leave you feeling sort of dead and sort of more alive than ever. This was the shining gem of one of my college classes, World Literature By And About Women. I was often called on to give the male perspective in this class. I did my best but still feel like I should apologize to my fellow men. I also left out the part about developing my perspectives on World Literature By And About Women in the restroom.

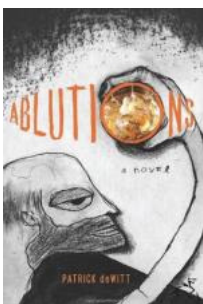


The Call by Yannick Murphy

Approximately 20.65 PR

Each section of this book is a vet's journal entry, the log of the vet's visits to animals big and small and what he did to treat them. The format starts simple and then becomes a scaffolding for a great, heartbreaking story. And you don't have to be an animal lover to enjoy this book. I'm not someone who would call himself an animal lover. Although I DO love pictures of cats thrown into Snapchat who have clothes drawn on them. Or dogs, also thrown into Snapchat, but I prefer they be mounted with shoulder missiles, machine guns, stuff like that.

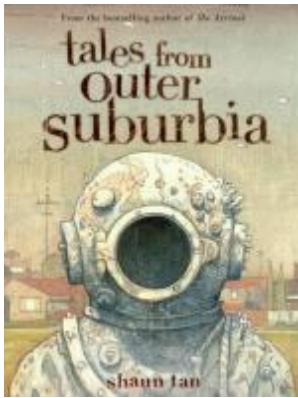
The Call has the kind of structure that lets a reader pull a lot out of a small space. Not to mention a voice that keeps you going through call after call after call. It's a really gorgeous book. Read it and then find me on Snapchat.



Ablutions by Patrick DeWitt

Approximately 10.01 PR

A truly great book that reads fast. Not to mention that for writing nerds, it's a really great study in second-person ("You wake up. You go to the store.") It shouldn't work, but it does. This slim story about a bartender near the end

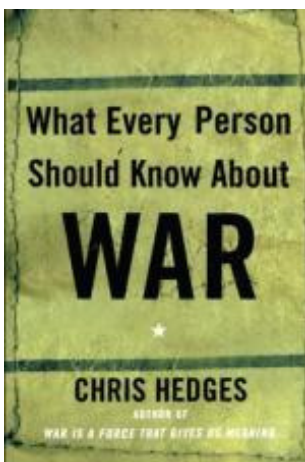


Tales From Outer Suburbia by Shaun Tan

Approximately 7.11 PR

If you grew up during the time when *Calvin & Hobbes* ran in newspapers, you've probably been looking your whole life for something else that captures some of that magic. The way the world was pretty and big and a little dangerous. This book is the closest thing out there to *Calvin & Hobbes* a little grown up.

Tiny alien foreign exchange students, a minotaur, the place at the end of the world. It's all here. It's a slim book with short sections, but PR times will vary depending on how long you spend exploring Shaun Tan's gorgeous artwork.



What Every Person Should Know About War by Chris Hedges

Approximately 11.9 PR

Laid out for you in Q&A style, this book presents all the facts about war. About a soldier's likelihood of ending up in combat. What happens when a bullet hits Kevlar. How things might go if you get captured.

The format makes for good, broken-up reading, and it has a great side effect. Somehow, the clinical, statistics-based answers hit differently when they're answers to questions like, "How likely is it that I'll lose a limb?" Before long you'll almost start to think of the asker as a character, someone who has found himself in a pretty bad situation. Great book for non-fiction buffs, great book for fans of experimental ways to tell stories.



Palm-Of-The-Hand: Stories by Yasunari Kawabata

Approximately 30.22 PR

A book that comes with a hard recommendation by Amy Hempel, this collection of single-PR-short stories can teach any willing reader a thing or two about writing fiction. Kawabata, a Nobel-winning Japanese author, considered this form of flash fiction to be his true art. These brief tales are short on text and long on feeling, often leaving the reader with an ending just open enough to think on throughout the day and into the night, long after sleep should have come.

Enjoy your reading. And remember, true bathroom scholars always wash their hands.

Book Breakup: Tell The Story, Break Up With A Bad Book



To finish this column, you'll have to tell me a story. The story of a book that haunts your nightstand. The story of a book you throw in your bag every day, the same book you toss in your bag for weeks with the best intentions. The story you'll tell me is the story of a book you've loved too long.

Bad book relationships have a way of dragging on. So many bad Friday nights with this book. So many uncomfortable afternoons. This book doesn't treat you right. It's almost more like being alone than being with a book.

How do you know when it's time to break up with a book, and how do you pull the trigger?

That's where your story comes in. This is where you can tell your book breakup story to someone else, get it down to where you believe it yourself. It's the easiest way out of your bad book relationship.

Tell me the story. Let me help. I'm the right person. I've read a lot of books. I've broken up with lots of books. You can trust me. I'm sensitive. I've peed my pants stone sober three times in my adult life. I wouldn't tell you that if you couldn't trust me.

It's nice to meet you.

Now that we're friends, let's be honest with each other and figure out if it's time. Okay, Muffin?

Don't worry, I won't read too much into things here. Won't try and catch you on the *Moby Dick* rebound. I only use words like Muffin and Cupcake because those are the words my sister uses for me. My sister's bakery words that make me feel better. I'm not good at bakery words like her, but I'll

try.

First things first, put the book in a drawer. Really. In another room. Really. Put the book in the bathroom cabinet and turn on the fan. Really get up and do it. Right now. I'll wait.

Done? Good.

Tell me about the book. Tell me the How We Met story. Really, say it out loud. Chance meeting at the library? A look across the room at the bookstore? One pickup line from the inside flap and you were done for?

Close your eyes at the end of this paragraph. Tell me that romance kind of story, Baklava. Say it out loud, like a story you're telling for the first time. Breathe once, lick your lips, and say it out loud.

Tell me another story. The part where things got deep. What got you so in love that you wanted this book with you all the time, carried it with you. Slept next to it.

Close your eyes and say it out loud, Crumb Cake, like a story. Say it out loud like I'm across the table from you at a café. Like I got here early to make sure we'd get the good table, the one with no wobbles. Sit here with me, your friend, and tell me that fairy tale love story.

Now tell me what the book is about. The truth this time. Not the story you made up in your head when you guessed and filled things in for yourself. Tell the hard facts, the non-fiction story of the truth, how the book isn't the way you'd like. Really. Do it. Tell me. Say it out loud. Say it out loud to me and to yourself. It's okay.

If we really were at that café table I'd put my hand on top of yours. It doesn't mean anything, Bear Claw, other than I'm listening.

Now tell me the story of time. How long you've been together. Tell me that time travel kind of story.

If we really were at that cafe table without wobbles, I'd rub the knuckle on your thumb while you talked. Rub my thumb on it. Tell you with touch how I'm listening.

Tell me the story of how long it's been. Tell me the story of how long, and use something besides days or weeks or months to explain it to me.

Tell me about the you from when you picked up the book. Those clothes you don't wear anymore. The blank patch of skin that's tattoo now. Remember and tell the story. Out loud, for real.

Tell me another story about time. How long since you were happy? Excited to get in between the covers with the book? Tell me. Out loud. For real.

This one's tough. Tell me another story about time. How long since you were happy? Excited to get in between the covers with the book? Tell me. Out loud. For real.

Tell me another story about time. How long since you were happy? Excited to get in between the covers with the book? Tell me. Out loud. For real.

Think about the stories you told me. How you met, what you liked, what you didn't like, how long it's been. Our coffees empty on the cafe table in front of us. Tell me, with all those stories together, do those stories sound like the end of something?

And can I tell you? Nobody who's happy asks those questions. Nobody breathing asks if this is drowning. Nobody still in love asks if this is still love.

If we really were at that table without wobbles, I'd turn your hand over and curl your fingers into mine, tell you with touch that I want to say something.

This *Ulysses* guy, he was there for me. On the train this one time. Heavy in my bag, bumping against my back. He was right for a long time. Then he wasn't.

When you find the right book, when you find the right man or the right woman, when you find James Galvin or Sharon Olds, you'll regret the wasted days. When you find your Mark Richard you'll curse all those yesterdays forcing it with *Ulysses*. Sweet Roll, Coffee Cake, trusted friend, Cannoli, I don't want to panic you, but your Ben Winters or your Grace Paley is out there, and you're spending another day without them.

Before you really break up, one more story. The fantasy kind of story about how someday you might give it another whirl. Think it. We all think it. You can't get away from that. Take a second. You're older. Sophisticated the way you always thought you would be. Different glasses for red wine and white wine. Party clothes. You don't wear coats for skiing or camping unless you're skiing or camping.

You show up at a party and take off your coat, the one that's for walking and taking cabs to parties, not for skiing or camping, and that's when you see the book's familiar cover across the room. It's hard to say. You changed. It changed. Something's different. Something is different and it makes you grab at your wrist the way you always do when you're nervous. Makes you tell yourself to stop grabbing at your wrist the way you always do when you're nervous.

Hello, old love.

Now lock it up. Scone, It won't happen, but if the fantasy story has to happen at least a little bit in your head so you can put it away, let it. Tell that story now because you can't say that part to the book. You can't leave the door propped open. Or unlocked. Or locked with just a cheap barrel bolt. You have to board this one up.

Now Macaron, Cinnamon Roll, it's time.

Get the book out. Hold the book in your hands. Touch. Touch is important.

Slip out the bookmark. Don't check the page number. Just pinch the bookmark between your finger and thumb and pull.

If you're a corner folder, iron that corner down with your finger. It's okay if you're a corner folder. I like you. We're friends. Your little things you do, they're like the way my old girlfriend would breathe loud when she slept on the couch. Not a good sound, but good to me.

Don't feel like you're quitting because you can't do it. Tell me another story. About a time you stuck it

out with a book and things worked out. Tell me an underdog kind of story. Tell me why you did it.

Tell me a story how this feels different.

We'll take the book to the library. To return or recycle or donate. Whatever they do. Trust me, they have ways. The important thing is that the book leaves your nightstand. The back seat of your car. Your hands. The important thing is that the book leaves your touch.

I'll walk with you from the cafe. We'll do it together.

On the way, tell me a story of the book's next lover. Maybe she's glamorous and wonderful and has her life together like this book deserves. Maybe he's a loser and you feel better because you moved on to a handsomer book with the kind of characters you always hoped would love you back.

Now tell the story to the book. The parts you need to tell. Remember how they felt on your lips when you told me.

Say, It's time. Hold it with your hands. Touch is important, Brownie. Tell the story, just like we practiced. Out loud. For real. The non-fiction parts, the parts about time. Tell the breakup story.

Finish up in front of the library, then carry the book inside. Through the doors. Through the lobby.

If you can't, just put it in the return, the outside one. It's okay. They'll figure it out. They handle this stuff all the time.

A last touch. Touch is important. Touch is a great end to any story.

Come back to the cafe. To our table without wobbles. Come back to the cafe and hold my hand.

Like with any breakup, you'll want to go back most in the next couple days. You'll feel the void of story. Don't go back. Just don't. We can tell other stories to fill that emptiness.

We can talk about new books. We can joke about you slumming it. We can tell a gossip story about how you'll find a bad boy, how Jim Thompson will take you home. We can laugh about you looking for a new mother, how what you really need right now is a strange mother, maybe a Mona Simpson.

But we don't have to talk about new books. You don't have to see anyone else yet. You don't have to say it anyway, even if you've got Tom Spanbauer waiting for you at home. It's not dishonest. It's breaking up.

Tell me a story about the first book you ever fell for. A young love kind of story.

Tell me the story of a book you shouldn't have fallen for and did. A forbidden love kind of story.

Tell me stories. Turn them all into stories.

And Sugar? Muffin? Cupcake? Scone? Jam Bar?

This story? Pumpkin Loaf? This breakup story, it's part of the big story of how you found your true book love.

Offer The Coffee Branch: A Plea For Peace From A Coffee Shop Writer



Family Guy sure has a way of saying what we're all thinking, like the time me and Brian...wait, no. Nice try, but I'm not falling for it.

But seriously, remember that bit from *Family Guy* where a bunch of writers are in a coffee shop, on laptops, all talking about how they're writing to be noticed?

Hating the coffee shop writer, it's part of the common hate now. The way Bluetooth early adopters were hated, the way we laughed at the one idiot who wore Crocs until every idiot was wearing Crocs and the rest of us were hopelessly outnumbered. The way we sneer at the people who paste stick figure families to the rear windows of their cars. Now, along with the lady who wears tights as pants and the man who wears super tight pants as pants, the coffee shop writer has become a type we're all sort of okay with hating.

I'm a coffee shop writer. And I want to propose peace. In the interest of that peace, in the interest of mutually-assured brownie enjoyment, I'm offering a treaty.

We've been at war too long. Like in any long war, we've lost sight of why we started fighting in the first place. Like in any long war, I suspect we'll look back on all this with confusion as we're counting up the corpses littered amongst stylized gift cards and roasted Sumatran blends. We'll wonder whether it was all worth it, why we couldn't just enjoy our latte foam and café seating in peace.

This is the first treaty I've ever written. I tried looking for some decent examples. I really did. And let

me tell you, this treaty stuff is complicated. Lots of this country that doesn't exist anymore telling this other country that doesn't exist anymore to stop crossing a border to another, third country that maybe never existed at all. And to be 100% honest, it wasn't long into this research that I got very distracted by the Outer Space Treaty which prevents its signers from placing weapons in space and, get this, on the moon. If you ever want to put off a peace treaty project in favor of writing a pilot episode of a show about cosmonaut lawyers, I highly recommend looking into the Outer Space Treaty.

What I did manage to gather before losing track was that most treaties are organized into articles that say something like So-And-So Will Stop Stabbing So-And-So With Such-And-Such. Usually these articles strike a balance, both parties give up some things, both get some stuff. Except no one gets the moon which, again, is off-limits.

The treaty below is arranged into 5 Articles. Each article is represented by a terrible type of coffee shop writer. I'll apologize for each type and explain how we might do better and get along. If you're a coffee shop patron who engages in non-writing activities at the coffee shop, see how you feel about these terms and comment below. If you're a coffee shop writer, same deal.

One last bit of housekeeping, a quick note on names: All names used below were selected at random from a list of people I hated in junior high. There was at least a small amount of randomness in that there were a lot of names and more than one Ryan. Junior high was not fun.

Is writing in a coffee shop about getting attention? About making sure people see serious Lit-tra-tour happening all over the place?



Article 1: Territories and Greg, Who Threw Hard Snowballs At Me And Is All Spread Out

Greg. This guy's got a stupid laptop, a stupid notebook, stupid coffee, empty stupid pastry dish, stupid jacket slung over an otherwise empty chair, stupid huge book, a package of those stupid little tab things that I still don't know how to use. Greg might even have a stupid pencil in his mouth because there really isn't a pencil's-width of space left on his table. He's got THAT much stuff.

I apologize for Greg and all his stupid stuff.

This spreading out is bad form in any situation. For example, I don't generally rest my entire leg in the driver's lap if I'm in the passenger seat of a car. I say "generally" because I'm still learning how to flirt and I don't want to take that move off the table just yet. Another example, most people waiting in line for a water slide don't hold their fists straight out and spin. It's common courtesy.

You are one person. Yes, a wonderful person, but try and take up about a one-person amount of space, or a one-wonderful-person amount, which is the same as a regular person amount, maybe even slightly less.

Gregs: Pledge to relocate to smaller tables or counters whenever possible. If a large group comes in looking for a spot to sit, offer to move before being asked. It's hard to complain about a guy typing on his laptop who gave up his spot for you and your friends.

If you don't know how to condense your space needs, try this: Walk to the coffee shop with all your stuff. Believe me, after carrying it around awhile, that inspirational Complete Works of Shakespeare will wear out its welcome forthwith.



Article 2: Temporal Needs and Cody, Who Made Fun Of My Pants And Camps Out Too Long

It's a good thing someone named Cody was cruel to me in Junior High. Really made that "Cody the Camper" alliteration work.

Cody. Cody might take up only her allotted space as far as the 3rd dimension goes, unlike stupid Greg, but she's taking up way more than her share of the 4th dimension, time. She's a tick. Once she's burrowed in, the only way to get her out is with cleansing fire or some kind of prescription tweezing device.

Imagine bowling with Cody. She gets a strike, the pins fly around, she celebrates with a little jig, then that jig extends into a dance number, then a brief rest, then some more dancing followed by a rendition of "Wrecking Ball" which makes sense in context, but boy is this going on and on or what?

Hey, we all love a strike, but you've danced through most of *Bangerz* at this point and some of us would like a turn to bowl now.

It's not about whether it's okay to do something or not, write in the coffee shop or celebrate success Cyrus-style. Let's just be reasonable about how long it goes on and the fact that no one else can take a turn until you've finished.

I apologize for Cody.

We can work this out. Peace treaty, right? What's the right amount of time in a coffee shop? Better question, what's the right amount of time in YOUR coffee shop?

It's not an exact science, however the owner of a shop makes choices that set the course. Throw some easy chairs or a couch in your coffee shop, free WiFi, refills, all of a sudden you've got a place built for a nice linger. If we're looking at a small space, small counter, a couple patio chairs, then not so much.

It's up to the owners to decide how they want things to go, and their decisions are expressed through choices. Sort of the way the Sumerians chose to write a peace treaty on papyrus in order to deeply offend their enemies. That was a choice. Or the way I completely made up a fact about Sumerians just there. Also a choice.

Codys: Pick up on cues. There are spots where a person can sit for quite some time without taking anything away from anyone else. Pay attention. If you work long hours, consider giving up your

favorite shop for one that's less popular, or at least less busy.



Article 3: Environmental Control and Roy, Who Was 8 Feet Tall And Terrified Me And Now Has Control Issues

Roy. This guy is the worst.

Can we change the temperature just a teensy bit? Can we turn down the music a skoche? Do you mind if I adjust the shades all the way across the room, maybe just a smidge? How about I just rearrange all the tables?

Turn your back on Roy, and when you face him again he's carrying a chair over his head in order to prop the door open just a tad to create a cross breeze with the fan he brought from home and set up in the corner, all while he's on the phone with a contractor to see about getting a skylight installed over his favorite table.

I apologize for Roy.

The purpose of working outside the home, Roy, is to be in a different environment. This is how it works. So get over yourself. If you want to play god, I recommend either Sea Monkeys or possibly an Ant Farm. Feel free to rearrange their environments any way you wish. They can't complain, and so far I haven't heard stories of ghost Sea Monkeys revenge-haunting a cruel owner, or even haunting a neglectful owner who maybe was too embarrassed to ask someone to care for his Sea Monkeys while he was at the Grand Canyon and instead let them perish (I'm so sorry, Sea Monkeys).

Roy: Decide if writing outside the home is really right for you. Take your biggest problem, whether it be noise or sun or just an unending hate for Josh Groban's holiday albums, and find a place where that one thing is resolved. You get one thing. Forget the rest.



Article 4: Community and Pete the Office Grump

Yes, my name is Pete. This name still falls within my name guidelines, only using names of people I hated in junior high. Self-loathing counts.

Pete. Pete is not approachable. Buried in his laptop, headphones screwed deep into his ears, love for fellow man entombed under layers so thick they're only punctured by the sweetest of souls and cinnamon rolls, Pete is clearly not happy.

The problem isn't so much that Pete brings his work to the coffee shop. It's that he brings his work attitude. Scowling. Grinding. He's working, and man his face isn't going to let you forget it.

I apologize for Pete

Pete, you have to remember that other people are there to have fun. To enjoy the weekend. You might be hard at work, but you're not grinding it out at a warehouse, assembling dolls for the dollar store, killing yourself with thoughts of kids opening boxes on Christmas Day only to find these inferior, homely dolls with visible hair follicles. You're writing. It can be a lot more fun than slapping together sadness dolls.

Bring your work, but don't bring your work face.

Pete: Be a bit more approachable. If someone interrupts, be kind. You've got 40 hours a week to be grumpy about working. Use your coffee shop time to be happy about working on something you enjoy. I know it can be a grind, I know it's not always easy. But hey, if you're not enjoying the writing, I know a terrible man at a terrible doll factory looking for someone with crushed dreams and some weekend hours to kill.



Article 5: Attention-Seeking and Connie

Connie. Connie is always at the coffee shop near my house. Always, always there, always, always writing.

Connie is a real author's name, by the way. She's a known author. If you read sci-fi, you know who I'm talking about. I broke the name rules a bit. Sorry.

Connie's not prickly like Pete, and she doesn't try to feng shui the Starbucks like Roy, but she does pull a Cody and linger, and she definitely has a Greg thing going, her handwritten pages spread out all over the table.

It works. She writes books, great books. And many, many people I've talked to love seeing her. I'm not nearly alone in smiling when I see the longhand paper piles that make up her next book fanned out all over a Starbucks. She sits and works hard and the results speak for themselves. She gets attention for her writing, but not because she demands it in the shop. She gets attention because she wins awards, because she's been inducted into the Sci-Fi Hall Of Fame.

There's no apology for Connie here. The reason I won't apologize for Connie, the attention-seeking writer, is because Connie isn't attention-seeking. And I don't know that the attention-seeker shows up as often or in the way Seth Macfarlane would have us believe. The truth is, I don't know that the attention-seeker is really a thing, and I certainly don't believe that this person is representative of those who choose to write in a coffee shop.

Is writing in a coffee shop about getting attention? About making sure people see serious Lit-tra-tour happening all over the place? Or could it be something else going on here?

To get at an answer, let's talk about other things that happen in a coffee shop.

You see people reading the paper. Does that elicit a, "Well, well, well, look at J. Freakin' Jonah Jameson over here, reading the paper. Just HAS to show off his love for print media!"?

There's a group of older men who play chess at a coffee shop near me. It's never occurred to me

to say, "What do we have here? Seems like Bobby Freakin' Fisher is ready to show the world he's chessing like crazy."

There's this other guy I see all the time who stares at the wall in sadness. I don't have a clever slam for him. Well, I do, but it seems unnecessary.

If those people can do their thing at the coffee shop, why not the writer? If one writer can do it, maybe there's hope for all of us.

Connie: Keep kicking ass.

Final Terms

The truth is, I write outside the home because writing at home is very, very lonely. Which would be okay except that so many other parts of my life can also be very, very lonely. The truth is, it's difficult to go all the way from Friday after work to Monday morning without hearing another human voice. Except for the voices of the wonderful actors from TV's *House*, of course, now available on Netflix streaming.

The truth is, I'm writing a coffee shop peace treaty because it's scary to admit you need other people, and it's even scarier to worry that those people you need only want you to go away.

I need other people. Please don't make me go away.

I didn't apologize for Connie. I do apologize for my neediness.

The truth is, I want to offer peace, and I'm willing to condemn a lot of coffee shop behavior to get it. I'll toss the Codys and the Roys and the Gregs into the sacrificial, near-boiling French press water if it means you and I can coexist.

So how about it? How about we find peace together? Me, you. Greg, Cody, Roy. And Connie. Especially Connie. Believe me, it's in everyone's best interest to keep Connie hard at work.

And fair's fair. I'll keep the spread to a minimum. I'll stay a reasonable time or find somewhere better suited to a long haul. I won't play *Property Brothers* and remodel the entire store. I'll try and leave my work scowl at work and use my leisure scowl at the coffee shop.

And fair's fair. If I hear one more Josh Groban album, I'll jump up on a table and kick the speaker right off the wall. I'm a man of peace, but a man of peace can only be pushed so far.

Eat Lightning, Write Thunder: Writing Lessons From Rocky Balboa



Rocky movies inspire me to all sorts of new heights. A pair of good headphones and "Hearts On Fire" from the *Rocky IV* soundtrack? All it takes to push me to the threshold of human endurance...on a low-impact elliptical trainer while *Reba* reruns play on a gym's mounted television. But hey, we all have our own mountains to climb.

I want to share with you my *Rocky* movies, the way I see them. These stories always push me, whether I am writing, making art, or straining a hamstring in embarrassing fashion.

Here are six pieces of writing advice to take away from the six *Rocky* movies. May you eat lightning and write thunder!

Rocky: The Distance

Rocky's a loser. Seriously. In the first movie, he's not a super-talented fighter at the top of his game. He's a washed-up thug who breaks legs for a loan shark. His slur is just this side of punch drunk. He's the worst at dating, this coming from a guy who picks date locations based solely on whether or not they have a Ms. Pac-Man machine.

Long story short, the first movie is about Rocky being set up to fight the current champ, Apollo Creed. Rocky doesn't stand a chance.

The movie is packed with famous scenes. The training montage, the running up the steps, the big fight at the finish. All great, but none quite as good as a quiet scene between Rocky and his girlfriend

Adrian.

Alone in a bedroom, Rocky talks to Adrian in a voice so quiet you almost can't hear him. They're on a small bed together, Rocky the little spoon:

Rocky: I can't do it.

Adrian: What?

Rocky: I can't beat him.

Adrian: Apollo?

Rocky: Yeah. I been out there walkin' around, thinkin'. I mean, who am I kiddin'? I ain't even in the guy's league.

Adrian: What are we gonna do?

Rocky: I don't know.

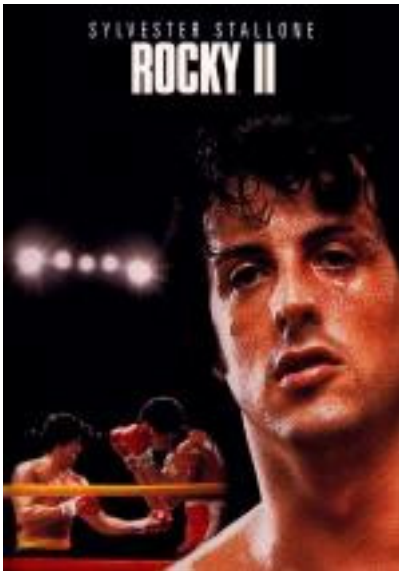
Adrian: You worked so hard.

Rocky: Yeah, that don't matter. 'Cause I was nobody before.

Adrian: Don't say that.

Rocky: Ah come on, Adrian, it's true. I was nobody. But that don't matter either, you know? 'Cause I was thinkin', it really don't matter if I lose this fight. It really don't matter if this guy opens my head, either. 'Cause all I wanna do is go the distance. Nobody's ever gone the distance with Creed, and if I can go that distance, you see, and that bell rings and I'm still standin', I'm gonna know for the first time in my life, see, that I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood.

A writer's got to have goals, but those goals don't have to be the next Great American Novel or construction of a 40-book series. They can be about going the distance, whatever that is for you. Writing 50,000 words this year. Writing 5,000 words this year. Writing 5 words today. For Rocky, finishing the fight was the goal. Pick what, for you, represents The Distance. Then, whatever your Distance is, do it.



Rocky II: The Imperfect

If you asked whether a Stallone movie could bring me to tears, I would say No. If you then asked whether a sequel to a Stallone movie ever left me outright bawling, I'd remember *Rocky II*, apologize for lying, and excuse myself from the room for a polite but masculine weeping session.

Oh, that scene where Rocky proposes to Adrian at the zoo!

We all like to imagine what we'll say during big life events. Graduations, funerals. Maybe on the occasion that one man's humble dream comes true and someone names a Gravitron after him. We always want the right words when something big happens.

In *Rocky II*, Rocky's proposal to Adrian is less than polished:

I was wonderin' if, uh, you wouldn't mind marryin' me very much.

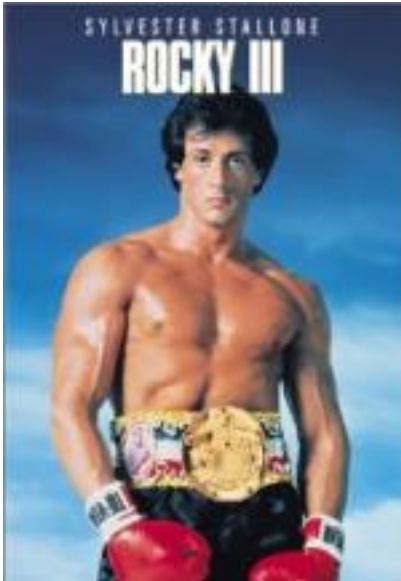
Not only are the words a bit wrong, but Adrian makes him repeat himself. He has to say that jagged, unsure, scared sentence twice.

That uncomfortable, imperfect proposal, it's perfect.

In Tom Spanbauer's workshop, he said "character lies in the destruction of the sentence." What that means, to me, is this: the way a boxer's mangled nose becomes the character of his face, Rocky's mangled words become his character.

Don't be afraid to say it wrong. Don't be afraid to use the words that feel right in your gut, even if they'd kill your English teachers. Don't be afraid that if your characters talk rough, we'll think you're an uneducated oaf. Those twisted words are your words, and your words are the right words to tell your story.

Rocky III: The Fear



Rocky III sits in an odd position between II and IV. II is the sequel that showed everyone the Italian Stallion wasn't a one-hit (to the face) wonder. IV is a movie ever off the rails. III is often forgotten between its bookends, but it's got a lot to say about fear.

In a key scene that drives the movie, Rocky's trainer, Mickey, confesses that all of Rocky's title defense matches were fought against handpicked opponents. Palookas. Jobbers. Tomato cans. Other boxing terms for people who are not very good at boxing. All the matches were setups.

All this time, turns out Rocky wasn't fighting at his level. When he finds out, his confidence is blown.

As a writer, it can get easy to dodge your harshest critic, the person you dread because his or her advice always sends you back to drafting.

Just the way Rocky had to beat Clubber Lang and earn confidence, your toughest critic will give you confidence. They'll make you less afraid. When your tough critics believe you're not a bum, that voice in your head that's always saying you're a bum gets quieter.

When the time comes, when you're ready to step up to a microphone or seal a manuscript in an envelope, you'll be glad you've been fighting the toughest there is.

Rocky IV: The Fun

Rocky IV is the wildest movie in the series. James Brown shows up. The Balboas own a robot. Oh, and Rocky pretty much solves the Cold War with punches. It's a bag of mixed nuts, and yet it's the highest-grossing of all the films.

It could be the steely Dolph Lundgren's menace that brought people into the seats. It could be that audiences wanted to watch a small American underdog punch down the Iron Curtain. It could be the robot. If Short Circuit's Johnny 5 taught us anything, it's that we should never underestimate a 1980's movie robot.

My personal theory, however, is that people like *Rocky IV* because it's fun.

In terms of spectacle, in terms of scope, in terms of pure scene-by-scene enjoyment, the fourth movie is tops. Cheesy, but a damn good ride.

It's not always fun to write. Sometimes it's downright misery. But if you can find a way to have some fun with it, there's a good chance your reader will have some fun too. Don't be afraid that your reader won't follow you if you're usually dark and this time you're funny. They might be ready to take a breath too.

And hey, it's just one man's opinion, but an ill-placed 1980's robot never turned me off.

Rocky V: The Flop

There are plenty of reasons *Rocky V* flopped. People tire of characters. The cultural landscape can change. Oh, and casting athletes in lead roles is always risky. See *Kazaam*. "See" as in "reference", not as in "view." Please do not VIEW *Kazaam* under any circumstances.

In what's no doubt the fifth movie's best scene, Rocky breaks into Mickey's old gym and flashes back on some words of wisdom:

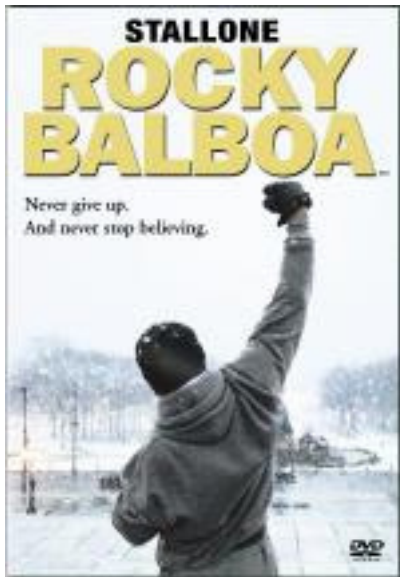
You know kid, I know how you feel about this fight that's comin' up. 'Cause I was young once, too. And I'll tell you somethin'! Well, if you wasn't here I probably wouldn't be alive today. The fact that you're here and doin' as well as you're doin' gives me—what do you call it—motivization? Huh? To stay alive, 'cause I think that people die sometimes when they don't wanna live no more.

The whole mentoring thing doesn't work out so well for Rocky. By which I mean he ends up in a bare knuckle street fight with his student.

Helping out another writer CAN help you, though. Working with writers and writing can be a rewarding experience that improves your work too. Share your skills. Work with young writers. Volunteer some time to help with a convention in your area.

Yeah, you might not be the greatest. That's okay. You don't need to be the greatest. You just need to know a little more than one other person.

Training Rocky kept Mickey going. Working with another writer can keep you going. Oh, and good news, the chances of your writing relationship ending in a bare knuckle street brawl are reasonably low.



Rocky Balboa: The Cleanse

This final installment is packed with tender moments and wall-to-wall Rocky speeches. While the previous movies saw one or two marble-mouthed monologues, this one is jammed with Rocky dealing out advice to his son, his friends, members of a board of some kind. You get to wondering whether he waxes on to the mailman about how life's like dis and dat.

Just like the fighter he plays, Stallone had "some stuff in the basement" by the time he wrote *Rocky Balboa*. All of it, all those speeches and scenes, he got them out of the basement and onto the screen. While you watch, you get the idea that everything Stallone wanted Rocky to do, he did it in *Rocky Balboa*.

Stallone was lucky. After *Rocky V*'s bad performance, *Rocky Balboa* almost never happened.

If you've got an idea, don't save it for your next project. Or for an unnamed project down the road. Don't save stuff in the basement. It may never see the light of day. You might not be as lucky as Stallone.

I'm not suggesting you cram every idea you've ever had into one book. I'm saying, make sure you're not starving your current work to feed a future that may never come. Don't worry that you won't have enough ideas for your next book. Write this one and it'll ensure the one to come.

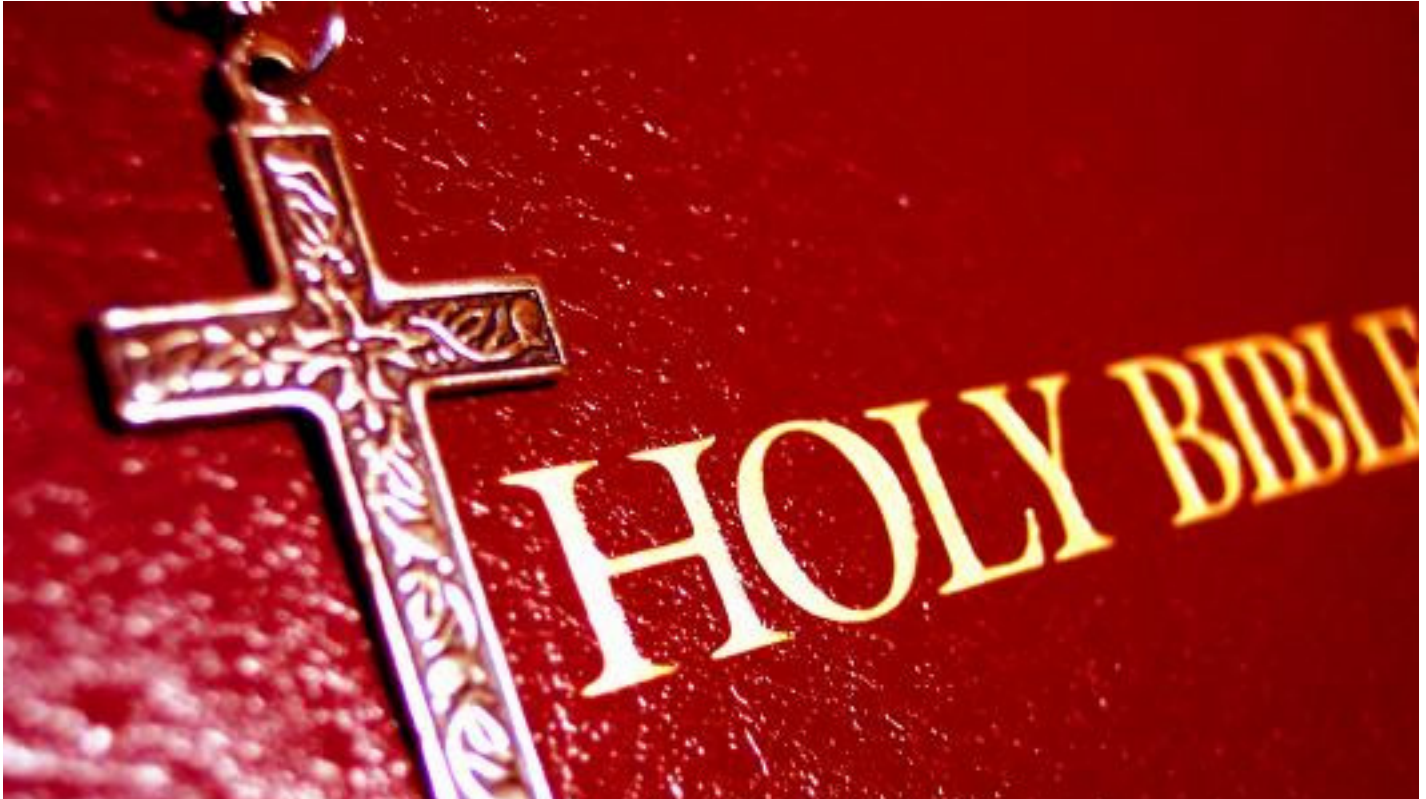
When you look at *Rocky* as a series, the character parallels Stallone as a writer. In *Rocky* an underdog gets his one big shot and nails it. In *Rocky II* he proves he wasn't a fluke. *Rocky III* is a commentary on the way a successful person has to prove success over and over. *Rocky IV* is about bringing something small onto a big stage. *Rocky V* was the lesson, what happens when you aren't invested in what you're doing. *Rocky Balboa* was about whether or not he still had it.

As much as *Rocky* is the story of throwing punches, it's the story of anyone trying to do something that maybe they weren't meant for, something that they'll never be the best at. The movies will never be the pinnacle of cinema, their writer will never be considered a poet, and god help me, there's only so much 1980's robot novelty I can excuse. That said, it's in their imperfections, in their struggles, and in the way they give us the one hero who will never quit, that these movies push my heart through a few extra beats every time.

As a final spur to all the writers out there, the words of Rocky Balboa to his son:

The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place and I don't care how tough you are it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done! Now if you know what you're worth then go out and get what you're worth. But ya gotta be willing to take the hits, and not pointing fingers saying you ain't where you wanna be because of him, or her, or anybody! Cowards do that and that ain't you! You're better than that!

Bible Thumping: The Good Book For Writers



As religion goes, I'm a nothing. By that I mean I don't practice or subscribe to anything. I guess that makes me an Atheist, but I shy away from that term because...well, it seems to indicate a position of sorts, a position I'm not prepared to argue.

Allow me to share the whole of my religious education:

1. I read The Tao Te Ching once. I was 17 and understood almost nothing of what lived in the pages.
2. I read a good portion of, not The Qur'an, but a Q&A book ABOUT The Qur'an.
3. I attended two Sunday School classes as a child because I stayed the night at a friend's house. His family went to church, and because I couldn't get a ride home early, I went with them. I don't remember much except that we were supposed to draw Jesus. I had no idea what Jesus looked like, plus I sucked at drawing. I went with the one thing I'd practiced, a Ninja Turtle. Out of respect for the gravity of the situation, I DID draw Donatello, the scholarly, studious turtle who didn't say Cowabunga as much.

And that's the whole of my religious study. So please know that as we move forward, I'm coming from a place of ignorance with the goal of improvement.

I do consider myself a reader and a writer. Which is what got me thinking about whether a person like me could read the Bible as literature. As a book. Not as a religious text or a map to guide myself through life or to explain why there was only one set of footprints on the beach (by the way, I would rather someone carried me the time I got off at a very frightening train stop in Chicago as opposed to being carried across a peaceful beach, but I digress).

The Bible can probably be read as a classic of literature, right? If it can, that means I'm like a film student who's never seen *Citizen Kane*. Or more accurately, as my very limited understanding would lead me to believe, *Star Wars*. Because after all, people who have never seen *Star Wars* understand the basics. They might not know what a Vader is, but they use the phrase "Luke, I am your father." They might not have opinions on whether Greedo shot first, and they might not even know what that sentence could possibly mean, but chances are they've tried a Chewbacca growl at least once, have attempted use of The Force, and haven't gone longer than a couple days at a time without confronting *Star Wars*, whether it be in the form of a bumper sticker or action figure.

Plus, from what I understand, it sounds like there's some cool stories in the Bible. A guy who gets his hair cut and then loses his strength? A Superman kind of thing? I'm intrigued. A king who suggests cutting a baby in half? A God who magics a woman into salt? A man tasked to build a gigantic boat and save the world? Yes, yes, and because I love anything that involves a ship saving the world ever since Michael Bay's *Armageddon*, hell to the yes.

Which brings me to the beginning of my quest.

The Bible: THE good book, but is it A good book?

And right then, dear reader, right at the beginning, I hit a wall.

Please excuse my horrific ignorance here. I kind of thought I could type "The Bible" into Amazon and have what I was looking for. Hell, I figured I could type "Teh Bibel" and still get it.

It turns out there's almost no such thing as a THE the Bible. In fact, let me just list a few of the versions I came across:

ASV: American Standard Version: Sometimes called the "Standard Bible", common in American seminaries.

RSV: Revised Standard Version, a revision of the American Standard Version.

ESV: English Standard Version, a REVISION of the REVISED Standard Version.

Then you've got your KJV, your NKJV, your HCSB. It starts to look as though any combination of three to four letters can be put together, and then a Bible written to accommodate.

Now, the various versions may not be that different. They all have different origins that trace back to other Bibles or other kings who ordered them translated, and the lineage of each weaves in and out of Bible history. I have no idea how to evaluate any of this. And herein lies the problem. How would I know which Bible to read if I had no idea which Bible contains all the baby-cleaving and giant-killing? Which one possibly has a bit of cyclops combat, if that's not something I've just added in myself? How would I know which Bible was right for me, the reader?

If you feel like there's not enough on the internet to waste your time, try to discover which Bible you should read using Google. I'm not kidding. Because every Bible has a following, and every following thinks they've got the right Bible.

Not only are there lots of Bibles that appear legit, there are quite a few that, even to my heathen eyes,

looked...well, all wrong. Those have to be sorted through as well.

For example.

I saw a lot of Bibles that looked like this *NIV Boys Bible* by Zondervan.

To my uneducated eyes, this appears to be the sort of thing that capitalizes on the whole Xtreme! marketing thing. Perhaps it comes with a free Mountain Dew? Oh, and listed under Amazon's "Frequently Bought Together", this item was matched with a lovely camouflage Bible cover. Just in case you wanted to be that much more X-Treme-er.

There's also this *NIV Faithgirlz! Bible*, Revised Edition.

We could talk a long time about the gendering of Bibles here. Maybe in this version Lot's wife is turned into...a pile of salt...who was respected for her intelligence and independence before she was turned into a pile of salt? I don't know. All that we need to say about this one is that it's clearly not the Bible I was looking for.

A bit closer is *MANual, The NIV Bible for Men*:

But I don't know. The description says it has "200 'Downshift' notes" which are described as "penetrating questions." All this car talk and penetration-speak, it's a bit much for me. My gut says reading this would be like talking to that uncle who wanted to know just a little too much detail about your teenage dates.

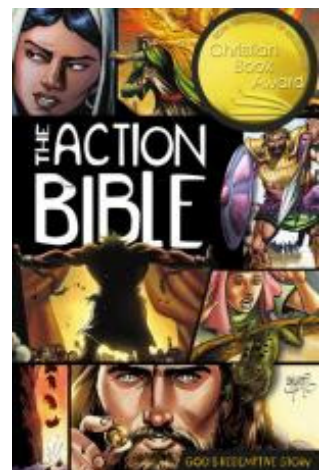
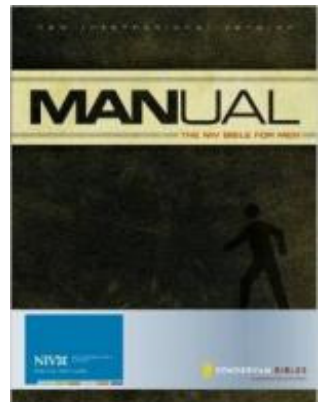
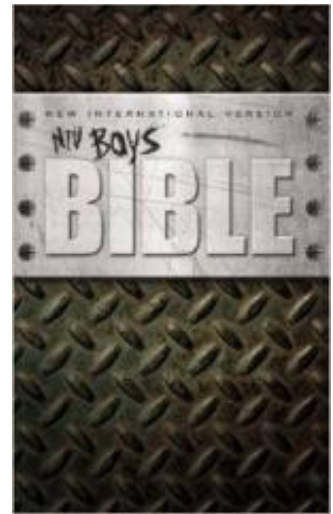
Then there's *The Action Bible*:

Now THIS I can get on board with. Comic book bible? Action? If someone had presented me with this as opposed to *X-Men: The Complete Dark Phoenix Saga* as a boy, my life may have taken a different course. That said, I'm generally not a fan of comic book adaptations of things that weren't originally comic books. I believe the format and story should compliment each other in such a way that one couldn't imagine the story being told in any other medium. Or, put simply, I'm too much of a nerd for what is likely the nerdiest form of the Bible.

I decided, at this point, that I was out of my depth. Yes, it took some time for me to figure out how ignorant I was. I never said I was smart. I pursue smarts precisely because I don't possess them.

If all-knowing Google has failed, where do you turn to next? It's not like I can just ask at a church. Because guess what? I suspect that each church will pimp its particular favorite, and who knows what I might end up with? No offense to the churchgoers out there, but what I needed was an opinion on literature, not religion.

Which is when I decided to email several professors of religious studies at



various universities. And A.J. Jacobs, author of *The Year of Living Biblically*.

I asked about the Bible and which one to read as a book. Here are a few selections from answers. Please note that these answers were longer, many pointed out the difference between a Christian Bible and others, and generally all responses were well-thought-out and very helpful. If anything here is offensive, it's almost certainly due to the way I asked the question or have quoted only a few lines from each answer.

Eva Mroczek, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Judaism, Indiana University:

...for writers, hands down, no question the best annotated Bible is the Norton Old Testament edited by Herbert Marks. It uses the old King James Version, not a modern translation, so it is more challenging to read the text itself. But for anyone interested in the Bible as literature, and how the Bible has influenced literature, this is the one to get...as a translation I'd also recommend the NRSV, but Mark's Norton Old Testament edition, which uses the KJV translation, has the best additional material, like introductions, notes, and appendices.

David Frankfurter, Professor of Religion, Boston University:

I require the New Revised Standard Version for my students, since the translation is most satisfactory for historically-oriented study of the texts (and I do read Greek and Hebrew). It's not perfect, but it will do...I would avoid the NIV and Good News translations as simplistic, inaccurate, and theologically-oriented, and absolutely avoid any versions that have 'words of Christ in red'!

A.J. Jacobs, author of *The Year Of Living Biblically* and others:

For pure literary style, you can't beat the King James Version. But it does have some serious mistranslations. Which is why I might recommend the Revised Standard Version. Still has some of the fancy language of the King James, but they toned it down and made some corrections.

M. Gail Hamner, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Syracuse University:

I'd say that the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is the best place to start for a Christian (Protestant, though there is a Catholic version, too) oriented scholar-authorized translation.

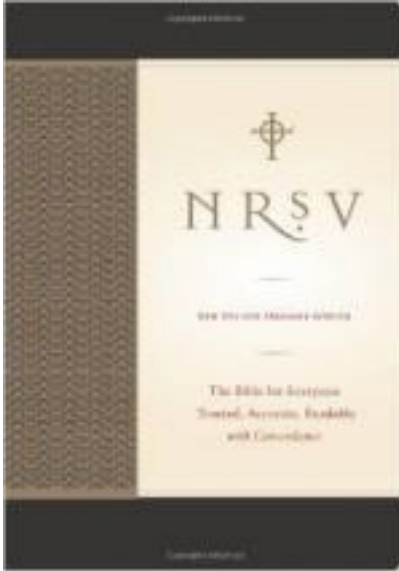
Geoffrey Pollick, Assistant Professor / Faculty Fellow, New York University:

If I were to recommend a translation, it would be the New Revised Standard Version, which balances literary quality and literal accuracy of meaning...If you wish to find a copy that includes less marginal information, and reads more like a typical novel or work of nonfiction, you might try the HarperCollins NRSV Standard Bible, ISBN 9780061946516, which presents the biblical text in clean paragraphs, with the appearance of most published books.

In addition, a couple professors who preferred to provide information without being quoted responded, and with those in the tally, the New Revised Standard Version was the clear winner.

NRSV 4EVA!

I chose to purchase this edition, the one recommended by Mr. Pollock:



As he recommended, it's the one that looks the most like a published book. Which is a big plus for me. Not as action-oriented as a comic book, but less studious than a tome with four columns per page. The smarter choice, but a choice that's not TOO smart for a person like me. The Donatello of Jesus drawings, if you will.

And thus, with a couple clicks online, I am now an owner of the Bible. Perhaps even THE Bible, the one that will turn me from a complete dolt into a complete dolt who has read the Bible, a complete dolt who just might learn a thing or two about writing and literature. But that, friends, along with the still-unverified presence of a cyclops, remains to be seen.

In the beginning...

Author's Note:

Thanks to all the folks who responded to my question. I appreciate your dedication to providing knowledge and guidance to a buffoon such as myself. This includes Eva Mroczek, Ph.D., David Frankfurter, M. Gail Hamner, Geoffrey Pollick, A.J. Jacobs, and all others who chose to remain nameless and help out anyway.

Culling Your To-Be-Read List



Because I make poor financial decisions—such as purchasing inflatable pickles and American flag fanny packs—I found myself needing to downsize apartments in a bid to get my spending under control. Seriously, my Amazon purchase history is downright shameful, and now I'm paying the price.

Moving into a smaller apartment is an art. Scale diagrams were drawn. Creative solutions to the problem of having one's toilet a few feet away from one's oven were addressed. After some serious art, it turned out that I could not fit as many obsessions into a studio apartment as I did into a 2-bedroom. I know, shocking. The intersection of science and art always is.

Lots of stuff had to go.

Possessions can get out of hand. Things you don't need, like golf clubs. Things you should probably get rid of but can't, like love notes. And if you're just a little like me, your to-read list gets to be like that two-bedroom apartment, jammed with stuff that really should go.

Just the way a reduction in possessions can help (a person can't move into a smaller apartment and continue to purchase shirts depicting eagles riding motorcycles), a reduction in your to-read list can help too. The slimming down will get you familiar with your love of books again. It'll make your list something useful again.

Let's machete back the overgrowth, clear out the cobwebs, and sure, we might throw a few babies out with the bath water, but the good news is you've got a Double-Duggar-Bus number of babies on the list, so toss away!

Sweet Emotion

The hardest part of slicing and dicing your To Be Read (TBR) list is getting over the idea that you've built something of value here.

Let's be honest. A TBR list is like a map to the world of books, right? If so, the question you have to ask yourself is whether you're drawing a map of a city you'll ever visit.

As much as I would like to believe I'll one day take that trip to Classic Town and visit all my friends—the Brontës, Señor Cervantes—that's just not happening.

The TBR list has value, don't get me wrong. But only as a to-do list.

Sometimes making a list of things can take the place of actually doing those things. I once made a laminated list of cleaning tasks, figured I'd tackle two a day and after a month I'd clean everything. I made the list, made checkboxes. Not once did I follow it. The list itself became the job, which was the exact opposite of what I was shooting for.

So here's what you need to remember and accept: Reading has value. The books you've read have value. The list of books you genuinely want to read has value too, but the TBR list that includes every title you've ever thought of reading? It could use a trim.

A TBR list is like a map to the world of books, right? If so, the question you have to ask yourself is whether you're drawing a map of a city you'll ever visit.

Same Old Song And Dance

This step is simple. Take the oldest 10% of your list and cut it, straight up. With my list, most of that 10% ended up being stuff that was about five years old. It'd been on the TBR list for five years, unread.

Guy Kawasaki, author of *APE: Author, Publisher, Entrepreneur* and others, [has a theory](#) that any email older than 21 days can just be deleted, a theory he developed after he lost his inbox and no one complained.

If you put a book on your TBR list five years ago and never got to it, how badly do you really want to read it?

A five-year plan is an ambitious thing. And when it doesn't pan out, it's time to change.

A 10% cut from my TBR list of 988 resulted in a newer, shinier list of...nobody link my math teachers to this...somewhere in the neighborhood of 802.6 titles.

By the way, the advice here for reading lists is solid, the math is not.

Toys In The Attic

Sometimes the TBR list is bulky because you've got a book-buying problem. We've all been there. *I wouldn't normally be interested in The Sun Also Rises...but this copy is pristine and 99-cents!*

Before long you've got a shelf full of stuff you'll never read.

Slim down your collection of physical books and cut your TBR list. Get a cardboard box and fill it with the books you're least likely to read in the next month. Be honest. If I picked up a book and said "You MUST read this next" would it fill you with happiness or would you spend the next month reading something you hate, shooting longing looks over to the bookshelf?

Tape that box up, then tape a blank sheet of notebook paper to the top. If, over the course of the next month, you remember a title that's in there and want to read it, write it down on the notebook paper. After a month, any titles on the notebook paper can be saved, the rest have to go.

Emptying the box and saving the books you wrote down is a good job for another person, by the way. Which brings us to...

Angel

One of the toughest things I ever trashed was a bunch of ex-girlfriend pictures.

The problem, of course, was that the ex-girlfriend pictures were intermingled with all the other pictures from the last couple years. There was too much feeling attached to those pictures. I could never toss them. But if they just disappeared I'd never know which ones were missing.

To get it done I enlisted the help of someone who knew me, and someone I knew would be brutal, ruthless, and could call me out on my nonsense. I enlisted my brother.

Have a trusted friend look through your TBR list, and tell that friend to slash out 15-20%, whether that number be 10 books or 11 books or even 1000 books. Chances are you won't notice which ones are missing, which means it was time for them to go.

Using this method, I made a reduction of...96.8 titles, leaving me with a poorly estimated 747 titles.

Same Old Song And Dance

Noah saved two of every animal in the Great Flood. A coward would have saved three or four, you know, for spares. Hell, when I go camping I bring three flashlights. A regular one, a backup, and a backup to the backup. Panic sets in when I lose the original and have only the backup and backup's

If I picked up a book and said "You MUST read this next" would it fill you with happiness or would you spend the next month reading something you hate, shooting longing looks over to the bookshelf?

backup to keep the world illuminated.

Presumably, two of each animal was enough to repopulate the planet once the flood was over and things were cool again. I'm not totally sure whether Noah managed to call for a moratorium on intercourse while the boat was afloat, but for his sake I hope so. Point being, two was the minimum number he needed for things to move forward, and the minimum was enough.

On your TBR list, feel free to condense by taking off multiple titles by the same author. If the book is good, it'll carry you into the next book. You don't need to add every book by an author. Just the next one.

Using this method, I reduced my list just a bit, down to 700.2 titles, approximately.

I Don't Want To Miss A Thing

I had an English teacher who once told me to copy edit paragraphs by doing them out of order. Edit paragraph seven, then paragraph two, then paragraph one. Honesty time: he most likely never told me to edit paragraph seven because I can't imagine I put in seven paragraphs of effort, but the idea is still sound.

If you've kept a TBR list for a long time, you're probably used to looking through it from newest to oldest or from oldest to newest.

Taking a look at your list out of order will break up the rhythm. It will keep you from bobbing your head from title to title. If you've looked through your list too much, you expect to see *Willful Creatures* right after *My Korean Deli*, so rather than thinking about each title on its own, each one becomes another beat from the song in your head.

Look through your list starting at the middle. And cut. Cut titles that don't ring a bell whatsoever. Cut titles from authors you've since read and didn't enjoy. Cut titles that you added at a time when you had an interest in typography and fonts that faded pretty quickly once you made the sweeping decision that there are about three good fonts and that's the end of it.

This method helped me cut a good 13%. Which, based on string theory, brings me down too about 618.333 titles.

Livin' On The Edge

Chuck Palahniuk, your friend and mine, [wrote an article](#) about committing suicide every couple of years.

Okay, not actually killing yourself, but preparing your life as though you might. Getting everything together, condensing what matters and eliminating what doesn't. Why?

Any man will tell you that it's not the big disasters that finish you. No, given an invasion by hostile space aliens or an attack of flesh-eating zombies, most guys will grab their coats and hats and run out to join the fray. Even a run-of-the-mill earthquake or forest fire constitutes a nice change of pace. Instead, what grinds us down are the parking

tickets. The spoiled food in the back of the fridge. The dirty clothes at the bottom of the hamper that haven't seen daylight since 1995. Once you allow a critical mass of these petty annoyances to collect, you're sunk.

As you take a last look through your TBR list, think about it like this:

If I had a year left to live, which books would I want to read? Which books would I want to have in my head before I die? Which books make good use of the time I have left?

It's a dark way to think of it, but honestly, it's effective. And it might just get your list down to a nice, manageable, very useful tool.

What It Takes

Now that you've got this tidy list, what's to keep it from spiraling out of control again? How can you make sure you don't have to make big cuts year after year?

Librarian Meagan Day shares this hint:

I go through my To-Read list in pieces. I'll look at the next 50 books on the list and say 'Do I really want to read this?'

Similar to *Hoarders* cleaner Matt Paxton's advice:

Don't go to bed unless the sink is empty and each night clean a room for 10 minutes.

Break the big job into small jobs, and keep up with your TBR list. I know, it's the hardest thing to do. We, as a people, are not good at regular, easy maintenance. However, if you make your TBR list something useful, something alive, something you refer to all the time because it helps you keep up with what kind of book you need next, you'll be more likely to keep it tight.

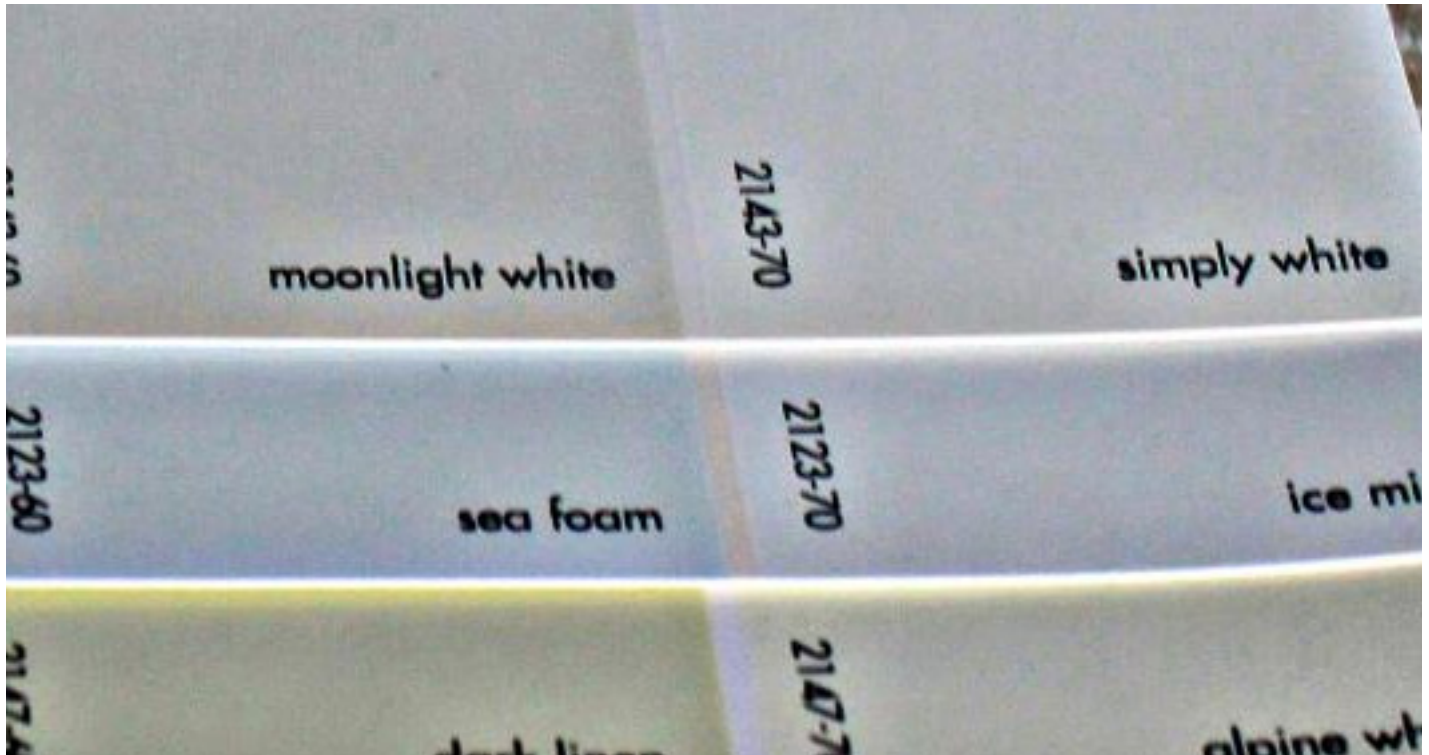
So far, everything is good in the studio apartment. In fact, maybe even a little better. Because it's so small, I narrowly avoided relatives staying at my place last week.

My smaller TBR list is an improvement too. Because it's smaller, it's useful. It actually reminds me of things I want to read right now. Instead of acting as this monument to all the books I'll never get to, it's become something that I can move towards.

More than anything, it's something I can skim through quickly, which means I spend less time working on a list and more time reading.

And ordering junk from Amazon.

White Guilt: 10 Books For The Betterment Of The Straight White Male



This intro is impossible. So I'll just go for it. If you read this and start feeling that flush of anger in your face, or if you start chewing the insides of your cheeks with fury, all I can ask is that you read a little further and give me a chance here.

I'm a straight white male. Always have been, always will be. Probably. There was that one rugby player who got hit in the head, was knocked out cold, and then [said he woke up gay](#). But that seems to be an oddity, and one that I doubt I could repeat. I know nothing of rugby.

I'm not going to pretend. Straight white male has been easy for me. There's a ton of stuff for me to read, watch, whatever. Most of the time if I pick up a video game or a comic book, I'll see a face that looks like mine staring back. Well, okay. Not like MINE. A face that could be a distant relative of my most handsome distant relative. A face that says smart things and says them through perfect teeth. But you get the idea.

So this list isn't about making sure there's stuff BY straight white males FOR straight white males to read. We all know there's plenty. It's not about straight white pride of some kind, fighting against some sort of secret multicultural, GLBT cabal that's trying to...I don't even know. I honestly asked someone who used the term "gay agenda" what that meant, and I never got a good answer. This list isn't addressing "reverse racism" either because that term baffles me. Does reverse racism mean you think another race is really great? Or is it about pronouncing racial slurs backwards so they come out like Harry Potter spells? It's just too confusing.

Here's what this list is about.

Straight white men are encouraged to get outside their straight white bubble from time to time. This

is a very good thing for us to do. The only problem I see is, well, as an avid reader and as a librarian who recommends books professionally, what I often see promoted as a book that will help someone think a little differently...a lot of those books are great, well-written pieces of literature that can change how a person thinks and acts. The only thing I'm not sure of is whether they always make for great starting points.

Let's pretend I had to recommend books to someone who was an avid fantasy reader looking to dive into sci-fi. My technique would be to take something that has some fantasy elements, something of the familiar, mixed in with the sci-fi. Terry Pratchett, for example, is a mixture of fantasy and sci-fi who can serve as a bridge between those worlds. His books might not be hardcore sci-fi, not like a space opera or something. But the goal in recommending Pratchett would be to start the reader down the path to finding space opera on her own.

So this book list, these are books for people who are looking to get out of that straight white male realm a little, but are maybe a bit nervous. Hesitant. Unsure of where to begin.

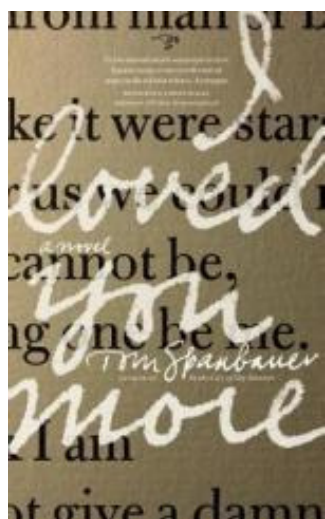
Oh, and you'll notice books on this list written by straight white men. It would be easy to write a book list that checked off the boxes. "We've got a guy from Japan, a lady from Iran, a transgender 95 year-old working in Antarctica..." Okay, maybe the last one wouldn't be a cinch. But checking those boxes, that doesn't seem terribly useful. Instead, I had two criteria:

1. The books are all damn good to read.
2. Each book made me think differently about race, sexuality, gender, SOMETHING.

Please understand that I'm doing my level best to learn about and understand other cultures, ideas about sex, ideas about love, and just generally ways that people who are more or less like myself make their way through life. This is by no means a thorough cultural education, merely the water in which one can dip a toe. Warm water meant to entice the reader into reading further and further from the shores he knows until, eventually, he finds himself comfortable in unexplored, open water with no land in sight.

Finally, let's address the inevitable question: "What's the point of this list if I'm not a straight white male?"

That's easy. See Criterion 1.



1. I Loved You More by Tom Spanbauer

"Faggot" was never one of my slanderous words of choice. I was in the butthead/butthole/buttface insult camp. Butt-centric name-calling was really more my speed. But I grew up in the 80's and 90's when the word "fag" wasn't as loaded as it is today, or at least didn't feel that way to a straight white male living in a podunk town, so it's a word I've heard more than a few times.

I'm not here to say that some words can be used at some times, or that it's all about context, or anything, really. If you're curious about my personal take on words, it's that each person needs to make a personal decision about what to say and also what to let pass without comment.

This opinion is recent, and it's because of this book.

This book, more than anything I've read, helped me to understand the word "faggot." Specifically, the kind of terror the word might hold for someone. The book bends a lot of the other notions I had about sexuality too, but the most surprising change for me came in a single scene:

But that night, in that moment, those first two times fighting for my life were right up close to me, inside me, inside, in my fists, the breath in my chest. Went on forever that moment — the adrenaline making me pop.

But I couldn't figure it out. Why was Hank taking this fight on? The skinhead dude was an asshole but not worth a minute of our time. Plus there was twenty of them and two of us.

Fag.

Fag. Out of that moment fag was what was sucking out all the air.

I won't play language police. I'm not the right buttface for that job. But if you want to understand the harm words can do, if you want to really understand rather than be told again, read this book.



2. & 3. Swimming Studies' by Leanne Shapton paired with The Chronology Of Water by Lidia Yuknavitch

Swimming Studies makes a great, quieter companion to Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water*, and through the lenses of swimming goggles you get just the tiniest idea of what it's like to have a woman's body.

These books are absolutely fascinating. I'm shy to say it, but I had no idea about the amount of change a woman's body goes through in a lifetime. And how much a woman's relationship to her body can change as well.

You can pick one of the two if you'd like. *Swimming Studies* is a gentler read in some ways. It's a strange, meditative book whereas *Chronology* is beautiful in its savagery and there is very little held back. For my money, I'd read them as a pair, starting with whichever book you think suits you best.

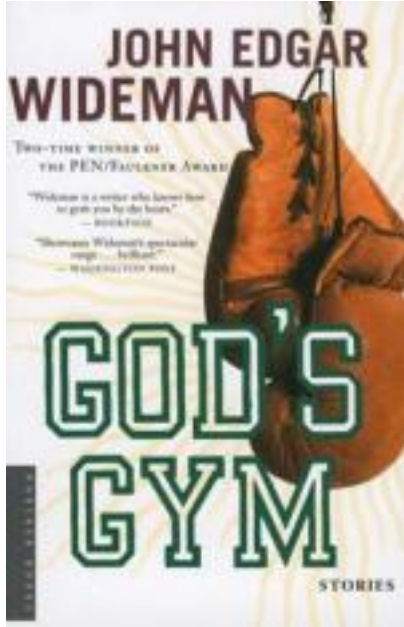
By the time you read both of these, I'm not going to say that you'll understand what it's like to live in a woman's body. What you will understand is how little you know, and you'll be prepared to surrender to the fact that you'll never understand everything.

4. Pyongyang: A Journey In North Korea by Guy Delisle

The beauty of this book, besides the fact that it's a rare glimpse into North Korea from an outsider's perspective, is the way in which Delisle balances respect for a culture with the ability to occasionally stop and say, "Okay, that's just ridiculous."

He's not overly disrespectful or dismissive of North Korean culture. Yet he's also not afraid to point out that certain things are patently silly, such as donning special slippers to walk through a gigantic museum of gifts from other countries.

It's important to try and experience something new, but once in a while you'll come across something that just seems too crazy to stomach. You might even get a chuckle out of it. Don't worry. You're not a bad person.



5. *God's Gym* by John Edgar Wideman

John Edgar Wideman is the guy who's left out of the good company he deserves. Raymond Carver, John Cheever, Robert Olmstead. I'm not going to say that short stories are a straight white man's boys' club because that would be denying the influence of Flannery O'Connor and the endless talent of Amy Hempel. That said, Wideman isn't on the list as often as he should be.

He also doesn't seem to make the list with Alice Walker, Walter Mosley, or Zadie Smith. Wideman is a great writer whose work can't get the credit it deserves.

Get him on the list. Read his stuff. *Fever* is another excellent, sometimes-experimental collection, and *Brothers and Keepers* is a memoir that's hard to forget. For my money though, it's *God's Gym* all the way.

6. *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* by Haruki Murakami

More than just a great read (or a great listen if you're a runner and dig audiobooks), Murakami's meditation on running long distances not only serves as a great introduction to the author, but it also provides a very non-Western, non-American idea of athleticism.

Running, for Murakami, is about living a healthy, holistic life. He wanted to have a long writing career, and in order to do that he needed to stay healthy. So, running.

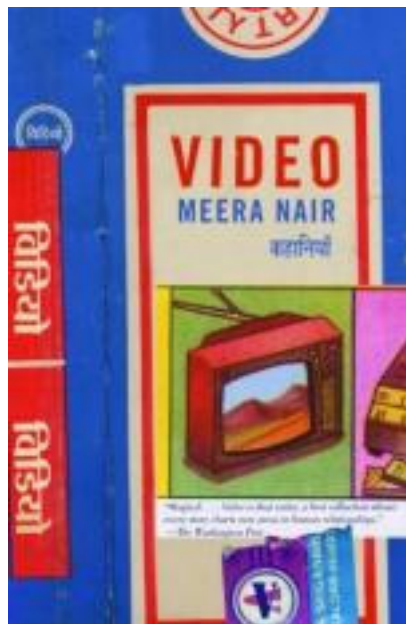
Murakami's point of view is very pragmatic, and his style is blunt without that in-your-face feeling. Reading this book will make you think differently about writing, running, and even possibly a couple of your favorite writers, as Murakami discusses his work translating F. Scott Fitzgerald and Raymond Carver.

7. "My Flamboyant Grandson" by George Saunders

He looks like no one else, acts like no one else, his clothes are increasingly like plumage, late at night he choreographs using plastic Army men, he fits no mold and has no friends...

Master of the short story, Saunders' piece from *In Persuasion Nation* is narrated by a grandfather working to make peace with his grandson's proclivities in a future that is sort of like a mix between our present and *Blade Runner's* advertising nightmarescape.

What's challenging and wonderful about the piece is the way the grandfather loves the boy, yet his inner monologue is ready to admit that it doesn't necessarily come easily for him. Not that the love doesn't come easily. The expression of that love.



8. Video by Meera Nair

Fifteen years we've been married and now you want me to do this—this thing!

"Video" from Meera Nair's collection by the same name tells the story of a wrecked marriage, the closing of intimacy because of a man's selfish and inexcusable act.

After the husband and narrator of the story sees a pornographic movie for the first time, he forces an attempt to replicate one of the, uh, stage directions at home.

What's fascinating is to see a marriage that was open enough that this could be discussed fade into something where the couple becomes less than roommates.

This story was penned by a woman writing a man's voice, and it's wholly, unquestionably a man's voice. Even when the main character acts in heinous fashion, I wouldn't call the narration unsympathetic. If you've ever said any variation of the phrase "women writers don't speak to me" I'd recommend a hard look at this story. It might change your ideas of what a woman can and can't do with words, and more importantly, what a woman can or cannot understand about a man.

9. The Arrival by Shaun Tan

An excellent example of "show, not tell," this wordless graphic novel is a beautiful and disorienting look into the experience of an immigrant in a new country.

Like most good sci-fi, *The Arrival* shows us something about ourselves by making the point through something we don't quite recognize. It helps eliminate the politics of the situation and distill the terror, confusion, and overall bizarre experience that immigration can be.

Rather than explaining to the reader the difficulties of being a stranger in a new place, the book takes the reader right through the entire thing. You'll walk away from this book with a much better idea of what it means to be a complete stranger in a (super, super) strange land.

10. Paying For It by Chester Brown

If you're a white boy who always figured he'd grow up and marry his high school sweetheart, Brown's accounting of several years he spent seeing prostitutes (legal where he lives) will leave you scratching your head.

The encounters can feel a little cold, clinical, but along the way Brown engages in a lot of conversations with people who ask a lot of questions about what love is, how sex fits in, all that stuff.

The appendices at the end, in my opinion, are skippable. And you might find yourself not particularly fond of Brown. However, the viewpoint of straight, white male sexuality is channeled through a very different pathway. Technically, what Brown describes is a series of straight sex events. However, the book proves that there are many variations on the theme when it comes to sex, and his particular variety will most definitely challenge many peoples' ideas about what sex and relationships really are.

Anyway, that's it. Don't be a buttface. Take those shoes off, get those toes in the water.

Should You Be Reading Archie Comics?



Archie comics were never COMICS, comics to me. There was a significant lack of super powers. The characters spent very little time foiling schemes that could be described as "maniacal," "dastardly," or even good, old-fashioned "evil." I don't know that I ever saw Archie comics anywhere BUT the checkout aisle at the grocery store.

Archie books were, to put it in the parlance of the young boy I once was, for girls. In place of the powers and schemes and occasional science machine, Archie offered fashion, relationships, and a cleanliness I just didn't care for. Where comics of the 90's offered dark anti-heroes, Archie offered teens so squeaky clean that even a Punisher crossover couldn't dull their sheen.

As I've grown, so has my love for comics. I still read superhero stuff, but now there's room in my beefy heart for the emotional comics of a Jeffrey Brown or a Chris Ware, the hilarity of a Kate Beaton.

Events such as the announcement of an interesting new character and a zombified version of the Archie gang, combined with my broader tastes and deeper tolerance for comics that don't include fisticuffs, forced me to wonder: Is there maybe, just maybe, room for a gang of clean teens from Riverdale on a comic fan's reading list? Are Archie comics good? Is there something more going on than the will they/won't they shtick they've been running for decades?

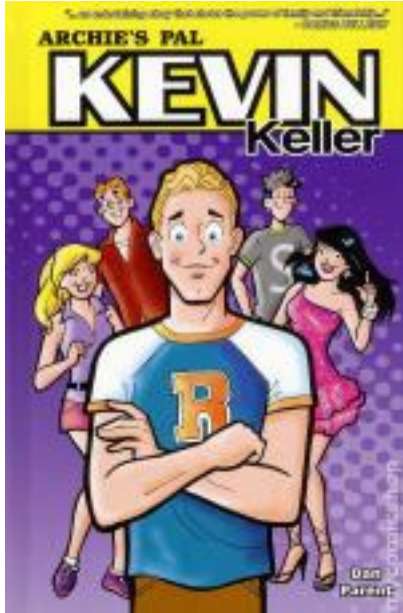
The only thing for it was to put on my investigator's hat (which is actually a pair of sweatpants I read comics in) and see just what was going down in Riverdale.

Let's start with 'Archie's Pal Kevin Keller'

Kevin Keller's arrival in Riverdale was a big story at the time. As an openly gay character in comics, Kevin was poised to set an example not only in Riverdale, but the larger world of popular

entertainment.

The comics in this volume aren't all that great. Yes, they set up a pretty strong pro-tolerance stance, which is a good thing, but sadly they just aren't compelling, good comics. It's really too bad because they do some good work, but it's not enough to ignore the fact that the stories are a little disjointed. Oh, and there is another big problem with the idea.



It didn't occur to me until I'd read about half of this book and part of the next, but Riverdale, home of these teens, is a pretty sexless place. Archie LIKES Betty and Veronica, but it mostly ends there. Which is how it has to be. In a world with sex, Archie's indecision would come off as sleazy, or sleazIER depending on how you feel about it now. Not to mention that I can't help but think that in a world where sex was a real thing, it wouldn't take too many three-straw malt shop visits to broach the three-way option.

So in Kevin you have this character, and he's sold to us as gay. That's the part we're told to be excited about. The only thing is, if the character's sold to us on the basis of his preference for same-sex partners, something that cannot be acted on whatsoever because sex is not something that is acted on in this world, then it's like having a guy who is the world's greatest gunfighter in a comic book about adjusting insurance rates. In this volume, although he is 100% open about the fact that he's gay, the closest Kevin has to any sort of relationship with a man is a hamburger-eating contest with Jughead. He does say that he finds a couple of non-character characters cute, but that's the beginning and end of it. It's boring, although at least it's even in that the straight kids aren't having sex either.

I guess what I'm saying is, it feels a little like finding out a Teletubby is gay. Does that make any difference to the story? I mean, in whatever the hell kind of story Teletubbies are part of?

To answer my own question, perhaps. Because when you get down to it, this is sort of the crux of the equality argument. If Kevin Keller is sleeping with men or women or multiple women or Archie's parents on alternating Tuesdays, I really can't judge that. He's a nice, All-American boy who the other characters value in the same ways they value straight characters.

So maybe the failure of Kevin Keller, for me anyway, is that the story of a gay teen who lives in a throwback town and is accepted and happy...well, there's not a lot of conflict there, and though happiness is certainly what I would wish for any real human, it doesn't make for terribly compelling reading.

However, lack of conflict aside, this is where something started happening in Archie comics.

Kevin Keller's introduction exposes the fact that the writers are very aware of how their decisions in Riverdale are seen in our world, the real world. Indeed, Kevin's appearance is a much bigger deal in our world than in theirs. It's a much bigger deal precisely because the big effects of his orientation are felt in the real world, not the imagined world of Riverdale. Which is when things start to get interesting.

Kevin Keller's appearance is like the part in *Terminator* movies when they say the machines become sentient. Archie comics became self aware somewhere around this time. The writers knew what these comics were, they knew Riverdale was squeaky clean, and they managed to embrace that and push the boundaries at the same time. Kevin Keller showed that an openly gay character can fit into a setting that might seem unlikely, and he actually fits in seamlessly. It's a step towards what would become the first Archie comic I can wholeheartedly recommend.

Archie: The Married Life

Let's talk concept and then execution.

The concept here is that *Archie: The Married Life* is actually two series that run in parallel. Think of it as Earth 1 and Earth 2. On Earth 1, Archie proposes to Veronica, the rich girl who is ambitious and perhaps a little spoiled, but cares for Archie. On Earth 2, he proposes to Betty, the iconic girl next door.

The result is a series that tells two different stories. You get one issue where Archie has married Veronica, followed by an issue where Archie has married Betty. In the Veronica arc, Earth 1, Archie works for Veronica's billionaire dad, Veronica is his direct supervisor, and the couple remains in Riverdale. Betty is present, and she's in that fun, mid-20's tailspin of failure that so many of us have experienced.

On Earth 2, Archie marries Betty. The pair moves to New York where Betty pursues various jobs and Archie pursues his music career.

Now, on both Earths, the side characters have essentially the same plots. The Jughead stuff is the same, the Moose and Midge stuff. The only difference is, on Earth 1 Archie is with Veronica and working the corporate life, while on Earth 2 Archie is chasing a dream and he and Betty are basically broke.

The truly fascinating and unexpected thing about these comics is, it would seem that Archie...actually isn't happy in either scenario. Where I thought the comics would present Archie as a loving husband without a care in the world, basically doing the same stuff as always but with a tie and maybe a beard, the books have done a really nice job of dealing with a tough question: Is it better to pursue an artistic dream or a steady job?

I have to say, I was surprised at the way things shook out. It's not all Beach Boys surf songs with the top down anymore. It's darker. Like Beach Boys stuff that's not about surfing. Not about surfing one bit.

I'll also say that Veronica is pretty interesting in this version. She works for her father, and she has to make some really tough choices about siding with her dad or her husband. It's an inflated, soap opera version of a problem, but again it's a problem many of us know. You love your spouse, but my god it wouldn't be such a bad thing if their parents

I have to say, I was surprised at the way things shook out. It's not all Beach Boys surf songs with the top down anymore. It's darker. Like Beach Boys stuff that's not about surfing. Not about surfing one bit.

decided to study volcanoes and maybe got a little too excited about them and then maybe just fell in a volcano and that was that.

Betty is a bit more disappointing. They just haven't given her much to do early on in the story. She supports Archie financially, which is something, but early in the series she just doesn't have a lot going on.

Another mark in the win column at this point is the art. Less cheesecake, the female characters don't seem to be drawn with nearly as much fantasy sex appeal as they once were. The art has grown up in many ways. Somehow the artist has taken the Archie characters and made them look contemporary, but not by throwing Jughead in a leather jacket and Archie in skinny jeans. They just look...right. Grown up. Sort of like that kid from high school who looks older now, but still has the same face. Familiar, yet adult. The change in the art is a lot like the change I see in the books. It's different in tone, but it doesn't feel like it's different for shock value. It's different because that's the right way to tell these stories.

Yes, some of *The Married Life* is still very silly. It's dramatic, and it's very much a comic book. But I read comic books, and this is one I would read. One I DO read.

And if we're talking about life with Archie, it's hard not to talk about the recent announcement, the death of Archie.

Yes, in issue #36 of Life With Archie, our hero is felled by a bullet meant for his aforementioned friend, Kevin Keller.

The death of a comic book character is rarely, if ever, permanent, and oftentimes it's nothing more than a plan to boost sales by tricking people who assume every comic book gains value if

A. Something happens, and

B. It is old.

I'll let you in on a comic book secret. SOMETHING happens in every comic, and EVERY comic will become old given time.

I'll let you in on another comic book secret, one regarding the death of characters. The only true death comes when a book is canceled and the character is phased out. You don't get foil covers, multiple variants, all that stuff. You just show up to pick up the next issue of *Warriors Of Plasm* and it's not at the comic shop. Or anywhere.

So this death is temporary, partial.

The third comic book secret I'll let you in on, one requirement of reading comics, is that you surrender yourself to the story, just a little, and trust the creators to take you for a ride.

I don't know where Archie's death will take the stories, and it's hard to say. But as a fan of the events that led up to this point and of the issue itself, I'm curious enough to see what waits for Archie in the great beyond. Which leads us to...

Afterlife With Archie

There are a couple ways to test if something has been mainstreamed enough that it's over. If Target sells shirts based on your favorite show, it's no longer an unknown entity. If commercials feature cheapened versions of whatever you're into, we're well into the danger zone. If something shows up in Riverdale, it may very well be over.

At least that's what I thought before I read *Afterlife With Archie*. Because let's face it, you can get *Walking Dead* in about 5 different comic book formats, on television, and even in side story novels. Not to mention the other zombie media out there. Books, comics, movies. Zombies were everywhere for a time, and it would seem that Archie and the gang got in on the action a bit late.

I can admit that the zombie market is saturated. And yet, I have to say, these are damn good comics.

They're fun, they're a good read, and they're very self-aware. At one point Archie even jokes about the fact that he wouldn't be able to decide between Betty and Veronica "even if he had fifty years." His mom gives him a hard time for his ride, a car that should've hit the scrap heap somewhere around VE Day. All the characters hint at just a bit of what's going on, the ultimate balance of a story that's aware of itself, yet not ashamed of what it is.

The writing is solid, the art is great, and just like *Archie: The Married Life*, the comic works because it's a good character study.

I wish there was a better way to say this, but I read this right before reading volume 21 of *The Walking Dead*. Archie was better. I felt more. I wanted to see what would happen. The characters were more fun to watch. I didn't feel (and I truly adore *The Walking Dead*, but it has to be said) that Archie was stretching out the story because they have to put off the ending.

You could spend a half hour in ways much worse than reading *Afterlife With Archie*, and the surprising part is I would count *Walking Dead Volume 21* as one of those ways.

I can't force anyone to read certain things. Especially comics. Comic fans can be, to put it in delicate terms, opinionated dorks who can rebel against change in a way that's powerful, frightening, and downright gross.

Which makes it all the more exciting to see Archie, of all characters, change so much.

The answer is Yes, you should read Archie. Read Archie: The Married Life. Read Afterlife With Archie too. Feel free to put on your skeptic's pants first. Mine are sweatpants that look suspiciously like my "investigator's hat" in that they are the same pants. Pants can be more than one thing.

Give Archie a shot. The creators have done some good things, and we're really still in the phase where it's not too late to jump on board, consider yourself an early adopter, and really criticize the bandwagoners who show up later. Which, final comic book secret of the day, is a super fun form of fandom.

Can We Build It?: 5 DIY Bookshelves



More than anything, the advance of Pinterest has provided me with a deep understanding of just how shabby my life is. Never before was I aware of all the custom wooden blocks that hold wine bottles at decadent angles. How chalkboards fill people's lives with motivational slogans. How there's nothing that can't be improved with a painted-on ship's anchor. Every food is cooked on a wooden plank, and every drink is quaffed from an embellished Ball jar. Bamboo is the new hardwood, concrete the new granite. There are so many beautiful homes, beautiful gardens, and beautiful people on Home And Garden Television.

These crafter magicians, they pull a patio furniture set out of thin air and maybe some old firewood. They use a microwave and a dumpster-scrounged coffee mug to concoct a delicious cake treat. By the time I look over enough pictures, I'm convinced I can build a new car out of a porta-potty and a reclaimed fire hydrant. Until, that is, I'm standing over a pile of PVC pipe, looking at the hammer in my hand, suddenly unsure which side is the "hit-ty" side.

How come when I do a project, I always manage to break something? How come I always end up with some kind of contraption that looks nothing like the picture? How did I make a pasta dish from Pinterest and have it turn out purple?

How does a screw head just pop off?

This column asks and answers the question: Can an average person, with slightly above-average chance of calamity, build some nice Pinterest bookshelves for himself?



Background:

I've had no formal carpentry training. No wood shop classes. I did build three pinewood derby cars. One was mediocre. The other two could not actually make it all the way down the track.

That's the sum total of my carpentry training.

Tools

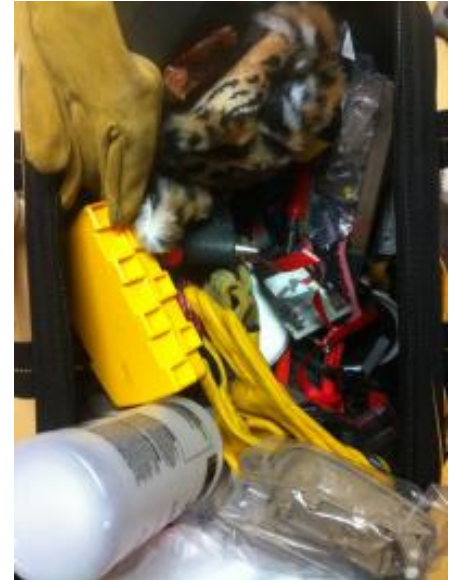
I own a reasonable set of tools, but nothing that doesn't fit into the pictured tool bag (right).

Don't mind the cat tail. Some might say it's not a tool, but I've never been more popular at a party than the time I was Cat King. So it's certainly a social tool.

No crazy grinders, no bench vice, no whatever that vat was they used at the end of *Terminator 2*. Not even the knowledge of whether or not that vat of molten stuff from the end of *Terminator 2* is a "tool."

Here's a list of the tools I used:

- Hammer
- Screwdrivers
- Level (Did you know there's a level on your iPhone? Open the compass app and swipe!)
- Wall Anchors (These are basically screws with a thingy-ma-doo that pops open to hold heavier things on drywall.)
- Drill
- Measuring Tape
- Power Saw
- Hand Saw (Because the stupid power saw ran out of power almost immediately)



Standards:

Each bookshelf had to meet these standards:

- It should cost no more than \$50 in materials.
- It must support a minimum of 10 books.
- It should take no more than 1 hour to assemble.
- It has to stay upright and intact for a minimum of 24 hours.
- Each bookshelf must be apartment-friendly. So no alterations to the structure of the building, no rotating bookcases that lead into secret rooms. Sadly.
- Each bookshelf has to not look like total crap. The least calculable standard, and probably the most important. When a person asks "Did you make that yourself?" it's generally not a compliment. In my case, anyway.

Safety

Eye Protection: I recommend safety goggles. Barring that, women's sunglasses cover a lot more of the eye than men's. This is valuable info if you're building or hung over. Or building AND hung over.

Ear Protection: Probably a good idea. Definitely a good idea if you want to listen to podcasts while you work.

Gloves: Before this project was finished I stabbed myself twice with saw teeth. Should have worn gloves the whole time instead of just for this picture.

Flannel Shirt: I don't know how this makes a person safe, but it's customary. Nobody wants to look like a noob.

Oh, and hey, if you've got access to other safety equipment, go for it.

With these standards in mind, it was time to make a trip to the hardware store and some back alleys to gather supplies. Uh, and those back alley supplies refer to cast-off building materials, not crank. Although crank would have helped me finish quickly.

The Hardware Store

Acceptance is the key to hardware store success. Accept the fact that you will make more than one trip to the hardware store for any project. I don't know how this works or why, but the sooner you accept this cosmic math, the better off you'll be.

The second key to hardware store success, don't talk to strange older men. This is probably a good rule in general, and in the hardware store it's meant to save time as opposed to your life. But truly, you'll never get into more bizarre conversations than you will with old men at the hardware store. While I pulled rope off a giant spool doohickey for this very project, an old man stopped by and said, "Don't do it. It's not worth it." We had a little laugh about his suicide joke, and before I could finish unspooling rope, the old man came back at me from the other side and said, again, "Don't do it. It's not worth it." I swore that if he came back a third time, I would have to disagree. I'd rather hang myself in the hardware store than hear that joke a third time.

Bookshelf #1: The Pallet

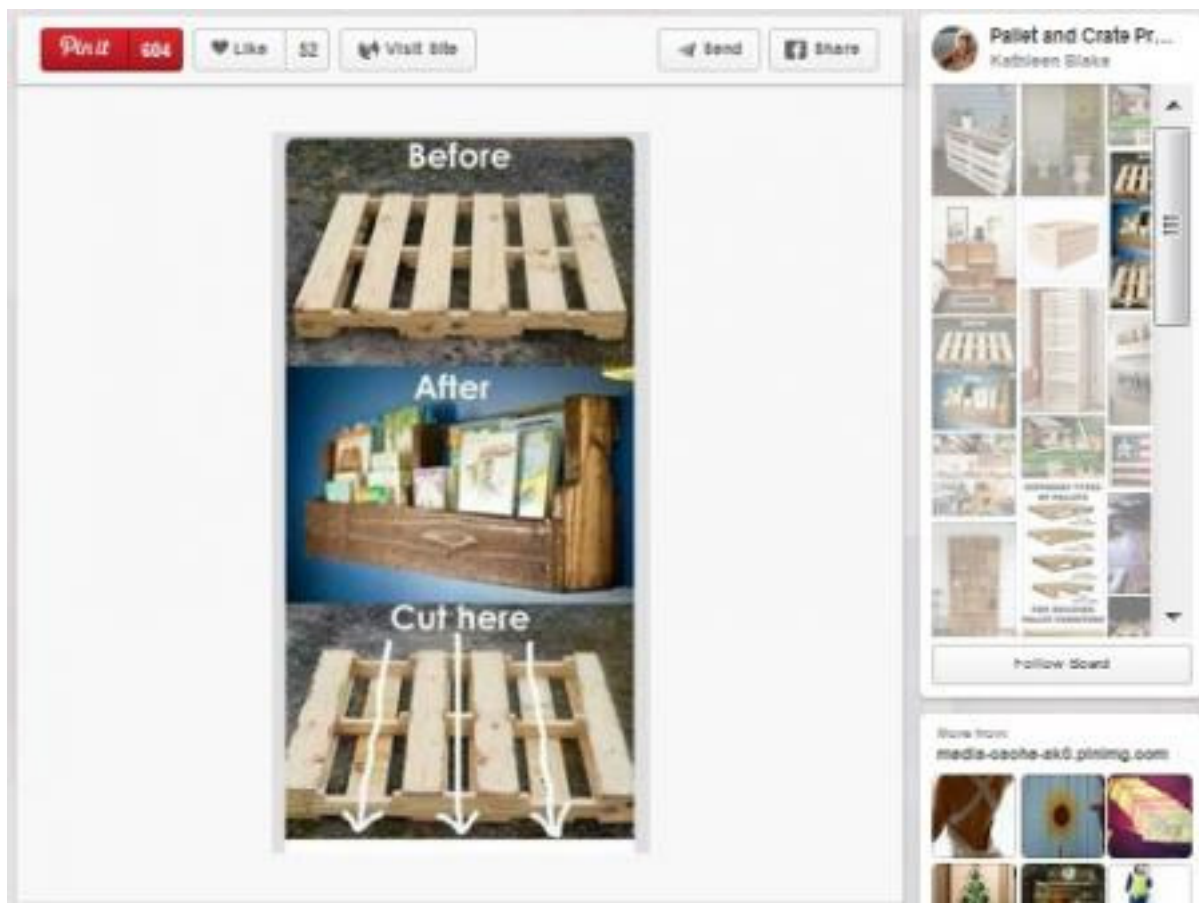
Pallets are the hottest thing to hit the web since the invention of spelling "cheeseburger" with a "Z". You can find tables made from pallets. Bed frames. Outdoor patio furniture. Oh, and bookshelves like you wouldn't believe.

It sounds like the perfect idea. Grab a pallet, take it apart, and put it back together. Easy as pie.

"Easy as pie" is a very accurate saying for this project. Have you ever tried to make a lattice crust? It's hard as hell, and my version looks like crap.

Let me be the first to tell you, just because a place piles a bunch of pallets outside does not mean those pallets are free. One could argue that anything in the dumpster area out behind a store is free,

and I tend to agree in most cases. However, taking a pallet is more like taking the dumpster than taking the stuff inside the dumpster. If you want pallets, look on Craigslist or for a new business in town. Someone has free pallets somewhere. In my case, a new gym opened up, and they were looking to unload some pallets.



By the time I arrived in the alley behind the gym, the pallets were picked-over. I managed to find one that was in decent shape. Decent enough shape that the world's most gigantic spider had decided to call it home, anyway. He'd also decorated his rustic pallet home with the corpses of several dead bees. Truly, a charming touch.

Here we are back in the workshop, aka An Alley Near The Dumpster. An ideal space. At least until some odors revealed that someone had urinated in my workshop. Sharing space is all about the realization that people use the same space in different ways. Ce'st La Pee.

Here, amongst the urine, is where I discovered something about pallets. They're not made of great wood. Or good wood. Did you ever have one of those wooden planes as a kid? The kind that comes flat in a package and you punch out the different pieces, slide them together and then it sort of floats when you throw it? One step above a paper airplane? That's the kind of wood you get with pallets.



How people build these into furniture I have no idea. Maybe some people have boring lives and like the danger, the thrill of a night's sleep on a bed that could collapse if you take in too heavy a breath. Who knows?

I'm here to tell you, pallets are fun, but in terms of function, they're meant to be pallets. Flat on the ground, stuff stacked on top. They aren't meant for anything else.

With a little bit of doing, here's what I put together:



Summary:

Purchased Materials: Screws, wall brackets, drywall anchors. \$5-\$10.

Time to build and install: 45 min.

Most Commonly Used Curse Phrase: "Ah, shit."

No. of books held: 10

Advice: Pallets make for cool, rustic holders of knick-knacks, and free is always good. They make for great decorative elements. If you're looking for something fun, they're not a bad choice. If you're looking for something that's no headache and made of something that's at least popsicle stick quality, pass.

Shelf #2: Pipes



This shelf and versions of this shelf are tearing it up on Pinterest at the moment. They have a beauty in their simplicity, and they wouldn't look out of place in a hip bar or restaurant. The best part, all you really need is some piping, some flanges (the round bits that attach to the wall) and some screws.

The thing is, doing one with this intricate, curved design is tough. The reason being, you **HAVE** to screw the flanges into wall studs. The pipes are heavy as hell, even before you load them up with books. You have to plan out your shelf so that both ends hit studs, but at the same time you're a slave to the length of pipes available at the hardware store.

For an expert at spatial reasoning, this might not be too tough. I got my head stuck in a fence as a kid, so I opted for a simpler "U" shape.

The pipes are pretty easy to find at the hardware store. The thing you want to look out for, **MAKE SURE** that your pipes, flanges, and connectors are all the same size. They may be in the same bin, but remember, you're relying on the last person who cruised by there to put things back where they belong.

Another little issue, you'll find that the dark variety of pipes is covered with a greasy filth. So clean those off with a vigorous motion that is best accomplished after you light a nice candle and lower the lights.

Here's the result:



Summary:

Purchased Materials: Threaded pipes, flanges, screws. \$35-\$40.

Time to build and install: 20 min.

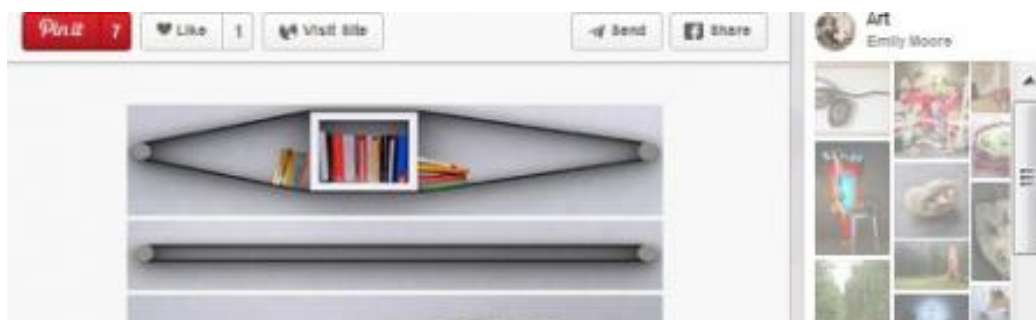
Most Commonly Used Curse Phrase: "This shit is filthy."

No. of books held: 16

Advice: These things are heavier than you'd think, even before they're loaded. Also, pipes ain't cheap.

What People Are Saying: This shelf was probably the one that people responded to best when I showed off the pics.

Shelf #3: The Rubber Band



It didn't seem that any Pinteresters had added instructions for this one. But hey, a couple cylinders, a big rubber band. What could be simpler?

I decided that I'd mount the cylinders on a wooden plank rather than straight to the wall after I... scavenged a nice wood scrap from a nearby demolition project.

For the cylinders, I decided to go with a couple small, empty paint cans.

The rubber band was where the real trouble began.

A few companies that sell crates and shipping containers sell something called a "Pallet Band," which is a giant rubber band to hold stuff together on a pallet. So, pallets, we meet again.

The issue is that they sell pallet bands in packs of, oh, 250 or so. Because it would seem these items are meant for warehouses that deal in pallet-loads of stuff as opposed to columnists who deal in less volume (though FAR deeper purpose!).

I thought about whole bags of large rubber bands from the office store, how I could build a web of sorts, when I hit on elastic body bands.

Body bands are, well, big rubber bands that people use for exercise. In a 3-pack of body bands, you get purple, orange, and green. The workout industry and popsicle industry are the only two businesses that share this color palette. Guh, I need to stop using the word "pallet", even if it's the homophone.



The assembly wasn't too bad. Open the paint cans and screw them into the board. Stretch the bands between the cans, load the whole mess with books.

And honestly, it worked. The biggest surprise so far. And other than the shades of the bands, it's not too shabby.

A person willing to get spendy can find black body bands meant to hold a decent amount of weight, so if you're attached to this one, you can do it better.

Summary

Purchased Materials: Paint cans, resistance bands. \$35.

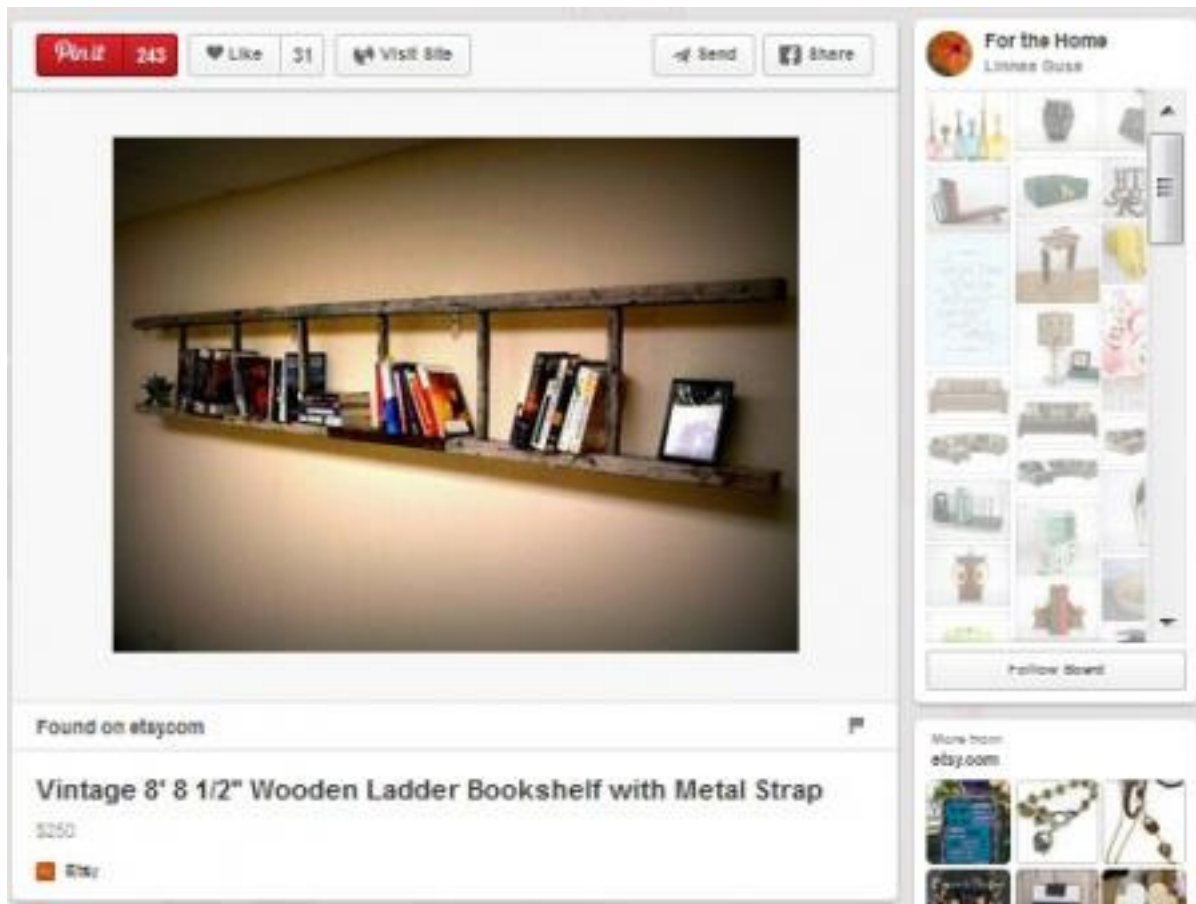
Time to build and install: 50 min.

Most Used Curse Phrase: "There is no way this fuckin' thing is going to work."

No. of books held: 10.

Advice: This one is definitely not about holding a lot of books. It's a conversation piece. If you want to start a conversation, this one is unique.

Shelf #4: The Ladder



I figured this one would be tough as far as sourcing the material. It's the part I hate on every home improvement show. "Oh, we found this priceless, perfect piece on the curb!" Or, "You can find an ideal piece just like this one for less than \$1 at your local thrift store!" My ass.

The thrift store nearby had three ladders, but none were of the variety that work for a horizontal wall situation. The thing is, an old ladder, the kind you might use to climb up into the loft part of a barn to make out with a pigtailed gal, that kind of ladder is two straight poles with straight steps. If you look at it straight on, it looks like a capital "H." The modern ladder, the kind that doesn't seem to involve makeout parties, has angled steps and side planks. The bottom step is wider than the top step, so when you look at it straight on, it looks like a capital "A." The result, you can't hang it sideways in a way that looks straight or remotely sane.



So instead of a wall shelf, I changed course and went for a version that leaned against the wall.

I cut the back half off the ladder, then cut its height and a couple of the steps too.

As an amateur, it's easy to find myself engaged in questionable construction practices. Does Ty Pennington ever step on a pair of cutters to get more force out of them? I can't imagine he does. But it got the job done, and the shelf held. Until about 3 AM.



Another piece of advice. If something falls apart, it will fall apart at 3 AM. It's a scientific fact that things do not fall apart or fall off the wall at noon or maybe in the early evening when you're out of the house. It's at 3 AM when there's the maximum potential for terror. So when my ladder shelf fell apart, it was at 3 AM.

Oh, and ONE OF MY BOOKENDS PAID THE PRICE FOR MY HUBRIS!

I kind of suspect this bookend was supposed to be an artsy version of that racist thing where a Mexican gentleman with a sombrero sleeps up against a cactus. So maybe it's not such a tragedy.



But I didn't give up. I screwed the ladder pieces back together and reinforced the whole thing using other pieces of the ladder that I'd cut off before. Since then, it's been great.

Summary:

Purchased Materials: Ladder: \$10 (I swear, this is true, and there were two others. If you have a Habitat For Humanity ReStore nearby, this is a good place to look).

Time To Build And Install: 1 bout of 60 min, plus a second bout of 20 min.

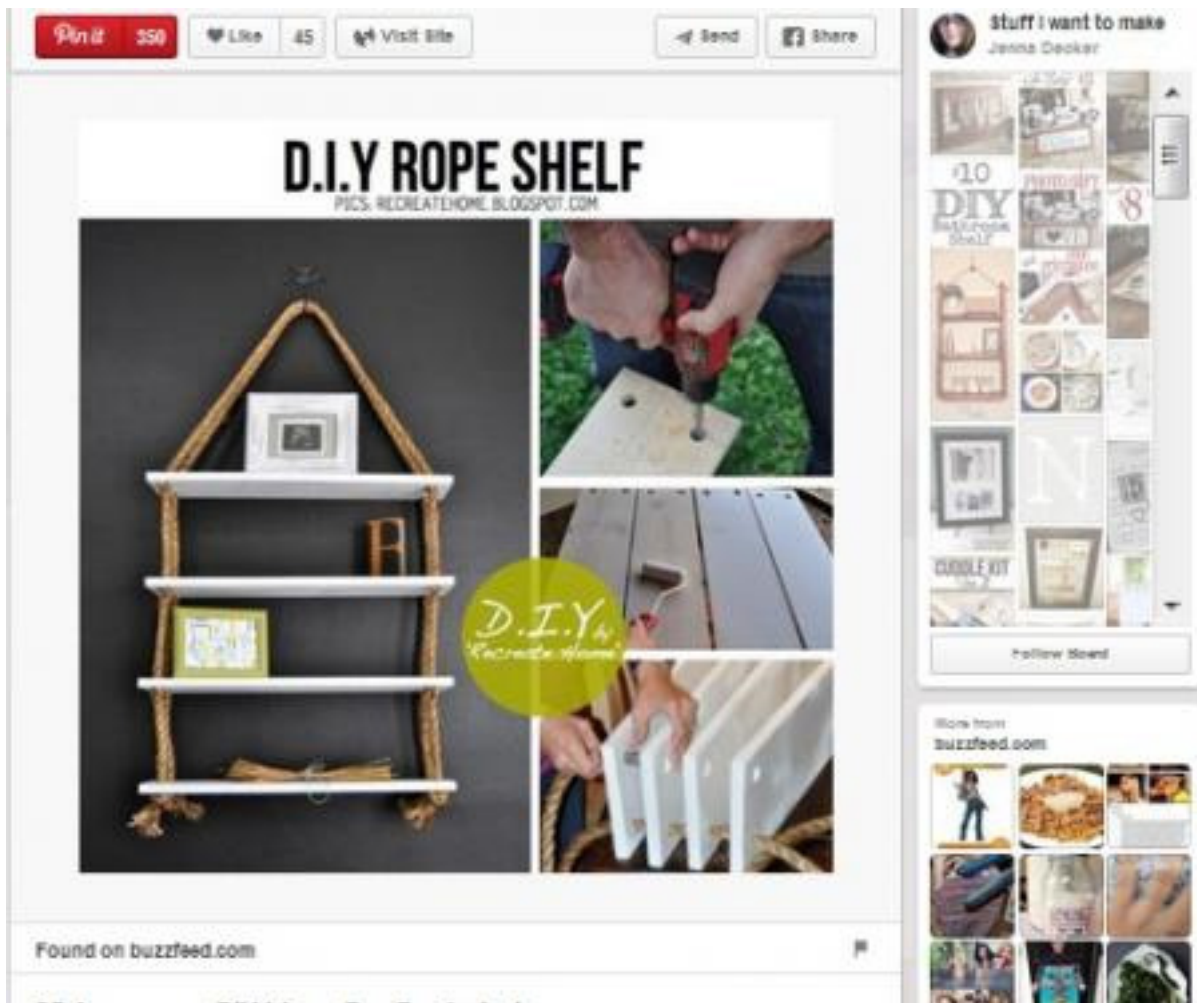
Most Commonly Used Curse Phrase: "Fuck, Shit, Holy God!" This at 3 AM.

No. Of Books Held: 33

Advice: I got a painted ladder, which was cool, but the previous owner painted over the screws and bolts that hold it together, so it was tough to get it apart. The thing to look for in a good ladder for this project is how easily it'll come apart.

Extra Note: This one definitely holds the most books, and I have total confidence in it. It also doesn't require any wall attachment, although if you have kids at home, you'll want to anchor it to the wall.

Shelf #5: Rope Shelf



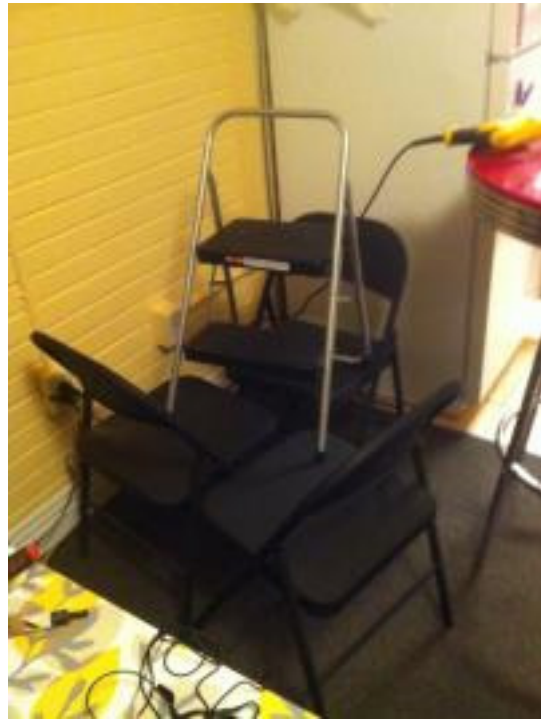
I felt out of my depth on this one. I never got my Tenderfoot in the Boy Scouts because I couldn't tie a square knot. I know that sounds like a tall tale, but I promise it's true. And is a tall tale only for greatness? Is my tale really a Short Tale?

The rope shelf turned out to be pretty easy. Use a hole saw (basically a drill attachment that allows you to make big holes in wood) to cut holes in some planks. Do this with the boards stacked on

top of each other so you know they'll match up. Then, it's easy as threading the rope through the top board, tying the two knots and then moving on to the next board. It helps if you set your level on the board as you tie, and it really, REALLY helps to have some assistance on this step.

The tough part, it turns out, is attaching it to the ceiling.

For one thing, to get up to the ceiling, it would be nice to have a ladder. Which I totally DID until I cut it up to make a charming bookshelf. So, an ill-advised contraption was created.

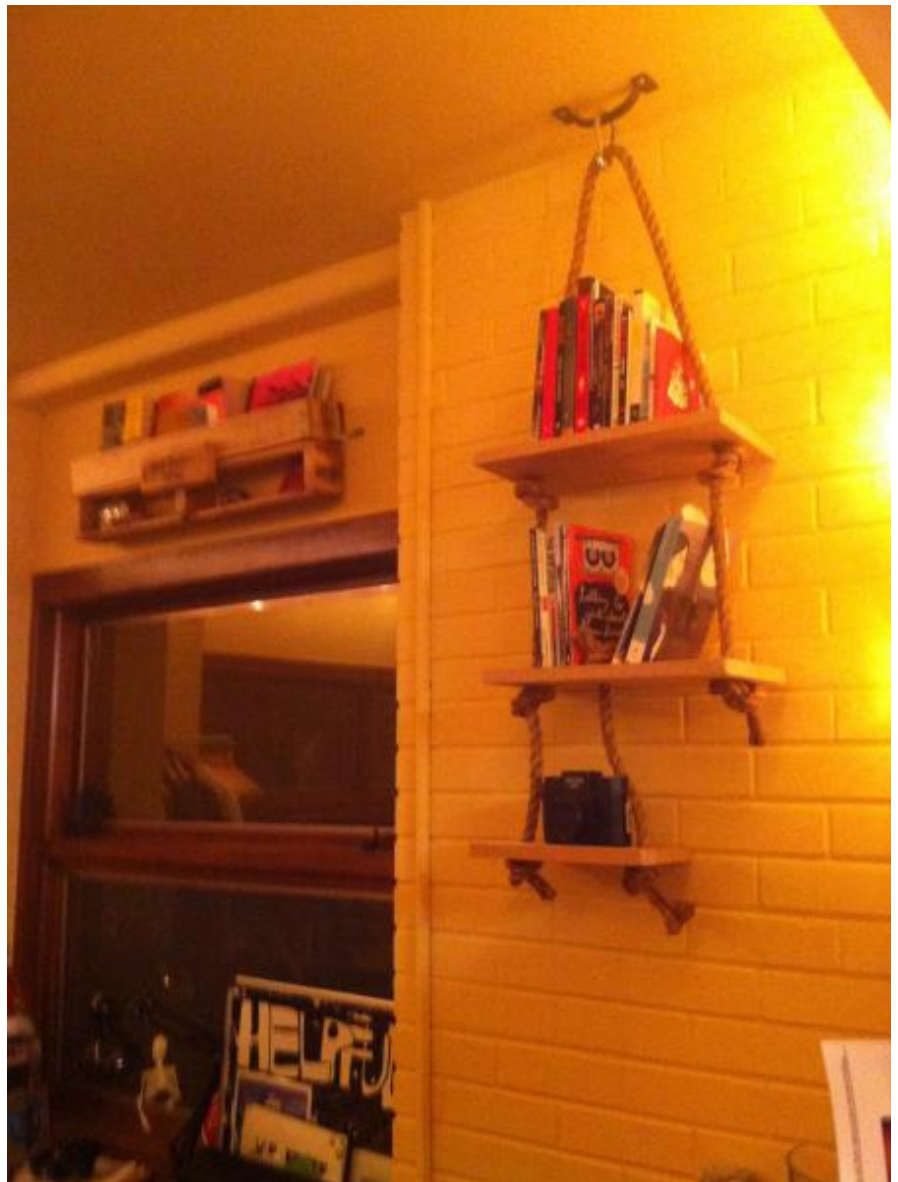


A warning that comes a bit late in this column: I'd like to use this opportunity to let everyone know that neither LitReactor nor myself endorse ANY of the practices in this column. Seriously, if you do this, get up on a step ladder balanced on folding chairs with a drill in your hand, you're even dumber than I am. At least I was doing this as a professional act.

I drilled a couple "experiment" holes, as I like to call them, in search of a ceiling stud so I could place a ceiling hook. No luck. No studs.

Even if I found the right spot, I wasn't sure how well one large eye hook would hold. This shelf would be pretty heavy, and unlike the others it had only one bit holding it all up.

I had quite a few failures, including quite a number of "experiments" before my partner suggested we screw a handle into the ceiling. Which was absolutely



brilliant.

A few drywall toggle anchors later, it held. It balanced. And 20 books later, we had our final shelf, embellished with an old-school film camera to complete the hip look.

Summary:

Purchased Materials: One board, some rope, handle, carabineer, dinner for helpful partner: \$75.

Time To Build And Install: 120 min.

Most Commonly Used Curse Phrase: "Ohhhhh, fuck, ohhhh shit." Said while on homemade ladder.

No. Of Books Held: 22

Advice: Get a stud finder if you want to hang something from the ceiling. Also, "stud finder" almost certainly must be a dating site by now. Oh, and Google "drywall toggle anchor" if you don't know what I'm talking about. Lots of apartment leases forbid them, but there are a few different varieties of drywall anchors that might work for different applications and might not get your landlord in a tizzy. And finally, I'd suggest using two ropes, four holes in each board, for balance.

Final Thoughts:

Overall, the spending was high to hold a low number of books. \$165 to hold 91 books, to be exact(ish). So when you talk money, these homemade bookshelves aren't the way to go. Plus, if time is money, which business guys always say it is when they're pissed off about waiting for a coffee somewhere, you're way, way in the hole.

That said, I think people really take pride in their home libraries, and this is a way to take even more pride in them. To interact with and appreciate your books in a new way. There's a craftsmanship here that you'll never get from slapping together particle board.

Oh, and something else interesting, that "craftsMANship" word. While I have my issues with Pinterest and the DIY movement, I do really like the element of mash-up between traditional male/female roles. If we're talking traditional stereotypes, a man would build something like an unfinished wood bookshelf while a woman would create some sort of painted wall embellishment. These worlds are less separated as the difference between form and function becomes less important than the need for both. These are real building skills, real tools at use, and all in the service of creating something that people will call "cute." You can build something that both Ward and June Cleaver would enjoy.

The ultimate answer: Yes, you can build these at home. It's not as easy as you think, and not as easy as Pinterest would have you believe, but you CAN do it. Be prepared to hit a seedy thrift store or two, be prepped for a 3 AM shelf collapse, and try not to be alarmed when an old man at the hardware store makes a crack about your impending suicide. As long as you're prepared for all that,



emotionally and physically prepared, you can do it.

One last piece of advice: Pete's Method For Patching Experiment Holes:

Step 1:



Step 2:



Step 3:



On Weed: Should Writers Write While High?



A woman at the dispensary searches for something called "Green Crack." She tells me this strain is ideal for writers. There are a few great strains, but Green Crack would be the best.

Marijuana is legal for recreational use in Colorado. There are some restrictions and other funky laws that tag along, but the average Colorado citizen can avail herself of the services provided by everyone's favorite green friend without going to a lot more trouble than it takes to buy a beer or a lottery ticket.

Yes, it's a little weird. You do go to a store that can only let so many people into the purchasing area at a time, so you might end up in a waiting room with (mostly normal) people and one guy in a mobility scooter who has peed himself. Yes, the strains of marijuana still have names like "Mantanuska Thunderfuck" and "ChemDawg Biodiesel." Yes, you can pay with a debit card, but only through a complicated, "cashless ATM" procedure. There's still a certain level of seedy charm to the whole thing. But ultimately, you can drive home with marijuana you purchased above-board, and if you get pulled over, so long as your dispensary bag is still stapled shut, everything is fine (if you work at an Office Depot in Colorado and wonder why you've had a sudden run on mini staplers, now you know).

For lots of Coloradoans, it's been nice, though not a huge lifestyle change. This hasn't traditionally been a state where it's difficult to come across marijuana, and medical marijuana has been going strong for a while.

Personally, my life didn't change much after the law did. I'm not one for drugs. The most significant difference in my life with the legalization, and not one to be sneezed at, was the ability to walk downtown areas without having some guy ask if you would sign a petition to legalize marijuana. I complained long and hard about the ineffectiveness of these goons, but I guess they did it. Or someone did, anyway. And I hope they are enjoying the sweet, sometimes harsh, taste of victory.

Let's talk about what this has to do with writing.

There's any number of stories out there about creative people doing creative things with the aid of marijuana. Jay-Z. Jon Stewart. Steve Jobs. Brian Wilson. Oh, and the writers. Hunter S. Thompson, Ken Kesey, Norman Mailer, Stephen King. Even Maya Angelou.

What surprised me most was [a recent-ish article about Lee Child](#), author of the Jack Reacher series. It's a good profile, and Child comes off as charming, especially when he points out with true humor and humility that people are always looking for the next Jack Reacher book, not the next Lee Child joint. But the big reveal in the article: Child says he's been smoking marijuana 5 nights a week for the last 44 years.

Okay, it's one thing for your Hunter S. Thompson's to smoke. The man wrote a book about a drug-fueled drive across the desert that both horrified and intrigued my younger self. I'm convinced he invented drugs just so he'd have something new to occupy his afternoons. The inclusion of marijuana in his process is a given.

But Lee Child? This is a guy with an impressively steady output. His books are super popular, and he shares a lot of rabid fans with the likes of Bill O'Reilly (I have an inside line on this knowledge). The guy writes successful books, puts out multiple titles a year, and his main character is a straight-laced, militaristic hero type who would sooner use the word "joint" when he talks about popping a bad guy's shoulder out of socket than he would to talk about mind-altering substances.

As an aspiring writer, I'm willing to do a lot of things to improve my game. Pretty much anything, really. Different techniques, regiments of pens, lighting schemes, getting up 20 minutes earlier or 30 minutes later. Especially the 30 minutes later part. If I hear [David Sedaris uses a certain kind of notebook](#), I take a look at it on Amazon in hopes that maybe it's cheap (it is not) and that maybe just the tiniest bit of doing what he does will transfer his talent to me (it does not).

Like a lot of writers, I use caffeine. I don't drink coffee. I abuse caffeine. Abuse it with the giddy aptitude of a teenager abusing himself during the Big Change. I drink alcohol. Not so much as a writing aid. Socially, and rarely, every few blue moons or so, to facilitate a vomit session on a country club patio.

Anyway, there are a lot of little things that writers try to get better. To write better. And if one of those things is now legal, and if a good number of the cool kids AND the squares are doing it... is there a strong reason not to try it? Or, more to the point, test it out?

Why Am I The Right Person?

For starters, it's legal for me. Which means I can write about it.

Second, I'm not a weed guy. I don't have any sort of agenda or reason to pretend that it's awesome

Drugs can open your mind. But for me, that opening of the mind had a lot more to do with the people and places I saw, the things I heard, than it did with the chemical properties of a

when it's not. I don't know anything about the benefits of hemp rope or any of that, and the argument of America's Founding Fathers growing weed does nothing for me. They also probably used slaves to cultivate it, so the decision-making is questionable there.

If weed sucks as a writing tool, I'll be honest and say it sucks. If it's awesome, I'll tell you, and maybe you'll have to plan a writer's retreat out west. I hope it succeeds because that'd be great, but I suspect it won't. That's the extent of my bias. Hope versus pessimism, which is a distillation of my normal state.

Apology and Drug Content Warning

I will talk about marijuana use here. This was all done in the legal privacy of my home, 100% compliant with the law, and I never worked or operated machinery while intoxicated. Well, unless an Xbox counts as machinery. However, I'm fairly certain that the Xbox was designed specifically to be operated while high, and good luck convincing me otherwise.

Let's keep in mind that I'm not endorsing any illegal behavior here. If smoking is illegal where you are, then, you know, just like any crime, you'll have to weigh the consequences and benefits and make your own decision.

If there are any folks under age out there, I will also say a little something. I'm a product of the D.A.R.E. system, which was all about telling kids how horrible drugs are. It's a program that most kids of the 80's and 90's remember, and recently I found out [it had an abysmal success rate](#). My personal theory, D.A.R.E. wasn't very honest with us. I was led to believe that a hit of marijuana would cause me to go into a fugue where I would murder a cat and then eat a sandwich made out of my own face.

Look, that's not going to happen. But if you start using drugs or drinking when you're young, and if you keep doing it, everyone around you will know it when you're 25.

The Tests:

Now that we've got all that out of the way, I have four tests. It's pretty tough to plan objective tests for art. So I tried to cover a few different areas and ideas about art and the process of making art. I'll do each test high, and I'll do each test 100% sober, see which yields better results.

Please excuse me for calling this art.

For the tests taken while high, I took 5 or 6 hits total from 2 different vapor pens. These are delightful, disposable devices that are like electronic cigarettes. You take a hit, the end lights up, and when you breathe out there's just the tiniest bit of vapor, like breathing out on a cold day.

I bought two pens with different sativa strains. The two basics marijuana types you'll find at the shops are indica and sativa, and then you'll see some blends of the two. I told the nice lady at the shop about my project, and she



let me know that sativa was absolutely the way to go, that I'd feel a little high but there would be no cloudiness.

Test One: Motivation

Let's be honest. Sometimes the hardest part of writing is...writing. That's a gross oversimplification, grosser than the grossest ghost in *Ghostbusters*, which is either Slimer eating all those hot dogs or that rotting corpse driving the taxi.

My normal method is the Put On Your Sweats method. Something I came up with from coaching runners, the premise is that you don't have to go for a run today, but you DO have to put on your sweats and walk your ass to the end of the block. Most times, if you get there, you'll decide to go ahead and run. It's that part where you move from the couch to the road that's hardest.

The writing equivalent, I'll go to a coffee shop or get set up at home, get everything out, put pen to paper. I don't have to finish anything or go any further, but most times I'll keep going once I'm that far.

The test works like this:

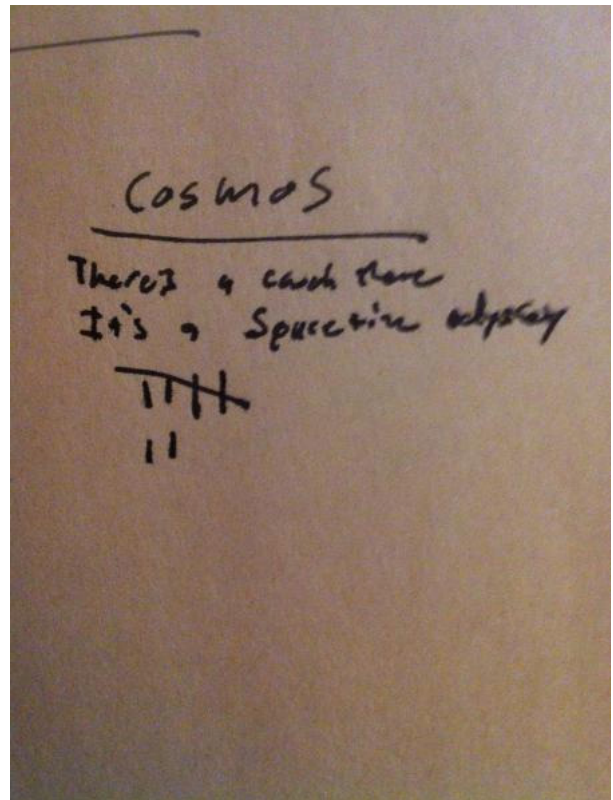
During a timed 5-minute period, I have two options. Start writing or watch *Cosmos* on Netflix. I picked that program because it seems like something I would enjoy while high.

For the 5 minutes, I'll tally how many times I decide I'd prefer to watch *Cosmos* and how many times I'd prefer to start writing this column. My computer is in front of me with the cursor blinking, *Cosmos* is ready to go on the TV with a button press.

Results: Sober, I only went for writing. I was ready to write. I figured that the infinite *Cosmos* would be there when I finished.

High, I tallied my thoughts. A decision to write twice, *Cosmos* seven times, and a third category I created, "Do Nothing" twice. *Cosmos* did have a strong edge in that I could watch it from the couch, which sounded like a great idea at the time. I also made a couple of arguments in favor of *Cosmos*, including "It's a spacetime odyssey," which, it turns out, is the tagline under the show's title.

Conclusion: The results of this test, would weed motivate me to write, came out strongly in the negative. Sober takes the category. Not a big surprise. Weed isn't exactly known for being a strong motivator. In fact, [I even cruised over to the Phish forums](#) when I was looking up advice for this column. A member asked whether or not it was a good idea to smoke before he wrote a paper that was due the next day. The advice, FROM THE PHISH FORUM, was a level-headed answer to write sober, then reward yourself with a high after you finished.

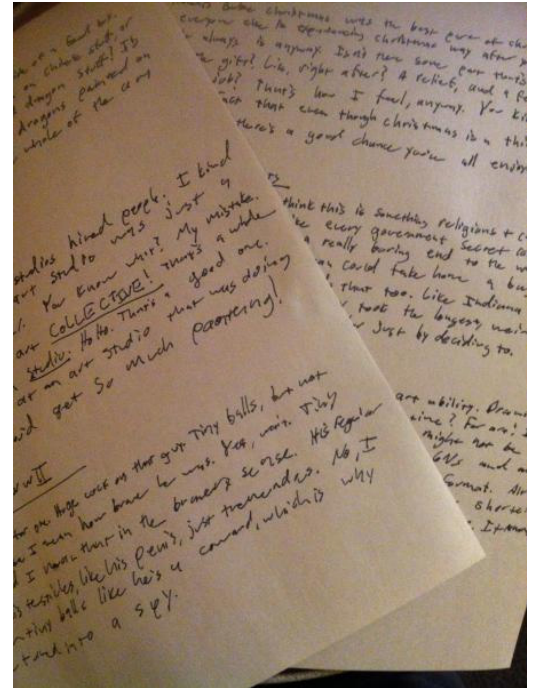


There aren't a lot of advice questions I would ask of the Phish forum, but in this case, I think it might be a good place to connect with an expert. If the Phish forum advises against drug use, then I have to count that as a hard strike against marijuana in this situation.

Creativity Test:

I'm not someone who usually requires a creative boost. I'm not bragging here. Not saying my ideas are good. Simply that I have them. I keep a notebook of what I consider my dumbest ideas in case I win the lottery or become a powerful man. These ideas include a video game called Noah's AnARKy, where you play as Noah, who has to team up with a talking bear to kill two of every animal. There's also an idea in there for a service that provides a weirdo that can be rented, and this weirdo will liven up social events such as weddings or house parties by being, well weird. Finally, there's a proposed decree that we should retire the name "Rhinoceros" in favor of the name "Rhinosaurus," pronounced "rye-no-sore-us."

Again, these aren't good ideas, just ideas that may illustrate why I don't really feel the "mind-expansion" portion of drugs is something I'm in desperate need of.



To test how creative I'm feeling, I'll use [this random topic generator](#) to come up with 3 topics, each of which I'll write on for 3 minutes. I'll do it once sober, once high. Is my mind expanded? Am I more creative?

Results: In terms of pure production, you can see the sober text (bottom sheet) is tighter and more abundant. From the high attempt, the highlight was probably a question about the art on the side of Chinese food boxes, the red dragon stuff, and whether there was anything like that in China or not. Sober, the biggest question was why they bothered with all the cult stuff in *Temple Of Doom* just to have child labor for a mine. I mean, it's terrible, but you don't have to do the whole cult thing to enslave children. You can just sort of decide kid labor is the way to go.

If I were to take these writing prompts and say which had more usable content, the sober attempts were a lot better. I could pull something out of each topic that's worth exploring. High? Well, one topic (Famous World War II Spies) resulted in multiple attempts at a dick joke, which I did pull off. But there was some serious heavy lifting. That's not the joke, by the way.

I WILL say I did get a lot of laughs from the high attempt, and if you had the right kind of dorks such as myself, getting high, writing on randomly-generated topics for three minutes and sharing your work would be a pretty decent get-together for people of the pen.

Editing Test:

I knew a young lady who was training for a marathon, and before her long runs, which she found

boring, she would get stoned. She claimed this allowed her mind to drift and made the whole experience pretty painless.

I'm a big editor. If something of mine sees the light of day, it's been edited several times. And while editing is important, it's something that I wish was easier to slog through. It can be tedious to go through a draft the sixth time.

Can I effectively edit while high? Or even more effectively?

For this test I pulled a page from a project I'm working on. Full disclosure, it's not a heavy project. It's a story that takes off on the movie 3 Ninjas, and it's written from the dad's perspective. I always thought it would be strange to be a father who suddenly finds his boys are karate experts who regularly fist fight ADULTS.

Results: I timed each attempt, and they were pretty darn close. Sober, I got through the page a minute faster. So over time, that'd be a big gain. It's a minute, but it's also an extra 25%.

I also counted the number of changes I made. High, I made 73, while sober I made 61. Which is pretty similar, especially considering the nature of the test going over two different pages that may or may not need as many edits.

How did I feel about the corrections?

High, I felt pretty disconnected from what I was doing. I could edit a page, but only line to line. It was hard to keep track of what I was doing. The context was lost. At one point I came across a section where I'd badly copied and pasted something, and I couldn't deal with that whatsoever.

Sober, it was a lot easier to keep the entirety of the previous page in my head. To edit with more context of the larger piece as opposed to what was immediately in front of me.

Sober wins this one. Although if a person were doing line edits, someone who is used to being high might be reasonably effective.

Test: Clerical Skills

Sometimes the life of a writer is a lot of clerical stuff. Typing, inputting edits, emails. There are a lot of tasks that don't require a ton of thought. It wouldn't be such a bad thing to turn off the brain just a bit while the body did this work for me. Sort of like having my own robot who lives inside my skin. Except way less disgusting and terrible than that idea. In fact, scratch that idea from your mind. That's just an awful concept.

The test is to type up a handwritten page from my notebook. After doing it once sober and once high, I'll check for errors, record the time, and discuss whether or not it was a slog.

Results: High, I typed a page in 3 minutes, 52 seconds. Sober, it was 3 minutes, 45 seconds. Close enough there.

In terms of errors, I made 7 errors while high, 3 while sober. A difference, certainly, although while high I felt less need to correct errors I knew I was making. It was all about the typing, which could be

an advantage in a case like this. If the goal is to type, you can type, and the errors made are easy to catch and rectify later.

The biggest difference: while sober I added new lines or changed the text just a bit here and there. The type-up served as a second draft opportunity, which is a plus for me. If the time is similar but I've added and edited, there's a distinct benefit to sobriety there.

Overall Results:

Weed did not improve my motivation to write, my creativity, my editing skills or my clerical skills. As a writing tool, weed batted 0-for-4.

Before someone out there gets upset, let me reiterate a few things in one short phrase: Weed didn't work for ME.

It might work for you. It certainly works for many, many other creative people, or at least it's something they feel is beneficial or essential to their process. I may have blown it and gotten entirely too high, gone beyond a working high. I'd lend credence to that theory based on the fact that I consumed two of these "donuts" which came in a strange, foreign-born box of powders. Just add water to make 4 gelatinous mounds of hate. Then decorate with the provided sprinkles.

While the smoking was a failure in terms of productivity, did it expand my mind in any significant way? Yes. Sort of.

As an explanation, let me put it this way:

I did a thing.

As a writer, something that I'd share with other writers is that it's important to do stuff. Get out and do something you haven't done, or go somewhere you haven't gone. Even if it's a weird thrift store in town or an outdoor trail, or the tourist trap that you've never gotten around to if you live in a big city.

A different experience here and there helps. If you go to the Empire State Building, you'll overhear a snatch of dialogue between tourists for a story you're working on. If you hit that thrift store, maybe you'll find a beloved object that can become a beloved object and touchstone in your newest piece. If you buy weed from the dispensary, you might not do a lot of good while you're high, but maybe you have an idea for a story about a rogue Office Depot employee selling mini staplers in a van outside the dispensary. Maybe you notice that the man who peed himself in his mobility scooter is piloting a scooter called MegaStar or Sprinter. Maybe you see something, anything you wouldn't see if you stayed in your comfort zone, which for most of us, is home.

Try a 5K this week. Maybe next week go to a music festival. Maybe the week after that you go to a church service. Even just entering your office building from a different side is something. Whatever you do, it's not just about what you do, it's about the stuff that surrounds that new thing and the way you, as a writer, experience it.

Weed did expand my mind, but not in the traditional sense. It expanded my mind to include some real-life touchstones that I wouldn't have experienced if I went to Gordon's Liquor again instead of the weed dispensary. I wouldn't have been on the hunt for "Green Crack." I wouldn't have anticipated

the munchies and purchased bizarre, DIY donuts. I sure as hell wouldn't have EATEN those abominations, no matter how many sprinkles they had, if I'd been in my right mind.

Drugs can open your mind. But for me, that opening of the mind had a lot more to do with the people and places I saw, the things I heard, than it did with the chemical properties of a burning leaf.

Oh, and also, if we're talking mind expansion, I finally got to watch *Cosmos* after I finished the tests. I was very correct about watching that show while high. Very, very correct.



Testing Lab: Gifts For Writers



When you Google phrases like "Good gifts for writers" or "unusual gifts for writers" or "what the \$^#& do I get this stupid @\$%^@#?" you'll find plenty of advice blogs and heaps of bizarre gadgets, and you'll find several that pop up over and over. But do these gifts actually work? Are they, as MC Hammer put it, 2 Legit 2 Quit, or are they the exact opposite, 2 Crappy 2 Make You Happy? When you buy something for the writer in your life, are you wasting your money in a fun, conversation piece way, or is it in a junk drawer kind of way?

Waste no more, friends!

I personally tested several items that popped up on more than one list of great gifts for writers, and I'm here to lay out the results. Take heed, take notes, and if it's now stuck in your head, feel free to crank up a sweet MC Hammer jam while you read.

Product: Aqua Notes

Sales Question:

Ever had a great idea in the shower only to have it go down the drain like so much dirty soap water?

Pretty simple idea, a waterproof notepad and pencil with suction cups. Mount the whole thing on the shower wall, never lose your shower inspiration again.



That phrase sounds gross. "Shower inspiration." Let's revise that to "writing inspiration as conceived in the shower." It's a little wordier, but I can live with that.

The back of the Aqua Notes box is the first thing that's suspect about this product. I mean, assuming you don't find it completely suspect already.

I have a rule. Never put money into a product that tells you about the potential different uses for it. This is the hallmark of a bad product. Think late night TV. The ShamWow. ShamWow ads spend hours telling you all the different uses for a towel. We get it. It's a cloth that takes wet things and makes them not wet anymore. When you buy a screwdriver, no one has to tell you "Screw screws! Unscrew screws! Use as an ill-advised pry bar! Smuggle into a prison and use as a weapon!" A screwdriver doesn't do that because it doesn't have to. We already know about screws, unscrewing them, and we know about prison justice. A screwdriver doesn't have to explain that it's useful because we already know that to be true.

Aqua Notes's packaging tells you about a variety of uses for the product, but all of those uses are as a notepad. Leave a note for your lover, write down a grocery list. You know that thing where a pencil touches paper to make symbols that have meaning in language? You can do any form of that thing **IN THE SHOWER**, thanks to this device!

Aqua Notes's paper feels a little glossy, sort of like thermal receipt paper, if you've ever touched that. The pencil seems to be exactly like every other pencil except for the sweet slogan printed on the side ("No more good ideas down the drain!"). Everything about this seems like standard issue infomercial crap, so I went in with low expectations.

Which is why I was surprised that it actually worked. It does exactly what it's supposed to, and it works even when the pencil and paper are under the water stream. The marks don't wipe off, even if you soak the paper and pencil. The eraser even works wet.



Am I dumb for not knowing that a pencil works when it's wet? I feel like I'm discovering something everyone has known for a long time. Like everyone but me has known that you could scuba dive with a pencil and write as much novel as your air tanks and the sea, being a harsh mistress, will allow.

In terms of doing what's advertised, mechanically, Aqua Notes work. Even the suction cups are decent, which is more than can be said for SOME products (see below).

My complaint about this item is one that should have been obvious, but wasn't to me. I'm not all that perceptive, which is why my mind was blown by a waterproof pencil.

If you're writing on a pad, you're not really showering, right? You're **IN** the shower, there's a lot of the shower things happening, but you're not doing stuff to your body to make it clean. There are some things that you can do in the shower while you clean yourself. You could sing a song. You could sing "Timber" under your breath so your roommate doesn't hear. You could sing "Timber" loudly when you think no one is home and then emerge from the bathroom to find your roommate came home at

some point, and then you can spend the rest of the night wondering how much he heard. But writing and showering?

Look, I've had more than one incident in life where I came across someone on a train or at a concert who wasn't properly showered. I think that, as a society, we could stand to be more diligent about hygiene. Once we have that tackled we can discuss making sure we have a note-taking tool in the shower.

Should You Buy It?

The good news is that it's pretty cheap. It's fun for a lark, and maybe good if the recipient complains about the troubles of remembering shower brainstorm, which would be dangerous if brainstorm involved lightning and thunder as opposed to horrible business speak and corporate exercises. But if you buy this, you should buy it and install it in a loved one's shower for them. Don't hand it over in the box. It just seems junky. You'll have to force this on someone to demonstrate its value.



Book Perfume

Sales Question:

What book lover wouldn't want to smell like books?

People tell me they like the smell of books. This can mean a lot of different things. A new graphic novel has a smell that is always linked to human odor for me. Just a little hint of armpit, plus some citrus. An old bookstore, it has that smell that's like a nicer version of a dishrag that's been in action too long without a wash. A brand new book, that smell mostly makes me thirsty.

I'm just trying to be honest here and say this product wasn't likely to work for me.

It's a very flawed idea, book perfume. Think about it this way. I really like barbecue. Would I consider it a plus if a date slathered herself in sauce? "Who are you wearing?" "Oh, just Sweet Baby Ray's."

No. Well, maybe. Okay, no. I thought about it more, and I do not want to date a woman slathered in sauce. As adults, we learn that some combinations of two good things, a nice lady and a sauce, are not always desirable or better than their original parts.

The smell of Paperback, when you uncap the bottle, is pure chemical. Like nail polish remover. Or turpentine. Basically, take your chemical of choice that's designed to strip a coating of something from something else, and you'll have the smell of book perfume. Maybe a little less head rush, but the same sort of notes.

I was nervous to put it on my skin, but I don't own any of those little cards the ladies at Macy's spray perfume on. So I went for it. The fear sweat may have affected the scent a little. The smell was less offensive on skin, mellowed out. But still, I wouldn't say this is something I want to smell like on purpose.

Should You Buy It?

You know, it's a cute addition to a book nerd's shelf of literary doo-dads and gew-gaws. But in all honesty, it smells vile. And that's half the fun, right? The smell. If they'd created something that actually smelled like old books, even if it didn't really work as a fragrance, that'd be one thing. But this stinks. And I applied it to my skin. I've poisoned the temple that is my body in order to write this column for you people.

I'd skip this one. It's a little pricey for a gag. Maybe if they decide to put it in a more exciting bottle that could serve as a conversation piece, we'd have a worthwhile item. As it stands, pass.



Fisher Space Pen

Sales Question:

Don't you want to write upside-down, under water, or...some other nonsensical way? And hey, isn't the pen that's good enough for America's astronauts good enough for you, or are you some kind of Commie?

This is easily one of the more popular gift pens. It's a neat idea, even though we apparently don't have a real space program anymore. I guess we got the pens, the astronaut ice cream, enough fodder for one horror movie about Leprechaun in space and one horror movie about Jason in space, and then we decided to let sleeping dog stars lie.

I ordered the Fisher Space Pen and had it for a few weeks when a friend asked me about it.

"Does it really work upside-down?"

Which is when I realized I'd never actually tried it upside-down. It turns out that I spend very little time upside-down. Excepting a foolish ride on a Las Vegas rollercoaster last summer, which culminated in a nausea that I was only able to cure through heroic alcohol consumption, I might go so far as to say I spend NO time upside-down. I'm no Spider-Man, Spectacular, Amazing, or otherwise. The Otherwise Spider-Man, I am not. There's never reason for me to write upside-down. And kind of like the waterproof pencil question, I'm not entirely sure that MOST pens require being right side-up to function.

I did try the Space Pen in water along with our friend Aqua Notes. It worked. Pretty much. There's something strange about holding a technologically-advanced pen while nude in the shower, and I don't really want to go into it. Let's just say, for me, it worked on all levels except the spiritual and leave it there.

The weakness of the Fisher Space Pen isn't how it performs in adverse conditions. It's the day-to-day. The thing writes like the kind of crappy pen they have at every front desk ever, the kind of pen that has crazy flowers taped all over it. You know, that thing where someone hit on the idea of adding \$18 of tape and fake flowers in order to preserve a 40-cent pen investment.

This pen, it's sort of like buying a badass sports car with hard suspension, no radio, no A/C, and using that sports car as your day-to-day ride, to commute 15 minutes on a choked freeway. Yeah, on the rare occasion you get to open it up, very cool. However, most of your time is spent wishing you were in something moderately priced and comfortable.

Should You Buy It?

If you think you'll be doing a lot of writing in wacky places, perhaps an upside-down, water-filled cave is the only place you can concentrate, then go for it. If you're Jim Cantore, the most intense weather man ever, then this would be a good choice to have at the ready in your weird weather jock coat.

If you're not any of those things, well, it's a pen. If your writer friend is a pen nerd, it's a fun one to add to the collection. For my money, however, you'd be better off going with any of the pens from this list. They're nicer for writing 99% of the time.

Nancy Pearl, Librarian Action Figure



Nancy Pearl Librarian Action Figure

by Accoutrements

★★★★☆ 4 customer reviews

Available from these sellers.

- Nancy Pearl Librarian Action Figure
- with amazing push button shushing action

1 new from \$65.98 2 collectible from \$39.95



Editors' Top Picks for Toys & Games
for September

Sales Question:

Your other action figures may all have swords, missiles that actually fire, and other great accessories, but are any of them based on one of Library Journal's Librarians of the Year?

Nancy Pearl is the only famous librarian, right? Okay, sure, Batgirl is a librarian. But is she a famous librarian or famous because she's Batgirl? Librarians often wear this Batgirl career choice as a point of pride, but come on. Librarian is her gig, Batgirl is her CALLING.

While Nancy's action figure sort of resembles her in real life, it also sort of looks like the Dana Carvey church lady. Although, to be fair, action figures don't have a great track record when it comes to looking like the people they represent.

Nancy Pearl makes a fine gift, but let me tell you, it would seem that nearly every book nerd and writer who sought refuge in a library has received this figure at one point or another. I got one that



my mom picked up at the thrift store. Why my mom looks through the baskets of action figures at the

thrift store, I do not know.

Let me just say, this thing does not have many points of articulation. For those of you who aren't former subscribers to Toyfare, points of articulation are joints, basically. Places where the figure can move. Perhaps this is on purpose. Nobody wants Nancy Pearl, Library Journal Librarian of the Year, to lose her dignity via articulated hips.

That said, it makes for a boring figure. No Nancy versus Swamp Thing battles. No Nancy dangling from a string of patio lights all summer. No Nancy holding a lit cigarette the size of her entire body.

Truthfully, the story behind the figure is more interesting than the figure itself, [and you can hear more about it here.](#)

Should You Buy It?

If the victim of your affection is a fan of stuff, as in a fan of having stuff all over the house, then it's a go. If not, definitely pass. If you're not sure, also pass. It's a gag gift. Not that there's anything funny about reaching the pinnacle of librarianship, which is having an action figure made in your likeness.

Treadmill Desk

Sales Question:

Tired of sitting all day? Why not get in your exercise while you work?!

While I couldn't buy and set up a treadmill desk at home, I DO have access to one. So on a weekend morning, when it was not in use by legitimate business types, I availed myself of this gizmo. Try and ignore the creepy puppets in the background. I wasn't able to, and I think my work suffered.

I'm not an expert on the evolution of office furniture. At home I rock a \$5 dollar rolling office chair that squeaks so loud I feel bad about using it past 10 PM. It would seem, however, that desks morphed from places you sit and work to places you stand and work, and now have evolved to places where you walk and work and work out. I guess we discovered that our sedentary lives were killing us, and it was of vital importance that we live longer in order to do more spreadsheets.



I think you could probably set this up for yourself if you already have a treadmill. Just buy the tabletop part and a regular treadmill, not a whole treadmill desk setup. Which is what I'd recommend, because the one I used, the one that's meant to be a treadmill desk only, has a low top speed. So while it's a treadmill desk, you couldn't throw the table off to the side for some quick wind sprints. Also, you couldn't use this all-in-one version as JUST a desk. Unless you set up a rolling chair with some wall anchors, which would be a great triumph of ingenuity and laziness over the human spirit.

I figured the way to go was to try and get in 10,000 steps, the amount everyone says you should shoot for per day. At top speed I managed 100 steps per minute. Which means, according to my

calculations here, it would take 400 million years of spreadsheets and purposely looking away from puppet creeps to get in my 10,000 steps. I swear, that old man puppet DID NOT have a screwdriver in his hand when I got here.

Should You Buy It?

No. It's too expensive for what it is. Also, the value of walking is definitely diminished when you're still staring down a laptop screen. You're better off taking a half hour break to actually walk outside rather than walking while you work. Perhaps consider whether you want to live another decade if that decade is spent on a treadmill that lets you do office work.

Oh, and as a side note, it's always a good idea to use caution if you buy somebody a thing that MAY be interpreted as carrying the message, "Hey fatso, here's a gadget for fatsos that will make you less of a fatso."

Lighted Clipboard

Sales Question: Ever had a great idea in the car, but no way to write it down as you plow into the back of a truck and out of your mortal body?

My main problem with this device is that I haven't made peace with a higher power in such a way that prepares me to die. Also, death with dignity is kind of a thing for me. When I got uncomfortably close to rear-ending a giant truck, I was writing a note to remember a joke. The joke was that instead of remixing Beyonce's song for the 50 Shades movie, they should have hired R. Kelly to do a "Submission Remix." "It's a remix to submission/hot and fresh out the kitchen/mama tie up that body..."

That would have been the last thing I did in this world, make a joke about an R&B singer who pees on people doing a remix for the film version of Twilight fan fiction.

On first glance, I can see why someone would say this looks unsafe. But what they're missing is the fact that it's actually WAY less safe than you'd think on first glance. This is seriously a bad idea.

I'll admit, I keep a plain, spiral notebook in my car to jot ideas. It sits in the passenger seat, and if I need it, I grab it and write in huge, sloppy letters so I don't have to take my eyes off the road.

This thing is a much worse alternative. If you want an idea of how inconvenient this is, next time you're in your car, lay a piece of paper across the dash and try to write on it. While you drive. There's a reason dust collects all over the dash, and it's because that surface is much further away than I ever imagined.



Not to mention the suction cups are total nonsense. They don't work. I don't know what it is about suction cups that some work and some do not, but these categorically do not.

Minute 1:



Minute 1.0001:



Oh, wait, the light! How could I forget?

I tried to photograph the light in action, and it was impossible because the light was not bright enough to create an image that made any sense to the human brain. Perhaps this is a safety feature. One brave soul at the factory sabotaged the light so that, at the very least, users of this contraption wouldn't be blinded at night.

Should You Buy It?

Only if you find the ranty writings of your writer friend to be hilarious. In which case, this would seed a great Amazon review. Assuming that your friend still has the use of her brain after she rolls her Subaru 40 times while jotting down a quick joke about, I don't know, Tag Team's soundtrack contribution to *Addams Family Values*.

Merry
Christmas!

This card good for ONE HOUR
of distraction free writing time!



"Time to Write" Coupon

The Sales Question:

Isn't a homemade gift always better?

This one comes up on a lot of lists, the idea to give your loved one a coupon for a set time of uninterrupted writing. Usually it comes up as the last, more crafty, cutesy thing. Make a little coupon that gives the writer in your life what they really need: Time.

I wanted to address this one because I think it's important.

Don't give your writer time to write as a gift. I think you'll both be unhappy with the result.

Time to write is something the person needs as a constant, not as a one-off. It's a nice thought, but it's a little like giving someone a coupon that says "Good for one free day where I don't criticize your morals, values, and everything that combines to make you a human person." It's sort of an expectation, right?

If the person you care about is a writer, it's important that you make the effort to give them time on the regular. It can be annoying and frustrating, I know. Nobody hates it more than me. Non-Writing Pete HATES Writing Pete. Non-Writing Pete does all the chores. He has to tidy up after that other jerk. And for what? Where's this great NOVEL we've all been hearing so much about?

However, this sort of coupon makes it feel a little like, well, like it's a heroic effort to give someone the time to pursue something they love.

Should You Make It?

I'm just saying, if you're in a relationship with someone who writes, and if you want that to work out for both of you, it's better to give them the time as a normal, regular thing.



Roll over image to zoom in

Keurig K10/B31 MINI Plus Brewing System, Black

by Keurig

★★★★☆ 1,393 ratings | 871 reviews

| 51 answered questions

List Price: \$166.99

Price: **\$92.59 & FREE Shipping**

You Save: **\$73.40 (44%)**

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Keurig Coffee Maker

The Sales Question:

Writers love their coffee, right?

By now it's starting to feel like I picked things that I knew I'd hate. I swear, this isn't true. I thought I would enjoy writing in the shower. Which I sort of did until my environmental guilt caught up with me and I felt like I should write an apology note to the planet, and that I should do so at my desk, which is not a treadmill.

The Keurig seemed like something I would really like. A single cup of coffee without all the hassle of a bunch of cups of coffee? Okay, that's dumb. It's not the amount of coffee that makes for the hassle.

The issue with making more than one cup of coffee at a time, I will drink however many cups are available. If I make a single cup, I will drink that single cup. If I make 8 cups, then I guess we're in for a jittery afternoon. Let me put it this way: I go to a greasy spoon that shares a parking lot with my apartment, and in true diner fashion they refill your coffee after almost every sip. A normal person will, at some point, cut off his or her own refills. I am not a normal person.

For me, I figured that the big advantage of the Keurig would be getting only one cup at a go. So, when I look at it now, I was really hoping that it would be less convenient for me to make single cups.

I managed to operate this device. It was a little like Will Smith flying the alien spacecraft in *Independence Day*. It wasn't really believable to me that I figured out the Keurig's alien technology, but the plot made doing so necessary.

I took a drink, and it was not great. Not great at all. The coffee was super hot, which usually happens to disguise flavor, I think. The one-use-only K-cups of instant coffee are a little less than a dollar apiece, a price that's pretty high for what you get here.

Am I a coffee snob? Maybe. I'm not above any cup in a storm. Much the way the United States Air Force learned to rely on a drunken Randy Quaid in *Independence Day*, I've been known to drink a cup that's rough around the edges when the situation calls for it. Most of my life lessons come from the motion picture *Independence Day*, by the way.

The other thing, making coffee in this doohickey is pretty easy, so it didn't do a lot to reduce my consumption. Although looking into the garbage and seeing 5 K-cups was a fairly shaming experience.

While the Keurig might be just the ticket for some coffee drinkers, I don't think it'll go far towards pleasing many coffee lovers.

Should You Buy It:

I have to go with no again. Especially because for a much lower price, you can get a grinder and a French press, which also allow you to make coffee in whatever quantity you want.

Conclusions:

Let's tally what we've got. 8 options, none of which I would recommend after this lousy, subjective battery of tests. If this set of tests were a real battery, it would be a C. Bulky, crappy, and just a drag. But a battery of tests nonetheless.

It leaves me with a big question: What DO I recommend people buy for the writers in their lives?

The trick is to buy something for the person in your life, not the writer.

There are many people in my life who are writers. But that doesn't mean I'd buy them the same gifts, nor would I necessarily buy them a writing gift. Maybe Writer Friend A is very motivated and ambitious, and maybe what she needs is a day off, so a trip out to lunch where she can get away from her keyboard is really what she needs. Maybe Writer Friend B is staring down writer's block, so I would probably avoid buying that person a huge, scary, blank notebook and instead buy him a book that I thought he might love, that might inspire him. Maybe Writer C can handle coffee like an adult and therefore is eligible for a Keurig or other coffee device.

The point is, when it comes to gifts, my recommendation is that you buy them for people, not types.

And no matter what, do not buy them a lighted suction cup clipboard. Seriously. I'm revising the sales question on that one.

Lighted Clipboard Sales Question:

Ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?

In Defense of Chelsea Cain



In this column, we're going to talk a little about an online flare-up, we'll hear a little something about Nicholas Sparks being a jerk at the Laundromat, and we'll cap it off with bit about this author's time in high school. And these will all end up in the same place, if it works out.

Fingers crossed, readers.

Let's start this off with what happened online between Chelsea Cain and some other people who are not Chelsea Cain.

Chelsea Cain, author of *Heartsick* and most recently *One Kick*, posted some stuff on her Facebook that got folks in a tizzy. [Here's the first post, in its entirety:](#)

I am not your personal customer service hotline. Do not ask me the order of my series or when the book is coming out in your particular country or how to make your fucking Kindle turn on. Google it. It will take you less time and turn up a much more reliable answer.

And the second:

*It is almost 1 AM and here I am. Let me clarify my earlier post. I'm here because I want to be here. I spend hours every day reading your comments and questions. I think most of you are super smart and handsome. But if you ask me to take time from writing my next book to answer a question, ask a question. Don't ask me to list the order of my books or ask me if there are any books after *Heartsick* or ask my how many pages *One Kick* is. It steals time from everyone. It's so funny to me what social networking has done to all of us. I write stories. I am a person. And I maintain my own FB page. And I will piss you off. This has nothing to do with my books. And here is the thing—I don't*

care if you like me. I am trying to get through the day. Just like you are.

A few posts ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) and the subsequent online responses brought up some interesting questions. What does an author owe her readers, and what does it mean to be an author plugged into social media?

For me personally, it brought up another interesting question: am I still eligible to get my high school writing endorsement?

Let me explain.

In high school we had to take these writing assessments. You'd pick a topic from a pool of three, and then you'd write an essay explaining your position on the topic. If you did a good enough job, you got an endorsement on your diploma.

I never got this endorsement. In fact, in one of the few smart moves I made in my youth, I asked our test facilitator, "Let's say I don't pass this test. Is there a blank spot on my diploma that indicates there should be an endorsement, or is there just a normal spot that nobody would know SHOULD contain something?" Of course, there was no spot that indicated "missing endorsement here", so I figured that as long as I didn't try to get a job at my own high school, this endorsement had no purpose. Which is why I turned in writing assessment essays that included illustrations on the rare occasions I turned them in at all.

A big part of the problem was that I didn't care about the topics. Should Kids Be Allowed To Wear Hats In School? That was a popular one, which I didn't care about. I had a giant head. Hats never fit me. It's is a family trait. Last summer I saw an uncle who got a great deal on a Stetson tucked away in the back of a shop. The shop owner gave my uncle a great deal because he figured, unless a circus came to town, this was his only chance to unload what was, essentially, a 32-gallon bucket with a brim.

School uniforms were another popular writing assessment topic. Which I was really torn about. On the one hand, I didn't really want to wear a tie and blazer. On the other hand, this was in the heyday of Britney Spears. My adolescent brain had an easy time coming up with some positive aspects of traditional school uniforms, but it couldn't really translate those reasons into any sort of palatable text.

Finally, in September of my 30th year on Earth, a topic has arisen that piques my interest. The Defense of Chelsea Cain.

I'll write my essay in five sections, just the way we were supposed to in high school, and perhaps, if anyone is in touch with the Greeley Central High School English department, we can negotiate that diploma endorsement at long last.

Let's do this.

**Neil Gaiman
is 100%
correct.
George R.R.
Martin is not
your bitch.
Chelsea Cain
isn't either.**

Introduction: Tell 'Em What You're Gonna Tell 'Em

My high school English teachers always told us to start these writing assessments with a freebie paragraph where you outline what you're going to say.

I'm going to tell you about why Chelsea Cain was right. I'll start with some facts. Then we'll get philosophical, and this will involve an invented story about Nicholas Sparks and Mike and Ike candy. Then we'll talk about an ex-girlfriend's dad. Then the conclusion, where I summarize what I said and leave you with a line that really makes you think. The stinger, if you will. The part that really blows minds and endorses diplomas. The part that I haven't really come up with yet, but I will. Swear.

First Argument: The Facts

Chelsea Cain, in her post, said she is not your personal hotline. She doesn't facilitate questions about the order of her books, the number of pages in them, their release dates. Nor does she act as any kind of Kindle troubleshooter.

Whenever you can quote an authority in academic-ish writing, you should. Which is why I once made the ill-fated decision to quote Ice Cube in a history paper about the triangular trading system ("Life ain't nothin' but bitches and money"). Since then I've become a bit more choosy about who I quote. So how about [a Neil Gaiman statement](#) regarding George R.R. Martin's decision to enjoy his life rather than finishing his books?

Look, this may not be palatable... and I keep trying to come up with a better way to put it, but the simplicity of things, at least from my perspective is this:

George R.R. Martin is not your bitch.

Neil Gaiman is 100% correct. George R.R. Martin is not your bitch. Chelsea Cain isn't either.

Man, how come every academic paper I write has to include the word "bitch?" Is there a more scholarly word I can use in its place? To mean "put-upon employee?" How about "Bartleby," as in the Herman Melville story? Stick that in your pipe (which you almost certainly have, if you're a professor type) and smoke it (in your smoking jacket, which you also likely have).

How do I know that Chelsea Cain is not your Bartleby? Because I am.

In my regular life, I work as a librarian. I can say with authority that things like series order and page numbers are not Chelsea Cain's personal responsibility, and I can say that with authority because those things are MY responsibilities

People come into the library and ask about the order of books. They ask about page numbers. And they ask about Kindle help. My god do they ask about Kindle help.

Look, these tasks cannot be Chelsea Cain's job AND my job. We have different jobs. I suppose what I'm saying here is that I'm your Bartleby, your bitch in the parlance of Mr. Gaiman, which means Chelsea Cain is not.

So far, Chelsea Cain's words are factually correct.

Let's do a little experiment to establish another fact, that Chelsea Cain is right in directing people to

Google for answers.

Here's the procedure for Googling how many pages are in the novel *Heartsick*:

1. Type "Chelsea Cain Heartsick" into Google.
2. Click the first link, to Amazon.
3. Less than 25% down the page, I find the answer. 336 pages! Armed with that information I can now...well, I don't know why people ask that question, but here we are anyway.

Now let's try it again, but this time I'll attempt to ask Chelsea Cain the same question and get my answer that way:

1. Type "Contact Chelsea Cain" into Google.
 2. The first page of results directs me to contact her publicist.
 3. I go back and try the next Google result. Which takes me to Cain's home page. Then I click CONTACT and get the same publicist page as above. Balls.
 4. Back to the Google search. 5 results down I find her Facebook! Ah!
 5. I sign into Facebook and am presented with the option to post on her wall.
 6. And then, if this is how I'd decided to ask such a thing, this is where I would post.
- According to my calculations, the second search was dumb. Feel free to check my math on that.

My point here, the second important fact, is that people are taking the long way 'round when they ask Chelsea Cain these sorts of questions. Not to mention that at the end of the second search I've only succeeded in asking the question. I still don't have the answer. How am I supposed to plan my day without knowing how long *Heartsick* is?

These two facts, the fact that I'm your Bartleby and the fact that it's actually harder to contact the author directly than find the information yourself, support the truth behind Cain's words.

You might not like how Cain spoke to these truths, but I'm not asking you to like anything. Neither is Chelsea Cain. Remember?

I am a person. And I maintain my own FB page. And I will piss you off.

All I'm asking for is acknowledgment of the fact that she was empirically correct in what she said. Which closes my first argument. I can taste that sweet, sweet writing assessment endorsement already.

Second Argument: The Curious Case of Nicholas Sparks's Mike and Ikes

I'm a huge Nicholas Sparks fan in this story. You don't really know me, so if you feel like I'm being less than genuine about my love for Nicholas Sparks, that's on you.

I'm a big fan. I loved that book about the magic, time-traveling mailbox. Wait, was that him? Or was that a James Patterson. Crap. Well, either way. I'm a huge fan. I buy all his books, I enjoy them. Especially...The Notebook! That's a Sparks joint!

Let's say I bought *The Notebook*, the Nicholas Sparks story that taught the world just how alluring

Ryan Gosling is with wet hair. Let's say I bought that book, and then I buy all his other books, and then I meet Nicholas Sparks at the Laundromat. He's fallen on hard times because he wrote a book about a magic, time-traveling mailbox, and then James Patterson sued him like crazy. Now he's forced to use a Laundromat with the likes of me, with the scumbums and occasionals who need to handle a peed-up area rug.

We say hello. I speak to Nicholas Sparks a little awkwardly because I'm such a huge fan. He thanks me, and as we shake hands I can't help but notice he's wearing a fanny pack stuffed with quarters for his laundry. I tell him how much I love his books, how I have all of them in soft cover and hardcover. I think about making a punny joke regarding his title *Three Weeks With My Brother* and how that amount of time is more like THREE YEARS with MY brother. But I don't because I'm too nervous.

I start loading my stuff in the dryer while I tell him how much I loved another one of his books, the one where there's this guy and a girl and they do love stuff. It's during this time that I notice I'm one coin short of what I need to get my dryer tumbling.

I lock eyes with Nicholas Sparks. His are dreamy. Poorer than ever, but still, dreamy. And then he pulls a handful of quarters from his fanny pack, and instead of handing one to me, Nicholas Sparks starts cranking quarters into the candy machine in order to claim all the Mike and Ikes inside. Not boxes of Mike and Ikes from a vending machine, mind you. The loose, quarter machine Mike and Ikes that have been in there since 1974.

Nicholas Sparks was a jerk. A real big bastard. Not only is my laundry soaked, but now no one else who visits this Laundromat will be able to temper the misery of laundry with the fruity, satisfying chew of a Mike and Ike.

My question is this: Did Nicholas Sparks owe me that quarter? If I bought his books, if I loved ALL his books, if I gave him 5-star reviews everywhere I could, does he owe me a quarter?

The answer is No.

When I purchase a book, that's the beginning and end of our transaction in terms of who owes who what. Okay, if the book wasn't what I was promised, if somewhere in the middle of the rising action the text fell away, leaving only a hand-scrawled message from Nicholas Sparks that said, "No time to finish this book, losers! #YOLO! —Sparky" Then yes, I was duped and deserve some kind of refund. Maybe even a total refund.

But that didn't happen. The story was completed. From what I've gathered, the old man got his memory back, used his superpowers to save the ghost boy from the haunted graveyard, and all was well. I bought his book, I got the book, and that's the transaction.

When you buy a book, think about it like a contract. That contract is for the one book. Not for a series, not for merchandising. Not for an on-going relationship. Chelsea Cain fulfills her end of the contract up front when she writes the book. If you feel like she owes you something, a certain response to

When you buy a book, think about it like a contract. That contract is for the one book. Not for a series, not for merchandising. Not for an on-going relationship.

a query, I'd point out to you that you're creating a new contract with her, and if you think Nicholas Sparks is not required to give me that quarter, you're agreeing as well that Chelsea Cain's time, the time it takes to craft a response, is worth less than 25-cents.

Yes, we all hope our favorite authors, our favorite sports stars, and Nicholas Sparks will act the way we want them to if we're lucky enough to interact with them in some way. They have to interact sometimes, but sometimes, sometimes they just need to do some damn laundry and eat some Mike and Ikes.

If you're not convinced, let's look at your side of the coin.

Let's say you buy the Nicholas Sparks novel *A Walk To Remember* because you saw the movie and found Mandy Moore enchanting. As we all do.

You buy the book, and it sucks. Remember, this is purely hypothetical. If you're reading this, Mr. Sparks.

Now, my question for you, does your purchase of the book, your participation in the art of Nicholas Sparks, mean that you have to write a positive review of the book? Of course not, right? You bought the book at the set, market price, and that's the exchange.

You run into Nicholas Sparks at the Laundromat, and this time YOU have the quarters. Are you obligated, because you enjoyed his book, to give him a quarter? No.

You enter into a pseudo-relationship with an artist when you purchase his work. However, that relationship does not dictate your future behavior in regards to that art or its creator, nor does it dictate your behavior, in general. You can, of course, CHOOSE to become a devotee of Nicholas Sparks, or you can elect to actively mock him in a column, but the simple act of making a purchase and experiencing a piece of art does not put you under any sort of contract, nor does it put the artist under one.

This whole issue goes beyond whether or not Chelsea Cain should be nice on Facebook. It's about whether or not she is obligated to behave a certain way because people bought her books.

Nicholas Sparks's contractual participation ends with the last piece of punctuation in his book. Your obligation ends when you purchase the book legitimately. After that, it's basically a handshake. Each of you go your separate ways, and each of those separate ways include a stop at the bank to get a roll of quarters.

Third Argument: My Ex Girlfriend's Dad

So we've established that Chelsea Cain was factually accurate and that she is not obligated to behave within any certain parameters based on the fact that people purchased her work. That brings me to a bigger, even more important point.

I can't remember if my high school English teacher told me to put the best point first or last. This is why you should pay attention in school. Ugh, I can't believe I just wrote that. Don't pay attention in school, kids. I'm an adult with a career, and I'm telling you that they're wasting your time.

Back to Chelsea Cain.

A lot of the blow back I read online went something like this:

Geez, you could be nice to your fans. If I made as much cheddar off writing as you, I'd be a little more grateful to the people who bought my books.

Okay, most of the people didn't use the term "cheddar." That's a bit of what we call "artistic license." Another crucial writing assessment technique.

Let me explain why the If/Then logic is flawed here, and let me explain it via a story about my high school girlfriend.

My high school girlfriend, her parents were divorced. She lived with her mom, who was kind of horrible. She treated my girlfriend like a true Bartleby. My girlfriend took care of her much younger siblings every evening, all weekend, and all summer. This wasn't like a fun, nanny, be close to your siblings situation. This was a thing where she woke up to take care of the kids in the morning, fed them all their meals, and if they took a nap, my girlfriend celebrated because she might have time to finish staining the fence in the backyard. On top of all this, her mom was not very nice about the whole thing.

It sucked. It really sucked.

My girlfriend lionized her father, who she never saw. She always wanted to visit her father. And who could blame her? She badly needed to get away from the Bartleby life and have just an occasional, normal teenage life.

My girlfriend blamed her mother for the fact that she never saw her father. Her mother, who was remarried and was quite wealthy, wasn't getting the child support owed by my girlfriend's father. No check, no visit. In the two years I knew this girl, I think she visited her father once.

I kept my mouth shut. But I knew the truth, and the truth was that in my girlfriend's mind, her father was perfect. And he remained perfect because he was never around to prove her wrong. He was never there to enforce a curfew or make her do homework. He didn't have to be a parent. He didn't exist, and because he didn't exist, he never promised anything. It was impossible for him to let her down.

Here's where the analogy comes in.

Chelsea Cain was attacked with this message:

Chelsea Cain is lucky to be a bestselling author, and if I were in her shoes, I would behave differently.

If you ever think like that, if you ever think, "If I only had X" or "If I could just do Y" then stop yourself. Right in the moment, cut that thinking right off. What you talk about when you say those phrases is an idealized version of yourself. A version of yourself where all your personal flaws are extinguishable because of a change in your circumstances. I would hire a personal trainer and be in great shape. I would give to all these different charities. I would donate to a different awesome Kickstarter every day! If this one good thing happened, I would become this good person.

You are saying that this idealized, non-existent version of you would be a certain way. It's an easy thing to say because, much like my high school girlfriend's father, that idealized version of you is not going to show up on your doorstep to prove you wrong.

What you're doing when you say Chelsea Cain has a certain something that should cause her to act a certain way, is to compare Chelsea Cain, the real, actual, flesh and blood Chelsea Cain, to the idealized version of yourself that doesn't exist. Which is supremely unfair.

The real Chelsea Cain is a person. She lives in the same world as you, not the idealized version of you, but the real, actual, flesh and blood person you are right now. She pays bills. She works. She gets in her car and the CHECK ENGINE light comes on. She gets hassled at the airport.

If you want to be fair, compare yourself to Chelsea Cain. Put your real self in that hypothetical moral cage match with Chelsea Cain. Say what you actually do. Don't tell everyone how you would react to the question Chelsea Cain gets over and over. Tell us how you react to the question YOU get over and over. The "Where's the bathroom?" from work or the "Why is your hair like that?" look from everyone. Because it's not the one silly question that breaks a person down. It's the one silly question for the hundredth time on the same day the CHECK ENGINE light comes on and you don't get the work done you should have and you forgot to pay the stupid Nicholas Sparks fan club bill this month and now you won't get exclusive offers.

I'm not saying that Chelsea Cain has it harder than anyone else, or that she's a saint. I'm saying she's real, and what you do, if you compare her to an imaginary being, is to say she's not.

Conclusion: Tell 'Em What You Already Told 'Em And Then BLOW SOME MINDS

Chelsea Cain was not incorrect. Chelsea Cain has completed her obligations to fans when they get her complete, non #YOLO-ended books. Chelsea Cain suffers in comparison to the imaginary version of you that saves dolphins and speaks French.

The arguments I've made so far have mostly been about how Chelsea Cain was right. Not about whether she made people happy.

Can I tell you something? Her answers, her posts? They made me happy. Because I read those, and damn it, I knew that Chelsea Cain was a real person. I knew that there sure as hell wasn't some faceless company running her social media for her (which, by the way, is the proposed solution one outspoken critic of this event provides, and it just so happens that she provides this service at a cost. I call conflict of interest on that play!).

I want my books written by writers. Not marketers. I'll take an author over a marketer any day of the week. It's sickening that books and art might suffer because their authors are their authentic selves on social media or in the public eye. Which is how Chelsea Cain did it. Have you read her books? They are blood and guts. A little Facebook wrist slap does not cross any of the lines she's established with her voice as an author. We're not talking about Eric Carle telling kids they can take The Very Hungry Caterpillar and see if it can eat through their dumb, thick skulls. We're talking about an adult talking to adults in a consistent manner.

Can I drop a few Cain quotes pulled off Goodreads?

Our relationship is complicated by the fact that I am emotionally retarded.

Her body was spattered with tiny bits of the reverend's flesh and blood, like someone had combined shrimp and tomato soup and then forgot to put the lid on the blender.

One more, apropos of the situation:

Something about the way she moves through the world does not lend itself to the care of fragile objects.

If you were offended by what Chelsea Cain said, then I would guess you're not much of a fan ([one anti-Cain blogger admitted, right from the get-go](#), to having no familiarity whatsoever with Chelsea Cain, which seems to negate a lot of the cred there).

When I see the lines quoted above, and when I read what Chelsea Cain put up on Facebook, I hear an authentic voice that has something to say. Which is why she should be writing books, and why I'm damn glad she does.

If you've got a voice, and if you've got something to say, you're bound to offend people. If you're one of those offended parties, I recommend you sit down with a box of Mike and Ikes, dip them in water so all the flavor will be washed away and you'll be left with only the bland gelatin. Then, seek out Nicholas Sparks on Facebook. Trust me, if inoffensive is what you want, you will be in a paradise of flavorless gelatin and numbing social media content.

The author is now prepared to accept his high school writing assessment endorsement. Whether that be in the form of a stamp, seal, or some sort of sticker.

Locked Up: Books For My Father



Allowable property includes 2 books, 2 faith group items, 1 eyeglasses/case, authorized hygiene items, legal papers, 5 photographs, 1 plain wedding band & 1 pair of shower shoes.

—Colorado Department of Corrections Offender Orientation Handbook

My father probably wears shower shoes in prison. He's always been conscious of hygiene. He was a doctor, an anesthesiologist if you want to get picky.

Doubtful he wears a wedding band though. He was married three times, but I only know of one wedding band. He hardly wore it. The times he did, he'd twist it on his finger. He's not married to that woman anymore. He's not married at all. He didn't like the band before. He probably wouldn't have much use for it now.

Photographs were never a big deal for my father. I don't know that he ever owned five. He never put them up. He had a giant poster of the comic book character Lobo, one of our shared favorites. I'm guessing that doesn't count as a photograph.

He did wear glasses. Bifocals even. He's got those, for sure.

He was never religious in the least.

Of all the things I could give him, he probably doesn't need the shoes, the wedding band. The photos. He probably has his glasses, even though he's not wearing any in his Department of Corrections photo.

But maybe, maybe he could use a couple good books. My father, who I haven't seen in over a

decade, who's been homeless when wasn't locked up, maybe he'd like something to read to pass the time until his next parole hearing.

There Are So Many Hard Things About This Column That It's Hard To Know Where To Start

The start might be with my dad. That he's real. That this former anesthesiologist, now prisoner, taught his kids how to ski, set our garage on fire (it was for a Cub Scout project), was a drunk, taught his kids condom safety way too early and in a terrible way, was divorced for the second time and married a third on the same afternoon. Maybe the first part is about how he's real. It's hard to convince people that it's all real, all the stuff from when I was a kid. There are some pretty tall tales in there. I'm less sure than I used to be. It's been a long time.

The next part might be how I feel about all of it. Which is harder. As unsure as I am about him being real, I'm even less sure how I feel about him, how I feel about the ways he raised us.

Somewhere in here we need to get to the part where I explain how I don't want to be exploitative. How I don't want to write this because it'd make great material or to hear how people feel sorry for me or for my father.

How about for right now we stick to talking books? About my father's love of books and reading, especially comics. How I credit my mom with teaching me how to read and reading to me when I was a kid, but it was my father who bought *Preacher* and *Transmetropolitan* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Welcome to the Monkey House* when I was way too young, which was the perfect time to enjoy them. How he always said, "I don't care WHAT you're reading, so long as you're reading."

There's so much to get to, so many parts.

Maybe the first part goes like this:

What you really need to know is that my father is in prison. I haven't spoken to him in over a decade. And I got the idea to send him some books.

What you really need to know is that I had two big questions on my hands. A third if you count the question of whether or not this is actually a good idea. But we'll get to that.

Can I send books to my father in prison?

If I can, which books do I send?

With those two questions, we have a start. The start of a column anyway.

Part 1: Is It Possible To Send A Book To A Prisoner?

Indigent offenders who have less than \$4.60 in their account, have not received

I thought some parts of this would be hard. The parts I didn't think about were a lot harder.

deposits, or have not been receiving unassigned pay for 30 days will be allowed to mail one (1) personal letter per week with postage paid for by the facility.

—Colorado Department of Corrections Offender Orientation Handbook

To find out whether I could send anything, I had to find out where exactly my father was. I said before that I hadn't seen him. To be clear, I haven't heard from him in any small way since maybe 2003 when he sent me a MySpace message. I could probably leave the year off that fact. Just knowing it was a MySpace message timestamps his last words to me quite nicely.

The sibling rumor mill told me he was still in the state. After spending some time homeless, or somewhat homeless depending on how you feel about tents as homes.

The part about how I searched for my father on the computer isn't very exciting. It's like the computer hacking part of a movie. If it goes on very long, I start thinking, "Wait a minute. I'm watching someone type right now. This isn't entertaining!" Then I think, "Wait ANOTHER minute. This person is PRETENDING to type. This has gone from bad to worse. Not amused."

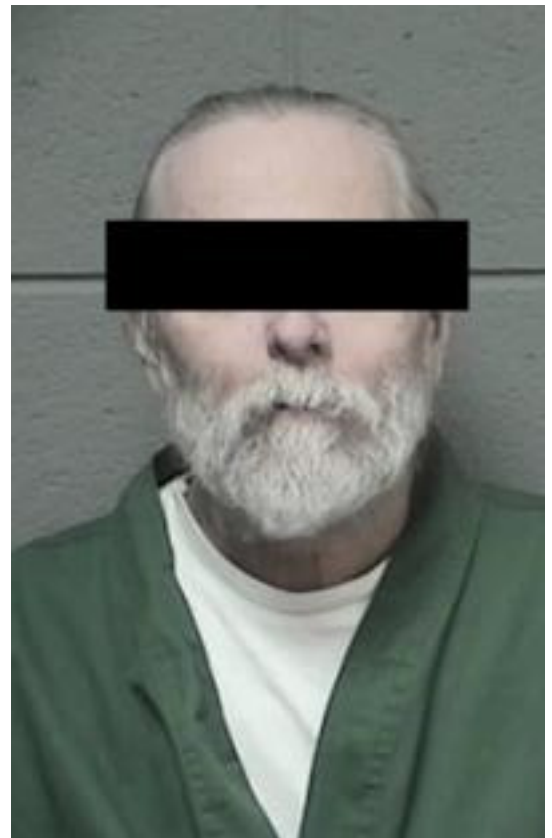
So I'll sum it up. I looked into some court records, searched the evil LexisNexus database, which charged me about \$7 per search, not per result, but per search. Then it was just a dab of Google (Wow. gross phrase there. Way to go, Pete.) to locate the Colorado Department of Corrections Offender Search.

There he was. All his information. When he was born. How tall. How heavy. How long he'd been there. I saw his picture. Saw his face for the first time in a decade. Which is a short word for a long time. I hadn't seen his face since before the end of high school. Before I got my job, where I've been for ten years. I'd never slept with anyone the last time I saw him. I could barely drive.

My father's eyes droop further at the corners, small hoods on the outside edge. His hair and beard are all grey. His nose is more crooked than I remember. It's definitely him, but he's not all the way the same.

I thought some parts of this would be hard. But the parts I didn't think about were a lot harder.

I read a little about the facility. On prison forums, which are mostly populated by the wives of inmates. They say the food is a little better at Delta, and overall it's not bad as prisons go. The inmates have lots of time to themselves, and they can work outside the facility. There's a short fence around the property that's used mostly to keep wild deer outside the prison grounds. The low fence is successful sometimes and not successful other times. One forum poster said she had a relative in Delta, and a lot of times there would be deer inside the fence with the inmates. It was a strict rule that inmates do not touch or feed the deer.



After I saw my father's face, after I read about the place where he is, after the details about the deer made it real, I was less sure about this kooky plan.

I didn't want to do this anymore.

But I'm a schemer. And I came up with a scheme, a cop out.

I did some more very boring internet stuff to get a number for the Delta Correctional Facility. I picked up the phone.

DOC: Corrections.

Me: Uh, hi. I have a question

My voice cracked like when I was 13. Like when my father wasn't locked up.

DOC: ...

Me: I have a question about whether or not the library over there accepts donations. Cash or books.

DOC: We do not.

Me: Okay. Thanks.

-click-

Well, crap. So much for schemes. In my head, the place where these things always work out, I figured it'd be easy to send books to the library. If my father got his hands on them, great. If he didn't, I tried. Sort of. Cop out tried, but that's still something.

I made a second call a day later.

DOC: Corrections, this is [garbled].

Me: Yeah, I saw online that I can send books to...inmates if they come straight from Amazon. Is that true?

DOC: Let me send you down to the mail room. They'll know for sure.

Me: Thanks...

DOC: Mail.

Me: Yeah, I saw online that I can send paperback books to...inmates if they come straight from Amazon. Is that accurate?

DOC: They don't have to come from Amazon, just from a publisher or a store. Not a person. They have to be new and paperback.

Me: Okay. And are there any restrictions on how many they can get or anything like that?

DOC: Well, they can have 12 books at any time. So if they already have 12, they have to mail some out or give them up.

Me: Thanks so much.

There it was. Yes, it was possible. I couldn't throw some books at the prison library and hope for the best. But I could send them directly to my father.

Question 1.5: What Are The Rules, Then?

The prison mandated that books had to be new paperbacks, available directly from a retailer.

My mandates were a little stricter. I'd send two because I felt like asking him to give up more than that would be too much. They had to be books I suspected he would enjoy. And they could not be books with any sort of message in terms of fathers and sons. I just...that wasn't the purpose of this. Finally, because of the nature of his incarceration, I wanted to stay away from mental illness if possible. Anything that might feed into that. If he were able to select those on his own, I'd have no problem with it. But this was me picking for him. He was my father. And I had no idea what kind of shape he'd be in now.

Question 2: Which Books Do I Send?

I'm a librarian. It might be surprising to find out that my amazing columns about smoking marijuana or making fun of a crazy person who thinks *Frozen* is based on her memoir don't bankroll my plush lifestyle. But hey, it's true. On the plus, a big part of my library job is recommending books. We all do things for money, and putting books in peoples' hands is not such a bad thing to do for money.

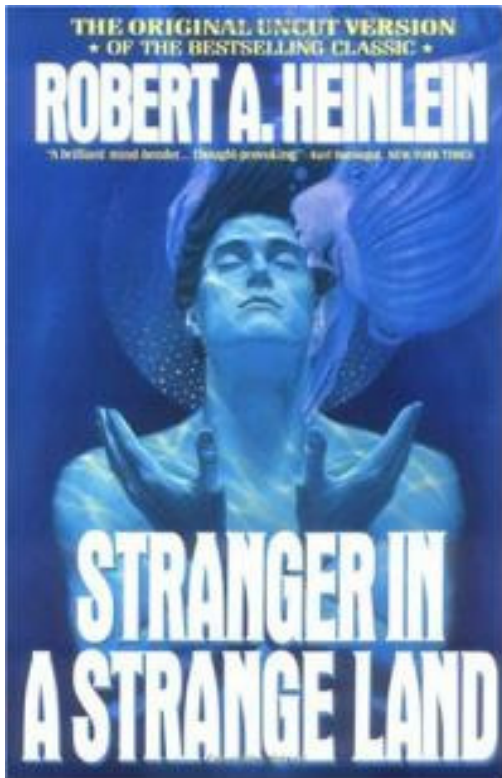
It can be hard to make recommendations to strangers. You don't really know them, and you have to recommend a book, something that can be very personal. A shared experience.

It can be hard to make recommendations to people you know. They'll usually tell you what they thought. Which, depending on how good a match you made, can have you questioning your career choice. When it's someone you know, there's no excuse. It becomes personally important that they enjoy whatever you put in their hands.

My father occupies a weird middle ground. I know him. But not now. Not the man he is right now. I have ideas about what he was like when he was 40, maybe 45. The things he liked, the stuff he enjoyed. At the same time, I have to acknowledge that what I know about him is what I knew about him when he was older and I was younger. When things were different. When he was my father and I was his son.

I thought some parts of this would be hard. The parts I didn't think about were a lot harder.

There's so much to get to. Maybe we can stick to books. Talk about my father through the books I considered.



Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert Heinlein

My father talked about this book a lot. That's all I know about it. I think about him when I see it, but I've never read it. A little bit on purpose. Another part of him that's still mysterious.

Planet Hulk by Greg Pak

My father collected comics. Collected as in subscribed to and read, not as in cherished as obsessions. For years his comics lived on a decommissioned particle board entertainment center, stacked in the large middle space where a TV would go. He was always a Marvel True Believer. He drove us kids the hour to Mile High Comics where he'd let us pick out just about whatever. I still have the books I got on some of those trips. *Preacher*. *The Dark Knight Returns*.

The Collected Stories by Amy Hempel

My father was divorced three times. First from my mom, a split that happened before I was old enough to remember. The second time, from the mother of my younger brother and sister. A dirty, awful kind of divorce. The third, a woman he met in his apartment building. I don't know what their split was like. I don't know much about how he was as a husband. I don't know if a wise woman's words are what he needs or not, but Amy Hempel fits that bill.

The Sisters Brothers by Patrick DeWitt

A weird, darkly comic western. My father liked dark comedy. The darker, the better. And he liked the slow Clint Eastwood westerns from way back. He would sit in front of the TV with us. He made the saltiest popcorn, drenched in butter. He'd sit with us, his kids, in front of the TV and eat popcorn and drink beer. He would drink beer through the whole movie and then keep going after. Most of the weekends we visited, he drank at night. He'd drink until he slept in front of the TV. When he woke up, he'd squint and decide whether to go to bed or stay on the couch. I always hoped he'd fall back asleep and stay.

The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach

A great sports story and then some. My father was always an athlete. Not a member of teams or anything, just someone who was good at whatever sport he picked up. He was strong. Quick. When he took us to the roller rink, the staff usually warned him about skating too fast. Backwards. On the ski slopes, the ski patrol usually warned him about skiing too fast. Backwards. Without poles. He said the poles slowed him down. He snowboarded. Rollerbladed. Rode bikes. Lifted weights. He met my mother in a college swimming class.

Masters of Doom by David Kushner

My father loved computers. He had the internet at home before anyone I knew. He spent hours downloading a weather map once, and he was a little disappointed when no one else found this amazing. He left the computer connected all night to download a demo of *Doom II*, just the first level. After he was jailed the first time and lost his medical license, he still fixed computers and set up networks for a few of his doctor friends. Part of his sentencing, according to the sibling rumor mill, is that he's got restricted access to technology.

The Time Machine Did It by John Swartzwelder

Maybe he could use something funny. A story of the variety where someone stupid does something stupid. My father told a lot of jokes. Knock-knock jokes. Street jokes. Joke book jokes. Dad jokes. I don't know if he was actually funny, but he told a lot of jokes.

The Proud Highway by Hunter S. Thompson

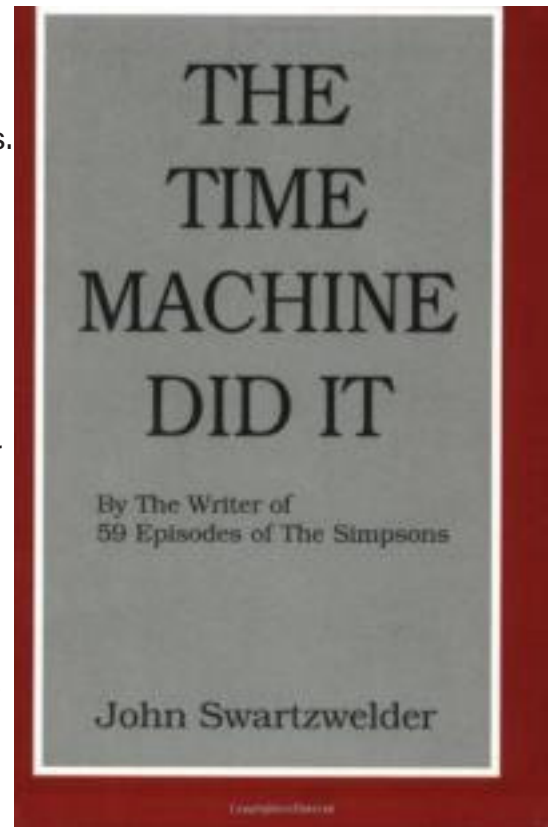
Hunter S. Thompson, his voice, reminds me of my father. I brought this book with me on a trip, and I couldn't finish it. I could hardly read it at all. Every word reminded me of my father. Thompson's sunglasses on the front cover, his dark hair reminded me of my father. When I read Hunter S. Thompson, I hear my father. Even though a lot of what he sounded like, the way he spoke, I don't remember.

Leviathan Wakes by James S. A. Corey

He loved sci-fi movies. I only remember my father going to the theater a few times. *Terminator 2*. *Species 2*. Oh, and *Bambi*. He took us kids to *Bambi*. I looked over to him when Bambi's mom died. I wasn't sure whether it was alright to cry or not. I thought I could see what my father did and do the same thing. He was asleep. His head tilted back on the chair so his mouth pointed at the ceiling. He snored. I laughed and poked my brother so he could laugh too.

Catch-22 by Joseph Heller

His own father was an airman in WWII. I don't know how he feels about that, though. My father told us a story about it that I thought was made up. Then, not so long ago, a distant relative emailed me a copy of my grandfather's "After-Action Report." Which was just like what my father said. The real story was just like the thing I thought my father made up.



I went through a ton of books. And even more memories.

I thought some parts of this would be hard. But the parts I didn't think about were a lot harder.

I settled on two titles.

Snowcrash by Neil Stephenson

I've never read it. I don't know if my father has either. There's a copy on my bookshelf. It's a sci-fi book that I've been meaning to read. The idea of sending my father a book he might like and that I'd read the same book, I like that idea.

American Gods by Neil Gaiman

My father's been away during Neil Gaiman's rise from great comic book writer to great man. There's something bizarre and wonderful about this book. A mix of the old and the new. My father loved *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and he also loved Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. He bought pocket-sized

editions of this book, an entire box, and gave them out to family, friends, and even some of my friends. *American Gods* might be a good mix of the two book worlds I know my father dabbled in. Not to mention it's a longer one, which I imagine is a good quality in a prison book.

Question 3: Can I Send Books To My Father?

This question is the same as the first. And also not.

It's the question that comes after the question, Can you send books to prisoners? It comes after the question of what I'd send.

It's the question about whether I'm able. Me. His son.

I thought there would be parts of this that would be hard. There were. The parts I thought would be hard were definitely hard. And the parts that I didn't think would be hard, those were hard too.

I visited my father once in all the time he's been incarcerated. It was the first time, when he was in the jail down the road from the house we grew up in. My mom, she drove me and my brother to the jail to visit our father.

We had to take off our belts. Leave all the stuff from our pockets in the waiting room before we went through the door into the visiting room, where it was darker and there was a row of stools in front of Plexiglas.

I sat on the stool, in front of the piece of Plexi, just like in the movies. There was a phone that connected to a phone on the other side. Just like the movies. My father walked into the room, the other side of the room that was behind the Plexi, and he picked up his phone. A lady next to me, she talked to someone in an orange jumpsuit on the other side of the Plexi. She put her hand up on her side of the Plexi and the man across from her mashed his hand up on his side. Just like in the movies.

My father was there. In an orange jumpsuit. Just like the movies, and also nothing like the movies.

We only talked a minute. I didn't ask him anything. The things I was scared about. Would people beat him up in jail? Do they get raped there? I didn't ask him anything, and he told me he was okay. He said he ate a lot of cookies and played chess in jail.

That was way before. Way before anything. When my father was still my father. The skier. The son of a WWII navigator who used the stars to save his crew when their equipment was shot up. When my father was the man who got extra phone lines so he could stay connected to a primitive internet at all times. The comic book fan who gave all his comics away to his children. The problematic human who couldn't maintain a relationship. Any relationship. The man whose taste in music ran from bad to horrible, to the point my brother had to hide a CD by 90's singer Poe because he couldn't stand to hear it one more time. The man who always told his kids he wouldn't buy them cars but would pay for their college. The man who could have done it on his anesthesiologist's wages. The man who didn't because things changed and he couldn't. The man who drank until he passed out in front of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or *Doctor Who*. The man who I always hoped would stay passed out on the couch. Wouldn't wake up and leave us.

I can. I can send something to that man.

What I can't do is send something to a different man. The man he is now. Maybe he doesn't care about *Star Trek* anymore. Maybe he doesn't like special effects anymore. Maybe he's been banned from computers and that eats him up just a little. Maybe he's mean all the time the way he used to be mean just sometimes. Maybe he's nice all the time.

Whoever he is, the man from today hasn't written. Hasn't called. I didn't know he was in the state. I didn't know he was homeless, tent homeless. Maybe he can't. Maybe he's thinking the same thing. That the son he knew is probably someone else by now.

I want to send two books to my father. But I can't. Because my father, the man from ten years ago, he doesn't have an address.

The Pleasures Of Writing At Night



Believe me, if anybody has a job and starts at 9, there's no reason why they can't get up at 4:30 or 5 and write for a couple of hours, and give their employers their second-best effort of the day—which is what I did.

-Mary Oliver

Yeah, totally do that, but in reverse. Write at night.

-Peter Derk

Daylight savings is close. Your life is about to be way more night than it is day. I know that's a dramatic thing to say, something Winona Ryder would say in *Beetlejuice*, but it's true. Unlike most of the things Winona Ryder's character said in *Alien: Resurrection*. The fact is, night's about to get a lot longer.

What I'm saying is, you might as well get used to finding pleasure in the night. Especially writing at night.

What are the pleasures of writing at night? Glad you asked.

You Can Tell (Internet Article) Science Where To Stick It

Scientists, or maybe I should say internet article scientists, say a lot of wacky crap about the optimum time of day to do things. They tend to disagree on a lot of this sleep/wake/work stuff. And not by just a little. It's not like there's one study that says prime writing time is 11 PM and then another

that disagrees with a controversial 11:14 PM. I'm talking about one study that says to do things right when you wake up, another that says right before bed, and then a third study that pretty much says both. There was one web site that, I'm not kidding, did back-to-back articles, one saying that you should get up 30 minutes early to engage in creative work, and the next article prescribing 30 minutes extra sleep to enhance creativity.

I don't want to get overly Insane Clown Posse here, but scientists be getting me pissed.

I looked towards nocturnal creatures for inspiration once scientists let me down. The earthworm was the most interesting. It turns out their breeding activity goes way up at night. And it turns out their breeding activity is pretty weird. I don't want to come off as overly judgmental, but earthworms can't read, so I'll come out and say it: they are gross sexual deviants. Their reproductive process is so complicated. Worm sex must feel pretty amazing, because otherwise I can't imagine they'd even bother.

Just think, you could be reading an article titled "Night Moves: Spirit of the Earthworm."

But you're not. It's for the best.

You're reading about the pleasures of writing at night. Which is separate from science, right? From the facts of the matter? From weird worm sex that involves backing up through a mucus-y ring of your own creation to create a birthing cocoon (See? Told you it was weird).

Pleasure is a feeling, and feelings aren't always based in science. Feeling something and knowing something are two different things. It's why the Black Eyed Peas say "I got a feeling that tonight's gonna be a good night" instead of "I got scientific evidence that backs my thesis, which is that tonight will be a quantifiably good night." Although we ARE talking about a band that did a song called "Let's Get Retarded" so I'm probably not using the best example.

Let's forget science. Let's talk pleasures. Not the kind from the adult store named Pleasures, or the adult store called Pleasures with another word in front of it (Intimate, Illicit, that sort of thing). Simpler pleasures. Writing pleasures.

Late Coffee

The pleasures of night writing start before night time. They start in the late afternoon. The time when most people in an office cut off their coffee consumption.

There are the people who leave coffee behind after a single morning cup. Amateurs. There are people

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who go on a steady stream until a certain cut-off point. Junkies. I knew one person who ate apples instead. She said one apple has the equivalent wake up power of a cup of coffee. I call this person "monster."

And then there are night writers, those of us who laugh in the clock's face when it tells us, "Pete, it's 6 PM. You'll be up all night." "Clock," I say. "That's exactly the idea."

With late coffee, in the afternoon or the evening, it's not even night and already you are living a different life. Outside the law of men. Night coffee is about a lot more than drinking an AM beverage in the PM. It's a little sign of rebellion. A little flag you can wave that says, Hey, not only am I not scared to stay up late, I'm doing it on purpose. A small act, those sips say your evenings are more than the time you rest and get ready for work the next day. Those sips say your life doesn't exist solely to support your job.

It's only a little sip on a coffee cup, but at night, it's a hell of a lot sweeter.

Good Company

Let's talk about another pleasure, the company you keep when you write at night. Again, let's stay away from science and reality, even though the reality means you're in good company too ([Chuck Palahniuk](#), [Darwin](#)). Instead, let's talk pleasure, the crap that lights up a person's brain.

When you write at night, you're keeping company with the holy trinity of non-scientific insomniacs: Dracula, Santa, and Batman.

Dracula, the first leg of the triangle of great night people. Dracula might or might not explode when he sees the sun. That part is less clear all the time. In some realities, it seems he would burst instantly. In others, he would be afflicted with having gorgeous, sparkling skin without spending a dime in that crazy Proactiv vending machine at the mall. I suspect the truth is somewhere in the middle. Sun doesn't kill him, but what Dracula understands is that the day is the absolute worst time to get anything done. There are just too many people around. Too much going on. Facebook and Twitter are alive. TV, don't even get me started on TV. TV is like a toddler. It gets all excited, bounces off the walls all day, doing some especially heinous crap mid-day when you're not watching. And then, when it gets late, TV wants to keep going even though it's clearly cashed out for the day. TV might as well go to bed, just like a toddler.

I don't trust vampires when it comes to fashion or home decor, but when it comes to night work, they might be right. The night is a great time.

Everything is so loud and fast and crowded during the day. At night, everything is quieter. Easier. Whether you're writing or turning yourself into a bat, night is where you want to be.

Second leg of the triangle, Santa. Santa is a night guy, which is sort of weird when you consider he works with children. Although almost everything about Santa's gig is pretty weird when you consider he works with children. Let's not get into it...okay, real quick: breaking and entering, over-consumption of dairy products, militaristic footwear, drunk appearance, Coca-Cola affiliation.

The magic of Santa is he does his whole pile of work while everyone sleeps. He understands the beauty of waking up to a changed world. A richer world. The fun of waking up to a world someone

filled with gifts while everyone else slept.

Santa understands something the night writer understands. The pleasure of seeing someone's face when they wake up to something unexpected and say, "Where did this come from?" Then, like Santa, you shrug, wink, drink a Coke, maybe steal an iPod dock and shoot up the chimney.

Batman. Final leg of the triangle. Batman is a billionaire during the day. But his real work, physically assaulting the mentally ill with punches and gadgets, happens at night. He's a night guy. He understands that the day is when he does his job, but the night is when he follows his passion. When he lives his life. When he smashes the face of an insane scientist dressed in a Mad Hatter suit. When he feels alive!

Batman is the embodiment of the American dream, circa 2014. Yes, he works two jobs. Yes, he is deeply troubled by the events of his youth. However, he still gets to do what he's meant to do. He makes it happen at night.

Writer as God

The pleasures of writing at night are about getting weird. Expansive. More in control. The later it gets, the more you feel like the Omega Man. The last person on Earth.

The pleasures of writing at night are the clothes I wear. My own, terrible decisions on fashion. Old man slippers. My feet are warm while I type, and they're happy, and I'm happy. Sweat pants with holes in both pockets, so when I get up, I get a little shock down my leg before a pen spills out onto the floor. My worst sweats. My night writing sweats. You dress however you like. You're the boss, you set the dress code. No need for those khakis. Damn those khakis.

You set the light however you want, no stupid sun making that decision for you. You control the light. The beautiful desk lamp my mom thrifted for me. The string of patio lights above my desk. During the day, the light controls you. You can fight it, but you'll never win. Unless your goal is taping up sheets and foil over the windows until it almost certainly appears you're cooking meth inside. In that case, you win big time. Sort of.

At night, you almost start to feel like maybe you have a little control over the whole world. That the way you set things up in your story, you can have a little taste of that in real life. It's small, and it's petty, but pleasures can be small and petty.

Or they can be huge.

You control your destiny at night. You control the light. You're Ra, god of sun. You're GHOMAX, god of sheets over windows, who I just invented and will likely become very popular in my neighborhood.

At night, you're the boss, you're always right, you're Tim Gunn, you're GHOMAX, you're the sun god.

Night Versus Morning

The pleasures of writing at night are different than the pleasures of writing in the morning. Or rather, there's a different tone.

When you wake up to write, you have to imagine a session that's worth moving your feet out from under the blankets and pressing them against a cold floor. You have to break away from sleep and start something new.

In the morning, the pleasures always have an end. The clock moves, and it's time to stop your writing pleasures and get ready for the day. Whether that means a uniform or kids stirring in their beds. Whatever it means, a morning writing session ends when it ends. Not when you say.

When you write at night, there's no getting out of bed. There's no stops and starts. You only have to keep going. Stay out of the bed. The words you're putting down, the project you're finishing, all you have to do is not stop.

At night, the pleasures end when you decide. When they stop feeling good. If you're on a roll, there's always the chance you could roll all night. Never stop. When you're feeling good, making progress, there's always the idea in the back of that night mind that maybe you'll never go to bed again.

As long as I'm typing, I don't have to give up. Don't have to give up on today. If the last thing I do is type, then it's okay if nothing incredible happens all day before that. The most likely time for it is right before bed anyway, right here in front of the keyboard.

...In Bed!

The pleasure of writing at night ends in bed. In true rest. The pleasure of writing at night, you fall into bed, maybe a few hours and a few pages late, but knowing you did it. You don't have to reset and start in on your regular human stuff. You're finished. You earned a rest, earned the bed.

The pleasures of writing at night tuck you into bed after you've exhausted all the words. After you're out of things to say, to put on paper or tell yourself about tomorrow or about what you did wrong. All that's left is the bed, and you don't have to drag the words in there with you. They stay on the desk. Away from the blankets and pillow. They wait on your paper, in your keyboard. All those plots and pronouns and the little mannerism of the woman on the bus who sucked in a spot on her bottom lip through a gap in her teeth. All of them stay out of your bed. They wait for tomorrow night.

5 Things Bodybuilders Know That Writers Don't



I'd think it was crazy too if I were a normal person.

-Jay Cutler, bodybuilder

At the risk of going even further to the bro side of things than the title would indicate, I'll start with a little story about *FHM*.

Every spring, at the end of the semester, the college in my small town would roll out huge dumpsters. Most of the dorms would empty into them. All the cheap furniture and whatever weird, disposable chair Target pushed the previous fall would fill these giant trash bins as if the buildings tipped over and the entirety of their rooms fell inside. My brother and I were always there to root through the trash for some diamonds in the rough. "Rough" in this case being ripped binders, destroyed clothing, and more shower caddies than there were showers on Earth.

I made some good finds. Lamps, staplers, things like that. I made finds that were less good. A used Foreman Grill I fished out of a trash pile, took home, revived, and cooked on for a few years. Sure, every chicken breast pressed between that grill was likely infused with a certain amount of what us trash connoisseurs call "garbage juice." And sure, the little cleaning spatula that REALLY helps clean a Foreman grill was not to be found. But I was living the high life, or a version of it, and eating leaner chicken than ever.

On one of these dumpster expeditions, I took home a box fan, a floor lamp, and a pile of discarded lad mags. *FHM*, *Maxim*, and the like.

I should reiterate, just in case you forgot about the Foreman grill plucked from the garbage, that this is not a story of pride. These magazines were scrounged from the garbage. Not next to the garbage, not adjacent—IN the garbage. They were not 100% clean. One even had notes left inside by the

previous owner's roommate, and I would periodically find these notes and be reminded, "Oh yeah. I got these out of a dumpster."

In other words, just in case you weren't sure, I'm not bragging. Not bragging about pulling semi-porn from a pile of garbage.

I had the chance to peruse these magazines many, many times, and there were...downtimes wherein I would actually read the articles. Yes, the text that someone makes lots of money to lay out such that it doesn't encroach on any part of Megan Fox's body. Do you think if one were to write an article about a model, there is a formula somewhere in the back offices of Maxim magazine that reconciles how many words can fit compared to how much lady? Do certain weird poses allow for the optimum ratio of semi-nudity to text? I haven't profiled any models for LitReactor (yet). I have a lot of questions.

The women posed in my dumpster magazines are long gone from my mind, but [one of the articles](#) stuck in my memory hard.

It was a profile of bodybuilder Jay Cutler. At the time he was shooting to win Mr. Olympia, the Stanley Cup of bodybuilding. I guess I should say it's the Super Bowl of bodybuilding, but everyone compares stuff to the Super Bowl. Live a little, guys.

Cutler looks shocking in the pictures printed alongside the article. There's one photo of Cutler holding a weed whacker for some reason. He's tanned a deep brown, copper the way a penny looks after it spends a few weeks on the ground at a gas station. In another picture, Cutler holds the end of a couch in the air with one hand, above his head, while he vacuums underneath. The vacuum's handle is tiny in his huge hand.

He's more naked than most of the female models in the magazine. He wears only tiny bikini briefs in a lot of shots.

Mr. Olympia is not a figure contest. It's not a CrossFit thing. This is for the spray-tanned gigantors of the world. The ones who cannot wear clothes off the rack. Whose hands are lined with veins, the fingers chubbed up with muscle. Cutler looks uncomfortable. His muscles bulge away from his body. He's gone past the place a celebrity goes to get ripped for a movie. He doesn't actually look like a human person anymore.

In one of the pictures, Cutler stands next to his father. His father looks like a regular dad. Khaki shorts. Glasses. He's thin. The sleeves of his polo shirt have a little room all the way around his upper arms. But when he's next to his son, it's hard to believe that these people are the same type of animal, let alone of the same blood.

I remember more than the pictures. I remember some of the things Cutler said. Before one of his competitions, he didn't drink anything for days. He dehydrated himself, then he ate uncooked oatmeal to draw the water out of his skin, which made his veins and muscles pop. He was so devoid of fat that he said his feet, there was no padding. He could feel that he was walking on pure bone.

He talked about a cruise he took with his wife, how he couldn't snorkel because they didn't have a

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different from**

life jacket that could buckle over his chest. How he got in the water and sank immediately. How the rich cruise food, which normally packs a few pounds onto people, had a huge effect on him. He was coming straight off a competition diet, and he put on 15 pounds. In 5 hours.

There were so many little details about what a personal hell this was. It has stuck in my mind for over a decade. I wrote a first, complete garbage novel with a character based mostly on this interview.

It's been a long time since I dumpster-dived those magazines. Since I threw them away. All it takes is one move to a new place. Am I going to pack dumpster magazines in a box? Likely not.

I'd like to think I've graduated to a new level of class, one where I may still find myself in seedy corners, but those corners are digital and don't involve a lot of panicked questions about whether the creature that ran past my feet was a rat or a squirrel. I don't eat off that Foreman grill anymore. And I started exercising a bit myself. Which is why I started cruising the internet for workouts and found Jay Cutler again.

Since our last meeting, he's won Mr. Olympia four times, his last win being in 2010. Wikipedia lists his height as exactly the same as my own. His contest weight is me plus 100 pounds. His off-season weight is me plus 135. His thighs are 30" in circumference. That means the belt I put around my waist, tightened by one notch, would fit his thigh.

When I saw him, saw him all these years later still at it, it reminded me of that article from those dumpster pornos. Of how bizarre his story was, but also why it stuck with me.

Because I'm a normal guy and sort of make everything about me at some point, I thought about what I pursue in my life with dedication. And the answer is writing.

I've never gone on a water fast, but I've certainly done some accidental coffee dehydration. I've never set an alarm to wake up every two hours and eat a full meal, but I've certainly skipped meals on accident or lost sleep to work. I haven't won a Pulitzer, which is sort of the Mr. Olympia of writing, or the Stanley Cup or the Super Bowl, but I've entered a few things here and there and learned a lot about winning and losing.

It's not easy to look at someone like Cutler and think he's smart. We don't think of bodybuilders as smart. We think, in cultural shorthand, that someone like that builds his body to compensate for a weak mind.

The more you read up and watch these men and women, the more difficult it is to dismiss them as dopes. Simpletons who build these strange bodies because it's all they can do. Watch Pumping Iron. Arnold Schwarzenegger is an ass, no doubt. But you can't call him stupid. The way he lines up the competition, the way he completely gets in Lou Ferrigno's head. He's evil, but he's no dummy.

Even though I don't agree with their choices, especially their aesthetic choices, I have to admit to myself that bodybuilders do something I cannot do. And whenever someone can do something you can't, it pays to listen to them.

There are some smart things that bodybuilders do. Some really smart things, actually, that apply to a lot more than lifting heavy things and putting them back down.

As writers or artists, we can learn from anyone. I would suggest we can learn more from someone

different from ourselves. Someone who has different experiences.

So what are the five things bodybuilders know that writers don't? What are the 5 bodybuilding practices writers could use? Put down that pen, pick up a dumbbell, and follow me.

1. Cramming Doesn't Work

Pull-ups are not easy. Reach your left hand across the front of your body as far as it will go. Then, use your right hand to feel the muscle. Put your thumb in your armpit, then cup your back with your fingers. You're feeling the latissimus dorsi. The muscle that will make or break your pull-up.

A pull-up motion is key to most bodybuilders. If you did 10 pull-ups every other day for the last year, you'd have 1,825 pull-ups under your belt right now. When one considers the number of people who've done zero pull-ups in a lifetime, that's a hell of a commitment.

What would happen if you tried to cram all those pull-ups in during one day?

You'd fall apart. Literally. If your hands could curl around the bar after the first 30 pull-ups, you'd probably feel it in your shoulders next. You'd hang, tired at the bottom of every pull-up, and you'd feel bones pulling out of place. If you pushed through that, managed to keep your bones where they belong, there's a good chance you'd tear a bicep next.

As writers, we've all been there. You set the goal. "1,000 words a day, every day, no matter what."

You get a day behind, so you figure it'll be easy to jam out 2K tomorrow.

Then you get another half a day behind, and you start thinking about 7,000 per week, how you can divide what you missed and get it all in.

On Saturday you're looking at a 5,000-word weekend warrior situation.

By Sunday, all is lost. By the spring, if you've been keeping track, you basically have to write a novel per day, plus perhaps a greeting card, to get all those words back.

Here's what a bodybuilder knows: if you didn't get it done yesterday, you start again tomorrow. You can't jam it in. There's no such thing. If you try and slam three workouts into one day, you'll be more behind than you will be caught up. If you want to get in 1,825 pull-ups, you have to spread it out.

Yes, we all have those golden days where we're unstoppable writers, where we can write forever. Bodybuilders have those days too. Where it feels like you're stronger at the end of every lift. That you'll get stronger and stronger as the workout goes on.

But the truth is, if a bodybuilder does a leg workout and a back workout on the same day, she has

If you missed your writing session on Tuesday, maybe you double up on Wednesday. But is the work as good?

to question whether she was able to give her back all the work it needed. Whether she had enough energy after the leg workout to do the kind of back workout she would have done with a day's rest in between.

If you missed your writing session on Tuesday, maybe you double up on Wednesday. But is the work as good? Did you give it the kind of care and attention you would have if those thousand words were the first set instead of the second?

As a writer, consider sticking to the plan. Don't overtax yourself to make up for missed writing sessions. Try and get in there and write today. If you don't, figure out what stopped you, kill that roadblock, and start again tomorrow.

2. The Importance of Rest

When you lift weights, you're essentially tearing your body apart, and then your body puts itself back together. It's a complicated process bathed in some weird science and very specific cell types, but it's easy to think about it like this: tear something down, then build it up bigger and better.

What doesn't work is constant tearing. You can demolish a building to make a new one, but you need to let the rebuilding part happen too. If you run your demolition crew in there when the new building is halfway up, you'll never have anything completed.

Bodybuilders know that you can't work out every day. You can't. The physical process your body goes through requires rest. Bodybuilders plan their rest and stick to it with the same fervor they plan their workouts. The workouts are important, but without the rest they are futile.

Writers often have the spirit to work every day. And yes, there's a difference in a physical mandate and a mental/emotional need. However, writers would do well by themselves if they took a page from one of the many bodybuilding books and planned some rest into their schedules.

I know, we like to think of writing as so different. That we're the iron men and women, going for long stretches without a break. But rest is essential to a bodybuilder, and is there harm in trying it as a writer?

What would happen? How might your life as a writer change if you rested? If you were that 1,000 word/day person, what might happen if you said "Two days where I get in 1,000, then a day off"? What if you planned it out so you could spend every Sunday binging on Netflix and still meet your goals? What if you planned it out so the nights you work late, you don't have to worry about writing as well? What if you tracked yourself for a month, saw that most of the days you missed were Thursdays, and adjusted accordingly?

Doing it all, doing it every day, is not easy. Give yourself time to rebuild. Time to think about your work without typing it onto a page. Try some rest.

3. Everything Matters

If you read a bodybuilding book, if you actually read it instead of flipping straight to the workouts, you'll see pages and pages of advice on sleep, diet, and almost every aspect of life. These are usually the boring, filler pages of the book, and they're filler and boring because they have a lot of advice

that everyone knows. Sleep at least 8 hours. Eat healthy food. Don't drink and smoke. Avoid spending time in areas where it's likely you might be exposed to deadly bacteria, such as dumpsters at your local college.

What bodybuilders know that writers don't, or what they practice that writers don't, is the lifestyle where sacrifices are made in service of the goal. A bodybuilder might really enjoy beers. But if you drink 3 beers, you add lousy calories to your diet. You don't sleep right. You wake up maybe the smallest bit hung over, and as a result you don't eat the right breakfast. Then you work out, and it takes half the workout to get back to feeling normal.

What bodybuilders understand is that all these choices, all these decisions about treating the body like the machine it is, have effects that go way beyond the immediate.

Writers are not exactly famous for taking care of themselves. There's this idea that sacrificing one's health, that human suffering, is sort of the ultimate in artistry. But if you care about truly great writing, consider the possibility that maybe you're a bit sharper when you're rested and fed. Maybe talking to a therapist will clear some stuff out for you. Maybe getting the recommended 20-30 minutes of exercise every day will lend focus to your work, or just the ability to sit in a chair for a couple hours without standing up and walking away. Maybe you're a better writer when you preserve your liver instead of battering it with booze.

Now, the good news here is that as a writer, you can make a lot of healthy sacrifices without going bodybuilder overboard. You don't have to eat 10 egg whites. You don't have to pile your kitchen counter with those hideous, day-glo supplement bottles. Instead, your "sacrifices" can be about stuff you should do anyway. Eat sensible meals, food that doesn't make you feel lousy. Get in a good 8 or 9 hours. Yeah, you can get by on 5, but are you doing your best work? Are you sleeping 11 hours every Saturday, chopping your best writing day in half to catch up? When you sleep 5 hours, are you blown out by the end of the work day, unable to get any writing done?

The writer can be smart about it. You don't have to get extreme. You don't have to take all the fun out of food and make it into math.

4. Never Forget The Base

In an article about the value of free weights versus machine circuits, the kind of machines where you sit, strapped in and bolted to the floor, one bodybuilder made an interesting case for free weights. This is the sort of debate that rages through the bodybuilding world time and again. Which heavy things to lift how many times.

The free weight proponent compared each muscle to a cannon. Let's say the bicep. Everyone knows the bicep. It's the classic flexing muscle. Hold your hands out in front of you, palms up, and then imagine someone sets a huge lunch tray in your hands. Now imagine they're filling the tray with rocks. The muscles that hurt first, those are your biceps.

So imagine your right bicep as a cannon, and your body is a boat. The cannon is meant to fire from the boat. If the cannon overpowers the boat, if it was built separately and without considering the

Reading is work. It's part of the writer's job. It's absolutely essential. It's the base.

boat, you'll have a problem. Imagine firing a large cannon from a rowboat. Or from one of those swan boats that are in a lot of romcoms, which are romantic only because it's a movie and you can't smell the water surrounding them.

The idea is that free weights are necessary. They force a person to build the whole body. To maintain a strong base. You can build an awesome cannon, but if you can't fire it from your boat without tipping over, it's a useless showpiece.

You, as a writer, need to maintain a strong base. A bodybuilder makes sure to keep up with free weights. You have to read.

It can get tough. Who has the time to read AND write? They're both time-consuming activities. Time-destroying. Time-annihilating! I'm trying out some workout terms here.

We've all done that thing, that thing where you're reading a book, but all you're thinking about is how you should be writing. How you should be working instead of doing something fun.

But you have to read. Not just research material. Good writing.

Reading is work. It's part of the writer's job. It's absolutely essential. It's the base. It's what keeps your cannon mounted on a huge ship with awesome pirate flags. It's what keeps you from tipping over in the tiny rowboat that is your experience with the written word. It's the only thing that keeps your swan boat afloat over that cesspool of cigarette butts and green water.

5. Work Your Weakness

With this one we can start with writing, go to bodybuilding, and then come back around to writing.

Ready?

Your friend and, mine Chuck Palahniuk, is famous for saying, "Find out what you're afraid of most and go live there."

To a bodybuilder, that means something pretty simple. Which lifts are you afraid of? Where are you weak? Whatever part of you is weak, easily identified as the muscle group you dread working, that group should become your focus. If your chest is sunken, live on the bench. If your back isn't broad enough, camp out under the pull-up bar. When you say, "Oh crap. It's shoulders day," then you know what you're doing is more important than any other day that week.

A bodybuilder can't enter a competition lopsided. There's someone waiting to check that box right away. Is this person in proportion? Symmetrical?

As a writer, it's easy to live in a cozy home. To find something you do, your thing, the thing you're good at, and stay there. It's easy to trick yourself into thinking no one will notice your skills aren't in proportion, but really you're the fella walking around the weight room with huge biceps, giant traps, and tiny little legs. Yes, we all noticed. Immediately.

You won't be a great humor writer if you can't write a serious scene to save your life. You'll struggle to write bizarro fiction if you can't write dialog that makes sense. If you think you've got nothing to learn

from poetry, then you're exactly the kind of person who should try out a sonnet.

Even though a reader of your turn-of-the-century crime novels might not profess an interest for heartfelt memoir writing, those skills will help. And even though your reader won't check a box, they'll feel the absence of the mark.

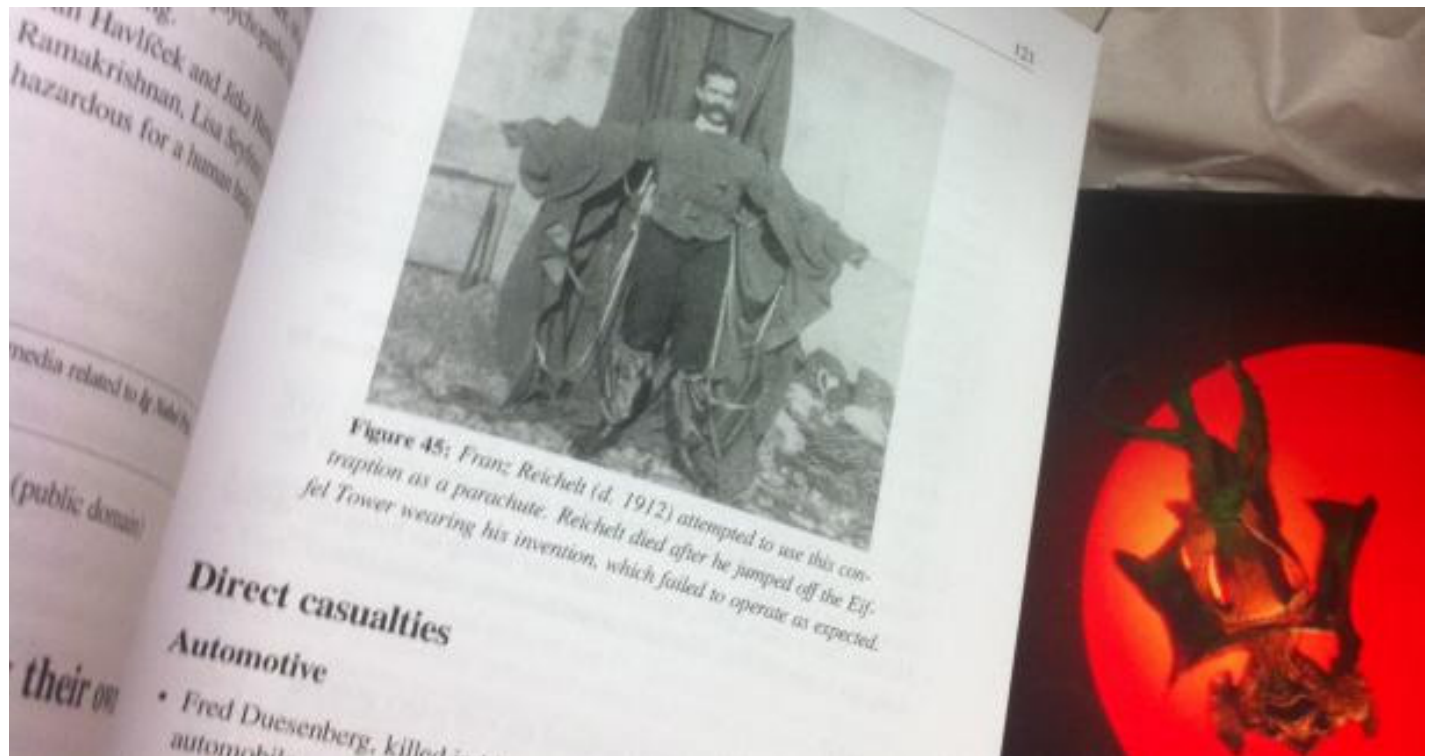
Find your weakest writing muscle. Dialog. Settings. Character traits. Figure out the place you're afraid of, rent the U-Haul and move there.

One of the last details I remembered from the magazine I dumpster-dived, Jay Cutler has a custom keyboard. His fingers are too big for a regular keyboard. I'd say too fat, but they're not fat at all. They're wide. Huge. They rub against each other.

Bodybuilding is a sport that requires sacrifice, dedication, and a bizarre personal drive, an almost aggressive stance on not caring what people think of you. For a lot of us, I know writing is the same way.

If you're looking to take it further, if you are ready to sacrifice, and if you don't care what people think, heed the wisdom of the bodybuilder. At least up to the point that said wisdom requires the purchase of tanning airbrushes and special keyboards. Feel free to stop short of that.

Create Your Own Wikipedia Tome



Step 1: The Discovery

It was a complete accident that I found Wikipedia's book creator feature. I was looking at a Wikipedia page I'm embarrassed to mention. Alright, I'll mention. It was Hilary Duff's Wikipedia page. I have this problem where I attribute a lot of Hilary Duff's great work to one Avril Lavigne, and vice-versa. If either of those young ladies are reading this article, I deeply apologize. You're both really great at... you're not the same person.

After answering some of my burning questions (Is Hilary Duff Avril Lavigne? Are you sure?) I scrolled deeper into Duff. I wondered, if there's this much info, how many references were used to build this page, this treasure trove of information? 149 if you're curious. If you're curious about how that scales, Ernest Hemingway has 201, Ernest Borgnine has 27, and Jim Varney, who played Ernest in the Ernest Goes to... movies has 16. Joseph Conrad, who isn't named Ernest, has 48. The man who wrote Heart of Darkness has 101 fewer references than Hilary Duff, the woman who wrote elixir.

While I paged through other famous artists in order to make myself sad (Melville: 120, Denis Johnson: 22, Mary Oliver: 11), I saw this little chunk in the column off to the side.



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Wikipedia:Unusual arti

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"WP:UA" redirects here. For the Usernames



Please note



Articles about things considered unu
Lists of unusual things in Wikipedia r
all such lists risk being deleted for la

This page is for Wikipedians to list articles that s
care to meet the highest standards of an encyc

1. The article is something you would not e
2. The subject is an unusual combination o
3. The subject is an **anomaly**: something th
4. The subject is well-documented for unex
5. The subject is a **hoax** of significant succe
6. The subject might be found amusing, th
7. The article is a list or collection of article:

This definition is not precise. Some articles may

To keep the list of interest to readers, each entr
unusual contributions that are less worthwhile, s

[Contents](#) [hide](#)

I had side-by-side Wikipedia windows of Hilary Duff and Joseph Conrad. Rather than provide a reason for clicking on the Create a Book link, I'll just say that there were damn few reasons not to click anything at this point.

The link took me to this page, where you can add pages to a book and order a printed copy! An actual, printed book for people to read.



The collector side of me rejoiced. This part of me that was dormant for a long time, since the days when I gathered and sorted baseball cards, including a cherished card featuring [a topless Kirby Puckett](#). The collector in me loved the idea of this new type of collection, this new form of curation. The eclectic side of me was pumped too. The more ridiculous side that put X-Men cards, Nintendo cards, and Desert Storm cards in the same album alongside the [scantily-clad Mr. Puckett](#). Both sides of me met, shook hands, and then did an adult version of shaking hands that I won't get into here. It was an exciting moment. Like my hero John Hodgman, and like a bunch of people who were my enemies and designed the terrible textbooks that were slapped together in order to prevent sane people from finishing college, I was going to put together my own book, My own miscellany.

Who's writing history now, David Kennedy, author of that damnable *The American Pageant* textbook?

Step 2: What? Why?

You might not be like me. You might not be the kind of person who delights in the thought of cramming a bunch of insane Wikipedia articles together into a bizarre mish-mash and then giving them out to friends and family for Christmas. You might not be a person who spends a lot of time looking at the lives of former Disney stars on Wikipedia. I can acknowledge that there might be some weirdos out there who don't care about the marital status of Hilary Duff. Wait, no. Avril Lavigne. Either.

So why would you want to make your own Wikipedia tome?

[PediaPress](#), the company behind the endeavor, uses the example of someone creating a gift for a friend who is sailing around the world. You could make this friend a book about the places she'll see, the history of sailing. You could give someone traveling a long way in a harsh environment a piece of print material to ruin. This is an opportunity not to be missed!

In this scenario, I would advise that, in addition to destinations and sailing techniques, you also add some terrors of the sea. Maybe [Sloane's Viperfish](#) or a nice [Anglerfish](#) will do. Let's face it, if I'm sitting at my desk while my friend is sailing around the world, I'll sleep better at night knowing I've

introduced some terror into her life.

Just in case your friends aren't jerks who sail around the world, I have some other possibilities:

You can make a point like a real ass.

Ever had an argument where you were right? And now you're looking for a great way to continue rubbing it in someone's face? How about a printed book?! The recipient is sure to remember whether Avril Lavigne or Hilary Duff is responsible for "sk8r boi" after receiving a handsome volume about the two stars and their various discographies. That's the last Hilary Duff reference, swear to god.

You can read Wikipedia on the toilet.

Poop reads, as they're known here at LitReactor. Don't risk your tablet near your bathroom's open water. Print up a tome and let the magic of Wikipedia take you away. Perhaps the [Bristol Stool Scale](#), a chart that categorizes human waste, would make for appropriate reading.

You can create your own textbook.

Ever took a class and left feeling like you never covered the most exciting stuff? Wait, let me revise that question. Ever take a class? Now you can create your own textbook for your own curriculum, and now you can be sure [The Emu War of 1932](#) and all its machine-gunning-of-birds glory is covered in your very own Australian History textbook.

You can make a lovely gift.

Imagine. An anniversary gift with pages all about you and your sweetheart. The place you went on your first date. A story about the history of [menudo](#), the food you ate on your first dinner together. An informative look at [Taenia saginata](#), the fascinating little parasite that improperly cooked beef entrails are likely to harbor. Nostalgia, science. Ah, what a romantic gesture!

You can go deep on any subject.

[The McDonaldland page](#) alone. A few key entries:

Iam Hungry – A short-lived McDonaldland character who was the self-proclaimed "Vice President of Snacking".

Officer Big Mac – Featured in several of the campaign's commercials throughout the early 1970s and early 1980s. He was similar to Mayor McCheese in that he had a large Big Mac for a head (minus the vegetables and the special sauce), except he was the chief of police and as such he wore a constable uniform with a disproportionately small custodian helmet resting atop his head bun

Uncle O'Grimacey – Created in 1977 and first appeared in 1978 for an advertising narrative of McDonald's, both in celebration of Saint Patrick's Day and to mark the annual appearance of the Shamrock Shake. O'Grimacey was the Irish uncle of Grimace and was a variant of the Grimace-design in that he was green instead of purple, sported a waistcoat covered with several four-leaf clovers, and carried a shillelagh.

It's good for writing research.

I did, actually, have a writer-ly purpose for this. I've been working on a longer piece featuring an astronaut, and the more I could learn about space, the better. Creating your own Wikipedia tome gives you access to that material in a simple format that's really easy to mark and get back to. [Space colonization](#) questions? No problem. [Robot-assisted space colonization](#)? Even less of a problem!

Step 3: How

Once you decide to join me in this greatness, click on the "Create a Book" link on any Wikipedia page and then click the "Start Book Creator" button. You'll see this toolbar added to the top of every Wikipedia page you visit (boxed in red here for your ease):



When you hit a page you like, just click the green plus sign to add it to your book. The middle "Show Book" option will track the number of pages you've added, and on the far right you've got suggested pages, which is helpful if you're putting together a book on a rational topic, not so much when you're seeking out oddities like [The Cardrona Bra Fence](#) or a brief article on the life of the unfortunately named [Dick Assman](#).

Once you've got your book creator started, surf with care. And then without a care in the world. Because there is some seriously great stuff out there, including people with names almost as hilarious as Dick Assman. If you need a place to get started, or if you just want to kill an afternoon or 30, I recommend the [List of Unusual Wikipedia Articles](#).

Here are some basic tips I learned when creating my book. This is hard-won knowledge that resulted from some serious clicking hardships that haunt me to this day, much like [the peak of Koh-i-Chiltan](#) is said to be haunted by 40 ghost babies.

Fast Add

You can add articles quickly by hovering over the title. You don't have to click and add from the individual pages. Instead, just hover and click.

Literature [edit]

112 Gripes About the French	A handbook pro
Aldiborontiphoskyphomiostikos	Published in 182 twisting mock-La
Anthropodermic bibliopegy	The practice of l
Atlanta Nights	A group of scien
The Book of Heroic Failures	A book which gl
Bookseller/Diagram	Who can forget: <i>How to Increase</i>
La Bougie du Sapeur	A French newsp
Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest	A contest to find
Lyttle Lytton Contest	Like the Bulwer-

Do Not Dawdle

Time is of the essence. I can't give you an exact number, but at some point, the cookies crumble and pages in your book will disappear. It's not a terribly tight timeline, but if you leave your computer idle for a half hour, chances are you'll have to start anew. Keep up the pace, unlike the song "[As Slow As Possible](#)."

Pick at least one article with a good image

You'll be able to pick from the article images for a book cover, so it'd be wise to have at least one cover-worthy image locked down. http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Flesh_fly has a picture of flies having sex. Just saying.

Order Is Key

Before you publish, you can alter the order of your book. If your articles are going in a particular order, like a finely-tailored mixtape meant to demonstrate love, but cool love, not weirdo love, make sure and order them properly before you publish.

Page numbers don't equal page numbers

When you add a page, you add a printed 8.5"X11" page. When the book creator reformats, you'll end up with a much larger number.

Step 4: Pressing

You've finished adding pages. You selected the "Show Book" option from the menu that hovers at the top of every page you click. You put the articles in the proper order. You made sure to include the entry for [Inventors Killed By Their Own Inventions](#), which is an important and all-encompassing entry because it covers hubris (Karel Soucek, inventor of a stunt barrel), irony (Li Si, inventor and victim of the 5 Punishments method), sadness (Marie Curie) and the bizarre (Scottish Maiden, which allowed stolen animals to wear the executioner's hood).

You added a title, perhaps by looking at [the Bookseller/Diagram Prize for Oddest Title of the Year](#) listing.

You've assembled your tome. It's time to push the Order as a Printed Book button.



As a quick note, you do have the option to grab the PDF instead. If you're cool with an electronic version, then you're all set. If you're a print and paper fiend, my advice is to go with PediaPress. They aren't paying me anything to say that, and LitReactor isn't in some kind of gross business partnership with them. I'm just telling you, from personal internet perusal, that it comes out a lot cheaper and easier if you go PediaPress than shopping the PDF around

Step 5: Go back a few steps?

My first run through, my book came in at an alarming 687 pages. Which isn't alarming so much as costly. At \$38.25 apiece, it would be tough to order these suckers for friends and family as a holiday gift. My options were to make some reductions in my tome or in my friends. So it was goodbye to [Goose Pulling](#), which is pretty gross anyway. See you later, [Bigfoot Trap](#). See you in hell, Stephen, who isn't a Wikipedia entry but a friend. Hey, I had two options to bring my costs down, and I took both. That's just good sense.

If you, like me, find that your book is of crazy length, my advice is to go back through and eliminate those entries that have large reference/external links sections when compared to their article size. From what I can tell, you can't leave those off, so your best bet is to reduce the articles with tons of sources.

Sigh. Later, Hilary Duff.

Okay, THAT was for real, the last Hilary Duff reference.

After cutting my team like a ruthless high school football coach, who almost always seems to have a southern accent in the movies, I got down to a reasonable \$24.45/book.

Step 6: The Arrival

And then, they arrived. *What the What: A Derk Holiday Miscellany* hits the shelves (of family and friends) this December. Whether they're happy about that fact or not.

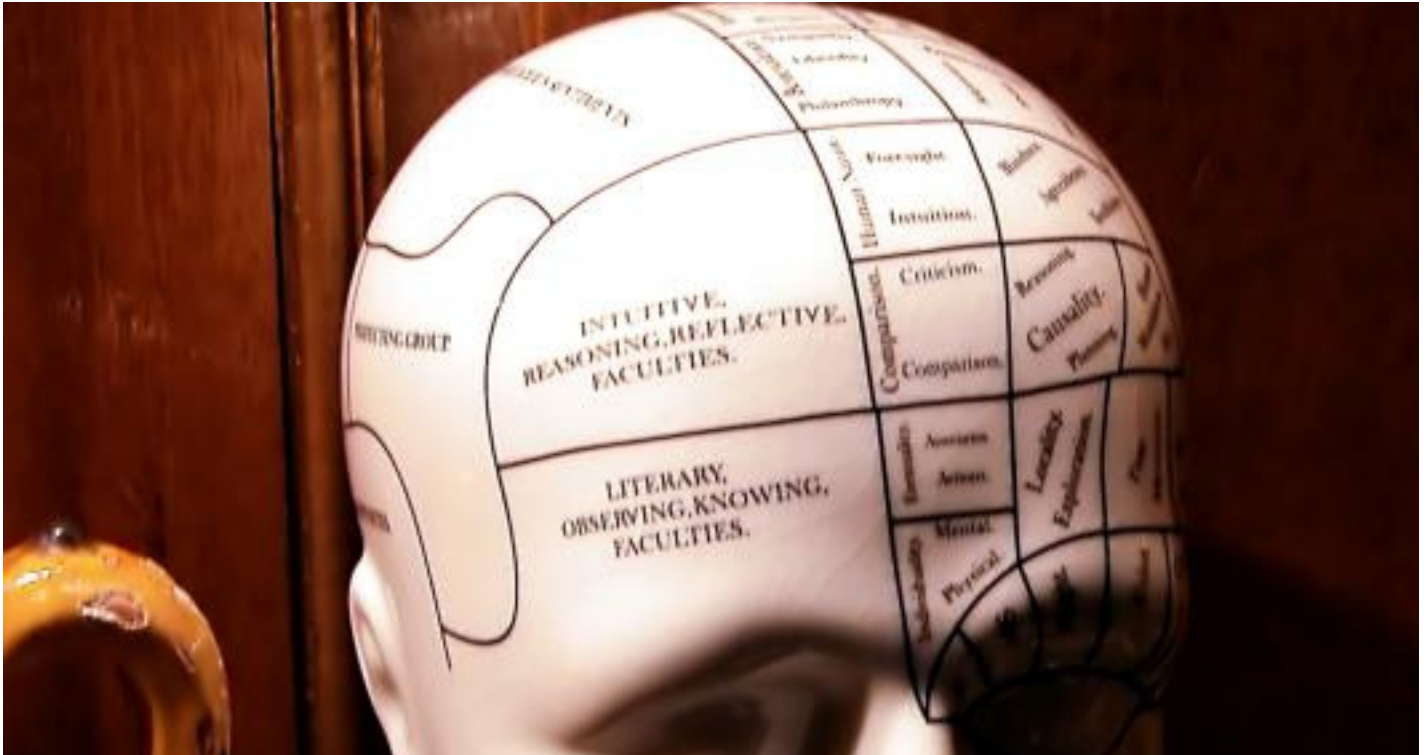
I checked out the binding and flipped through the finished product. Honestly, it looks pretty great. It's well-bound, the paper is good quality. The image of [Jenny Haniver](#) on the cover turned out beautifully.

Overall, this is a great experience I highly recommend. It makes an awesome gift for the person who has everything, like the [Collyer Brothers](#), famous packrats who went so far as to boobytrap their collection.

My advice? Go forth and chase those dreams. Who knows, maybe you'll inspire someone to finally solve [the self-balancing unicycle conundrum](#). Maybe your content will bring out the [chess boxer](#) in someone you know. Or, if you're lucky, you'll inspire a duo of great mathematicians like David A. Cox and Steven Zucker, creators of [the Cox-Zucker machine](#).



How To Tell Your Family and Friends You're A Writer



Let me tell you about a life thing that I didn't handle very well.

I had a girlfriend. And a new writing habit. Writing's a good new habit to have, and my girlfriend was a good girlfriend to have. I know, so far none of this sounds like a problem.

The rough spot came when I started to feel like I didn't have enough time for both my writing habit and my girlfriend. I liked writing. I liked my girlfriend. And I wanted to maybe, just kind of, sort of, just kinda sorta see if I couldn't take some of the time I spent with my girlfriend and use it as writing time.

I didn't know how to talk about it. How to ask for a little more time. I didn't know how to do it, so I took a bad route, and instead of talking to her about it, I made excuses. I'd come up with reasons we couldn't see each other, and eventually this turned into a big mess.

Things did not work out. The good news was that I could write about it.

It's my deepest hope that none of you have made similar dumb decisions. Wait. Not dumb. Just decisions that could have been better. While that's my deepest hope, that you're all emotionally grown up and I'm just a stunted dum-dum, I kind of suspect some of you have found yourselves in the same place, or a similar place. Maybe it's not your girlfriend or your husband. Maybe it's a job or a parent. Maybe it's a circle of friends. Whatever it is, I can't help but believe some of you have been down this road.

Lucky for me, and for you as well, I decided to make a change. Maybe, instead of writing about the end of relationships, I could write about something else.

I decided to ask someone in the know. I decided to ask about the best way to talk about this stuff. How do you talk instead of making excuses?

Which is how I ended up talking to my interview subject for today, hoping that she'd have some answers.

As a quick note, this is a person I know personally. You might disagree with some of the advice here, but in all likelihood, this person was drawing on the way I was saying things or what she knows about me personally. In other words, some of the answers might be more specific to my quirks or personality. Take it with some grains of salt. The big, soft pretzel kind of salt.

Hi. I don't know how to start an interview. So. Hi.

Hi.

Hi. You're a counselor. Can I call you by an alias for this? Are there some famous counselors? How about Counselor Troy? Did you watch *Star Trek: TNG*?

I don't know who that is. How about I go by Sigmunda?

Fair enough. Just to get us started, can you tell us a little about yourself, about what you do? Or, to put it another way, tell me why the hell I should listen to you. Even though I know you and begged you to help me out with this. I think readers will want to know a little about your credentials.

I'm getting my master's in clinical counseling from an accredited school that's well known for producing quality counselors. I'll be done with that in about three weeks. For the last year I've been in a few different counseling roles, including career counseling for college students. A lot of that is talking about how to make career choices and being confident in those choices. Oh, and if there's any resistance in the family, or if students aren't sure how to get support, working with students and helping them find support elsewhere if that's what's needed.

Can I throw you a curve ball right off the bat? See what I did there with the two baseball terms? Let's say I come to your office for an appointment and I say I want to be a...cosmonaut.

Cosmonaut. Well, I'd ask what led you to that decision and what kinds of things you foresee in the future. What you would enjoy about that career, how that career might help with other life goals you have. Then we'd look into...cosmonau-try(?) What kind of education you needed, the training and that sort of thing.

**Look at...
what writers
who write for
a living do.
What you do
is the same.
The basic
activities
are the same
regardless
of whether
you're making
money or doing
it for personal
fulfillment. The
prestige isn't
what makes
you a writer.**

Sounds like a plan. Now, I'm thinking the way we could go through this is, I'll set up some scenarios based on myself at different stages in life, and I'll ask some questions. Here we go. First question/scenario: I'm a teen. To set the scene, I'm 17, but I haven't really gone through puberty yet. I listen to a lot of Staind. A lot. And I'm sort of getting into writing, starting to dabble. Is this something I should share with my family and friends? Is it something I should just let simmer for a while?

If you're serious, if you're confident that it's something you like, and if your friends and family could be supportive, then absolutely. Share with whoever would be excited along with you. If you're still exploring and not sure, there's nothing that says you need to make a life decision and a declaration at this point. An interest isn't something you should be ashamed of, but you also shouldn't feel pressure to share.

Right. Although if you could see the stuff I wrote, shame would be the word of the day. This question is a little off track, but as a counselor, how concerned would you be that I was listening to a lot of Staind?

I've never heard of Staind or their music.

Yes you have.

[Interviewer queues up "It's Been Awhile"]

Oh, I HAVE heard this. I hate this song. It's like Creed.

How concerned are you, 1-10, that this is what I'm listening to? On a constant loop.

What's highest?

10 is the highest.

My concern for your mental health: 0. My concern for your taste in music? 7.

Seems fair. Next scenario. I'm older now. In my early 20's. I'm in college or I have a job. I'm writing, and I'm getting into it more. Oh, and I'm VERY cool. This is me, remember? So I'm VERY cool, and sometimes friends want me to go with them to parties. Alcohol parties! And...I like my friends and I want to be cool, but sometimes I want to stay home and write. How can I talk to them? I don't want them to think I'm a poseur. Poseur? Is that still the word for the thing I was?

I didn't know there were poseurs in writing. So that's new.

I think it depends on your comfort level. If they're close friends and you feel like sharing, then go for it. Maybe saying something like, "I really like hanging out, and let's make plans to hang out next week" is better than just saying "no". If they're good friends, if they know you and they care about you, they'll be understanding that you need to do some things for yourself.

Let's talk about that same scenario, but with a significant other. A girlfriend in my case. She's really cool. Very attractive and rich. She's probably one of the smartest people, and she wears oversized men's hoodies. I really liked a lot of young women who wore oversized men's hoodies when I was this age. Anyway, I like spending time with her, but I need time to work. That kind of

conversation is tough for me because I feel like I'm saying I don't want to spend time with her. How can I bring it up in a way that isn't hurtful?

The fact that you're aware of how the other person's feelings might be impacted is a good start. Being honest and really acknowledging that it could be difficult shows that you're cognizant of how all of this might impact the other person. That helps, and it helps them be supportive if they know what's going on and that you've thought it through a little. And it doesn't hurt to throw in, "And you're beautiful."

And rich? And wear cool oversized men's hoodies?

Sure, that too. Whatever those drawing factors are in your relationship, whatever it is that brings you together. You might as well be honest about that too.

I'll be honest then. Sometimes I think this is the part where I blow it. I tell the person I need to be alone to do the work, and I think I suck at saying it nicely somehow. I've never really had anyone tell me something like that. I've had people say, "I have to work" or "I have class", but I've never had someone tell me they needed time away from me for a hobby. So I don't really know how to do it right.

Yeah, it's a lot easier to carve out time for an obligation than it is for something voluntary. But you don't want to blame something. Explaining why writing might need to be a solitary activity might help the other person understand. Talk about your process. If you work alone or in a different environment, and if that fuels your passion or your hobby, explaining that can help someone else understand. If you can share the same space with someone without interacting, and if that works for both of you, you can still spend some time together that way too. You writing and the other person doing something else. It depends on what you need or whether you need to be physically alone or just sort of not engaged.

Let's say we have that conversation and it doesn't work. Let's just say I blew it again. My significant other had hurt feelings, or I felt she did. So I backed off and now I'm back in my comfortable spot, making excuses to write instead of being honest. I'm saying I have to go do this or that, and I'm writing in secret. But I don't want it to stay like this. How might I bring it up a different way?

It depends on how direct you want to be. A lot of times people shy away from being too direct. Instead of making writing time a regular thing, it might seem easier to turn down your significant other one instance at a time, come up with excuses in the moment until they stop asking for things. I don't think that's the healthiest or best thing for families or relationships though. Be really honest, however that fits in your style. If you're comfortable, you can say, "I need to put in time writing. If I want to be productive and get the most out of it, I need to be alone." And then talk about compromise, or consolation. "When I'm done, we can go get dinner together" or, "I can't tonight, but let's hang out on Friday." The other person's interest is spending time with you, and that's a good thing. Try and meet them in the middle, give them an option of a time to be together that's separate from the time you need alone.

Something I've felt, if I can get in and do some good work, then I feel better when I'm out with a friend or a loved one. I feel...like I'm actually with them instead of still being mentally at my desk.

That's definitely something to be aware of and to bring up in that conversation. If there's something you have in your head, a to-do list that comes up when you're trying to relax, that can be an issue. Explain that to them, that you feel like you can be a better friend or partner when you don't have that to-do list running in your head. I think the other person will understand that you're trying to be fair, trying to give that other person the fully-present version of you.

Next scenario. Let's say I'm 35. I'm married, maybe we have a kid. Maybe it's from my imaginary wife's first husband, who is Paul Reubens. So I'm raising Pee-Wee's kid, which is cool and confusing. Am I over thinking this? Okay, I'm 35, I have a family, and I haven't been writing for quite some time. Or maybe I've never been a writer, really, but I'm starting to get the itch to spend more time on it. How do I talk about it with my family?

One thing that's good for you, there's a definite difference when someone takes up a hobby that takes time instead of money. If you're buying new laptops and lots of new software and you're paying for self-publishing and...I don't know, a printing press, all those things will seem absurd when you're just starting out. But writing doesn't necessarily require a lot of spending, which is good.

If you're starting a new hobby and starting to dabble, you're experiencing a whole new part of life you haven't experienced before. There's a lot of room for personal growth. I'm a big advocate of being honest and talking about that, what it's doing for you, how it's fulfilling you. You don't have to justify it, but saying you get a lot of peace or joy or relaxation through writing, that helps ease the other person into the idea. It helps them understand where you're coming from.

Also, make sure to give the other person or people permission to tell you when they need you, to tell you if they start feeling neglected. Acknowledge that it's something that could occur.

Let's say I'm still this guy, this man who's 35. I have an awesome beard, by the way. And a whole collection of really great coats. These are the things that seem adult to me. Let's say I'm this guy, and I want to pursue writing, but I know I have to give something else up. I just don't have the time to do everything. Any advice on how to pick something to abandon?

That's really dependent on the person. In general, look at what makes you happy, and look at what could maybe be reduced.

It's good to evaluate what might not need as much attention while you're gearing up with this. With relationships, there are always dips in terms of the time and effort that they need. If your relationship is solid and stable, maybe it doesn't require as much time at this moment. Don't pull away entirely from your relationship. See if you can't figure out how much time you need, pull 60% of that from an old hobby, 20% from your relationship, and start out that way. And again, be honest. Especially when it involves another person. Let them know what to expect.

Oh, and when it comes to sacrifices, make the decision together. Make a choice together instead of making a declaration. Ask about their input. Let the other person know what else you're cutting so they don't feel cheated or like they're making all the sacrifices."I'm thinking about giving up fantasy baseball" instead of saying "I'm giving up all household chores."

Or like, "In order to make time for writing, I'm giving up all personal grooming. And bathing."

Those are wastes of time. You could be writing.

Sometimes I think it's easy to say "That sounds reasonable" in the moment, but in practice it's harder. Let's say my partner is struggling with giving me space and I feel like I need to ask again. How can I talk about it without getting into something like, "But you said..."?

Start by trying to use "we" statements. "We agreed that we would try" and the like. When you use "I" or "Me" statements, try and use them to explain how you feel. "From my perspective, this could really help me." "You" statements are okay when you're asking questions about how the other person feels. "How are you feeling about how things are going?" "It seems like you have a different perspective. Can we talk about it?" Getting the other person's perspective and seeing where their frustrations lie, what the barriers are, that's really helpful in any conflict.

Alright. Let's say I'm the partner now. My girlfriend has been writing, and it's been 15 Saturdays in a row. We haven't gone out, we haven't spent much time together. I want to bring this up. How do I do that as the partner?

Explain where you're coming from, and try to understand your partner's perspective as much as you can. "I know it's important, and I can see you've been working really hard. It seems you're very happy. It's been more of a struggle for me. It's been quite a while since I've been able to see you on a Saturday. I'm wondering how we can incorporate time for you and I, or if we can rearrange things so you and I can connect and I can feel like your partner."

Another good tool, when you talk about taking up writing, talk to your partner about a trial period. Figure out how long you're willing to go, and establish that time frame up front. Then, commit to talking about how it's going at the end of that period. It can really help to have a built-in end time if it's going badly for one party. It gives them a light at the end of the tunnel. They don't have to feel like it's going to stay bad forever, and it's a natural time to discuss if it's going badly.

I'm going to come out and say it. I feel like a pretentious dork when I tell people "I'm a writer." Maybe because I don't do it as my primary way of making a living, or maybe I just don't feel like this cool, literary guy. I don't own a single cool hat, and I've never smoked a pipe. I never tell people I'm a writer. I'll say "I write" instead. Sometimes I feel like maybe these conversations would be easier if I was a little more confident, if I could figure out a better way to say it. How can I get better at saying "I'm a writer"?

Look at what published writers do, what writers who write for a living do. What you do is the same. You have a process, you write, you revise. The basic activities are the same regardless of whether you're making money or doing it for personal fulfillment. The prestige isn't what makes you a writer.

It helps if you have a firm foundation, a good understanding about the content you enjoy and what you like about it, what your writing interests are. That way, when people ask, you can tell them. When they ask what you write about, which they will, you have more to say. You can give them more information about what your passions are within writing.

It's a big enough deal that you've had serious conversations with family and friends. You're devoting a lot of time to this craft. Don't talk about it like it's no big deal when it's clearly impacting your life.

Last question: what should I do if I'm writing and a cat keeps sitting on my laptop.

Forget writing. Today is canceled.

Okay, REAL last question: what if the cat is really cute?

Pet it. Why is that a question?

Give: Volunteer Your Cow Fart Knowledge As A Writer



I have a system that proves I'm a bad person. It works like this:

Yesterday I ate my girlfriend's leftover chicken curry. Which is one point in the negative. And it was really, really good. Which is minus another point. If it'd been lousy, I could have justified eating it and thought, "Well, now she doesn't have to." But it was great, so here we are.

I have a system. This isn't just some arbitrary nonsense.

We don't have to get super philosophical to explain this point system I've got going. Just know that I've come to accept a truth about myself: I'm going to do bad things. For the rest of my life, probably, but absolutely for the near future.

I wish things were different. I wish I could sit in the most sage-like place (top of a mountain), in the pose that's most full of wisdom (seated, criss-cross applesauce), with a haircut that betrays my years of calm (bald or very long, one extreme or the other). I wish I was a person who never did bad things, who said, "Perish the thought" if someone even suggested it.

I'm not that person.

I sit on a couch. And I slouch. And I don't even really have a haircut to speak of. I never say, "Perish the thought." Instead I tend to opt for something that involves at least one curse word. One of the really bad ones.

All of this means I have two life paths to choose from. They aren't the traditional choices: be a good

person or a bad person. I can do the bad stuff and just live with it. Or I can do the bad stuff, plus some good stuff and hope that makes a difference.

The thing that's tough about it, the bad stuff comes easy. It's natural. The good parts, I have to work for those. Or volunteer anyway.

Since early last year I've been volunteering at a non-profit that teaches writing workshops for kids. This last month was the first time I actually led the workshop. Made a curriculum. I can't spell that word right, but I had to make one and then teach young writers with it. If everything went according to plan, it would get me far, far on the positive side of things. Or at least far enough to carry me through the holidays, a time when I find it awfully easy to be an ass.

On the day of destiny, early on a Saturday morning, I seize the day. I seize it by the throat and try to choke it with all the worst words I know. I seize the blankets and a pillow, which are PART of the day. -1 point for the behavior, minus another for the justification. Remember, there's a system here.

I shower too long and hurt the planet. Seriously, if you're reading this as a parched person of the future, I'm glad you still have the internet, and I really am sorry for using an entire year of drinking water because I just can't wake up. -1.

I take the time to scrape my windshield, which prevents me from striking a child with my car. Which might be a +1 but also might just be in the expected behavior category. No points awarded.

Then I drive to my volunteer gig. It's an hour and change. Or, to put it another way, about 18 swears. -18.

And just to make it sweet, today I run a red light just before I park. Sort of. Technically, it wasn't running a red light because the light had no color. The power went out. And because I'm a -21 guy at this point, I don't even notice. I follow the car in front of me. And cars on all 3 sides honk. -3.

I'm about 10 minutes late. -1 point.

Are you keeping track of my points still? I'm down 24. But I carry two heavy bags of books and supplies the few blocks to the coffee shop, so that's +2. And I've got a whole curric...class idea thing. I went over it and over it in my head the whole way here. Which might be part of why I ran the red light, but it's still an easy +1.

I'm down a mere 22 points at 9:30 AM when I arrive at the coffee shop where we hold the workshops, and the head instructor lets me know the power is out. Just like it is on the street nearby, the spot where I ran the light. It's bad news. We hold class in the basement. No windows, no lights, no way.

I put on a brave face and let her know I don't need electricity for anything. That the cuh....LESSON PLAN doesn't require anything besides what I brought. +1 for lucky planning.

You should give as a writer. You have a talent, something you've worked hard on, and passing some of that on to someone else makes it even better.

We wait to see if students will show up. In my head, I think maybe none will come and I won't have to do it. I have a sickness, a disease where no matter how small the obligation, no matter how much I enjoy something when I'm in the thick of it, there's always a moment where I imagine riding off into the sunset without a care in the world. Or walking back to my car and going to get a Bloody Mary, which is my version of a horse and a sunset.

I don't know why my brain is always trying to sneak away from stuff. And also looking for any excuse to incorporate booze at every turn. -1.

Of course, writers show up. Their parents are with them, and the parents aren't super happy that the coffee shop can't serve them any drinks with the power outage. Except Italian sodas, which they are polite and decline. I start wondering why the baristas are even offering Italian sodas at this point. I'm really overthinking how someone else should do his job. -1.

No power means we move the class across the street, to a patio at an unopened restaurant. It's a little cold, but the sun's out. The students mostly have jackets. I start teaching. I start teaching kids a tiny part of the tiny things I know about writing. While they pull their arms close and sit with their legs up on the chairs to stay warm.

My lesson is about science. Making the impossible possible. The students all get two index cards, part of the supplies I went out and bought. +1. On one index card they're supposed to write a question. On the other, something that's impossible.

The questions can be about anything. I tell them questions that start with Why or How Come are really great, but any question works, really. They can ask anything they want.

They write. The groups of them at the restaurant patio tables, it looks like a regular restaurant crowd was hit by a de-aging ray. Their menus all shrunken to index card size, possibly by another ray. I guess all my science is about rays that do things. I'm just about the worst person in the world to teach this class.

They share the questions they came up with. A question about time travel. They're getting it. +1. A question about life on other planets. +1. "Why are we here?" Whoa. +2. One kid asks if we'll be buying them lunch when the restaurant opens, and I laugh.

They share impossible things. Faster-than-light travel. +1.

Then comes the part of the lesson where we make the impossible possible. I tell them to take one of their index cards, and I say, "Now we're going to walk through these cards. Your whole body is going to pass through that little card you're holding in your hand." They all agree it's impossible. It's working. +1.

I show them how to fold the card and cut it along the seam. How to turn it over and back, cut ribs into the white paper all the way down until you have what looks like the spiny end of a toilet brush, the kind that's bent into a circle. Then you unfold the whole mess into one long paper chain. Then, put it over your head. Past your shoulders. And let it drop to the floor.

Mine is too small for me. My shoulders are too wide. -1.

They try. A couple failures, the cuts spaced too far apart to make a long chain. -2. A couple are cut

nice and thin, but the chains rip. -2. Then, one girl, one girl who's good with the scissors, she puts her paper necklace over her head, shucks her shoulders through, and the ring falls over the rest of her, lands on the concrete. She stepped through her index card. The impossible made possible. Just this once, just for a minute. +1.

It's a long day with this math running in my head. Like it always is.

Some kids play with a newspaper machine, and that goes in the plus category. The power comes back on and we go back inside, down the stairs to the workspace. Another plus even though it wasn't really me. A kid who doesn't want to write talks to me about Minecraft, and I convince him to write about that. +1. Another kid doesn't write much at all. -1. In the last exercise, I encourage them to answer a science question pulled from a book (see below): "If A Cow Didn't Fart For A Whole Year And Then Did One Big Fart, Would It Fly Into Space?"

Teaching kids. +1. Relying on my old standby, farts, to do so. -1.

They write. And they share.

One cow explodes. -1. Although there's a pretty great description of the blast. +1 One cow ends up on another planet, surrounded by other cows who tried the same scheme. +1.

The time goes by fast. They write and write, and they laugh. They share a little more. The end of the workshop is always the same. You hear the parents' footsteps on the stairs that lead into the coffee shop's basement. They listen while some kids share. Then they hustle out to soccer or fencing or lunch or whatever's next.

I collect all the scraps of note cards and the scissors and the books I brought. Other volunteers help too, help collect stuff and sweep.

One kid asks if she can take an index card to show her sister at home. +1.

And then it's over.

I go and eat a late breakfast. A super fatty biscuit sandwich. -1. And boozy coffee. -1. I stick around in the city the rest of the day and pay for a \$2 coffee with a card. -1.

And on Monday, it's time to take all the stories and put them together in a booklet. And I get this email from a writer:

Here is my writing from yesterday all typed up. Thank you so much it was really fun, I think this is my best Denver Writes writing piece!

I want to call that +1,000,000, but then I think about it. The writer did the work. Not me.

For the last several months, I've had a great time volunteering for a non-profit in Denver. The students are great, the other teachers are awesome. I'm not going to get into stuff about "No, they teach ME" because I know nobody wants to hear it. It's true, which is why it's so worn out, and I just won't say it.

What I will say is that you should give as a writer. You have a talent, something you've worked hard on, and passing some of that on to someone else makes it even better. It makes your skills sharper when you have to explain them to someone else. It's more time in your life devoted to the craft, and it's time that's not just you and a keyboard.

On a concrete level, here's some help getting started:

I found my organization through [this list from 826national.org](#).

There are 826 branches in lots of major cities, and lots of other cities have similar organizations. It might take a little looking, and you might have to make a commute that's about 18 swears long. But there's something out there.

Most of the times I volunteer, I don't teach. I don't have to figure out how to make the impossible possible. I sit with the kids, and I write with them. It's as easy as modeling the behavior I do every day. Writing, and having fun with it.

You don't have to teach, and you don't have to work with kids. These organizations need people to do all sorts of things. Web work, setting up crowdfunding campaigns, managing social media, making supply runs, sweeping up after. You don't have to bust out your Dead Poet's Society aspirations to help. Talk to the people who run these things. Be honest if you don't want to teach. See if there's another way you can help.

If you can't find something nearby, figure out what's closest and see if you can help. What you can do online. The place I volunteer, we make booklets out of student work. Someone needs to put those in a template, print them up. The organization I work for needs a new template design, but most of the volunteers are just keeping up with what we're doing day to day. Tasks like that come up all the time.

I know, sometimes you might want to volunteer to get away from writing. You would rather do anything else. But think about it like this. You've got something great. And when you volunteer, it's not for you. It's for other people. You can help the most other people by volunteering your skill. By volunteering your strength.

And hey. Let me know if you're inspired to send an email or look around by this column. Even if it doesn't go anywhere. Because there's a carton of chicken lo mein in my fridge that most definitely does not have my name on it. I could use a +1.

Crappy New Year: 5 Failed Writing Resolutions



I use New Year's to make a solemn promise to myself. A New Year's resolution to renew myself as a writer, as an artist. As a human. Then I drink a huge glass of something, followed by a dainty glass of something else, and then eat an entire bag of BBQ chips and pass out mostly dressed. Truly, it's a banner start to every year.

You might be shocked to hear that after such an auspicious beginning, most of these writerly resolutions fall apart. Some slowly peter out over the year, a term that should be offensive to me except it perfectly describes what happens when I give up. Others explode in a more dramatic fashion. The one thing all my writing resolutions have in common—none of them worked.

Here's what happened.

Resolution: Write 500 Words Per Day

I made this resolution without any other caveats. It didn't matter if I was working on a terrible manuscript (which I did) or a blog about a machine that turns ANY liquid into urine (which I also did, and it was called Mr. Piss). 500 words was 500 words was 500 words.

Which is why it didn't work. I can type 500 garbage words. Believe me, I've done it many times. Some of you are probably thinking that I'm doing it right now. Well, joke's on you because at the end of this sentence, we'll only be at 240 garbage words! That's half as trashy as you accused me of being, thank you very much.

There's nothing wrong with typing 500 garbage words per day. There are way worse uses of your time. Instead of writing 500 garbage words about a machine that turns fluids into urine, you could actually BUILD said machine. But even so, the 500 words plan didn't do me a whole lot of good.

My problem was, the 500 word mark was as far as I took it. There was no second stage, no improvement. In a quest to reach 500, I abandoned editing almost completely, and for me, editing is crucial. Without a second and third and fifth look back through my words, through that mess, my work didn't get very far. I never filtered through the garbage to get to the gold. Much like Mr. Piss could have filtered through garbage to get to the golden...

You know what? Whenever I start to sense I've talked too much about urine, it usually means I've already talked WAY too much about urine. Let's move on to the next resolution.

**The secret
flaw of an
unambitious
goal is that the
failure really,
really stings.**

Resolution: Write 1000 Words Per Day

I already know what you're thinking after that last one. No, I didn't use my 1000 words to write about a more complicated machine that creates a facsimile of solid human wastes. Don't worry.

Because I am good at learn, I decided that 500 didn't work, so the obvious solution was to DOUBLE the number. 1000 words per day is a lot, but hell, if I got those out, I'd be a rich famous writer by the end of the year. Or, at the very least, have enough manuscript pages lining the walls of my apartment that if a pile fell, it would crush me. An ironic, poetic death. So, win-win.

I completely screwed up. Or a version of me did. Allow me to explain.

I have this split where I think of myself as Future Pete and Past Pete. Past Pete is always screwing Future Pete. Past Pete does stuff like leave his glasses on the floor where Future Pete is likely to step on them. Past Pete doesn't have the energy to hit the grocery store, which means Future Pete gets to play a game called "Will It Filter Coffee?" with various objects in the house.

For reference:

- Wet Copier paper: No
- Kitchen Rag: Yes, but too much.
- Ripped Shirt Sleeve: No, and now it's getting a little desperate

Future Pete hates Past Pete. Future Pete lifts his arm to the sky and curses Past Pete. Then Future Pete curses again because his lifted arm doesn't have a goddamn sleeve.

Past Pete was also the guy who figured that if he missed a daily word count, no worries, Future Pete's got it covered. Which meant Future Pete had some 5K weekends, and I don't mean the kind of 5K that benefits cancer kids. I mean the kind where Future Pete gets to type in his darkened apartment, aka Cave of Hate, and help nobody at all.

It's good for me to have an ambitious goal. But there's also something to be said for setting the bar somewhere in the neighborhood of reality.

1000 words per day is too damn much. You get two days behind, and then you're writing 3,000 words in one day, just to catch up. And here's the kicker no one tells you about: hope you didn't get too fried

on that 3,000 because you've got another 1000 tomorrow.

Look, you're going to miss sometimes. It happens. Sometimes it's in your control, and sometimes it isn't, but a resolution that involves me being on the word count ball every day is just foolishness.

Resolution: Write Every Day

I had this friend who always gave up watermelon for lent. Lent being in winter and him living in Colorado meant that a slice of watermelon wasn't a temptation he had to resist. Although I always thought it would be really hilarious if he fell down on his promise. If he made a decision precisely because it was easy, and then he failed. If you already feel half-assed for giving up a summer treat in winter, how bad a human being are you when you mess it up?

I can type 500 garbage words. Believe me, I've done it many times. Some of you are probably thinking that I'm doing it right now. Well, joke's on you because at the end of this sentence, we'll only be at 240 garbage words!

With this goal, 90% of the time it's too easy. And then 10% of the time, it's impossible. So the days you do it, you're not really that proud of yourself. You put pen to paper. Hoo. Ray. And the days you fail, you feel like a complete nincompoop. I couldn't write a single sentence today. Yet somehow I managed to eat a bag of Funyuns. I don't even like Funyuns.

The secret flaw of an unambitious goal is that the failure really, really stings. It's hard to get over. Especially when you make the resolution January 1st and stick to it all of 4 days before screwing up and looking to your old pal Funyuns to pull you out of a funk. This'll help, right? Fun is right in the name! (Note: Funyuns are a lot of things to a lot of people, but I've yet to find them "helpful".)

Resolution: Write And Complete 1 Short Story Every Month

This one took some time to go bad. Unlike a fish, it didn't start to stink after just a few days. But much like a dead rat corpse in the wall, when it went bad, it went super bad and then felt like it'd never get better.

On December 31st I have this great plan for how the year will go. And in January, things are cool. February, March. Then I start thinking I might want to write something besides short stories. But no! You've been doing so well. Hang in there. This could be your year. The year you actually accomplish something.

April sneaks by, and flash fiction counts, right? You didn't say no flash fiction.

Then it turns into a game. A terrible game. Like Life. Not like life as in "this life we live is all a game", I

That's the problem with the writing every day resolution. It's really easy, but you won't be able to do it. And then you've blown it. And blowing something so simple, that feels terrible.

mean Life as in the dumb board game. Where you cheat just because you want it to be over, and you really don't give a hot damn how many kids you ended up with or whether or not you went to college (although I do recommend not going to college because when other, more studious players screw up on spinning the wheel, you can make with a "Nice spin, college boy!").

I try to change the rules in Life to make it go by. Let's spin twice and add the totals. Let's just distribute all the cards and see what happens. Let's be very, very drunk.

Same deal with my short stories. Let's do some micro fiction. Let's revise an old story that's been sitting around for a couple years. This month only has 25 days. Let's extend into the next month.

To me, the best evidence that a game is flawed is when players are immediately looking for any way around the rules. If the rules are good and fair, then players will try to play the game. That's where their energy will go. If not, then they'll subvert the rules.

Life is a rigged game. And I mean that in both the living and board game way this time. It's all rigged, so the least you can do is take those rare chances to set rules for yourself, and make sure those rules are something you can live with.

Resolution: Write for 1 Hour Every Day

Ah ha! Now I've solved my word count problem. And editing counts as writing, so I'm good there too.

This was my resolution last year.

Let me compare this to another part of my life. I'm not good at sleep either. I average 7 hours per night during a great week, which means there's always a 5-hour night in there, maybe even less. And I just read this article that said in order to get out of a sleep debt, what you have to do is sleep 3 extra hours one night on the weekend, then an extra hour every day the next week. That's what it takes to get back to equilibrium. Which was comforting because at that point, it was clear that this was never going to happen and I might as well just accept that I'll die tired.

Now don't get me wrong. This hour of writing was a resolution that should have worked, and any of these resolutions probably work great for other people. What I was doing, the reason this didn't work for me was, I felt really busy, that there wasn't enough time to write, and the solution was adding 7 hours a week to my schedule. Which is kind of backwards. What's a bad way to ease my schedule? Add in 7 hours every week.

Which kind of brings me to the plan for this year.

It's a lot like last year's. Gone are the word counts. The numbers, really. Gone are the whimsical poo machines and the alarmingly detailed, imagined pee machines.

This year, my writing resolution is related to writing. But it's not writing.

Instead of saying I'm going to write this or that way, this or that much, instead what I'm going to do is attempt to clear out my time a little. Figure out a way that lets me make better use of the time I already have.

How will it work? I have no idea. But that's okay. For now, it's time to get a big glass of something, fill a bowl with BBQ chips, and be optimistic about 2015.

If you're a person who plays the odds, you might want to buy Funyuns stock.

Slashing Childhood: An Erotic Fanfiction Adventure



Let me be clear, I want to see what happens when significant characters from my childhood have sex with each other.

Lots of kids had action figures they mashed together in stiff, open-eyed lip locks. "Look, Swamp Thing is kissing Wolverine!" And in some cases, the idea of characters having sex with each other was barely a half-step out of frame. Barbie and Ken did lots of stuff together. Some versions of Barbie had children. There's a bridal Barbie. Really, there's just a little thing that was skipped over. Something unspoken that obviously happened at some point.

This, the little stuff that got skipped over, this is the kind of story I'm curious about.

There's another reason to go with stuff from my childhood. I haven't really explored the world of fanfic or slash. I don't know a lot about it. You get some people saying it's all nonsense, some people saying it's an economic and cultural force, and others who put it even higher than that, saying it's true art and expression of the highest order.

So what is it? What's out there? That's what I wanted to find out.

When I started to look, it became pretty clear that I don't know a lot about the most popular slash subjects. I've never seen *Supernatural*. I'm not a big *Sherlock* watcher. I'm not very up on pop culture. I could certainly read about those *Supernatural* fellows, they are certainly handsome, but I think that there would be something essential missing from that slash experience. All the references, all that stuff, it wouldn't make any sense. I needed slash based on stuff I knew. Stuff I had fond feelings for. So I decided to mine my childhood.

Let me be clear about a few other things before we get started. For one, I'm aware that slash fiction implies gay relationships. There are some straight relationships here, as well as some animal relationships, which cross species boundaries before they even get to the gay/straight distinction. I'm playing it pretty loose with the term "slash". When I look up definitions, I'm presented with a lot of things like "typically it's this" or, "some people use terms like femslash, but some don't prefer that." Some suggest "shipping" as a better term, but I was looking specifically for sexual material, and "shipping" didn't seem to cut it. I'm using "slash" in this column to talk about fictional couples who get it on.

Let me also be clear about something else. I read a pretty interesting article on Daily Dot that describes the overall world of fanfic. I recommend it if you want an overall picture, a responsible portrait of the world of fanfic, its writers, and its consumers.

This column is not a responsible portrait of anything. I made a big list of things I remembered fondly from childhood and sought out sexy stories based on that list. Then, if there were multiple options, I picked ones that were a bit shorter (so I could read the whole thing) and more on the outrageous side. That's how my personal tastes run in all forms of entertainment. Short and strange. So let me be clear: I purposely picked shorter, more outrageous pieces of fiction where characters have sex with each other. I'm aware that this is an extremely unrepresentative sample. I'm dipping a toe in the water, and readers should know that this is one toe's-width worth of sampling from a vast ocean.

I'm entering this as I enter most things: In wide-eyed idiot mode.

I did, however, make an effort to scout different sites and pull from them. Fanfiction.net, Archive of Our Own, and even Tumblr.

Last bit, and I'll be upfront. I do think there's something inherently giggle-worthy in the raw idea of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle having sex. If the author sells it, I'll buy. But I'll be honest with you readers and say that I'm coming from a place where I can't help but start out stifling a laugh in a some cases here.

And while I may critique the work of some writers below, I don't seek to color anyone else's opinion. I don't want to ruin anyone's artistic aspirations. Keep writing, keep writing about whatever the hell you want, and shine on you crazy, secretion-covered diamond.

Oh, and be advised, this column is somewhat NSFW, but all the stories, which are linked in the titles, are definitely SNSFW (Super Not Safe For Work).

"Sonic The Hedgehog Slash Wolf O'Donnell"

Crucial Quote:

Sonic and Wolf were in bed, Wolf was asleep and Sonic was awake, thinking about their first anniversary together. How it all began, how they confessed their love; yet they never made love.

Sonic the Hedgehog. Gaming's original badboy. Sure, Pac-Man was dangerous, known to hang out with a rough crowd before he became a family man. But Sonic was cooler, badder, and faster.

I spent a lot of time with Sonic as a kid. My parents split, and I spent some time with my mom, some with my dad. Or, to put it from a kid's perspective, some time in a Sega house, some in a Super Nintendo house.

I didn't know anything about slash, but Sonic seemed like a ripe candidate for the treatment. He's badass, but in a cute sort of way. Like Jared Leto in...anything where Jared Leto has shortish hair and no beard.

Who the hell is Wolf? Turns out he's some side character from StarFox. Which means this is an even BETTER unification of my Super Nintendo/Sega childhood.

The story itself is pretty basic. Sonic gives Wolf a little oral sex, and that's most of what happens.

After I read this, something was missing. There wasn't much of a story, but I was okay with that.

You know what it was? What didn't quite cut it for me? As far as I could tell, you could replace Sonic and Wolf as they appear in this story with any other characters. I was expecting, I don't know, a super speedy sex act, or maybe Sonic would be a one-minute man/hedgehog. Basically, I was kind of hoping for some premise regarding Sonic's super speed that would complicate or enhance the sex acts.

Just saying. I hope that as we venture on, I'll get a little more specific stuff. That something inherent to the characters will pop up.



"Insert Coin" (Wario X Waluigi)

I was one of the few kids who actually owned a Virtual Boy gaming console. After a brief cold war where the aforementioned Sega and Super Nintendo resulted in a stalemate, my father reached for a lead in the Most Beloved Parent category with a misguided Virtual Boy purchase.

Virtual Boy was kind of awful. No, it was really awful. The games came pre-loaded with a feature that paused the action every 15 or 30 minutes to prevent SERIOUS EYE DAMAGE. This wasn't the thing on Wii that says, "Maybe you should go outside and play?" This was a medical necessity.

One of the games I did manage to enjoy in brief spurts was *Wario Land*. *Wario Land* is also probably the reason I wear contacts today.

The premise of the game isn't too complicated: Wario likes treasure. And so he collects it. Possibly in a pyramid.

The basics of the slash "Insert Coin": Wario REALLY likes treasure.

But it wasn't enough. Something was...lacking. That's when he eyed a lone coin just by his feet, and had a brilliant idea.

This was more like it. I hesitate to get overly excited about a story that has Wario cramming gold in his butt before his brother, Waluigi, jumps out of the bushes to engage in a sex act. But at least, through the vehicle of a video game character cramming gold into his butt, we get something that seems character-centric.

I don't want to take the analysis too far. However, one could certainly view this as a pretty funny commentary on what happens in video games. Why is Wario always gathering treasure? Is it possibly a sexual proclivity he hasn't explored yet? I think, as a player, I would be more motivated to collect coins in a game if I knew they were going to be used. And they could show that in-game with Wario on a shopping spree or, you know, a butt full of gold. I'm just asking for a little more reason behind the constant acquisition of wealth, and in a way I think this story is too.

You know what they say, though. Money doesn't buy happiness, but you can put it in your butt.

"The Name of the Game" (Bart Simpson X Martin Prince)

There's this thing I said once as a kid. I was in the basement at my mom's house. It was a Thursday night. A new Simpsons was starting, and I had Little Caesars pizza in front of me. Out loud, I said, "It doesn't get any better than this!"

That statement has stuck with me. It was both very naive and cute while also turning out to be soul-crushingly prophetic.

In this fanfic, we see Bart Simpson and school nerd Martin Prince as a teenage or early 20's couple on the downlow. While it's secret, their relationship seems, in some ways, fairly loving.

Crucial Quote:

Because this is Bart Simpson – and, as he said earlier, he’s pretty sure that the man will never advance past the mental state of a ten year old (excluding views on sex, for Bart has apparently picked up some moves over the past few years)

Again, not super big in terms of character specificity. There's not a lot about this story that requires these two particular characters. In other words, you could tell this tale about, say, Ned Flanders and Bumblebee Man. Or Duff Man and Disco Stu. Okay, I'm starting to get some of the appeal here.

However, we DO get a good Milhouse slam in the story, so I give it some credit there.

Honestly, *The Simpsons* was never a totally sexless show. So thinking of Bart grown up and gay, it's not a big thing. Hell, there's more than one Burns/Smithers fantasy actually depicted in the show.

I think the thing I'm discovering here, a good slash story has to be a read-able story, but it also has to have something that makes me think it could only be written about these particular characters. Make it specific. I mean, in a normal sex scene, I don't want to see characters drop everything about themselves, all of the things that make them who they are. And I feel the same about slash.

Which makes it kind of tough. To make a comparison, I think it would be a lot easier to write a sex scene about an original character than it would be to write a sex scene that reads as a dead-on impression of someone who already exists. To put it another way, it would be much harder for me to make a shot-for-shot remake of a *Simpsons* episode than it would be to make an entirely different show, the reason being that everyone would compare what I did to what's already out there.

So I'll try and keep that in mind as I move forward. OH, Mr. Bergstrom and Hank Scorpio! What a combo of love and ambition. Okay, I'm done. Last *Simpsons* slash pairing.

"Shadow and The Colossus" (Colossus X Kitty Pryde)

Colossus was my favorite X-Man back when I was a kid. Wolverine was great and all, but it seemed like, for all his snikt-ing, he didn't really do a whole lot of stabbin' and slashin'. I expect more from my blade-wielding heroes. I have high standards that way.

I didn't keep up my Marvel subscriptions, so I don't know for sure whether Kitty Pryde and Colossus ever actually had sex. They are/were an in-comic couple, and it's pretty likely they had sex somewhere between panels at some point, but after the revelation about comparing the regular story to the slash, I'll go ahead and not Google it. Not to mention that, God knows, after this column, my Google history has probably tripped any sort of flagging process designed by anyone, ever. So I can probably leave one weird search off the list here.

This story starts a little romance-y, then we get some graphic sex stuff. AND THEN, when the characters reach...the tipping point, as Malcolm Gladwell would put it, their mutant powers manifest.

Kitty Pryde's power is to phase through objects. When she "Gladwells", she falls straight through the floor, into a living room. Which is pretty entertaining. When Colossus "Gladwells", he shifts into his metallic form and the pair completely destroy the bed.

Let me give some credit where credit is due. The author makes you wait for it, and only when the action is at its peak do we get the payoff: a pair of explosive Gladwells and a display of mutant

powers. So kudos for keeping the mutant power close to the vest until the very end.

The thing I do want to say, in terms of noticeable trends, is that I feel like a fault in these slash stories is that the characters are all kind of perfect.

Kitty Pryde has "perky b-cups." Colossus' member is, well, colossal. Though not described in these terms, I'm picturing an object that was probably the inspiration for the first aluminum baseball bat. But shinier.

I guess part of the beauty of fantasy is that it's perfect. But I could go for a battle scar here and there. A little imperfection.

'Spider-Man-Spider-Sluts' (Mary Jane X A Bunch Of Strangers)

I...this one leaves me at a loss.

Mary Jane is captured and made into a sex slave by no-name criminals. One especially egregious line: "...she sucked c### and drank their j### like a starving infant."

Now, I am not a total expert on babies and what their dietary needs are. But I have to say, there is either a mixed metaphor happening here or a very, very confused take on newborn nutrition.

MJ is then somehow brainwashed and trained into becoming a "sperm toilet." And for some reason, she performs oral sex on unsuspecting strangers. These strangers, men who come into the bathroom to pee, are orally assaulted. For the most part, they have reactions of semi-polite confusion: "'Miss, I'm gonna c**.'"

The Black Cat joins the bathroom workforce as well for no apparent reason.

The women become pregnant, have children, put them up for adoption, and then return to their "jobs" until a police bust, after which the women are de-programmed and also hypnotized so that they don't remember the incident. The police records of this incident disappear. It's theorized they vanished in the hands of a horny police officer.

What I find remarkable about this, other than every other thing about it, is that the writer has made an effort to write in situations that mean these events could be canon. The way it's written means it could be actual Spiderverse material. That's a new twist I haven't seen yet. Most of the stories seem to kind of toss off some of the basics of one universe or another. Sonic and Wolf don't exist together. Bart and Martin are older in their story. In this Spider-Man story, we have something that could slip into the cracks of the Marvel Universe.

Oh, also, I want to point out this is the first entry I would call really and truly gross, and also this is the first and only time I'll call something out as being possibly written by someone who seems to have a strange understanding of sex. Phrases like "...her ovulating, fertile womb and eggs impregnated" don't demonstrate a solid understanding of biology. In fact, a lot of the words in here leave me confused about the basic concepts of sex.

It's definitely the most degrading thing I've read so far. Hopefully it holds that mantle as we continue,

because it was pretty far over the edge in that regard.



"Metroid: Smut"

A little like the game itself, I was confused, then a little frightened, then it was over.

Metroid wasn't my favorite game. It was just too goddamn hard. I didn't know where I was going, I didn't know how to do anything but curl up in a ball and roll around.

Actually, pretty great metaphor for my early explorations of sex right there. I see a parallel.

Super Metroid, however, was a total favorite in my house. If you haven't played it, it has to be one of the best all-time games. No exaggeration.

I didn't know much about Samus, *Metroid's* main character, other than the fact that she had a space suit with a gun hand.

Apparently, Samus has this whole back story where her colony was destroyed by space pirates (damn space pirates) and she was adopted by a race of bird people known as Chozos. She was infused with some Chozo DNA, which is part of why she kicks so much ass in *Metroid*. That, and they gave her a power suit. That, and she's also like 6'3" and 198 lbs. and just good at kicking ass.

This story did make me feel a little heartened, in a way. Even across the great galaxies, even raised by a race of bird men, a young woman can still discover herself through the magic of a reliable bath tub.

In a weird way, the way this story works reminded me of an aspect of sex. A bad aspect, but still, something real.

There have been a few times, and luckily they've been few, when...acts have been disrupted by an unquiet mind. I'll be thinking "Oh, geez. I need to update my calendar right when I get into work tomorrow. I can't believe I forgot that appointment." And this line of thinking can go on for a couple minutes before I realize, "Oh, you need to focus on what's happening right now. Y'know, the sex stuff. Which is happening, like, right in front of you."

This story reads a little like that. While Samus is discovering the joys of self-love, there's also a lot of narration and back story happening. I mean, everyone is different, but it's hard for me to really get in the zone with Samus when the narrator's talking in my ear about the death of an entire space colony and how Samus' life took this unexpected turn and now she's living with bird people. It's hard for me to get sexy when there's a meeting I forgot to put on my calendar. Bird people and genocide, that's even a step further.

"Butts With Children" (Beavis X Kelly Bundy)

Beavis and Butthead was forbidden in my house after my sister, who was about three, started doing impressions of The Great Cornholio. She didn't get the lines exactly right, but her Cornholio, complete with "I need T.P. for my asshole" was a rousing success in our home. Critics (me and my brothers) praised this performance for its bravery and use of the word "asshole."

In this story, we have Beavis and Butthead wandering into the mall where Al Bundy works selling shoes. And really, there's a lot more *Married...with Children* action than there is *Beavis and Butthead*. In fact, the sexual encounter consists of a bathroom encounter as heard from outside the bathroom door, and its description is fairly brief.

In fact, the weird part isn't Beavis and Kelly Bundy having sex. It's the death of Peg Bundy, which leaves Al confused and ambivalent about the future. There's even a pretty great part where Al arrives at home and his son, Bud, is sitting on the couch. It's a typical setup for a *Married...with Children* joke, but in this case Al has to break the news about Peg's death:

'Son...I have bad news.' Said Al.

"Let me guess." Said Bud in a sarcastic tone in his voice. "A fat woman came in the story today and asked you if those shoes make her fat. Then you said It's not the shoes that make you fat, it's the fat that makes you look fat." He chuckled at that.

Al broke the news to his son in many details in which Bud broke down and cried at this.

The story wasn't pitch perfect, and the sex was light. But I did discover something else I like in a good slash. I like when STUFF HAPPENS. God help me, I need a little foreplay, and a little cuddle after. I like when there's a plot, no matter how thin. Which is a little different from my hypothetical pornography preferences that we really don't need to go into further here, other than to note this difference between slash and pornography, even if the difference is on the user end. When you've got these characters, I want to see them do some stuff.

"Patton Oswalt/Weird Al Yankovic Porn Fanfiction"

Crucial Quote:

Aaaahm gonna have gaaaay sex toniiiiight and it's gonna be so goooood...

It's the match-up that would create the ultimate *Onion A.V. Club* article.

It's a point of shameful personal pride that the first album I ever bought was Weird Al's *Smells Like Nirvana*. With that childhood purchase, I became part of a pretty exclusive club: people who heard the Weird Al versions of popular songs before hearing the actual versions. Metallica's "Enter Sandman"? Yeah, I first heard that in polka format.

This slash doesn't pull punches. Chocolate sauce is drizzled into Weird Al's butt crack. I'm here to confirm this. This happened on the real internet.

This story is weird in a totally different way because it's about real people. Weird Al and Patton Oswalt are actual human people. Okay, one of them has chosen the name "Weird" Al. And the other's most famous role might be as an animated rat chef. But I think they still deserve a little dignity.

It's not the idea of a gay couple or even gay sex that bothers me. I don't think that's what feels intrusive to me at all.

To make a comparison, I understand there's a decent amount of Kirk/Spock slash, especially focused on the new Star Trek movies. And while it's inevitable that the actors who played Kirk and Spock will have feelings about that, there's a level of remove. Those actors were playing characters, and it's the characters who have sex. It's the characters locked into this romantic relationship.

And while it's easy to see this as novelty because of the chosen characters, I think it would read really differently if, say, I wrote a story featuring two non-famous people from my real life and just threw it up on the internet. It reads, to me, as a little mean-spirited. A little more like we're laughing at the sexuality of these two men, laughing at the very idea of them as sexual people.

Honestly, this piece left me pretty torn. People should have the right to write whatever they want. On the other hand, it feels kind of disrespectful to me. Again, I don't speak slash. Maybe there's a part of me that still doesn't really understand what's going on here. Or maybe this one does cross a line. Hard to say.



"Hot Night In NYC" (Ghostbusters' Janine X A Prostitute)

I always thought Janine from *Ghostbusters* was attractive. For real. There was something that mystified me about her. How did she work as, essentially, a secretary for GHOSTBUSTERS!? How long could you work at a desk there before saying, "Hey, give me one of those proton packs. I'm ready to kick some ghost ass!?" Something about her active disinterest in what was clearly the most interesting thing of all time, that fascinated me as a youth. She was too cool for Ghostbusting. Yet, she wasn't too cool to date Louis Tully. Total enigma.

I was sure that the hooker Janine picked up in this story would turn out to be a ghost. I was positive. How could it not be?

Well, it could not be if the prostitute had a different sort of surprise.

The story built to a scene where, as the prostitute undressed, she told Janine that she was in for a shock. This being a *Ghostbusters* story, I expected something supernatural. A haunted orifice perhaps, or a cursed something.

The presence of both male and female genitalia, though outside the statistical norm, was not what I expected. It wasn't played for shock so much. Janine seemed to have no problem with it whatsoever. But I guess, again, I really wanted something more specific, the kind of story only these characters could tell. There was nothing about this story that meant these two characters had to tell it. This story could have been about any fictional woman and any fictional prostitute. It seemed, to me, that the author was really relying on familiarity with the character of Janine to fill all the gaps. That I would hear the lines in her voice.

If the prostitute's surprise had been a haunted scrotum or demon-possessed inner thigh, then it would have been a *Ghostbusters-y* story. It would have been awesome to see Janine bust out a proton pack, blast away, and then slide one of those cool ghost traps under the person. Then, once the haunt was over, Janine and the prostitute could have commenced with the celebratory sex!

You know what? I'm just rewriting someone else's story to be something else. That's not what I'm here to do.

"Best B-Day" (Beetlejuice X Lydia)

This one had me giggling. Not because of the contents, so much. In some ways, it was a little more romantic or intimate than a lot of the others. What had me giggling is that I remember this cartoon way too well.

You might not have a special place in your heart for the *Beetlejuice* cartoon, and you might not remember it as vividly as I do. The overarching structure of the world is the same as the one in the movie. And some of the same characters appear. But the tone and the way it works are pretty different. Lydia, who was played by Winona Ryder in the movies, is buddies with Beetlejuice. They hang out and have weird, afterlife adventures together. Beetlejuice, instead of being a lecherous undead creep, is a harmless, friendly, undead creep.

When I say I remember this show, I mean I really remember it. I remember the weird trumpet sound

that played whenever Beetlejuice threw out a real bad pun. I remember the little side characters, like Jacques the Skeleton and some kind of obnoxious spider lady. I don't totally remember my first kiss, but I remember the car's name in the *Beetlejuice* cartoon. Yes, the car had a name, and it was Doomie, and I hope that first kiss was at least a three out of ten.

With all this memory devoted to the *Beetlejuice* cartoon, I could picture all this sex stuff happening. Actually, it was worse than that. ALL I could do was imagine the voices and the characters from the cartoon. Which made lines like this tough to take seriously:

'Lay down,' [Beetlejuice] said. 'I want this to be about you.'

That is really, really hard to read when all you can imagine is a chorus of farting trombone sounds in the background, which was a staple of the show.



"Unexplored Territory" (Full House)

A good tip for touching yourself is to look at naked people.

Well. Full-on incest.

I have to say, this one was pretty icky. Sisters having a romantic and sexual relationship. Underage, no less.

There were three parts to this story, but I could only get through part one. And even that was a struggle.

Incest, character incest, does crop up in slash. It's not uncommon.

I guess part of this experiment is knowing the outer limits of my comfort zone. And one can argue it's hard to identify that comfort zone without crossing the line. But I will say, with certainty, underage girls carrying on this way for the sole purpose of showing it, that's a long, long way outside.

Ick.

"When True Love Falls Out Of The Sky Onto You" (Growing Pains)

Yes.

Yes, yes yes.

Finally.

I honestly just want to put in the introductory paragraph. I think the appeal here is pretty self-explanatory.

One day, Leonardo DiCaprio from when he was on Growing Pains was out skateboarding, being a cool kid and wonder why he was randomly only in one season of Growing Pains. While contemplating life and his possible future of dying frozen off a huge ship because that chick from Titanic was too much of a fatass to share the dresser piece so he dies.

Sure, the writing's a little rough. And sure, if one wanted to quibble, one could definitely point out that it's a little confusing whether we're in the show or real life. I still don't know.

All I know is that a goomba from *Super Mario Bros.* falls from the sky, Leonardo DiCaprio falls instantly in lust, and short antics ensue.

The story's end?

Once again, the met each other's guys. Leonardo DiCaprio decided he'd had enough of this Growing Pains bullshit, since he was only going to be on for a season anyway, so they peaced out off into the sunset.

Perfect. A truly happy ending, at last. I like to imagine them together as a couple. Both of their careers grew over the years, and both have worked steadily for quite some time.

This one was the craziest. It felt, more than the others, like reading the strange but compelling journal of a stranger. Their inner monologue. And even though the writing was rough, it had a real voice-y quality to it that I liked.

Yes. This is the kind of slash I like. This is something for me.

Conclusions:

I came, I saw, I slashed. Uh, and by that first verb, I mean that I arrived.

I read something I enjoyed. I read something that seemed like a decent erotic scene between characters, something that felt like it could exist within a real universe if some of the explicit material was removed. I read a piece that was degrading and sounded like it was written by someone with some strange ideas about sex, and I read a story where a first-time sexual encounter was a little flower-y and purple, but ultimately kind of nice. I read something that flew way outside of my comfort zone, and something that made me wonder how the depicted parties felt.

I ran the gamut. And the big question: Will I read slash again?

As it turns out, MagistrateoftheGayUnicorns, author of the above *Growing Pains* tale, has written two other pieces. And as it turns out, in literature, as in life, his title speaks the truth. Sometimes a true love falls out of the sky onto you.

The Art And Necessity Of Love Letters



Dear Reader,

Right now, on my desk I've got a stack of 500 love letters. Just a few more than 500, if we're being exact.

It's a huge ream of paper. And because I'm an idiot, I never bothered to number the pages. Every time I pick up the stack, every time I move it around, I hold my breath. I'm terrified I'll drop it. That the pages will splash on the ground, scatter all over the place, and that's it. My whole love life, all scrambled to pieces.

Dear Reader, this stack of papers represents a lot more than the money dropped in a machine at Kinko's. It DOES represent that, let me tell you. But there's more to it. There's time, the two years spent writing these short letters. There was the work of posting them online under the banner *Pete's Unsent Love Letters*, queuing them up to post automatically every few days. There's the brain power spent deciding whether something posted online is truly "unsent." There was editing and all that, hours of editing. There were nighttime hours spent awake, scared. Scared and wondering which letter was going live the next day. Scared that I was revealing too much about myself.

Really, this stack, it's my love life. Which is my whole life.

Dear Reader, the stack looks a lot less thick when you think about it that way. It doesn't look thick enough to be a whole life.

Dear Reader, my love life is nothing to imitate. I have a small scar on a very sensitive area. This should be all the proof you need that my love life is nothing to imitate.

If that doesn't do it for you, how about the fact that I've broken up with someone by phone? I met this person's parents, and then when it was time, broke up on the telephone.

I've had my successes, my failures. I also refer to past relationships as "successes and failures" which means I have a ways to go.

Dear Reader, you should not even consider imitating my love life. I haven't worked it out yet. I have, however, worked out one little part of a love life. I've worked out love letters.

Dear Reader, I'm here to tell you about the art and necessity of love letters. The how and the why. After writing over 500, after editing them over and over, after holding a lifetime of breaths while I move that damned stack of paper, I have some things to share. Consider these pieces of advice as love letters straight to you. Because that's what they are.

Dear Storyteller,

I wanted to touch this woman's coat. That's where my stack of love letters started. There was a woman I worked with, and her coat hung in the back room all winter. Most nights, I'd walk past it and want to touch it. It was this impulse I had. To touch a woman's coat. To touch this woman's coat.

I didn't. But I wrote a letter about it. The first of 500.

The feeling I had, it was hard to describe. It still is. Whenever I explain it, I feel like a weird creep. And start to wonder if I may actually be a weird creep.

That's why the letter I wrote, it was about touching her coat. Not about the feeling I had.

A great love letter, it needs to do more than talk about a feeling. It needs an event. A thing has to happen. Your love letters, they should tell a little story, or at least a little bit of a story.

Don't use a feeling to tell your story. Don't start with how much you love someone. Don't spend pages explaining to someone what love is, or what it is for you. Don't use a feeling to tell your story. Use a story to tell a feeling.

Do it. Write the stories. They'll keep you from fondling someone else's coat in the back room at work. Which is a decidedly, deeply creepy behavior.

Best,

Pete

Dear Confined,

One of the best love letters I wrote was to my brothers. And it was about the game Super Contra.

I'll explain. In real life, it happened a little different than it did in the letter. The real life version was a lot nerdier.

I downloaded an app that let me listen to Nintendo music on my phone. Which was fantastic because I could plug it into my car stereo, which is a great way to listen to Nintendo music because the sound...you know what? That's probably enough explanation of that.

When the songs shuffled around, after my fill of *Castlevania* and *Mega Man 2* (best Mega Man soundtrack - FIGHT ME!), I got the *Super Contra* theme.

Just a little ways in, I started bawling. My eyes were filled with tears. I was on the interstate. 75 MPH. I could picture the officers on the scene: "Crashed into a median. Seems the guy was listening to Nintendo music, which got him crying pretty good. Haha, sorry, okay. I almost made it that time. Seriously, let me practice a couple more times. The news truck is gonna be here any second, and I gotta get through this without laughing."

The reason I cried, that music made me think of my brothers. The place in our basement where we sat in front of the TV and played Nintendo together. For years. For us, for the three of us, that was the soundtrack of growing up.

I don't know if it's normal to write your sibling a love letter. I definitely know it's not a common thing to write a love letter to your brothers. We're not used to talking that way. To saying that stuff to each other.

Dear Confined, when you write love letters, you have to trash what you think of as the right kind of love letter. Your love letters don't have to be to your best gal or your biggest crush. They don't have to be to someone you love in a romance way, or someone you love in a handjob way (handjobs being the sincerest form of flattery, I'm told). You can write to someone you don't know about the relationship you wish you had. You can write to someone you've never met. You can write to your brothers. You can write to your brothers about *Super Contra*, and you can tell them how much you love them.

Dear Confined, there are people in your life who need to know how you feel. And to a lesser extent, how you feel about *Super Contra*.

Best,

Pete

Dear Oaf,

I met a woman who had only one leg. Well, one leg, plus part of another leg. Actually, I'm not sure how much of the other leg, either. I didn't know her that well.

You can see where the "oaf" part of this comes in.

I wrote her a love letter. Because I had questions about her leg. Questions that I could never ask her. We weren't remotely close. But she laughed at a few of my jokes, and that made me happy, and I couldn't help but wonder about her and about her leg.

The questions were all wrong. They were clumsy. They were insensitive. They were the kind of

questions that a person doesn't want to answer, I imagine. The questions that reduce someone down to some plastic and metal. Or rubber. Or, I don't even know.

Dear Oaf, you don't have to be fair in your letters, or nice. You don't have to be culturally sensitive. You might want to TRY, but in your letters, in that world, it's okay to fail. I'm giving you permission to write about something that might seem wrong. To ask a question that your real-life self, that you might not be proud of.

Your letters are you. Your love is you. And that means the part that is nice and polished and pleasant, the part that will listen with good posture to a lecture about social mores. And it means the part of you that is maybe curious about an artificial limb or what it's like to be pretty or ugly or how it works for a man to run with a scrotum hanging right there. If you're curious, I have no idea either. It just sort of does.

You don't have permission to badger people with these questions. You don't have permission to hold a person in your heart as being only one thing. But in your letter, in that little story you're telling, Dear Oaf, you have permission to be wrong and ugly and honest, if that's what helps. Don't step on someone, don't take something away from them. Don't say, "I'm, just being honest" when what you're really being is factual. Learn the difference between honest writing and factual writing.

In the world of your love letter, it might be okay to wonder whether someone removes an artificial limb on Friday nights and whether that feels like a relief or a loss of some kind. It might be okay to be an oaf in some of your letters.

Best,

Pete



Dear Inhuman,

There's a character in Marvel comics that hasn't made the movies quite yet. He's called Black Bolt. He's a king. And he can never speak.

The reason he can't speak, his voice is so powerful it can destroy entire cities. Whole worlds. If he yelled, he could crack the world in half.

I wrote a letter about Black Bolt. Somewhere in that stack of paper there's one sheet devoted to a third-tier Marvel character.

I was nervous about posting that letter. It was so specific. It wasn't the most relatable topic.

It turned out to be one of the more popular letters I posted.

Dear Inhuman, it's okay to be specific in your letters. No, I take that back. It's required.

Think how you might describe what it's like to sit in the passenger seat of your girlfriend's car. You can leave it there, say nothing else. "I was in my girlfriend's car." Or you can say how it smelled like cigarette smoke because her brother used her car every weekend. You can say how on Monday it smelled the most like smoke, and then it faded a little as the week went on, or maybe you didn't notice it as much. You can say how the heater buzzed loud, so on cold mornings it was hard to talk to your girlfriend with all the noise.

That won't be everyone's exact experience, but sitting in a crappy car is. It feels like most of my teens were spent in crappy cars that someone shared with a sibling. Specific details shine bright enough to illuminate memories, yet not so bright that they blind readers to their own. Your details make me remember my own, and that, Dear Inhuman, connects me to you and to myself. And that connection, that's a need.

Don't be afraid to get micro. Don't be afraid to throw in an inside joke. Don't be afraid that the richness of your inner life will turn me away. Let me in. Make me feel like you're opening a door to a secret room, that you want me to be here. Do it with detail. Real detail.

Best,

Pete

Dear Editor,

I sent copies of my love letters to some editors. Friends, really. People I know and people I know from online. I sent out about a dozen copies. And it was months before I saw the typo on the top page.

Yes, Dear Editor. A fatal, tragic misuse of "you're" on page 1 of 500.

This, Dear Editor, does not make a person feel very good at all.

There are people who will tell you that love letters are better when they are raw. When they are from the heart.

Do you know what "raw" means? Unprepared. Unfit for consumption. Swimming with bacteria.

Your emotions are powerful. No doubt. And that power will come through the way you want it to if you give the emotional, heartbroken writer a chance to take a Swiss Cake Roll break while the editor steps into the room.

Best,

Pete

Dear Orator,

I have two Skype appointments a month with a writing teacher. Every other week we meet on Skype, and I read out loud to him.

I do these appointments in my apartment. I can hear people outside my door, in the hall. They wait for the elevator right outside my door. I can hear them talk to each other or talk on their phones. Even when they're not loud, I can hear them. The clicks of their thumbs spelling out a text. I can hear that.

Which means they can certainly hear me. Hear me read the fiction I've been working on. Hear me say phrases like "Fart Factory."

The thing is, when I read out loud on Skype, I read louder than I do to myself. Loud, clear, and slow. With some emotion, when I can.

When I read that way, when I read so someone else can hear me, I catch a lot of shit. It's easy to skip over mistakes when you edit. It's a little harder if you read out loud. When you read loud enough so the elevator people can hear you, that's when you know you're reading loud enough.

I'm not the first person to tell you to read out loud. But I don't hear a lot of people emphasize the LOUD part of out loud. Read loud. Too loud to be in public. Too loud to be in private even, if your version of private is like mine, right next to a goddamn elevator. When you read your love letters loud, you'll hear what's right and what's wrong. More than that, you'll hear what sounds like you and what doesn't. What sounds like some other person sneaking in.

Dear Orator, you need to read your letters to yourself. You need to read to yourself, and love letters are a great place to get in the habit.

Also, unrelated advice, don't lease a ground floor apartment next to the only elevator. Dumb. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

Best,

Pete

Dear Reader,

One last story.

Dear Reader, there were some really bad times during the writing of these letters, during the time it took to fill that stack of pages without numbers. It wasn't easy.

There was this morning I remember. It was the morning after my birthday. I drank. And drank and drank. I drank, and I vomited. I vomited in front of a friend's house. Then rode a block in the car before getting out to vomit again. I dropped a good \$25 in quarters while I was sick. And I couldn't make it all the way home. Some friends were nice enough to let me stay at their place.

The next morning I woke up, and I made sure I hadn't puked on myself or in the bed. I put my clothes on, and I carried my boots downstairs. While I carried them, I saw they were spattered with vomit. I carried my boots, sprayed with vomit, down the stairs at my friends' house. Their staircase, the walls are lined with pictures of them and their families. Nice people in the sun doing nice things. This was a real, grown-up house. A place for adults. Not for a guy who drank too much and vomited all over his boots.

It wasn't a great moment. But the upside, even in that dark spot, was that I had a secret. I knew I had something to say about this. A love letter to write about it.

Dear Reader, I'm done talking about how to write love letters. I just want to make sure you know why you have to start.

After my letters were finished, I went back through and edited them. Over and over.

People will tell you that writing is good catharsis. Which is a fancy way of saying that you take your feelings and get rid of them.

Dear Reader, I'm here to tell you, that doesn't always work. It didn't work for me with love letters. Sometimes, especially when you write about old, hard love, sometimes it's more like living it all again than it is exorcising some kind of demon.

People will tell you that it's good therapy to write something down. To have a physical, tangible version of whatever bothers you. That once you can put that between covers, you can see it's just this stack of paper. That you have some control over shit.

Dear Reader, I'm here to tell you, that didn't prove true for me either. There's no putting it up on the shelf. There's no control.

Dear Reader, there are things that can make me cry so fast. Let's not discuss "Nightswimming" by R.E.M. right now. Let's just not.

Dear Reader, none of that stuff worked for me. Which isn't a great endorsement for writing love letters.

Dear Reader, Dear Friend, I'm not here to tell you what works and what doesn't. That's up to you. That's what you'll have to figure out.

What I am here to say is that love letters gave me something. Something to look to at the worst moments and say, No matter what, this is going to make a damn good love letter. I can turn this into something.

Catharsis didn't work, mastery didn't work. But you have to do something. You have to try. Dearest Reader, Bestest Pal, you can't just let this stuff sit. It might not be cathartic for you. It might not put everything you felt into nice little boxes. It might not fit between a leather binding, not ever. It might not give you something to look forward to the way it did for me.

Dear Reader, there's no guarantee. Except the guarantee that doing nothing, that's the worst. That's the worst thing you can do. This shit is hard. And writing can save you. Love letters can save you. Looking for love in your life, even if it doesn't work out, it will save you.

Dear Reader, I'm going to end this by addressing you one last time.

Dear Writer, it might be okay. It might not. But either way, any way it goes, you can make it work. Spin the straw into gold, spin the shit into gold. Spin the gold into BETTER gold.

Dear Writer. Thanks for reading this letter. Love you.

All of My Best,

Pete

Crazy In Love: Five Authors And Their Stalkers



When you start talking stalkers, some famous songs spring to mind.

"Every Breath You Take" by The Police. The classic in which Sting gets detailed. He'll watch every breath AND every move. Buddy, if you're watching every breath, in and out, I'll assume you'll be watching when I actually do something. What kind of stalker watches me breathe all night, but when I go out to, I don't know, skate a half-pipe, he says, "Eh. Not interested"?

Blondie's "One Way Or Another" was pretty frank about not only finding a person, but also that Debbie Harry would "get" said person, a statement that was threatening in a way most people seemed cool with.

Of course, who could forget Tag Team. "Whoomp! (There It Is)" isn't so much a song about stalking, but it's really great and I like to slip it in wherever I can.

There's plenty of stalker music. Songs crooned by attractive stalkers who make the whole proposition seem not so bad. So when I started looking into actual stalkers, stalkers of authors, I was in for a bit of a surprise.

Let me tell you something. Doing the research for this column freaked me the hell out. I thought it would be a lark. We use the word "stalking" all the time. "I'm Facebook-stalking you", which just means "I'm looking through your second-cousin's wedding photos for no real reason other than my brain has decided this trumps sleep."

The incidents of author stalking I found were not fun. And, lucky you, now you can read about them.

Quick note, I tried to include a lesson learned from each of the stories below. Not because I'm trying

to armchair quarterback, not to say anything that the stalked have done wrong. These are simply the things I'll be saying aloud to myself while I try to sleep for the next few weeks.

The Stalking of Peter James

Dear Peter I thought you looked nice in that black T-shirt and I liked the way you smiled at me.

You wanted a stalking case? You got it. Complete with an honest-to-goodness creepy shrine.

Fiction author Peter James' stalker started showing up at any and all of his public appearances in Britain. He noticed her once, then a week later he saw her again, and then, another week later, she showed up at a THIRD signing event. Shortly thereafter she started emailing him, and it wasn't long before the occasional email multiplied, and soon enough James was getting up to 20 emails per day.

One stand-out email began, "I thought you would like to see my Peter James collection."

What followed was a photo of a floor-to-ceiling mish-mash of newspaper articles, book covers, and even real photos that were clearly taken from a distance. The photos were of both the author and his wife, pictures of them leaving bars and restaurants.

The shrine was complete with burning candles.

Just a warning, a running theme in this column is that the law is almost powerless to help you. Unless your stalker is pretty explicit about harming you, there's not a lot police can do. Your stalker can build a shrine, email you over and over, and take pictures of you from a distance, but until she jabs an ice pick in your eye, the law, though often willing to help, is kind of powerless.

The emails James received got longer, hinted at deeper relationships, and even turned analog in the form of a scented love letter arriving at James' house.

Things came to a head (for about the fiftieth time) when, at a book signing, a blonde woman set a book on the table for James to sign. When he asked which name he should make it out to, the woman shouted, "Mine!" It was only when she shouted that James recognized the woman as his stalker. She stomped off and wrote James a 10,000 word email berating him for not recognizing one of his self-described "biggest fans".

After that, things were a bit quieter. James got an idea.

Not Dead Yet, the eighth novel in his detective novel series, focuses on a rebuffed, obsessed fan's attempt on a star's life.

It sounds like poking the bear. But on the other hand, we're talking about a guy who was once snubbed by Martin Amis and decided to strike back by including a new character, Amis Smallbone, in one of his books. Smallbone, as his name would indicate, is not a well-endowed gentleman.

The Lesson: Smell your mail. If it's scented, trash it. It's either a stalker letter or a terrible men's

magazine. Either way, you're better off.

The Stalking of James Lasdun

I couldn't write, read, play with my kids, listen to the news, do almost anything, without drifting off, for longer and longer intervals, into morbid speculations about what new mischief she might be getting up to.

James Lasdun, a writer and teacher, fell face-first into his stalker's clutches. And he wrote an entire book about it.

In a memoir he titled *Give Me Everything You Have*, Lasdun describes how it all went down. How he'd praised the work of a writing student he calls Nasreen. How they continued a friendly, though very chaste correspondence, which included Lasdun forwarding Nasreen's manuscript to his agent.

The correspondence went on for about three years before things started to take a turn.

Nasreen sent an email to James accusing him of sleeping with a student. A claim he rebuffed. He then started to be overrun with emails from his "friend", emails that became more and more problematic.

Lasdun eventually broke off communication when he felt things were headed a flirtatious direction he didn't care for. Which prompted even more messages in which Nasreen described suitors she met through a personal ad. Which is an interesting tactic I'd never considered. If an ex sent me her new boyfriend's profile from Match.com with qualities highlighted, qualities I didn't possess (has nice home, likes hamsters, doesn't giggle at the phrase "penal system"), that would hurt.

Nasreen's messages got even darker. She told Lasdun that his children would grow up to be Nazis. That a story of his about an older man who sleeps with a servant must be based on Lasdun's real life. When Lasdun didn't respond, she called him out:

You fucking faggot coward, say something!

The next few years? A deluge. Voicemails and emails. She accused Lasdun of conducting affairs, of stealing other people's writing and selling it as his own work. Nasreen was thorough. Amazon, Goodreads, Facebook.

Perhaps her most diabolical method, Nasreen would email Lasdun's employer or other organizations, and then she would copy their email headers and cloak her own address so that it appeared as though messages to Lasdun were coming from his work or from literary outlets. She also played the same game from a different angle, writing messages and disguising them so that they appeared as though written by Lasdun.

Nasreen also became pretty adamant in accusing Lasdun of engineering her rape. A rape that indeed happened, but years before the two met.

The thing is, Lasdun's stalker wasn't stupid. She knew where the lines were. The police sent Nasreen cease and desist letters, which she tossed off. The FBI told Lasdun that they couldn't do much unless Nasreen threatened his life.

There is some question from a *New Yorker* review of Lasdun's memoir, a question of whether Lasdun may have been more attracted to this student than he's ready to admit to himself. Lasdun does, in fact, acknowledge that Nasreen had entered into his fantasy life, into that part of his imagination. He also talks about her beauty quite frankly in his book. And he's very careful to remind readers that he's happily married and that the entirety of his correspondence was chatty, but in no way flirtatious.

The Lesson: When your stalker accuses you of something pretty damn serious, it's hard not to wonder, no matter how straight-up you are in your memoir. It's a lot easier when your stalker is a little wacky. See below.

The Stalking of Stephen King

Contrary to all reports about a lone drifter named Mark David Chapman who allegedly shot John Lennon in the back December 8, 1980, you'll find ample evidence in the back issues of Time, Newsweek, and US News and World Report magazines to suggest otherwise. Namely, that John Lennon was, not only politically assassinated, but that Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and, you'd better sit down, horror novelist Stephen King are the three people who can be proven guilty of the crime. King being the real murderer and Chapman but a look-alike, paid actor misleading you with an absolute hoax, the media in tow.

Of course, right? It wouldn't make sense if the master of horror went stalker-less.

Stephen King's had more than one issue with a crazed fan, if you can believe it. There was a guy who broke into King's home while making two big claims. One, that he wrote Misery. Two, that he had a bomb.

There was also this old lady across the street from my mom's house, and this old lady claimed Stephen King wrote *The Shining* in her basement. This is 100% true. I mean, it's 100% true that this lady SAID it and that she lived across from me. The rest is up for debate. I'm not saying it's impossible that King actually wrote in her basement. All I'm saying is that I hope, if it is true, that her basement had a good deal less cat vomit when he was there.

All that said, if we're talking about King's rogues' gallery, Steven Lightfoot takes the cake.

Lightfoot claims he received letters from King, and it was through these letters that he came to a very important conclusion: Stephen King was John Lennon's killer.

In order to stir up more believers, Lightfoot souped up a van with decals that explain his "evidence" of King's involvement in Lennon's death. Lightfoot then drove cross-country and parked the van in the town of Bangor, Maine, where King resides.

According to the Bangor Daily News:

[Lightfoot] drew curious spectators for a few weeks, but Bangor residents weren't persuaded by his thesis.

Lightfoot was eventually served with a protection-from-harassment order.



I originally wrote a little more here about King's efforts to strengthen anti-stalking laws, however I think a better use of the space is to just list a few post titles from Lightfoot's blog:

Get rich; Buy my vans!!!
BUSH ADMINISTRATION WITCH-HUNTING ME
Stephen King Shot John Lennon
John Cougar Melonhead
I NEED SPONSORS; Quadruple your money offer;
Cover letter / Resume
YOKO'S NO GOOD

Lesson 1: It helps you repel your stalker's accusations when your stalker is clearly a little...out there. Plus, John Cougar Mellencamp? Who attacks the 'Coug?

Lesson 2: Get your accusatory book up on Amazon. Sorry, Lightfoot. I want to read more about your compelling evidence. I just don't have a ton of faith when it comes to handing you my credit card info.

The Stalking of Melissa Anelli

Melissa Anelli is the author of *Harry, A History: The True Story of a Boy Wizard, His Fans, and Life Inside the Harry Potter Phenomenon*. She's also part of the driving force behind GeekyCon, formerly LeakyCon, a Harry Potter convention that has grown into an all-out geekfest.

Anelli was also deeply involved in a Harry Potter fan site. When some of her moderators made repeated and unsuccessful attempts to stop Jessica, a particularly abusive poster who was sleazing around the fan site, Anelli reached out, contacting Jessica and asking her to be cool. Which was when Anelli's stalker was revealed. HogWARTS and all. [insert *Law & Order* "duhn-duhn" here]

The very next day, Anelli received a death threat from Jessica.

Anelli went straight to the police, who would have been able to intervene (finally, right!? Finally a case where the cops can help!) except for the fact that Jessica lived in New Zealand (damn it!).

The FBI was more helpful. It turns Anelli talked to an FBI agent who just so happened to be a Harry Potter fan. Anelli thinks their mutual love of all things Potter may have opened some doors (see, *Alohomora* isn't the ONLY unlocking charm out there).

Jessica was jailed for a brief period. However, once she was clear of the law, she immediately got back in the game with renewed vigor.

Anelli on the messages she received:

The normal is 3 to 5 times a week. She'll go on a string so ... I'll get 20 messages you know, in a day. And they range from really, really, really graphic rape threats to really graphic death threats, to threats of both of them at once. And it goes in waves, you know? So it's very, very, very very frequent.

Jessica's family is trying to involve mental health professionals, however it's been slow going, and the harassment has continued for more than five years. Fellow author and friend Maureen Johnson wrote a Tumblr update on Anelli's situation that sums it up nicely:

*While I have great sympathy for the fact that the stalker has mental health issues—and that her family are now trying to deal with it—it has been five years. One day of this is a long time. Five years is unthinkable, and the toll it has taken on Melissa is immeasurable. And *her* mental health is also to be considered.*

All the while, Melissa has carried on. She has never given up, or given her stalker control. She runs LeakyCon, and writes, and is her normal, lovable self. She's a great friend and a great aunt. In the background, this happens to her, all the time.

And it has to stop.

The Lesson: New Zealand contains more terrors than just Mt. Doom. Wait, crap. That's a Tolkien thing, not a Harry Potter thing. Shoot. Well, the point being, the internet has made stalking from afar a very real possibility. The internet can see you anywhere, like the Eye of Sauron! Damn it, that's LOTR too.

The Stalking of Helen DeWitt

I write this with a baseball bat by the bed. A weapon that will do more damage than you can bring yourself to inflict is useless; last time I made the wrong choice. (Could I hit someone with a baseball bat? Perhaps.)

There's something seriously messed up going on when a man with a gun can break into your house in the middle of the night, and after he spends a little time in jail, that's it. You're on your own.

DeWitt's first-person account of her stalker is nothing short of goddamn bone-chilling. The above quote is the ending. The END of her story finds her in a remote cabin with a baseball bat, waiting for

the return of a man who has broken into her home with a gun once before.

The beginning of DeWitt's story was pretty great, actually. Okay, she was in a little bit of a jam, money-wise, but if she could do some serious writing in two months, everything would be fixed. She got her hands on a mortgage for a small cabin. No phone, no internet, just two months to crank out a word count. Not easy, but she's a pro.

Not long after DeWitt started working in the cabin, a middle-aged man living on the property next door began making frequent visits. DeWitt calls him E., and E. seemed like an alright guy at first. His visits start as an almost-comedy. Here's DeWitt, desperately trying to write under a tight deadline. She finds this perfect spot, and then E. shows up. He's chatty, he swings by all the time. The one place in the world where DeWitt had nothing but time, and this guy is ruining it. DeWitt tries to kindly, but firmly, ask E. to visit a little less. He always says he understands, and then later the same day she'll see him again

At some point, DeWitt makes a daring escape to a nearby hotel. Not so much because of a feeling of danger. It's the only way she can get any work done.

DeWitt gets in touch with the landlord of the nearby property where E. lives. The landlord is pretty much a jerk about the whole thing and doesn't help out at all.

The visits continued, and they started to take on a darker tone. E. let himself into DeWitt's cabin while she was on a walk. On another occasion, E. showed up at DeWitt's door bleeding, covered in snow, and dressed in slippers in the dead of winter.

The landlord's response to DeWitt's continued complaints:

You're a very attractive woman. He can't help himself. I'm sorry you can't live on your property.

DeWitt managed the stalker to the best of her ability and eventually persuaded the law to become more involved. Local police discovered E. had a long criminal history. He was brought to court and released on conditions that included no contact with DeWitt. Which he violated shortly thereafter in epic fashion by breaking into her house with a gun.

DeWitt debated bludgeoning her stalker, but when the opportunity came she couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, the two stayed up for hours, talking. E. tried to convince DeWitt not to file charges. They talked for some time before DeWitt managed to make a break for it, slipping out of the cabin and running through the woods to the nearest neighbor's house.

DeWitt's stalker was jailed. And he was subsequently released 5 months early. It is at this moment that DeWitt's column begins, with her huddled, holding a baseball bat. Waiting.

Lesson Learned: There's something seriously messed up going on when a man with a gun can break into your house in the middle of the night, and after he spends a little time in jail, that's it. You're on your own. Best to simply move. To sell the cabin to someone else, who, by the way, could very well be victimized too.

In a lot of ways, stalkers are taking a lot more than a person's privacy away. They are taking away their safety when they break into someone's home. They are taking away a person's money when

the victim decides that moving is the only option. They take away a person's ability to simply be left alone, to not be harassed on a constant basis.

To circle it all back, final Lessons Learned:

Sting and the Police: I now find your song creepy, if infinitely hum-able.

Blondie: I'm going to need a little more specificity on what you're going to do once you "get" me.

Tag Team: I don't know where you are. Which I was okay with before. Now, now I'm just afraid that means you're right around the corner.

32 Valentines: Showing Love For Books And Writers



In third grade, there was this country kid in my class, Bryan. He was one of these kids in school who definitely lived on a farm. He wore tight black jeans and a black cowboy hat. On Valentine's day, he gave this girl Stephanie roses. I thought this was about the ballsiest thing I'd ever seen.

I'm trying to be more equal in my language, so also it was the ovaries-est thing I'd ever seen. Whatever organ produces and/or stores your gametes, or whatever organ you want to reference as a source of gutsy power, that was the organ I would reference to say how I felt about the act of giving a girl flowers in school. It was very much an organ-powered act to a young me.

I decided that this year, I'd make my big, public declaration of love. My "Bryan's Ovaries" act, if you will.

I filled out 32 valentines, 32 being the standard number in a pack. And I sent them to people who helped me out in in the reading and writing realms. Writers who taught me something. Joke writers who make me laugh. Book publishers that do good work.

This column is kind of a project post-mortem. What happens when you send out 32 Valentines to people who helped you out, inspired you, or made your life generally better as a reader and a writer? What happens when you take a shotgun approach to love? How do people react when they receive the kind of note normally used as a vehicle for Nerds candies? What 32 little love lessons are to be learned by this project?

Here we go.

Valentine #1: Amy Hempel

First things first, I had to buy some valentines.

There were many excellent choices of Valentine's Day cards in stores weeks before it was necessary or appropriate. The scratch n' sniff variety struck my fancy right away. The only problem, scratch n' sniff is such a gamble. You can't smell until you buy, and most times the smell is best described as:

- A) Cinnamon
- or
- B) Chemical spill with a hint of cinnamon

I ditched the scratch and sniff. Then I came across these bad boys:

Metallic Britney Spears valentines. So shiny they can't be properly photographed. There was one unopened pack for sale on Amazon. I see that another one has gone up on Amazon since I purchased the first, and I just want to tell everyone that I didn't pay NEARLY the \$230-some dollars that this seller is asking. Not that I will judge if you do.



Valentine #2: Koushun Takami

Now that I had all the cards, I wanted to send them by snail mail. Any other method would be a waste of early-2000's Britney Spears, the Britney who made us believe that with 500 crunches a day and a red outfit made out of Fruit Roll-Up material, we could achieve anything.

Right off I hit a snag. How do you find an address for someone in Japan? I wasn't having any luck, so I decided to search for a Japanese address using the Japanese language!

Unfortunately, I do not read or type Japanese. I tried a Google Translate. "Address for Koushun Takami." *Takami koshun no tame no jusho*. Just to be crazy, I translated it back to English. Then Japanese, then English again. After a few back and forths, I got "Takami N is koshun the jusho you are not tame."

I settled for sending a valentine to Takami's publisher. Everyone already knows the wild heart of Mr. Takami can't be tamed. He doesn't need me to say it.

Valentine #3: Julieanne Smolinski

The internet means there is really no need, whatsoever, to put a personal physical address out there. This is a lesson that it would seem a lot of other people learned and did not advise me of before I wrote this column. I mean, it makes sense. Why put out a physical address? There are plenty of ways for people to get in touch with you that pretty much eliminate the chance that they get in touch with you in a way that's gross or scary or creepy or likely a combination of all three. By sending you a Britney Spears valentine, for instance. A Britney Spears valentine that hopes you have a red hot Valentine's Day.



Valentine #4: Patrick DeWitt

I'd forgotten how hard it was to play the weird love politics of childhood with these damn cards. For example, I didn't want to give my best male friend a card that demanded he have a RED HOT Valentine's Day when I was in third grade. I wish I could sit here and tell you that I didn't give a damn. But I totally did. I wanted the best valentines to go to the people I liked best. The romance-y ones to go to the people I would most want to romance, in whatever way I understood that in third grade. The

two giant ones they always put in with these packs, I wanted to give those to someone I had a crush on. I'd pretend like it was no big deal. But come on. We all knew.

Valentine #5: Brian Azzarello

I had a bad run-in with Mr. Azzarello at a comic convention one time. Which was 50% his fault, 50% the fault of me being an awkward 18 year-old. Hell, instead of going to Cancún or wherever for a senior trip, I was at Chicago Comic Con with my buddy. We stayed at my grandma's house and took turns sleeping in the bedroom with the TV that got scrambled porn. To say I was an awkward youth is to put it lightly. I wanted to bury that hatchet more successfully than I've buried the memory of watching scrambled pornography at my grandma's house.

Valentine #6: Mike Drucker

6 cards in I needed to make some rules for myself.

It hit me that I could probably find a whole lot of addresses if I really, really tried. It was when I started using the white pages in conjunction with Google Maps. When I grabbed that little orange man and dangled him above what may or may not have been Mr. Drucker's house, it was then that I thought, "Pete, you've entered a very creepy place, and I don't think people will appreciate a valentine sent this way. I think your methods might distract from your message."

Valentine #7: Gail Carriger

Ground Rules:

1. I will try to find a physical address, if possible.
2. I will try for only 10 minutes before giving up and sending to a publisher, agent, or possible other source so the valentine can be passed on, hopefully.
3. I will not get all excited when I find out Gail Carriger's agent is nearby in Denver and I WILL NOT consider dropping off her valentine by hand.

Valentine #8: James Kochalka

4. I will not drop the little orange Google Maps man anywhere. Not even at Gail Carriger's agent's place. Seriously. If that orange guy were real, he'd be an all-time biggest creep.

Valentine #9: Lisa Zimmerman

Lisa was one of the best professors I had in college and a great poet. She really was great. One of the very first people who took an interest in my writing, and when I lost a contest she had no problem being just a little pissed off for me. She also had a great rule: In first semester poetry, you are not allowed to use the word "soul."

Valentine #10: Chuck Klosterman

Somewhere in here, around valentine #10, I started to feel this part of me revive. The part that felt kind of good about spreading a little love. It's been a long time.

When I say it's been a long time, I mean that more than time-wise. I mean it spiritually. The kid who did that stuff, who stuffed little envelopes, who gave a little pack of Nerds to everyone in class, that kid was long dead. He grew up, contracted a serious blood condition because he never stopped eating valentine Nerds, passed away from old age, and then maybe spent time as some kind of romance ghost like in a Nicholas Sparks movie. That kid was super dead, is the gist. But now, NOW

he had arisen to terrorize again. WITH LOVE!

Valentine #11: Powell's

More an apology to this wonderful bookstore than a love note. Powell's has a bag check. Which I have abused when coming in from the airport. Maybe even going so far as to treat their generous system as a personal travel locker of sorts. You fly in, you take the train to Powell's, you check your bag in, slip out another door and explore downtown a little, come back and retrieve basically everything you own from a nice spot in a wooden cubby.

It really is a great bookstore. Sorry, Powell's.

Valentine #12: Simon Rich

I'm getting close to half-way done writing these. I've sent some out. So far, nothing. No word back. Not that I should expect it. I don't know how long it takes a letter to reach someone in Japan via a publisher, or if it ever does, but this was a hard moment. It was hard because when I started, I felt like it wouldn't be disappointing to hear nothing. To send all these cards down a well, which would now be a fairly fabulous and shiny spot, as wells go. Now, in this hard moment, I figured out that I will be. I'll be disappointed if I don't hear anything back.

Valentine #13: Richard Siken

Will an amazing poet appreciate a foil Britney Spears valentine from someone he's never heard of?

Valentine #14: Michael Kimball

Does my horrible handwriting on the front scream anything but "Crazed Stalker"? Why can't it be reversed, insane killers have perfect handwriting and normals have the scrawl?

Valentine #15: Muji

Would anyone actually be foolhardy enough to open one of these, and if so, appreciate the weirdness from a total stranger?

Valentine #16: Carlton Mellick III

In answer to all those questions, maybe yes and Carlton Mellick III.

Valentine #17: Tom Stecschulte

The thing you start to figure out, while I might have gone through these experiences with these people and their work, they don't know me at all. Tom Stecschulte read the audiobook for Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. And for me it was like we were buddies. He was in my head. He told me a story when I was out running last winter, in the snow and I had to stop because I'd started crying a little. For me, it was this whole thing. But for Tom Stecschulte, for him that never really happened.

Valentine #18: Allie Brosh

From her web site:

The truth is that I am bad at responding to praise even though I enjoy getting it a great deal. I never know how to reply when I receive an email that is just a wall of adoration with no other topics thrown in. I enjoy those emails more than you can ever know

and I have even created a special folder for them so I can go back and read them when I'm feeling down, but, outside of just saying "thank you," it is hard to converse with someone about how much they love me. Just know that your praise doesn't go unappreciated. Sometimes it's the only thing that gets me through a bad day.

Okay. I decided to Tweet a valentine. Which seemed lazy, but I made it into a COMIC! Haha! Now who's lazy?



Unsent Valentine: Marya Hornbacher

From her web site:

Due to the volume of mail she receives, Marya cannot respond to emails personally. Please rest assured that your email will get to her, and that she sends her gratitude and warmest wishes in return.

Hmm. A little less warm than the warmest wishes from Allie Brosh. And if she doesn't respond to email, what chance does snail mail have?

Unsent Valentine: Michael McDowell

Who the hell is Michael McDowell? Only the screenwriter of a little movie called *Beetlejuice*. Which has become the movie I call my comfort movie.

It turns out Michael McDowell is dead.

It's weird, isn't it? This guy wrote my favorite movie. I didn't know his name. And now he's dead.

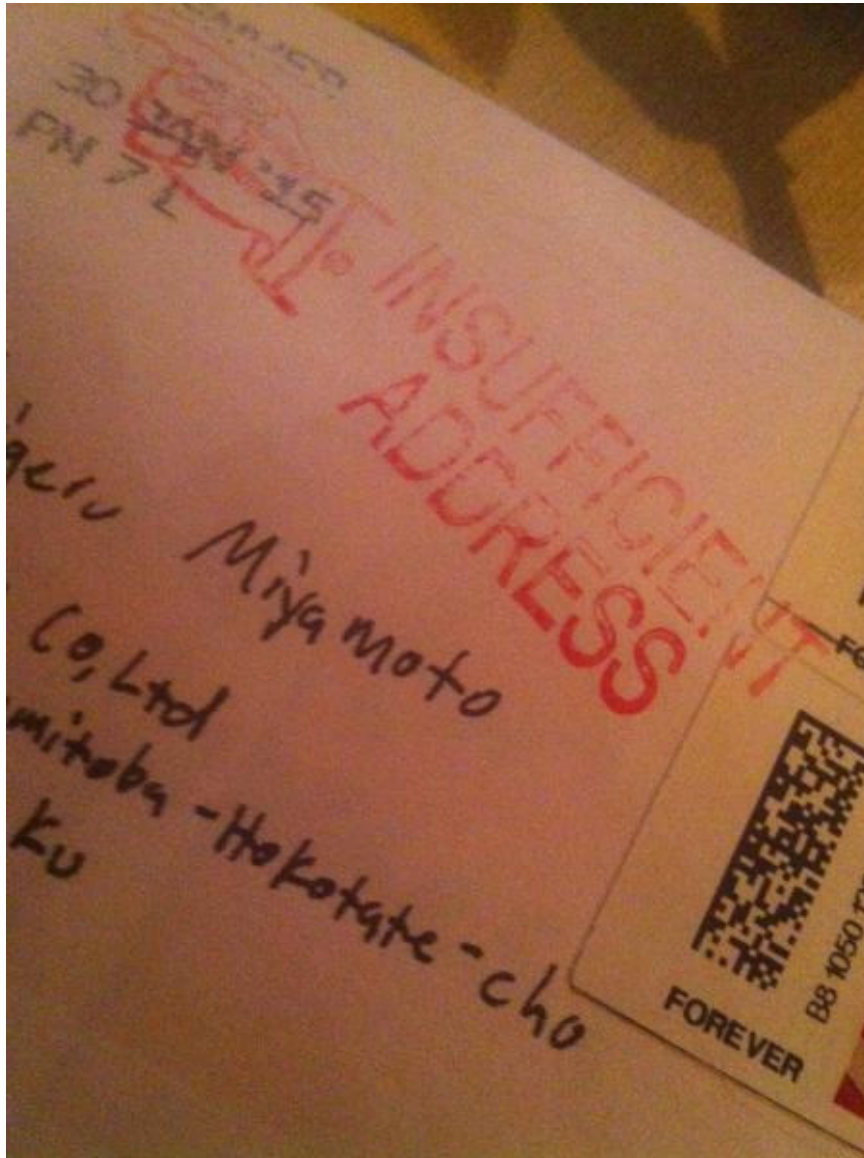
Valentine #19: Shigeru Miyamoto

Sure, it was a long shot. The godfather of Nintendo. The man whose characters and worlds inspired a young Pete to storytelling.

I found an address allegedly used by someone who supposedly got a letter through to Miyamoto. I don't know anything about mail to other countries, but the address didn't look right.



And it was not.



On the plus, my first response! Of sorts!

Valentine #20: Jarte

Am I a bad person because it's starting to get tough to come up with people to thank and love? At about 20? That I'm resorting to thanking a piece of software?

Would it make me a bad person if I told you the trouble really started in the first dozen?

Valentine #21: Bukowski's Grave

This last summer I was in Los Angeles, and I wanted to visit Bukowski's grave. Partially because I think he's pretty great, and partially because his gravestone is kind of unbelievable.

Well, I didn't make it. I decided to sleep in at my very spider-y AirBNB. Seriously, this place was almost comically filled with spiders. You open a cupboard: spider. You open a drawer: Spider. You close the door, spider behind the door.

I felt pretty bad about that. The valentine is addressed to a grave. I have no idea if that works at all, whatsoever.

Valentine #22: Kate Beaton

This was my second Twitter valentine. I couldn't help it. I tried to do something nice. It's really, really hard not to be a creep on Twitter. I don't know how to do it.



My hope is simply to come off as a harmless loon as opposed to a creep. That's all I really ask out of life. Can people just assume I'm a dummy who's a little off and not be afraid that I'll do whatever it is

creeps do when they tweet someone a valentine?

By the way, tweeting valentines to strangers sounds categorically like something a creep would do.

Valentine #23: Hideo Kojima

Solid Snake is the closest I've ever been to being in love with a man. He's a character in a video game, but we all have an experimental phase. Mine ended with the second installment in the *Metal Gear Solid* series. I didn't dig the mullet, and the visible panty line was a strange addition. It was short-lived, but we'll always have Shadow Moses.

Valentine #24: Ernest Cline

Holy shit! An honest-to-goodness PO Box! This dude has a physical mailing address. 2/3 in, my first real physical address. A place where you could go and stand around, and eventually maybe Ernest Cline would...no, no. Pete, you're sliding into stalker creep mode. Maintain.

Valentine#25: Candy Mafia

This might need some explanation.

I have three complaints about Jolly Ranchers. Namely:

1. What the hell?
2. Where the hell are the orange ones?
3. What the hell?

And let me tell you, people are happy to say orange was never a part of the Jolly Rancher line-up. And let me tell you, I'm happy to curse the lineage of those naysayers because orange was real. It was real TO ME.

Turns out, there's a company that sells orange Jolly Ranchers by the bagful. There's some kind of tropical mix that still includes orange, and this company will separate them out from the other flavors. This company, Candy Mafia, is happy to point out how difficult it is to separate the deliciousness of orange from Peach, the vile imposter, because the two look very much alike.

Ever since I got a sack of these, the orange candy has basically worn a hole in my face while I write.

Valentine #26: Tom Spanbauer

I'm lucky enough to have Skype appointments with the man himself. I sent him peppermint Pop Rocks for Christmas. They were in the mail when I found out that Mr. Spanbauer really avoids sugar as much as possible. I learned the man avoids sugar, and in the next day or so he'd be getting peppermint candy from me. Ho, Ho, Ho.

Valentine #27: The Kirch

The Kirch is a person I actually know. She edits stuff for me. With vigor. She's pretty awesome and helpful, so I sent her a valentine. Then I worried that her husband would beat me up. I've never met her husband, and I don't think she would marry a beater-upper, but you never know.

Valentine #28: Hawthorne Books

In fact, should I wonder if someone is going to show up on my doorstep? I put my real address on

these valentines. Shit. Should I have a prepared statement for the police that explains why I'm not a berserk stalker man? Could I use this column to explain? Or is this just a surefire way to remove any doubt of mental illness?

Valentine #29: Ivan Brunetti

Officers, I know this looks bad. But let me explain. I'm in my 30's, and I stayed up late over a series of nights to create these Britney Spears valentines for my friends. Well, not friends. See, I just think of them as my friends. I'm not explaining this well. Tom Stecschulte is inside my head, but he doesn't know it.

Valentine #30: McSweeney's Internet Tendency

McSweeney's Internet Tendency sent me a very kind rejection email when I was about 21. I'd submitted two pieces. One was a travel guide to Latveria, the imaginary country run by Dr. Doom. The other was a letter from a fictional *Rush Hour* fan club begging Mr. Jackie Chan and Mr. Chris Tucker to make a third installment in the series. Which they eventually did. Did my letter somehow find its way to the producers? I'm not saying No.

Valentine #31: Poonmaster Flex

Long story. But this is my girlfriend's nickname.

If her tolerance/embracing of that isn't enough to justify a nice card, then the space and time she gives me to write pretty much has to be.

Valentine #32: LitReactor

It's been almost a year that I've been with LR so far. And I love it. I couldn't work for a better place. I got busted looking at the forums on Chuckpalahniuk.net way back when at work, and now I'm typing stuff for the next iteration of that site's spirit. Never would have thought.

Response:

I thought it might be low. I thought I might not hear much back.

One thing I will take away from this, I suck at mail. I got a couple letters back in my mailbox. I do not know how much postage other countries demand. I am not really sure which parts of an address go on an envelope unless they're given to me exactly as they go on an envelope.

But I have to believe that some of the valentines hit the mailboxes they were intended for.

I'll update in comments when/if I hear back from people. But you know what? It's cool. I didn't demand to hear back in the valentines. It's not like anyone I targeted...wait, poor word choice. It's not like anyone I wanted to praise owed me something back. I owed them. That's why I sent the valentines in the first place.

Now that I think about it, I remember country boy Bryan in 3rd grade, and I remember when he gave Stephanie flowers in class. But I don't remember what her reaction was. What she thought about it or said about it. I know there was something, but I can't remember.

Which means I've had my Bryan's Ovaries moment. I put the love out there. Maybe even twice if

some folks on the list get a little link love.

People will tell you that you can't force someone to love you. That is true. What people won't tell you is that you can have your Bryan's Ovaries moment whether anyone loves you or not.



What The Hell Is 'Wild Animus'?



There are a few baffling items every thrift store carries.

Every thrift store has a collection of crutches. Usually they're corralled in a big barrel, and usually the under-arm pads are in a state that makes you wonder just how many people sweat acid from their armpits.

Every thrift store has golf shoes ranging in size from men's 14 to men's 177. These shoes usually contain remnants of the last round of golf played, a little dried grass and mud from whatever course frustrated the player to the point of tossing the sport entirely.

Every thrift store has a used book section, and within that section there are some books you're guaranteed to see. There's almost always *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. You'll always find some Janet Evanovich. You know, the fun mystery novels with titles like *One For the Money*, *Two for the Dough*, *Three to Get...Deadly?* *Four to Score?* Five to...Five is definitely something. If that's not your thing, how about a Dick Francis book? Those look to be almost the same except they also involve horse racing. Jesus, how many books can one man write about horse racing?

And then, amongst the horse races and number puns, there's another book.

Every time, without fail, every time I go to the thrift store, I find *Wild Animus*. At least one *Wild Animus*.

Maybe it's the version with the pictograms on the front, the little drawings that look like Led Zeppelin runes. Or maybe it's the version with the mountain and wolf eyes. Or maybe I'll really hit the jackpot and find another audiobook copy. Or the musical CD meant to accompany the book.

Whatever the format, whatever the weird cover, there it is. *Wild Animus* is always there.

How is this possible? It's no big surprise to run into *A Million Little Pieces* or a *Da Vinci Code*. Those books, the guys who wrote those books, they were everywhere. But who the hell is Rich Shapero? How did his book get this much exposure?

Just what the hell is *Wild Animus*?

For most of my life, I thought I knew what *Wild Animus* was. Here's why.

Maybe ten years ago I ran the Bolder Boulder. For those of you who don't care for running, the Bolder Boulder is a gigantic 10K road race in Boulder, Colorado. For those of you who don't think in numbers expressed in K's, just know that 10K is pretty much forever and at the end you go into a field filled with tents and get free things.

Anymore, when I see a town of tents at the end of a road race, I pretty much seek out the beer tent and consider the rest of the tents obstacles to the beer tent. Why would I want a Powerbar right now? I just ran K's. Give me a beer and a sandwich that's full of the second worst thing for me, slathered in a sauce made from the number-one worst thing for me.

But ten years ago, way back then I was young and foolish, I was naive enough to think that any company that had their shit together enough to purchase a collapsible tent might have something to offer.

At the end of the Bolder Boulder, in one collapsible tent, they were giving away books. Hundreds of the same book. Maybe thousands.

These were real books. Professionally-bound, long, and the cover art looked pretty decent.

I went up to the table and asked if they were really free, because that didn't seem possible. But they were, and I was handed a copy of *Wild Animus*.

Ever since then I've seen *Wild Animus* here and there. At thrift stores, at library book sales. Anywhere you can buy a book someone else gave up, you can get yourself a copy of *Wild Animus*.

I always figured they must have given away a ton at the Bolder Boulder. I live only an hour away from Boulder. If someone gave away a few thousand copies of a book, there's a good chance I'd see it over and over, right? Hell, I see Bolder Boulder t-shirts in the thrift store all the time, so there's a good chance the books would make their way too, right? Stands to reason?

Case closed. Until I made a *Wild Animus* joke to my partner. I didn't expect her to know what the hell I was talking about, and I prepared to explain the joke because that ALWAYS makes it much funnier. But it turned out I didn't need to. My partner, who went to school in Missouri, said, "Oh, that book. People used to drop off boxes of that book on campus all the time."

Turns out, *Wild Animus* isn't just a Colorado thing.

And it turns out, acquiring this book through normal methods is almost unheard of.

I looked up *Wild Animus* on Goodreads. I wanted to know what people thought of it. What their opinions were.

What I found was a treasure trove of stories where people explained the weird ways they'd acquired *Wild Animus*.

Here are some lines pulled from several different Goodreads reviews:

Someone handed me a free copy of this book (they were giving away tons, I'm not special) as I was walking on the quad of the college I attend.

At the LA Book Festival ten years or so the author was giving out free copies of this book. He had hundreds of them. I got one.

Got mine in Chicago outside the Art Institute. They had boxes of them.

Like most reviewers, I ended up running across this as a freebie in Vancouver, on my college campus. It would disappear from the dorm every few days and then reappear in the laundry room, so I finally decided to read it.

Found it at a local Goodwill...The next time I visited that Goodwill, they had about a dozen unread copies—now that would have been a fair warning.

I got this book for free. I hate it.

i got this as a freebie at the final Phish concert.

This book came to me very awkwardly, they dropped a copy of it in the front yard and i read it

Oh, that's right, our book group got a bunch of copies for FREE from the publisher along with smoked fish.

Like so many others here, I got this book for free—it was being given away on my campus. (Honestly, doesn't that freak anyone else out that it was given away on so many college campuses nationwide, or am I just being paranoid?)

How the fuck is it even possible that this book has been in every single thrift store I have ever been in the USA and I've been to like 8000 thrift stores in my travels what the fuck is this book a govt coup

I swear that last one isn't me. We share concerns, but it wasn't me.

Take a second, look away from your screen. Think about a book you have on your bookshelf. Now think about where you got it. Friend? Bookstore? Garage sale?

Did any of you pull up a memory of getting a book outside a Phish concert? Did any of you ponder a book that just appeared in your front yard? Of course, I'm sure we all have those books that arrived at our book clubs along with smoked meats. That's a given. I'll never forget the day I got a copy of

Wuthering Heights sent to my house with a pepperoni platter.

Seriously, is that not the weirdest string of stories you've ever seen? And I did not dig far to find these. These were in the first five pages of reviews. People seem pretty interested in discussing how they came about the book, and between the giveaways and library users, you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who paid for this book.

I went to Goodreads for some answers, but came away even more confused. What the hell is *Wild Animus*? How is this happening?

Interestingly enough, and I don't want to sound like a paranoid maniac here, but there really aren't many articles or reviews, and finding an interview with Shapero is nearly impossible.

Indeed, when I clicked links, I often got the 404. Where did all this stuff go?

I did find some details about the release of *Wild Animus*, however.

Wild Animus was published by Too Far in 2004. Too Far was author Rich Shapero's self-started publishing company. Around the release of *Wild Animus*, [one news writer claims](#) to have visited the offices of Too Far, which were deserted except for two employees.

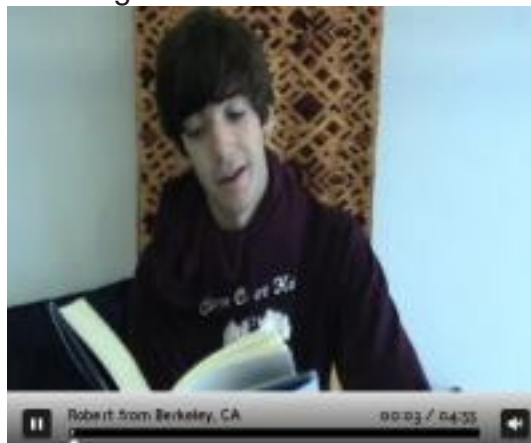
Too Far made big plans to distribute these books all over the place, especially on college campuses. Most of the distribution was done by [hiring students on Craigslist](#). However, there was quite a bit of time and effort put into unorthodox methods of distribution. Personal favorite highlights:

[A group of "wolf women" appeared](#) at several music festivals in Europe and Australia. These costumed promoters would encircle people and hand them the CD preview version of *Wild Animus*. I couldn't find pictures of the costumes, but they were wired for sound and played wolf howls from somewhere within.

[A March 2005 article alleged](#) that actors were hired to put on fake demonstrations against *Wild Animus*.

There was a video project involved with *Animus*. Allegedly we had videos of college students reading the book aloud, then experiencing the accompanying music for the first time.

These tend to involved a sincere reading:



Weird, silent, beatific stares into the camera:



And ultimately, utter transcendence:



The best promo story of all, a box of *Wild Animus* books was mistaken for a bomb on Yale's campus. A brave bomb-disarming robot investigated, and it turned out the box was filled with copies of *Wild Animus*. I'll leave the "bomb" jokes to others. Just know that if you make one now, you'll be vindicated in a few paragraphs.

Now, I know. I know the obvious answer here is that Richy-Rich Shapero self-published these, cranked them out, and basically found a really interesting way to spend a whole lot of money. I know that doesn't sound amazing. But please, indulge me. Let's talk scale for a second because I think this may be the most ambitious self-publishing project of all time.

How many copies of this thing were printed?

It turns out that finding info on how many copies of a book exist is a difficult task. Especially when the publisher is basically one guy.

I found [one article that said](#) the initial print run was 50,000, and later on a Publisher's Weekly blurb confirmed this, but did it end there? Just how many of these things are there?

Let's compare Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, and Rich Shapero's *Wild Animus* using Bookcrossing, the web site dedicated to people releasing books into the wild. We're going with Bookcrossing because it's a site focused on giving books away rather than sales. This experiment doesn't work on Amazon because who the hell is going to buy a book that shows up everywhere for free? I have to believe that the readily-available quantities of free books would mess up sales numbers, so giveaways are a better picture.

Why *The Da Vinci Code* and *A Million Little Pieces*? After all, there are certainly other, more popular books with higher sales. The thing is, you don't tend to see them show up at the Goodwill. *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone*, for example, comes up with a relatively low 1346 books on Bookcrossing. People keep their *Harry Potters*.

Bookcrossing has 5653 copies of *The Da Vinci Code* listed.
Wild Animus comes in at 3478 copies.
A Million Little Pieces? 989.

Now, let's chew on that for a second. *The Da Vinci Code* is probably one of the bigger print books that you're likely to find secondhand. Think about it. It was one of the last big pop books before the digital boom really hit. It was published in 2003, and the first Kindle came out in 2007. Indeed, *The Da Vinci Code* sold 81 million copies worldwide as of 2009.

A Million Little Pieces was a book that went through some serious hell. But its print run was more than decent. It sold more than 5 million copies worldwide.

We certainly can't look at these mixed-up data points and assume that *Wild Animus* has over 5 million printed copies. But what we can say, what this mish-mash of data says, to me, is that the lifetime print run for these things had to be a hell of a lot bigger than 50,000. It had to be nothing short of goddamn staggering.

Not to mention the audiobook, which was also given away in huge quantities. In 2009, [a librarian used the WorldCat database to determine which sound recording was available in the greatest number of libraries in the world](#). *Harry Potter* books came in at second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. Number one? Yep. *Wild Animus*.

A quick review of what we've learned. In terms of copies floating in the wild, it would appear *Wild Animus* is competing with the big boys, falling somewhere between a book that sold 5 million and another that sold 81 million. And it was one of the most ubiquitous audiobooks held by libraries in 2009.

Rich Shapero must have been rich as hell to bankroll this whole thing himself. I clicked over to CreateSpace to see what it would cost just to print 50,000 copies of a book about the size and scope of *Wild Animus*. The bill comes out to \$250,000, give or take. And let's keep something else in mind. The original 50,000 copies of *Wild Animus* were printed in 2004. More than ten years ago. If Shapero started his own publishing house in 2004 and printed 50,000 copies, it's safe to assume that his cost was way, way higher. Not to mention shipping, hiring people to hand them out, sending wolf women

to Australia.

Who is this aptly-named Rich Shapero, and where does he get his money?

Well, it depends who you ask.

You can read [the bio on his web site](#). It focuses mostly on Shapero's literary inspirations, his love of Knut Hamsun and Henrik Ibsen, and his spiritual connection to the natural world, especially in Alaska.

To answer the question about his money, a piece of his bio:

He did well in the computer industry. Ultimately, he was president of two high-tech start-ups, and partner in a Silicon Valley venture capital firm.

If you look elsewhere, you'll find only a little bit more of the same story.

Bloomberg Business has [a short blurb](#) on Shapero and his professional history, which reads like the spewed results of a random name generator for 90's tech firms. Crosspoint Ventures. Shiva Corporation. NetBoost. Bluestar Communications Group, Inc. Web.com Group Inc. Powerwave Technologies.

The safe assumption: the guy made a killing in the tech boom.

That tells us about Shapero's money, and it tells us how he got *Wild Animus* out to everyone. But why?

At one point Shapero had some interviews up on his web site, interviews conducted by a company that he seemed to own. I couldn't find them anymore, but I did find excerpts quoted on an old-ass blog:

Rich Shapero: Some people like to write because they enjoy putting their thoughts down. They enjoy the act of self-expression, the way a child likes to finger paint. You know, it just feels good. It feels good to me, too, but I don't think it's worth doing unless something important is being expressed. I liked words and I liked the power that words have to illuminate and change people's lives, but I didn't think it made sense for me to be a writer until I had something to communicate that was important.

Interviewer: And you finally found that.

Rich Shapero: No, I just got tired of waiting.

Oh, and just because it was too fun to leave out:

Interviewer: Do you have any special writing rituals?

Rich Shapero: I like to have sex while I'm writing.

I don't even understand the mechanics of that enough to really make fun of it.

Is it too wild an assumption to speculate that, with print and audio numbers combined, when one considers the efforts put into distribution, this book may very well be the most ambitious self-publishing project of all time?

With the exception of religious texts, has anyone, ever, given away this many copies of a book in physical form?

The question, the big question behind What the Hell Is Wild Animus? is the question of whether someone can throw a lot of money behind a book and make it a success.

Is it just a matter of getting the good work into peoples' hands?

There's a problem with the normal book reviews in this case.

Indeed, the Amazon rating is a 2-star average with the vast majority of reviews coming in at 1 star.

Goodreads is even worse. 1.9 total, lots of 1-stars there too.

The problem with the numerical review system in this case is that so many people seem to comment quite a bit on how they acquired the book and the fact that it's clearly a vanity project. Which is worth noting. Hell, I'm writing an entire column about it. But it doesn't really tell me the good and bad about the book.

I spent quite a bit of time looking through reviews to find one that seemed unbiased about the book. By which I mean reviews that discussed the text as opposed to how it came into existence.

After some looking, [I found a few consistent pieces.](#)

People who liked it were very spiritual. Or would probably describe themselves that way. They tended to talk about personal growth, discovery, and the deeper meaning.

From Amazon:

...if you are a low IQ idiot and you can not climb out of your little boxed-in world you will not be able to experience this book which should be a movie. It would have you at the edge of your seat and exhausted yet high by the end. Issues & obstacles of your life will seem like nothing when you relive real experiences of a wild animus.

Wild Animus is a worldwide movement. It's a shared ideal. Paintings, sculpture, movies with established stars - all these have sprung from Wild Animus. People are gaining spontaneous enlightenment from reading Wild Animus! It's happening across the globe! Wild Animus will introduce a new template for human potential. If you don't have the gnads for it, go sit with the girls!!

People who were middle-of-the-road on it felt like there was, perhaps, something there. But they just weren't interested.

For a book that seemingly was meant to be something moving and thought-provoking I found it quite dull and dry.

And then you have the haters.

If you were to take The Room and instead make it a story about an LSD-addicted man who thinks he's a ram and have it take place in the frigid realm of the arctics then you would have Wild Animus.

There are a lot of haters.

I would rather watch my father take a shower than read lines like "Lindy, Sam murmured blindly" or "He felt a terrible danger in her desire" one more time. This whole book is a Comp 101 professor's nightmare.

Publisher's Weekly was [the only professional review I could find](#). Their opinion? Shapero can write some interesting descriptions, but he spoils the ending in the prologue of his book, rendering the rest of the journey worthless.

My personal opinion?

Well...I couldn't read it. I tried. I really tried. I couldn't get into it at all. But I think I can still add something useful to this conversation.

I've read some bad books and enjoyed them in a way. I read a good third of Tyra Bank's *Modelland* and only quit because I stopped reading for a bit, picked the book up again and had no earthly idea what was happening anymore. I didn't know where we were, who else was there with me, and frankly, it was so utterly insane that I wasn't sure what was new information being introduced and what I should know already.

To give you a tiny taste the things that happen on almost every page of *Modelland*, the father character, Creamy de la Creme, was a circus performer who was blinded when his wife opened her makeup mirror, accidentally bouncing a beam of light in Creamy's eyes, which sent him plummeting from a tightrope. He fell face-first onto a sword, resulting in the loss of his eye.

I also read a romance novel that involved, to my unending joy and confusion, a rocket launcher equipped with a bayonet.

Those books were bad, the kind of bad I can get behind.

Wild Animus was not bad in that way. Not in the *Demolition Man* way, not in the bayonet rocket launcher way. It was just kind of boring. A lot of writing for the amount of story. And it seemed like the author wanted to confuse the reader, throw her into the middle of a scene and rely on the reader's desire to solve tiny mysteries as opposed to actually just telling us what was going on now and then.

I have some patience for bad books. What I don't have much patience for is an author who is withholding information, creating a false sense of mystery by covering my eyes here and there.

What I have even less patience for is an author who withholds information when I don't care to know the answers anyway. I'm so uninterested that neither the mystery nor the answer seem to warrant much effort.

To be perfectly honest, the existence of *Wild Animus* as an object is a lot more interesting to me than

whatever is contained inside.

Rich Shapero:

I want people to see what I've done. I have no commercial motive. I'm like a street musician playing for whoever might have the interest to stop and listen.

Now, this certainly seems like a view of street musicians that differs from my own. In my experience, if there's a guy with a saxophone on a street corner, he plays a damn good *Ghostbusters* theme, he has great sunglasses, and he has a case open for a nice donation when he can get it.

Clumsy metaphors aside, did Shapero do what he set out to do?

The book didn't make any money. But that's outside the stated goals.

The book isn't very good. But that's not necessarily within the stated goals either.

Rich Shapero wants people to see what he's done. No doubt, people have seen. People have been made aware.

In my estimation, it's such a tough call. On the one hand, people are unduly harsh towards *Wild Animus*. It's hard to get a clean review because it's seemingly impossible for a reviewer to come upon this book without bias.

Let's face it. We all figure a rich kid really can't write a book with heart. Whether or not this is true, it's an artistic prejudice most of us hold. We like the story of a lady living in her car and writing a great book much better than we like the story of a wealthy guy in a boring industry doing it. Although I must say, Rich's story isn't all that different from most writers. Well, other than the fact that he walked away with a hell of a lot more money:

I would get up at four in the morning, write for four hours, drive to work, bust my guts, crash and wake up at four a.m. again. If the bubble hadn't burst in 2000, I'd be in the graveyard. I hung up my tech spurs, and focused on my very first project, Wild Animus.

On the other hand, without that prejudice, if one were to eliminate that background, I don't know that *Wild Animus* would have popped up anywhere. Without the money poured into it, it seems likely this project wouldn't have been snapped up by a publishing house. That's not even a slam on the book. It's a reality for any manuscript.

I like to think that Rich Shapero doesn't necessarily consider himself a great author. That perhaps he knows where his limits are, that his prose isn't what's going to carry his books. He seems like an ideas guy, and he's said more than once that his ideas were the most important thing for him.

I like to think that while Rich Shapero hasn't written the Great American Novel, he's written something, and he's put it into hands.

I also like to think of Rich Shapero as someone who, unknowingly for most of us, heralded a future we couldn't have predicted. Now, with digital options, self-publishing and self-published authors are everywhere. They can be all over social media, all over the world, and they don't need to hire a pack of wolf women to do it.

Rich also heralded the downside of that future, a future in which it becomes harder and harder to sift the great self-published works from those that are unreadable. Indeed, the force of presence behind *Wild Animus* has almost legitimized it in my brain somehow. The physical quality of the object, and seeing it everywhere—it's an imposter in a literary landscape, but it's there nonetheless.

If Rich's only goal was to get his stuff out there, he's an undeniable success. He's proven that you can put a book on shelves all over the world if you're willing to devote the cash. Sure, those shelves might be in thrift stores, and some copies might not be so much ON the shelves as being used to correct wobbles, but they are out there. They're around.

If Rich's idea was to open minds, I don't think it's happened. Because, from what I can see, the primary outlet for *Wild Animus* is in snarky reviews. And columns.

What the hell is *Wild Animus*?

It's a book with a story big enough that I could write an entire column about it without describing a single plot point.

To make up for it, my favorite plot summary [from a Goodreads reviewer](#). Spoilers, I guess:

I'll tell you the ending. A column of lava erupts from beneath his feet while he is dressed in a goat costume and wolves are in mid-air tearing him apart.

Boozing Like Famous Writers



I hate to think of myself as a pile of stereotypes, a bunch of checkboxes with marks for either yes or no. But if I'm honest, there are some stereotypes that are true of me.

I'm a white male. I'm a terrible dancer. This is true about me. I'm ridiculously bad at basketball. Unbelievably bad. If you want to disprove the stereotypes there, find someone else. I'm not your guy.

The stereotypes don't end with dancing and sports. I'm a librarian, and I had passionate discussions as a youth regarding whether 311 should be at the front of the music section at the mall's music store or the back (my friend said in the front because numbers go in the front. I said in the "T's" because if someone calls on the phone, you don't have to ask if it's the digit or the letter. Also, that put 311 further towards the back, which would make me pretty happy). I care about the way things are organized.

Here's another stereotype. I'm a writer. And I like to drink.

I'm not a drunk by any stretch. I'm super careful about never driving, I haven't thrown up from boozing for quite some time, and I can go weeks without a drink and not even notice.

But I am a writer, and like a lot of writers, I like to have a drink now and then.

And when it comes to this stereotype, I'm in pretty good company.

In March, this month of green beer and drunken public parades, this month when many an amateur boozer tries to step up his or her game, I decided to see what would happen if I did the same. What would happen if I tried to drink like an author?

The Stephen King Method: Beer Until You 'Cujo'

Stephen King was pretty open about his drinking. And cocaine use. Most famously, King says he doesn't remember writing *Cujo*. He sat to write, and he drank beer until...well, until *Cujo* happened. I guess. It turned out okay as far as books go. As far as King's personal life, it took a pretty serious intervention to bring him around. He's sober now, but it wasn't easy. He was pretty open in saying that, at one time, he figured if he stopped drinking, he'd lose his muse.

Drink beers until I can't be sure what's happening? Does the Stephen King method work?

Several Beers Later...

Here are the first things I noticed. I put a couple away, and it was harder than ever to resist leaving my document and heading online. I commented on a LitReactor post. I started up one of my favorite wordless soundtracks, a 2-hour playlist of Nintendo 64 music (don't judge me. Or, if you insist on judging, wait to judge me. The really sad part is coming). I Googled "racing game part motorcycle part person" because I vaguely remembered a racing game where a motorcycle was made out of a lady and you saw her in basically a machine costume and then a thong. I thought, "That can't possibly be real" and Googled away.

I don't know if the game was real or not, but what I can tell you is that the internet is composed of about 30% pictures of women on motorcycles wearing thongs, and those search terms are not helpful in locating an old video game ad.

At this point, it was pretty clear that writing had taken a backseat.

A few beers in and the words were still decent. I was having a good time, in case you were concerned. But the work, the work seemed to fall by the wayside pretty quickly. There was just so much in my head, and the differences between what was important and what wasn't seemed to fade into the background. It was all equal, which is a problem when you're working on a piece of writing and also wondering whether a video game of be-thonged rollerblade/motorcycle/future people really existed.

Maybe it's my distractible nature, or maybe it's that a lot of these classic author alcoholics, they didn't have the options I have for distraction today, options that are located in the same tiny rectangle that just so happens to be my writing tool.

Whatever the reason, I can't hang with the Stephen King beer method. At the risk of sounding like the lushest of luses, I deem it too fun.



The William Faulkner Method: Blood And Whiskey At Hand

Faulkner was said to write with whiskey both in him and nearby at all times. There's a famous story where Faulkner showed up to a meeting with a bottle in a bag. He sliced his thumb open trying to get the bottle opened. Rather than do something like, I don't know, get a bandage, he simply moved a trash can from across the room, let his hand bleed into the garbage and got down to business. The business of drinking and writing.

It worked for Faulkner, at least from a writing standpoint. Safety, not so much. Does it work for me to keep whiskey at hand?

A Few Drinks Later...

I have to say, the feeling of a big gulp of whiskey is pretty nice on a winter's eve. Even if the winter's eve came after a day that was in the mid-60's, because Colorado seems to consider seasons more of a suggestion as opposed to climate.

That gulp, it spreads a nice warmth throughout your chest. I can see why they call this Grandpa's Cough Medicine. It sure seems medicinal.

I can also see why they call this, Pete's Overindulgence Juice. Or why they might start to pretty soon, anyway.

I kind of figured I'd cheat my way through this one. All Faulkner did was keep whiskey at hand. I never found out exactly how much he drank. I figured I'd gulp a little down and get to writing, and everything would be good.

But there's something about a glass of whiskey. It's like a little challenge. I have no problem leaving a half-full beer at a restaurant. Because, basically, I'm an adult and I decide how much of a thing I want. But there's something about a glass of whiskey. It will not be denied.

I drank more whiskey than was necessary to fulfill the requirements of this column. There was a party in my mouth. Not everyone was invited to this mouth party, but eventually I was lit enough that there was no preventing anyone else from crashing.

How did Faulkner's whiskey-at-hand writing method treat me?

Ehhhh...I wrote. I wrote a story about the characters from the NES game *Contra*. The story was a takeoff on buddy cop movies of the 1980's. Which sounds great in the sober light of day, but I wouldn't say I put forth my best effort when it came to the actual words.

Also, I can see why Faulkner kept his booze at hand. You really have to stay on top of this drinking in order to keep the magic flowing. Never let up. Never surrender. Don't go sober into that warm bed. No, you must rage against the cotton in your mouth, you must...

I'm saying, you need to be a little more consistent than I was. That's all, really. When you start to feel total sobriety sneak in, you're already done for.

Whiskey is not for amateurs. You have to have a plan, you have to stick to that plan, and you have to love that plan. And maybe it's a good idea, when you're ready to come back to earth, to listen to Plans by Death Cab for Cutie. The kindly tones will help you settle, for sure.

Carver Break

Of course, what would a drinking column be without Raymond Carver?

One kind soul was kindly of soul enough to round up [a list of several Raymond Carver stories and list some of the cocktails consumed within](#). Although I don't have the intestinal fortitude to drink the same AMOUNT as Carver's characters, I could certainly try a couple of their beverages.

Carver Break #1: Scotch and Milk

Yep, you heard it right. Scotch and milk. As in dairy milk.

Apparently, word on the street is that this concoction was invented not on a dare, but because someone had to come up with a way for sufferers of ulcers to keep up their boozin'. They hadn't yet invented the ingredients for my famous Mylanta-Bombs, so they mixed a little scotch and a little milk. A little country, a little rock and roll. Oh, and throw a bit of powdered sugar in as well.

The result? Uh. Pretty not great. I can't say I recommend this drink. I mean, if you like scotch, it's kind of an abomination. If you like things that taste like anything besides scotch, this still tastes mostly like scotch.

Also, it's got that weird orange dreamsicle look that doesn't really work on any other objects besides orange dreamsicles.

Maya Angelou's Bottoms Up Wake Up

This idea of drinking first thing before work came from none other than Maya Angelou. You read that right. Apparently, Maya Angelou would start off her writing day around 6:30 AM, and she'd do so with a little sherry. Seems maybe the caged bird sings because it's loaded and can't find a good karaoke joint first thing in the morning.

Morning drinking. Seemed simple enough.

I kept trying to come up with the alcohol version of the phrase "wake and bake". The snooze and booze? No, that would mean I was still asleep. The rise and...(moon)shine?

A Few Sips Later...

My partner was in the room, and a little ways in she asked whether it was working. Whether I was becoming a great scribe. The next poet likely to be involved in an inaugural address.

To be honest, I couldn't tell.

Yes, I could tell that I wouldn't be at an inaugural address. Of that I was certain.

What I couldn't tell was whether the drink had altered how I felt. I feel really horrid most mornings. You know how Garfield isn't a morning person? That's like me, except I engage in more liberal use of the word "fuck" and more angry looks and, well, generally it's a lot less fun and more scary and off-putting than Garfield. Nobody would call the morning version of me cute. Or syndicate it in a newspaper.

What was hard to tell was whether it was the morning that had me out of sorts or the drink. The combo of the two just made everything difficult to parse.

The typing wasn't too hard. I didn't feel as disoriented or distracted as I did during the previous attempts at boozy work. But it didn't quite get me there. I kind of just felt like I might fall asleep at any moment.

What I needed was a little pick-me-up.



Carver Break #2: Coffee and Whiskey

Now, normally I would assume someone was talking about an Irish coffee when they said coffee and whiskey. An Irish coffee usually involves some sugar, maybe some Bailey's or something. But after Carver Cocktail number one, bourbon and milk, I have to assume we're going straight-up here. Something about the afterglow of dairy and dark liquor really made me think there's not a lot of sugar involved in Carver's drinks.

Whiskey and coffee isn't the easiest thing going down. I'll tell you that right now. What the hell was Raymond Carver thinking? I mean, I know people had to get drunk in his stories. Maybe he got tired of typing "beer" or "bourbon" all the time and wanted to get creative?

Carson McCullers and Sonnie Boy

Carson McCullers had a system. Every day she made a drink she called her Sonnie Boy, a mixture of sherry and tea, and she put it in a thermos. That way she could maintain a level of drunkenness throughout the day.

Seemed like a workable solution. The thermos was a nice touch too. Very blue collar. Very industrial revolution. Or Fred Flintstone.

A Good Bit Of Sonnie Boy Later...

What's smart about this plan is you avoid the come-down part. Even after a few beers, the feeling of sobering up, it's like my body is rebelling against the very idea of unaltered life. Like my entire soul is saying, We want to stay drunk forever! Let's party forever!

Then the phrase "party forever" gets me thinking about the Lego Movie song, which makes me drink another beer because that's the best way to enjoy that song. And at that point, when I'm cycling through thinking about the Lego Movie song and drinking beers, the working day is officially over.

If you go the McCullers route, maintain a consistent, low-level drunk throughout the day, then you avoid that whole Lego Movie mess.

Sonnie Boy isn't a bad cocktail. I could see growing to love this over time. It kind of scratches the same itch as coffee and whiskey, but it scratches with a kind hand as opposed to a cheese grater.

How was the work?

I have to say...I did this on a Sunday morning. Yes, I know, but don't worry. I totally went to church on Saturday night in preparation. We're good.

The thing that sucks about a Sunday is you can't help but feel like the weekend is already over. For me, for writing, that just feels like crap.

With a little booze in me, I just didn't give a shit. The time passed pretty quickly, I'll tell you that right now. An hour of typing was like nothing. I barely even noticed, and I didn't feel the sand in the hourglass the way I usually do on a Sunday.

I do think the McCullers method warrants another stab. Not being blind, stumbling drunk, but having a little something in your system that keeps you on the page instead of the rest of the room. Kind of fuzzes the background a little. That doesn't seem like such a bad proposition.

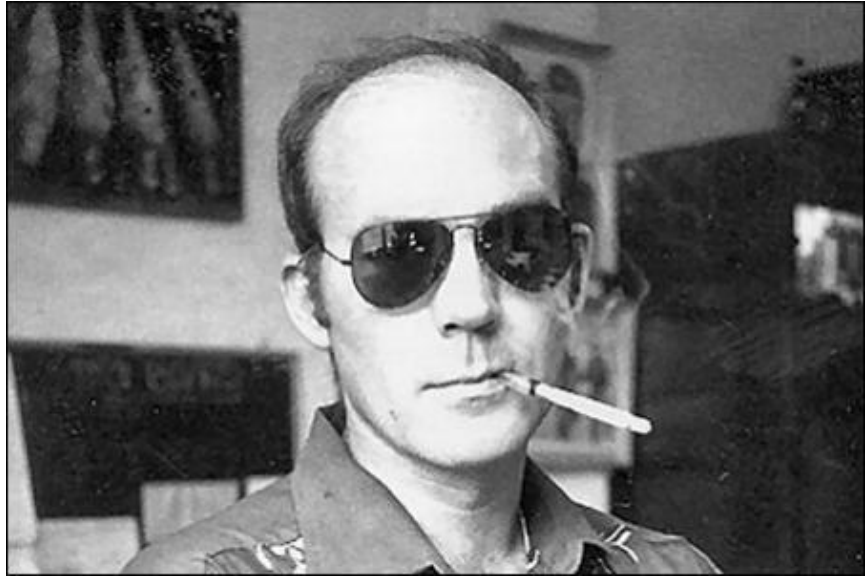
The Hunter S. Thompson Method Of Complete Destruction

I looked up the famous drinker and druggie to see what I could find. It turns out the man had a routine, which was surprise number one. I always thought he was kind of putting any nearby

substance into his body based mostly on what was close and how easily it was absorbed.

Surprise number 2 was the routine itself. It's a doozy.

Thompson woke up in the late afternoon, and his routine went like this: whiskey and cigarettes, cocaine, whiskey and cigarettes, coffee and cigarettes, cocaine, orange juice and cigarettes, a lot more cocaine, and then a lunch of beer, two margaritas, two cheeseburgers, fries, tomatoes, coleslaw, taco salad, onion rings, carrot cake, bean fritter, ice cream, a cigarette and a beer, plus some cocaine. And on the ride home from lunch, a snow cone. Which is flavored with whiskey instead of a snow cone flavor like cherry or blue. Then a little cocaine, acid, marijuana, more cocaine, and at midnight, Mr. Thompson is prepared, bodily, to write.



I'm not even kidding. This is not a fabrication. There was a man who lived this way.

Listen. I love that people read what I write here. But there are certain bridges that are just too far. Am I willing to wake and slake (my thirst) like Maya Angelou? Sure. Will I beer it up with a matrimony between the King of horror and the King of Beers? Absolutely. Will I make an attempt to imitate Thompson, an attempt that will make for a cool column and an obituary that could go viral? Probably not.

Here's what I did. I had a few drinks too many, I had a burger, I ordered an appetizer that was called "Bucket of Onion Rings," which came in a basket. Seriously, if you want to disappoint someone, call your appetizer a bucket of something when really it's a basket. No greater downgrade known to man than that from bucket to basket.

One Disappointing But Nonetheless Fried Appetizer Later...

It was impossible. I don't know how Thompson did it. Truth be told, I don't know how he did anything. How the guy could stand up straight is a mystery to me. How he could even commit this routine to words is baffling.

I tried to write, and I failed. I tried to do laundry, and I kind of failed at that too.

The Thompson method is pretty serious.

I feel like we left writing methods behind quite a while ago in favor of lifestyles. I have to wonder whether Thompson just had a crazy capacity for this stuff and was a good enough writer that he could do what he wanted. This just doesn't seem do-able.

Carver Break #3: Vodka

Okay. Last one.

I had a choice here between vodka/cranapple and vodka/instant coffee.

The coffee called my name. What can I say?

Well, I can say that there are times when a person is called by name and should not answer.

Not as...flavorful as a whiskey and coffee, but still has a weird sting on the end that coffee just doesn't need.

Probably doesn't help that instant coffee isn't my favorite.

Probably also doesn't help that I really needed a cup of unadulterated coffee after all this drinking.

Pete's Balanced and Potentially Foolish Decision

After all this drinking and writing, or drinking and ATTEMPTS to write, where's my sweet spot?

Here's the part that's irresponsible. Two beers in? Not bad. I might even go so far as to call it helpful. I was having a good time writing, and as much as I enjoy writing, the act isn't always a blast. Maybe beers and writing are two things I like by themselves, maybe it's a better combination than you'd think. Either way, a couple drinks doesn't seem to have too bad an effect. It seems to work just fine.

All this has left me with a couple ideas about writing and drinking.

I have to wonder a little about the ritual of it all. If drinking became the ritual tied to your writing, and if your writing worked on the level of a Faulkner or a King or an Angelou, that would be pretty good reason to keep it up. That would make it tough to stop.

For me it's a tough call. I'll probably have to try and stay away for the most part. I like to get a lot of writing done on lunch breaks and such, so unless my boss would extend my break so I have time to get a little drunk and write and sober up and come back, it's probably not going to work. I could always ask, I suppose. They say there are no stupid questions, although I'm pretty sure whoever said that never got asked whether it would be cool, as an employee, to leave work for three or so hours to drink and write and sober up and come back.

All that aside. On a Friday night, I could definitely see working on a fun writing project with a beer or two by my side. Or possibly a shot of whiskey and RC Cola. Which is Carver Break #4 that I just couldn't make happen. It's tough to get your hands on RC these days.

Elegy For A Dead World: The Poetry Game



A video game about writing? Sounds awful.

If that doesn't give you an idea about my stellar attitude going into a playthrough of *Elegy For A Dead World*, let's talk a little history. Before today, there were only two video games I played that could possibly be categorized as writing-related.

One was *Mario Teaches Typing*. I guess Mario is more exciting than Mavis Beacon. Far as I know, Mavis Beacon never attained invincibility or the ability to throw fireballs. But I'm not ruling it out. I never made it to Mavis' advanced lessons. If the programmers of Mavis Beacon DID include that stuff, they made a big mistake in hiding it all in the later levels. You have to give us a taste to keep us coming back! Let's see Mavis throw a dagger at a vampire or something, maybe pilot a spaceship that's about to crash land.



Mario Teaches Typing is a great tool if your goal is to wish you were playing any game besides Mario Teaches Typing. As a typing teacher, I guess it's fine, although I object to the idea that I was typing semicolons before I typed a single letter that appears IN MY OWN NAME. How does that work? And why do typing programs always push knowledge of individual keys first? Can't we type words? Bad words? Shit? Shitty shit? Well, now I'm just abusing my columnist power, but you get the idea. *Mario Teaches Typing* was better than the alternative typing programs, but that's only because the alternatives were total shit (alright, I had to do one more, but I'm done now).

The only other writing game I've played, and the writing connection gets pretty tentative here, is *Alan Wake*. In *Alan Wake*, you play as a horror writer named...*Alan Wake*. He's the video game Stephen King, which means younger and handsomer and knows how to use a pistol and wears the same clothes all the time. I lost interest in that game pretty fast. The main thrust seemed to be replacing batteries in flashlights, which is something I hate in real life and really don't need to simulate in a game. As for the writing aspects, you DID collect coffee cups for some kind of bonus. So that's... that's something.

When *Elegy For A Dead World* came along, it wasn't my first writing game, but it was the first one that looked like a real game, and it was the first one that looked like it actually involved writing. And it was ambitious. Not only would this game be a writing tool. It would teach poetry. Like, old poetry. Byron. Shelley. Keats. Yeah.

Confessions. Let's get these out of the way.

I'm an English major. I've read a good deal of old poetry, and it doesn't do a lot for me. It's too impenetrable. I'll be the first to admit, this can be because of my shortcomings as a reader, my tendency to laziness and the fact that I have a hard time following any thread that doesn't run pretty straight.

My experience with these poets is similar to my experience with writing games. Shallow-ish, and not something I remember fondly.

With a disdain for old poets and learning games in my heart, I decided to give *Elegy* a try.



I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about how the game plays. Let's get it out of the way so I can talk about whether it's a good writing tool, how it feels, and if it's any fun.

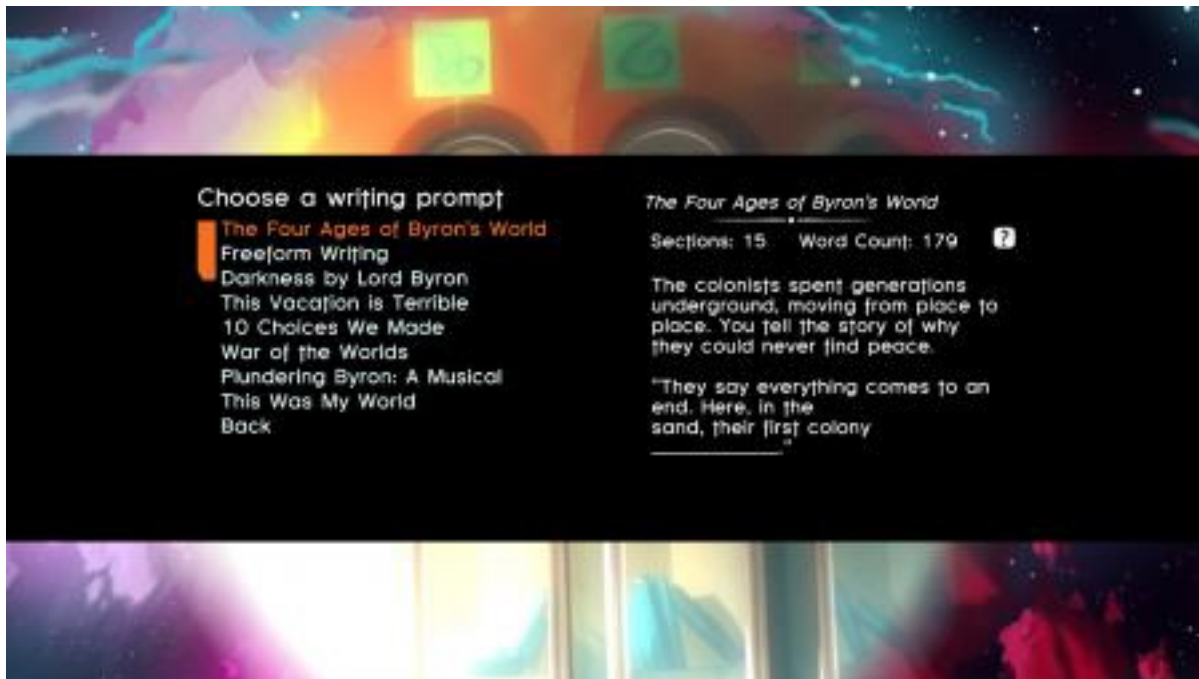
When you begin the game, you're a future-y astronaut floating in space, the last survivor of some kind of space disaster. Space explosion, space crash, someone forgot to use the space mixer to mix the space liquids in the space tanks. You know the drill. The space drill. A bad thing happened in space, as is the norm, and now you're the last remaining person.

You float around through the credits sequence with a jetpack, then pass through some...uh, space fog? I think fog might be impossible in space. I haven't watched all of Cosmos, so my space facts are pretty sketchy, but the point is you end up in this area with three portals. Each portal leads to a different planet. Keats, Shelley, or Byron.

Your original space mission was to record what happened on these worlds. Now that you're the only survivor of the crash, your mission is even more important. As the game developers' site puts it:

Your mission remains the same: survey these worlds and write the only accounts of them that outsiders will ever know.

You select one of the three portals, and then you select from a healthy list of writing options. Check out Byron, for example.



You can basically re-write "Darkness" by Byron with some key words left out. You fill in some blanks, MadLib style. You can select a prompt called "This Vacation is Terrible" which begins with the text "Oh. My. God" and is angled towards a younger voice. There is a pretty awesome variety of prompt types to pick from, and you can also go freeform, which lets you stop and write whatever you want, wherever you want.

Then you're on Byron. You walk/jetpack along. There's not much difference between walking and

jetpack-ing other than the jetpack being faster. And also the fact that it's a jetpack. Every so often you see a quill pen icon near the bottom of the screen. If you stop in the quill pen spots, you get the chance to write.

For the most part, the quill pens show up in spots with some interesting wreckage, inside some building, or near a statue. There's something to look at, an obvious reason to be prompted in a particular spot.



Once you finish a prompt, you can go back, review your work as a whole, revise, screenshot and print it with provided images. You can go back and redo prompts, complete other prompts, or try out the different worlds.

That's the basic idea. Now let's talk about whether the basic idea works.



I started on Byron with the "Darkness" prompts, the mode that has me messing around in Byron's classic poem.

Here's what's cool about it.

You fill in about 10% of the text, so even though you're not reading the original poem, you're still gaining some familiarity with the material. AND, the prompts aren't stiff. What I mean is, you can choose to just fill in the blanks, or you can change the words around the blanks too. This comes in handy with some subject/verb, plural/singular stuff, and with a little customization. Don't care for the line "Morn came and went, and Men..."? Change it to "women". Or "Bart Simpson." Whatever you want. The plasticity of the prompts makes them a lot more fun.

The other great thing provided in this fill-in-the-poem mode? Context. Okay, this is not likely the context that Byron was thinking of when he wrote "Darkness." Right? An astronaut being the sole survivor exploring a dead world?

Oh, wait.

From our friend, Wikipedia:

Darkness is a poem written by Lord Byron in July 1816. That year was known as the Year Without a Summer, because Mount Tambora had erupted in the Dutch East Indies the previous year, casting enough ash into the atmosphere to block out the sun and cause abnormal weather across much of north-east America and northern Europe. This pall of darkness inspired Byron to write his poem. Literary critics were initially content to classify it as a "last man" poem, telling the apocalyptic story of the last man on earth.

Whoa. So other than the space suit, it's pretty damn close.

What about the Keats poem you can fill in on planet Keats? "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be"?

*Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.*

And the Shelley poem? "Ozymandias"?

The central theme of "Ozymandias" is contrasting the inevitable decline of all leaders and of the empires they build with their pretensions to greatness.

Turns out, teen lit isn't the first genre to capitalize on this post-apocalypse business. Not by a long shot. Nor are disaster movies. Turns out, Bruce Willis and his band of roughnecks may have never braved asteroids and "space dementia" for our entertainment if it weren't for some old-timey poetry guys.

There's a beauty in the context *Elegy* brings to these poems. It's not the original context, but it's a good analog, and it's helpful for someone afflicted by my particular brand of stupid.

I can watch you tie a knot 10,000 times, and if you hand me two pieces of rope, I'll mess it up. I can watch something an endless number of times, but it's not until I do it that I can actually understand.

It's not until I feel the ropes in my hands, make the movements myself, it's not until I do those things that I can tie the knot myself.

Part of the impenetrability of poetry, especially older poetry, is that it can feel like a spectator sport. It's hard for me to feel involved. To really get in there and start messing around.

With this, I have that choice. I can get into the poem, walk through the poem and its creation. Messing with something, re-forming it into different shapes, that's how I learn. Changing the form of it, that's the easiest way for me to see how it was formed in the first place.

This game is teaching me poetry. It's happening.



Outside poem-based prompts, there's still a lot to do and explore. There are 8 options on each planet for a total of 24 (including freeform), and they cover a wide variety of tones and emotions. There's a lot of fun to be had in the simple pleasure of messing with this game. Pushing on things to see what happens.

I've explained to you why I'm not a great poet. Now let me explain why I'm not a great gamer.

Take a game like *Super Mario 64*. Your basic 3D platformer. You put Mario through his paces, jump around, collect stuff. It's an awesome game, but before I finished, I became obsessed with surfing on a turtle shell. There are only a couple places you can do it, and one of those places is the first level. For hours, I sat and tried to surf that turtle shell to the top of a mountain. Up a twisty road to the flat top, where I was rewarded with absolutely nothing.

It's that kind of stuff that really attracts me to a game. These little things that make me wonder if there were grander plans at some time. If there was a lot more turtle shell to be had in some long-lost version of the game. The things I love about games, they tend to be games within the game that I

make for myself.

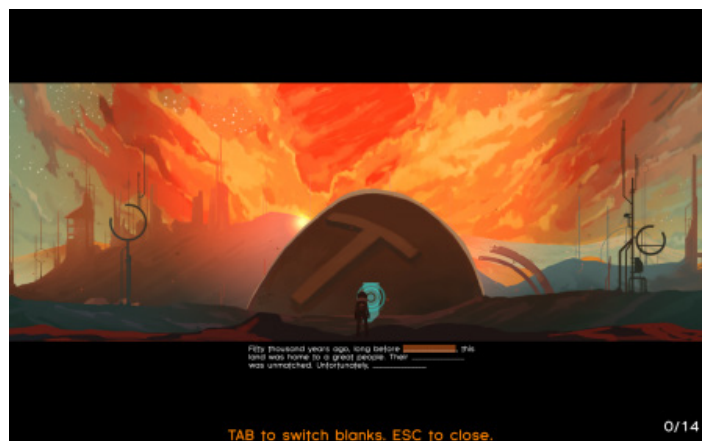
Elegy has that in spades. You can write the sort of thing the prompts hint towards. Or you can write whatever the hell you want and push the limits. You could tell any kind of story you want.



And in that way, or through that doorway, I think I found what I really like about playing this game.

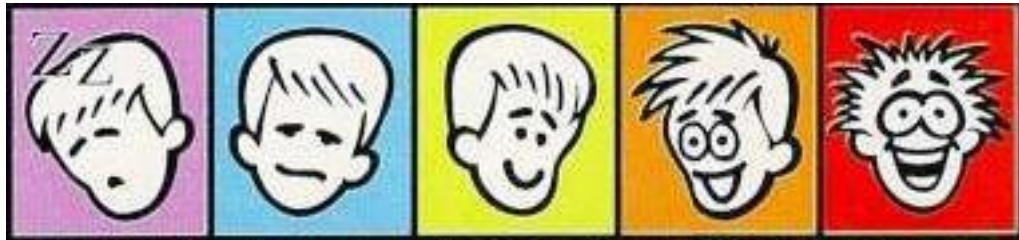
This game is a lot more reminiscent of the games I played with action figures as a kid than it is of other video games. It's more like free play, where inventing the story of the game was as important as the play that followed. When one kid would stop and say, "Wait, what if this guy was from space, so he has a laser that..."

Where a lot of the older games I love are pretty limited narratively while being expansive in gameplay, *Elegy* flips that model. There's not a lot of gameplay involved in moving the character around. There aren't any pits to fall into or health bars or coins. But the story depth is limitless. It lets you play, and it lets you create. Maybe more like a *Sim City* kind of game. Heavier on freedom, but lighter on some of the other gameplay elements. Where *Sim City* took the worldbuilding idea very literally, *Elegy* lets players take on the task in an artistic, very different way.



Let's talk about this as a game.

The magazine *Gamepro* used to rate things using different categories, and the marker was this kid's face. Just this generic drawing of a white boy that would express his feelings on a game with a sleepy face if he hated it, an excited face if he loved it. If he REALLY loved it, he looked like he'd pushed a finger in an electric socket and just kept on pushing. His hair standing out, his mouth open wide in a 90's, "YEAHHHHH!"



Let's use that scale to talk about Elegy as a game.

First category: Graphics

I'd draw a *Gamepro* kid who looked like he was having a serious disorder. That's how excited he'd be. The graphics are beautiful. They really are gorgeous, and the way they often sync up with the writing prompts, the way the backgrounds and objects give you something to type about, they function the way they're supposed to, and they're very pretty.

The only complaint I have about the graphics, sometimes it's a little intimidating. I don't know what to type because I just think what I'm looking at is so cool. It's a little like being dropped in a museum and being asked to write something beautiful about a piece of art that you find stunning. What can you say about the art that lives up to the art itself?



The sense of wonder and exploration starts with the graphics, and these visuals are up to the task.

Second category: Sound

It's a quiet game. It's definitely intended to be a quiet game. The ambient music is nice, and it wouldn't make sense to have much else. The worlds are meant to feel empty, and if there was a sweet soundtrack along the lines of Nine Inch Nails' contribution to *Quake*, the mood would be ruined.

For this category, I'd draw a kid who was satisfied. Maybe with an empty bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos empty in his lap. It's not a meal, but it'll do.

Third Category: Control

There's not a lot to control, really. That's something players might miss. There's nothing tricky about the controls, nothing that doesn't work. But really, it's move and type.

You can jetpack or walk, and even though the jetpack is faster, I preferred walking a lot of the time. Using the jetpack, it felt like sprinting through an art gallery. The normal thing in an art gallery is walking, yes? Possibly while drinking wine? I don't go to a lot of art galleries.

I wonder if there's room for further, more game-y options. Some portions that involve a little more gameplay, jetpacking up through a vertical chamber. I think I'm a little too excited by this jetpack business, really.

For control, *Gamepro* boy would be pretty neutral. The control totally works, and it's in no way frustrating. There's just very little to control. The movement is subordinate to the writing.

Fourth Category: Fun Factor

I want to use this category to talk about *Elegy* as a writing tool AND a game.

There are a lot of games that rely on twitch reflexes, on hitting the right button at the right time. And there are a lot of games that are puzzlers, games that drop you into a maze and have you work your way out.

Elegy is different. The reflexes you call on are more emotional. The puzzles are puzzles that don't have quantifiable best answers.

I had fun. I like writing, but I don't particularly like old poetry. And the game gives you slack. You can kind of make it whatever you want. If you wanted to screw around, there's fun to be had screwing around. If you wanted to learn about poetry, there's a depth of experience found here that I don't know I've gotten elsewhere.

This is fun. It's a fun game. But it's a different kind of fun.

Gears of War is fun because it's like playing an insane, early-90's action movie. Tetris is fun because it's a game that puts you in the zone. It's peaceful and stressful at the same time.

Elegy is fun that I'd compare to going on a hike. Every moment isn't thrilling joy. But the total experience, all these little discoveries and moments, lead up to something very nourishing and effective. Even if you're not screaming with orgasmic joy at every keystroke, there's a pleasure here. It's a quieter, slower pleasure that's hard to compare to other games.

Which makes sense. *Elegy* isn't really doing what other games do. I don't think it's meant to be *Gears of War* or *Tetris*. It's really a different animal.

Gamepro kid? He's standing on top of a mountain. He's got a backpack, and he's wiping sweat off his brow. He's smiling. He doesn't want to take an early-morning hike every weekend. But once in a while, he's pretty happy to do it.

I'm thinking way too much about this made-up kid.



I feel like there's also a need to defend this game. From both sides.

I feel like there's many a gamer who would say this is not a game.

I also feel like there's many a poet who would say this isn't writing poetry.

I'll just remind you of two things.

One, there are a lot of gamers out there who have very stupid opinions on the way people should interact with each other, stupid on the level that it pretty much invalidates how they feel about most things. Personally, I think the debate on what is or isn't a game is stupid because Monopoly is a game, and I can't stand that. Hitting a metal hoop with a stick seemed to be a game of sorts at some point in history, and this is a hell of a lot more game than THAT. There are a lot of definitions of what is and isn't a game out there, but I think we should face facts. Like the Supreme Court's porn decision, I know a game when I see it. I know a game when I see a game, and this is a game.

Here's the second thing I'll remind you of. There are many poets out there who are just like the bad sort of gamers. Maybe tweedier, maybe more likely to have a walking staff or to wear turtlenecks. Just the way some gamers want to tell you what is and isn't a game, these folks want to tell you that something is or isn't poetry.

When someone tells me that this or that isn't poetry, I question, then, what IS poetry? Only sonnets? Only something with a rhyme scheme? Only words written with intentional line breaks? Press someone for a hard definition of the difference between prose and poetry and see what comes up. I'm betting you that the answer includes a lot of "sometimes" and "typically" and "for the most part." I'm betting you that for any definition, there are dozens of examples in one of those fat Norton anthologies that'll crack that definition in half.

Here's what I'm going to tell you:

I majored in English. I entered a poetry chapbook into several contests and got some nice feedback. I love video games, and I've been playing *Castlevania* obsessively on my lunch breaks, to the point that I'm bothering people with the endless comparisons of real life things to *Castlevania* things. When someone is describing how difficult it is to clean out a blender, trust me, they will not appreciate a well-crafted *Castlevania* comparison.

Elegy is a game. You can use it to read and write poetry.

Like most games, the fun factor depends on what you put into it. Like all poetry, the quality is dependent on what you put into it.



If you're reading this, if you're a visitor of this site, you'll dig something about this game. It'll be a new experience for you, no matter what. It's not perfect, but it's a better mix of play and writing than just about anything else I've encountered.

If you're a gamer who stumbled onto this site about writing, welcome. And you should try *Elegy* too. As much as it's a game for writers, it might function even better as writing for gamers, or writing

for non-writers of any background, really. If you're a gamer who is tired of the newest shooter being pretty much the same as the last shooter, then lean into change a little bit and give this a shot.

I'll end with a last piece of advice. If you hate poetry, if you hate games, this is your chance to insert the word SHITHEAD into a video game and a piece of classic poetry at the same time.

If you love games and poetry...well, same advice.

Let's Read About Sex



Everyone who read the above title and clicked away to watch a Salt-N-Pepa video, just know that I forgive you and understand your plight. Regardless of which Salt-N-Pepa video you chose.

As for the rest of you, welcome to this column about sex. I'm hoping this qualifies me as a "sex columnist" and maybe even a "sexpert." Two goals met with one column? Not bad.

Here's the problem: most books have some sex in them. Wait, no. That's not the problem. Most everything has some sex in it. Most movies, books, songs (the good ones, the Salt-N-Pepa songs), comics, visual art pieces, and when you get right down to it, most real lives have a sexual encounter thrown in here and there.

The problem is not that sex exists or that it exists in art. If that's the column you want to read, the one where some dude is alarmed about sex being a thing, I'll suggest reading something from a little column you might know as THE BIBLE.

No, the problem isn't with the sex. It's with me.

In other media, sex scenes don't bother me. In movies, I spend a lot of time wondering how things are strapped down or covered or what have you, how the actors make it look real. Real-ish. I wonder if there's a sort of anti-Viagra one can take. I wonder if anyone's ever done one of these fake sex scenes and in the middle of filming, everyone stops and says, "Eew, you do it like that?" And by the time I wonder about all this stupid stuff, the sex scene is over.

In songs, well, if you can't take a song that talks sex, then you probably have to avoid pop music going back to...I'm no historian, but whenever pop music was recorded on wax cylinders. Maybe even a little further back.

I'm good with movies, songs, all of that. What I'm not so good with is reading about sex.

When I read a sex scene, when these acts show up in a book, I get a little squirmy. Or it seems silly somehow. Or like I'm doing something wrong. Not the fun, naughty kind of wrong. It's a bad wrong. Less like a kinky thing with a little element of possibly getting caught, more like peeing in the shower. It's not something you're proud of. It just sort of happened.

Uh, this is probably a swell time for a warning. This gets gross before it gets better. Buckle up.

I enjoy reading, a lot of books have sex scenes, and I should be able to enjoy reading about sex on some level, right? Or at least be able to get past it without tittering or being embarrassed somehow?



The Plan

I just moved into a new apartment. It's weird. And it's uncomfortable. How does it get comfortable?

Well, not by thinking it over in my mind, that's for sure.

When it gets comfortable is when I feel like I've lived in it a while. When I know where the light switches are in the dark. When I stop trying to open the one cabinet in the kitchen from the wrong side (although some asshole definitely put the hinges on the wrong side of this thing).

One morning you're standing in the kitchen, you've got no pants on, and you're eating a bagel over the sink. At that moment, you've gone from foreign place to home. It's not a single event that brings the naked bagel kind of comfort. It's a bunch of tiny events.

To that end, I'm going to try some different experiments with erotic readings in hopes that I'll feel a bit more at home. Live in the erotic world and see whether I can get comfortable. Why exactly I can't enjoy sex scenes is hard to say, but let's go shotgun approach, try a series of experiments and see if

we find any cures.



The Story Cure

I like my porno with a little story to it. Sorry, everyone. Sorry that I'm horny for narrative. I don't know if you've heard the news, but here's a bulletin: Bestest Sex Organ? The Brain.

How do I know that I like story? As a fella who is me, I've availed myself of some of what the internet makes available. Specifically, the kinds of short films one finds when one types in a web address that begins with an English word and ends in "tube." Seriously, the number of sex tubes is astounding.

In the case that I am partaking of a short erotic film, let's call it, I like a little story. Not just clicking onto a video where the action has already begun. Let's take our clothes off. Get comfortable. Maybe discuss some alternative economic and payment systems involved in the sale of delivered pizza.

It's possible that I've just been reading the wrong kind of sex scene, right? That I need a little story to get me more involved?

For a story-heavy sex scene, I went with a sex scene from Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. It's a book I've read and remember pretty well. I've got a lot of context, so let's see what happens.

...

I blew it.

The sex scene in *American Gods* is a little atypical. For me, anyway. I don't often have sex with cat women in some sort of dream realm. But it seems to work for Neil's character, so if you have the chance, I'd say go for it.

I think I went too much story on this one. There was so much story outside of the sex scene that I kind of wanted the story to get back on track. There's a revolution of GODS brewing here. I find that more interesting than a dude and a lady getting it on. Hey buddy, how about we get you laid AFTER you save existence? Do you think you can keep it in your pants that long? Long enough to save EXISTENCE?

Too much narrative just made it worse. It was distracting.

But you know what? It's cool. There's an alternative option on the other end of the Derk Scale of Pornographic Narrative.

The Derk Scale of Pornographic Narrative is a measuring device I came up with that places anything porn-y on a spectrum. If there's a lot of story, it scores high. If there's no story, it scores low.

By the way, I just want to point out that I have a professor brother, a chemical engineer brother, and a neuroscientist sister. They share my last name, and the Derk Scale is about narrative in pornography. You're welcome, siblings!

Something high on the Derk Scale, an entire epic Gaiman novel, didn't work. So I'll try something lower, something with almost no story at all.

...

For a zero-story experience, I just went for a piece of flash fiction that ended up being about a dude whose wife walks in on him very much in media res, if I can use such a fancy term in such a filthy context.

That didn't seem to help either. I think with NO story, it's hard for me to hear a voice and understand, to be cool talking about such personal stuff. Maybe I want to hear a sex story from a voice that I already know and like, something a little familiar.



Experiment one was a failure. It didn't seem that knowing the characters made much of a difference. The Derk Scale, though very informative and possibly destructive to the careers of my siblings, didn't hold the answer.

The Monster Porn Cure

A good way to make sexy real-life stuff weird is to take it too seriously. Maybe what I need is something where I can get outside of my head a little bit. Something that distorts the lines so badly that they don't even make sense anymore.

Monster porn to the rescue!

I had a lot of options on Amazon. Werewolf, alien, bigfoot, orc, Nessie, Cthulu, leprechaun, phantom, Minotaur. Whether or not having sex with a monster is popular, reading about it on a Kindle apparently is.

As a fan of old VHS horror, I went leprechaun. Hell, those guys have been to space, the hood, they've harassed pre-nose-job Jennifer Aniston and they've gone back to the hood for a second round. Is there anything they can't do? Why not take a turn for the erotic?

...

Oh, that's why.

Well, there's a novelty here. But the leprechaun is a bit...rape-y. Okay, he's more than a bit rape-y. He's a lot rape-y.

Not a judgment call. People can read whatever they like. It's my fault, really. How would a person and a monster have consensual sex, anyway? How would Cthulu go about properly courting a human? That doesn't seem like a thing. Does Cthulu have a schwang? And if so, why?

Also, I know this is nitpicking, but the leprechaun was about five feet tall, which turns out to be a result of being a half-leprechaun, half-human love child himself. A tall leprechaun? Is that still a leprechaun? He DID, however, possess the sexual powers that leprechauns are granted, which are vast and mostly unmentioned in fiction.

Maybe it was the rape narrative. Maybe it was the fact that the leprechaun was clearly a stand-in for an ideal man, a typical fantasy: Murderous cereal mascot in the streets, sexual leprechaun in the sheets.

Monster porn is not going to work for me. I thought that by amping up the ridiculousness, I'd get somewhere. But it looks like I may have jumped into the very deep end of a very deep pool, and in that deep end I found the creature from the black lagoon, and he was aroused and scary and just get me out of here.

The Drunk Cure

I'm not advocating the use of alcohol to lower one's inhibitions. Inhibitions exist for a reason. Such as preventing a person from entering a domicile with Greek letters stuck on the facade or breaking into a spontaneous dance party inside of, say, Circuit City.

However, I have to admit, my personal inhibitions may be set just a bit too high to really enjoy sex writing. And so, it was in a safe environment that I helped myself to a drink or two and got down to reading.

When I say it was a safe environment, I mean that relatively. You can only be so safe when it comes to spontaneous dance parties. Cameras are abundant and of high quality these days.

...

That old saying, "Booze makes everything totes rad" was proven true. Mostly.

Drunken erotic reading was a lot better than sober erotic reading. It worked. I still laughed a little and got a little squirmed out, but things were noticeably better. I daresay I enjoyed the erotic tale set before me just a bit.

Great solution! Done and done! Excelsior!

Except.

I can't read books drunk all the time. God, would that I could. If I could live that lifestyle, you would never hear from me again. It'd just be drinkin' and erotic readin', perhaps an occasional trip out of the house to see what new kinds of energy drinks were on the market that might better fuel my drinkin' and erotic readin'.

But I don't live that lifestyle. I work, I drive places. And sex scenes tend to crop up unexpectedly sometimes. I can't just get emergency drunk when the emergency is that someone wrote something sexy.

While it works, sort of, it's not a sustainable solution.

The Audio Cure

Maybe an erotic audiobook is the ticket. A little audioeroticfixation, if you will. Maybe it's something



about the physical act of reading that makes me feel so complicit. But if someone reads TO me, that's a totally different story. If an erotic story just so happens to be read aloud, and if that reading aloud just so happens to cross my ear holes, what can a fella do?

...

Aaaand that didn't work either. Like a lot of people, I use audio to take my mind off doing other things. I might listen to a favorite podcast while cleaning a bathroom, for instance, or doing laundry. Or, I might end up listening to an erotic story while playing *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*. Just sayin'!

The story just kind of passed me by. I didn't think I'd ever be bored by a lady talking about doing lady things to her lady stuff, but by golly, I was bored. Which is better than being super uncomfortable, but still doesn't meet my goals here.

The Loaded/Unloaded Gun

This has a bit to do with some gross stuff. Let's just put it this way. Does it matter if it's...been awhile or not? Does one state or the other make the reading a little more interesting? Palatable even?

Let's not get into the gory details on this one. Let's not even make a joke about the phrase "gory details." Let's just move on to results.

...

I DID learn a little something here. I think that my mistake has been partially about reading erotic stories as the beginning, middle, and end of an experience. But a saucy tale might be better suited as the beginning of an experience. The appetizer, if you will.

Is that flowery enough? Too flowery? Should I have used the phrase "entering the bone zone"?

When I read a story as a prelude, it kinda worked. The only problem is, much like my drinking problem ("drinking problem" being defined here as my inability to be perpetually drunk) I can't know when a sexy time is coming up in a book and then immediately...eat the full meal right afterward (or "do a victory dance in the Bone Zone End Zone" for you filthy people out there).

I suppose I could plant the seed in my mind earlier in the day and then let it germinate. But that doesn't seem like a great idea. I don't think I need an assist in thinking more sex thoughts throughout the day. Doing just fine, thanks.

Between the drinking and this, I'm starting to wonder if I just need content warnings like an easily-offended Homeschool parent or something. Pages that are colored black on the edge so I know when something erotically-charged is on the horizon and I can prep. I'll be the only person at the bookstore saying, "Does this book contain sex? Because totally awesome if it does. I just need to make sure I'm drunk and horny before I dive in."



Did It Work?

Ultimately, no.

Okay, there was a difference. I did feel a little like, just by force of reading a heck of a lot more erotica than normal, I did ratchet up my threshold just a little. When I came across a sexually-charged passage in a book after doing this stuff, the things that bothered me before didn't bother me AS much, or they felt lessened. Like they weren't a big deal.

I do think I might've zeroed in on an answer to my problem.

Sex can be such a personal thing. It is hard to find a compatible partner in real life. Someone you like enough to hang out with and are compatible enough with to engage in insertion or acceptance of their genitalia (I've officially run out of cute ways to say this stuff).

In real life, there are plenty of people who I like, and I do not want to have sex with all of them. We get along in other areas, and that's all we need. In books, there are plenty of authors I get along with, and I need to accept that although we might like the same kinds of stories and writing styles, we might not be compatible with sex.

The good news is, I can read my favorites, my friends, even if they aren't my preferred sexual partners. And the other good news is, when it comes to books, it's cool to have my romantic partners and sex partners, and they don't have to be the same people.

Looks like I'm embarking on my experimental phase when it comes to sex reading. Sorry, everyone. Hopefully I won't be obnoxious about it later.

Quick note: some great stories I read while I put this together were written and/or collected by Rachel Kramer Bussell, who just so happens to be teaching a class here at LitReactor starting next month. I don't know much about this stuff, but if you're going to learn from someone, you should learn from her.

My Digitization Nightmare: 10 Ways To Fail While Digitizing Your Work



I don't know much about life hacks. I don't know a lot about the finer points of Evernote. And I definitely don't understand the life-saving magic of tidying up. I missed that class at Hogwart's, I guess.

What I do know is that I just moved. As in, moved from one house to another. As in, carried every item I own, in my arms, out one door and into another.

Every time I move, my relationship with my stuff really changes. A few hours into a move, I'd consider abandoning a child to save the effort of carrying him. Maybe not a first-born, but a second or third, one of those back-up kids...

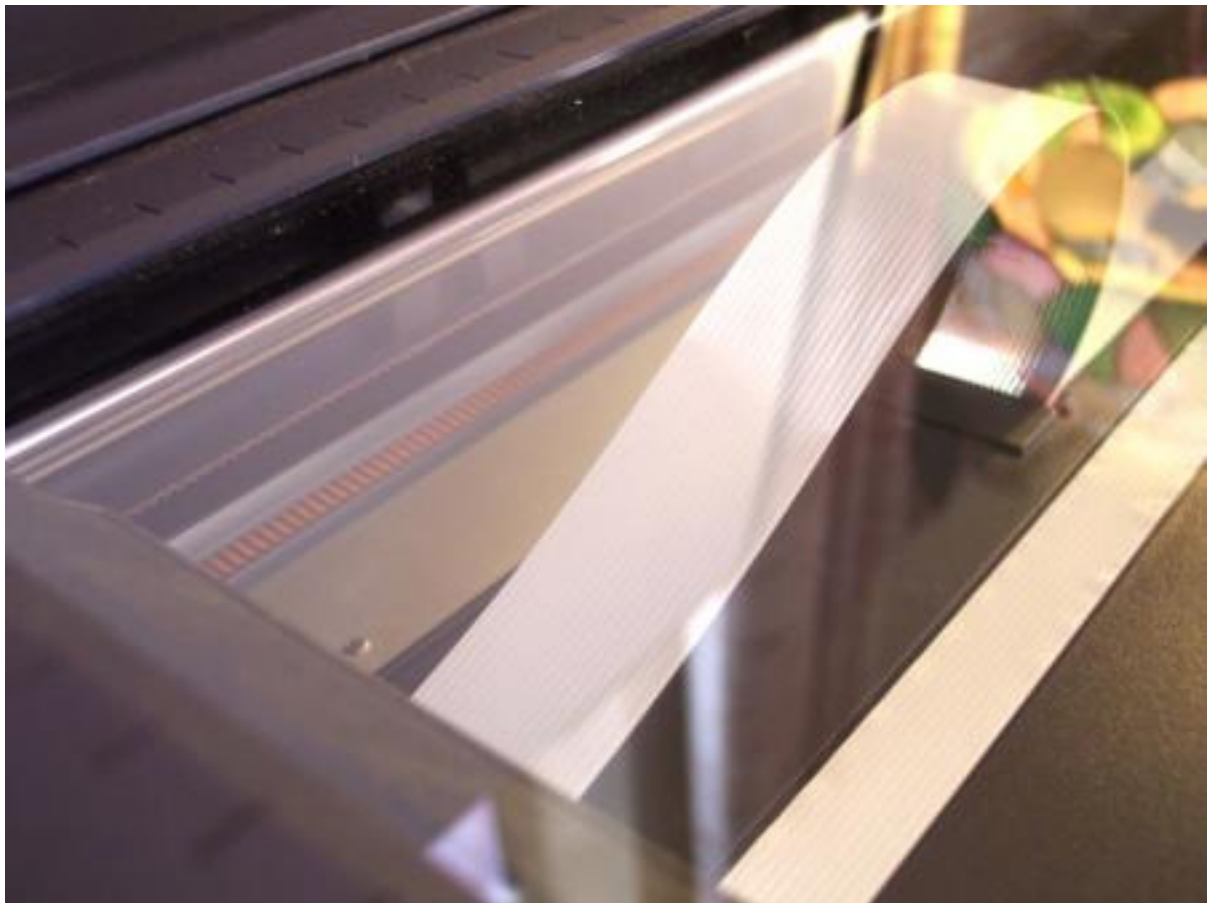
Unfortunately, I don't have a kid. So leaving one behind wasn't an option. What I DO have is a trunk full of old writing.

It's huge. It's heavy enough that the handle nearly broke when I carried it. It was like watching one of those strong man contests, watching me get this in my new place. There were veins popping out of my arm where there should not ever be veins on a human arm. I grunted. My head turned pink. I regret not asking a protein powder company to sponsor the feat.

What makes this thing so heavy? It's jammed full of old papers. Poems from college, journals from the last decade. Invitations I made to an imaginary party that was never meant to happen. I just had some funny ideas for invites, wrote them down, and tossed them in here. This is the sort of stupid impulse that results in a trunk of old writing.

I moved it. All of it. But I don't want to move it again. Which is why I decided to digitize it.

It was with this simple goal that my nightmare began.



Mistake 1: Underestimation

People make everything sound so easy. Oh, just digitize your old papers. It's so easy. Just turn this giant trunk of crap into a simple, digital piece of crap. Keep it on a portable crap drive. Throw it in the crap cloud. It's so crappin' easy!

It's not easy. Trust me on this one, digitizing a trunk of papers is not easy. You might think that with a little hard work and effort, you'll find yourself in a tidy, beautiful, paperless world.

With A LITTLE hard work and effort, I'll tell you where you'll find yourself. Hell. A hell of papers scattered all over the place, a hell of confused, mis-named and misplaced files. A hell where up is down and down is up. If you put in just a little effort, a normal human effort, I'm here to tell you, Hell Is For Real, and you will find yourself there.

Granted, this whole project, the work, it's not busting concrete with a sledgehammer or working a railroad or smashing rocks.

Hey, how come every prison job is just hitting stuff with a hammer?

Whatever. It's not a prison job. But it's work. It's hours and hours of work. Don't underestimate that

simple fact.

Mistake 2: Optimism

When I opened up my trunk of papers, I was optimistic. I knew there were a lot of papers, and I knew they weren't organized all that well, but I figured it was manageable.

What I didn't expect was that opening this trunk would be like opening the Ark of the Covenant. Face. Melted. Off.

It wasn't just the amount of paper. It was the complete lack of organization. Looking back at my old papers, it was almost like I'd made it difficult for myself on purpose. Like I'd crammed all my stuff in there with the idea of making it hard in the future. Like I'd forgotten about my past as the Batman villain, The Disorganizer, the criminal who was driven to put things out of order (note to DC Comics: if you're looking for a good way to defeat the Disorganizer, I'd suggest putting him in a room where images of minimalist apartments are projected all over the walls. He'll lose his mind).

Notebooks, sheets ripped out of hotel stationary. Note cards scattered throughout. There was even a stack of note cards from an aborted novel attempt, ordered scenes with numbers, and they were rubber banded together IN THE WRONG ORDER.

In other words, without really considering it, here's how I imagined the beginning of this project.



And here's how it was.



Mistake 3: Pay Your Problems Away

You can't just box this crap up and send it away. This was the first thing I checked after my face reconstituted from the melting. Hey, it's 2015. Maybe I can pay someone else to do this for me.

Bad news. You can't do it. I mean, maybe you can send a box of crap away. YOU. I can't.

If I go to a web site to find out how much something costs, and if I have to request a quote, I'm already screwed. I'm already WELL out of my price range. This is something I've learned over the course of attempting to print t-shirts, embroidered patches, and once, last-minute golf balls that really would have benefited from pictures of a porcupine with its spines replaced with male genitalia (the rare and gross "pornupine").

Trust me, if you stumble into a quote-based web site, the kind where pricing is sent to you via email or (shudder) live-chat, it's too price-y.

Now, if you're reading this and you have no idea what I'm talking about, you might be able to afford this kind of service. I have to assume that you've never seen a quote-based site because your assistant handles that stuff. If you're at a level of success where you employ an assistant, THEN you might be at the level required to have your stuff digitized by a stranger.

Lest you think the only reason I walked away from this option had to do with money, I do have

another little problem.

No, it's not because I'm afraid someone will rob my genius ideas. How to put this...

I once decided to embark on a highly scientific experiment to see if I could...uh, "have myself" 25 times in 24 hours. And wrote about it afterwards. Now, these writings MIGHT be in a notebook with a weird Abraham Lincoln coloring page on the front, or they might be in the Spider-Man folder. I'm not sure. However, these words are definitely in my pile of papers. And if that's something I KNOW is in there, it begs the question, what's in there that I DON'T know about?

That's why I can't send it in, okay? I don't need people reading about how I've abused my body sensually for my craft.

Mistake 4: I'm Dumb

When I dug into the trunk, I found papers of every size imaginable. Some of which were seemingly created for novelty purposes only. There are pieces of card stock the size of baseball cards. there's tracing paper. I have old writing on vellum. VELLUM! Why? How? How did I even end up writing on vellum? What was I thinking? Was this piece meant to be distributed by scroll one day?

If I'd spent the last ten years writing on pages that were about 8.5"X11", that would have been great. I could have fed them straight through a scanner in huge stacks. If I'd at least used a consistent-ish KIND of paper, that might have worked too. But alas, no. That just wasn't possible for me, apparently. Couldn't have done that.

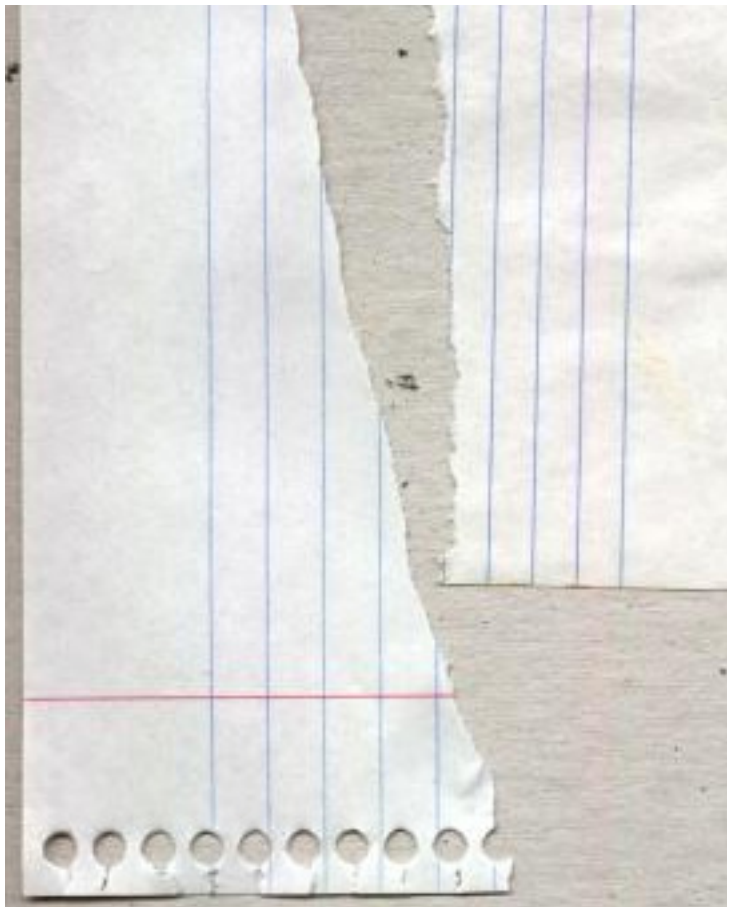
I had no idea that the ultimate notebook, the best option in the world, was a ream of loose copy paper.

Mistake 5: Removal

On the topic of notebooks, I do NOT know how to remove pages from a notebook the right way. Or if there is a right way. I tore pages along perforations, I cut them out with a blade. I tried it all, and every single piece of paper came out less rectangle, more the shape of a prison weapon.

A lot of sites handled this part of the digitization process with one or two sentences. "You can scan your notebooks one page at a time, or you can remove the pages and scan."

It's that "remove" word. Such an innocent, little word. Such a lie. It makes it sound like there's a button on the back of a notebook, you press it, and the pages just pop out.



Again, it's not the worst work in the world. Crack a beer and a DVD of the *Lord of the Rings* Director's Cut. That's what an expert with one ounce of honesty would say.

I would say that you should probably just get the entire LOTR trilogy, plus a Hobbit movie of your preference, plus *Demolition Man* because it's awesome, and if you haven't done so before, see about hosting your own private kegger. It's kind of fun without all the frat boys and when you have the option to drink from glassware you can see through. Armed thusly, you MIGHT be able to get through the notebook disassembly process without running out of viewing material. And even if you do, you can always watch *Demolition Man* twice. There's just so much nuance you miss on the first dozen times through that film.

Mistake 6: Skip A Test Scan

I had a stack of papers. I had Post-Its stuck to full-size pages. I had notebook pages, and I'd used a paper cutter to get them about the same size.

I was ready for the scanner. Or so I thought.

There's a reason this device is called a "scanner", a reason it has the same name as the Cronenberg movie where people's heads explode.

I scanned a good stack of papers. A fat wad, writing on both sides, all ran through the feeder, no problem. I had my headphones on, and the machine at the library chugged away, zipping it off into my email. Finally, progress!

After a good hour or so, I went back to make sure the scans had arrived in my inbox. Sure enough, there they were. I opened one up and it even looked pretty good. The quality was great. Same thing with the second image, which was a scan of the back side of the first page. It was pretty good too. Except that it was upside-down.

That feeling when you just threw away a ton of work.

I clicked through a 400-page PDF. Every other page was upside-down.

This is totally my fault. I can never remember if I want something to flip on the short edge or the long one. I don't really know what that means, and I've accepted that this, like a foreign language or empathy, is something that I'm not going to learn in my lifetime. I DO blame Xerox, to an extent. I mean, come on. Who the hell wants to copy, scan, or print something oriented the opposite way on the other side? What's the point of that? I'm sure there's an occasional reason, but can't that be something you have to click a few things to make happen? Can't the defaults for stuff be the way I use it all the time? Can't someone ask ME?

Sure, you can fix this. Google for answers and you'll find out that by purchasing some Adobe products and then writing a simple macro, you could flip every other page of a PDF document.

Again, YOU probably could. As for me, I broke down and Googled "macro" for the first time in my life. I've read that word hundreds of times, and never have I really understood it. For the curious, a macro is an impossible solution to a problem where the real answer is "just manually re-orient 200 items."

Mistake 7: For The Love Of God, For Real, Do A Test Scan

It's hard to tell exactly what happened, but while my huge wad of papers was scanning, it would appear that they got a little out of whack. Which means the first inch or so of every line of every page was missing.

I blame gremlins. Both the creatures and the feature film. The creatures destroy mechanical stuff, and I often get distracted while thinking about the movie. What happened to all those puppets after filming? Where did that old man get Gizmo anyway? It was likely during one of these deep, reflective moments that everything went awry.

I can't stress this enough. They haven't invented a type of CAPS lock or punctuation that would give the emphasis I need here. Maybe an exclamation point, but instead of the dot at the bottom it's a hand holding a gun and the gun is pointing right at the reader.

Do a test scan.



Mistake 8: The Library Rocks

I did most of my scanning at the library to start with. Don't get me wrong, the library rocks, but not as hard as it rocks to wear no pants and be drunk and scan stuff at home.

If you ask some library visitors, they might not see the distinction here. After all, the library's motto is

sometimes interpreted as "Give us your tired, your pantsless, your people who are drunk at 11 AM."

If I had a portable scanner, I could do this myself, at home, and once I finished the mass scan I could keep up with work in the future.

Also, beers.

Also, no pants.

There are a couple portable options. One costs about \$250. The other appears to be some kind of wand from Brookstone. Brookstone being the company that's like Sharper Image except they possess even less sense. At least Sharper Image was smart enough to go out of business, leaving a warehouse of life-size Predator statues in their wake.

I'm not spending that cash. Or buying anything that's called a "wand." If I'm making a dumb purchase, it'll be from SkyMall, thank you very much.

Mistake 9: Home

If you're embarking on a digitization project, just do me one last favor. Decide where this crap is going. Because I didn't. Not soon enough, anyway.

Papers went to my email. My Google Drive. A flash drive. They went goddamn everywhere.

Same thing with the actual paper papers. Once I scanned them, I wanted to check if they were online before tossing them. Which meant stacks ended up in my car, my desk, my purse that I call something besides a purse but that's definitely a purse.

If you're doing this, have a plan. Where the files are going, where they'll stay, and what you'll do with the papers.

And by the way, I definitely sent a bunch of crap to the wrong email at one point. If you have an email address close to my own, I apologize, and I apologize again if you got that thing I mentioned earlier. The thing about jacking off.

Mistake 10: Late Realizations

I made a big realization about this entire project. See, you're not just getting rid of objects. When you digitize your stuff, you're making a trade, trading time for space. You're giving up something, a hell of a lot of time, to gain a little space. If that's a good trade for you, then go for it. But just be aware that it's not a blast. And download some new music or something. R. Kelly's "Ignition (remix)" seems to synch up with the rhythm of a Xerox, if that helps at all. As do most works of the 90's hip-hop group Tag Team.

Your space gets more efficient, but it costs you time.

Here's the other thing.

While the light from the scanner passed over my face, left to right, right to left, I had a lot of time to

think. About gremlins, about Gremlins, about why Tag Team's "Tootsie Roll" never caught fire the way it should have. And when I ran out of stupid stuff to think about, there was a little slice of time to think about important things too.

I think the only reason I want to keep my old papers is because I'm afraid that someday I'll run out of ideas. I'll have written about everything I can think of, and I'll need to go back and mine my smarter, younger self.

Which is pretty stupid. Or a stupid reason to do all this work, anyway. Not because it's impossible to lose that spark. It's very possible, and very possible that it's already happened. But it's a fear-motivated decision. A fear of losing papers, a fear of losing whatever it is in my brain that comes up with things to write about. Fear-motivated decisions have never been my best ones.

All this time I'm in front of the scanner, it's time I could be writing new stuff. Or doing something else that might give me something to write about. Instead of being this far up my own ass, I could be writing about something that is, like most of my work, only 90% up my own ass.

And thus, my digitization nightmare ended. With the decision to be 10% less up my own ass. It's a realistic goal. Keep your fingers crossed for me.

Video Game Flops: What E.T., Simon's Quest, and Virtual Boy Can Teach Writers



I recently beat *Castlevania* on my Game Boy Advance.

Am I writing this column entirely for the sake of making that announcement? To give space to what is probably, pathetically, the greatest achievement of my life thus far?

Not entirely. But there's a percentage.

The real reason for this column, the 87% of the reasoning that isn't my *Castlevania* announcement, is *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*.

For the un-Castlevania-ed, the first *Castlevania* game is simple. Move from one side of the screen to the other, hit things with a whip until you reach the end of a stage, then hit a big thing with a whip way more times. Rinse (with holy water) and repeat. Simplicity at its best.

The second *Castlevania* game, *Simon's Quest*, threw that simplicity out of a castle window. Which I'm pretty sure is just a hole, by the way. Castle glaziers, you're not fooling anyone.

In the second game, you're the same guy, you have the same whip, but now you're wandering the countryside, which is positively infested with monsters. The gameplay, the once simple plan of killing everything, changes to the performing of bizarre rituals. You get hearts by killing things, and then you trade in the hearts for crystals. Like someone's weird aunt, you spend most of your time worrying about crystals and their potential powers.

It's this second game, *Simon's Quest*, that got me thinking about video game failures, and it got me

thinking about lessons learned from these failures that I could apply to my own work.

Which is why I bring you these writing lessons learned from video game failures.

Castlevania II: Noob's Clues

I described the game to you a little already, so let's skip straight to the problems.

Castlevania II, like I said, was complex. Which the developers must have known because, as you travel the countryside, you come into villages where villagers provide "clues" as to just what the hell you're supposed to do next.

If you're wondering why I used quotation marks around the word "clues", I'll respond with a question of my own: What is a graveyard duck?

Here are some of the *Simon's Quest* clues and their meanings:

"A symbol of evil will appear when you strike the stake."

This means you're supposed to hit these weird orbs with an oak stake in order to break them and retrieve the contents. A little confusing, to say the least. Strike the stake? With what?

"Wait for a soul with a red crystal on Deborah Cliff."

What you really have to do is go to the cliff with the red crystal already in hand, kneel, and wait for a magic tornado to come and pick you up, bringing you to the next area. You know, if there are any English teachers out there, translating these clues would make for an interesting grammatical exercise. Screw *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.

"Get a silk bag from the graveyard duck to live longer."

If you're thinking about some sort of ghost mallard right now, you're not the only one.

The Lesson

Simon's Quest is a good game. It's fun, there's some good action. The music is tops. The gameplay elements, the mysteries, it's like the game-makers knew what they wanted, but their intent didn't quite make it onto the cartridge.

It begs the question. Didn't they have one person read this and tell them it was insane?

When you're writing, it's great to have trusted editors. And it's great to have a very specific kind of trusted editor, someone who is good at saying, "I don't understand what's happening in this scene."



It's easy for you to see what's happening in a given scene. You made it up. And that means it's easy for you to see elements in your head that aren't on the page.

Of course the clues made sense to the creators of *Simon's Quest*. They made the entire damn game. They know the thing inside and out.

What they needed, and what you need, is someone to go through your drafts and make sure your narrative does the simple task of making sense. Make sure that if a character puts down a screwdriver, he's not holding it again, magically, a paragraph later. Make sure that people don't just appear and disappear from rooms. If you're having a character hold a crystal and wait for a magic tornado...don't do that. Okay? Just don't.

If you can take something away from *Simon's Quest*, take away the quest of finding a details editor for you. This person doesn't have to know grammar, and she doesn't have to be an expert in prose. Just someone who nitpicks the physical details and calls you out when you blow it.



E.T.: Burial At Sea... Of Garbage

The Game

Atari's *E.T.* is one of the more famous bad games. A recent documentary sought to prove a large number of the cartridges were, in fact, sealed away in a New Mexico dump. Which they totally were. That's right, the game was so underwhelming that Atari buried surplus cartridges in a dump!

The game, developed by a star developer with a very unrealistic deadline, was going to be huge. It had an endorsement from Stephen Spielberg himself, who either outright lied about playing the game or really understands very little about video games. Almost dangerously little. Which might explain why the *Jaws* game is also horrendous. ...wait a second. There were some pretty godawful *Indiana Jones* games too. I guess it's a good thing he managed to resist licensing *The Terminal*.

The Problem

Developer Howard Scott Warshaw had crunched before, cranking out finished games from scratch in six months. He figured he could bang out *E.T.* in five weeks.

Warshaw finished something. But what exactly he finished, it was hard to say.

E.T. is almost unplayable. You walk around, you fall in a hole. You find stuff, then you fall in another hole. There is almost, ALMOST a game hidden somewhere within the confusion. But it's not the game that should have accompanied a smash film, and although sales were brisk at the outset, Atari was ultimately left holding the bag. A bag filled with millions of copies of a game no one wanted.

The Lesson

Warshaw thought he could crunch. He finished a thing, but that's the highest compliment you can really give *E.T.* Although there IS enough game there to think that, given a little more time, he just maybe could have made something decent.

Take it from a New Mexico garbage dump, you might not be as good at working under pressure as you think. Yeah, you get it done, you get it in under the deadline, but think about it this way. If they'd taken a couple more months on *E.T.* and made a serviceable game, it wouldn't have gone down as one of the worst games in history. It would have been a blip (or a bleep or a bloop or another Atari sound) in history as opposed to being the awful fart-y noise that signaled the great video game crash of the early 80's.

Stop telling yourself you work well under pressure. Crunch isn't a work system. It's a sign of timetable failure.

Daikatana: I Don't Wanna

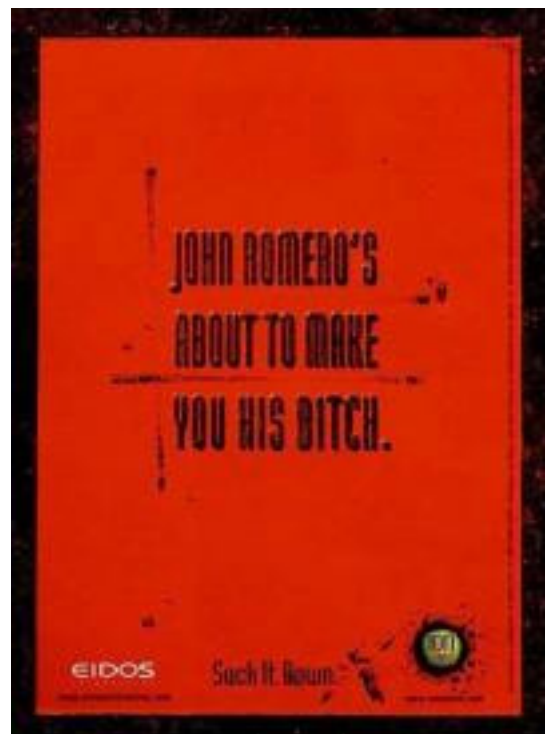
The Game

Oh, *Daikatana*.

If you've never played *Daikatana*, I'll explain it like this: I have no idea. I have no idea what's going on or how you're really supposed to play this game. You're a guy and you're supposed to find a sword. And you walk around and try to do that. I guess. Things kill you left and right. I don't know. It's a horrible experience.

Daikatana is from John Romero, one of the head developers who brought us *Doom* and *Doom II*. It was the next big thing from a promising group of people. Who promised a lot more than they could deliver.

You know, if by making me his bitch John meant that he was going to fool me into buying something I shouldn't, then



I am, in fact, his "bitch." By that definition, I'm also the "bitch" of basically every place in a 50 mile radius that sells donuts, hamburgers, and I'm also the bitch of all of the Little Debbie corporation and its holdings. Damn you, Little Debbie and your Swiss Cake Rolls that aren't Swiss or cake and are barely rolls because they're kinda flat on one side!

The Problem

What's interesting about *Daikatana* is that, demanding I "suck it down" aside, *Daikatana* might have been a good game at one point.

Here's what happened. A development team started making *Daikatana*, then a new engine (think of the engine being like the core programming that makes the game go good) came out. John Romero decided to reprogram the entire game to work with this new engine, which added to the timetable for legal reasons, and then added even more time due to programming problems.

What it means in real-life terms is, this game was developed to fit in with a cohort of others, then re-tooled, and then re-tooled some more to the point that it was three generations behind where it should have been by the time of its release, and it was a shell of what it could have been, tortured through all sorts of different permutations. It ended up as just a mish-mash of craziness.

The Lesson

I had a novel that I wrote. Years ago. And when I went back to fashion it into something new, it'd been too long. My engine, if you will, had changed. A few times. Hell, it'd been ten years.

What the makers of *Daikatana* couldn't do is slap a little year 2000 onto a game they developed in 1997 and make it go.

What I'm encouraging you to do here, the expensive, time-consuming lesson of *Daikatana*, is to finish things, finish them completely, and finish them in a decent timetable. There's incentive to do it. If you don't, you might never be able to. You might not be able to go back. Don't set your novel aside for two years and expect to finish it later.

Steel Battalion: Too Awesome To Succeed?

The Game

What is *Steel Battalion*? It's a game where you pilot giant mechs. You know, the kind made famous by Stuart Gordon's *Robot Jox*. Or more recently by Guillermo Del Toro's *Robot Jox 2: Electric Robo-loo* (might not have the exact right title, but you know the one I mean).

Who doesn't want to pilot a giant robot and destroy things? Seriously, who? Because I have a lot of questions for you, and they are not worded kindly because I think you're a damn fool.

The Problem

With this one, the problem wasn't so much the game. It was the setup. As much as *Steel Battalion* was a game about robots, it was also this:



What you're seeing here is the controller set that allows a player to actually play *Steel Battalion*. It's two sticks and about 40 buttons. Plus some pedals. Oh, and a manual. You're gonna need that.

To start your mech, to START the thing like you start your car, you have to hit 2 buttons, then 5 switches, then successfully complete a test of your timing. Then your mech becomes operable. If you hit the 2 buttons and 5 switches and ace the test, you can BEGIN THE GAME.

Which might sound like a failure...but it's really not. Think about it. There's a certain kind of nerd that eats that stuff up. So what's the problem?

The Problem

The problem with *Steel Battalion* is commercial failure, which is easy to summarize. The game, with controller, was \$200. And the controller was a bear to set up. It's not like you could leave this monstrosity in your living room. Insert joke about sex repellent if you must. Not to mention, this controller ONLY worked on this one game.

While *Steel Battalion* was a pretty cool idea, the reality of playing it in your home was messy, expensive, and insert callback to previous joke about sex repellent here.

The Lesson

Atsushi Inaba, the man behind *Steel Battalion*, said at a 2005 conference that *Steel Battalion* was created to show what can be done with video games that cannot be done in any other medium. And in that way, it may have been secretly, internally, successful. Inaba and his team did create an experience that was immersive and unlike anything else. No movie could replicate the experience of truly piloting a sophisticated machine. Neither could a book. A video game was the best analog experience.

The lesson from *Steel Battalion* is this:

Even though books are often praised for being "cinematic," and even though book-to-movie is the current path, there's something to be said for writing something that only works on the page. Writing a book that could only work in the medium of the written word.

Don't be afraid to write a book that only works as a book. It might not be a commercial success, but like we see with *Steel Battalion*, sometimes commercial success isn't the goal. Sometimes the goal is divorced from commerce, and sometimes, rarely, in a shining moment, a non-commercial goal is achieved.

Virtual Boy: Real Oy, Who Did This To My Eyes!

The Console

The Virtual Boy is Nintendo's most-famous misstep. The console, which was originally pitched as a virtual reality experience players would never forget, was a flop. I had one. I can tell you first hand, this thing was no good. No good at all.

The Problem

Red. All red. And not portable. And look at it!



Once in a while there was a pretty decent graphic or 3D effect. But overall—good god. I'm surprised my eye doctor never asks, "You haven't ever played a Virtual Boy, have you?" I'm surprised I was able to get vision coverage on my health insurance. Playing Virtual Boy should disqualify me as it's a pre-existing condition.

It turns out there were a lot of internal problems at Nintendo that really made this crap stew into a full-on shit buffet. The console kept getting more and more expensive, and the creators were tasked with making it cheaper and cheaper to manufacture. Once they discovered that red LEDs were a

lot easier to get than blue and green, which would have provided the full color the Virtual Boy was originally slated for, the console's fate was sealed. In bright, piercing red.

The Lesson

Who's the man responsible for the Virtual Boy? Mostly, Gunpei Yokoi. Who is also the man behind the Game Boy, *Metroid*, and *Kid Icarus*. This is the dude credited with inventing the D-Pad, that plus-symbol thumb control that guides every character through every NES game.

Yokoi also developed a philosophy called "Lateral Thinking with Withered Technology." What it means is, sometimes cutting-edge isn't necessary to create something great. Sometimes cutting-edge tech gets in the way of making something that's just plain fun. It's a philosophy evident in lots of Nintendo's work. The Wii was underpowered compared to its contemporaries, as is the Wii U. The Game Boy wasn't as advanced as Sega's Game Gear, and yet Game Boy outperformed. Yokoi should have listened to his own philosophy a little more closely while developing the Virtual Boy.

Think about what you've written that you liked. Did you like it because it was something brand-stinking-new? Was novelty its best feature?

Or, more likely, did you like something else about it? Was there a way in which you used existing tropes and turns of phrase in novel ways? Did you build on something accessible, something people could grasp? Did you take a classic story structure and re-tool it?

The lesson here, don't always look to doing something wild and new to solve a narrative problem or create excitement in your work. Remember, you can do it just as well, sometimes better, with something that's proven.

Or, secondary lesson, don't print your book in red LED. I don't know why you would do that, and I hope it wouldn't be necessary to say as much. But just in case.

Brown Bag Your Writing: Using Your Lunch Break To Write



Every week starts the same. "This week, for real, for sure, for serious, I'm going to get some writing done during my lunch break."

Every week ends the same. "Wow. I for sure, for serious, got approximately NONE writing done during my lunch breaks this week."

It's not a huge loss. Until you do the math on about 5 hours of work time per week. Multiplied by weeks in a year. I'm no numbertician, but I know enough to see how all of that time maths up to a whole hell of a lot of missed opportunity.

Got the same problem? Thought so. I thought so, you lazy punks!

Here's what you can do to actually write during your lunch breaks.



MONDAY: The Big Escape

Step one of writing at work, get the hell away from work. It's the only way to avoid the dreaded phrase, "I hate to bother you, but..."

It doesn't matter if you wear headphones, it doesn't matter if you wear horse blinders. It doesn't matter if you wear people blinders, which are a visor equipped with two pointed fingers molded after Moe Howard's that flip down into your eyes. It doesn't matter what stupid, made-up accessory you wear, the nicest people in the world, the most well-meaning people, they'll say "I hate to bother you, but..." when you take your break at work. And you can't listen to them. They're nice and all, but they're liars.

You know who is never interrupted during work? The garbage disposal in your sink. Nobody ever waltzes up and says, "Hey buddy, I hate to interrupt you" and then shoves a hand down in a garbage disposal. Nobody bothers the disposal while it's working. Because they would ACTUALLY hate to. Assuming they hate having a hand ground into a stump. Maybe some people are into that. I haven't actually read the Fifty Shades, so I'm not totally up on what people are into.

No one interrupts the disposal, but everyone interrupts you. Which means you have a choice. Leave your workplace during lunch or create some kind of hand-grinding device that activates when anyone interrupts you. I'm no mechanical engineer, so for me it's an easy choice.

Leave your workplace. Go somewhere you can be alone and where no one will bother you. It might cost you a little time, but it's worth it.

TUESDAY: Drawing Toast



A ten-minute drawing of some toast is a zillion times better than a zero-minute drawing of some toast.

-Leonardo Da Vinci via Danny Gregory.

I see what Leo's getting at. Maybe replace "toast" with pizza and I'm more on board. Or better yet, a Wendy's Double Stack. Considering the Double Stack is under \$2.00 and has square meats, the Double Stack is a severely under-drawn sandwich. Everyone wants to draw a damn \$35-dollar bowl of fruit, but no one goes for the Double Stack? You're all monsters.

Let's talk about Double Stacks some more. Rarely are they perfect. Onion hanging off the side, mustard smear on the bun somewhere. They're so imperfect that I've taken to eating them in the dark.

Eating Wendy's in the dark. It's less sad than it sounds.

Look, a Double Stack isn't perfect. But it's still a lot better than no Double Stack. It's still lunch.

Your goal is replacing lunch with writing time. Just like a lunch, your writing doesn't have to be perfect. Or even good. If you let go of the idea that you have to create perfect, deep work every time you sit down to write, you're going to find it's a lot easier to sit down and write.

Even if you only end up with ten minutes of free lunch time, that's 50 minutes at the end of the week. And yeah, 5 10-minute chunks isn't as good as a single 50-minute block, but it's still a hell of a lot better than spending that same time NOT writing.

Just remember, it's like Leonardo Da Vinci said. A 10-minute drawing of a greasy, delicious Double Stack is better than no drawing of a Double Stack. A ten minute writing session is better than no writing session. And a Double Stack is better in the dark.

That last sentence is good advice AND the title of my new erotic novel.



WEDNESDAY: The Brown Bag

Bring your lunch. Don't go out. If you're the kind of popular kid who has co-workers ask you along to lunches, an easy way to say no is to say you packed a lunch. I assume. I am not the kind of popular kid who gets asked to lunches. When someone asks what my lunch plans are, it's so I can cover the

cool people who go out together. Weep for me. Weep for me and my lonely lunches and darkened Wendy's binges!

The brown bag is your best friend. It saves you time. It saves you money, which is a great way to increase your writing time, long term. If your life is less expensive, you can work less and write more. [Monica Drake wrote about this a lot better than I ever could](#), so I'll leave the heavy lifting to her if you're interested in the life-saving magic of scrambled egg sandwiches.

If it helps, print out the following little messages, fold them up and put them in your brown bag. They're just like the notes your mom used to put in your school lunches. (Note, my mom, though great, wasn't much for lunch notes, so I'm guessing here).

I'm so proud of you for bringing your lunch today! One million of hugs and kisses -Mom

I'm your mother, and this is a lunch, and I hope you have a really good day at work and when you come home you can expect a similar, but better and warmer form of food, possibly cooked by myself or your father. End message. -Mom

At some point we will have to do a talk about sex. I just want you to know that I'm looking forward to it even less than you, so if you could spend your lunch time talking to some of your goofball friends about it first, that would help. That way I can mostly do a Mythbusters thing instead of deciding when to start and stop. Maybe ask that kid Frank. He's weird. He probably has all kinds of dumb ideas about sex stuff. -Mom



THURSDAY: Pen and Paper

Bring a pen and paper version of your work, and let that be the only thing you bring with you on your lunch break. You won't need an outlet, you won't need WiFi, you won't need anything but what you've got. And just as importantly, you won't be tempted away to the world wide internets.

In fact, I suggest that you don't bring anything else with you to work if it's at all possible. If you're in the habit of bringing a book, leave it at home. Just bring whatever needs working on.

Leave your phone at home if you can. Try it. See what happens.

I know, I know. What if your mom dies?

Why does every discussion about whether or not you need a phone always come down to "What if my mom dies?" Your mom is going to die once. It's a one-time thing. And I don't know about you, but I'm not going to be a lot of help in reviving my mom after she gets hit by a bus or whatever. My lack of medical skills will not only mean I'm worthless when it comes to helping my mom, but also that she'll fade into oblivion knowing that her son was not a successful doctor. Really, all my phone does is ensure that I'll be on hand to disappoint my mom one last time.

If you can't leave your phone behind, put your phone somewhere at work and leave it there the entire day. Don't check it before you start your lunch. Don't touch it. Walk out with your work in hand and nothing else on your mind.



FRIDAY: The Art of the Irish Exit

What's the Irish Exit? [In simplest terms,](#)

...the Irish exit refers to the departure from any event without telling any friends, associates or acquaintances that one is leaving. It is almost always the result of being very inebriated/intoxicated.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty, is "Irish Exit" racist? According to a HuffPo article, probably. Although some people call it a French Exit, and then the French call it "leaving the English way." Frankly, I consider this the proper way to get the hell out of somewhere, so I hope any of my fellow Irish people won't be too offended and might instead offer a "Hip Hip Hooray!" to this column.

Oh, wait. I scrolled further in the HuffPo article. Turns out "Hip Hip Hooray" is an anti-Semitic phrase. Scratch the "hip hip hooray." I guess offer me a hearty...I don't even know what, but something not racist. Tell you what, new plan. Think of something to cheer me on, email HuffPo and make sure it's

okay, and then go ahead and say it.

For now, we'll just call it a Pete Exit. And maybe you don't need to worry so much about the drunk part of it when we're talking about leaving your workplace. Although if your work allows you to be staggering around drunk, then I suggest you take advantage of it. The rest of us want to do it, and we're a little pissed that you aren't making use of your workplace benefits.

The key to this act, it's about getting the hell out of a place right when you can and not a moment later.

It's easy to spend the first little bit of your break slowly making your way out. One last email, one last little thing. Chat with a couple people. And then you sit down to write and you've got 8 minutes to make the magic happen.

Don't do it. Get the hell out. And feel free to call it a Pete Exit, drunk or not. I understand my personal legacy, and if it's about leaving somewhere early and drunkenly vomiting next to a dumpster in as dignified a manner as possible, then so be it. No matter what you say, I'm certain that I'll be riding with Immortan Joe and my War Boys in Valhalla.

10 Reasons To Draft 10 Times



There was this time I had to write something, and it had to be perfect.

I was headed to a workshop with my idol. I wanted to know what one of my literary heroes thought of my work, and I wanted to know what he thought of my best work. I had to know.

I'm a drafter. I write something, then revise, revise, revise again. I'm a drafter, so when it came to writing something important, I stuck to the one trick I knew: relentless revision. Relentless, punishing revision that melted my damn eyeballs.

I figured that if I revised the same 5-page story 10 times, I figured it might not be any good, but it would be as good as I had in me.

At the top of each draft I wrote the draft number. 1-10.

By the time draft 3 was finished, the story was taking shape.

By draft 7 I wanted to die in my sleep so I wouldn't have to wake up and face those same stupid pages again.

And by the time draft 10 was finished, I knew what I had. I knew it was as good as I had in me.

This column, this column's going to ask you to do a hell of a lot of work. This column is going to ask you to try writing 10 drafts of your next project. 10 complete, start-to-finish drafts.

Read this column, then give it a shot. I urge you. I challenge you. Whatever you think your writing style is, however you think you work best, I challenge you to trash it and write 10 drafts of your next piece.

Here's why.

1. There Are Some Guarantees

10 drafts isn't going to guarantee you have something awesome. That's never a guarantee. Let's get that out of the way.

There's that saying about a polished turd, of course. And when it comes to turds, I make no guarantees. Turd guarantees, those are between you and your bowels.

10 drafts don't guarantee a great story. But they will guarantee something. Those drafts will guarantee that what you've produced is just about as good as you can make it. If your work is a turd, it's a turd. If you're going to throw a turd down on an editor's desk, might as well make it a nice one.

If a polished turd is the best you've got, if polished turd is your pinnacle, then best not to skimp on the polish.



2. You'll Never Be More Free

Your first draft, there's so much to explore. So much territory to cover, so much to do. And in that first draft, it can be tough to let yourself go. To let yourself really explore, really go down a different path or deviate from whatever skeleton of a plan you had in your head because you get interested in something along the way.

When your rough draft is draft number 1 out of 10, you become a lot less concerned with whether or not you're headed down the right path from start to finish. Doing it just right is a hell of a lot less important. You have 9 more tries to get it right. You can waste a couple paragraphs writing about, I don't know, the sunset or some other crap.

It can be hard to break through and write free. To make yourself not care about spelling or about



grammar. To make it so you can interrupt yourself mid-sentence, start a new paragraph, and take things in a new direction.

10 drafts, it takes all the pressure off your first draft.

For one draft, for one beautiful, messy, hellacious slog of a draft, you're free.

3. You Will Get Over That Hump That Comes In Starting A Second Draft

Coming back to a messy draft isn't fun. It's like leaving for a vacation, and 2 hours in to a 14-day trip you realize that you left a package of raw chicken in the garbage can under the sink. The garbage can under the sink that you meant to empty out before you left.

That messy draft, like that raw chicken, it festers and it brews up something fierce. Like that chicken, it's okay for a while, but it gets worse and worse when you leave it unattended too long. Like that chicken, your messy first draft plagues your mind. Whenever you're in a quiet moment, all you can think is, "Oh, man. That draft is gonna be NASTY by the time I get back to it."

Here's the good news. If you've already signed up for 10 drafts, you've already committed to a hell of a lot of work. You're prepared. You've flushed the idea that you can return to your desk and sit in front of a great, tidy little piece of writing every time. You've already told yourself that this piece is going to be work.

If you've already decided that it's going to be work, then draft 2 of 10, that's no problem. Maybe it's still a mess after draft 2. That's fine. It's a process. You don't have to kill yourself perfecting, smoothing a rough draft in one go. There's sanding to be done, and you do it one pass at a time. As much as you took pressure off of draft 1, you do the same with draft 2. You can get back in there and get to work.

4. You'll Perfect Your Voice

When we talk about voice, we say what something sounds like. We say how a person's voice sounds. We talk about the music in the lines. Aural. All those terms, they're all about sound.

Draft out loud over and over, read those drafts out loud over and over, and you'll get to know your voice. Your voice within a given piece, and your voice as a writer.

When you draft just a few times, you'll catch the big inconsistencies. The things that are obviously discordant (for example, me using the word "discordant" instead of "shitty sounding").

When you draft in the double digits, you'll find the smallest, tiniest things. You'll have conversations with yourself about the individual words, how they fit and whether your character would really say that. Instead of a few big decisions, you will make thousands of tiny decisions. Which is how you cultivated your regular, everyday voice. The one you talk with.

Do the same thing in your work. Build your voice the same way. A thousand tiny decisions at a time.

5. You Get Away From Thinking You're A One-Draft-Wonder

I talk to a lot of people who think there are two kinds of writers. One-offers, people who get it right the first time, and drafters, people who draft and draft and draft.

To you one-offers, I just want to ask. What are you afraid of? What are you afraid is going to happen when you go back over your writing?

Is it that FEELING? That raw authenticity? Is it the feeling that a first, emotional rush of a draft will always be closer to the real feelings than what looks like a cold, clinical self-autopsy of those words?

Maybe it's like coming back from a vacation. Everyone at work asks how your trip was. Everyone asks separately, and each time you tell the story, you notice details drop away. You don't care as much. By 3 P.M., by the time you've told the story a dozen times, it's like it happened to someone else. The passion is dead.

I get that. I understand how that one goes. You can only tell the story about your vacation, the story about that chicken you left in the garbage, you can only tell that story so many times before you lose the thrill, the verve that comes with such a heady tale.

But if you want me to understand your words, if you want me to feel what you felt or understand what you felt, your first expression of it is never going to be as good. It's never going to take me there.

Remember, if you're writing something for others to read, there's a difference between your purest expression of your inner emotion and your communication of that emotion to me.

Break your one-draft habit. While you're at it, break it like crazy and go for 10.

If you're skeptical, I challenge you to try it. Keep your first draft. Keep that file or those pages pristine. Then draft 10 times. Then find a reader to read both. See which one she prefers.

6. You Will Make Better Use Of Your Editors

By the time you bring your piece to an editor, if you've drafted 10 times, you'll know all the weak points. You'll know the stuff that caught you up. The lines you're unsure about. On your tenth draft, you know the material inside and out.

Which is great for your editors. Assuming you're not a defensive person, assuming your editor can be honest with you, 10 drafts lets you skip a whole lot of nonsense with your editor. Typos, cut and paste errors, or little quirks that don't fit with the rest of your piece. All of that is gone, and you and your editor can talk about what you really need to talk about, your story.

You will know the questions you want to ask, and you'll be able to answer all of the questions your editor has. You and your editor, you can have a much deeper conversation about what is and isn't working if all the details are handled.

7. You'll Get To Know When It's Time To Step Away

A question lots of writers have, How do I know it's time to walk away from a piece? How do I know when it's done, when the edits are done?

The answer is impossible, and that's why the question gets asked a lot.

However, I will tell you, as you climb in drafts, you start to get the feeling you're beating a dead horse. And then you get the feeling you've beaten the dead horse so much that you accidentally restart his heart. He rises again, and now you're beating an undead horse. An unholy, undead horse that's terrorizing the countryside with its speed, jumping ability, and taste for human flesh. Just pray that you can find a horse's only weakness, two small squares of opaque material to put on the sides of his head. That trick always seems to disable a horse completely.



When you get up there in drafts, you'll find yourself changing words back and forth. You'll flop back and forth on the same sentence, turning it into two sentences in draft 5, then one sentence in draft 6, then back to two sentences again.

You'll get to know when you're done. Somewhere within ten drafts, you'll feel it. And the more time you spend in that knowing, the more time you spend with the feeling that your work is done, the easier it will be to recognize that same familiar feeling in the future.

8. You'll Lose Patience With Your Own Unnecessary Crap

If you read the same sentence ten times, it'd better be good. If you wrote it ten times, it'd better be worth your damn while.

There's no room for wasted words in a 10-draft story. You're going to be sick of your own nonsense way before you hit draft 10. Stuff that's not mind-blowing but serviceable, more and more of that goes away with each draft. You hit draft ten, and by then it's like...

It's like moving into a house. If you knew you were moving ten times in the next year, you'd suddenly have a lot less need for the stuff that wasn't important to you. That ironic lawn gnome? He'd be left behind 3 moves ago, and you'd never look back.

Consider each draft a move to a new home. In each draft, you have to decide which words are worth carrying with you. If each draft is a move, then 10 moves will get you down to what you really need, down to the story you really want to tell.

The more you draft, the more you move those words around, the more you carry them, the less time you'll have for extra crap you don't need.

9. Writing Becomes Your Life

Tell me a year, tell me "the year was 1993," and I won't remember anything.

Play me The Cranberries' "Linger", I'll remember. I'll remember my boombox. I'll remember the music video, I'll remember the Zenith TV that I watched it on. The Mazda van I rode around in. Give me a life

thing, not a number, and I'll remember.

When you draft a couple times, pieces come and go. They don't stick in your memory. You use that brain space to write something new.

When you draft hard, you remember. You remember the hot summer when you worked on that love story, remember how you drove to the coffee shop where they made terrible coffee but they had air conditioning. When you draft hard, you remember how you worked on that horror piece when you lived in the crappy apartment, the one where you took all those dog sitting gigs from friends because it meant you could crash on a couch and spend a night anywhere else but your hellhole apartment.

When you draft hard, the memories from your life, they become entwined with your writing memories. Your writing, it becomes a part of your life that's no longer separate from everything else.

When you draft hard, your writing, it's your whole life.

10. Because If You Do It Enough, You Won't Need To Do It Anymore

All this stuff, it's about getting to know yourself better as a writer. Your voice, your editor, the things you mess up all the time, your finish line. If you push the drafts to a ridiculous limit, you'll spend more time with these crucial aspects of your own writing than you ever have before.

The best reason to draft 10 times, the biggest endorsement I can give, if you draft 10 times, if you draft enough pieces 10 times, you won't have to do it anymore.

Why 'Fury Road' Is The Best-Written Movie of... Ever!



If you haven't seen *Mad Max: Fury Road* yet, see *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

There's no reason to not see *Fury Road*. Not a single reason that I would tolerate. It might be too late to see it in first-run theaters, which means it's the perfect time for the cheap seats, where the only thing more stale than the popcorn is the concern for whether or not you're sneaking in tallboys.

Fury Road doesn't need me to tell you how awesome it is. How it's redefined the car chase. How its emphasis on practical effects has reminded us that, yes, we can tell the difference. *Fury Road* is the movie that dares to say, "Yes, you can name a character Slit."

But what we might need, what some people might need, is a little bit of talk about just how well-written the movie is.

Indeed, if you looked at all the dialog on the page, you wouldn't find a lot. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is a movie that the director, George Miller, describes as "visual music," a movie he says can be understood by those who don't speak English.

Fury Road might seem like it succeeded for reasons other than its writing.

I'm here to tell you that the writing was key. That good technique and innovation in the writing, those things were the keys to it all. Good writing is what has ensured that *Fury Road* is a movie that will ride eternal, shiny and chrome.



First Things First, Yes, There Was A Script

There's a rumor of sorts circulating that *Fury Road* was scriptless. Let's squash that.

There was a script. It was a different kind of script, a script that started as a graphic novel consisting of 3,500 storyboards. Which is what the actors and crew worked from most of the time.

From that, a screenplay, a more standard script was created.

Let's remember, the "writing" of a movie goes way beyond the words that come out of people's mouths.

If you want to argue whether a script can come in graphic novel format, go ahead and tweet Scott McCloud (@scottmcccloud) about it, because he has a lot more interesting, convincing, curse-free things to say on that topic than I do.

'Fury Road' Was Always Meant To Be A Movie

Yeah, we're in the era of book-to-movie. We're in an era, maybe just coming out of it, where it would seem that selling a book is all about selling the movie. Write a book filled with characters that can be played by teens with swoopy hair and washboard abs, stretch it into a trilogy, and make it cinematic as hell. Boom.

It's been a good thing for some movies. But is it a good thing for books?

[In a recent piece](#), Tom Spanbauer talked about his book *The Man Who Fell In Love With the Moon* and what happened when Ross Bell, *Fight Club's* producer, tried to turn it into a movie. Bell said the book was the best book he'd ever read. He said the book was great, but he couldn't turn it into a screenplay. Bell said the book was, therefore, flawed.

What Bell sees as a flaw, I see a different way. A book that's meant to be a book, a story that's told in its intended medium, that's a beautiful thing. A book being "unfilmable" is hurtful to a writer's wallet, but that doesn't mean the material is flawed. It means it was created in the right medium.

Fury Road was written as a movie. It was always meant to be a movie. And that's why it works.

There's something to be said for writing your movie as a movie, your book as a book, your comic as a comic. There's something to be said for writing in a medium such that any other medium just won't work, using a medium to its maximum potential such that your art's translation to another medium means, necessarily, losing a piece of the story. There's a way in which an inability to translate means you've used a medium to its fullest.

'Fury Road' Was Edited Down To .4% Of Its Footage

In my first ever LitReactor class, a novel-writing class with Max Barry, I was kind of horrified when he told the story of editing his book *Syrup*. Barry said he kept a file of everything he cut. By the time the book was finished, the word count in the scrap heap dwarfed the word count of the final book.

That was bad enough. The truth that I might cut more than I'd keep, that was hard to hear as somebody trying to churn out a first draft.

If Max Barry had told me to George Miller my work, if he told me that my final draft would consist of .4% of my rough draft, I don't know that I could've survived it.

When George Miller shot *Fury Road*, he shot 450 hours of film. 450 hours. All of which was condensed into 2 hours of movie. That's .4% of the rough material that made it into the final cut. Not even half a percent.

73,404 is the number cited for words in *The Catcher In The Rye*, a fairly brief book. If you kept .4% of that book, you'd have 294 words. That's not a lot of room to talk luggage and bathroom graffiti, and you can just forget about solving the mystery of where ducks go in the winter.

It takes guts to cut that hard. It almost certainly means leaving out some very good, very worthwhile material.

Fury Road was edited hard, and the story works, the action works. Everything that needs to be there is. And nothing else.

Good editing is indicative of good writing technique.

Wait. Let me take a page from Miller's book and rephrase that.

Good editing is good writing.

Backstory Filled The World

Fury Road feels full. Not "full" as in "filled with stuff." *Fury Road* is "full" in that it takes place in a real world where people lived and will continue to live after this story ends.

Every vehicle, every character had a backstory.

For example, you can read an entire backstory on the MAN KAT I A1 (8x8) "Doof Wagon". Or you can read the backstory of the wagon's signature rider/player of flamethrower guitar, Coma Doof Warrior

(oh, don't worry, we'll get to Coma Doof Warrior).

You can look up a brief backstory for Rictus Erectus. Which is worth doing if for no other reason than the opportunity to type "Rictus Erectus" into Google.

Everything had a backstory. A conceived, written backstory. Everything existed outside of the movie, outside of the two-hours we saw on screen. Everything in the movie was something before we saw it, and it felt like it would be something long after we turned to watch something else.

The world, everyone in it, it all felt like something real because, narratively, it was.

And the best part, all the backstory informed the movie, but it didn't drive the story.

A crappy movie, a badly-written movie, we'd get all this unnecessary backstory. Sometimes it feels like you watch a movie, and the screenwriter has something to prove. They want to show you how much work they did. They wrote a backstory for everything, and that needs to be on the screen. *Fury Road* left that stuff out. And for good reason.

All the back story filled the world with great stuff. And using that story sparingly meant we got to experience an actual adventure in this world as opposed to a history lesson about a fictional world. Great use of written backstory.

War Boys' life [Edit](#)

War Boys are hand picked at a young age by the guardians of the elevator platform of The Citadel and are indoctrinated as zealots in the cult of V8 with Immortan Joe as their immortal leader. They were based on the Japanese Kamikaze pilots of World War II. They are completely loyal, blindly following their leader, never questioning the morality of his actions. They view death in service to Immortan Joe as an honor.

Selection [Edit](#)

Becoming a War Boy is a privilege, unbeknownst, however to the subject. The guardians of the elevator platform select healthy and strong individuals upon their descent into hordes of The Wretched. In a deleted scene of the movie it is shown that The Wretched want their children to be taken atop The Citadel seeing it as the only chance for their children to survive. That request is often denied in a rather brutal fashion.

Upbringing [Edit](#)

Upon arriving at The Citadel, children are given new names and become War Pups. They are taught to believe in the cult of V8 and worship all things mechanical. They become mechanics, "rev-heads", or "black thumbs", crafting all kinds of mechanical devices, usually involving vehicles and combat, however are not allowed to go into battle yet.

Health issues [Edit](#)

If War Pups survive long enough they become War Boys. Most of them are plagued by cancer, the most common one being lymphoma, others resulting in partial or complete blindness. They require blood transfusions to prolong their lives and it's one of the reasons they hunt for unsuspecting wanderers of the wasteland such as Max. Max's utility as a source of blood is what kept him alive after being captured.



War Boys salute to Immortan Joe atop The War Rig



The Movie Lived In The Crazy

I have three words for you.

Coma. Doof. Warrior.

Yes, none other than the pajama-clad "little drummer boy" with the flamethrower guitar.

If you haven't seen *Fury Road* yet, if you didn't drop this column and get yourself a ticket, damn it, ask someone about the guitar dude. Ask one of your friends. If your friend doesn't know about the guitar guy either, good sign that it's time to drop him as a friend.

Doof is kind of an encapsulation that comes in handy when you're talking about *Fury Road*, when you want to talk about what makes it so crazy and what also makes it so awesome.

What we got from Doof, we got the idea that we were in a fantastic world that still follows our basic rules. No magic, no dragons, no outer space stuff. But insane cars, hyper-real characters and just enough filth to fill in any gaps.

Very often, when a story has a bizarre world, the entry point for viewers is through a character who is also new to the world. Think *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*. Think *The Wizard of Oz*.

It's the fish out of water who guides us through the world, maybe the fish out of water on acid. It's tried and true, but damn, is that the only way to enter a strange world?

The weakness of the fish-out-of-water-as-guide method is, as a viewer, I have the strangeness normalized for me. Because I'm watching a character from my world enter this strange world, I know that what I'm seeing is supposed to be unusual. I know that this chocolate factory is an anomaly, not the norm.

Fury Road presents us, unapologetically, with the weird.

All the characters buy into it. We didn't need someone to say, "Hey, what the fuck with the guitar guy in the pajamas?" We didn't need that because if the characters question the world, if they point out how weird it all is, then the audience is removed from the crazy. When you do that, when you have a character normalize something that way, you take away from the fantastic nature of something, the fantastic nature you're trying so hard to build. By leaving all of that out, by entering us into this world with a narrator who is part of the crazy, we got to live fully in *Fury Road's* crazy.

The Story Answered The Question: Why Live?

I am the one that runs both from the living and the dead. Hunted by scavengers, haunted by those I could not protect. So I exist in this wasteland, reduced to one instinct: survive.

Fury Road answered a question asked by a lot of other movies. A question that's been inadequately answered thus far.

How many people have told you they would kill themselves in a *Walking Dead* scenario? How many

have read or watched one of the many, many stories of post-apocalypse and wondered, Why the hell does anyone even bother?

The characters in *Fury Road* live in a craphole. And I don't just mean Australia. (Note to Australian readers: I have an Australian co-worker that I REALLY need to burn every so often. I do not actually hate Australia, and I apologize for being physically incapable of writing this without slamming Australia one time.) The characters have terrible lives. You have the War Boys, diseased young men who won't live into middle age. You have the Vulvani, the women who live their days on motorcycles in the desert. You have the wives, who live in a prison that has some books, and that's pretty much the best thing you can say about their situation.

You have all this, you have a post-apocalyptic vision that's as bad, if not worse, than most others. And yet, there is a reason for each character to go on. There's a reason they continue. And it's not as simple as "Well, I have this family, so I guess I'll stay alive for them."

Their reasons are insane, they're selfish, and they're bizarre. They're foolish. And sometimes they are nothing more than mental illness. But they exist. A portion of the sparse dialog explains why the characters fight to live another terrible day, and it's a portion well-spent.

George Miller Picked A Great Editor

George Miller hired his wife to edit *Fury Road*. She'd never edited an action movie before, which is precisely why he wanted her to do it. He wanted his movie to look like no other movie.

Margaret Sixel set upon the difficult task, and she proved that up to now, she may have been missing her calling.

Fury Road is edited in such a way that you're never confused about where you are in space. Even when you can't see, even when you're deep inside a sandstorm, even when you're blasting through a desert on a motorbike, the movie carries the viewer through what could be some really confusing sequences. It respects the space and the placement of things so well that it really, really makes you feel like you're there.

And my god is this a welcome break from the frenetic action sequences that come in so many current films.

I unfairly blame the Bourne movies for this, for the way in which action is shot with so many quick cuts that it's hard for a viewer to understand what's going on. It's a technique that can work, that can make the pace feel quickened and make the viewer feel involved. But most times, most times I just feel lost, and then it doesn't take long before I say to myself, "I'm just watching blurs on a screen right now."

Oftentimes, action movies are cut together the way some choose to cut together a story about tripping on shrooms. "Yeah, it's confusing. Because I wanted you to FEEL what it's like to be on shrooms."

It's a personal pet peeve of mine. I like my stories to be stories. Have your experience, then relate your experience to me so I can understand it.

Fury Road does a beautiful job of relating what is an impossible experience, and it does so seamlessly.

It's a fine line, to put a story together in such a way that it makes sense, yet the viewer doesn't feel the editor's breath on her neck the whole time, doesn't feel a presence saying "I'm here. Let me show you where to look. Let me take care of all this." That's beautiful editing.

Beasts In Repose

If you cannot imagine a monster in repose, it is a bad design.

-Guillermo Del Toro

Possibly one of the best scenes in the movie, the slowest scene in a movie that's nearly non-stop, comes when the bad guys are camped out, just sort of waiting around. They're parked, all working on their own little rituals. Prayer, sleeping while suspended from a web of bungee cords, having giant, grotesque feet maintained. You know, evil desert warlord type of stuff.

The bad guys are grotesque and weird, and they take a break. By the Guillermo Del Toro rule, they work beautifully.

It's a difference between a movie like this and a horror movie. What the hell does Freddy do during the day? What does Jason do when he's not taking Manhattan? When the Leprechaun has all his gold in his possession, does he just hang out in his studio apartment all day, sliding coins under his front door and into the hallway in hopes that someone will pick one up and then the Leprechaun will be able to go outside and actually do something?

Fury Road's bad guys are characters. And they're characters because they can exist in states beyond angered action.

Intimacy

There was no way George could have explained what he could see in the sand.

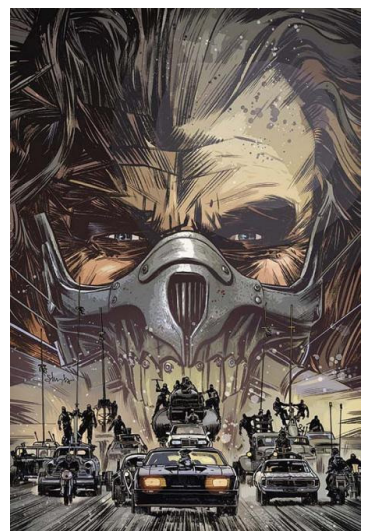
-Tom Hardy

A wild, personal vision is a risk. It can work, and when it works, it's great. When it doesn't work, it's a disaster of *Birdemic* proportions.

George Miller had a vision. He knew what he wanted to make. He knew what he wanted things to look like. He knew, when he made this movie, what he wanted.

Let's face it, you'll never get a Spider-Man movie like this. A movie that plays it fast and loose with a character. A movie that's driven by a singular vision, a movie that even the actors are unsure about during filming.

If I can make one more plea to get you in a theater, if I can give you one



more good reason to sit in front of a screen while *Fury Road* plays, let me try this.

Fury Road is the most intimate big-budget action movie I've ever seen.

I never thought I would describe this kind of movie this way. I never thought a movie with a robot arm and a post-apocalyptic world and an endless car chase would feel personal in any way.

Mad Max: Fury Road is a personal, intimate story, a rare instance where the greatness one person saw in his mind made it onto a screen. It doesn't read like a movie where a dozen of the same ol' people sat around and homogenized something great into something palatable.

Because so much work went into it, because George Miller put in the time and the energy and the effort, because of all the ways in which *Fury Road* is well-written, it manages to be that rare, beautiful confluence of individual voice and spectacle.

Plus, again, just one more time: Flamethrower Guitar.

Fantastic 4's Film Failures



There was a time when I had a personal policy: Support comics, see every comic book movie that comes out.

This was not a good policy.

Elektra. Daredevil. The third installments of X-Men and Spider-Man. Both Ghost Rider films. *Punisher. Punisher: War Zone* sober. All bad policy-based decisions.

Of course, this policy also extended to two Fantastic Four movies. 2005's *Fantastic Four* and 2007's *Fantastic Four: Rise of The Silver Surfer*.

Both movies featured the super team of Mr. Fantastic with his power of stretchy stretchiness, Sue Storm and her invisibility ability, Johnny Storm, the hothead with the fiery temper and flame powers, and Ben Grimm, the Thing. The Thing is a hideous rock monster whose life is stolen from him. It's actually kind of sad. There's nothing cute or funny to say about it.

Wait, Ben Grimm rocks! We did it!

In preparation for the new Fantastic Four movie (and yes, I PREPARE for movies because I'm that guy), I watched *Fantastic Four* and *Rise of the Silver Surfer*. And I watched another, lesser-known Fantastic Four movie, the unreleased *Fantastic Four* from 1994.

Famed director Roger Corman (*Little Shop of Horrors, The Raven, A Bucket of Blood* and of course, *The Saga of the Viking Women and Their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent*) took the helm for a Fantastic Four flick that was eventually purchased by Marvel executive Avi Arad, who attempted to wipe the movie from existence.

I watched all 3 of these movies over the last 24 hours. All three were failures. Here's why.

Fantastic Four (1994)

The plot of this movie concerned a film producer who wanted to retain film rights, and in order to do so he had to make a cheap movie really fast. Also, some kind of diamond-powered laser was plot-critical.

Is that enough detail? Okay, fine. I'll do it for real.

Reed Richards, along with his science friend Victor Von Doom, are studying space nonsense in a lab when Von Doom gets hit by magic lightning.

One sentence into this summary and I used the phrase "magic lightning." Oy.

Doom gets hit by the magic lighting and appears to be dead.

Cut to ten years later. I'm not skipping anything. The movie says "Ten Years Later." It's important to jam ten years into the timeline because Sue Storm was a child in the first sequence, and now she's merely 25 years younger than Reed Richards and love can bloom. "Bloom" meaning "be assisted by bad parenting boner pills".

Reed Richards decides it would be a good idea to do a space mission for some reason. He builds up a ragtag crew: the aforementioned Sue Storm, now a woman. Johnny Storm, who has grown up to be a boring Seth-Green-a-like. And Ben Grimm, a muscle guy. Because if there's one thing you need in space, it's a muscle guy. Just in case space gets pushy.

Reed designs this amazing spaceship, a design for which he recently acquired the final necessary component, a giant diamond. A giant diamond being the only thing that could dissipate space heat or something. Who cares.

Unfortunately, this giant diamond that's somehow crucial to the operation of a spaceship is stolen by a mole man named The Jeweler, who replaces the giant diamond with a look alike giant diamond. Perhaps a veiled message about trying to pass off a cubic zirconia, you cheap bastards.

The team launches into space, unaware their diamond has been replaced. As they enter some kind of space something, because of the inferior quality of their ship's diamond, the four are bathed in rays and they gain superpowers. Reed turns rubbery and can change shape, Johnny can control fire and shoot it out of his body, and Ben turns into a super strong rock man. Oh, and Sue can turn invisible, which is confused for being intangible throughout the entire movie. She may actually be dead and manifests as a ghost only in Reed's tortured mind. I'm not sure. I'd have to give it a second watch to confirm this theory.



Meanwhile, on Earth, The Jeweler has revealed that he plans to use the giant diamond as a wedding present for a blind woman he's never met before. This blind woman also just so happens to be in love with Ben Grimm based on a brief meeting where Ben smashed a piece of art she made. It's the classic romantic tale. Boy meets girl. Oafish boy smashes girl's art. Girl is blind and captured by mole people and given a giant diamond that was a crucial component in a spaceship. Fortunately, her boyfriend is a rock monster and can rescue her with punching.

Also meanwhile, also on Earth, Von Doom reveals he's still alive, and he decides to take the diamond from The Jeweler in order to power a laser that can destroy New York City.

And from there it's pretty much a poorly-choreographed fight scene that ends in a special effects spectacular. "Spectacular" being a VERY strong word for this:



Perhaps the best part, Doom falls off the edge of his evil fortress lair castle place, and Reed reaches down and catches him with stretch power. As Doom dangles below, he continues to taunt Reed, telling Reed he's too gutless to drop someone to their death. Doom makes no pretense about changing his life as Reed struggles to pull him up, and Doom seems to expend a lot of energy explaining just what a jerk he's going to be if Reed would just hurry the hell up and save him. Then Doom's glove comes off and he falls to his doo...demise.

Sue and Reed get married. The end.

Most Fantastic Failure: The Stretch

Let's put aside the effects and the acting and the nonsense plot and the look of the movie and,

honestly, let's put a lot aside.

This movie does a really annoying thing that a lot of superhero movies still do today, even with bigger budgets and better effects options.

People in movies get powers, and then they just sort of bumble into being superheroes. We waste a half hour getting to the superpower, which we all know are coming because the movie is based on a comic book property and there's a FIRE GUY ON THE POSTER. We wait a half hour to see anything remotely super, but we can't spend five minutes on the all-important second origin?

A second origin is what I call it when a superhero story has an explanation for the way a person got powers, and then a second, separate explanation of why the person decides to fight crime.

Spider-Man is bitten by a radioactive spider. And then his uncle is killed, spurring him to fight crime and save others from the same heartbreak.

Batman is the same, but in reverse. His parents are killed, he decides to fight crime, and then the origin of his powers follows, usually represented in comics by a splash page that shows Bruce Wayne in a dojo, lifting weights, and mixing stuff in a test tube while he wears a lab coat.

The Fantastic Four get powers and then...then they fight evil.

Honestly, Marvel Comics tend to have weak power origins. Gamma radiation, spider radiation, really rad steroids, toxic waste in the face. It's the second origin, the Why, that makes these characters great. And it's this second origin that's sorely missed in *Fantastic Four*.

Fantastic Four (2005)

Okay, I'll give this summary a shot too.

The movie opens with Reed Richards and Ben Grimm staring up at a giant, black, metal statue of Victor Von Doom, captain of industry. Just in case you didn't know who is going to end up as the bad guy, one of the characters is named Von Doom and erects enormous, terrifying statues of himself.

Reed Richards, Ben Grimm, Sue Storm and Johnny Storm go into space with Victor Von Doom in order to study some kind of energy thing. Unfortunately, Reed miscalculates the timing on the energy thing, seeming to confuse minutes for hours, and because of this miscalculation the group is bathed in cosmic radiation. Which is why the movie was originally called *Fantastic Four: Reed Richards' Whoopiswoodle*.

Back on Earth, the team, seemingly okay, retreats to Von Doom's secret medical base, which is in the Alps and the rainforest and also within walking distance of Brooklyn. I'm



not an East Coast guy, so maybe this is what the Hamptons are(?).

Everyone's powers manifest. Johnny Storm uses his powers to be fire and snowboard and ride a dirt bike. Sue uses her invisibility to strip naked and then be a mostly-naked Jessica Alba. Reed uses his stretching to reach really far away on a chalkboard and also to get toilet paper from another room, presumably while he's taking a dump. Ben uses his rock monster form to cause a traffic jam on a bridge, smash a dozen cars, and repulse his wife, who decides to show up moments after Ben's first heroic act and divorce him in front of everyone based solely on his looks. Von Doom has also manifested the power to be made of metal and shoot electricity and be the evil jerk we all knew was deep down inside.

Reed Richards makes a machine that turns Ben Grimm back into human form, but Ben ends up deciding to turn back into a rock man in order to punch Dr. Doom and redirect a fire hydrant, defeating him.

Oh, and Kerrie Washington plays a very likable, blind, magical black person. The end.

Most Fantastic Failure: They Didn't Start The Fire

Charisma. Charisma can make all the difference in a superhero movie. It's hard to imagine, for instance, *Iron Man* working without Robert Downey Jr. A lot of actors would have made Tony Stark an unwatchable jerk. Robert Downey Jr's Tony Stark is definitely a jerk, but damn is he a watchable one.

Can we run through the charismometer for *Fantastic Four*?



Ioan Gruffudd as Mr. Fantastic

While not a horrible actor by any stretch (HA!), boy was this dude boring. You can give the movie reality points for portraying a science genius as someone who may not be electrifying as a personality. But overall, the character was flat. (Ha!? Also a joke because he can flatten himself as well as stretching, and...never mind. No one cares. I don't even care.)

Jessica Alba as Sue Storm

With Jessica Alba, it's hard to separate whether she's awful or has pursued exclusively awful projects. She's supposed to be a scientist in this movie, and I would have enjoyed if she'd done one science thing. That's a low standard. One science thing. Other than starring as the least scientific scientist in FF, Alba's probably best known for her role as the abdomen from *Sin City* or the person who is confused in my mind with Jessica Biel, who is best known for her role where she fights a sentient jet plane. I don't want to just talk shit, but let's put it this way: There are people who I see on a cast list and I fist-pump. And there are people who, eh, not so much.

Chris Evans as Johnny Storm

I'm a Chris Evans convert. I was not so much sold on the guy based on his fratish bro of a Human Torch. He's since turned in some good performances in *Scott Pilgrim* and *Snowpiercer*, and his Captain America is a bit bland, although that's certainly the idea. But man, this guy has the most fun in *Fantastic Four*, and still he's kinda unwatchable. I guess I just don't care much about a space captain/X-Games Winner/snowboarder/superhero/guy with awesome sports car/motorcyclist who makes out with a girl in a convertible while he motorcycles alongside her on what appears to be a private dirt road that leads to a spaceship. Something about that is a tad difficult to relate to...

Michael Chiklis as The Thing

Oh. This one hurts. This is the real missed opportunity. Because Michael Chiklis is a pretty watchable dude. When he's not buried by Nerf and a script that pulls punches, anyway.

There's a point in this movie where they almost, ALMOST get there with The Thing. He can't pick up a glass without destroying it, he can't take a bite of food without taking a bite of his fork too, and when he smashes a bar stool and falls flat on his back, he hits a complete low in terms of dignity.

This is one of the only superhero movies where I actually feel that terrible burden. Spider-Man, I don't buy it. Spider-Man has a tragic back story, but swinging all around New York City looks pretty damn fun. And god forbid the Man of Steel cracks a smile while he's flying around the Earth. Batman's a dour dude, but c'mon. Sweet car? Your own airplane? Michael Caine? Substitute grandpa Michael Caine? Michael Caine can be my substitute grandpa any time. That sounds sexual. That's mostly non-sexual, I assure you. Mostly.

The Thing, he had to give up a lot, and this movie almost got across the idea that with great power comes great suckiness of being a lump of orange rocks.

But. The movie just couldn't live in the pathos. They kept pulling their punches. It seems like every time we're on the cusp of something real, someone shits on the moment. Or a pigeon does, anyway.

Fantastic Four just doesn't deliver anyone I want to watch on screen. I get excited when Hulk shows up in the Avengers movies. I'm happy to see J.K. Simmons kill it as J. Jonah Jameson. But there's just nobody in *Fantastic Four* that brings me joy to see on screen. Your characters don't have to be heroic or even nice. Just make them people I want to watch.

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer

Phew. One more.

Now, I have to level. I hadn't seen this one for a couple years, and although I found it streaming, it was not in a language I understood. Nor was it a language I could identify.

On the other hand, I'm not sure that the English dialog would have improved the movie a lot.

It's a true sequel, so we have our same characters, same actors.

The Silver Surfer arrives on Earth, and he flies around on a chrome surfboard and disturbs the environment in some weird way, also accidentally re-awakening Victor Von Doom.

The Surfer makes a giant hole in the ground right next to that Ferris wheel in London, the London Eye. You know, that big Ferris wheel that they call "the Eye" because that's the creepiest name ever for a ride? The Silver Surfer almost knocks that thing over, sort of on accident, and then the *Fantastic Four* show up and save London with America's greatest export, grit. Wait, no. In this movie, America's greatest export is orange rock men. My mistake.

The *Fantastic Four* capture the Silver Surfer with the help of Von Doom (they somehow let him help, don't ask me why) and the military (who help by shooting a missile when they shouldn't, and then correct that error by shooting a dozen more useless missiles).

After capturing the Surfer, the Four immediately decide they shouldn't have done so. It turns out the Surfer is just a herald for Galactus, a giant space cloud that eats planets. If you're unfamiliar with the concept and duties of heraldry, think of the Surfer as a super powered warm-up act. He comes out, tells a few jokes, bores holes in the Earth, and then the crowd is ready for the main event.

In the meantime, the evil asshole WHOSE NAME IS DOOM AND HOW DOES NO ONE PICK UP ON THIS takes the Surfer's board and uses it to fly around and break stuff and be generally powerful and evil.

Johnny Storm absorbs the powers of all the members of the *Fantastic Four*, negating the entire point



of the group dynamic, and beats Doom by himself. The Surfer's board is returned, and then Galactus arrives to eat the Earth. Luckily, the Surfer has decided to betray Galactus and kill him, mostly because Sue Storm looks like someone the Surfer loved on his alien home planet. So the good news here is that alien ladies look like Jessica Alba. The bad news is that they look like Jessica Alba with a bad wig and weird blue contact lenses and like they're sleepwalking through a script about chrome aliens or whatever.

Most Fantastic Failure: The Invisible Movie



This movie has an uncanny ability to NOT show viewers what they want to see.

I want to see The Thing clobber something. I want Mr. Fantastic to stretch. I want to see the Torch light stuff on fire, and the Invisible Woman...I don't want to see her at all, I guess. I want her to be invisible and using her powers, is the point.

The Torch chases the Silver Surfer. The four save some foreign Ferris wheel. The Thing yells at a bear and drives a crane. And then we get to Galactus, who, instead of being a giant purple guy like in the comics, is a swirly cloud of nothing. Just a big dustball of nothing.

I guess we don't have time for all the fights in the world. But you know what we DO have time for? We have time for some of the most shameless product placement of all time. Reed Richards makes a Fantasticar, a flying car that splits into four separate flying cars. He unveils it, and it has a Dodge emblem on the front, presumably because it was made from an old truck? Because he made a hovercar from a Dodge truck? Somehow? And if that wasn't enough, Johnny asks if it has a Hemi.

Arguments about the efficiency and power provided by combustion chambers with domed cylinder heads aside, especially when a vehicle is performing at moderate power levels as opposed to full

throttle, goddamn was that product placement hard to swallow.

I want to see superheroes do super stuff. I don't want to see them attend two separate weddings. I want to see a giant guy come from outer space to eat the planet, not a dust swirl. Basically, I want some stuff to happen, and I'd like to SEE that stuff.

I guess what I'm asking for here is a motion picture of sorts.

Fantastic Four (2015): The Rock-Hard Sell

What will become of the newest entry in the Fantastic Four movie collection? What can we expect?

I like the casting of Michael B. Jordan. And Billy Elliott as The Thing is pretty different, but it's worked in the past. Hugh Jackman was a Broadway dude before his turn as Wolverine. Heath Ledger was a pretty boy from that knight movie that had a Queen song in it.

Really, the movie is going to be what it's going to be. And my choice comes down to how I react to it as a fan.

I can let bitter experience be my guide. This is definitely the smart choice. *Fantastic Four's* have been anything but.

But I choose to be the kind of fan that imagines possibility. Things might be crappy, but it's just more fun to believe they might be good, even if that belief can only last until the movie actually comes out.

Let's put it this way. In a couple weeks we'll know if the new movie is good or terrible. I've got my entire life to confirm that something terrible is, in fact, terrible. But I've only got a couple weeks to hope that it'll be (I'm doing it) fantastic.

Can Good Writing Save Spider-Man?



Hey web-heads. Smilin' Stan here.

Okay, not really. I'm Pete. But I really care about Spider-Man. To the point that I've ALWAYS wanted to write a comic, put an asterisk next to a word balloon, and then write something down below like, *"See ish #3314 for the first appearance of the Outer Space Wolf From Outer Space -Smilin' Stan."*

That's a dream of mine. Let's just establish that you're dealing with that kind of arach-nerd here.

Even as a fan whose blind allegiance to Spider-Man has led him to defend some really dumb stuff, I can recognize that the Spider-Man movie franchise is in trouble.

Let's face it. The Spider-Man movies have been, so far, hit and miss.

The Spider-Man movies have been pulling in less cash as they go.

A new reboot has been announced. A third reboot in less than 15 years.

And let's face something else. Marvel blew it by rebooting Spider-Man as white. Whether you consider it a social justice issue or simple marketing, they blew it. Although I'm still holding out for my Heroes For Hire movie and a beautiful team-up between Luke Cage and Iron Fist, even though a blaxploitation/kung-fu movie already exists in the form of the near-perfect *The Last Dragon*. Which includes great stunt-casting: Vanity! The lady, not the personality trait.*

**as for a Marvel superHEROINE movie, I'm into it, even though the bizarre reality is we might get a second Howard the Duck movie first. But if anyone is looking for suggestions, I think the time is ripe for a Saturday-Night-Fever-Esque Dazzler movie -Smilin', Sexistin' Stan.*

Probably the most damning evidence, or the most disturbing to me personally, Spider-Man is a less popular character than Captain America at this point.*

* *Captain America* was so lame in the 90's that we made him into a werewolf. Just to try SOMETHING. -Smilin-With-Wolf-Fangs Stan.

Spider-Man is less popular than Thor. The blonde bombshell who talks like someone drunkenly recounting Shakespeare In The Park.

If we face all the facts, Spider-Man's screen days might be limited.

Yet. There's a glimmer of hope.

Recently, some really, really great Spider-Man comics have been written. *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* by Brian Michael Bendis, *Amazing Spider-Man* by Dan Slott. *Spider-Man and the X-Men* by Elliott Kalan, *The Superior Foes of Spider-Man* by Nick Spencer. All great.



What lessons can the movies take from the comics? Can the good writing in these comics save the movies?

A New Story Wouldn't Be The Worst Thing In The World

We've now seen a spider bite a teen twice on film. And we've seen that teen's uncle be shot twice. And we've seen a teen deal with these events. Twice.

And now we're headed for a third run at the same origin story.

You'll notice something with the Christopher Nolan Batman movies. *Batman Begins* is pretty damn different from Tim Burton's *Batman*. *The Dark Knight* draws from existing material, but it's a new story. Same deal with *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Avengers and Avengers: Oops We Made An Ultron are cribbed from comics, but there's a lot of new in there too.

Spider-Man comics have been running for long enough now. There are plenty of stories beyond the origin. Maybe try one.

With Great Laughter Comes Great Cry-Ability

The Spider-Man comics that are written right make us laugh.



**Spider-Man and the X-Men -Studious Stan.*

And they make us cry.



**Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man Annual #1, a horrifically sad story that I can't recommend enough -Sobbin' Stan.*

Every writer knows that you can laugh and cry in the same story, and every writer knows how much one is improved by the other.

We've seen Spider-Man cry in the movies. We've seen the tragedy onscreen. Now let's have a couple more jokes, huh?

Peter Parker is a funny dude. J. Jonah Jameson* is a funny dude. Any one of these characters can be funny. We need them to be sad, and we need them to be funny. We need both.

**In fact, one of the few redemptive moments in Spider-Man 3 is the portion where J. Jonah Jameson reacts to the runaway bride situation at his son's wedding -Side-Splittin' Stan.*

Good Writing Sells A Patently Ridiculous Concept

Dan Slott has been writing the Amazing Spider-Man comics for several years, and I have to say, he's one of the best. He'll be in that pantheon of great writers.

And I have to say, he's sold me on some crazy-ass storylines.

Spider-Man's entire life was sort of reset in a deal with the devil.*

**Actually, it was a deal with Mephisto. At the time, Marvel wasn't owned by Disney, who has trademarked the Devil as they are the ones who currently have Satan contained in an underground lab -Slanderous Stan*

In another arc straight out of General Hospital, Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus swapped bodies. Long story short, they did it with technology. Which is silly, but no sillier than peeing in a fountain at the same time as Ryan Reynolds.

Comic book stories, let's face it, are pretty ridiculous. Evil elves want to make our dimension into a hellscape that's really windy because... they're jerks? A purple space guy assembles some jewelry into a giant golden boxing glove in an attempt to convince Death to go steady?

Here's the thing of it. These crazy stories totally work. They're a joy to read.

Good writing can make a lot of things work. Even a body swap not facilitated by urine. Even a bejeweled boxing glove. Even a spider man.

I don't even know how to describe it better than the way Joe Bob Briggs describes so many movies: 'Too much plot getting in the way of the story.'

Make Me Care About A Non-Super Character

I care about Aunt May. In the comics, anyway. Probably because they make her a human.



In the comics, side characters are people. Well, okay. Most of the time. They have their missteps, which sometimes involve creating a giant space Twinkie:



And then there was this whole debacle:



**I'm progressive as hell, but I still think supervillain marriage weakens the institution of marriage!
-Sanctimonious Stan.*

I care about these side characters, but only in the comics.

Superhero movies have a weakness, and it's that I don't really care about the non-super characters. The only way that they've found to try and make me care, they have a regular character pick up a gun and shoot it, or they pick up a pipe and whack a bad guy around. But I can't think of a superhero movie where a regular person, a person not involved in the super stuff, was someone I cared about.

How about you make me care about the regular people a little?

How about when a character is falling in slow motion, I want Spider-Man to save that character? Not because I think Spider-Man needs the win, but because I want to see that character on screen again?

Give me that panic people had in *Toy Story 3* when it looked like the characters were headed into the incinerator!*

**Luckily, the Toy Stories (that's what I call Woody and Baz and those guys) didn't die. They lived on to sprout further films, proving that even Pixar isn't above tricking us with possible death, which is a ploy I invented in the 60's -Spoilin' Stan.*

Pardon My French, But How About A Fuckin' Story!?

What is the story of the Spider-Man movies?

For the most part, Spider-Man gets powers, and coincidentally, so do some real jerks. Then it's like, I don't know, a heist?

The plot summary for *Amazing-Spider Man 2* reads like...I don't even know how to describe it better than the way Joe Bob Briggs describes so many movies: "Too much plot getting in the way of the story."

Spider-Man 2 had the closest thing to what could be summarized as a coherent story. At least we had a Spider-Man, who wanted to do good, and a bad guy who wanted to do good, but found himself stuck doing bad to do good.*

**Sorry for that sentence. It's awful. But I thought it would be easier to just apologize and move on rather than smooth it out -Syntaxin' Stan.*

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to give us a story that can be summarized. Spider-Man gets powers, he becomes involved in X, which causes Y.

Sense Of Wonder

Does anyone else remember this?



It was this slow-mo sequence from *Spider-Man*. There is stuff flying at Spider-Man, there is fire, it's bonkers. And when I saw this in the preview, it was the kind of thing that gave me a sense of wonder.

What's the next-best sequence in the spider-film canon? Honestly, it's the DVD menu for *Spider-Man*, which is the scene from the end of the movie where Spider-Man is swinging around the city.

Write a story, and then have the good sense to know when there's an opportunity to step aside and let something cool happen. I don't need every action sequence to be laden with placing a beacon on a device to create a force field to...ugh, enough. Give me a story, and let some of the true wonder live outside the story.

Maybe Bring In Some Comics Writers

Writers don't always make great movies. But I have to say, with the disparity between the movies and comics, it wouldn't kill me to see a Brian Michael Bendis or a Dan Slott on board. It sure as hell wouldn't hurt my chances of planting an ass in the seat if I saw that Elliott Kalan did some punch-up. If G. Willow Wilson* worked on the dialog, you wouldn't hear me complain.

G. Willow Wilson is writing Ms. Marvel, which wins the award for best non-Spider-Man Spider-Man dialog. -Smilin' PakiSTAN.*

***The new Ms. Marvel is Pakistani-American. I don't know. That nickname was probably taking it too far. -Shitty-At-Columns Stan.*

5 Exercises From Comics Creators That Will Save Your Prose



No, we're not talking about this:



No, you don't need a motorcycle jacket to support your lower back for your Bizarre Bicycles:



And if you're looking to get a sculpted butt just like the ever-lovin', blue-eyed Thing, look elsewhere:



We're not talking about your thighs or your butt. You figure that stuff out on YOUR time. Nope, we're talking writing exercises from the experts in comics that just might save your prose.

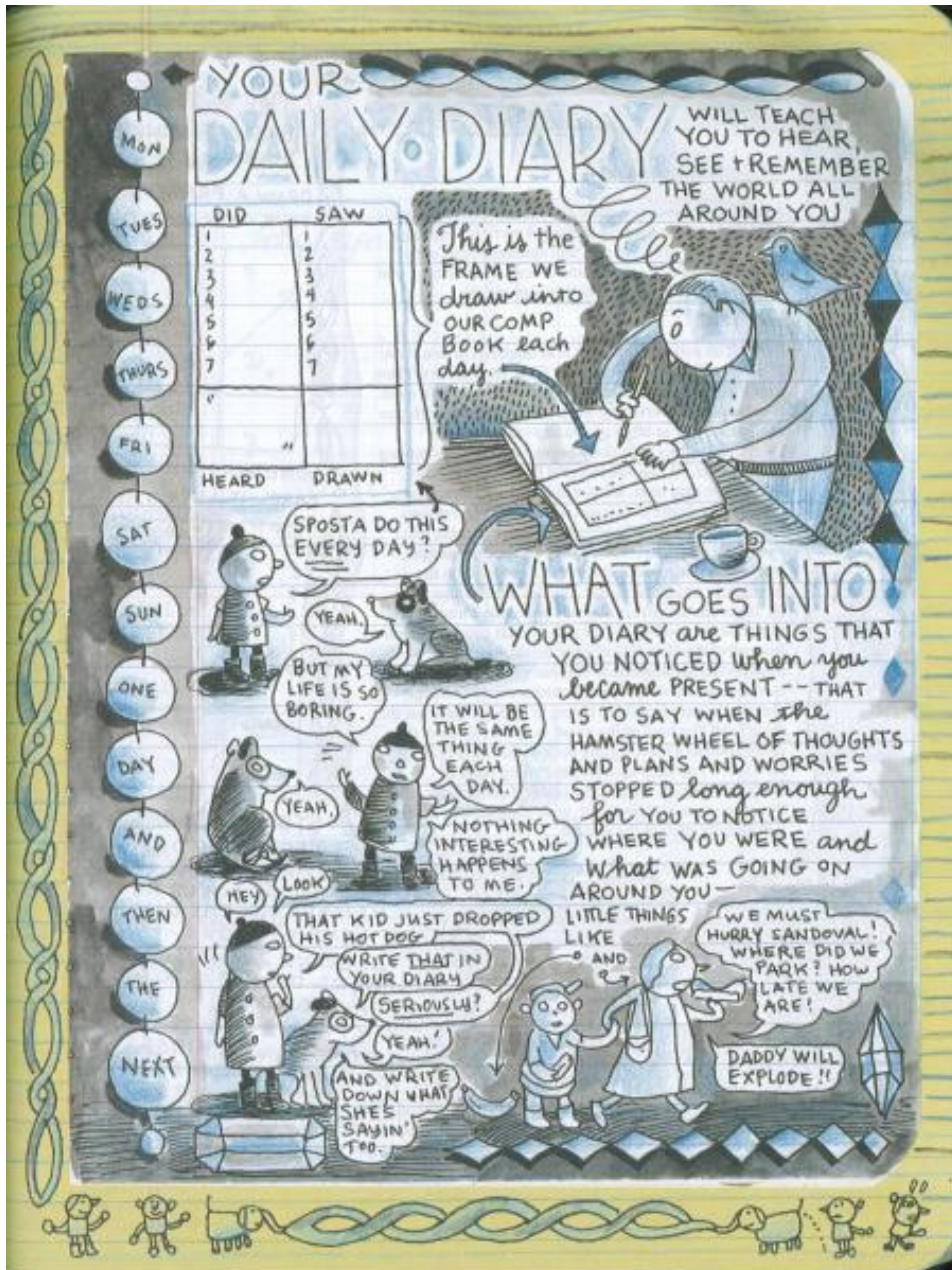
Lynda Barry And How You're Journaling Wrong

You should be keeping a journal. You don't need me to tell you that. But what you might need is some advice on how to keep up with it. We all have that problem. You get a sweet notebook, maybe a new pen, and then this, FOR SURE, is going to be the journal you are REALLY going to use every day.

But it's hard. You forget. And then you get behind. And then you lose the little key that opens the lock on the front of your journal. Things pile up, and it's tough to keep journaling.

Lynda Barry's got a solution. And she knows what's up. Hell, she's been on the coloring Zen thing for years, instructing her students to color complex pictures with crayon as part of her classes.

Check this out, Lynda Barry's journal page structure:



Instead of starting with a blank page, give yourself some boxes to fill. Take Barry's advice. Try it for a week. 4 minutes a day will not only leave you with a nice archive of phrases and actions, but will train you to be on the lookout for great material.

Ivan Brunetti's 5-Second Car

Ivan Brunetti has a great exercise for burrowing into the essence of an object.

Think of something complicated. Not complicated the way my feelings for Ke\$ha's "Timber" are complicated. Something mechanically complicated. I'll use a chainsaw as an example. Probably because I just mentioned "Timber." Other good options include a bike, car, or one of those water jetpacks that are cool and still somehow underrated by society as a whole. It's a jetpack people. Sure, it only goes over water, but 70 percent of our planet's surface is water. Do the math.

For Brunetti's exercise, you'll draw the same complicated object a few times in a row. First, set a timer for 3 minutes. Draw your object, and don't let your pen stop the entire time. Keep adding detail until the clock runs out. Next, draw the same object, don't stop, but this time you've only got 1 minute. Then a third drawing, 30 seconds. Then 15 seconds. Then 5.

What you'll see is that your faster drawings focus on the essence of the object. If you chose to draw a chainsaw like me, you'll probably find your 5-second drawing breaks something complex down to a few basic shapes. A chainsaw comes down to its very essence.

You can do the same thing with your prose. Write a chainsaw. 3 minutes, no stopping. 1 minute. On down the ladder until you've got 5 seconds to create a chainsaw with words. Use visuals, talk about the weight of it.

What you're likely to find is a balance. Three minutes on a chainsaw is going to be too much. 5 seconds won't be enough.

What you're likely to find is the essence of an object. Which things have to be present in your description in order for something to be, truly, a chainsaw?

And what you're likely to find is you don't know a chainsaw as well as you think. Even if you've heard "Timber" enough times to wear out an MP3. Impossible, you say? I beg to differ.

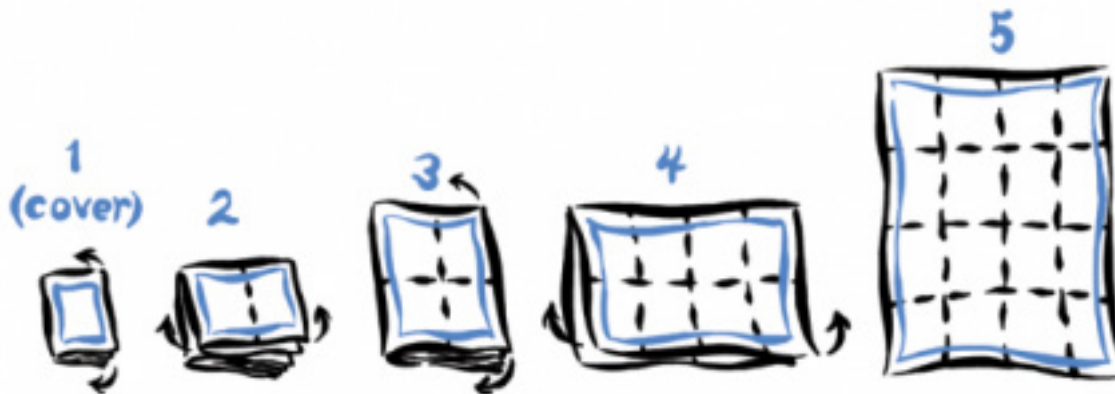
Jessica Abel and Matt Madden's Foldy

For this exercise, we'll write an entire book. Get out a sheet of paper, 11x17 if you've got it handy. I don't know, maybe you've got extra sheets of paper in weird sizes. Maybe you're the one putting up the obnoxious, huge Garage Sale signs in my neighborhood. By the way, if that IS you, go ahead and feel free to look up the spelling of the word "garage." The answer might shock you.

Take your paper and fold it according to the directions from our friends at foldycomics.com:



What you'll have is 5 sections. And you'll notice that each section is a little larger.



What we're going to do is write a story using each section as a discrete chapter or part of the story. Your first space, that's your intro. You don't have a lot of room to hook your reader, and you have to compel her to unfold to section 2. So make it good. Then, your next section, you've got a little more space. Use it wisely. Write something that earns the space. Give the reader enough that they want to flip to the next part. By the time you hit the last section, you should have enough going on to fill the space. Secondly, you should try to not only use the space, but to also ramp up the excitement in each section. The largest section should contain not only the largest number of words, but also the most exciting content.

It's a great exercise where you, the writer, have to match the physical space limitation with an increase in action and excitement.

Jeffrey Brown's Tracing

Comics artist and writer Jeffrey Brown puts his classes through a simple exercise. Take a single, fairly complex panel from a comic, copy it as closely as possible, and then redraw it using your own style.

If you want to try it for yourself, might I suggest this gem?



When we talk drawing, it's very common for artists to learn by imitation, even tracing. Tracing is encouraged, good practice. They sell special paper for it, for the love of Odin.

In writing, we don't make tracing a habit. But we should.

Find a section of prose you really like. If you're not sure, try the last page of *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson. Copy it by hand. When you copy it by hand, you have to think about every word. You'll question why every word goes where it does, how it was all put together. When people talk about reading as a writer, this is a great way to access that skill.

There are worse things you could do than check out 10 books at the library and copy a page from each.

When you finish tracing, pick out a few of the things that make the section work. That make it tick. Then, write your own section using the same tricks.

Kochalka and Crafty Enemies

James Kochalka got an avalanche of shit for his letter/essay "[Craft Is The Enemy](#)" in which he encouraged creators to stop perfecting their craft and start creating stuff. The strong reactions were understandable. Who wants to be told that 6 years and \$100k of art school was a waste of time?

[A cherry-picked, typical response:](#)

The last thing modern comics is in need of are more naive artists lacking technical skills, when the majority of comics that are currently being published are already so horribly drawn that there's little to be gained by looking at them

If I may, I think Kochalka's point wasn't that skill is worthless. His point was that waiting to create until all your skills are in place is a mistake. Keep working, and keep creating. You don't have to hone

every skill before you start writing. You don't have to read the dictionary first. You don't have to read every classic.

Just get cracking. Read the dictionary on your breaks. Or do a couple Jameson roars. Either way.

The Jameson Roar

KNEEL ON THE FLOOR WITH YOUR BOTTOM RESTING ON YOUR HEELS AND YOUR HANDS ON YOUR THIGHS, PALMS DOWN.

1



BEND FORWARD, OPEN YOUR EYES AS WIDE AS YOU CAN, AND TENSE UP EVERY MUSCLE IN YOUR BODY.

2



3

STICK YOUR TONGUE OUT AS FAR AS YOU CAN, SPREAD YOUR FINGERS WIDE APART AND HOLD TENSE FOR A COUNT OF 12.

4

SLOWLY RELAX, BRING YOUR TONGUE BACK WHERE IT BELONGS AND RETURN TO YOUR STARTING POSITION.

25 Book Marketing Ideas for the Desperate and Shameless: Field Test



I have a few books up in the Kindle store. Like a lot of writers, I assume. And like a lot of writers, mine cover topics such as pre-adolescent boy ninjas and masturbating in a tiny house.

I make a lot of assumptions. They are often false.

At the risk of force-feeding the snake its own tale, if you will, I read a column here at LitReactor called "25 Book Marketing Ideas for the Desperate and Shameless" by Max Booth III.

Behind the sage-like advice, which we'll get to, there was an expression of something familiar. That feeling of how hard it is to stand out in this brutal world of self-publishing and small presses.

As I read each marketing idea, I thought about my book, the little Kindle book that couldn't.

The book itself is pretty shameless. I'm not a proud man. Why not take these 25 ideas out on the road?

01. Jump into the middle of every online conversation and comment about how the topic reminds you of your book.

No problem. Here's a comment thread for The Onion A.V. Club's review of Ernest Cline's *Armada*:

A.V. CLUB Ready Player One author's follow-up Armada is a pale imitation of his

Disqus on your favorite communities. Get Disqus

Dismiss ✕

454 Comments A.V. Club 1 PeteyPabBackInT...

Recommend 4 Share Sort by Oldest ▾

Join the discussion...

PeteyPabBackInTheHouse · in a minute

I just don't get it. D? I feel like the scale is all wonky here. I read a Kindle book called the Time Traveling Racist about a racist professor who makes a time machine from a tractor. I read another one called Ninja Sons that was 3 Ninjas told from the dad's perspective. Now THOSE are D's. As in "disgracefuls".

^ | ▾ · Edit · Reply · Share

KJB · a month ago

Ernest Cline wrote something that sucks? That's impossible!

And here's another from a BuzzFeed article about the worst first dates of all time:

Facebook Conversations

18 Comments

Sort by Top ▾



Oh man. One time I went on this date. And this dude, all he did was talk about this stupid, self-published Kindle book he wrote. He was so proud of it. Granted, handsome. Good dental hygiene. But how many times can a person tell you about this book he wrote where it's the movie 3 Ninjas as told from the dad's perspective?

Also post on Facebook

[Log in to Post](#)

The A.V. Club comment pretty much disappeared right away. I guess their plug detector is dialed in. As for the BuzzFeed comment, someone else left a snarky reply letting me know I was bashing on fan fiction. It was too perfect, this guy telling ME that I should be nicer to ME. I was 100% against trolling before, and now I have made a complete U-turn. Maybe More of an O-U-turn, where you do a donut in celebration, then turn around.

02. Jump into the middle of every offline conversation and slap somebody in the face with a copy of your book.

I got all the way to number 2 before I realized there was a problem. My book was never in print. Luckily, it's just a novella. And luckily, my library has free printing. A few pamphlets and staples later, and I had an artifact ready for the slappin'!

As much as I'm shameless, I'm not a total jerk. So I lightly slapped a couple volunteers in the face, who received a free copy of the book.

I'll say this. Slapping someone across the face with your book is one of the most satisfying sensations I've ever experienced. I don't give a hot damn if it works as marketing, it's just good for the soul.

03. Jump into the middle of a game of jump rope and start singing an old school jump rope rhyme with references to your book.

Unfortunately, there are no rope jumpers in or around my neighborhood. And any attempt I might make to approach a group of young girls on the street, I can only imagine that would go poorly. However, I've created a pretty good rhyme. Please memorize it in case you come across a group with a jump rope and you're not an off-putting, indoors-y weirdo.

To the tune of "Miss Mary Mack":

*They're Ninja Sons
Sons
Sons
They got nice buns
Buns buns
Hey you can't say
That
Shit
They are just kids
Kids
Kids
You'll go to pris
Pris
Pris
For this many life
Sen
ten
ces:*

1, 2, 3, 4...

04. Send the police anonymous notes crafted from cut-out newspaper clippings and pretend to be a ruthless serial killer. Claim the secret to your identity can only be found within the pages of your book.

We've officially run into illegal territory. But there's nothing stopping me from creating a ransom note and kind of just...what's the word for littering, but on purpose? Still "littering"? Great!



Intriguing, no?

For reference, the text reads: want to see your precious... "personal object" intact again? then read Ninja Sons (Amazon.com, B00TKPB6ZY). It's your only hope for gratificational release. You scum.

05. Find an empty table at your local Barnes and Noble and set out a dozen copies of your book. Even if the store doesn't carry it, you can always bring your own. Hire actors to line-up at the table like a legitimate book signing.

This is where things started to get useful for me.

It's one thing to slap an acquaintance across the face with a copy of your book while saying, "Calm down. You're being hysterical." It's quite another to set up in a legit bookstore and try and sell copies of what all of a sudden feels like a cheap pamphlet in your hands.

I couldn't stand behind the legitimacy of my project in that context. My little book felt so...well, stupid. Which it totally is.

One useful part of marketing, it does make you confront the fact that your book might be garbage. Setting up a fake reading is a pretty good test of just how much you believe in your work.

06. Start socializing with criminals and convince them to keep a copy of your book on them during all illegal activities. If enough people get arrested with your book in their pockets, a conspiracy is inevitable. Maybe you'll get lucky and one of them will shoot a celebrity.

My criminal friends aren't hardcore. But I have a friend who's gotten more traffic tickets than I thought was humanly possible. It's only a matter of waiting until she does hard time for rolling

through stop signs. Everyone should have a friend like this because you'll stop worrying about how many points are on a license because if SHE'S still got them, then what are you worried about?

07. Uh...shoot a celebrity? [Editor's note: please don't do this.]

Ok. And for the not-record, I was going to make a joke about how it worked for Suge Knight. But that dude still scares me. Blood clot and all.

08. Change the title of your book to Stephen King.

Done.



Strangely enough, it doesn't seem like anyone else had done this. I scrolled through 15 pages of Amazon "Stephen King" search results, and the closest thing I found was a book called *King Stephen*, which is allegedly a book about some old king. But you and I know the truth.

09. Gradually check-out every title in your local library and replace the interiors with your own book.

I...kinda work at the local library. And there's a saying that has something to do with defecating where you eat. A saying that, if *Mad Men* is to be believed, mostly has to do with not having sex with secretaries.

But there's a library not too far away.

This is a life situation where I'm confronted with the fact that I will never be smooth.

I go in this library. And it's tiny. One room. I make about five laps to decide where my book should go. I decide I'll slip it into a comedy book because, hey, at least that makes sense.

I slip my book in between another book's pages. Then I immediately start panicking about how I'm going to make a getaway. From the crime of leaving a pamphlet in a book.

I over-think it brilliantly and completely, and I pretend I'm getting a phone call and, hey, I'm a good citizen. I'll take it outside the library. Cue *Mission Impossible* theme.

Let's not discuss how much sweat I produced during this act.

10. Start an open call for submissions for an anthology of stories sharing the same universe as your book. Make sure you specify writers will need to buy a copy and read it before submitting, otherwise they won't know what to write about. Offer ten cents a word. Cancel the anthology one day away from the deadline.

ahem

Attention readers. I'm putting together an anthology of fiction as set in the universe of my book, *Ninja Sons*. You'll probably need to purchase a copy and read it in order to understand what we're going for. You might need to read it 2 or 3 times because it's a complex book, basically the 90's movie *3 Ninjas* told from the dad's perspective. You might also need to purchase the book again each time you read it. It's a little-known fact that Kindle books tend to wear out after a single reading. If your story is selected, I will offer you ten cents per word*. Please leave any submissions in the comments below, beginning with the word "Submission:"

*Maximum 10 words.

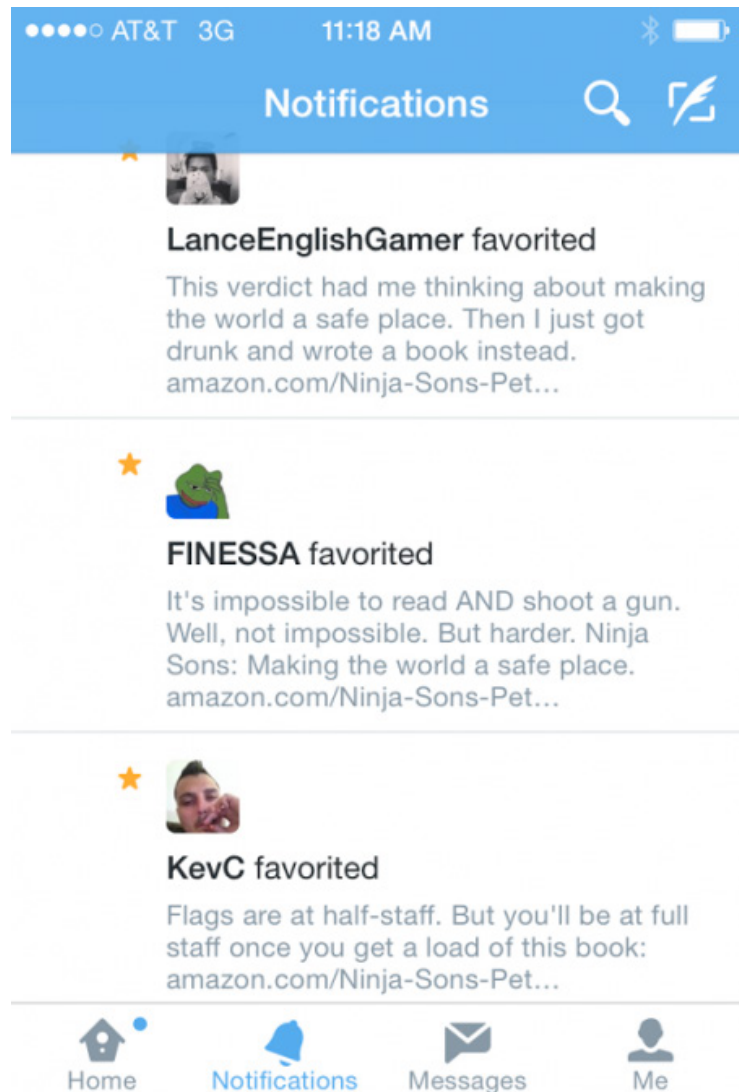
11. Wait until a national tragedy strikes. Create advertisements suggesting those who died would still be alive if only they'd purchased a copy of your book.

I waited for a tragedy. The closest thing, we got a verdict on James Holmes, the theater shooter from Aurora. Depends on your politics, but it's tragedy-adjacent news, anyway. A few well-crafted, paid tweets later, and I was on my way! To hell!

12. Make fake Amazon accounts and leave horrible one-star reviews of your book. Be cruel. Be a bully. The worse you make fun of yourself and the less you focus on the book, the better. Then show people on social media, accompanied with a sad emoticon. Now watch as people feel sad and buy/review your book to "get back" at the bully reviewer.

As it turns out, leaving a fake Amazon review is harder than you'd think.

First off, in an effort to curtail review farms, an account holder must make a successful purchase before leaving a review for anything. I



don't have to purchase the item I'm reviewing, which you'd think would be the obvious step, Amazon. But you do have to purchase SOMETHING.

Then, you leave a thoughtful review, and someone reviews your review and decides if it violates the review policies because I guess everyone's gone soft.

I tried.

For the record, here's the review text:

*1.0 out of 5 stars
Haha, wow. SUPER bad. And written by a loser.
By David P.*

I was a bully in high school. And I heard the same thing over and over. Watch out who you bully, because those nerd dorks are going to be your boss someday.

Well, it turns out that's totally not true. I had a GREAT time being a bully in high school, and I'm the boss of a lot of total dweebs today. I should have known not to take life advice from a teacher because if they were so smart, why would they be teachers having to deal with stuff like me stuffing kids like Peter Derk into toilets? Believe me, if you're any kind of worthwhile person, your job doesn't involve telling teens to not stuff each other into toilets.

Anyway, I was screwing around on my computer at work because that's all I have to do because I'm the boss of a company and I make all the nerds do work for me, and I came across a book by my high school chum here. What a pile of trash! Not even worth reviewing. So instead, I'll review things from the past, some good memories.

How funny does Peter Derk's head look when it comes out of the toilet? 5 out of 5 stars.

How good of a lunch does Peter Derk's mom pack and then I steal it and eat? 3 out of 5 stars.

How good is Peter to punch in the stomach until he pees his pants, which were the jeans with the elastic around the waist IN HIGH SCHOOL? 6 out of 5 stars. Haha, oh man.

13. Print out hundreds of stickers in all shapes and sizes featuring the QR code for your Amazon page. Walk around the city and replace all preexisting advertisements with QR codes.

Take that, alma mater that didn't teach ME anything about weather! I've got a forecast for you and your stupid pamphlet. Cloudy with a chance of sales. Big time sales.

14. Write articles claiming authors wrote books they did not actually write. For example, you could say Dean Koontz wrote *Odd Thomas*, which would be a ridiculous lie, since any true *Odd Thomas* fan knows Stephen King is the actual author, but the temporary confusion will outrage readers and spark them to share it.



I present to you, the shortest, most inaccurate LitReactor column of all time. Contained within an existing column.

The 7 Reasons I'm Positive Tyra Banks Wrote 'Go Set A Watchman'

1. *Because we're all still eagerly awaiting the sequel to Modelland and surely Tyra's expending her literary talents somewhere.*
2. *Suspiciously-similar shades of yellow used to accent the cover of Watchman AND Modelland.*
3. *Awful lot of talk from Atticus Finch about "smizing."*
4. *Scout's career path as a model in Milan at age 17.*
5. *Both books feature wacky names. Atticus Finch isn't that far from Tookie de la Creme.*
6. *Nobody captures what it means to grow up as a young woman like Tyra does.*
7. *Because it's almost certain Tyra also wrote To Kill A Mockingbird. Google it if you don't believe me.*

15. Write a listicle. The topic doesn't matter. Just write one. Or ten. Write a listicle about listicles. 10 Listicles That Listed Lists Better Than Other Listed Listicles. You Won't Believe #7.

Did you believe #7 from that last one? Because that one is a stretch.

16. Announce a contest. First person to crack a secret riddle found within the pages of your book wins \$100,000. After four to five months pass, pay your friend George \$50 to pretend like he won. [Note: this only works if you have a friend named George.]

Fudge. I have a cousin named George. But I don't know him all that well. Also, I wouldn't even have the \$50 to give him. This is starting to make me feel really bad about my life.

17. Post a link to your book on Twitter while also tagging random celebrities and using whatever hashtags are currently trending.

Pete

5,734 Tweets



Tweets

Media

Favorites



Pete @helpfulsnowman

8s

A #fridayreads choice from the era of white boy ninjas, @aceofbase and #spicegirls amazon.com/gp/aw/d/B00TKP...



Pete @helpfulsnowman

1m

#TheWorstPartOfDepressionIs #GOPDebate and @tedcruz and the shoddy products that pass for #art in the United America amazon.com/gp/aw/d/B00TKP...



You retweeted

18. Stand on the street corner with a box of your books and a cardboard sign reading: "WILL WORK FOR 5-STAR REVIEWS."

This was so much harder than I thought. I don't know how bums do it. My sign was crap. The edges were all torn to hell, it wasn't even kind of a rectangle, and I ruined TWO markers trying to write on the damn thing.

My advice is to pay a bum to make your sign. They seem to know what they're doing, and they need the cash.

19. Or, alternatively, stand on the street corner with someone else, each of you dressed like homeless psychos and holding signs claiming the other can read the other's mind. This insanity will intrigue passersby, and might lead to a few "pity sales." [Note: this only works if the other person is Christian A Larsen.]

These name-based caveats are killing me!

20. Give spontaneous book readings in the middle of the street. Shout like the apocalypse is nigh. In the past, I've read from the copyright page, but I suppose you could pick from any of the other pages. Whatever floats your crazy little boat.

I read in a strip mall. Up to the point in my book where male gametes are mentioned. Which means I read a total of almost one page. To a small but attentive audience. The volume and reading to an animal statue did not help me look like someone who writes fiction that's read-able.



21. Begin texting every possible number combination you can come up with into your cell phone with a link to your book. But don't be too obvious. Prelude the link with something like, "Hey, here's the you-know-what you wanted" or "Oh my God, Grandma is dead."

Holy hell. It turns out that 4 out of 5 made-up numbers don't connect to anything, according to the "research" I just did. But one lucky Floridian is going to get the message "Dude. It really happened." Unfortunately, it turns out that most people in Florida say "bro" instead of "dude". Which is good to know just in case you needed a SECOND reason to avoid Florida, the state so horribly hot it necessitated the invention of Gatorade.

22. Go to your local bookstore or library and stand next to the shelf holding your book. Whenever someone walks past you, start groaning and holding your stomach. Shout, "Help! Help! My stomach. Oh, my stomach." As you fall down, knock your book down to the floor. The other person will have to pick it up, because your stomach is in too much pain. When the person asks where the book is supposed to be, say, "In your hands." So smooth, right?

Here again, we hit one I just didn't have the... stomach for? See what I did there?

I will tell you this. 22 tasks into this list, I was having a pretty good time with my book. I mean, the sales weren't picking up with the Barry-Allen-esque speed I'd hoped for. But I was getting a good laugh out of the whole affair.

When I finished *Ninja Sons*, it went up on Amazon, and I called it a day. All these different tasks, they're letting me squeeze a little more joy out of all the work that goes into writing a book. Even a stupid one.

I recommend this. So far. Get a little more enjoyment out of your book. You worked hard. Now have some fun with it.

23. Travel the truck stops of the world and, with your trusty Sharpie, scribble the following on bathroom stalls: "FOR A GOOD TIME, TYPE 9789197972550 INTO YOUR AMAZON SEARCH BAR."

This was my favorite. The whole reason to write this column. I abhor graffiti. But it had to be done. Someone, somewhere had to make this real.

I picked the perfect spot. A hip hamburger joint. They were asking for it. Burgers with jam on them? C'mon.

Pen in my pocket, I eat at the counter.

Burger in my belly, I wait for the check. I was even paying cash because, like I said before, smooth criminal.

I'm waiting for my bill at the counter, and the guy who's been sitting next to me starts chatting about how he went mountain climbing and nearly died, and he regales me with the tale of another adventure where he was captured by a Mexican drug cartel. All fine. I mean, not really, but I only have to live with him as long as it takes to pay for my meal.

The waitress drops my bill. She walks away, and this guy next to me says, "Tell me the truth. You'd do

her, right?"

I don't answer him, and then he says, "Her rack is like disproportionately huge to her body size."

I still get surprised when this stuff happens. It happens every so often. But it's still a surprise, and I never really know what to say. I know exactly how I feel. And of course, like you, when I read back over this I have about 1 million perfect things to say.

But right then, I just left a few bills and excused myself to the bathroom. Which was pristine. Bright. Totally clean. It smelled nice. It wasn't just an absence of pee smell. It smelled clean.

And I couldn't do it. I stood at the urinal divider. And I couldn't do it. It was too much. I felt like I was being that dude, like I was wrecking a tiny piece of the world that was better off before I showed up. That there was maybe, MAYBE one nice thing on the entire planet, and I was going to muck it up with my dumb words.

24. Go to Walmart and purchase the following: silly string, rope, a frozen supreme pizza, and season three of The X-Files on DVD. I don't know exactly how this will help promote your book, but I feel like there's a real opportunity here.

I'm going to use this space to write the last little lesson learned here.

There are a lot of people out there who tell you about marketing your book. You have to be not only a writer, but a salesman, a pitchman, a shrewd business-doer who knows how to make an elevator pitch in an actual elevator without hopping up and down when the elevator moves because that's still fun and feels totally weird.

There's a lot of talk about how you won't make it anymore as someone who just writes good books. In 2015, you have to then turn around and sell those books.

For me, that idea never sat well. I write a lot of silly stuff, and I feel weird about getting serious when it comes time to sell silly stuff. I write stuff for fun. When someone mentions API or SEO or blogrolls, my fun-o-meter gets buried in the red. The bad red, the red on the low end.

Marketing your book doesn't have to be about putting on a suit, writing professional cover letters, and sealing manuscripts in envelopes with one of those red wax seals, which is how I assume people send these things to publishers. Selling can be fun. And if your purpose is more oriented towards fun than business, let me tell you from my experience here, there's no reason to abandon that ideal when it comes time to market your book. Get ridiculous. You'll have a blast.

Last little bit:

It's easy to get out there and do a few things to sell your book. If you've got a book, hell, why not pick 3 of these things? Why not do just a little thing every week? What's it going to hurt?

And while you're out there, you get more material. I think Kurt Vonnegut said something about how a writer should learn something besides writing, and then write about it. And then, learn something else and write about that. I think it was Vonnegut. It was either Vonnegut or Tyra Banks.

Get out there and learn something. Even if what you learn is about a jackass who maybe should have

stayed kidnapped by a cartel a little longer.

25. Write an article—preferably a listicle—full of writing advice you are in no way experienced enough to hand out. It doesn't matter if you have no idea what you're doing and spend every waking moment of your life afraid you're going to explode, nobody else knows what they're doing, either, so they'll just go with it.

Done. And done.

5 Lessons For Your DIY Audiobook



It takes a special kind of nerd to get excited about meeting George Guidall. You might not know that name, but you know his voice. If you're a fan of audiobooks, you definitely know his voice.

I'm a special kind of nerd, and I was pretty damn excited to hear George Guidall speak in my hometown.

Highlights included Mr. Guidall saying that he made a lot of husbands jealous until they saw him in person, at which point they decided he wasn't a threat. He also told a great story about narrating an entire audiobook, and only at the very end of the book did he discover that a character was supposed to have spoken with a southern accent.

The other highlight went like this:

My stupid brain, whenever I meet a real person and see what they do, I think, "Hey, I can do that!"

This is why I have a motorcycle license and no business on a motorcycle, and it also explains why I have a golf bag full of what I can only assume is a complete set of golf clubs.

But I did it. I recorded and posted my own audiobook. You can be like me. Actually, don't be LIKE me. Just do the same thing I did. Record and share your own audiobook. Here are 5 things I wish I'd known before I started.

1. A Quick And Dirty Audio Primer

People who really like recording sound are not very helpful on the internet. Swear to God, every article about how to record sound starts like this:

First, let's talk about what sound is. It's waves. There are waves that have this kind of curve, and then also this other kind of curve. Here's the opening riff to "Crazy Train" expressed in the most boring format possible, a drawing. Let's talk about it at length. The drawing, not "Crazy Train."

I'm going to give you the quick version. Audio nerds will argue with me, and I encourage them to record their complaints in crisp, clear audio formats of their choice, which they can then play back for themselves so they'll hear exactly how they sound.

Use a decent microphone. "Decent" means one that is not a microphone built into another device, and not one that plugs into something with the same cable as you'd see on a cheap pair of headphones. You can find a decent mic. It's 2015. Everyone has a podcast. If your friends don't have mics, try your local library. Seriously, lots of libraries are getting into this kind of equipment, and they'll be delighted to have you record your project there.



Reduce your background noise as much as possible. You don't have to install spongy stuff all over the walls. Just turn off the A/C, and try not to record next to the refrigerator. Because of the motor's noise and the noises from your stomach when you think of all the delicious foods so close by.

Wear headphones so you can hear what's being recorded. You'll hate it at first, but you'll know when something goes terribly wrong.

Avoid "peaking" audio. To put it technically, this is what happens when you record at too high a level, and the end result sounds like someone screaming into a phone. This is pretty much unfixable.

Set your equipment to record with the highest-possible file quality. It's easy to reduce size, but hard to increase quality once the damage is done.

Overall, I recommend the buddy system here. You're the expert writer. Find an audio expert. Or at least someone who's expert enough. Record something short and make sure it all works, and then record a book. See if you like it before you buy any equipment for yourself.

2. Pick Your First Battle

It's your first time. Pick something you're comfortable reading. Something short. Or something you've read in front of people before.

Pick something you're comfortable reading very slowly. Because no matter how slow you think you're reading, trust me, you need to slow down.

And pick something with your voice in it.

I made a discovery about myself. When I tried to read this one female character dramatically, I had three modes:

Mode A) Me. Regular.

Mode B) Me. With slight lisp. I guess my mouth somehow got the idea that talking with a lisp equals "woman". Because I'm a bad stand-up comedian from 1997. And a bad person.

Mode C) Lady character from Monty Python.

None of these are super-pleasant.

It's your first day on the job here. You may or may not want to always write what you know, but on your first go-round, read something written in your voice.

3. Read From A Paper Copy, Pen In Your Hand

You will find awkward stuff or a few typos when you do this. When you read your book out loud, go over every sentence in that kind of detail, you'll find places where you messed up.

Take this opportunity to clean up the text a little bit. Or, if it's already published and printed, to torture yourself.

This happened for me. An entire discussion between characters regarding whether or not skeletons could achieve erections would have been lost in typo purgatory if I hadn't caught all the boners I'd made on the first run-through.

4. Lean Into The Suck

There's going to be an aspect of this you suck at. That's how this kind of thing works. Whether it's you getting lost in your own prose here and there or a cat interrupting you over and over, something is going to happen that makes your audiobook, by industry standards, suck.

But industry standard isn't what we're really looking for here, is it?

Starlee Kine of *Mystery Show* has a lisp. And does she read ads for "SquareSpace"? Damn skippy she does.

Adam Carolla can barely read. So for his audiobook, he had a guest come in for a chapter and they TOLD the story, back and forth, instead of reading it from the book.

Don't lower your standards and think, "Well, who cares? It's just a crappy audiobook I made myself." But do recognize charm when it pops up, and leave the door open to that possibility. Turn your suck into an asset. That's the cleanest dirty-sounding sentence of all time.

5. Decide What You're Going To Do With It.

You finished!

Now what are you going to do with it?
Besides blare it from your car stereo
because, hey, why not?

Soundcloud? Maybe you want to try
and get it up on Spotify? Tumblr and
other blogging services are well-
equipped to take 10mb chunks, which
would be a great way to serialize
chapters.

I went with Audiobook Creation
Exchange (ACX). It's an Amazon
platform, because everything is,
and it gets your book on Amazon,
iTunes, and Audible in one fell swoop.
You need to have an introduction,
audiobook section, and end credits,
plus a fairly large, perfectly-square
image file for your cover art. But
other than that, it's pretty easy. It
doesn't sound like I'll be making a lot
of money from this, but that's pretty
much par for the course. My goal was
to get it out there in one more format and in as many outlets as possible.

You can also use ACX to find someone to read your book for you. If you're the shy type.

But I'm going to stop promoting this service because the last thing Amazon needs is more promotion.

What I am going to do is tell you that there's really no good reason not to make your own audiobook.
I was dumb enough to see someone else do it and pursue it myself. You only have to be as dumb as
me!



10 Things Every Author Needs On Their Website



I've spent the last couple months inviting over 200 local authors to an event as part of my day job.

This means I've seen over a hundred author web sites in the last month.

Folks, these are rough waters.

As someone who does some writing AND booking of authors, let me tell you what your web site needs. To put this another way, please, allow me to BEG you to make sure your web site has these 10 things.

1. A Reason For Being

Okay, not really a component coded into your web site. But before the rest of this can do you any good, take a deep breath and accept that the reason you have a web site is for people to find out about you and find out about your work. If you're a true artist who doesn't give a damn about selling books or talking to people about your work, then that's FINE. But don't waste everyone's time with a web site.

2. An Author Location

Tell Me Where You Live.

And before you panic, I know this reads like the last line of a telephone conversation that ends with someone being killed by



an electric drill, but I'm not asking for a street address.

But listing your state would be nice.

I work in libraries and for a non-profit that brings in authors, and I can tell you that when it comes to booking authors for readings, workshops, what have you, and when it comes to making sure that we've got a good representation of our local authors on our shelves, things are a lot easier when you say which state you're in.

I'm not going to email you and ask if you're in-state. If I can't be sure, I'll just move on.

This applies to bookstores too. And even Goodreads lists. You'll see things like "Best Colorado Authors" lists all the time. Make yourself just a little more eligible for that stuff.

If you get so famous that it's a problem, you can always lie later on and say you've moved. And if you do so, I recommend saying you've moved to French Lick, IN. Because it's hilarious, it's the home of Larry Bird, and it produced a very popular laxative. And also because it's a real place named French Lick.

3. An Email Address

Authors love their contact forms. And I understand why. It reduces spam, harassment, and other garbage.

But I'm going to tell you a non-secret: everyone else hates contact forms. When I fill out a contact form, I don't have the message in my sent email folder. I don't know that you actually got the message, whereas most bad email addresses will return a message letting me know you never got anything and I need to try again.

And, you know. A contact form, even a nice one, makes me feel like scum. When I contact you through a form, I feel like, in your eyes, I'm on the same level as penis pill spammers. I assure you, I'm at least as good as the cash-4-gold people, and I deserve that level of respect.

This is why I'm encouraging an actual, honest-to-god email address. You can set it up within an image if you want to discourage bots:



You can also set up an email that is ONLY used for this purpose.

If you must use a contact form for some reason, reducing the number of fields will increase the number of contacts you get. My recommendation: make the person provide an email and a message. That's all you need to get back to someone, and what good does it do to have their made-up name? How many contact forms does "Frenchlick Derk" have to fill out before people get the hint?

4. A Newsletter Sample

[This column by Michael David Wilson](#) makes some damn fine points about mailing lists. But I'm not signing up for any newsletters sight unseen. For all I know, it's a monthly email that says, "Buy my book. Don't forget to buy my book. For real, buy it!"

If you want me to sign up for your newsletter, tell me why (...ain't nothing but a mistake... Sorry. That's just a reflex when I hear the phrase "tell me why.") by showing me what kind of fun I'm missing out on if I don't get your newsletter.

Don't rely on me loving you so much that I'll sign up for your newsletter. Show me how I have as much to gain from reading it as you do from writing it.

5. A Two-Line Bio

I love your full-page bio. But if I'm putting something about you in a program or on a poster, if I'm spreading the word about you in some way, wouldn't you rather determine what those two lines will be instead of having me hack your bio to pieces and pick out whatever I think is important?

A two-line bio is easy for me to cut, copy, and paste wherever I might want to use it.

Good way to check this: Does your name, two-line bio, and URL all fit in a single tweet?

6. A Yearly Expiration

You will change your whole life today if you go through your spice cabinet and toss anything past its date. Yes, those bottles have dates on them. And yes, if you've never done this before, you'll toss half your stock.

There are things like milk where we don't go past the expiration. The consequences are dire. Rhea.

But with spices, whatever, you won't get sick. They're just less flavorful.

Web sites are the same thing. It's easy to let it slide because, hey, it still works. It still serves its purpose. As long as I don't experience bowel distress when I look at my web site, eh, good enough.



But if you set a yearly expiration for your web site's design, your web site will stay sharp.

You don't have to change everything around and make it insane. Just set a yearly date when you look around, make sure it all works, and ask yourself if there's anything that could be better. Make it a regular thing, and when you do it, don't leave any options for change off the table.

7. A Picture That Actually Looks Like You

Look at this handsome fellow. Whose picture I stole and I hope isn't mad:



I've met this guy in real life, and he looks like this. If I were picking him up at an airport, this is the guy I would find if I kept my eyes open. If I were organizing an event with this author, I'd have an idea what he looks like and who to look out for.

I know, some of us are ugly as hell. Some of us have adult braces for a time. Some of us don't have the innate ability to look cool and pleasant at the same time. We can't all pull that off, ROB HART!

But your face is your face. If you don't like the look of your own face, I understand completely, and I suggest you do what I do and just consider your face to be utilitarian rather than unattractive. My face is meant to have a food hole, a smell hole, and eye holes. And as a tool for others to differentiate me when there's a need to do so. If my face serves those purposes while also growing eyebrows of a ridiculous length and being a place for acne scars to remain on lifelong display, then so be it.

8. A Place For People To Tell You About Typos In Your Book

I am 100% kidding. In the research for this column, I found out that Stephen King actually has this,

and it's too bonkers not to share.

Maybe the contact form does serve a good purpose here. My only hope is that the messages that go into this form emerge from a printer that sits on the very edge of a very deep hole in the ground.

Report an Error or Typo

Please use the form below to let us know of any errors or typos you have found in one of

Your Name:

Your Email Address:


Confirm Your Email Address:

The book in which the typo/error was found:

The ISBN:

Page Number:

The error/typo:



[Privacy & Terms](#)

9. A Description Of What You Are Willing To Do and For How Much

Are you looking to write columns for web sites? Magazines? Are you someone who is willing to teach workshops? Would you visit classrooms? Will you edit someone else's work?

These are all legit requests and ways that writers work and make money. If you're up for it, put it out there. If you're not, then it's totally okay to say, "Sorry, my writing schedule won't let me make any appearances or do any events at this time, but check back soon!"

Bonus points if you can prepare a packet that includes the kinds of things you do, what you charge, and so on. This might all sound a little too slick and business-y, but when I'm looking to book someone for a workshop, when I'm handing over a check, I want a great writer, and I need that person to have their shit together. If I'm looking for writers for a web site, I need to know they've got chops, but it doesn't hurt for me to see that they're someone who is likely to get the work done on time without a hassle.

If I'm being honest with you, I'll book a second-choice author in terms of writing skill if the person is easy to work with. This isn't to say that writing skill doesn't matter. It's to say that the other things are also very, very important.

And if you DO make appearances, get someone to record a portion of one for you. That gives people an idea of what kind of speaker you are.

10. A Sense Of Who You Are

This one's ephemeral and tough.

Most writer web sites I see are fairly serious. But the question is, are you a serious person?

And more importantly, is it possible that your seriousness is making people too intimidated to reach out to you?

Look, if you're not a fun person, then no one is asking you to be one online. But just take a look at what you're putting out there. If you find that you're getting a lot of requests to write fantasy fiction when your passion is true crime, maybe it's time to re-evaluate why there's a picture of a wizard on your site. If you're a writer of heavy, sad books, but you're a joy to be around in real life, how would you expect anyone to get that if your site has a black background, lighter black text boxes, and grey text? If you have weird political views...actually, just keep that stuff to yourself. Let's not challenge my ability to enjoy your work by telling me what kind of wall you want to build to keep whoever out of wherever.

What do you think belongs on a writer's website?

How Character Likability Kills Movies (and How It Can Save Books)



Get a load of this jerk.



Okay, it's tough to be mad at a head of hair like that. Especially when we all know that hairline's bleak future. Enjoy the breeze, Cage-y locks. It will be...your last.



Maybe I'm being tough on Cage, aka Cameron Poe from *Con Air*. But I'm only tough on him because he's the first character I remember being too good for his own good.

Allow me to explain.

If you have memories of *Con Air*, they most likely involve the phrase "Put the bunny back in the box" or the mangled corpse of Dave Chappelle falling from the sky. What you might not remember is how Cameron Poe ended up booking a flight on Con Air in the first place.

Cameron Poe, Army Ranger visiting home, is harassed in a bar by a drunken dude. Later, in the parking lot, the drunken dude and two of his buddies start beating the crap out of Poe. By the way, this was pre-9/11, so "soldier boy" was an insult, bars didn't advertise military discounts printed in block font on Coors Light banners, and also there was very little information made available to drunken oafs regarding what an Army Ranger was and the fact that they dismantle people professionally.

When Poe's pregnant wife runs inside for help, Alpha Drunken Oaf pulls a knife, and Cameron accidentally kills the guy by hitting him in the face.

Poe gets railroaded in court by some nonsense and a judge who just seems like a real asshole, and thus, we have a reason for Cameron Poe to be in jail, and a reason for him to fly Con Air. To review: three drunks harassed him and his wife in front of dozens of people in a bar, then attacked him in a parking lot, and Poe defended his life when one of them pulled a knife.

It's pretty clear what's going on here. We needed the hero to be in jail, but we needed a reason for him to be in jail that wouldn't make it hard to root for him. We had to still like him. We had to be on his side all along. This is a blockbuster movie. It ends with a plane crash on the Las Vegas strip. We can't gamble on an unlikable hero here.

As a result, we get a fairly ridiculous story, and more importantly, a character who is robbed of an arc.



Now Showing

Let's look at a couple other recent examples from the world of blockbuster Marvel movies. Take *Ant-Man*. Spoilers for about the first 10 minutes of *Ant-Man* here.

Ripped Paul Rudd has a problem. He's a criminal. What crime did he commit? He stole money from an Enron analog and gave it back to the people who owned it in the first place.

Now, that might be a crime, and he might be arrested for it. But goddamn is it a lovable crime. That's Robin Hood. That's a guy we like.

And yet, the movie is centered around Paul Rudd clawing his way back to respectability, employment, and fatherhood, and he does so by becoming the heroic Ant-Man, proving he's not a lowlife.

It's problematic storytelling, and here's why.

When you have a character who is bad, or who does something actually bad, that character can have a powerful moment of redemption. If that Paul Rudd character had done something heinous, or if he'd at least done something thoughtless that harmed people, then his complete 180 would reveal him to be a different person. It would be a moment of character change. As it stands, doing something that is unquestionably right, morally, and then having to prove that you're a good person, morally, is kind of a flat character arc.

Let's look at Iron Man in *Avengers*. Spoilers.

Iron Man's shot at redemption is a moment of self-sacrifice where he carries a big bomb into a wormhole or something, and he proves to Captain America that he can do what's right, even at a cost. He proves that he's not selfish. Character growth, right?

Ehh...

We, as viewers, already know that Tony Stark might be, in Captain America parlance, a wiseacre. And we also know that his Mephisto-may-care attitude, his emotional armor, if you will, protects the soft, good man underneath.

One could say *The Avengers* is about Iron Man's redemption, but one could more accurately say it's about a lunkhead who throws around a metal circle realizing what the audience has known about Iron Man all along: steely exterior, good dude inside.

This isn't character change. It's just one character realizing something that was there all along. And realizing it after the audience. Viewers are robbed of actual redemption in favor of having what they know to be true proven. Instead of actual change in a character, we have to settle for a Captain America handshake and apology.

Why are characters written like this?

Because when there's big money on the line, no one wants to gamble on unlikability.

This need for likability fakes us through Iron Man's redemptive moment. It does the same for Ant-Man. As for Cameron Poe, it uncomplicates what could have been a potentially complicated character, a criminal who makes an unselfish choice to change.

The need for likeable characters kills movies.

Here Comes The Good News

It's my theory that as movies hold onto the idea of a Jurassic World or an Age of Ultron to make bank, and as theater revenue shrinks, studios will be less and less willing to gamble on unlikable main characters. This is a theory that looks pretty good if you check out the list of top-grossing movies of 2015 so far and compare it to the list from 1994. 1994 has *Pulp Fiction*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *Interview With A Vampire* in the top 25. Low likability in those movies, but they performed well.

I don't propose here that likability is the only way for studios to go or the only problem with movies. It might not even make the top 100 problems list behind "Why is John Goodman criminally undercast?" and "Who decided Judy Greer can't carry a movie because that person is a dum-dum." But if you're a storyteller, it never hurts to keep track of parts of the storytelling world where there might be a void. If you're a writer in a world where film and television are the dominant art forms, it's good to keep track of the places books can go that movies can't or won't. Recognize the areas in which your competition for people's attention is handcuffed.

More than that, it's good to recognize the common criticism "The characters are unlikable" as being different from "the characters are

You can go dark, you can make your character a jerk. If your character needs to end up on a prison plane, which is an underused plot, IMHO, you can make him or her an actual criminal.

poorly-written", and to understand that while some people just want to read a book and make a friend, many others want to explore something else.

The hunger for unlikable characters will exist, as it always has, and the risk of unlikable characters is one you can take in your writing. And good news, it pays off. Huge, top-selling books are packed with unlikable characters. Holden Caulfield, Ignatius J. Reilly. Unlikable as all hell. *Beloved's* Sethe is a complicated main character whose action puts up a barrier to likability. *Beloved* creates widespread discussion around the morality of killing your own two year-old child. That's a feat.

It's not just classics, either. *50 Shades of Grey*, *Fight Club*, and *Gone Girl* are great examples of modern books with unlikable characters, and their proof-of-concept publishing and sales push unlikable characters onto the big screen. Not to mention Harper Lee's 2015 publication of *Go Set A Watchman*, which paints the older Atticus Finch as a racist. A hard swerve into unlikability.

To put it another way, it's difficult to imagine huge AAA movies with actual unlikable characters. A *Jurassic World* creating a racist character in Chris Pratt. A *Fast and Furious* movie that has a subplot of an obese fool who lives with his mom, can't get a job, and thinks himself an intellectual. An *Ant-Man* movie where Ripped Paul Rudd kills his own child.

A book can be written by one person. You can do whatever you want. You can go dark, you can make your character a jerk. If your character needs to end up on a prison plane, which is an underused plot, IMHO, you can make him or her an actual criminal. You don't have a focus group telling you that a character is unlikable. You don't have to make Sony happy. You can get 1994 on a reader.

There's a potential storytelling hole that needs to be filled. Speaking of which...

Can Vonnegut Sum It Up?

Duh.

Kurt Vonnegut said that one of the best, most-popular story styles is Man In A Hole. Someone does something, finds himself stuck in a hole, and now he has to get out.

And I'll leave this question to you, readers and writers. Which story is more interesting? Which has the greater capacity for redemption? Which shows more character? In which story does something happen? Which has the better character agency? Which story is more likely to exist in a book as opposed to on-screen?

Which story do you want to read?

Story A: Noble man walks to pick up neighborhood cat in his yard, falls in a hole? (working title: *Good Guy Cat-Saver*)

Story B: Secretive, strange man hits neighborhood cat with his car. While burying the body, he becomes stuck in the grave? (working title: *Cat Grave: Revengeance*)

Why You Need A Writing Uniform



In school we used to have these writing assessments. A teacher would sit you down, give you three topics to choose from, and tell you to get busy on a five-paragraph essay.

Here were the topics that always came around: school lunches, whether students should be allowed to wear hats in school, and of course, school uniforms.

For the record, the correct responses were: gross, yes, and who gives a shit?

I never took these essays seriously. And now I wish I'd made a better case for uniforms. Because, who would have thunk it, I, an adult man, am about to write a column in favor of uniforms.

Because I've started wearing a uniform when I write. And it's made a difference.

Why Even Consider It?

It all started for me when I read about a fashion designer who decided that she needed to simplify her routines. Enter 15 white shirts, 15 of the same pair of pants, and a scarf-y thing to accessorize (I don't know a lot about fashion, so anything around the neck is a "scarf-y thing" with the POSSIBLE exception of a bow tie or neck tattoo).

This fashion designer started wearing the same thing every day. And then stuck with it. For years.

She'd already been in the uniform game for two years when Mashable put out an article about successful men who wear the same thing every day.

Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Christopher Nolan. Barack Obama wears a gray or blue suit most days.

As he puts it:

I don't want to make decisions about what I'm eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make.

The self-imposed uniform, it's a thing.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think a uniform is going to turn me into an American President or creator of a Batman film franchise, both of which have equal footing in my mind. I'm not a lifehacker person who is trying to reverse-engineer myself into working with Liam Neeson on his portrayal of an international terrorist, which sent him down the path of punching wolves and walking among the tombstones.

But something about this uniform business seemed like it might work for me. There's some appeal in removing a small, non-writing choice from the act of writing.

Would it be taking things too far to say that I could use those extra, dressing-up seconds to think about a work in progress?

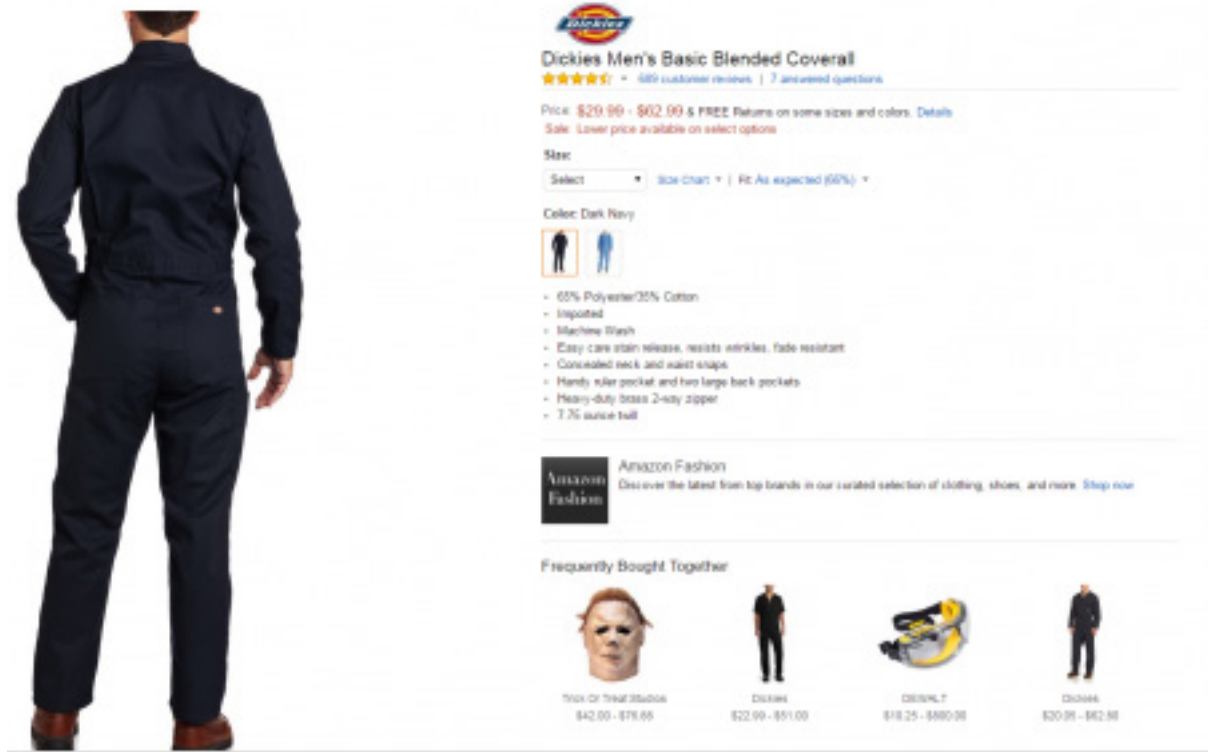
Would it be taking things too far to say that a uniform felt like some kind of freedom?



Yes, that would be taking it too far. Let's just stick with "Totally worth a shot."

Alright, I'm Sold. Ish. What to Wear?

Options were considered:



Pros: This would certainly signal that I'm doing something. This is a fella at work. It's pretty simple. And it would keep me from doing anything like making a quick trip for groceries or whatever. Because out in public, my butt doesn't...my butt doesn't.

Cons: I do a fair amount of writing outside the house. And while I appreciate a look that says I know how to make flames come out of unexpected places on automobiles and enjoy the music of the Reverend Horton Heat, it's not quite right for sitting in front of a laptop at Starbucks. And the suggested purchase of a serial killer mask really says it all.



Pros: They say to dress for success. This fits the bill. And it makes me look like I'm doing something a lot more important than writing novels about armies of skeletons.

Cons: I change clothes in my car more than most adults. It's a long story that involves a rec center where mashing Cheetos into the locker room floor is a municipal past-time, and I really don't want to get into it. The takeaway here is that I can't get too complicated with my getup.



Pros: Battle-ready. Claiming coffee shop space is pretty easy with a giant "implement of persuasion." Skulls. High-visibility colors.

Cons: None, really. There is nothing wrong with this uniform. It's just that the WORLD isn't ready for an Imperial Fists Terminator Captain/novelist.

Here's what I picked:



A hat and a shirt. I don't wear hats too often, and the shirt is a weird in-between of a hoodie and a t-shirt.

Here's why I picked this uniform:

It fits in my bag, it can be worn over or under all different stuff, it's casual without being slovenly, and it seems less likely to provoke battles with necromancers.

What Should The Rest Of Us Chumps Wear?

Pick something based on your particular writing challenges.

Are you someone who has trouble sitting down and getting started? Then make it something you really like wearing. Your comfortable clothes. A t-shirt you really love. Now you only get to wear it when you write.

Are you someone who has trouble sustaining long sessions? Then make it something that's a bit of a hassle to put on and take off. Don't go fetch laundry from the dryer until you take off your uniform. Get something without pockets so you won't have your phone.

Are you someone who gets shot in the face too much while you write? Batman famously had a yellow circle on his uniform. This was because he could place extra armor there and encourage baddies to shoot him in the chest instead of in his unprotected face.

Whatever your biggest issue is, whether it's signaling to others that you're busy or saving money on oral surgeries, pick out something that addresses that issue.

The Rules

1. Wear this when you're writing. You can also wear your uniform if you leave the house to go somewhere and write, but not if you're having a lunch or a stop at the store on the way.
2. Always wear it when you write.
3. Never wear it when you don't write.
4. The end.

The Benefits

Here's how it worked for me.

One thing that every author says when asked for advice is some form of "you must apply ass to chair and start writing." But few of them give helpful advice on HOW to do that.

A uniform can help. Really.

You put it on, and then you know it's time to work. It's like a pre-fight ritual. It gets you ready. It

reminds you of what you're about to do. It puts you in a head space, the same way you might feel when you put on swim trunks for the first time in summer and are reminded of what summer feels like, or the first time you put on your winter coat and it brings back memories of winter.

A uniform helps you get in a head space, and it can help you return to the world of your work wherever you last left off.

It's also a good transition. You get up on a Saturday, maybe watch something or think about how much stuff there is to vacuum, and then it's time to get to work. An actual, physical change might not typically be a part of this transition. But it can be with a uniform.

And not only is that transition a benefit to you, but it'll help the people around you. They'll recognize the uniform and that you're now working.

Last, it punctuates the end of the work day. When you're done with your work, take off your uniform and leave it in the other room. Leave your writing with your uniform. You did good today, and now it's time to think about something else.

The Last Thing

The fashion designer who got me on this idea in the first place, the thing that stuck with me the most was that she was a FASHION DESIGNER who didn't want to deal with fashion. It seems a little counterintuitive.

But her explanation works. She woke up every morning, and when she picked out her clothes, she made a small creative choice. Nothing big, but enough that she maybe felt like she'd done something good and creative simply by getting ready in the morning.

I can relate. I get out of bed and get to work, and I feel like I've won the day. Right then, just the act of being alive and upright and at work.

Save up that creative energy. Spare yourself that one, small creative choice every day. Don't be tricked by making the choice of how you'll be dressed, don't let it trick you into thinking you've expressed yourself today. Get yourself a uniform, save up that hunger, and put it on the page.

One thing that every author says when asked for advice is some form of "you must apply ass to chair and start writing." But few of them give helpful advice on HOW to do that.

Do It Right, Write Plotless Reviews



Nobody needs a book summary from you. Sorry.

You can find a book summary anywhere. There's a whole flap on the cover that summarizes the plot. There's the Amazon description. There's the Goodreads reviews. There's a white bar at the top of every electronic screen where you can type in the title of a book and then see what happens.

There are plenty of summary options. We don't need your book summary.

What we need, what we really, really need, is your book review, and the less summary there is in your review, the better.

How does that work?

If You're Not Convinced That Summary Is Worthless, Even Damaging

Fine, you obstinate jerk. Let's run through the problems with using summary as a review.

I have a friend who really loves the movie *The Usual Suspects*, and one of his great wishes is to be able to wipe his memory of the movie and then see it again without knowing anything. If you've seen *The Usual Suspects*, you know it's really hard to explain why it's good without blowing the ending. And at the same time, if you blow the ending, you blow the story. Same thing with *The Sixth Sense*.

Summary reviews rob readers of that first-time experience. And it's a mistake to sacrifice surprises, big or small, on the altar of review.

Here's the other problem. Review is subjective, and therefore the summary used in reviews is also subjective. To quote someone a lot smarter than me, Elliott Kalan, you can summarize *Star Wars* like this:

Star Wars is a movie about an old man taking a young man to a bar.

While every part of me likes the idea of a weird, possibly-inappropriate romance taking place in the *Star Wars* universe, that summary doesn't do the movie justice.

It's an extreme example, but it's designed to show you that what you choose to summarize and how you look at the whole story will change your review, and it'll change your review's effect.

How Do You Review Without Plot, You Self-Righteous Buttface?

I deserve that. I called you an obstinate jerk. Fair's fair.

First, decide why you're reviewing.

There are only a few reasons to review anything.

1. You want to encourage people to read the book you've just enjoyed.
2. You want to discourage people from wasting their time on something that sucked.
3. You want/need to write a thing.

In the first instance, the idea is to entice someone to experience the book for themselves. The idea is not to do the lifting for them. It's the difference between a travel guide and armchair travel. Armchair travel is about telling you what happens somewhere in such detail that you maybe, just maybe don't feel like you need to go. It's a substitute for being there. Travel guides entice you to go somewhere for yourself. You want to be a travel guide. Travel guides are always in sorry, battered shape because people actually read them. Meanwhile, every person over the age of 68 has a huge collection of unread *National Geographic* magazines in the basement.

In the second instance, okay, the plot might be very stupid, and the stupidity of the plot might be crucial to the review. I've read about a quarter of Tyra Banks' *Modelland*. Believe me, I know a book with a stupid plot. The characters travel to a faraway land in a giant ball sack. That happens.

However, even with bad plot, you have to give us more. Because frankly, it's very hard to describe a plot that's just plain bad differently from a plot that's bad but enjoyable. Think of a movie like *Tango & Cash*. They construct a battle van. And it's awesome. Bad and enjoyable. Think about the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* reboot. That movie proved that a battle van and a bad plot don't always equal cinematic magic.

In the third instance, if you're writing a review to write a piece or because it's a job, that's legit. And remember that in that case, you're writing for other people. Make it something other people want to



read. Treat it like a real piece of writing. No fair just summing up a book. Someone already got paid to do that.

Alright. Methods. Let's talk methods.

The Decapitation Method

A lot of book reviewers will write reviews like this:

Raw Delia is the story of a spunky girl detective who finds herself embroiled in a world of mystery when her uncle wills her a million dollars, but only if she can survive a night in a haunted mansion. As she snarks her way through projected ghosts, cardboard wolf-men, and maybe even a creature or two from a gray-ish lagoon, Delia learns a bit about herself, the value of money, and just what a prankster an uncle can be when he uses hallucinogenic mushrooms every day for the last 30 years of his life.

Raw Delia has a style that...

STOP! Stop right there.

The book happened in the first paragraph. The REVIEW happened at the beginning of the second.

Look through your old reviews. It might be as easy as cutting off the head. Put on your executioner's hood, get that standard executioner "fat-ripped" bod, and chop off the head of your reviews.

The Emotional Rollercoaster Method

This one is easy, and I recommend it if you're trying this out for the first time.

Finish these sentences.

When I picked up this book, I felt:

When I was about 25 pages in, I felt:

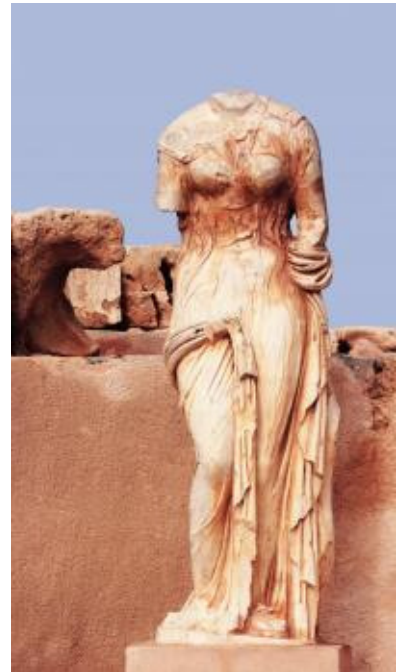
When I was half way through, I felt:

When I finished, I felt:

Now that it's two weeks later, I feel:

Congratulations. You just wrote a book review that tells me a lot about the reading experience without telling me everything that's IN the book.

The Appeals Connective Tissue Method



Hey, you loved *Demolition Man*, right? Well, I've got a book for you.

God, what I would pay to hear someone say that sentence.

When you connect a book to other media someone enjoys, you can relate what's great about a book without explaining every plot point. You can draw on the feelings and experiences from another thing that's already been explored to talk about what makes this new thing great.

The Carnie

One of my favorite reviewers of all time is Dave Carnie. He's a pro when it comes to reviews that actively avoid the topic at hand.

If you want to go all-out, no summary, one method is to write about something only tangentially related to what you're reviewing. Or to use the book review as a launch pad to write something else entirely.

"I was reading this book, and it had a sentence about lasagna. And that reminded me of the last time I crapped my pants."

Yes, I understand that when you write a book review, it might be disappointing for some to read about a time you crapped your pants.

And yes, I'm also putting a crapped-your-pants story on a higher pedestal than a summary of a book. This is certainly not everyone's opinion.

But I will say this. When I scroll through reviews, when I see one that has a funny line or does something different, I'm in. That's a review I want to read. When you tell the story of a time you crapped your pants, hell, you're telling the story no one else can tell.

To Summarize Finalize

Yes, you'll probably find that you need a bit of summary in your reviews. I understand that. My suggestion, my gentle suggestion, which is gentle only because I don't have the battle van that allows me to back up opinions with force, is that you avoid summary as much as you can. Think of summary the way you do adverbs, or maybe recreational drugs. It's cool to use them sometimes, but you should be aware of how often it's going down, and minimize where you can.

And yes, I'm also putting a crapped-your-pants story on a higher pedestal than a summary of a book.

Every Goosebumps Book Summarized In One Sentence



*Contains spoilers for the original Goosebumps series, *The Stuff*, the Rocky saga, and *The Sixth Sense*.*

Inspired by "Every Stephen King Novel Summarized in 140 Characters or Less" by Max Booth III

Welcome To The Dead House

The classic struggle of inheriting real estate from a great uncle only to find out your new home is on Zombie Ave, USA.

Stay Out Of The Basement

Two bastard kids spend 160 pages doing the exact opposite of what the title advises.



Monster Blood

Kid is convinced to buy a "surprising miracle substance" that doesn't directly mention erections, but does cause a dog to double in size.

Say Cheese And Die!

We learn that it's never a good idea to steal a haunted camera, or really any object from a man who goes by "Spidey."

The Curse Of The Mummy's Tomb

The real title should be *Curse Of The Mummy Hand A Kid Bought At A Garage Sale And Somehow No One Has A Problem With This Except Other Mummies.*

Let's Get Invisible!

The moment R.L. Stine probably regretted wasting spooky attic, invisibility, and haunted mirror in the same book.

Night Of The Living Dummy

A hilarious dummy makes fun of old people and vomits green liquid all over an overweight principal, is unfairly railroaded for entertaining people exactly as he's supposed to, even though he may have tested sympathies when he strangled a dog.

The Girl Who Cried Monster

A lonely, homely librarian is shamed for eating live snails and turtles #CheckYourPrivilege.

Welcome To Camp Nightmare

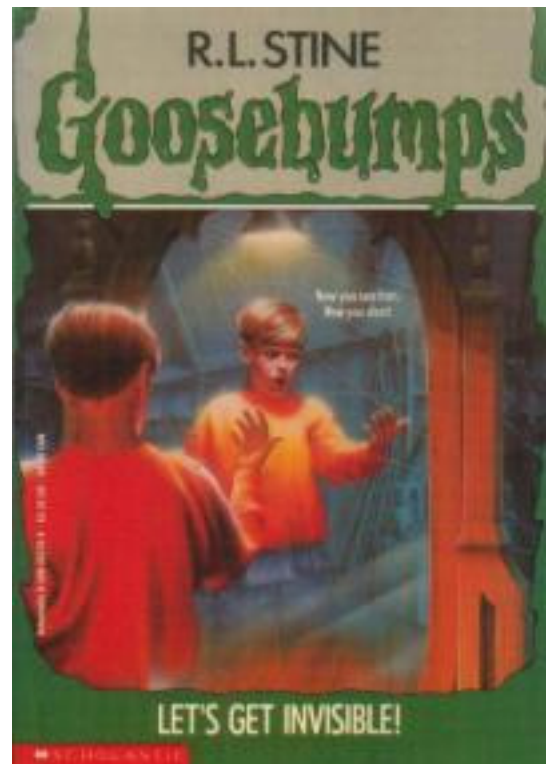
Not even kidding, this BOOK FOR CHILDREN ends with a boy being handed a rifle and told by a camp counselor to hunt the other campers in the woods, at which point the boy turns the gun on the camp counselor and fires.

The Ghost Next Door

Holy shit, M. Night ripped off R.L. Stine, and I'm sorry to the thousands of you who read *The Ghost Next Door* and have now had *The Sixth Sense* spoiled, but how did nobody ever tell me this before!?

The Haunted Mask

...may have watched the movie and cheated on this one, may have watched not the exact right movie, and may have been reminded why we all loved Cameron Diaz.





Be Careful What You Wish For...

...because for some reason every genie is a huge jerk who definitely misinterprets wishes on purpose because they think it's HILARIOUS.

Piano Lessons Can Be Murder

A "robotician" hits a roadblock in making robot hands, decides the best option is to kill people, steal their hands, and then add robotic stuff onto them, sort of the way a bad middle school scientist glues an egg timer to a cooking spoon to cruise straight through to a C+ at the science fair.

The Werewolf Of Fever Swamp

The best part by far is what brings the family in this book to the Florida swamps: In a fit of good ol' fashioned science-ing, Grady's dad decides to test the scientific hypothesis "Deer Can Live In Florida" (already 100% true, btw) by bringing a bunch of deer to Florida and seeing what happens.

You Can't Scare Me

In which mud monsters are at fault for two boys having to write a 1,000-word essay entitled "It's wrong to steal living things and drop them on people's heads."



One Day At Horrorland

The existence of the greatest theme park ever, with rides like a Coffin Cruise and Deadly Doom Slide, is threatened by an ungrateful family of dweebs.

Why I'm Afraid Of Bees

Imagine *The Fly* except it's called *The Bee* and was made in 1994 and being good at skateboarding plays a pivotal role, and then you've pretty much got it.

Monster Blood II

I'd like to take this moment to recommend a film called *The Stuff* for its lazy title and great, evil yogurt premise that seems to parallel the Monster Blood books quite nicely, minus enormous hamster, plus this:



Deep Trouble

A man named Dr. Deep and his muscular graduate student are doing something on a boat that doesn't matter because the sexual overtones here are just too strong to allow thoughts of anything else.

The Scarecrow Walks At Midnight

Finally we get someone defeating a supernatural foe while saying the concise and always inaccurate "Never again."

Go Eat Worms!

A creepy worm collector kid is a Raiders fan, always wearing his Raiders cap, and I'm pretty sure I should feel something about that as a Colorado resident, but football is really confusing and there's the whole Bo Jackson factor, and frankly I just don't have the energy.

Ghost Beach

Okay, at this point, 22 books in, I have to say there is a shocking display of lazy, neglectful, borderline abusive parenting in these books, which usually involves leaving kids with weird aunts or uncles for months at a time, and I just wish these parents had done a little more family planning and thought about whether they really wanted children in the first place.

Return Of The Mummy

The same kid from the last mummy book manages to end up in Egypt, again, lost in a pyramid, again, and screws around with spooky artifacts, again, and it's still pretty hard to feel bad for a kid who carries around a mummy hand, which is a human hand, by the way, an actual hand that belonged to a person and was mummified for religious purposes beyond some jerkass kid carrying it around to show his buds and make a bong out of in college (somehow) (probably).

Phantom Of The Auditorium

Is the school auditorium haunted, or is there just a bum living in forgotten corridors under the school, and the real question, which is the worse indictment of the state of American education?

Attack Of The Mutant

A pudgy comic book nerd named Skipper has a pretty lousy time, as one might expect for a pudgy comic book nerd named Skipper, when he's sucked into a comic book world and doesn't have ass-kicking powers and a ponytail.

My Hairiest Adventure

Some kids use an untested tanning product and suffer the consequences, and also ANOTHER kid is known for wearing a Raiders hat, and this seems to be an on-going theme that I can't understand without really getting into a lot of NFL history, and screw that, I'll just wait for Goosebumps 385: *The Hauntedest Raiders Hat* to show up.

A Night In Terror Tower

Resisting time travel up to this point is really a badge of honor for the series, but let's face it, it was inevitable.



The Cuckoo Clock Of Doom

I spoke too soon about time travel as Stine double-dips and jumps right back into the soupy waters of time travel in the very next title, but the main character DOES use it to wipe his sister from existence, so kudos for taking it way further than necessary after a tamer first outing.

Monster Blood III

It's very strange to me that the most-recurring character in the Goosebumps universe, the Goose-iverse or Bump-iverse, if you will, is a tub of goo that just seems to make stuff big when you eat it, not to mention the recurring cast of Monster Blood characters who seem almost willfully unable to learn a lesson about why it's a bad idea to ingest concentrated, viscous evil.

It Came From Beneath The Sink!

A valuable lesson is learned here: you can't just throw away a monster that is ruining your life, a lesson parents can impart to children if they follow my advice and screen Basket Case for their kids at the appropriate age of 4.



Night Of The Living Dummy II

Why the kids who previously owned a living dummy didn't dispose of it is one question, but perhaps the more interesting question, why did they stuff an entire sandwich inside the dummy's head before they gave him away (really!)?

The Barking Ghost

There is a strange aspect of these books in that they all have weird, unnecessary details, such as the main character in this book collecting snow globes, which is the kind of character trait reminiscent of the way a Nicholas Cage character will eat yellow and red jellybeans from a martini glass for no reason.



The Horror At Camp Jellyjam

Each of these books has a tagline on the front, and with this one ("Tennis...ping-pong...monsters anyone?") I think we hit an all-new low by just naming things and ending with "Oh, and by the way, there's monsters, so hang in there."

Revenge Of The Lawn Gnomes

A gnomes-come-to-life story badly masks the true tale of domestic problems manifested by parents arguing over whether or not plastic flamingos and other kitsch items belong in a front yard, which, for the record, they absolutely do and you're wasting your yard with natural beauty.

A Shocker On Shock Street

Yeah, they should have just called those Freddy movies *A Nightmare On Nightmare Street*, because why use more words than you have to?

The Haunted Mask II

A bunch of kids are supposed to STAY OUT OF THE BASEMENT because that's where the Haunted Masks (II) are, and the kids definitely don't stay out of the basement because there's nothing kids in these books like more than not staying out of a basement they're supposed to stay out of.

The Headless Ghost

Are most ghost stories where the ghost wants something (a head returned, a video tape copied, whatever) and uses confusion, terror, and indirect communication to get it just metaphors for the way people communicate in romantic relationships, or am I just a sad, introspective sack who can't even enjoy a headless ghost without thinking of where my life has gone wrong?

The Abominable Snowman Of Pasadena

More like the ADORABLE Snowman Of Pasadena who saves a girl's life by hugging warmth into her, thereby getting us a happy ending and REALLY pissing off a 12 year-old Pete who read a Goosebumps book and didn't expect it to end with a restorative hug.

How I Got My Shrunken Head

Well, an old lady just kinda showed up and gave it to me, but it turns out we're buddies, and I'm re-titling this adventure *Head N' Me: The Quicksand Escape*.

Night Of The Living Dummy III

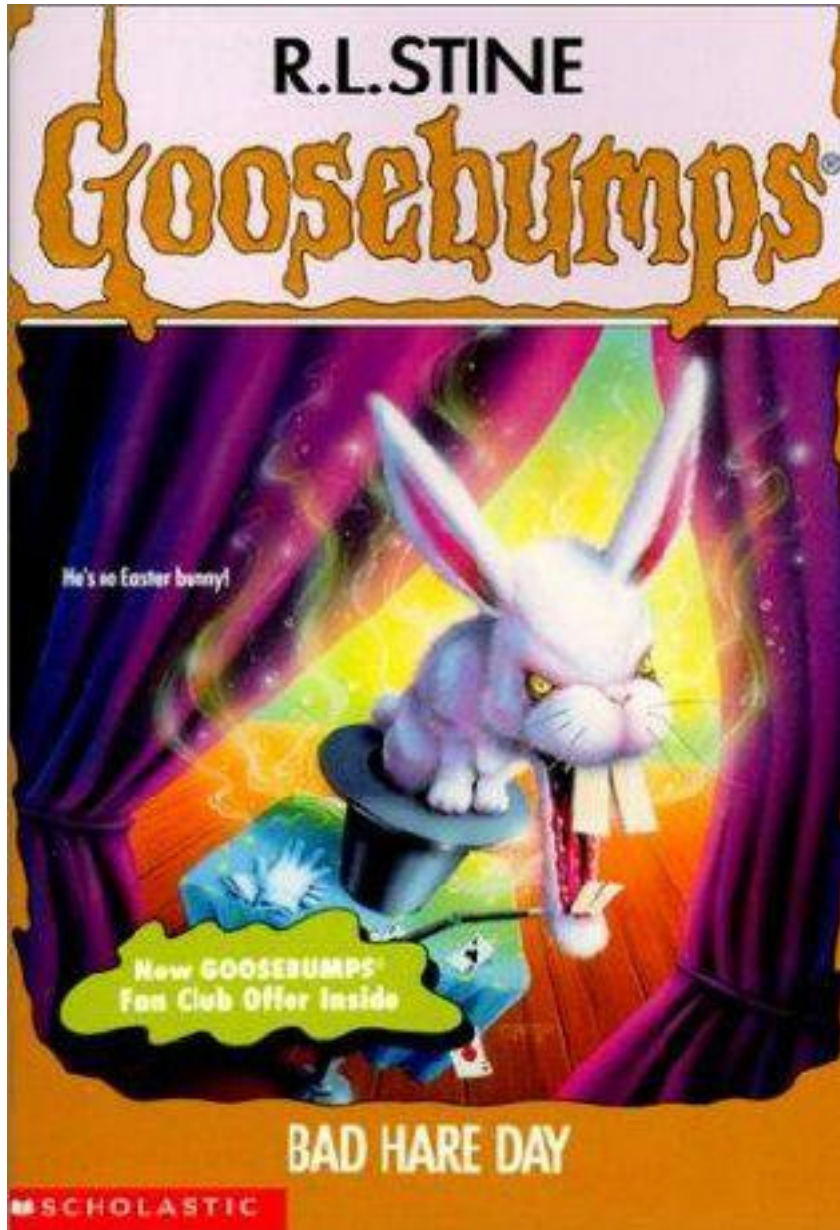
There's something about dummies where it's okay to have them get really violent in these books, punching a child in the face and watching a group of living dummies pounce on another dummy and



beat the bejeezus out of him.

Bad Hare Day

Magician turns out to be evil asshole rabbit, a minor twist on the evil asshole human magicians we are accustomed to, a plot that seems blown by the cover, no?



Egg Monsters From Mars

At one point, the egg monsters form a living, sentient blanket of scrambled eggs to save a boy's life, but I kinda feel like being covered by a sheet of scrambled eggs, while preserving your biological function, may not really "save" your life.

The Beast From The East

If you've ever played a game of tag with that jerk neighbor kid who keeps making up rules like

"Penalty Rocks" and "Made In The Shade" and "Level 3 Classic Clone" (actual rules from this book), then you've got a pretty good idea how this one goes.

Say Cheese And Die - AGAIN!

This book starts with the main character narrating the plot of this book's prequel to his English class, a report for which he receives an "F", which is kind of great as the reality is that this is R.L. Stine giving himself an "F" for his own book.

Ghost Camp

And now we're just putting spooky nouns in a bag, picking them out, and slapping the word "Camp" on the end.

How To Kill A Monster

Once again, there is ONE place in a CASTLE that children are told not to go, and they go there almost immediately, interrupting a monster...who takes a break from eating pancakes to chase them around for a while.

Legend Of The Lost Legend

Culled from the original title, *The Legendary Legend Of The Legend Of The Lost Legend Of Legend Legend*.

Attack Of The Jack O'Lanterns

If you're turned off by flashbacks and "it was only a dream", I would suggest skipping the first 2/3 of this one, and then also the last 1/3 as the ending seems almost designed to make humans unhappy.

Vampire Breath

Look, when it comes to vampire stories, let's just assume everyone's a vampire and not worry about it, and instead let's focus on the ending, which mirrors my own life in that the sighting of an air hockey table in any situation is an incredible relief.

Calling All Creeps!

I wonder how much time is spent deciding which titles warrant an exclamation point.

Beware, The Snowman

A family decides that the winters in Chicago suck too hard, and they move to the Arctic Circle, R.L.'s ultimate "Fuck You" to Chicago's climate and her people.



How I Learned To Fly

Stars a boy named Jack Johnson, who falls through a beach house floor, finds a book called "Flying Lessons", and uses the philosophy inside to get girls, and I will pose the theory that, other than the actual flying, this is the secret origin of singer/songwriter Jack Johnson.

Chicken Chicken

This:



Don't Go To Sleep

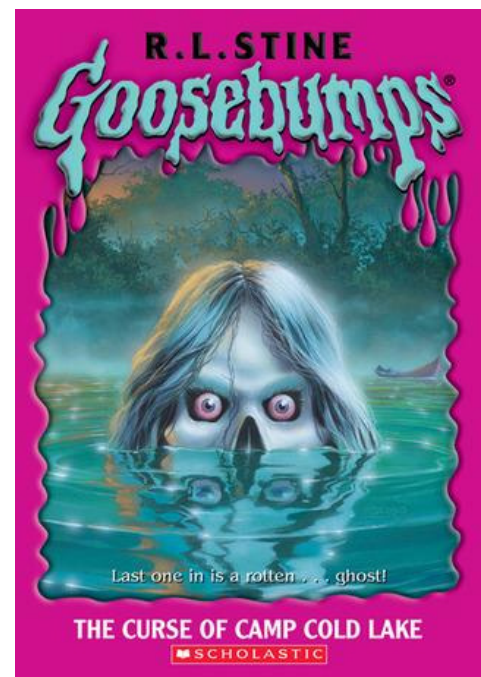
A young boy wakes up in a 16 year-old body, and you can just feel the onanism happening so fast and furious between every chapter break.

The Blob That Ate Everyone

In the end, the tale is actually being read aloud by the blob monster in a workshop-ish situation, and the true monster is the person who suggests a completely different ending that misses the entire point of the blob monster's work.

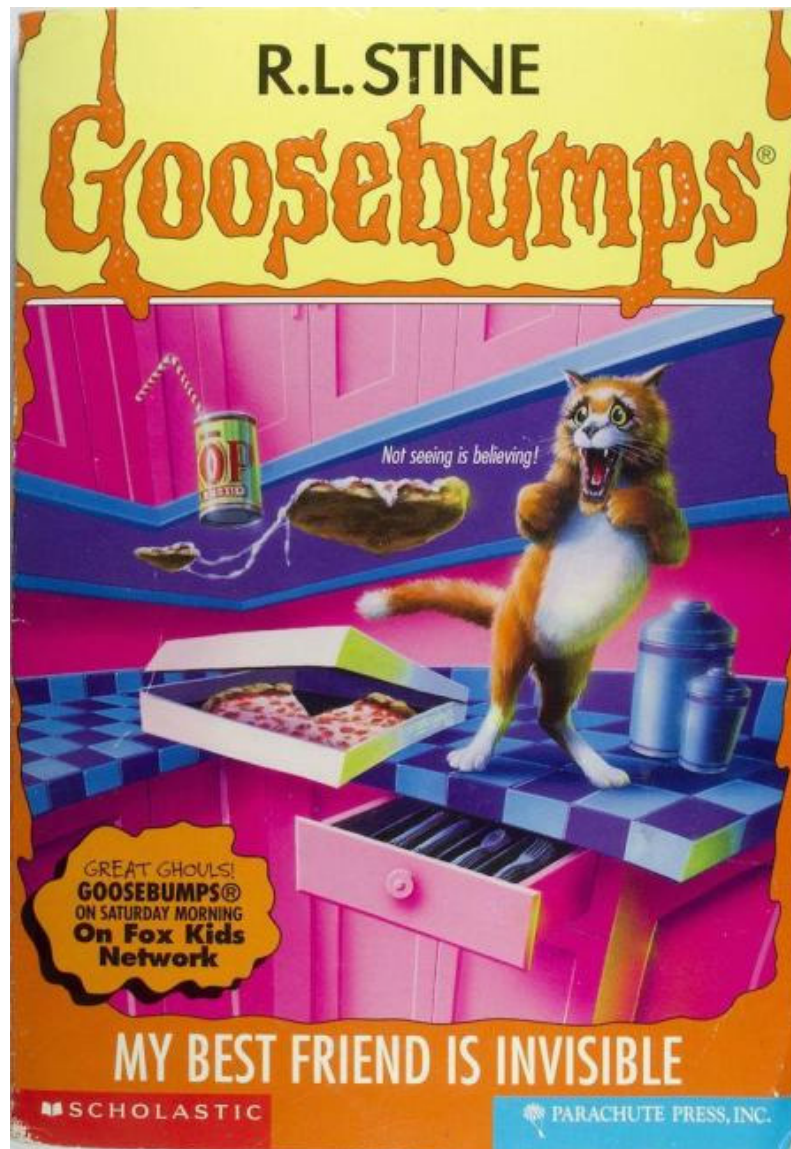
The Curse Of Camp Cold Lake

I'd be remiss if I didn't use/waste this one to just mention how, even this late in the series, the cover game is pretty strong.



My Best Friend Is Invisible

sigh How is it that as soon as I compliment something about this series, it comes back to bite me in the ass?



Deep Trouble II

The connection is pretty loose to the original, but it DOES involve the sea, so whatever, and it DOES carry on the rich tradition of a child who seeks revenge on another child after being the victim of a prank, and doing so by initiating a prank that would almost certainly kill the original prankster.

The Haunted School

I feel like the Goosebumps wiki says it best:

Despite the title, there are no ghosts in this book.

Werewolf Skin

An alternative to the werewolf lore where werewolves hide their skins and put them on for the full moon, and a delight to furies everywhere.

I Live In Your Basement!

The ultimate use of "It was all a dream", including a chapter that ends with the cliffhanger "It wasn't a dream" and then the revelation of, "Wait, yep, totally a dream."



Monster Blood IV

Monster Blood is clearly the Rocky of the Bumpiverse: IV is a case of going totally off the rails, V will probably be an unmitigated disaster, and Monster Blood Balboa will undoubtedly catch me unaware and leave me a complete mess of tears and joy.

13 Things Book Covers Can Learn From Horror VHS Covers

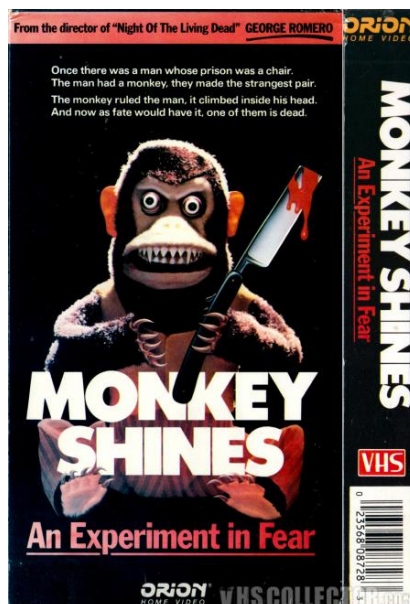


Let's flash back to a young Pete as he browses the aisles of Blockbuster.

He walks the store's perimeter to check for new movies. Sees if there are any guaranteed-in-stock titles that are all rented out, just for the sake of getting a coupon to rent something for free later (not that he ever actually WANTED to see *Hope Floats*).

And then, he steels himself and heads for the horror section.

Friends, THIS is what prompted this column:



A fake monkey. With an even faker razor. This was well before the days of Photoshop, but c'mon. Make the effort.

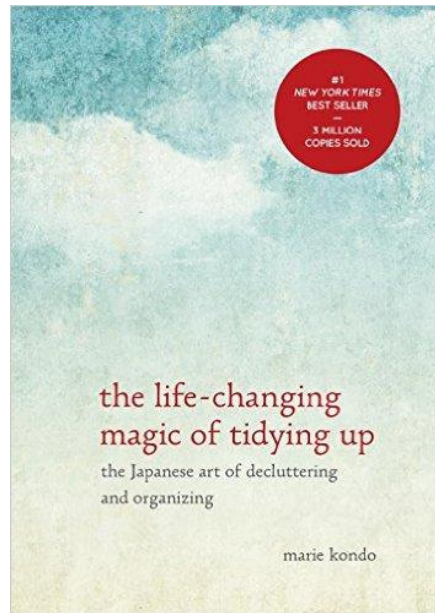
It's easy as hell for me to be brave and mock this thing now. Now that I'm an adult and enjoy more sophisticated fare around Halloween, like *Chopping Mall* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Any mall-based horror, really.

But the thing is, this cover stuck with me. This damn monkey and his grin. I NEVER rented this movie, but the image followed me home, and it lodged in my brain for the next, let's call it 20 years. Two decades, people.

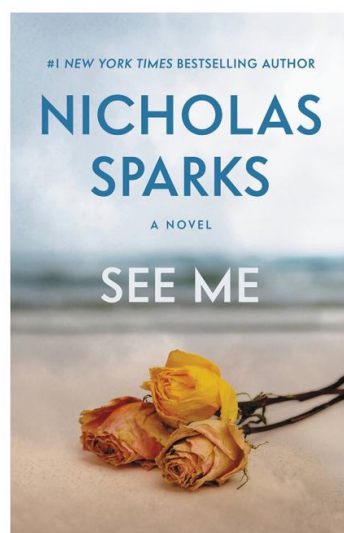
Here's the part that turned that shoddy monkey into a column:

Why don't book covers stick with me that long?

Let's look at some of the top sellers right now.

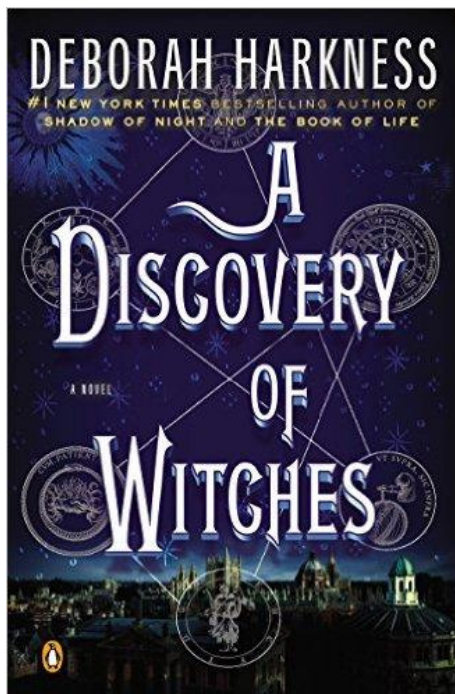


Suh-nooze. What do people say when they're looking for this book. "It's like...the one with clouds-ish things"?

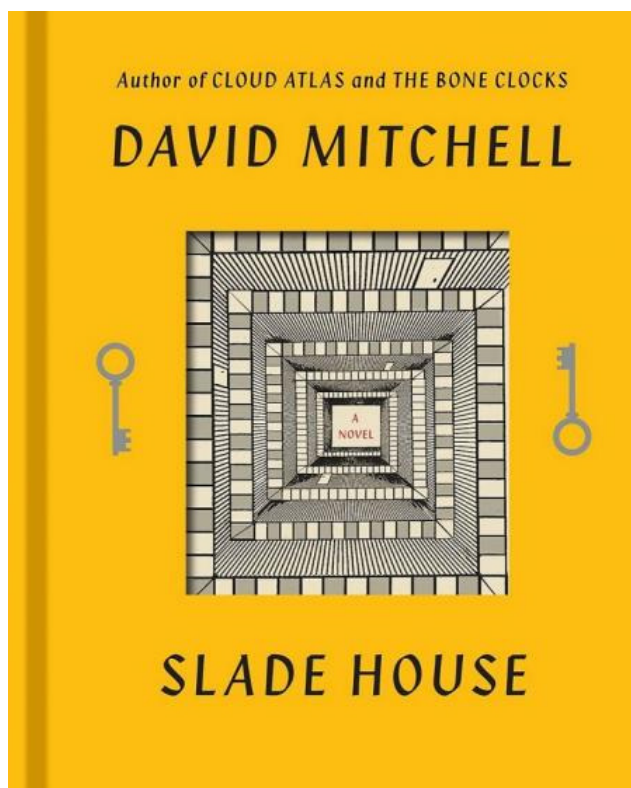


Ugh. I hope those roses aren't too brittle to stab my eyes out with, because I can't stand to look at this any more.

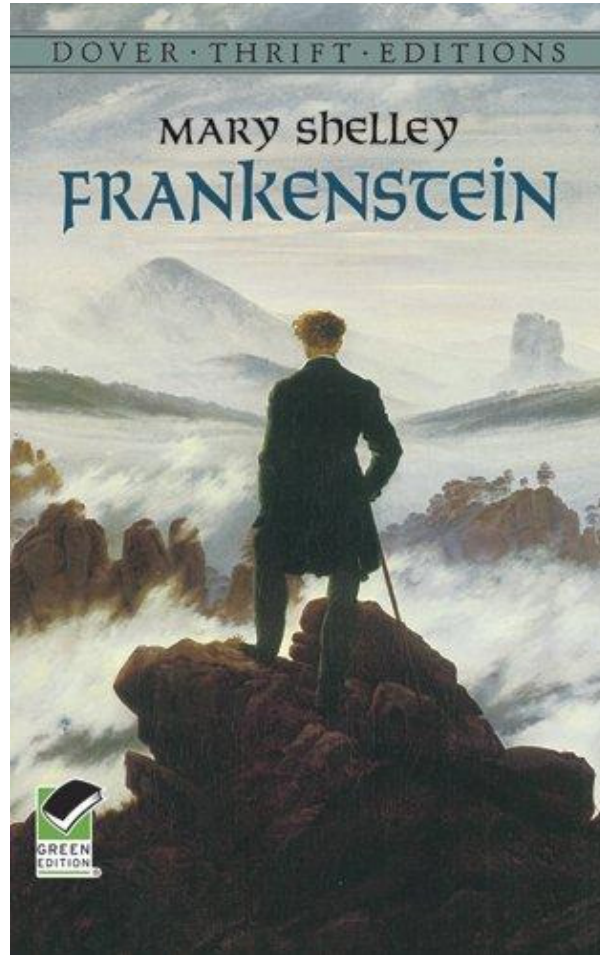
Okay, maybe we should be looking at horror? What's on Amazon's horror charts right now?



Nothing really wrong with it. But when I close my eyes, can I really remember it? Is it something that I'll remember 20 years from now? It's no razor monkey, that's for sure.



Dave, baby. I love you, but what are you doing to me here? Some squares and some keys. Not exactly Wes Craven stuff. Not exactly terror on the level of a horribly burned child murderer back for revenge here.



Ooooookay. This is *Frankenstein*. The book that launched a bajillion Halloween costumes. A slew of horror movies. A whole lot of corrections about who's Frankenstein and who's The Creature. One of the absolute classics of horror. And what's on the cover? A seaside dandy. My god is that NOT what I want from this cover. Need I remind you that this book is about a creature sewn together from human corpses?

Alright, enough. Let's get to the good stuff.

What can book covers learn from VHS horror of the past? How can a book cover lodge itself in my memory? What are the advantages of a toy monkey with a cartoon razor?

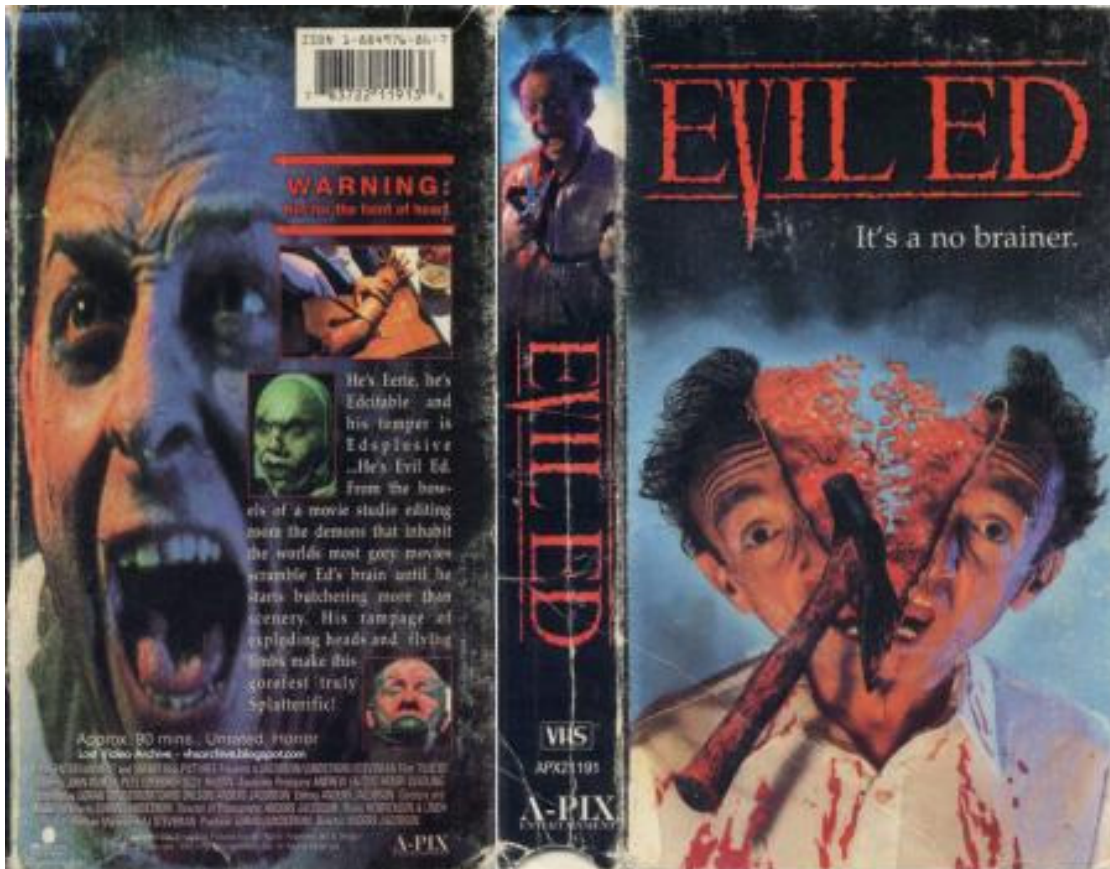
Don't Be Afraid To Hook Me With Visual Narrative



This cover gives me an idea of what's actually going to happen in the movie. Not an artist's vision of an emotional journey as expressed in colors and patterns. I know, when I get this movie, that I'm about to see a teen romp gone awry. In the murder way.

Maybe it's a good idea to create more than atmosphere with a cover. Maybe it's a good idea to relate some of the story, something that prompts me to pick this up off the shelf.

Taglines Set The Tone

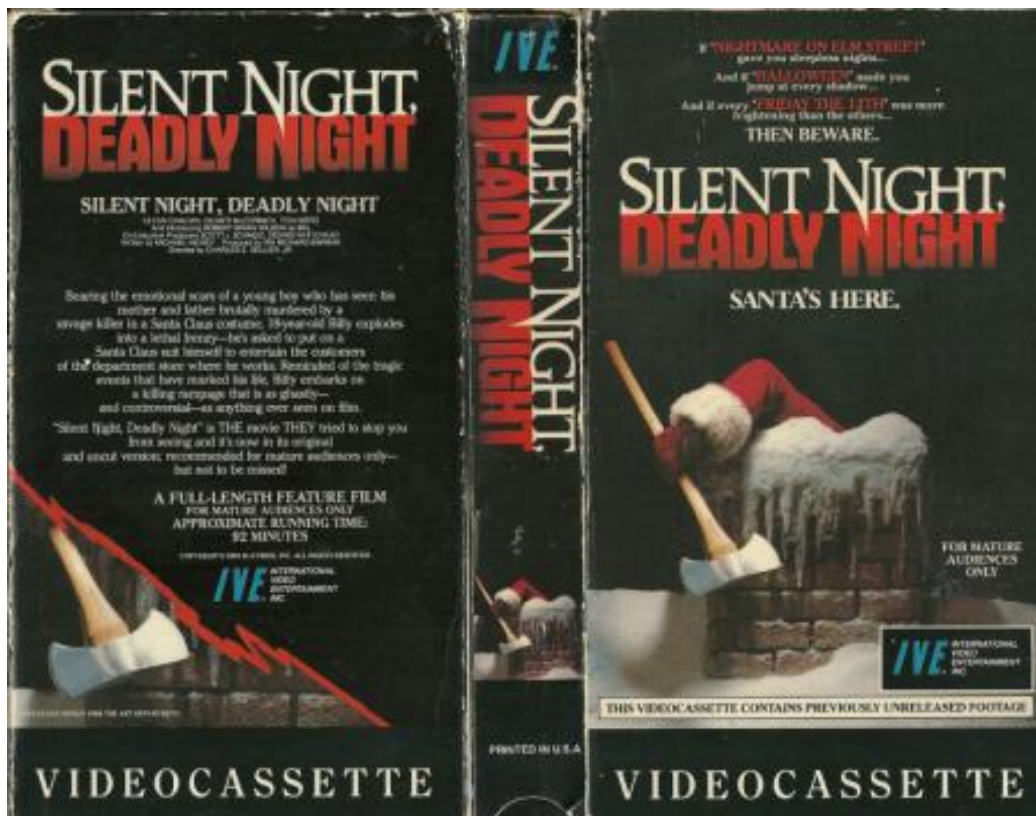


Note the use of little taglines in this cover, stuff like, "It's a no brainer!" Horror VHS taglines are cheesy, but hey, they express the way in which horror movies mix fun and terror. Maybe even allowing the viewer to laugh at a guy getting his head split in half by a hatchet that's held by...an invisible man?

I like how this cover tells me that I've got a horror movie, one that's got the gross-'em-outs, but without the serious, hostile Hostel feel. Those few words of tagline give me an entire reading on the film.

Basically, I like how this cover tells me that it's okay to watch this as a gore fest, but also gives me permission to get a chuckle out of it. It gives me not only the plot, but a way of coming at this whole thing.

Playfulness

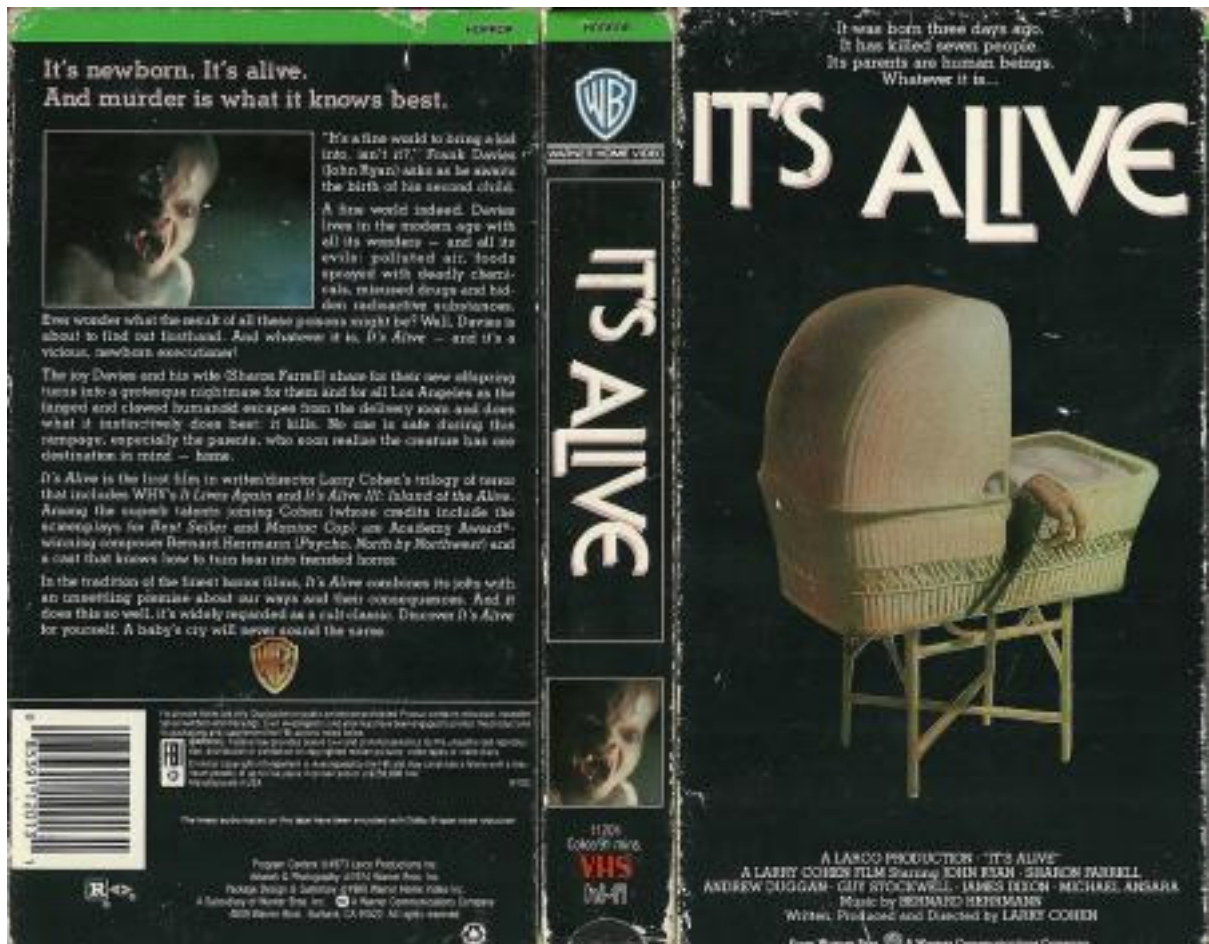


There's a way in which a lot of book covers take themselves very seriously. They say, "There is ART between these covers, sir. Real art. The kind from the museum you hate. The one with no dinosaurs or caveman dioramas."

This cover is playful and menacing at the same time. It doesn't detract from its scariness, but there's still a laugh wedged in there.

We read sad, heartbreaking books all the time, but there's a part of it that's enjoyable, right? There's a part of reading, even something that can be difficult at times, that gives us pleasure? Is there a way that a book cover can acknowledge that? The dual nature of books? Is there a subtle way books can accomplish that, like, I don't know, a Santa going down a chimney with an axe, or maybe Rudolph burning someone's flesh with his red hot nose? His nose is red because it's hot, right? And he burns people with it?

Tap That Spine

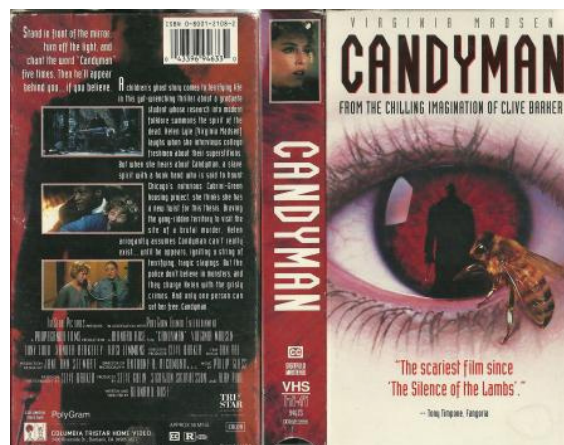


Look how this cover relies on one little detail. It's creepy, and then once you see it, that's it. You're in, my friend. That gross little baby hand will haunt your dreams.

Now look at the spine. That's the real money right there.

For the amount of time books spend on our shelves, the spine is wasted graphic real estate. Why not give me SOMETHING? A gross, mutated baby, a baby with no face, a baby that has fangs. Some kind of gross baby on the spine could salvage that Nicholas Sparks cover nicely.

When In Doubt, Bees



If you're not sure what to do, throw a bee in there. Bees are scary. I don't care what some hippie says. In fact, I'm coming out right here as anti-bee. Mother nature has been trying to kill humans the entire time we've existed, and now that we've got her on the ropes, we're going to save the bees? I think not. Screw the bees.

Entice Me Up Front, Take Me Even Further On The Back



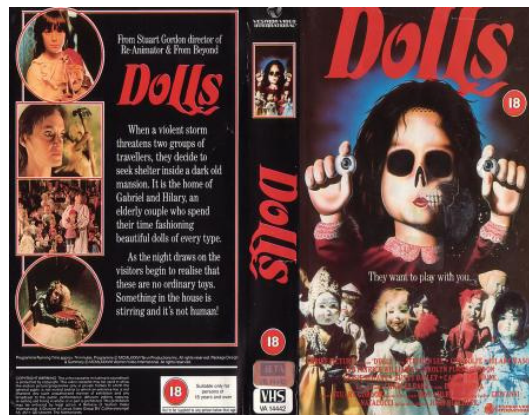
The front here is pretty great, and we think, "Alright, I've seen the worst. Let's find out what this movie is about." We're hooked.

Then you flip this bad boy over, and we've got A GUY SHOVING HIS HAND THROUGH A LADY'S HEAD SO IT COMES OUT OF HER MOUTH. Okay, that's worse. That got a lot worse.

When I see that much "narrative progression," let's call it, in that tiny space, I'm left feeling like there must be a hell of a lot going on with this one. If we go from something bad to something worse just from cover to cover, what's happening between those two things?

This cover makes me want to find out what's in the middle.

Dolls, You Idiots. More Dolls.



Every 5th horror movie involved spooky dolls. I don't think I need to explain myself on this one. Dolls, you fools. Dolls.

Visual Metaphor Doesn't Have To Be Impenetrable



I'm assuming that this doesn't ACTUALLY happen in this movie. A very tiny woman sliced in half by a butcher. A simple film about a butcher who sells human flesh would only be complicated by the existence of a race of tiny women. That's too much, even for me.

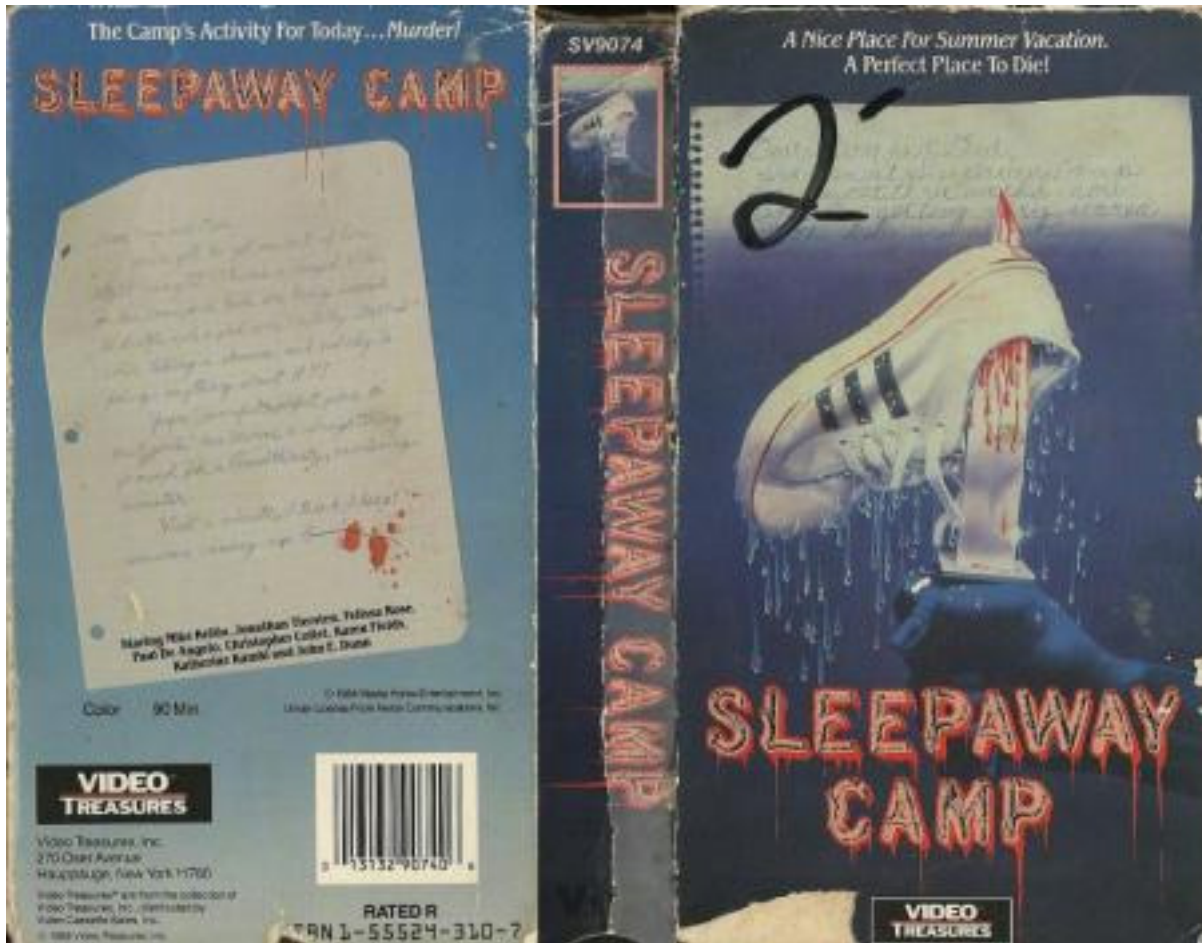
You can put a metaphor into your cover, express what's happening, without having it be so confusing, so non-specific that the only way you'd understand it is by reading the book. You can show me a version of what happens. You don't have to make it, I don't know, a yellow feather in a pile of red feathers or something.

Again, Dolls.



Puppets are pretty much dolls. Bonus points if you can add some German text. One of their words for "the" is "die." That's about as metal as a language can get.

Quit Trying To Make Something Timeless



Bold moves never go out of style, even if footwear does.

Okay, it's the opinion of myself and Run D.M.C. that these shoes are still great, but that's not an opinion we all share.

The thing of it is, I think a lot of books would move away from doing something like this for fear that the image wasn't timeless enough. That the shoe would go out of style, and people would recognize this as being of a certain era.

But shooting for something timeless, that's the ultimate in homogeneity. Not only do you want to please EVERYONE, you want to please people who aren't even born yet. That's a lot of pressure, and it doesn't usually work out anyway. It's alright if your story is time stamped.

Get All Bob Ross On It

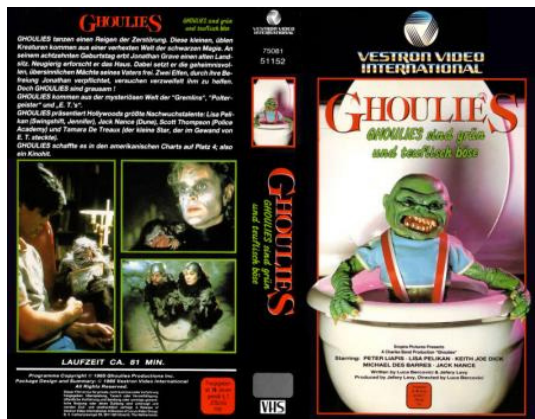


Painted covers aren't just for six pack abs on pirate ships. There's still some value there. You can still make an evocative image this way.

This is a cover that would stand out right now on bookshelves. It doesn't look like a lot of the other stuff that's out there. It falls somewhere between the big-budget covers and the inexpensive, computer generated stuff you're likely to see from some indie presses.

My theory is that book covers would benefit from a little back-to-basics, paints and pencils.

Just Go For It



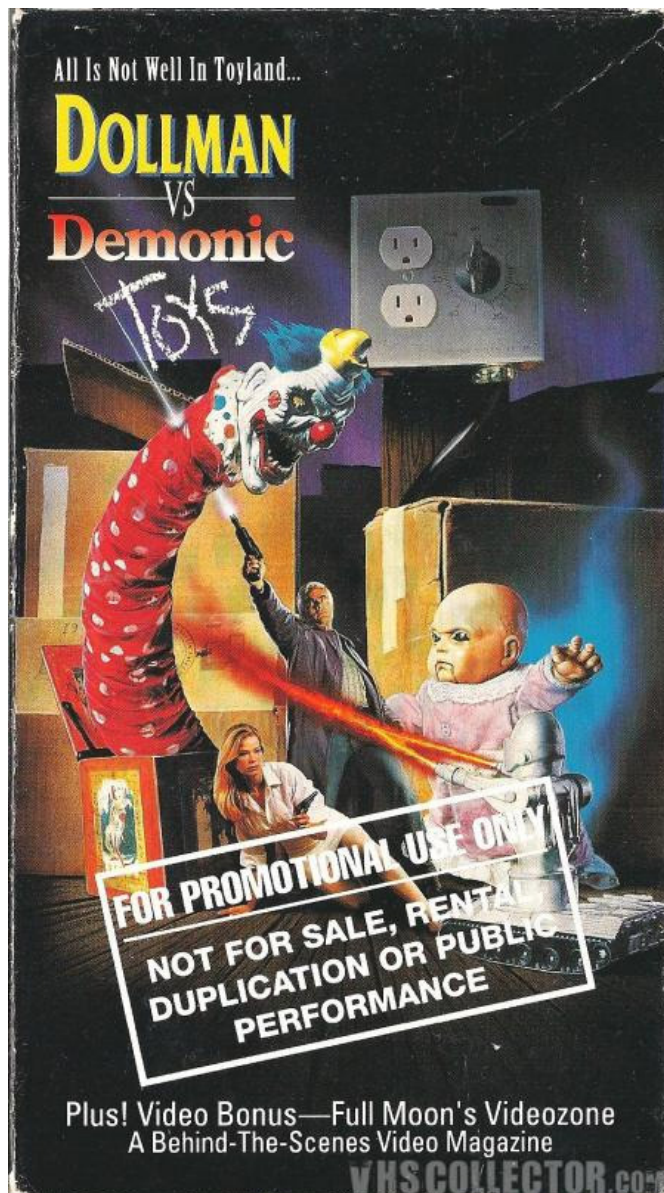
I was at a reading once where someone asked Patrick DeWitt how he found the names for characters in his books. He said he went to graveyards and looked at older graves. The reason? When it comes to names, people back in the day "really went for it." They weren't afraid of a name that might have been a little much. It's true. Look at your Civil War generals. Henry Blackstone Banning. William Tecumseh Sherman. Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard. When your parents name you Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard, that's not the result of a discussion along the lines of "Do you think it's a bit much?"

Is a Ghoulie coming out of a toilet the result of a conversation where ANYONE said "I think this might be a bit much?"

I think not.

My god, have some guts and go for it. Show me something. A toilet monster, a toilet snake. A toilet anything, really. If Jonathan Franzen's Purity had a toilet monster on the cover, I guarantee you we'd be having a VERY interesting discussion about that book right now.

Let Me Drive This Home, One Last Time: Dolls



Toys, dolls, dollmen. Maybe Chip Kidd can get an internship at Full Moon productions, work up some new skills on the cover for *Gingerdead Man vs. Evil Bong*.

Hey, look. I get it. It's the internet, and we're all tired of hearing that everything is this, everything is that. Everything is the best or worst thing ever.

I'm aware of book covers that play by my rules. Ones that follow these lessons.

I guess what I'm saying is this:

Put two boxes in front of me. One is filled with book covers. One is filled with horror VHS covers.

Sight-unseen, I know which one I want to look through.

But hey, prove me wrong. Share some book covers you love.

And prove me right. Share some of the VHS covers that haunted your childhoods.

11 Reasons You Should Not Get A Degree In Library Science



I should probably start with the giant poop story. Giant poops speak volumes. This could be a very short column that makes one very oversized, brown, awful, compelling point.

Instead, I'll start with this:

I've been a library worker for over 11 years, and a librarian for about 8 of those years. It's my chosen profession, and there are things about it I love.

And I've seen a lot of people come into the field for the wrong reasons. Maybe not the normal wrong reasons like fortune and glory and stockbroker stuff, but because they think the library is something that it's not.

It's about that time of year when students apply for grad school. When GRE's are taken. When professors are bothered with the practice of putting a recommendation letter into a sealed envelope like it's a goddamn game show question.

Before you send in your application, hear my warning.

This is why you don't want to go through with library school.

Disclaimer

I KNOW, okay. I know this job doesn't suck the way other jobs suck. I know it's not comparable to the shittiness of working at McDonald's or Wal-Mart, or the low wages of working at Pizza Hut, or

the soul-crush of phone centers, or the physicality of mowing lawns or cleaning gutters. I know that because I have worked ALL of those jobs.

I'm not starting a worst job contest here. I'm telling some truths about an advanced degree that prepares you for one job.

It's worked out for me, but I wish I'd known some things before I pursued my degree. I wish that people in my field would have been a little more honest about their chosen profession.

Let's do this.



"You Must Read A Lot At Work"

If you've worked in a library, you've heard this one. Let's squash it right away.

Librarians do not read at work.

McDonald's employees don't eat hamburgers all day.

Wal-Mart employees don't shop all day.

Bankers don't fondle money all day. I think. The McDonald's and Wal-Mart, I know those for sure. The bank one is just a guess. Because the thing is, banks don't need someone to fondle the money. They don't pay someone to do that. And libraries don't need someone to sit around and read all day. That's what the customers do, not the employees.

Don't mistake a librarian job for a job where you get paid to read.

"The Library Must Be A Peaceful Place To Work"

Allow the words exchanged between myself and a patron to fill in this point:

If we were in prison together, I'd be eating your food.

The library used to be a quiet place. I'm told. Now, it's a place with a lot of very nice people, and a place where someone might come in and threaten to take away prison Jell-O you didn't even know you had.

This is not a threat made quietly.

Kiss The Library You Loved Goodbye

Do you enjoy writing at the library? Maybe you like to sit there and read? Maybe it's your escape from the hellish nightmare that is your life, a nightmare for which you hold yourself responsible, yet lament at every available moment?

When you work in the library, you kiss that sanctuary goodbye.

It's a weird thing about libraries. It's not like when you're a scientist, all the science labs you used to hang out in start to feel like a workplace. Or when you're an insurance salesman, it's not like all the strip mall office hellholes you used to love become strip mall insurance hellholes that make you think only of work.

This is why Pee-Wee had a playhouse that was separate from his...workhouse? Where there were living forklifts and stuff? A poster that tells you how to aid a choking victim and also tells knock-knock jokes?

Take it from someone who wandered the beautiful New York Public Library and thought mostly about the security features and collection management. When something you love goes career, things change.

Financially, This Degree Doesn't Make Sense

Let's look at a job that is famous for having underpaid workers: high school teacher.

Most high school teaching jobs require a bachelor's degree, and the Occupational Outlook Handbook lists their median pay at \$55,050 annually.

Most librarian jobs require a master's degree, which requires master's degree loans, which are like regular student loans except you feel just a teensy bit worse because you were old enough to have known better.



Librarian median pay clocks in at \$55,370. That's an extra \$250 a year for whoever's counting. Which is exactly 1/12th of the grad school loans I'll pay this year.

Catch-22: Passion As Compensation

This is the other very teacher-y thing about being a librarian.

Teachers make shit. And part of the problem, there's an endless supply of teachers for whom a portion of their compensation is spiritual. They feel like they're doing a good thing, and that makes up for the lower wages.

People teach out of love.

And people librarian out of love.

This can lead to a really bad situation where, if you speak about wages, you're seen as "not a real librarian."

I had a wage discussion where I was told, "Well, you didn't get into this for the money."

And I didn't. But make no mistake. This is a job.

I wish the smile of a child knocked 5% off a teacher's car insurance. Or that every time a kid learned fractions, her teacher got an Arby's gift card. Because curly fries make everything better, even being broke. But good vibes don't pay rent.

Librarians Have Infinite Bosses



Here is how you figure out who your bosses are at the library:

First, you've got your above, internal bosses. These are the people we traditionally think of as bosses.

Then, you've got your other bosses. I've come up with a quick way to determine how many people that is.

How many people are alive and able to come into the building, send you an email, or make a phone call?

'Kay. The people who fall into that very large demographic are your bosses.

And none of these bosses will be shy about telling you what they want. You will hear the phrase, "my tax money" more than you would if you spent your life reviewing presidential debate footage.

And the real problem comes in because your different bosses want very different things.

Boss A: Whatever happened to the library of my youth, where it was quiet and children weren't allowed? The one peaceful place? I pay my taxes.

Boss B: I'm an enthusiastic math tutor who meets with students in the library, and sometimes we get a little loud. But I pay my taxes, and we deserve consideration too.

Boss C: How come you guys don't have more KoRn CD's? I...don't pay my taxes.

Boss D: I DO pay my taxes, and I also would like to inquire about KoRn compact discs, and frankly I'm a little perturbed about the implication that you made up above, that KoRn fans, also known as KoRnhOLes, are fiscally irresponsible.

This is a lot of bosses. Who are not afraid to argue with you about the merits of *...Follow the Leader*.

It's A Demographically-Homogenous Field

Let's look at an industry that's notorious for being dominated by white males. [Google's tech workers](#) are 83% male. 60% white.

[85% of librarians are women. 86% of librarians are white.](#)

In terms of race and gender, librarians are a more homogenous workforce than you find in Silicon Valley. That's kinda nuts. For a public sector work force, it's especially odd.

Now, granted, librarians fall into that category of jobs that women have held for a long time. Librarian was one of the few respectable positions you could hold as a woman in the American workforce from early on. It makes sense that these things take a long time to even out.

But I don't think I'm saying anything wrong when I say that diversity within a workforce is a desirable, beneficial thing.

I think we like to consider this a very progressive field. But in this aspect, it's just not.

Deep Love For Books Isn't Always A Plus

Walk through your public library. Walk into a section you don't know or care about. Pick your poison. Newspapers? Pattersons? Religious books? Political books? Bill O'Reilly's novel that has some [strange ideas of how oral sex works?](#)

Whatever it is you don't care about, walk through there, and think about the fact that you have to manage these sections with as much care and concern as you would a section you love. It's your job to care now.

Let me just repeat this. It is your job to care about a book where Bill O'Reilly describes the act of licking a woman's entire leg.

Now consider this. The other side of things. Imagine you're holding your favorite book in your hands. And you have to throw it away.

Because you will. You will hold books you love dearly, and in your other hand you'll hold a sheet that tells you NOBODY else loves this book. No one has checked it out in five years. It's been untouched, unloved, for five years. And now it's your job to throw it away. To make room for things people want.

If you love books, you'll hate parts of this job.

The Library Never Ends

When I shelved books at my library, the bookdrop had a hinged, wooden door. When people slid their books in the drop, they pushed the door open, and then the wooden door closed and clapped against its housing.

I heard that clap all day when I was at work. It meant there was more work to do.

I heard that clap when I went to sleep. When I had work dreams, that was what I dreamed of. That sound. No matter how weird the dream was, if I worked with vampires or I was in my pajama pants at work, that sound was always, always there.

The library is endless.

It's A Respectable Position. A Grown-Up Job. Pillar Of The Community.

Okay. Fine. Let me tell you a quick tale. The poop story, as promised at the beginning.

On the day I finished library school, I worked as a substitute librarian. I closed the library that night, and there was an incident in the bathroom. By "incident," I mean the largest, single, unbroken shit I've ever encountered. It was astounding. Looking into the toilet bowl was like staring into the cosmos. I couldn't believe there wasn't a corpse in the parking lot, that the person who delivered this stinkbaby was still upright.



The day I finished library school, I grabbed a coat hanger, and I broke up the largest shit I've ever seen and flushed it down.

That was the tip of the poopberg.

I've emptied a sink full of vomit.

I've squeegeed a floor covered in feces.

Blood is more common than you'd think.

These incidents are not uncommon.

Don't get it twisted. I'm not above breaking up a shit with a coat hanger. I've done it many times. I've even perfected a method on later outings that involves rolling up a paper towel and draping it over the center of a shit log, the flush then pulling on the paper towel hard enough to crack the shit. Someone who is above breaking up fecal matter does not do it often enough to develop a technique.

My master's education. There are times I'd be better off with hazmat training.

There May Be A Time When Librarians Aren't Librarians Anymore

A manager in a nearby library system was showing me their newest facility. They had beautiful equipment, exciting new technology, and nobody to run it.

Here's what this manager told me: "I need engineers. I need programmers. I need people who can learn library skills but come to me with something else. I don't need librarians."

Libraries are changing. And librarians are changing too. More of the education involves digital resources, modern technologies. But there may be a time soon when an IT background is more helpful than a course of study in library science. When a programmer has more use than a cataloger. When a hazmat suit is more appropriate than a cardigan.

Why You're Going To Love AMC's 'Preacher'



You've got a few months to catch up on *Preacher's* run of comics from the mid-90's before the series premiere on AMC. Or you could just read this column.

Let's take a look. And I promise, no spoilers that wouldn't be found in the show's trailer, that trailer's description, or in the description for the first volume of comics. This is a really great series, and part of what makes it great is the surprise. I swear, I'll do my best to preserve the element of surprise here.

The Skinny

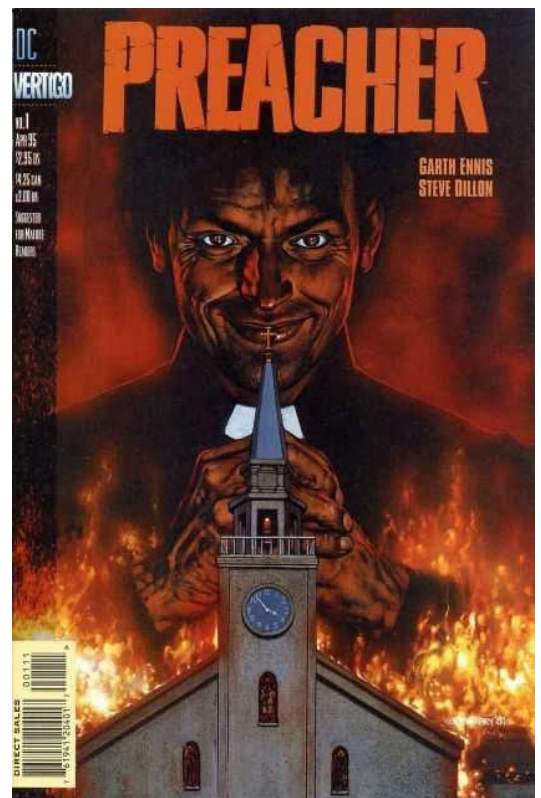
Jesse Custer, a drunken preacher, becomes possessed of a divine power: The Word.

Whatever Custer says, others are compelled to do. Whether it be asking someone to hand over his wallet or telling someone to go f*#! himself, humans can't resist The Word.

Throw in an ex with serious pistol talents and an Irish vampire buddy, and trust me when I say the comic's last story arc's title is spot-on: All Hell's A-Comin'!

Why You Give A Damn

Preacher is far from the first comic property to head to the screen. But it's not exactly the easy sell of *The Walking Dead* (Zombies. And they murder a horse) or *The Flash* (he's the most-fastest non-hedgehog being). *Preacher* doesn't have



the superhero thing going for it the way Netflix's *Daredevil* does, and it's a far cry from *The Avengers*.

And it's these differences that make it compelling as hell.

For starters, this comic talks about religion, God, and whether or not God is a huge bastard in a way that superheroes just don't. And TV just doesn't.

Maybe it was a 90's thing to have your comics give God the business. Like in *Savage Dragon* from 1997 when Satan kicked God right in his be-robbed ballbag. But nowadays, it's not as easy to find the kind of reverend-based irreverence that you can expect from *Preacher*.



Here's the other thing I love about *Preacher*:

Jesse Custer, *Preacher's* main character, has a past. And that's not something a lot of comic characters have. Not in a useful, story way.

What was Iron Man's childhood like? And more to the point, it's not like we see the monsters from under Tony Stark's bed come back to haunt him as an adult. Superman's past comes back, I guess, but not in the real, visceral way we see in *Preacher*. Trust me, there's no way Superman would be as popular as he is today if he and Jesse Custer shared even a smidgen of origin in common.

Preacher gives every character a very real, very alive past, and when superpowers come along, it's not just about how we're going to move forward. It's about how people can reconcile the past with

who they want to be in the future.

If that doesn't do anything for you, the book's also jam-packed with nudity and swear words like you wouldn't believe.

Preacher's History In Print

Quick and dirty, DC comics started an alternative line for comics called Vertigo. This was the era in which all music was labeled "alternative", most ways people dressed were "alternative", and the word "alternative" lost all meaning because everything was alternative. The important thing was, Vertigo was a way for DC to have a character whose head looked like a penis.

And Vertigo allowed comics and creators to do darker, more grown-up stuff. It was one of the best moves DC ever made, if sales and history mean anything to you.

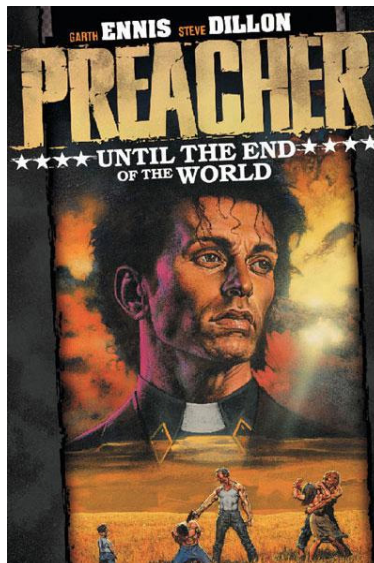
Just as a quick round-up, here are some of the titles published under the Vertigo banner: *Hellblazer*, *Transmetropolitan*, *Sandman*, *100 Bullets*, *Astro City*, *Doom Patrol*, *Daytripper*, *Fables*, *iZombie*, *Swamp Thing*, *Sweet Tooth*, *V for Vendetta*, *We3*, *Y: The Last Man*. Oh, and *Haunted Tank*, the 2009 reboot of which saw the ghost of a southern Civil War general occupying an Abrams tank in Iraq, piloted by...an African-American? How will these two EVER get along? Cue *Odd Couple* music.

Okay, they're not all winners. But a hell of a lot of them are.

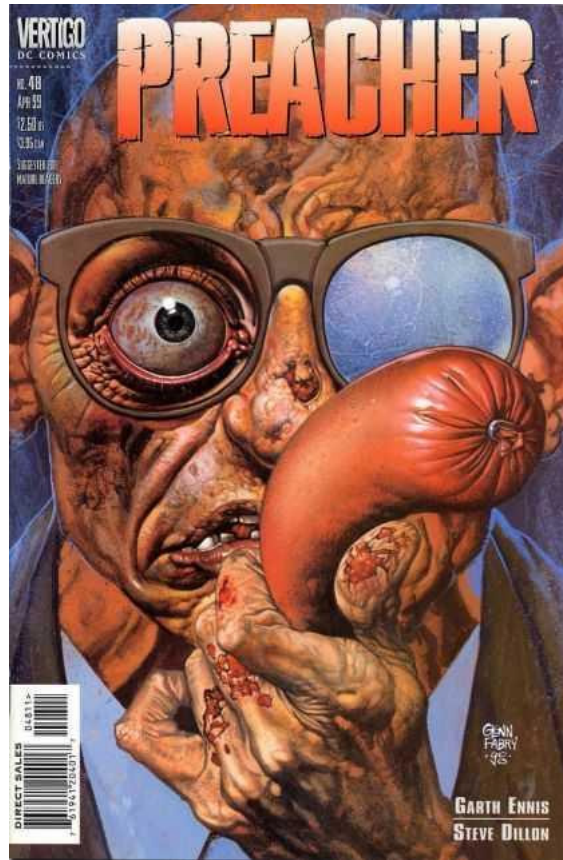
Preacher was one of the earlier Vertigo titles to make a splash, starting in 1995, and it made great use of DC's secret, dirty uncle of a publishing label.

Preacher, unlike most comics you see, had the same creative team from start to finish. It was written by Garth Ennis, who isn't a household name, but probably should be. His particular brand of goofy ultra-violence gave us not only *Preacher*, but also *Hitman* (not the bald, barcode guy, a different one), a great run on *Punisher*, not to mention the one-shot *Punisher Kills the Marvel Universe*, which spawned a ton of copycats, but none as good, as bloody, or as thick with that feeling that you're reading something you really shouldn't.

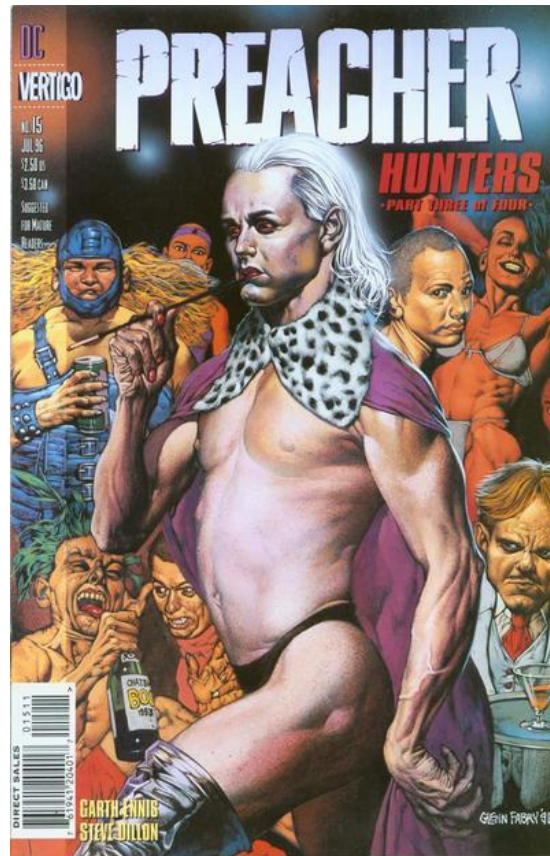
Preacher's art was also quite a feast, with Steve Dillon doing the interior drawings, and Glenn Fabry providing covers that ranged from incredible:



To just downright grotesque.



And, what the hell, while we're at it, he did this one too:



How Preacher Ended Up On The Screen

It hasn't been an easy road.

In 1998, Electric Entertainment was set to adapt the series. Garth Ennis wrote three drafts for the screen before Electric Entertainment stopped the project because of budget problems and the controversial source material. Perhaps they thought the story was a little more pro-god, anti-vampire, and fetish-party unaware.

HBO was ready to take a shot, and the ambitious plan there was to do a shot-for-shot version, each issue of the comic being 1-hour of the series. This series was also abandoned because new HBO execs found the material to be dark and religiously controversial. To be fair to HBO, almost everyone on *Taxi Cab Confessions* was in the cab at night. We don't know that these confessors didn't then get to church in the morning. Maybe ALL their shows were pious.

Columbia pictures owned the movie rights in 2008. There were some plans to breathe life back into a Kevin Smith take on the story from the early 2000's, but it never materialized. Am I saying for certain that Smith's *Preacher* script became *Chasing Amy*? Eh, why not?

Finally, the *Preacher* hot potato landed with Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg. It had apparently been a project on the duo's wish list:

This is amazing! We've tried for seven years to work on Preacher and we're so psyched AMC is finally letting us. It is our favorite comic of all time, and we're going to do everything we can to do it right. Humpardoo!

And when the green light finally stayed green, series creator Ennis was pretty pumped:

I'm particularly impressed that Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg and Sam Catlin understand Preacher fully — meaning they get it for what it is, not some vague approximation. All in all, it looks like Preacher can now be brought to TV in a way that I'd previously not have thought possible, and I very much appreciate that Steve and I have been included in the conversation in the way that we have.

What Might Need to Change

There are a couple things in the series that might not work the same as they did in 1997.

That whole vampire thing?

In 1997, we were pre-*Twilight*. Is the world a little vampire-ed out in 2015?

On the one hand, *Preacher's* Cassidy is the most anti-*Twilight* vampire ever. What's the opposite of a twilight? Daybreak? Crap, that doesn't work. That kills vampires. But you get the idea.

On the other hand, sometimes a vampire is a vampire is a vampire, and who gives a damn about another freaking vampire?

The other thing, this book has a lot of man's man shit in it. When I read this as a very young man, it all

worked. Now? We'll have to see. It's been almost 20 years, and I think we'll have to see whether the creators choose to hold up that part of the story. It's all interesting stuff, and it was fairly progressive to have a capable female character in your lineup in 1997. And in 2017 it probably still will be because that's how far we've come, but I digress. The relationship between Jesse Custer and his girlfriend, Tulip, will be the most interesting part to see interpreted and possibly updated or changed on-screen.

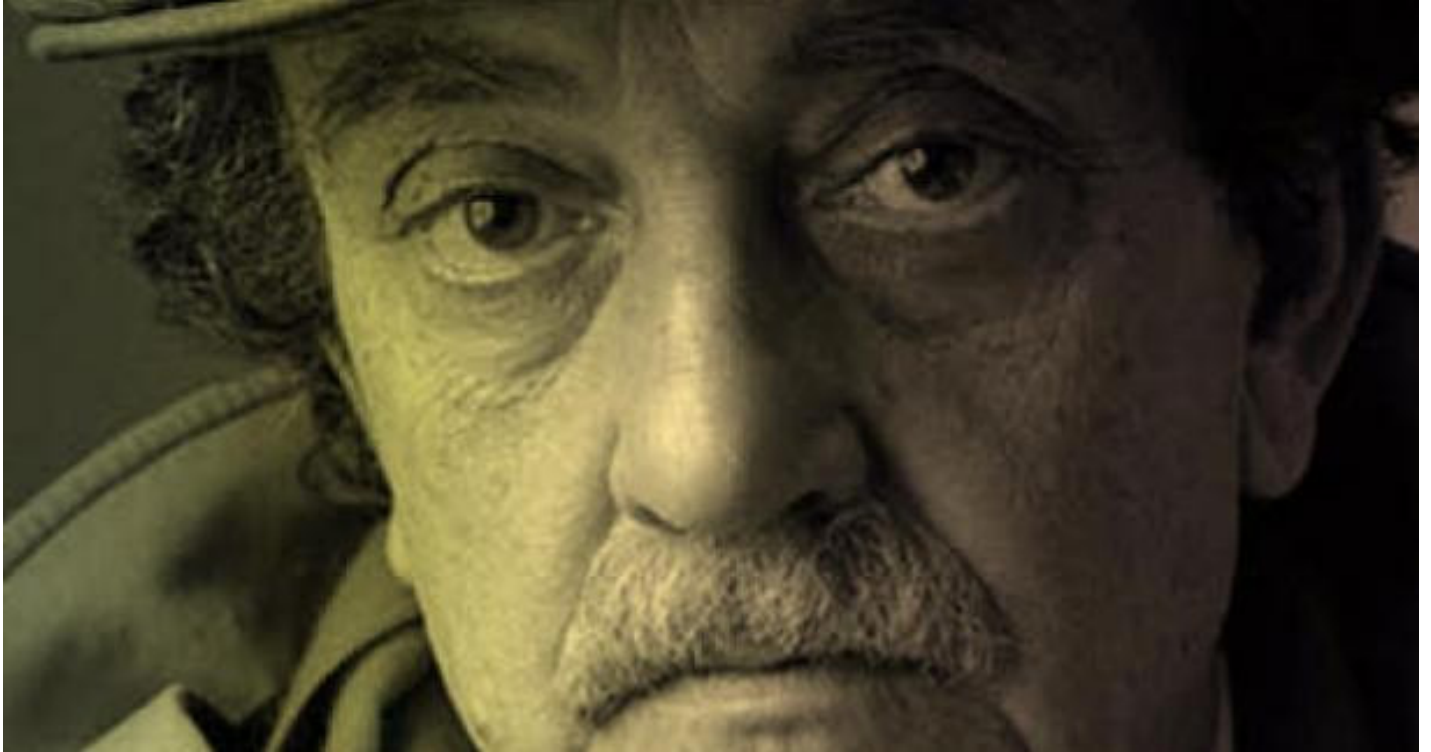
Still Not Convinced?

Alright. I've got 6 items to convince you. VERY minor spoilers ahead, so be done with this if you consider nouns out of context to spoil things in any way.

6 things from the comics to pique your interest:

1. A Zippo lighter emblazoned with the phrase "Fuck Communism."
2. A religious zealot with a severe eating disorder.
3. A discussion of why the Empire State Building isn't total bullshit.
4. The ghost of John Wayne.
5. A complicated love story that says a lot about trust.
6. The ultimate, badass revenge cowboy of all time, ever.

13 Ways to Live And Write Like Kurt Vonnegut



Kurt Vonnegut would have been 93 this month. If we were lucky enough to live in a world where people like Kurt Vonnegut lived to be 93.

The dude is one of those writers who's well-liked and popular, but still underrated somehow. How it is that *The Sirens Of Titan* isn't an all-time classic I do now know or understand, and frankly it's part of what makes me feel like our society is nothing but wreckage.

What really made Vonnegut great was his generosity. He wrote about fictional worlds in a way that let the reader in instead of keeping her at a distance. Vonnegut's voice on the page was that of a storyteller, someone who always made a point about the value of a reader's time.

And he gave some pretty damn good life advice too.

Take a moment, improve your writing, better your terrible life, and remember Kurt Vonnegut.

Most of what's below, unless linked, is contained in one of the two books featured at the end of this column, if you're looking for more advice.

Write And Quit Your Goddamn Nightmare Job

How do you make it as a writer? After Vonnegut sold his first story, he wrote a letter to his father. An excerpt:

I've deposited my first check in a savings account and, as and if I sell more, will continue to do so until I have the equivalent of one year's pay at GE...I will then quit this goddamn nightmare job, and never take another one so long as I live, so help me God.

I'll give you this much, either story publishers paid A LOT more back then or GE paid A LOT less. But perhaps this is a useful tactic for any writer wondering whether to make the switch. Figure what you can live on, and once you've got that for a year, boom.

Live Weird And Laugh

Vonnegut embodies the idea that you can take what you do seriously without taking yourself seriously:

I have written a story called 'The Big Space Fuck.' [laughs] It's about this big [laughs] it's about the end of the world...the space program has built this enormous spaceship, and the hope is that human life will somewhere go on, and it's got a big war head on it filled with sperm. And they're [laughs] firing it out there, hoping it will hit something.

Write And Cut

If you're a person who doesn't know what to cut and what not to cut, here's a brutal but effective way to get started:

Your rule might be this: If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.

Want To Live Without War? Then Write It Right

Vonnegut wasn't a fan of war. And who can blame the guy? Most people forced into labor in a POW camp probably aren't all that interested in seeing that crap go down again.

But where Vonnegut differs, he doesn't put the blame for war on politics and despots. He blames artists for war too.

My own feeling is that civilization ended in World War I, and we're still trying to recover from that...Much of the blame is the malarkey that artists have created to glorify war, which as we all know, is nonsense, and a good deal worse than that — romantic pictures of battle, and of the dead and men in uniform and all that.



Write For An Audience

What's the point of learning the writing craft anyway? Why bother? Isn't this an art? Isn't writing all about feeling and emotion and raw stuff on the page?

Why should you examine your writing style with the idea of improving it? Do so as a mark of respect for your readers, whatever you're writing. If you scribble your thoughts

any which way, your reader will surely feel that you care nothing about them. They will mark you down as an ego maniac or a chowderhead — or, worse, they will stop reading you.

Write For Yourself

After a class of young students wrote and asked Vonnegut to appear, he wrote a letter back to them advising that they make art for the sake of art. And he gave them an assignment:

Write a six line poem, about anything, but rhymed. No fair tennis without a net. Make it as good as you possibly can. But don't tell anybody what you're doing. Don't show it or recite it to anybody, not even your girlfriend or parents or whatever, or Ms. Lockwood. OK?

Tear it up into teeny-weeny pieces, and discard them into widely separated trash receptacles. You will find that you have already been gloriously rewarded for your poem. You have experienced becoming, learned a lot more about what's inside you, and you have made your soul grow.

Live With Each Other

Vonnegut gave a speech entitled "Why You Can't Stop Me From Speaking Ill Of Thomas Jefferson." Mostly, the ill had to do with the fact that Jefferson mortgaged human people.

With recent issues of race, social justice, and the role of larger institutions in those discussions, here's Vonnegut's take:

If I have offended some of you by speaking ill of Thomas Jefferson, tough titty for you. I can say anything I please, short of shouting 'Fire!' if there is no fire, because I am a citizen of the U.S.A. Your government does not exist and should not exist in order to keep you or anybody else, no matter what color, no matter what race, no matter what religion, from getting your damn fool feelings hurt.

Write With Simple Language

Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. 'To be or not to be?' asks Shakespeare's Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence in his short story 'Eveline' is just this one: 'She was tired.' At that point in the story, no other words could break the heart of a reader as those three words do.

And, of course, lest we forget the simple, two-word Bible verse. Which is:

A: Jesus Rocked!

B: Jesus Rocked!!!

C: [Something way less cool]

Live Without Technology

I hope you know that television and computers are no more your friends, and no more increasers of your brainpower, than slot machines. All they want is for you to sit still and buy all kinds of junk, and play the stock market as though it were a game of blackjack.

Junk? That's a little harsh. Now if you'll excuse me, it's time to get back to my favorite podcast, which is sponsored by a company that sends you a whole bunch of clothing in the mail and then you send stuff back. Basically the Columbia House Movie Club model, but in 2015 and we should know better. Technology as an avenue for junk. Heh, hardly.

Write With Clarity

Messy pages and lines aren't friends to your readers. Part of what Vonnegut always preached was that a reader's time was valuable. Sometimes I wonder if this is why he's less respected, because we so often view the ideas of clarity and simplicity and engagement as being antithetical to artistry and true emotion.

Think about your readers. You don't have to make things dumb for your readers. Vonnegut's ideas were far from dumb. But you might be able to cut your reader some slack.

Readers want our pages to look very much like pages they have seen before. Why? This is because they themselves have a tough job to do, and they need all the help they can get from us.

Write Off Semicolons

Almost certainly my favorite advice, of all time, ever. Semicolons:

All they do is show you've been to college.

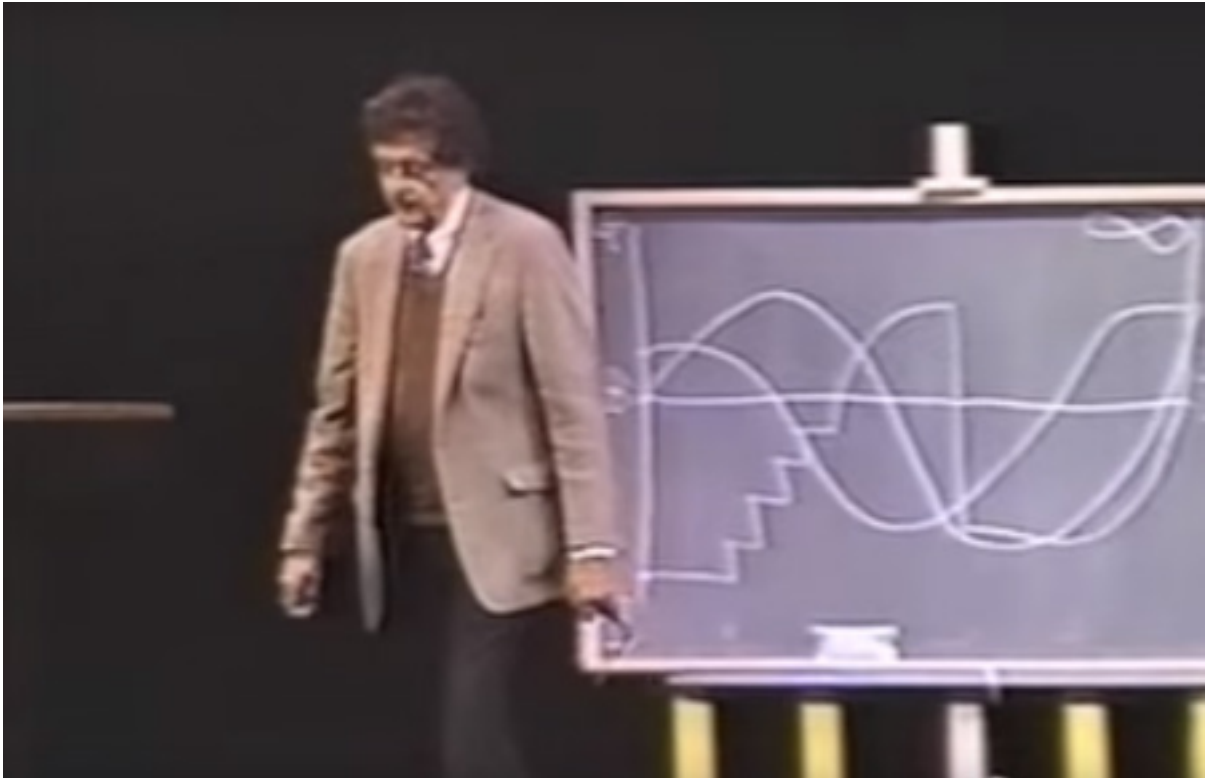
And, occasionally, make the symbol for "I'm sad, but let's have sex." ;(

Live With Money And Love

I will tell you how to make money: work very hard. I will tell you how to win love: wear nice clothing and smile all the time. Learn the words to all the latest songs.

I'll say this one thing. This advice was given in 1978. Long before a song about getting low and ejaculating all over a room was a thing that you heard anywhere a dance floor could be filled.

Write Stories With Defined Shapes



With time on the X-axis, happiness on the Y, [Vonnegut traces the arcs, literally, of popular stories](#). And makes the bold claim that people have loved and always will love these stories. After watching the *Cinderella* part, I'm not sure he's wrong.

Gather 'Round For Tales From Marvel's Holiday Specials



What's that up on the house top? Why it's some Marvel Holiday Specials.

Yes, in the spirit of the holidays, Marvel cranked out some special comic books, featuring all of your favorite characters in short, holiday-themed tales.

Consider me your personal Rudolph, guiding you through the hazy winter of the Marvel Holiday Specials. My nose is red (drunken bar fight), and kids were real jerks to me, so I'm pretty well-qualified.

I've clipped for you excerpts from 1991, 1993, 1994, 1994 (again, somehow), 1996, and 2006. Plus a couple bonus books.

So, without further ado:

Let's. Get. Merry.

Ghost Rider Dashes Through The Snow

Right off the bat, one of the stranger features was Marvel's insistence on using characters like Ghost Rider in Holiday Specials. A biker with a skull head that's always on fire. Sounds like the perfect dude to grace the pages and get us into the holiday spirit. I guess he's the Spirit of Vengeance, so just replace "Vengeance" with "Cheer" and we're there!



Ghost Rider stars in one of my hands-down favorite stories

See how this one strikes you:

A blind kid and Ghost Rider walk into a graveyard.

Setup for a terrible joke? No. Setup for a Marvel Holiday tale? You betcha!

This little blind kid gets kidnapped on Christmas Eve. He's crying, and he's wearing teddy bear pajamas and everything. He calls out for Santa to rescue him. And just when you're at the brink of feeling like maybe it's cruel to make fun of a little blind kid on Christmas, Ghost Rider comes to the rescue.

And because the kid is blind, he mistakes Ghost Rider for your buddy and mine, Kris Kringle.

Chains? No, no. Those must be jingle bells. Jingle bells that Santa uses to beat a man severely, but damn it, they jingle.

How about the flames? Well, of course Santa is warm, what with the rosy cheeks.

And the sound of a motorcycle that's got flame for tires? Boy, the reindeer sure must be hungry. I can hear their tummies growl.

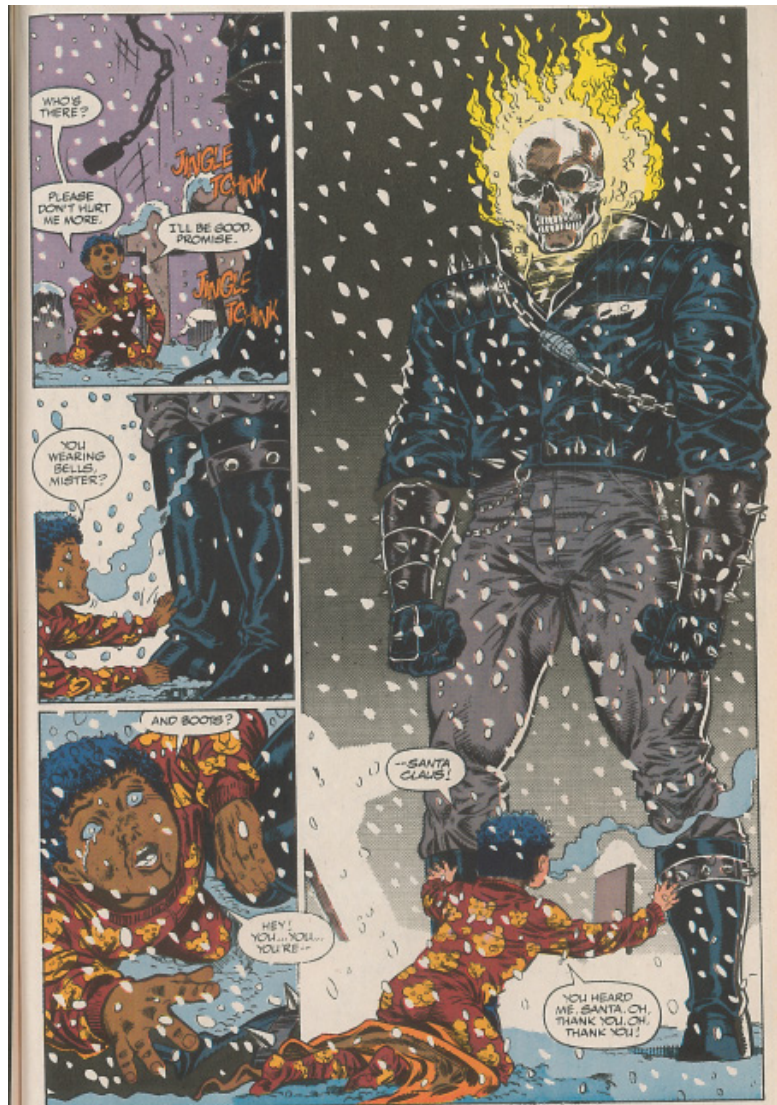
On the one hand, stupid as hell. On the other hand, I guess we trick kids into thinking Santa is a real dude without ANY manifestation whatsoever, so how outlandish is it?

It's a decent little story, and not bad for a Ghost Rider Christmas story.

But that's not Ghost Rider's last holiday appearance.

In another tale, Ghosty is riding down the street when he accidentally scares the bejeezus out of an office drone. In very un-Ghost-Rider-like fashion, Ghost Rider returns, apologizes, and decides to make up for scaring the dude by scaring the hell out of his boss.

Ghost Rider succeeds in his role of Ghost of Christmas past or present or whichever one is closest to a hellbeast. Although Ghost Rider's looking a little dumpy, no? I mean, for a living skeleton, you'd think it would be easy to keep the holiday poundage a little lower.



Ho-Ho-Horrific Punishment

Ghost Rider, if you can believe it, isn't the grimmest character we encounter in these specials.



Of course, the Punisher. Disguised as Santa. The biggest giveaway that this ain't Santa would probably be the 1000-yard, Vietnam vet stare, but we can excuse that away. Surely, if Santa's traveling all over the world, he's seen some shit.

In this tale of goodwill towards men, Punisher promises his buddy Micro that he won't hit anyone. And in the spirit of the holidays, he doesn't. Technically.

To work his way up a gang ladder, Punisher starts by welding a charity coin thing to the ground, pulling this kid off a bike so he can interrogate him.

Next, Punisher makes his way to the gang's muscle.



I feel...I feel like our friend Frank Castle is following the letter of his no-violence promise as opposed

to the spirit. Although this spiked Santa belly is pretty rad, and as a person who has reluctantly played Santa for a work function, I think there's a market for it.

Finally, we get to the ultimate bad guy. The baddie punches Punisher, and Punisher just smiles back at him like a creep. So baddie punches some more and even hits Punisher with the handset of a rotary phone, which is a classic action movie fight move that's in danger of disappearing forever unless they start filming more action movie sequences in hip Brooklyn lofts.

Of course, Punisher eventually wins out:



Ah, a skin-penetrating tranquilizer. We'll leave this fella gift-wrapped for the cops!

Here Comes...Santa Claus!

Now, so far we've seen some Santa impersonators. But what about the real McCoy?

Kringle shows up to stop an X-Men fight at the mall, which he does by turning some evil mutants into action figures. Including The Blob.

"Mom, why is this action figure all greasy?"



Even though the theory that Santa is a mutant rocked my world as a boy, it's not the best Santa material in the Marvel U.

HEIGHT: 6' (variable) **EYES:** Blue (variable)
WEIGHT: 250 lbs. (variable) **HAIR:** White (talking; variable)

ABILITIES/ACCESSORIES: Santa Claus has a number of magical abilities, including longevity, the ability to fit himself and others through any chimney (avoiding fiery injury in the process), levitate up a chimney (usually by touching his nose and nodding), alter the appearance of himself or other objects or beings (including physically transforming a person into an inanimate object), change the size of other objects, teleport himself and others across the world, generate snow and determine who has been naughty or nice. Lapland's Korvatunturi is said to resemble a hare's ears, which were rumored to be Santa's ears; the means with which he listened to determine who was behaving. His normal strength is augmented on Christmas Eve to lift (press) 2 tons. Santa's full powers are unrevealed, though he prefers not to use them in combat or other struggles. While he appears to be a senior, Santa has not physically aged in centuries. Santa Claus has access to a wide range of supernatural artifacts, which he uses to accomplish various feats of magic. Though often depicted as Caucasian in appearance, Santa actually appears to most people in their own racial features, though he usually retains his white hair and beard. He radiates a subtle charismatic charming effect on people, able to soften hardened hearts, and convert criminals.

He commands a sleigh pulled by a number of magic flying reindeer — including Blitzen (a.k.a. Blixem & Bliem), Comet, Cupid, Dasher, Dancer, Donner (a.k.a. Dunder & Dondor), Prancer, Rudolph and Vixen — who magically enable him to travel across the planet, stopping at most houses along the way, in a single night. His magical sack — actually a lesseract serving as a portal to a sort of storage dimension — holds enough presents to supply the entire world in one trip. At each home, he travels down the chimney (or the closest alternative where chimneys are lacking) and deposits presents for good boys and girls, but leaves only a lump of coal for the naughty. He frequently will consume cookies and milk left for him before departing on to the next house. His reindeer Rudolph's nose gives off a bright red glow that enables Santa to see and navigate through the worst blizzards, fogs, or other conditions of poor visibility. Santa briefly used a gasoline-powered sleigh, and he has also at least once empowered a pack of huskies to pull his sleigh.

Santa is served by a number of magical elves, who construct the toys he gives out. Though some have differing origins, the elves are descended from the Light Elves of Asgard's Alfheim, and they are resistant to aging and conventional disease. The elf Sunquist, in particular, is solar-powered and can animate toys and rearrange matter. In addition, Sunquist is a member of E.L.F., the Elf Labor Federation, which protects elves — an exploited minority — so that they might offer their services only to the extent that they did not cause humanity to become unduly reliant on elfkind. In addition, across America and other places, regular men (and women) serve as Santa's helpers, meeting with children, learning what they want for Christmas, and passing this information on to Santa himself.

POWER GRID	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
INTELLIGENCE							
STRENGTH							
SPEED							
DURABILITY							
ENERGY PROJECTION							
FIGHTING SKILLS							

SANTA CLAUS IS A TELEPORTER
****GREEN BAR INDICATES STRENGTH DURING CHRISTMAS EVE**

Some of you might recognize this character profile, complete with Power Grid, as a feature from *The Official Handbook To The Marvel Universe*. And here, profiled in full, we've got Santa.

Highlights?

His normal strength is augmented on Christmas Eve to lift (press) 2 tons.

That makes Santa almost as strong as Luke Cage on Christmas Eve. Sweet Christmas indeed.

Santa's full powers are unrevealed, though he prefers not to use them in combat or other struggles.

Santa Claus has access to a wide range of supernatural artifacts, which he uses to accomplish various feats of magic.

Though often depicted as Caucasian in appearance, Santa actually appears to most people in their own racial features, through he usually retains his white hair and beard.

Santa's magical sack is actually a...

...tesseract serving as a portal to a sort of storage dimension.

And hey, it's not all Santa helping the Marvel U. It goes both ways. Such as this moment, when Deathlok takes a night off to help out Santa. And if Santa appears to most people with their own racial features, I guess Santa must appear to Deathlok as a cyborg killing machine.



And Now, Awards

With Santa well-handled, I'd like to give out a few quick awards to some individuals in these books:

Worst Gift-Giver: Nick Fury



"Here ya go, ol' Yellowtooth. Maybe go do this in the bathroom right now and come back out when I can stand the sight of you."

Laziest twist ending: This Rawhide Kid western tale:



GASP! This little kid's name is Isaac STARK!?! And he's going to build a powerful suit of armor? Well, I never.

Biggest bringdown disguised as not a bringdown: Timmy's Brother

You may not remember this moment in Spider-History, but it's quite famous in the world of comics. Spider-Man visited a dying kid, even revealing his secret identity.

In this holiday story, kids in a children's hospital are trying to convince J. Jonah Jameson to let Spidey hang out, but JJJ is going on about the whole "menace" thing. And then this kid talks about his brother, Timmy, aka The Kid Who Collected Spider-Man, and what a good guy Spider-Man was to visit a dying child.

Why is it a bringdown? Well, Timmy is dead. And now his brother is in the children's ward of the hospital? Sounds like less-than happy holidays for this family. Gonna be a pretty Silent Night in their house with all the kids dead.

Ouch. Geez. Too far, Pete.



Clobberin' The Big Topics



I would accuse this girl of being a little dramatic, but a bunch of kids beat her up and steal her coat for no reason. Which is pretty bad, and then a bum gives up his coat for her to wear, which is a nice gesture but probably not the best Christmas memory. "Remember that time I got beat up and a Christmas miracle happened where a bum dressed me in his pee-saturated coat?"

Uhhh, then there's this. I mean, how do you make fun of this? Fa la la la la.....

I mean, the good news is that this kind of problem has TOTALLY gone away since the writing of this comic in 1996.

Okay, I know. Let's look at some more casual racism.

It's a long story, but Beast and Iceman team up to play Santa and Elf to a group of underground lava people.

By the way, this was from the era of comics when, if you wanted someone to be smart, you just had them use the most complicated words you could think of. Instead



of "Hurry up", go with "Vibrate a pedal extremity."



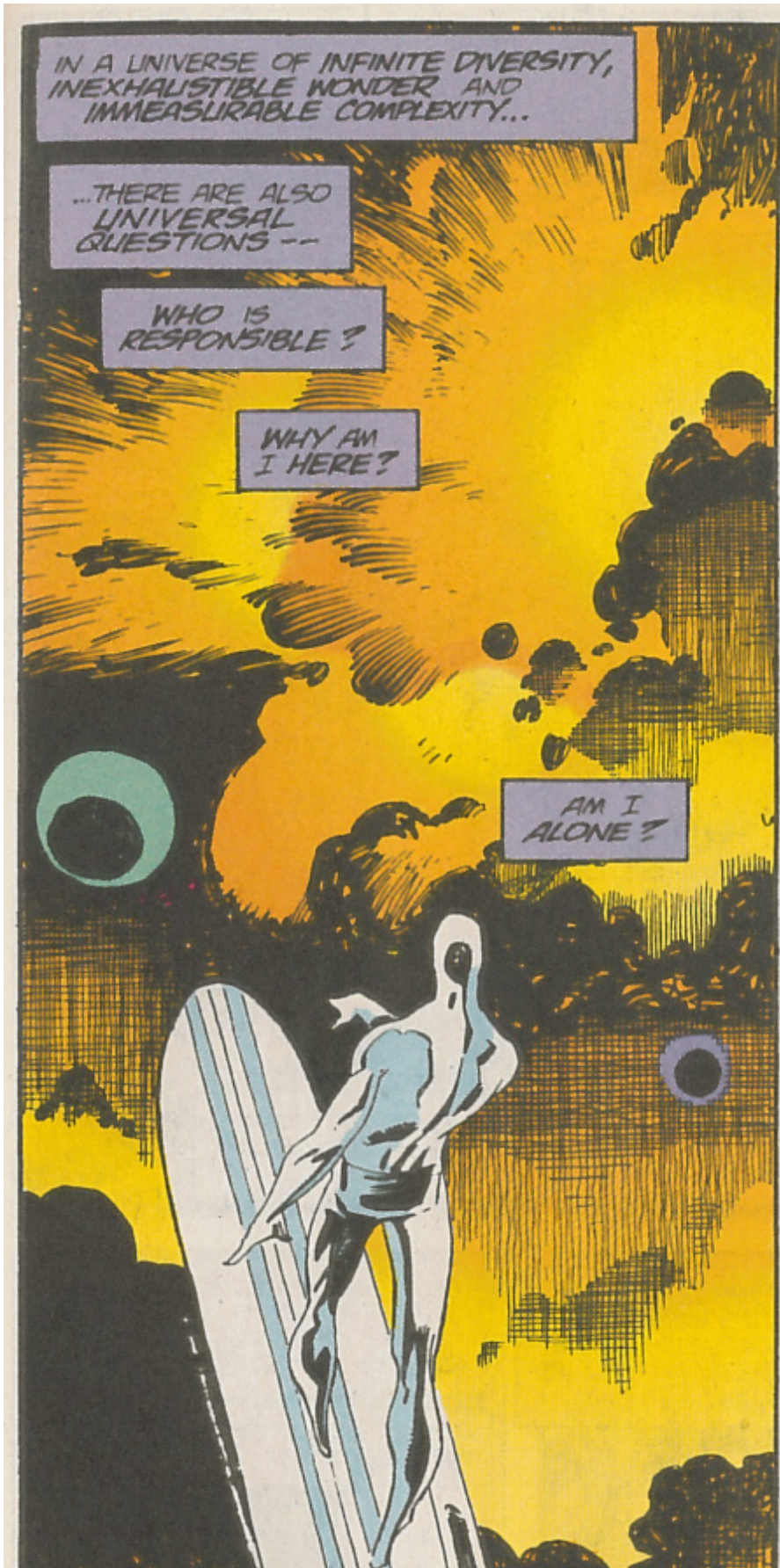
That kind of dialog is how we know it's DOCTOR Hank McCoy, thank you very much.

Beast and Iceman save the day, but they're a little unsure how closely Beast resembles Santa:



Ah, there we go. Now that's fun.

Let's Get Cosmic



There's the holiday spirit.

As if that wasn't bad enough, let's check out another story in which it's proven to the Surfer that the Star of Bethlehem is real.

We start off with the Surfer carrying Alicia Masters around on her charity errands:



Jeez. Surfer's kind of a dick. "I ignored the stares. Alicia Masters did too. I mean, she's blind, so it's not like she had a lot of options."

Anyway, The Watcher for another sector reveals that the Star of Bethlehem is real. But the big revelation, to me anyway, was that this other sector really got screwed in the Watcher lottery.

Our Watcher is a giant baby in a toga, but this guy is just a weird blob that seems to be plugged into the wall. If you're looking for something to be thankful for this season, just remember that a giant baby on the moon is watching you shower instead of a gross red blob.



Howard The Duck Christmas Special

In which all of our problems are solved by:

A swift punch to the lady parts:



And a nice, old-fashioned ass-kicking delivered to a child:



Punisher Christmas Special(s)

Yes, outside of the Marvel Specials, it was decided that Punisher should have his own specials. There have been a few of these, but this one's my favorite.



*I tried to lighten the mood...
back in the 'Nam.*

Holy shit. "Back in the 'Nam" is the best shutdown to anything.

"Sure, I tried to be someone's buddy. Back in the 'Nam..."

"I tried looking forward to the future. It got me really far. Back in the 'Nam..."

But it's okay. Punisher finds a way to deliver a final blow of holiday joy after all:



Yes, an enemy is impaled by a metal Christmas tree decoration, the Punisher is dressed as an insane Santa, and a pinky-ringed mob boss rots in hell. And Punisher used an even better holiday line than "I'm dreaming of a RED Christmas."

The Best

Okay, all fun and good.

There are some pretty good stories in these, and I'd like to give them a moment.

The aforementioned Ghost Rider kidnapping story is silly, but it's not bad.

There's a wordless Wolverine story with robots, dinosaurs, a manic art style that's just off-model enough, and a pretty decent twist



We get a low-action, but very lovable story where Doc Samson is explaining the origin of Hanukkah to a group of students, and the story spirals out of control to include Wolverine, the Hulk, Ultron, Elvis, and Captain America.



But my favorite is probably a Daredevil story.



It's cheesy as hell, told from the POV of a toy lamb Daredevil delivers to a toy drive. But it's pretty different, and if there was ever a moment for a little cheese, this is it.

Plus, Daredevil delivers the requisite beating to some punk.



And to all a good night, indeed.

The Horrors of Children's Christmas Books



Children's Christmas books are all fun and games. Until you actually look at them.

The Classics

Let's get these out of the way right up top.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas by Dr. Seuss

Yeah, the classic tale of a cave monster whose heart grows so large that it's improper for his body. And we always conveniently forget his dog friend, the most abused dog in the history of children's literature. How can people read this thing without hearing that Sarah McLachlan song from the commercial with the dog whose back legs don't work? Messed up.

The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsberg

Okay. Yeah, hop on a midnight train to wherever in your pajamas. That sounds safe. A midnight train doesn't sound AT ALL like a haven for bums. Especially if the name of that train is nowhere near a euphemism for cocaine. Seems above board from where I'm standing. Nothing wrong there.

The Elf on the Shelf

Just an elf who watches you do everything. It's No Diddle December, I guess. This book WAS, however, slightly less creepy than its follow-up, *The Voyeur in the Foyer*.

Dinosaurs



Dinosaurs are all over Christmas like stink on those Christmas candles that smell kind of like Hot Tamales and chemical.

What is going on with all the dinosaur Christmas books? I get it, kids like dinosaurs. We ALL like dinosaurs. But this, this is preposterous.

Even if we're to assume that dinosaurs were capable of celebrating holidays, what about the timeline? Is Santa some kind of immortal, earth-wandering elemental? And if so, who is getting the presents he delivers?

Anyway, *Dinosaur Christmas* by Jerry Pallotta sees Santa having to find animals to pull his sleigh. And hey, why not dinosaurs?



Oh, well, I guess there's the issue that insane Pterosaurs flew Santa outside of Earth's atmosphere. Nothing says "Christmas" like Santa, stricken with terror, spending his last moments wondering if

he'll freeze to death or suffocate.

But Santa's nothing if not a trooper. Let's try a different dinosaur.



Yeah, the velociraptors didn't work out because they were "fidgety." Sort of the way, I don't know, the BTK killer could be summed up as being "fidgety."

EVERYTHING Saves Christmas



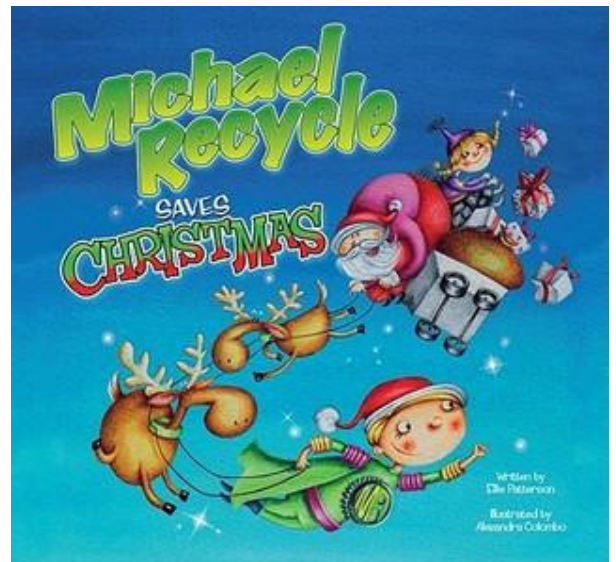
Christmas, in the world of children's books, is in constant danger. Christmas is on the brink, Santa is out of commission, possibly because he was eviscerated by velociraptors, and it's all going to hell. Unless one person can save the day.

Here is a brief list of people and things that have saved at least one Christmas in children's stories:

Tractor Mac, Sam and the Show Steers, Berenstain Bears, Bad Pete (not to be confused with Pete the Cat), Pete the Cat, Dumpy (a dump truck, not a living poo or an unfortunately-described member of an IT staff), Rainbow Brite, Herobrine, Jingles the Elephant, Thomas the Train, "Jenny" Lopez, Billy Rabbit, Michael Recycle, Cowboy Jack and Buddy, Katy the Kangaroo, Baskin the Elf, Diego, Nicky Moonbeam, Mac the Fire Truck, Fuzzy Rabbit, the Snow Flake Space Ships, Roxie the Supercat, Wiener Dogs, The Easter Bunny...

HOLY CRAP! How many Christmases have there been, and what percentage of them required saving? How many Christmases have been just fine? Where are all the stories about the ones that went off without the assistance of a living tow truck or Jennifer Lopez?

Probably one of my favorites, in *Michael Recycle Saves Christmas*, the elves all find that they are out of raw materials to make presents. Michael Recycle for the win! Mike comes in and shows the elves that you can RE-use materials to make toys. For instance, forget making a shiny new rubber ball. A bunch of rubber bands all mashed together makes a perfectly good ball. And that tennis bracelet you wanted to get your sweetheart! NO! Why waste new metals when a bunch of paper clips make a serviceable bracelet? You KNOW a gift is good when it's described as "serviceable."

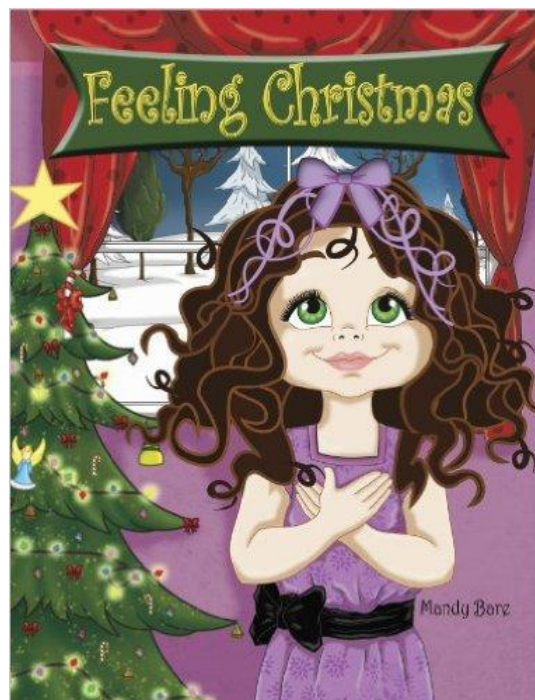


And when the elves work their way down the list to the batch of Wii U's desired by the world's children, I can only assume Michael has a tense phone call with Captain Planet. "I know...I told them already! Well...yeah...I'm just, I'm fucking TRYING, okay? But this is shit. This is shit."

Enough with the saving of Christmas already. I can't stand having this holiday on the brink all the time.

Oh, wait. Not technically a children's book, but I did forget to include Ernest P. Worrell in the list of Christmas savers. He saved Christmas but good in 1988. Sure, Santa fell out of a moving taxi and punched someone in the face, but all in all, this is the template, people.

Bringing Sexy Back



Here we have *Feeling Christmas*, which is ostensibly a children's story. But let's look a little deeper. Author: Mandy Bare. Hmm. Sounds porn-y, but let's hold off until we read the description:

Isabella can feel Christmas in the air. She is determined to find the source of this feeling! She travels to the North Pole, helps the elves, meets Santa, and even takes a ride on Rudolph's back! She has an amazing time, but comes home to find the true meaning of Christmas underneath the stars lying in a manger.

Take a ride on Rudolph. Find the true meaning of Christmas while you're on your back in a manger. Sounds fine.

My Friend Squidge

Squidge is a little elf who seems to get in big trouble quite often.

Squidge seems alright. I just...that name. I feel like squidge is what happens on a hot summer day when you don't wipe all the way, and your butt itches, and then you go in the bathroom and wipe and it's like you never wiped in the first place. All that debris, I'm pretty sure that's what "squidge" is.

But I went to Urban Dictionary. Because I was probably just being hard on the little dude.

squidge
noun; a wet fart
verb; the act of ripping a wet fart

I swear to you, I didn't look it up before making my assumption, and now I have to believe there is something inherent in the name Squidge that equals fecal matter.

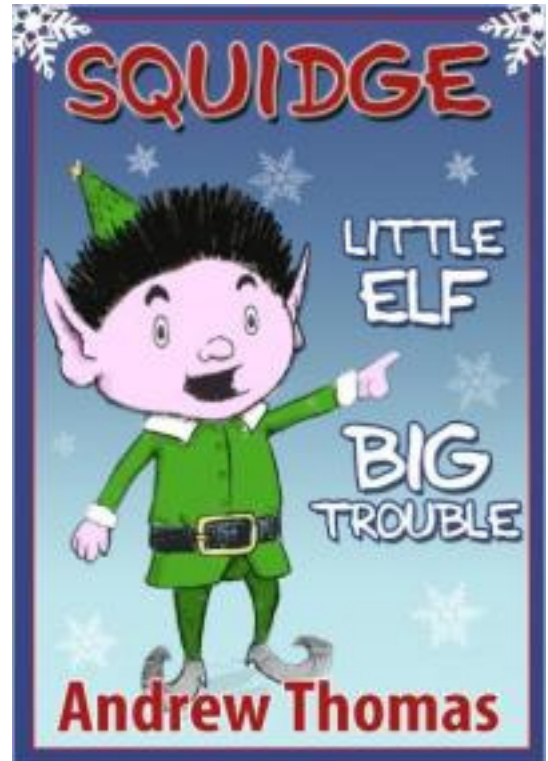
I guess that makes the alternate title here *Squidge: Little Wet Fart, Big Problem*.

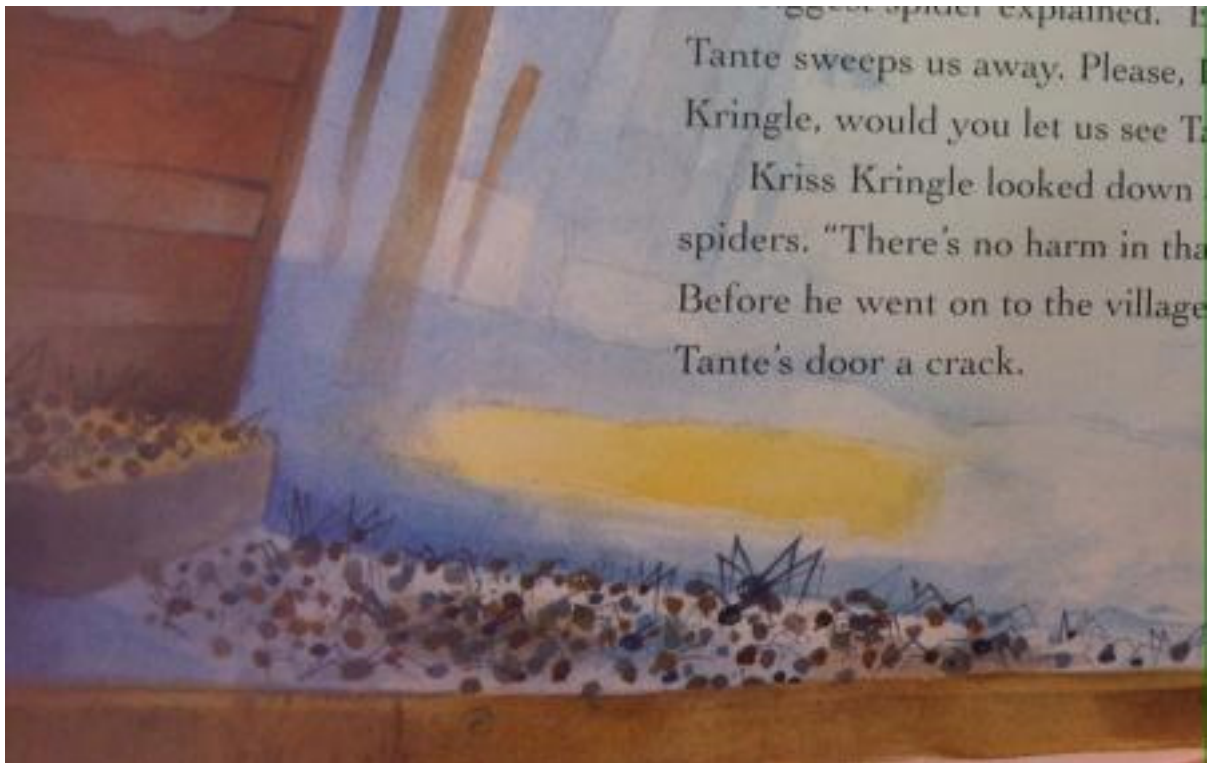
Arachnid Christmas

Aw, even a whole horde of spiders wants to get in on Christmas.

Wait. What?

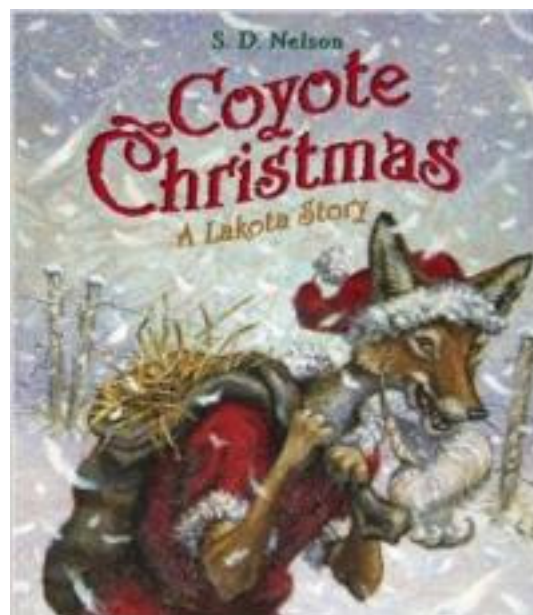
Yeah, the spiders are pissed off because the woman who lives in this hut always cleans up and gives them the boot before Christmas. So Santa lets this MASS OF SPIDERS into the house where they scuttle over the Christmas tree, uncontrollably ejaculating web all over the tree in excitement, and then, tree completely covered in web, the spiders all run away.





Luckily, Santa turns the webs into tinsel, and everything is cool. I mean, except for the part where we find out that enormous piles of spiders can communicate with Santa, and he will TOTALLY let them into your house if they ask.

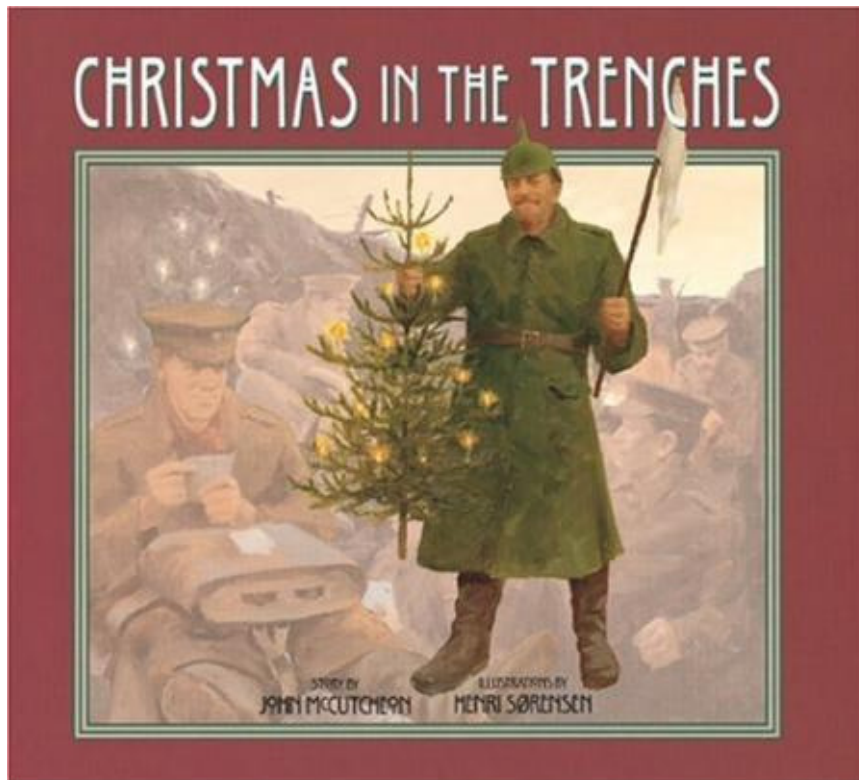
Coyote Christmas



Sure. A Lakota Christmas story. That...okay.

I'm going to skip a lot here and just tell you that Coyote disguises himself as Santa, heads inside, a kid in a wheelchair opens an empty box and is pretty sad until he realizes he gets the gift of working legs, the kid dances on his new legs, and then Coyote runs off, dances on a fence, falls and smashes his balls on a fence post on the way down. All in the rich Lakota tradition.

The War On Christmas



In this wonderful book, we have a war vet grandfather telling his grandkids about the famous Christmas during World War I where both sides emerged from the trenches and celebrated Christmas together. What a nice memory. How, for just one night, we all got along as brothers. Then the dawn came and we went back to our sides, and...well, that's the end of the Christmas part. Let's not discuss the day after Christmas. Mustard Gas Monday.

Just in case you wanted an ending that was more gritty and realistic, here's what I would predict if the book went on another two pages:

Grandson: Grandpa. You're hurting me.

Grandpa: I saw a boy just like you.

Grandson: Grandpa, let go!

Grandpa: His brain was outside his head. All of it. All the way outside.

Grandson: My hand hurts! Mom!

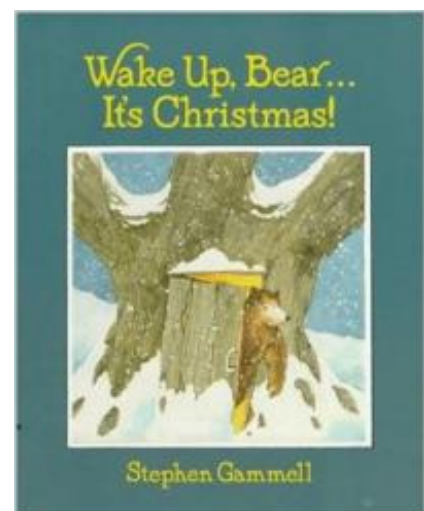
Grandpa: We're just made of meats.

Wake Up, Bear... It's Christmas!

Aw, what a nice story. A bear. Christmas.

And...wait. Does something about these illustrations look familiar?

Something about that smile? Something about that bear's posture?
Those deep, black eyes?





...oh. My. God.

It's Gammell!

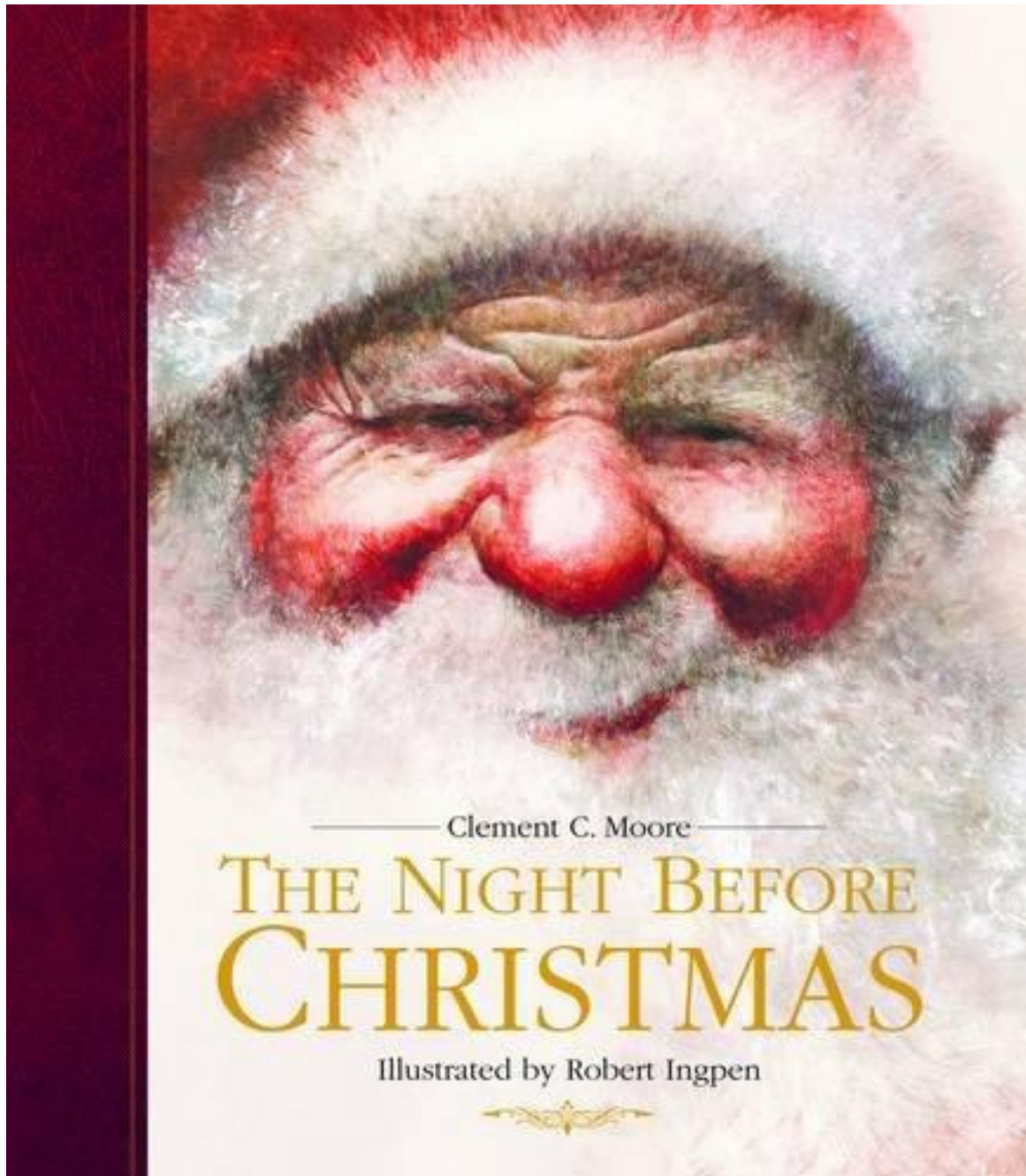


Oh, hell no! I see what you're doing here, Stephen Gammell. Trying to get on my good side with this bear story. You're the King of Terror! Accept it! It's who you are!

No way, I'm not reading this thing. I know this game. Five pages from now, the bear finishes romping in the snow and then a boil on his chest bursts open and spiders come out and I never stop peeing myself until I die from dehydration. No thanks, nice try.

And Finally, The Coal-Black Stare of Santa

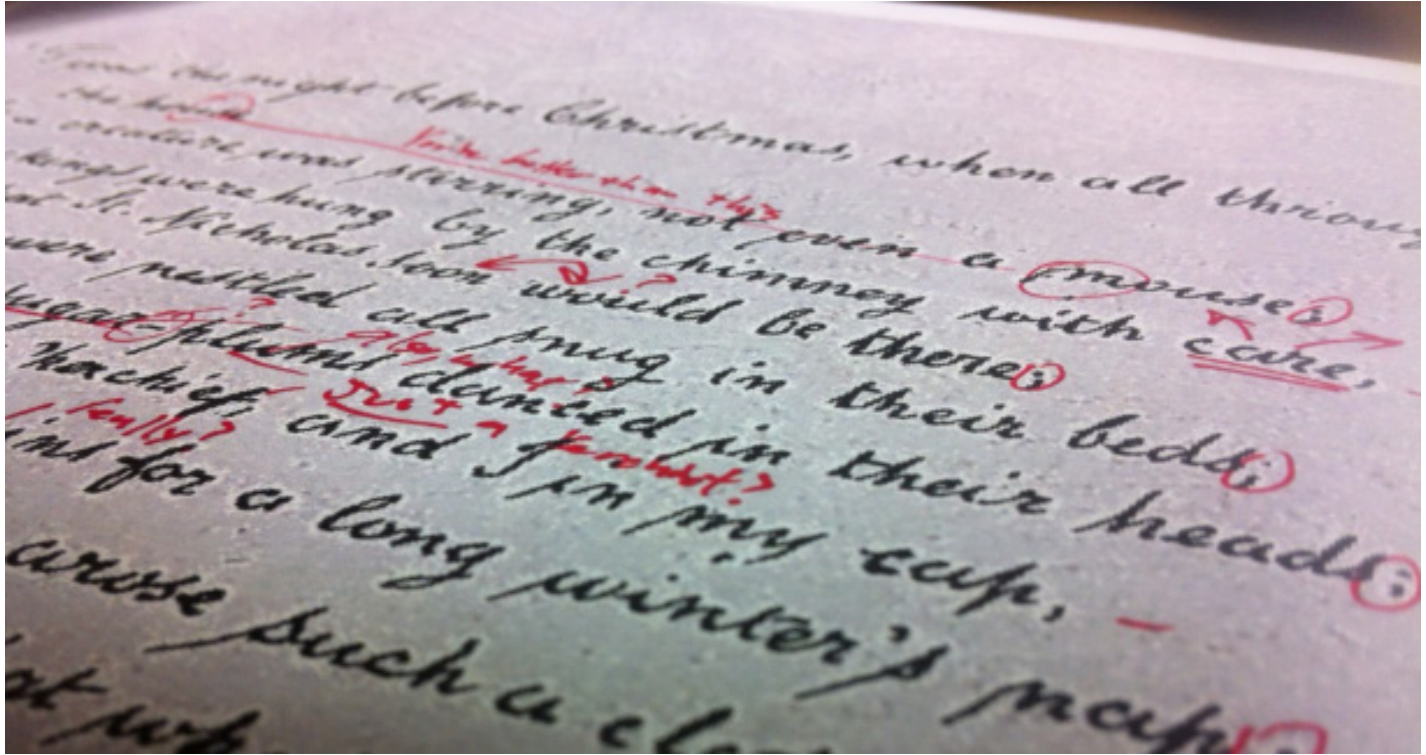
We have Robert Ingpen to thank for this terrifying Santa. Thank Robert. Thank him NOW.



Oh, god. It's too late. That Santa...he's INSIDE the house!



Editor's Notes: 'Twas The Night Before Christmas



Dear Mr. Moore,

I'm not sure how this piece became SO lost in my to-do pile, but I finally got around to it.

Overall, I think there might be something here, although there is a consistent problem with some old-timey language that doesn't make as much sense in 2015. I left that alone, but just be aware it's something I'm seeing throughout.

Please take the rest of these notes as constructive criticisms.

Best,
Pete

A Visit From St. Nicholas

by Clement Clarke Moore

Stop. Already. Clem, do you mind if I call you Clem?

Clem, this title, it's killing you. I showed this poem around the office, and EVERYONE called it "That 'Twas The Night Before Christmas Thing."

Do you know the song about chestnuts roasting on an open fire? Do you know what that's called? "The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas To You)". Those dum-dums had a title that didn't tell me

which song it was, and then they even had a parenthetical that didn't explain anything.

I'd be willing to have a Journey-esque compromise here, "Separate Ways (Worlds Apart)", where we could do your crazy title parenthetically and the real title up front. Findability in an online world doesn't begin with an obscure title.

*'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;*

Ooof. That rhyme's a little easy, don't you think?

My problem isn't the fact that it rhymes, but it feels like that second line exists only to serve the rhyme. It doesn't really illuminate the setting or advance the story. It's more cute than productive, and we're only two lines in here. More movement.

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,

This is a problem I'm having consistently here. HOW were the stocking hung? With care? What does "care" look like? Tell me. WHO cares? HOW do they care?

This is a really good opportunity to open up the story. If we see the stockings hung, I think we'll be right in there with you. We'll see the excitement. If I saw a younger child pull a dining room chair out from under the table, drag it towards the fireplace, and then stand on it to hang his stocking, I'd see the age and size of the child, the effort that goes into the act. "Care" is a word that needs a lot of unpacking.

*In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds;
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;*

Dude, with the semicolons.

*And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,*

"Brains" is not a term I'm in love with here. Very science-y in this cozy scene.

Hmm, unless this means you're drunk. Is that what this means? In that case, just say you're drunk. Possible brand placement? "And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap, / Had just gotten wasted on a six of Labatt's."

*When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.*

I feel it necessary to point out that this is your FIRST sentence ending. Let's see how this sentence looks without the line breaks:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse; The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there; The children were nestled all snug in their beds; While visions of sugar plums danced in their

heads; And mamma in her 'kerchief and I in my cap, Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap, When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.

We've gone from it's quiet and it's Christmas and the stockings and hopes and children and sugar plums and you and mamma and bedtime and then some shit on the lawn and then you got up. In that one sentence, you were going to bed and then you sprang up. I think it'd be more effective if you were REALLY in bed and THEN got up.

Also, the lawn? Is there snow outside? I'm picturing snow outside, but maybe that's just me.

*Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,
Gave a lustre of midday to objects below,*

Yes, finally! Finally this thing gets a little sexy. Flashing, tearing. I know a thing or two about poetic metaphors, and while I might not ALWAYS pick up on them, I recognize when the Polar Express is leaving the station. More of this, please.

*When what to my wondering eyes did appear,
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny rein-deer,*

I'm not as sure on the size of these things. Miniature sleigh? Is that like a Hot Wheels thing? Tiny rein-deer? Maybe we get Vern Troyer for the movie. Let's just keep an eye on this.

*With a little old driver so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment he must be St. Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:
"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now Prancer and Vixen!
On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Donner and Blitzen!*

Let's go name-by-name:

Dasher: Fine.

Dancer: Fine.

Prancer: Less sure about this one. I'm sure it wasn't intended to be an issue. But maybe something like "Eric" or "Janet" would be better.

Vixen: Yes! Now we get sexy again.

Comet: Would replace with something more like "Vixen", but male. Possibly "Rip Chisel" or "Channing."

Cupid: That's a fat baby already associated with another holiday.

Blitzen: A little close to "Blitzkrieg" for my liking. I don't like the road that sends me down. That road is paved with swastikas.

*To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"*

This feels too close to that "To the window/to the wall" song, which I'm pretty sure is just about

ejaculating all over the place. But DJ's play it at weddings, so maybe it's fine.

*As leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too—
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.*

"In a twinkling" feels like a holiday version of "all of a sudden." Nice try, buddy, but you're not getting that one past me. Put the work on the page, please.

*As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.*

Drew in your head? Are you a ninja turtle? If so, that's not a problem. That's marketable. But I need to know that earlier on, and we need to make sure the land on this stanza is either pizza-related or "Cowabunga."

*He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.*

Drop the fur, please. Not necessary. And we're avoiding the "ped" prefix as well, especially when talking about a character who is, in essence, a home invader.

*His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow;*

I'm sorry, but I started picturing his mouth, based on this description, as looking like a asshole. And once I pictured it, there was no going back. Try that one out on some other people. Could be just me.

*The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath;*

If this character is smoking indoors, let's change this to vape-ing. You get more "smoke" that way too, so it could make for a nice visual.

*He had a broad face and a little round belly
That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;*

Fat shaming. Not going to work.

*A wink of his eye and a twist of his head
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;*

*He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;*

Just the stockings? No presents under the tree? Is this one of those things about how it's good to be broke as hell on Christmas? Am I going to learn about the real meaning of Christmas? God help you if this ends with the real meaning of Christmas.

Also, the nose thing. First I'm thinking cocaine, then I'm thinking he's just blowing his nose on the floor like an animal. Let's lose that. He can just nod or something.

*He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.*

I can't possibly be expected to visualize that simile. This is not Little House On The Whatever.

*But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight—
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"*

Wow did you blow that ending. "Happy" Christmas? Who says that? Nobody says that. That's like saying "Merry Holidays" or "Have a rapturous Halloween" or "Wishing you an erotic Thanksgiving." I know there's pressure with the Merry Christmas/Happy Holidays thing, but pick a team. Have some guts, man.

Well, Mr. Moore, thank you for the manuscript. Keep on writing and working, and I'm sure that with a lot of practice and luck and then probably more practice, you'll create your masterpiece.

And I thought I was light on this point above, so just to finish it off, don't forget these words of wisdom when it comes to Christmas poetry: Sex appeal, dummy.

8 Ways To Fix Your Social Media Screw-Up



A lot of writers have the same nightmare.

You wake up one morning, and the notification numbers on your Twitter and Facebook are huge. You follow the stream to find out what happened.

You start seeing that you screwed up.

You posted something somewhere that was interpreted as insensitive, racist, wrong, bad, no-no, uh-uh.

And now the internet, which might as well be the world, is abuzz with the revelation that you're a piece of shit.

You watch your chosen career, maybe chosen art form, crumble away. You watch the possibilities for your life narrow.

Calm down a second. Let's talk realistically.

There's no silver bullet when it comes to managing a social media screw-up. If the Buzzfeeds of the world decide to take you on as a cause, you might be out of luck. If Slate is willing to take down an awareness campaign for prostate cancer in order to get clicks, you don't stand much chance. If HuffPo writes a column to point out that someone is not racist in one way because he's REALLY being racist in a DIFFERENT way, I don't know that there's a lot you can do.

But even if you can't fix it, you can handle it. You can decide what kind of person to be post-screw-

up. You can make a plan.

I'm not the field's foremost expert. But I've followed a lot of stories and done some reading, and here's what I think you could do to get through your social media snafu.

Quick Assumption: You are not, in fact, a piece of shit. Maybe you said something shitty, maybe someone dug up something you said years ago that you wouldn't say today. But I'm assuming that you are not, deep down, a total piece of shit. I'm assuming you're a good person who people like and think of as a good person. And I'm assuming all this because that's the kind of person I'm writing this for.

Don't jump in right away

This is counter to what a lot of self-proclaimed social media strategists will tell you. You can listen to them or you can listen to me. I'd just add the caveat that I don't stand to make a living from your decision. A social media strategist does.

Let's look at it this way. Famous game designer Shigeru Miyamoto, when it came to blowing deadlines, said that everyone will remember a terrible game. No one will remember that a great game was late.

Likewise, everyone will remember a terrible response to a social media screw-up. No one will remember that a great response took you a few days.

For the most part, responses in the first 24 hours don't seem to help the situation. Too quick a response will feel reactionary. It can be tough, but you have to wait to see how this plays out. Wait and see if it actually becomes a big deal. Take a little time. Take control by controlling the speed of the back-and-forth interactions.

I'd suggest, in the event that you instigate Authorgate 2016, you hang tight for the first 24.

Contrary to What I Just Said...

Here are the times I would suggest it's okay to jump in quickly:

1. You are accused of doing something illegal that you did not do.
2. You are accused of doing something and that accusation is 100% untrue. Not untrue in an interpretive way. Untrue in a way that's prove-able. Whether what you said is racist doesn't count. Whether you were once in *The Wonder Years* and are now Marilyn Manson does.
3. Your account has been hacked and you were, in fact, not the mouthpiece for what happened.

These are all situations in which it wouldn't be a bad idea to get wheels rolling. Perhaps not social media wheels, but make sure everything is in order, you have legal help if you need it, you change your passwords, and get a picture of you and Marilyn Manson together in the same place at the same time while you're both holding newspapers. Somehow we decided that means a picture **MUST** be real.

Tactic: The Non-Response

Don't automatically respond to an accusation because you feel like everything deserves a response. Because the truth is, not every criticism or calling out warrants a response.

Does Barack Obama have to respond to Donald Trump's plans to create a database of all Muslims in America? Hell no. Obama hasn't responded to my plan, Dog Zoos of America (like regular zoos except filled with dogs you can play with and pet), so why would he respond to Trump's asinine idea? Frankly, I'm hurt. Nobama for me, not unless he gets on the Dog Zoo plan pretty damn quick.

What I'm getting at here is that you should make sure that what happened warrants a response. Don't respond just because we're used to seeing call and response, callout and apology.

You aren't required to respond to criticism, and sometimes the most effective way to handle these sorts of things is through a consistent pattern of ignoring it. It's a lot less tempting to call someone to the mat if they never respond. And the less you give people to interpret and dismantle and reassemble, the better.

#DogZoo2016

Tactic: The Apology

Chuck Klosterman, author and (at the time of this incident) *New York Times'* Ethicist, got a letter from an upset parent about his use of the word "retarded" in his past writings.

Some comments from the blog where the letter was first posted:

Sending it to him now- his words are hate words. Full of hate and anger- they are inhumane and disgusting! Great job holding him accountable!!! Would you care if I re-post and link back to you on The R-Word Reporter blog? Thank you for writing this!

Reply ↓



notatypicalmom
on November 7, 2013 at 1:20 pm said:

Please do! Let's get this guy!

crystal on November 7, 2013 at 1:58 pm said:

Oh wow. No words. Will go on the attack when I get home.

I always wonder what would happen if he were to have a child, or grandchild, or niece, nephew born with Down Syndrome. Would he be proud of what he had written, and glad it had his byline?

Reply 1



notatypicalmom

on November 7, 2013 at 6:14 pm said:

He is a bad dude.

It's a precarious position. Klosterman is being lambasted for his use of the word "retarded" in two works that were, at the time, 10-12 years old, and a third incident from a tossed-off interview question five years prior. And it can be difficult to make a legit apology when a large group of people is really upset. "Will go on the attack." "He is a bad dude."

Here's Klosterman's response:

I have spent the last two days trying to figure out a way to properly address the issue you have raised on your web site. I've slowly concluded the best way is to just be as straightforward as possible: I was wrong. You are right.

I should not have used "retard" pejoratively. It was immature, hurtful, and thoughtless. I have no justification for my actions. I realize the books that contain those sentiments were published over 10 years ago, but that is no excuse; I was an adult when I wrote them and I knew what I was doing. I feel terrible about this and deeply embarrassed. I take full responsibility for my actions and understand why this matters so much to you. I'm truly sorry.

Feel free to re-post this message on your web site. I deserve the criticism I am receiving, and I want other people to know that I realize I was wrong. I would also like to donate \$25,000 to whatever charity you feel is most critical in improving the lives of people with cognitive disabilities...or any other organization you recommend. I have done something bad, so help me do something good.

Again, I apologize — and not just to you and your son, but to anyone else who was hurt by this.

— Chuck Klosterman

I wanted to share this apology for a few reasons.

For one, it contains all the elements of an apology.

1. Taking responsibility.
2. Saying very clearly that the person upset was heard and understood.
3. The words "I'm sorry:"
4. Making it hurt a little.

Second, I wanted to share this apology because it worked. It made the rounds on social media and online. It turned a hated dude into someone that people accepted. It turned furious people into understanding people. Negative Tweeting into positive.

Raf on **November 12, 2013 at 1:08 pm** said:

Wow, what an awesome conclusion! I spent a good hour online researching Mr. Klosterman and his works after you first posted about this. I too recognized he had written those things a while back, and that he is quite likely coming from a very different place now than he was then. Aren't we all? I think its totally awesome he is putting his money where his mouth is! Pretty much brings tears to my eyes. Good on him and good on you for calling him out.


Reply ↓

 notatypicalmom
on **November 12, 2013 at 1:09 pm** said:

We need a few more guys like this to come out on the side of our kids. We need change.

Wow! I am stunned! Heading to Twitter to thank him!

Reply ↓

 notatypicalmom
on **November 12, 2013 at 2:02 pm** said:

yea! Thanks for the help!

There's another, more sinister reason I wanted to share this apology, however. I wanted to show what an apology takes, and to make you ask yourself whether apology is right for you.

Between the words and donation here, I think it's safe to say that Klosterman is actually sorry.

If you're not actually sorry, apology might not be for you. Because nothing's worse than a cheap apology. Except possibly a cheap President who won't fund Dog Zoo. #DogZoo2016

Tactic: The "So What?"

You might remember when *The Daily Show's* new host, Trevor Noah, got in a little trouble for some insensitive jokes made on his Twitter.

His response:

To reduce my views to a handful of jokes that didn't land is not a true reflection of my character, nor my evolution as a comedian.

Here's the difference between the apology and the So What?

Noah isn't apologizing for his jokes or trying to convince anyone that they were okay. He simply says that there's more to him as a person than a small selection of his jokes. Which is undeniably true of any person.

The So What? worked for Trevor Noah. Comedy Central did not give in to requests that Noah be reconsidered as the host for *The Daily Show*, although they did acknowledge the controversy. Unlike a lot of people in these situations, Noah kept his job and moved on.

Plus, he managed to spawn a pretty [hilarious tweet storm from Patton Oswalt](#).

Tactic: How Reputation Companies Do It

An ounce of prevention. Or, like, a million ounces.

A reputation company, if you get in trouble, will work to bury your screw-up.

Think of your life as being a trip to the bathroom. When you realize it's going to be a more...auditory trip, you turn on the overhead fan to drown out some of the unpleasantness. To create a noise that the bad stuff gets lost in. The awful stuff doesn't go away, but it's harder to pick out from everything else.



That's a really unkind way of explaining how reputation companies work. They'll create blogs for you on topics like travel, sports, food, whatever. They'll make sure to put up lots of pictures of you doing normal stuff to help bury image-based searches. They'll create multiple social media streams with your name attached to other stuff, create personas with the same name as you that gain a following.

Basically, they're a fart fan that mixes your gastrointestinal distress with enough other noise that you can emerge from the bathroom, rejoin the party in progress, and play dumb when someone asks why the whole house smells like boiled eggs.

It's not the worst idea in the world to start some of this yourself. Have a friendly Twitter that's less about your interests, more about re-tweeting NPR or something. Start a work-friendly Facebook. Would it kill you to write a boring blog post every now and again?

Start now.

Embrace The People With You In The Van



When Lance Armstrong was interviewed about all the crap that rained down on him after being the world's most-famous cancer survivor/cyclist/junkie, he said that one of the few good things to come out of the mess was knowing who was "in the van" with him.

This concept sounded a lot less like a kidnap-y, scary van when Lance said it.

What Lance meant was, he knew who his friends were. The people that stuck by him and supported him, those people were with him in the van.

When the social media hammer drops, take stock of who your friends and supporters are. It's tempting to watch people drag you down further, but the more productive thing to do is cultivate and nurture those relationships that surprise you, thank those people who stick up for you, and dive full-on into your real-life friendships and relationships.

And it's also important to make sure you don't get in someone else's van. Don't let someone use your situation to make a larger point. Don't confuse your allies with people who are using your story for their own purposes.

Don't get in a stranger's van. I'm not going to lie, the candy in those vans is really good, but it's not

worth it.

Find Ways to Remind Yourself That You're Not a Piece of Shit

You are more than your social media fuck-up. If you're not your khakis and your job and all that other stuff that our friend Chuck Palahniuk said, then you sure as hell aren't your social media fuck-up.

As tough as this is going to be, you have to be tougher. You have to be resilient and find things in your life that make you feel better. Loving relationships, projects, learning a new skill, something to remind you that you have value. Something that feels good. Something that doesn't involve social media.

You might have screwed up, but that doesn't mean you ARE a screw-up.

Get In A Life-Threatening Plane Crash: The Jeff Bridges Plan

It might be nonsense, but some say that plane crash survivors end up with a more positive outlook on life. Hey, who cares if you typed out a bad Tweet? You're a survivor!

It worked for Jeff Bridges in *Fearless*.

If that doesn't work for you or sounds risky because you're a reasonable person, then I'd suggest The Jeff Bridges Plan B: Just watch a bunch of Jeff Bridges movies and hope for the best.

6 Self-Help Books That Actually Help



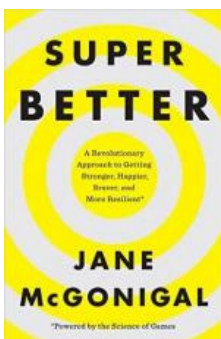
It's far enough into the new year that we've all given up, right? Given up hope. Given up being on time. Given up on that gym membership because, meh, the ID photo stinks anyway.

But you know what works better than resolutions, those champagne-fueled promises that are meant to be kept by a soberer, future you? A little help.

Here are some self-help books that might ACTUALLY help. Conspicuously absent is the nonsense of the 4-hour work week, the movement of cheese, and the book that can be summed up by its title, *He's Just Not That Into You Because You Keep Telling Him How Much You Learned From He's Just Not That Into You And That's Really Annoying Because It's Like, We Get It, Book*.

Here you will not find any requests to take a swim in Lake You, or to center some part of your body that you've never heard of before. There's nothing about desert-based hallucinogens or backpacking trips in Europe. The word soul is not in use here.

This list is about getting your shit together.



1. For the Scientist: 'Super Better: A Revolutionary Approach to Getting Stronger, Happier, Braver and More Resilient -Powered by the Science of Games' by Jane McGonigal

A game is an opportunity to focus our energy, with relentless

optimism, at something we're good at (or getting better at) and enjoy. In other words, gameplay is the direct emotional opposite of depression. (Goodreads)

Researched, proven. When Jane McGonigal had a concussion that barred her from doing anything she enjoyed (reading, writing, gaming) for months, she decided to do something about it. She developed a codified system to create goals, create powerups for herself, recruit allies, and make her recovery into something of a game.

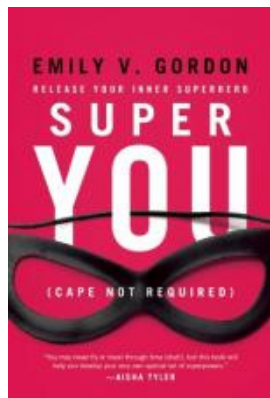
Which might sound like trivializing something important, but it's the opposite. In McGonigal's previous book, *Reality is Broken*, the author and Ph.D. outlines the reasons that we love games and hate life. Why we'll play Farmville for hours and would never consider actually farming.

The basic, really dumbed-down version? Games are made to please us. Reality is not.

The answer to your life problems, whatever they may be, is to make reality a game. When reality is a game, you draw on all these gaming skills that you might not utilize in reality. Acceptance of failure. Risk-taking. Iterative improvement.

Super Better is arranged into quests, small tasks that range from easy (sit with your palms facing up for 15 seconds) to difficult, like the quest that involves flipping lonely thoughts such as "No one was interested in what I had to say." I mean, I ASSUME that one's difficult. Everyone listens to me, always, because I'm more charming than a box of marshmallowy cereal.

If you're the kind of person who could use a guided way to improve yourself or improve a certain skill in your life, and if you're the kind of person who demands to know the science, *Super Better* is the ticket.



2. For the Dreamer: 'Super You: Release Your Inner Superhero' by Emily V. Gordon

Change is mandatory, growth is optional, and greatness is inside all of us. (Goodreads)

This one might be a tougher sell for some, but I think you should give it a chance, and I have some advice on how to do just that.

The thing is, it's written at young women. But let me tell you, it works. This book works for men. Alright, for me, anyway, a man. I might not be much of a man. I've vomited almost every time I smoked a cigarette. But I chopped down a tree once!

Here's the trick:

I'm going to bust out the college professor line and tell you that this book is as good as what you put into it. That's why my suggestion is that you take a balls to the wall approach to this thing. Do professors use the phrase "balls to the wall" a lot? Because I think they should. I would if I were Professor "Balls to the Walls" Derk, Ph.D. (It's very embarrassing how many times I had to look up Ph.D in order to capitalize it and punctuate it correctly in this column, and I'm pretty sure this is something Ph.D programs do to weed out the fakers).

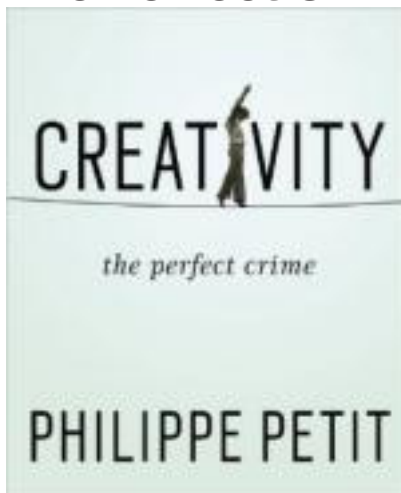
As I think is true of anything that has to be done without irony, you have to go into this book whole hog. Don't evaluate every joke or reference on scales of authenticity or humor. Some of the jokes are great, some you won't like. Which is what makes this book feel authentic. It's written with a voice, which is missing from a lot of self-help.

Read this like I watch *Demolition Man*: With pure love, acceptance of the fact that you're in control of how you feel about it, and with wishes that it involved just a little more Glenn Shadix. Go into this book wanting to love it, and you will.

Oh, and know that this is a workbook. You WILL need a notebook to go along with this. Trust me. If you're someone who relishes getting a new notebook, then this is your perfect excuse.

If you're not convinced, [check out Emily V. Gordon's advice for yourself](#).

3. For the Person Trapped in a Boredom Land: 'Creativity: The Perfect Crime' by Philippe Petit



It's impossible, that's for sure. So let's start working.
(Goodreads)

Petit has an interesting perspective on the world. If you know him, it's probably from his career as a tightrope walker, the one from the movie *The Walk*. Or, you might know him from his book of knots, which is certainly the greatest knot book of all time.

When I think of Petit, I always think of a picture.

With a handcuff on one wrist, Petit sits in a police department chair. He's just come down from his tightrope walk between the World Trade Center Towers, and while he's waiting around, he balances a policeman's cap, straight up, on the end of his nose.

Petit's book embodies that attitude. Brash and confident, but damn is it playful.

This is the perfect book for someone who feels trapped in their own life a bit. Who feels that they're happy enough, and most of their problems are the fault of other people.

If I'm describing you, by the way, pick up this book and quit being so annoying.

There are times when the book comes off as a bit arrogant, but I think it's written with a lot of "I, Me, My" because it allows the reader to explore this new realm of creativity without being so critical. The book and its self-referential style act like a space suit that let a reader into this dangerous new realm of not being so bored all the time.

4. For the Person Who Doesn't Know They're Sad: 'Art Before Breakfast' by Danny Gregory

I spent most of my life not believing I had the right to consider myself an artist in any way.

Danny Gregory is an artist.

I want to leave that sentence there before getting to the rest.

Danny Gregory is an artist who lost his wife. Twice, kinda. She was run over by a subway car and lived, though she needed the assistance of a wheelchair. Not too long after that, she passed away.

Art became therapy for Danny Gregory. And it can be for you too.

If there's one thing that this book convinced me of, it's the fact that if you're not creating SOME kind of art, there is something missing in your life. You might not know it, but it's true. Just the way someone who has never tasted Ranch Wheat Thins doesn't know what they're missing, you might not know what you're missing by not creating art. You might not know how much good it can do.



Oh, and there's another thing I like about this book. It presents the anti-Malcolm-Gladwell-10,000-hours-theory.

I hate that theory. This whole thing about mastery after 10,000 hours of practice.

Rather than motivating people, I think that 10,000 hours looked like a pretty good excuse. There's no way I'm getting in 10,000 hours, so forget it. Off the hook!

Danny Gregory feels otherwise. Because with art, it's not about becoming the best artist. It's about doing art because it's a human need.

Try this out. It might surprise you how much a little bit of art can change your life for the better.

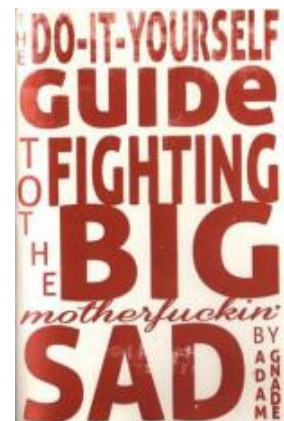
Plus, it helps when you play *Pictionary*. I tried to draw a butt in *Pictionary*, and only then did I realize that I didn't have any idea what a butt looks like. Draw more butts, people. Before it's too late.

5. For the Person Who Knows They're Sad: 'The Do-It-Yourself Guide To Fighting The Big Motherfucking Sad' by Adam Gnade

*Don't let yourself get lectured by people who hate their own lives.
Chances are they're addressing their problems, not yours. (Goodreads)*

Gu-nah-dee. Let's get that out of the way right off.

This tiny book, more like a zine than a full-blown book, is the perfect thing for your weirdos, your off-beat friends. You know the ones. We don't have to



come up with more terms.

The beauty of this one is that it's really short, and although it speaks to depression, it has passion.

It's also the only book I've ever read that provides practical advice for being a creative and working, or not, while not shaming a person for a lack of desire to dumpster dive for food. The premise being that it's okay to pursue a creative lifestyle and also enjoy access to hot water.

6. For the Lifehacker Person: 'Manage Your Day-to-Day: Build Your Routine, Find Your Focus, and Sharpen Your Creative Mind' edited by Jocelyn K. Gleib

Not a traditional self-help book, but full of interesting ways to make your life smoother based on the advice of business folk.

I don't know how I feel about the advice in this type of book sometimes. Steve Jobs ate raisin toast for breakfast? That's great, but I don't think there's any amount of raisin toast that'll get me to iPad rich. Is it really important to eat the same thing the same time Steve Jobs did, will that unlock my potential, or will that make me the same jerk I've always been but with raisin toast in my stomach?

This book, however, is pretty quick, and it's got a lot of different kinds of ideas. It's very buffet style, pick and choose what you like. Or maybe I should say it's like an ideal buffet where some of the food is actually good and they don't make a macaroni and cheese that grows a skin on the top.

As an added note, if anyone is on the verge of fame, please start using a really messed up daily routine. I would love to read the articles about your routine and how it unlocked your creative mind to, I don't know, fill one of those daily pill containers with sprinkles and pour them in the toilet before you pee. This is your chance to make the world a more interesting place. Don't blow it.



There you go. Now fix yourself before the next time I see you. I expect noticeable improvements. Or else an ice cream sandwich. Your choice.

Writing Gave Me Hemorrhoids



PLATE 93-G.

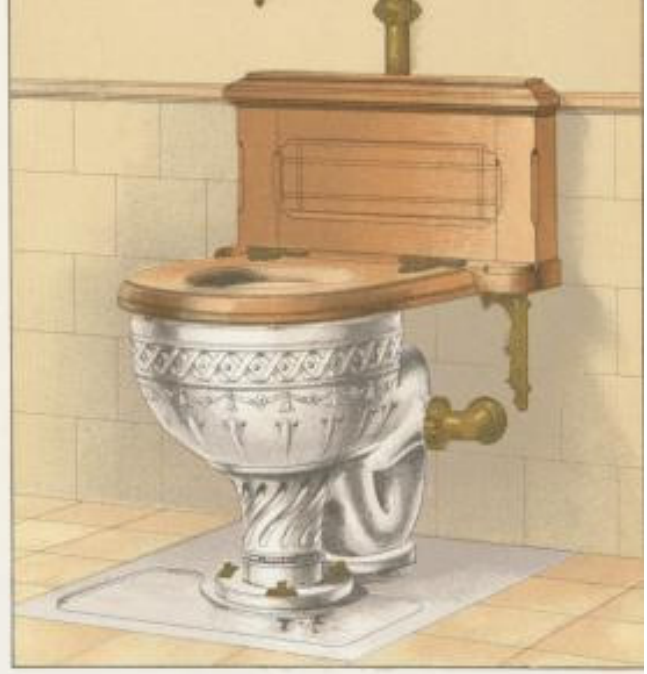


PLATE 94-G.

This is my PSA. My chance to give back to other writers.

[Imagine me narrating this to you while I'm in some kind of mountainous meadow. I'm in a jean jacket for sure. Jean pants, commonly referred to as "jeans." My hair looks great. And there's something wise about my face. It's a dark wisdom. I've seen...things.]

Here we go.

I've been writing a lot more lately. Which is a good thing. Mostly. I get more done, I feel better about myself. I put erotic fanfic about the shirtless dudes from Contra on the Kindle store, which is unquestionably a great addition to the world of literature.

But there's a dark side to all this progress. An underbelly. A dark, brown (and sometimes even a little red) underbelly.

I'm talking about hemorrhoids.

What Is A Hemorrhoid?

[We pick up the PSA scene in some kind of barn. I'm wearing a blacksmith apron, hammering a hot piece of metal.]

If you've never had a hemi, count your lucky stars.

If you think you might have them, my advice is to do internet research, become more and more certain that you're dying of some kind of butt-related cancer, panic for a week or so, and then come

back around to a more likely conclusion.

If you discover for sure that you're afflicted, take my advice, don't complain to my mom about it. Because, in my experience, she'll just say "Yeah, well I never had one before I was pregnant with you, so tough."

What's it feel like? Well... it feels like there's something sort of sticking out of my butt, to be frank. And it kind of always feels like I have to take a dump. And the wiping, my god the wiping. It doesn't end.

You've probably heard about the itching, the burning. *[Holds up hot, tempered steel, glowing orange.]* Just remember, it's your butthole itching and burning. Not your forearm. Butthole. Butthole ALWAYS trumps forearm.

What Does Writing Have to Do With This?

[At this point in the PSA, I'm carrying a hay bale. For what, who knows? I'm just lifting it, carrying it about ten feet, and then setting it down on top of some other hay bales. And now I'm taking off my gloves and leaning on the stacked bales. Now we're really going to talk.]

You see, I started writing a lot more, and therefore some other things about my lifestyle changed. And those changes had an awful lot of crossover with the things that go hand-in-butt with hemorrhoids. It's not like putting pen to paper caused my problems. But the connection is undeniable. Let's have a look.

Lack of Exercise: I've been a runner for the last 15 years, but that whole fitness thing has taken a dip with the increase in computer time. Getting exercise is a great way to prevent hemorrhoids, it turns out.

Lots of Sitting: I don't have a fancy treadmill desk or a yoga ball to sit on. I'm not one of these hip standing desk guys. Most days, ALL DAY, it's just me, my flat-ish butt, and a cheap wallet. Sitting a lot is bad news when you're fighting the Battle of the (anal) Bulge.

Chronic Diarrhea: This might be self-imposed. Coffee fuels the writing. And I drink an amount of coffee appropriate for a couple who works swing shift in the 1920's, before we knew that water was something that people needed to live. I made my own bed on this one. Then I crapped in it.

Sitting for Long Periods Of Time On The Toilet: This might not sound writing-related, but hear me out. I made a dumb Twitter pact: Only Tweet on the toilet. That way, I'm not wasting good, productive writing time on social media. The problem is that sometimes it takes me a while to come up with a brilliant joke like this:



Pete

@helpfulsnowman

Luthor: How's the project coming?

LegionofDoomIntern: Uh. Well, it got yellowlit by Sinestro. And I just found out that means Go.

So...okay.

1/18/16, 2:35 PM

Who Cares?

[Close-up on my face. Crappy background music stops.]

Well, I care.

I need to be able to sit and type.

I'm not someone who needs absolute silence and full concentration, but an itchy asshole is something that I can't really ignore, no matter how absorbing the work might be.

I like drinking coffee.

It was hard to sleep.

It's hard to be intimate with your partner. By the way, this really sums me up. Coy about "being intimate" in the middle of a column that's all about my buttohole.

So, what's a fella to do?

Deeper In The Rabbit Hole

[Now I'm brushing a horse. I'm hiding my terror because I don't know anything about horses and no

one told me that this PSA thing involved brushing a horse. Do I brush the long hair on its neck? Or like..it's whole body?]

There are two sections of the store I never paid much attention to before I needed them.

One was the wacky dental stuff. Go to your grocery store, I guarantee you there's an aisle of dental hygiene products that'll leave you shaking your head, thinking "What poor bastard needs this stuff?"

This poor bastard. I know, from experience, that they sell a tiny plastic barrel of putty for making your own temporary fillings. Dentists, my hat is off to you. Fillings are hard to do right.

The other previously-ignored aisle of the store, for me, was the butt stuff.

Let's break it down.

Adult Diapers: Thank goodness, not yet. If I ever go this way, I'll probably just explain to the checkout clerk that I'm like that astronaut nutt-o, and I'm driving cross-country to kill my ex-husband. That seems less humiliating.

Laxatives: I've never had need of these products. One time my father advised that if you ever were in need of unblocking yourself, just buy a whole head of lettuce, wash it, and eat it. I don't know if that works. My dad was a doctor, but he's currently an imprisoned felon, so take that for what it's worth.

"What poor bastard needs this stuff?"

Antidiarrheals, aka De-Laxatives: This seems like a dangerous game. Balancing laxatives with de-laxatives. There's a lot of chemistry going on here, and chemistry is the first high school class I nearly failed.

Medicated Wipes: Because when you've got a problem, toilet paper feels like wiping your ass with a corn cob made of sandpaper. Those bears that are always crapping in the woods and using Charmin? Those dudes are my sworn enemies now. They're dirty liars, and they could at least try and wait until night time.

Creams: The step up from wipes. For relief of swelling and symptoms. I don't have much to say about this other than the fact that any time medicine is applied to your butt, it will be cold.

What Worked For Me

[Now I'm done brushing a horse, and I'm mending a fence. It's nearly dusk. Very cheap CG lightning bugs are all around me.]

Much like Lynyrd Skynyrd's 3-guitar-attack brought them to success, my 3-method-attack brought me to less butt pain.

Let's do this first, suppositories.

If you've ever questioned the use of suppositories, if you're one of those hardasses who's like "I'd rather just be sick than put something in my ass", get over yourself. Take it from experience, the

human butthole is not too precious to act as a port for self-administered medicine. Because from where I was standing (leaned forward on the bathroom sink) there were much worse things than putting a greasy bullet up your ass. And those much worse things were the ailments that caused me to put a greasy bullet up my ass.

If you ever have to use these, I have just a little bit of advice. Don't look in the mirror, it's weird, and if you're not familiar with objects knocking on the back door, a suppository goes up A LOT further than you think.

Second, back to the exercise. No secret there.

Third, my god Metamucil. I'm officially shopping in the old people section of the store, and I don't care. I'll toast you with Metamucil next New Year's. If you don't believe in my statement that this Metamucil is a wonder drug, then read the Amazon Reviews.

The Future

[Me, standing with a family that's clearly not mine. They're all way too attractive, but they're good actors and I point out lightning bugs to the kids before I turn and start talking to the camera.]

I like to take something positive from these experiences.

I'm okay now, which is a plus. Health is always nice.

There's always something to be said for atypical experience. That's one.

There's always that motivating feeling after you get over being sick where you think, "Man, I could write more. When I feel good, I could totally write more."

But more than that, the experience of purchasing and applying suppositories and Metamucil regularly is humbling. When your ass doesn't work, it's pretty humbling. I wish I had a better word for it, but I don't. You walk through life, and no matter what happens, no matter how right you are in a situation or how enraging another person might be, no matter how sure you are that someone in your workshop is an idiot jerk, you flash back to yourself in front of the mirror, (this is why I told you not to look!) pressing a greasy little bullet deep into your ass, washing your hands, and preparing an orange powder drink meant for seniors.

Author's Note: I'm not a doctor. If you're having these problems, you should probably see one. Maybe five.

Making A Murderer: How Good Storytelling Made It So Damn Compelling



If you haven't seen *Making A Murderer* yet, I'm sorry. This must be a confusing and annoying time to be online.

If you have, then you know it's a wild tale, or maybe even a wild tale INSIDE OF a wilder tale, all inside another wild tale. It's a Russian nesting doll of wild tales, but instead of a tiny little doll in the center, there's a white hot ball of outrage.

What is it about this story? Why has this, amongst so many others, caught so much attention? Why have so many of us stayed up so late to see its end?

How did storytelling take the legal troubles of Steve Avery and make them into an epic tale?

Quick Fill-In

If you haven't watched the series yet and plan to, this might not be the column for you. I'm going to avoid spoilers for the most part, but some aspects of the story have to be talked about.

If you haven't watched the series yet and don't plan to, let me bring you up to speed:

Making A Murderer is a ten-part documentary released all at once on Netflix. It follows the story of Steve Avery, a man falsely convicted of a rape in 1985. Avery was imprisoned for nearly 20 years until DNA evidence came into play and Avery was cleared of all charges. Once Avery was cleared, it became obvious that the Manitowoc County Sheriff's Department, the folks who put Avery behind bars, engaged in a sloppy investigation and even ignored evidence during the arrest and trial.

Steve Avery decided to sue Manitowoc County for damages. On the eve of Steve Avery's lawsuit, which had a strong chance of costing the county millions, a young woman went missing. Fast-forward, the young woman was murdered, and it looked like Steve Avery was the prime suspect.

The majority of *Making A Murderer* focuses on the second trial of Steve Avery in addition to another trial, that of Brendan Dassey, Avery's nephew, who may or may not have been involved in the murder as well.

The Storytelling Of A Documentary

Of course, there are those who would say that a documentary doesn't involve storytelling. Those who feel it's about being in the right place at the right time. You point the camera at what's happening and push the big red button.

Anyone who says that has not seen enough documentaries. Or hasn't seen enough crappy ones. Trust me, when you see one where people just pointed a camera at a thing, you can tell. Check in with what Kirk Cameron's doing these days if you don't believe me.

The way things are ordered. What's left in and what isn't. The way things are shaped. All of this puts documentary filmmaking firmly in the realm of storytelling.

And with *Making A Murderer*, if things feel very natural, it's because the filmmakers, Moira Demos and Laura Ricciardi, did a great job.

If it feels effortless to watch, it's because of good storytelling.

Format And The Complicit Viewer

Making A Murderer's format, the multi-part series released all at once on Netflix, meant that viewers could choose how quickly they watched. At about 10 hours of runtime, *Making A Murderer* skirts the border between something you can plow through in a sitting and something that takes a little longer. It's one of those time machine shows. You come home Friday, you tell yourself you'll watch one, maybe two episodes, and then pow, you're at work on Monday, still in disbelief that you watched this entire drama unfold over the course of three days, and you're unsure if you changed your underpants the entire weekend.

It's the classic Netflix story. Especially the underpants part. But in this case, the binge-watch serves another purpose beyond making you the office stinky person.

Binge-ability means the viewer becomes complicit through the act of watching.

Making A Murderer is not light stuff. It's murder. It's real life. And you, the viewer, have to struggle with how much you're enjoying the high drama that comes with real peoples' lives and deaths.

It's different from a one-off documentary because, no matter how salacious the documentary might

There are those who would say that a documentary doesn't involve storytelling... Anyone who says that has not seen enough

be, you probably won't watch it for ten hours.

It's different from a crime procedural show because, well, it's all real.

Choosing to present this story binge format means that the viewer has to wrestle with the fact that she's being entertained by something horrific, and that the horror is real.

I'm going to put this out there, a quote from the brother of Hae Min Lee, the victim whose murder provided the material for the the podcast *Serial's* first season. Lee's brother posted this on Reddit:

...I won't be answering any questions because... TO ME IT'S REAL LIFE. To you listeners, its another murder mystery, crime drama, another episode of CSI. You weren't there to see your mom crying every night, having a heart attack when she got the news that the body was found, and going to court almost every day for a year seeing your mom weeping, crying and fainting. You don't know what we went through. Especially to those who are demanding our family respond and having a meetup... you guys are disgusting. Shame on you. I pray that you don't have to go through what we went through and have your story blasted to 5mil listeners.

Forcing the viewer to play a part is good storytelling.

Good Editing Is Good Storytelling

I'm not going to lie. Part of what prompted this column was that I went for jury duty a couple weeks ago. And goddamn, that's boring.

It's a civic duty and all that, but boy is it a bore-fest. It's like the worst parts of the DMV and airport security rolled into one. You show up early. You go through the metal detector. You watch a video about how important it is to show up for jury duty AFTER YOU'VE ALREADY SHOWED UP. The woman behind you is texting on an old-school phone, and every time she presses a button, the phone makes loud tones. Do you know how many tones it takes to send a text? Four billion.

While I sat there, I thought about how interesting *Making A Murderer* was, and I thought that the filmmakers must have done A LOT of work to chop things down to a reasonable, tasty size. Because if I sat around for about 5 hours without even being on a jury, there must have been a whole lot of sitting in boring rooms going on in a big-time murder trial.

Indeed, the filmmakers cut a lot. 700 hours of footage cropped to about 10. That's an end product that comes out to about 1% of the original footage.

I've made this argument before, and boy did I catch some hell, but I'll always pose that good editing is good storytelling. When you can look at a mountain of content and cut it down, kill so many of your babies, then you're forcing yourself to only use the absolute best, most crucial material. And when we're talking about something as complex as the stories contained in *Making A Murderer*, that makes things ever tougher. Do you keep this story element, or do we keep this emotional footage? Lots of choices were made, and clearly lots of good ones.

Good editing is good storytelling.

Villains

Every story needs a villain, and no doubt, the biggest villain in this story was Ken Kratz.

It's not hard to nail down why viewers had such disdain for Kratz. He's on the wrong side of public opinion here, he blatantly exploits goodwill towards law enforcement, and his salacious texts rank up there with Warren G. Harding's erotic love notes when it comes to politicians crossing a line.

In fact, let's play a game: Harding or Kratz!

See if you can guess which quotes were from letters written by former President Warren G. Harding and which were from former District Attorney Ken Kratz

Thanks for putting up with me so far. I wish you weren't one of this offices clients. You'd be a cool person to know!

I need direction from you. Yes, you are a risk taker and you can keep your mouth shut and you think this is fun...or you think a man twice your age is creepy so stop.

I'm serious! I'm the atty. I have the \$350,000 house. I have the 6-figure career. You may be the tall, young, hot nymph, but I am the prize! Start convincing.

My Darling, there are no words, at my command, sufficient to say the full extent of my love for you — a mad, tender, devoted, ardent, eager, passion-wild, jealous ... hungry ... love ...

Sigh. Jerks just don't do torrid love affairs like they used to, do they?

Indeed, it's the documentary's reveal that Kratz was sending sexual texts to a victim of domestic abuse, a woman who he was supposed to be helping in his role as District Attorney, that really sealed the deal and positioned him as the true villain.

Up until the part about Kratz's texts, the only display of Kratz's true nature is the way in which he does his job. It's a struggle, but it's not out of line to watch him work, and to see that he's a tenacious D.A. who is pressing a conviction. He's doing his job, but there's something about him you just want to dislike.

With the reveal of his impropriety, and the reveal that the state of Wisconsin basically let it slide, the storytellers give us the true villain we wanted in Kratz.

Good storytelling has good villains.

It also doesn't hurt that the dude has a very Snidely Whiplash mustache.

Heroes

The story, no doubt, finds its heroes in Jerry Buting and Dean Strang, attorneys for the defense.

What's great about the way the heroes are introduced is the subtly. These two guys show up, another pair of dudes in plain suits who are poking around the case. But by the series' end, these guys are giving viewers the warm fuzzies.

The series does an incredible job of easing these characters in, letting them speak for themselves, and letting the audience fall in love with them. The series doesn't put in trumpets when they show up on scene. The series doesn't tell viewers, explicitly, that these are the good guys, and instead lets the good guys cement their own positions in our hearts through their actions. The old "show, don't tell" executed beautifully.

I don't want to belabor the point about whether or not people adore these men. I think I'll let the internet speak for itself on this one:





Heroes emerge on their own in good storytelling.

Good Use of Time

A hallmark of bad storytelling is that you have no idea how much time has elapsed. Is this taking place over the course of a day? A year?

Time is one of the secret weapons in *Making A Murderer*. We fast-forward through the past, then slow down in the present, and near the end of the series, speed up again.

The way in which time passes is very real and tangible, especially when, near the end, you see the time on Steve Avery's face. Oh, and Brendan Dassey's. We haven't talked about him much yet, but we will.

The documentary was so masterful in using time that, by the end, the flashing of dates at the bottom of the screen MEANT SOMETHING. I wouldn't normally see a date flashed on the bottom of the screen and feel something. Let's be honest. It's the only movie where, more than once, a date flashed on screen and I said, "No fucking way."

Time can work for or against a storyteller, and the storytellers in this case tamed time and made it do their work.

Good use of time is good storytelling.

Strong A and B Stories

The Steve Avery story is strong, and it's gotten a lot of attention, but it's my opinion that the B story, Brendan Dassey and his parallel murder trial, is even more heartbreaking.

With the Steve Avery story, we got something that made us think. You really do wonder if Avery was framed. You wonder what happened to the victim, Teresa Halbach.

With the Brendan Dassey story, we saw something truly, undeniably heartwrenching. A young, low-I.Q. boy is forced into a confession by police, and it's hard to watch the series without feeling like the kid is being railroaded. You watch when Brendan calls himself dumb over and over. You watch him talk about how he was self-conscious about being fat. You watch this kid talk about all these teenage things in front of the whole world.

What is sometimes forgotten with A and B stories is that they can be closely-related and still do different things. The A plot in *Making A Murderer* engages the mind, and the B plot punches you in the stomach. The way in which the two stories were presented as separate, distinct threads that intertwine, is strong storytelling technique and certainly part of what pulled viewers along.

Good balancing of A and B plots is good storytelling.

Timeliness

No doubt, this is a story for our time.

It's interesting to watch the way in which prosecutor Ken Kratz uses the unassailability of police officers as evidence throughout the case.

In 2005, when the case occurred, we were living in a different world. Certainly a small, 94% white community would have a strong reaction to the implication that police might be wrong in 2005.

But in 2015 and 2016, and in the wider world, feelings are different.

Police are no longer the perfect, always-honest folks we thought. Or at the very least, that status has come into question.

Anyone who has told a story at the wrong time knows how much timeliness counts. You have to wait for your moment. You don't, for instance, go on a date, and just before dinner arrives at the table, tell your date about the time the Dave Matthews tour bus dumped sewage off a bridge, drenching a

boatload of sightseers in Chicago.

Good timing is good storytelling.

We Are Not Left With Answers

Making A Murderer is a twist on the mystery story. Rather than a whodunit, we have a whodidn'tdunit. This leaves the wild conjecture and internet sleuthing (aka "The Fun Parts") to the audience.

It's an interesting choice, shying away from making statements and putting forth suspects. But I think it's an important one.

The filmmakers were trying to make a good documentary, and they were also trying to get people talking about this strange, unfair, unjust case. It's my opinion that the way in which this story was told leaves a whole lot for everyone else to talk about.

The filmmakers said their piece, and now they're letting the world take it from here.

They wanted to make something great, and they wanted people to talk about it.

A story that accomplishes its goals is always the result of good storytelling.

10 Love Poems Beyond Roses Are Red



This column originally started with the origin of the "Roses are red" poem. But frankly, it's boring. That thing can be traced back to 1594, which is a ridiculously long time ago. The first flush toilet was invented around the same time, and its inventor wrote a long treatise about it which was, of course, a thinly-veiled political attack of some kind. Because EVERYTHING was a thinly-veiled attack on a politician back then.

And that's the long explanation of why this column doesn't start with the history of "Roses are red." Because the history of the toilet is more interesting.

The history of poetry is great. But that history is also a problem because, from time to time, something like "Roses are red" comes to stand for what poetry is in popular consciousness.

This Valentine's, I want to share with you some different love poems, and some poems that talk about different kinds of love.

And please note, for the most part, these are not classics, and I've skipped over the classic authors. Add your favorites to the comments. Join the party.

1. Denver Butson's "My Brother"

The Body (what the poem's about):

Butson writes a touching, surprising poem about his brother.

The Brains (why this poem is more interesting than "Roses are red"):

The desperation of this poem is right there on the page. Butson tries so hard to express everything that's important about his brother, and you can feel the way that each line leads to another line, each detail bringing up another to the point that what's important and what isn't is impossible to

distinguish.

The Heart (the emotion of this poem missed by "Roses are red"):

This is a poem of intimacy. Where some love poems are not very specific and say a lot about the poem's author, this one is all about the subject. The poem becomes more and more intimate as it goes down the page, and when it unravels, the reader is left riven.

It's not easy to say how you love your brothers. Especially when they're gone. Butson perfectly shows how hard it is to sum up a human life, especially when that life belonged to someone as big as a brother.

My Brother

*To escape headaches and fears of an unfaithful wife
my brother perpetually reforming drug user
machinist scrapper arrested at 14 for arson
and incarcerated for a few weeks
father of one son and one aborted fetus
occasional bowler heavy metal fan
connoisseur of ketchup potato chips stromboli
and cheesesteak wearer of faded jeans
faded flannel shirts pocket-tee shirts
unlaced hightops or workboots
concert tee shirts painters' hats and
army coat sufferer of aloneness
of paranoia and fear insomniac and talker
of another language in his sleep
expert belcher and marksman constant but lousy liar
moderate drinker of cheap beer violent rampager
demolisher of lamps electric fans telephones
blue-eyed ladies' man father brother and son
shy blushing ladies' man skinny-legged blue-eyed
ladies' man stuck the open end of a .357 Magnum
in his right nostril with the other end
in his calloused and stained hands
and blew his headaches and his head
from this world into the next
one night just like that.*

2. Laura Gilpin's "The Two-Headed Calf"

The Body:

The title says it all. Not a metaphor. An actual freak of nature.

The Brains:

Finding true beauty in something that is not beautiful, something presented as realistic and kind of awful, is where the magic of this poem happens.

The Heart:

Never have I felt like such a soft man as I have when re-reading this poem. It's got a lot. The shortness of life, the difficulty, and the way empathy can show us a sky full of stars.

The Two-Headed Calf

*Tomorrow when the farm boys find this
freak of nature, they will wrap his body
in newspaper and carry him to the museum.*

*But tonight he is alive and in the north
field with his mother. It is a perfect
summer evening: the moon rising over
the orchard, the wind in the grass. And
as he stares into the sky, there are
twice as many stars as usual.*

3. & 4. Donald Hall's "Summer Kitchen" paired with Jane Kenyon's "Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks"

The Body:

Hall's poem is about the extraordinariness of an ordinary evening. Kenyon's, lines about being painfully, endlessly woven into everything.

The Brains:

What you should know about these poems is that Hall and Kenyon were married. Both were sick during parts of their marriage, and Leukemia ended Kenyon's life prematurely in 1995. Knowing that brings a new depth to both poets' work and the way their work can be read in tandem.

The Heart:

Hall's poem is a perfect fit for remembering the goodness of the everyday. Full disclosure, this is a poem I read as a toast at a friend's wedding, and it killed. Keep it in your back pocket. Kenyon's poem, from the first line, also roots itself in the beauty of the everyday, but it captures a bitterness too. "Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks" has always felt, to me, like biting into something sweet when you have a cavity. It's delicious, and it's so painful.

Summer Kitchen

*In June's high light she stood at the sink
 With a glass of wine,
And listened for the bobolink,
And crushed garlic in late sunshine.*

*I watched her cooking, from my chair.
 She pressed her lips
Together, reached for kitchenware,
And tasted sauce from her fingertips.*

*"It's ready now. Come on," she said.
 "You light the candle."*

*We ate, and talked, and went to bed,
And slept. It was a miracle.*

Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks

*I am the blossom pressed in a book,
found again after two hundred years. . . .*

I am the maker, the lover, and the keeper....

*When the young girl who starves
sits down to a table
she will sit beside me. . . .*

I am food on the prisoner's plate. . . .

*I am water rushing to the wellhead,
filling the pitcher until it spills. . . .*

*I am the patient gardener
of the dry and weedy garden. . . .*

*I am the stone step,
the latch, and the working hinge. . . .*

*I am the heart contracted by joy. . . .
the longest hair, white
before the rest. . . .*

*I am there in the basket of fruit
presented to the widow. . . .*

*I am the musk rose opening
unattended, the fern on the boggy summit. . . .*

*I am the one whose love
overcomes you, already with you
when you think to call my name. . . .*

5. Lisa Zimmerman's "Dog From the Original Fire"

The Body:

It's about a dog, but it's also about a primal, somehow time-traveling love.

The Brains:

It's also easy to write a cheesy poem about one's love for a dog. This poem does the difficult work of showcasing love, but a different kind of love. A love that manifests from hard work and vigilance and springs from an unknowable source.

The Heart:

There's just something about this poem, in what it knows and doesn't know, that expresses the way a dog's companionship and love can feel so pure and so savage.

Dog From the Original Fire

*I have a German Shepherd
the sheriff's department would love
for his giant chest, his hundred and twenty
pound frame, his desire for honest work.*

*He helps me feed the horses
rummaging for mice behind the grain bin.
When the mares get pushy, his bark
booms across the frozen lake
and foxes slink away in their thin red sleep.*

*The growl from his throat
is prehistoric, a rumble from a black cave
where firelight breaks the rock in tattered shadows.
He knows there is danger in the world, and fear
is neither influence nor abstract.*

*When the doorbell sings its one chime
he looms quiet on the other side.
Being ready is a solemn job. He could do it forever.
In the cave of his ribs his heart is an ember.*

6. Lucille Clifton's "Poem In Praise Of Menstruation"

The Body:

Menstruation. And more importantly, loving yourself. Not in that cheesy way people talk about to sell you gym memberships, but for real.

The Brains:

Clifton isn't one to shy away from things, and this poem proves it. This is a poem that's about menstruation, but it's not trying to shock anyone with detail or catch you by the skin with barbed words. It works towards making menstruation beautiful, and it does so with gorgeous tones and sentiments while staying away from things that are too flowery. It's a fine line, and Clifton nails it.

The Heart:

A great piece of writing can make a person feel differently about something, even for just a while. I can't say I have strong feelings about menstruation, or that it's a day-to-day, on-my-mind kind of thing. But this poem did change how I felt about it, just a smidge.

In Praise Of Menstruation

*if there is a river
more beautiful than this*

*bright as the blood
red edge of the moon if
there is a river
more faithful than this
returning each month
to the same delta if there*

*is a river
braver than this
coming and coming in a surge
of passion, of pain if there is*

*a river
more ancient than this
daughter of eve
mother of cain and of abel if there is in*

*the universe such a river if
there is some where water
more powerful than this wild
water*

*pray that it flows also
through animals
beautiful and faithful and ancient
and female and brave*

7. Rita Dove's "Heart To Heart"

The Body:

"Here's the difference between those cartoon hearts with "Luv U" written on them and the actual organ inside my body."

The Brains:

The poem takes away fluffy language and ideas about what a "heart" can do, and it almost feels like Dove is writing herself into a corner. When she springs out of the corner, you can't help but be awed.

The Heart:

The feeling the reader is left with is one of total honesty. When all the stuff from the Target holiday aisle is stripped away, what's left?

Heart to Heart

*It's neither red
nor sweet.
It doesn't melt
or turn over,
break or harden,
so it can't feel*

*pain,
yearning,
regret.*

*It doesn't have
a tip to spin on,
it isn't even
shapely—
just a thick clutch
of muscle,
lopsided,
mute. Still,
I feel it inside
its cage sounding
a dull tattoo:
I want, I want—
but I can't open it:
there's no key.
I can't wear it
on my sleeve,
or tell you from
the bottom of it
how I feel. Here,
it's all yours, now—
but you'll have
to take me,
too.*

8. Richard Siken's "Boot Theory"

The Body:

That dumb "Take my wife...please!" joke is turned on its head.

The Brains:

The way this poem twists a dad joke is so perfect.

When you write, there are things that you imitate and things that you enjoy, and then there are those pieces that make you say, "Damn. I wish I'd written that." "Boot Theory" is that kind of work.

The Heart:

Richard Siken has a way of building these little worlds where everything makes sense, and then he pulls the rug out and you're left confused and hurt. This poem hits that hurt, confused feeling like a freight train.

Boot Theory

*A man walks into a bar and says:
Take my wife—please.*

So you do.
You take her out into the rain and you fall in love with her
and she leaves you and you're desolate.
You're on your back in your undershirt, a broken man
on an ugly bedspread, staring at the water stains
on the ceiling.
And you can hear the man in the apartment above you
taking off his shoes.
You hear the first boot hit the floor and you're looking up,
you're waiting
because you thought it would follow, you thought there would be
some logic, perhaps, something to pull it all together
but here we are in the weeds again,
here we are
in the bowels of the thing: your world doesn't make sense.
And then the second boot falls.
And then a third, a fourth, a fifth.

A man walks into a bar and says:
Take my wife—please.
But you take him instead.
You take him home, and you make him a cheese sandwich,
and you try to get his shoes off, but he kicks you
and he keeps kicking you.
You swallow a bottle of sleeping pills but they don't work.
Boots continue to fall to the floor
in the apartment above you.
You go to work the next day pretending nothing happened.
Your co-workers ask
if everything's okay and you tell them
you're just tired.
And you're trying to smile. And they're trying to smile.

A man walks into a bar, you this time, and says:
Make it a double.
A man walks into a bar, you this time, and says:
Walk a mile in my shoes.
A man walks into a convenience store, still you, saying:
I only wanted something simple, something generic...
But the clerk tells you to buy something or get out.
A man takes his sadness down to the river and throws it in the river
but then he's still left
with the river. A man takes his sadness and throws it away
but then he's still left with his hands.

9. Louise Erdrich's "Windigo"

The Body:

This poem comes with its own preface. I just get to kick back on this one:

The Windigo is a flesh-eating, wintry demon with a man buried deep inside of it. In some Chippewa stories, a young girl vanquishes this monster by forcing boiling lard down its throat, thereby releasing the human at the core of ice.

The Brains:

I love the lore-steeped feeling of this poem. Taking an emotion like love and mixing it in with a cryptozoological, legendary creature is up my alley in so many ways.

The Heart:

There's something wild and dangerous in those woods. The love of this poem feels dangerous. Feels scary.

Windigo

*You knew I was coming for you, little one,
when the kettle jumped into the fire.
Towels flapped on the hooks,
and the dog crept off, groaning,
to the deepest part of the woods.*

*In the hackles of dry brush a thin laughter started up.
Mother scolded the food warm and smooth in the pot
and called you to eat.
But I spoke in the cold trees:
New one, I have come for you, child hide and lie still.*

*The sumac pushed sour red cones through the air.
Copper burned in the raw wood.
You saw me drag toward you.
Oh touch me, I murmured, and licked the soles of your feet.
You dug your hands into my pale, melting fur.*

*I stole you off, a huge thing in my bristling armor.
Steam rolled from my wintry arms, each leaf shivered
from the bushes we passed
until they stood, naked, spread like the cleaned spines of fish.*

*Then your warm hands hummed over and shoveled themselves full
of the ice and the snow. I would darken and spill
all night running, until at last morning broke the cold earth
and I carried you home,
a river shaking in the sun.*

10. Mark Doty's "At the Gym"

The Body:

Observational poem about the gym, one of the grossest, grunty-est places on the planet. One of the

foot-smelling-est...okay, I'll stop.

The Brains:

The struggle between power and beauty is an interesting one, and where the line comes in, when power becomes ugly, is an even trickier question. The poem gets at why we struggle for beauty.

The Heart:

It's hard to see someone wanting, and this poem manages to display a collective want, which is even harder to look at. The vulnerability level is so high by the end.

At the Gym

*This salt-stain spot
marks the place where men
lay down their heads,
back to the bench,*

*and hoist nothing
that need be lifted
but some burden they've chosen
this time: more reps,*

*more weight, the upward shove
of it leaving, collectively,
this sign of where we've been:
shroud-stain, negative*

*flashed onto the vinyl
where we push something
unyielding skyward,
gaining some power*

*at least over flesh,
which goads with desire,
and terrifies with frailty.
Who could say who's*

*added his heat to the nimbus
of our intent, here where
we make ourselves:
something difficult*

*lifted, pressed or curled,
Power over beauty,
power over power!
Though there's something more*

*tender, beneath our vanity,
our will to become objects
of desire: we sweat the mark*

of our presence onto the cloth.

*Here is some halo
the living made together.*

Kindling Love: 9 of the Strangest Erotic Stories on Kindle



Love takes a lot of different forms. There's the love between a man and a woman, as exemplified by Adam and Eve. There's love between two men, as exemplified by this Adam and Steve couple I've heard so much about lately. There's love between women, Eve and Evie (they both used to go by "Eve", but it's too weird to date someone with the exact same name, so Evie made the switch). There's love between like eight dudes named Chris, Jim, uh, Alvin, Simon, Theodore, Chip, Dale, and probably some other guy that was less memorable.

There are lots of different kinds of love, is what I'm saying.

And they're all beautiful. Ish. Adam has been complaining that Steve has put on a few extra pounds lately. Don't tell Steve.

If you want a REAL taste for the variety of loves out there, get yourself to the Kindle store. There you'll find loves you never imagined. Types of love you thought were, perhaps, impossible. And chances are you're very correct. A lot of this stuff violates not just social mores, but laws of time, space, and general logic.

I'm inviting you to join me on an erotic journey into the weird. Which means this is VERY NSFW. Unless your workplace is totally awesome, in which case, feel free to gather everyone around the computer because this is going to be super fun.

'The Charmer' by Tonara Cluric

Something I noticed right away when browsing for this column, you'll start looking through titles and



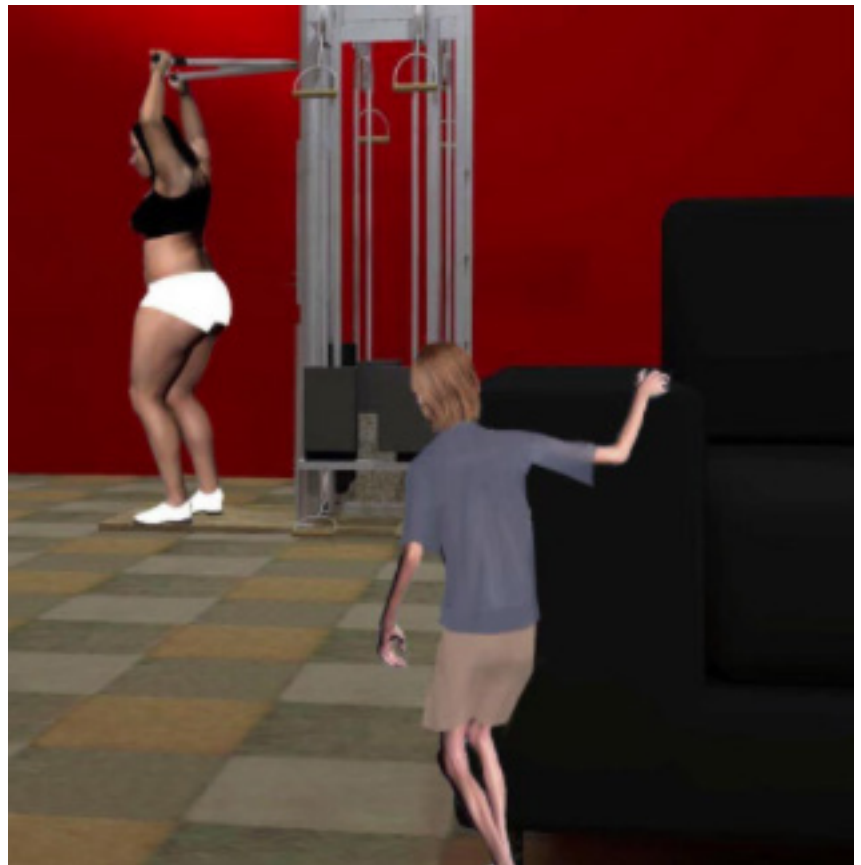
see a lot of themes. And one of those themes is a tiny/huge thing. One person is tiny or the other is, the tiny person is dominant or the large person is. This stuff is all over the map in terms of how tiny, how large, and who plays what role.

From the great selection of tiny/huge options, I picked *The Charmer*. Because it's got pictures. Frightening pictures.

Here's the deal: Alphonse is a dwarf, but not like any kind of dwarf with which I'm familiar. He's this tiny, proportional, rail thin creature who seems to sort of understand English and sort of not. I'd say he's about the size of a 2-liter soda bottle.

Through a complicated series of events, Alphonse ends up hanging out with a woman, Erin, who is a personal trainer. Erin's put on a few pounds in recent months, and when she starts working out, she notices Alphonse is pretty interested in what she's doing.

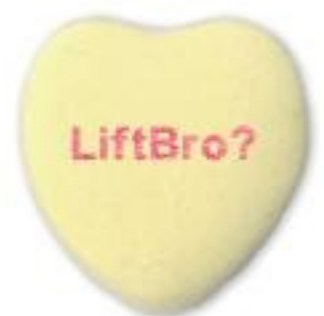
Working out in front of Alphonse is, basically, like when you're doing something a little sexy and the cat is creeping from a chair in the living room or something. Which is bad, but creeping from the chair is better than the times the cat is RIGHT THERE, sitting on your foot, looking at you like Robert Redford staring down Demi Moore in *Indecent Proposal*.



Alphonse, it's discovered, has the magic power of getting women to work out really hard. He watches them exercise, and he licks their legs and stuff, and it has the side effect of getting them super-pumped.

Alphonse is like, imagine if you could take the motivation of the theme song from *Rocky IV*, distill it down into human form, and also it licked you.

It's a true rags-to-riches tale. Alphonse becomes a personal trainer, and all the women he works with look like Arnold circa *Commando*. Your classic American success story, but with really ripped women and tiny dudes with magic powers. Your Horatio Alger tale, as directed by Russ Meyer, screenplay by Robert Crumb.



'The Littlest Astronaut' by Tonara Cluric



This one turned out to be almost the same as *The Charmer*, except the dude in it is SMALLER and an astronaut! How could I resist?

I can only recommend this book on two fronts:

1. The premise of this book is that if we could breed tiny astronauts, we could then send these tiny men into space at a far lower cost than we could normal men. I'm quite enchanted with the idea. Would it work? Would we be able to cheaply manufacture tiny rockets? How long could this little dude live off a Powerbar? It's a pretty interesting idea for a book where the climax is a tiny man crawling inside of a lady's lady parts.

2. The name is really cute. *The Littlest Astronaut*. If you told me to shelve this in a bookstore, sight unseen, and the only information I had was the title, I'd put it with the kids' picture books for sure. And boy would that result in some problems, not to mention some lifelong hang-ups for some little kids.

This also had the strangest, most out-of-nowhere ending I've seen in a long time. The lil' astronaut (Baxter) is crawling inside a lady while they're in her parked car:

Baxter knew exactly where to go and what to do, and the vagaries of life would continue unimpeded by mankind's expectations, with pleasure and esteem for some, sadness and regret for others.

What? None of the rest of this book sounded ANYTHING like this. Is it possible to rate this with question marks instead of stars? What the hell kind of ending is that?



'Pimp Dino' by Tani Fredricks



This cover is a lie. Like most comic book covers, which promised epic battles and didn't deliver, this cover writes a check that even a dino-sized ass can't cash.

Yes, there's dinosaur-on-lady sex, and there's a weird, telepathic threesome between a lady, a dude, and a dinosaur named Timmy. But, the only pimp portion comes in when the woman, Shanna, IMAGINES Timmy the dinosaur as a pimp. That's it! She just thinks about "What a dinosaur was dressed like a pimp?" she has a little laugh, and that's the extent of the pimping.

How could you come up with the concept of a dinosaur pimp and then just throw it in the garbage like this? This author does not recognize gold when it lands in her outstretched fingertips.

I'll say this, Timmy and Shanna have a pretty healthy relationship, all things considered. And there are a lot of things to consider here. Time travel, a giant diamond mine, telepathic dinosaurs.

Although Timmy makes a good point regarding whether his relationship with Shanna is really all that special:

No other dinosaur throughout history has ever bonded with a human before. That's probably because, in my time, there are no other humans except Shanna.



Accurate AND disappointing.

'Wesley Crusher: Teenage F*** Machine' by Kitty Glitter



This was great. Stupid, and great.

Star Trek: The Next Generation's Wesley Crusher is on the holodeck with a buddy, doing weird sex stuff, when Captain Picard walks in:

'An orgy aboard the holodeck?' shouted Picard, 'This is an outrage!'

Prof. Moriarty suddenly materializes in front of Picard brandishing a silver pistol and shoots the Captain in his balls.

Is this not something we were all waiting for? You've been playing with fire for a long time when it comes to that damn holodeck, Picard. How long would it take before Moriarty escaped and concocted an evil scheme to take over the Enterprise, or maybe just shot you in the balls with a handgun?

Although this book has erotic moments, it's pretty light on them, and even lighter on the sex.

But it makes up for it in other ways. What does Wesley Crusher do when a Borg cube pulls up behind his ship and has its headlights blaring brightly? He grabs a football and spirals that shit right into the Borg headlight, smashing it.

There was also a hilarious description of a group of three women:

The three customers happened to be teenaged girls in bikinis. Two blondes and a brunette, all three were build either like Betty or Veronica or somewhere in between with faces to match.

Aren't Betty and Veronica physically identical other than their hair? I mean, look at this:



They have the same hash marks over their noses! Their hands are in the same position! They both have black lipstick, which is pretty metal for Riverdale!

To describe three girls as looking like either Betty or Veronica or something in between...I don't know what the difference is between the two, and the only thing I can picture less is the appearance of a woman that's half-way between these two.

This is definitely the dumbest book I read, but also the best. Which is the kind of review you'll never get from Michiko Kakutani.



'Nostril F***** By The Micro Penis' by Fannie Tucker

Is it insane that this story is actually just a little bit sweet? Probably the most loving of the group here?

Yes.

Okay, we meet Chuck outside of a night club called Sex Flamingo. Chuck shows up in a giant truck

NOSTRIL FUCKED BY THE MICROPENIS



sporting the license plate BIG-UN. He has on big cowboy boots, he's got a weightlifter's body, and he never goes home with any girls, ever. But he's never met Naomi, who is determined to head home with Chuck.

They banter a little, Naomi complimenting Chuck's truck, Chuck interjecting a very awkward, "I bench three-fifty."

And then Naomi says that she knows Chuck must be compensating for something, but she doesn't care. She's into it.

And actually, she is into it. What little of it there is.

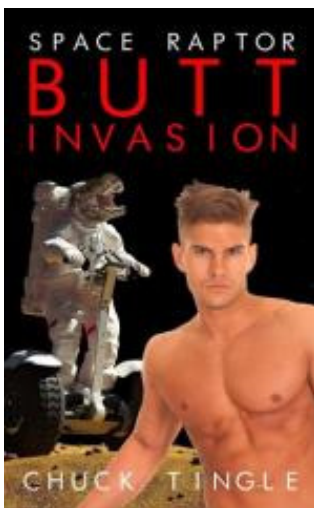
Now, the part where the deed goes down isn't so sweet. And the part after when Chuck makes a joke about trying the other nostril sometime and Naomi laughs so hard "seed sprayed from her nose" is downright vile. But honestly, at the book's end, this couple is happy together:

Now that Chuck had nothing to compensate for, she thought he might just have promise.



A true "be yourself" message in an erotic tale of nostril sex.

'Space Raptor Butt Invasion' by Chuck Tingle



This is what I was hoping for when I started this project. The third space-related book, by the way, and the second dinosaur. What I've learned about myself is that I'm most interested in pornography filmed in the science museum gift shop.

Here we go.

Lance is a guy up on a moon base, and he's going to be alone for the next year. Or so he thinks. After about half a day, a strange astronaut comes knocking.

Turns out, the new astronaut is Orion, a velociraptor from Earth 2, which is where the dinosaurs moved to get away from Earth. Orion is keeping tabs on the universe, and he stops by Lance's moon base just to see what's going on.

The two astronauts, human and dino, spacebro out for a while, play some space ping pong, and it's not long before Lance starts having feelings for Orion:

Despite being a bloodthirsty dinosaur carnivore, Orion is actually incredibly sweet and has a truly gentle soul. The longer we spend together, the more I find myself drawn to him, attracted even. Our difference in species surely couldn't classify me as gay, could

it?

The sexually-charged nature of being stuck with a dinosaur in a space station comes bubbling to the surface. And then, the space buddies have this classic conversation:

'I mean, it's not gay if it's a dude raptor and a dude human, right?' I ask.

'Totally not gay.' Says the dinosaur.

Which is both a good and fundamentally stupid question.

If someone told me, "You know how I was on the moon? Well, when I was up there, I had sex with a dinosaur from an alternate Earth" my first 18,000 questions would not be about whether or not the dinosaur was male.

Shortly after discussing, as only spacebros can, what is and isn't gay, the raptor takes down his "space pants" and his "space briefs" and the two get down to business. Which the raptor is good at because his species was having sex "billions of years before you were even around."

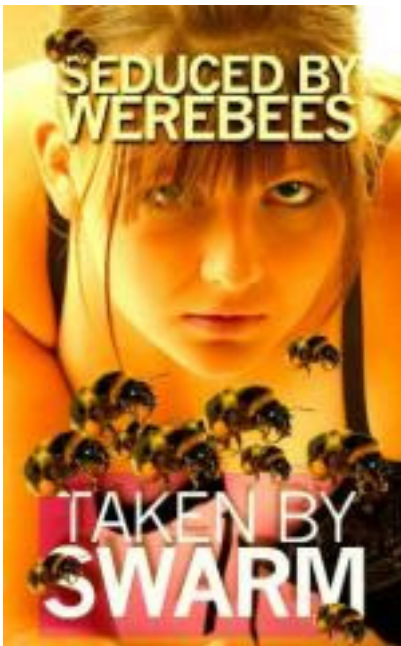
There was a lot to like about this book. It's got space, it's got dinosaurs. And the dinosaur in THIS book was named Orion, which is a much better dino name than "Timmy."

It also gave me an idea.

NASA, if you're listening: space erotica. You all can throw up thousands of space erotica tales, all scientifically accurate, and make enough money to fund space exploration. You could fly in ships built by eroticism. Explore the galaxy, fueled by human sexuality. Think about it. Just take a minute, take off your judgment hat, and think about it, NASA.



'Taken By Swarm: Seduced By WEREBEES' by AM Ball



Why do so many of these stories start with a description of the weather? I think fully half, if not three-quarters, of these stories start with something about the season and the temperature. Did we learn nothing from Snoopy's "dark and stormy night" gag?

This one was pretty confusing. I'm going to try and sum it up as best I can.

This lady stops in an unfamiliar town and goes into a diner. It's important that she likes cake, I guess, because it's mentioned like three times. The diner is full of men, and they bring her desserts, one after another, and then all of a sudden she's having sex with a swarm of bees somehow, and it's great. The sex. Not the description of the sex.

I think that the diner men are all bees who can transform? Or maybe they're men who can transform into bees? That's not super clear, but there's some kind of bee orgy that goes down, and then the

announcement is made:

That's bingo, and a successful impregnation, boys. Well done all.

I can tell you my exact problem with this book. I had expectations going in, and those expectations were that men would turn into bees with the full moon, and those bees would all fly together and form giant sex parts, like the way in cartoons they would fly together and make a giant hammer or something.

Also, this is like a werewolf story, but without the transformation part. How can you not show that? If I'm seeing a werewolf movie, I wanna see Jack Nicholson run into the woods, tear open his shirt, I want to then be unclear whether the amount of chest hair is wolf-related or not, and then I want him to run down a deer and eat it. I don't want to see him go into another room and then a wolf man comes back.

I want to see werebess turn into bees, or dudes, or even both. But alas, sometimes love is a letdown.



'The Unbirthing: An Age Regression Novella' by Mindi Flyth



This is possibly the strangest and least erotic entry.

The sexual part is up front and pretty standard. And then...The Unbirthing.

Maggie is some kind of weird creature who has sex with Trevor. After, Maggie sucks some kind of red mist from Trevor, and he's suddenly 5 years younger.

As Trevor gets younger, Maggie also gets younger. And more pregnant.

It's a lot more like a horror movie than an erotic tale. At least from this reader's perspective.

Also, Trevor is transformed into a girl as he de-ages. Which is just an added bonus, I suppose, an additional change along with the change of de-aging and becoming a baby again.

Most of the story is about Trevor trying to resist being sucked up into Maggie and becoming her baby, after which he'll be born again and...I guess live a new life as a girl? That part's not super clear.

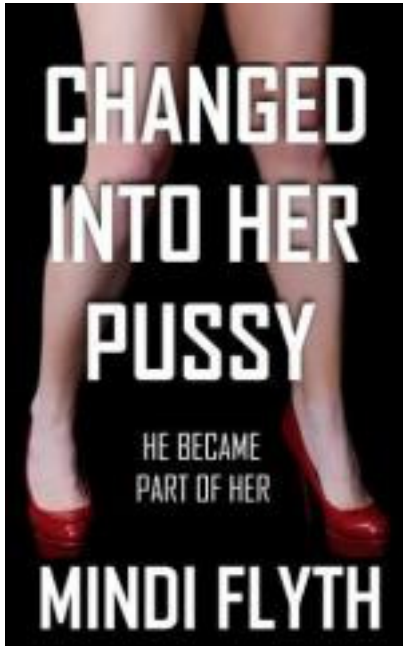
If they renamed the show *Black Mirror* as *Black Speculum*, and if it sucked, this would make a great pilot episode.



'Changed Into Her Pussy' by Mindi Flyth

Alex awoke to find that everything around him was a dark, pinkish blur.

This story wastes no time getting to the core. When we join our hero, Alex, he's already been transformed into a woman's bits. His girlfriend's bits, to be exact:



There's a lot you don't know about me, sweetie. Like, you never knew that I'm a witch.

That's a biggie.

Turns out Alex's transformation isn't the first for his girlfriend. She's got a dress made from her ex, a pair of underwear made from a dude who harassed her, and a bra made out of a girl who stole her boyfriend in college. Basically, if you cross this lady, chances are she'll make you into wardrobe, or maybe a chapstick if that's what she needs. I bet if she was running low on gas, she'd stop off somewhere and wait until someone pissed her off and then just transform the person into a couple gallons of fuel. And I bet her anger threshold gets lower the more she needs something. "Ugh, I really want a pizza right now. Hmm, that guy has a nObama bumper sticker. Good enough!"

Alex revolts, however, and finds that he's in control of the witch's entire body at some point, and it's not too long before he takes over.

He's a little freaked out about being a woman, but he gets over it pretty quickly. He says it's no weirder than being a vagina, which is a strange but accurate assessment of his situation.

For all the craziness, this story is not lazy. It poses some pretty good theories of what it'd be like to BE a vagina attached to a person, right down to the feeling of being exposed when unclothed and the difficulty of seeing where the hell you're going.



Thus ends our erotic journey together. Thanks for reading. And if you've got a weird one I missed, list it below. Unless it's, like, REALLY weird. Beyond space dinosaur weird.

Here's How Much BuzzFeed Book Quizzes Know About You



Hi, I'm Pete. I'm a *Mario Bros.* Master, I'm 35% teenager, Chris Pratt should be my celebrity boyfriend, I only need one hour of sleep every night, my worst habit is that I can't accept compliments, I'm more of a Shamrock Shake than a Mint Oreo Blizzard, and my soul has been 0% destroyed by working in retail.

This is what I've just learned from BuzzFeed quizzes.

Some of these results are accurate. I would call myself a *Super Mario Bros.* Master, even if I'm not that great at playing the game. I sat and thought about whether Chain Chomps were introduced in the second or third installment of the series for a good five minutes. This is more time than I spent on any SAT question.

Some of the results are less accurate. I need more than 1 hour of sleep per night. I'm not some automo-man who can charge up in 60 minutes.

And there's some stuff in between. My soul probably has been destroyed 0% by retail, but only because there was nothing left to destroy by the time I entered the world of retail.

It's hard to know how accurate BuzzFeed is because it's hard to really know yourself, right?

Unless...unless you could find something you're an expert on, and then evaluate that way. Unless you could take every quiz on that topic you could find.

And wait a second. I'm a degree-ed librarian. I read a buttload, enough that I should have been able

to come up with a better word than "buttload."

If I took every BuzzFeed book quiz I could find, what would I learn?

How much does BuzzFeed know about me?

Simple Steps

Let's start with the easy stuff. There's some stuff that is provable. I might have a tough time definitively proving that if I were a sandwich, I'd be a pizza bagel. I'd also have trouble proving that a pizza bagel counts as a sandwich. But if we go basic to start, we'll have a good baseline.

My Age Based On My Taste In Books

22! I take this as an insult, by the way. If this were based on my taste in something silly, like music or some such shit, I'd be flattered. If I LOOKED 22, a decade younger than I am, then I would feel pretty good about myself right now. Instead, I've been reduced to a quivering mass of disappointment in myself.

How Old Are You Based On Your Reading Habits?

23! Well, shit. After a few questions about preferring physical books to eReaders, I thought for sure I'd skew older on this one. But apparently, like a Mel Gibson romance movie in which cryogenics play a surprising role, I'm *Forever Young*.

Where Do I Live, Based On Taste In Books?

New York City. Not even close. The place where I live has been featured in one book that I know of, and the author referred to my hometown as a "rural ghetto."

Do I Prefer Books or Music?

You don't have to know much about me to know that I'm far more book lover than I am music lover. Case in point, my car. I have about a dozen books in my car. My car stereo? A portable speaker plugged into the cigarette lighter outlet, held in place by Velcro strips. And I mostly use it to listen to podcasts.

BuzzFeed got it right this time.

Score Check:

Four quizzes in, BuzzFeed is 1 for 4. I'd like to punish them further for being so drastically off on my age. If this were a carnival and I was at that age-guessing booth thing, I'd win a stuffed Minion, for sure. Or a mirror with Guns N' Roses printed on it. But we'll settle for 1 for 4 and move on.

Potter More

If there's one thing BuzzFeed quizzes love, it's Harry Potter. You can take endless Harry Potter quizzes. Let's do this.

Which Harry Potter House Should You Not Be In? Hufflepuff

Which **SHOULD** You Be In? Also Hufflepuff.

For a third shot at this, I took a quiz to see what percent Hufflepuff I am, and it's 20%. This is getting confusing.

Maybe indecisiveness is a Hufflepuff thing, and therefore these are accurate results? I don't really know enough about these houses to say for certain, but I would have guessed Hufflepuff for myself from the get-go. So let's just assume that this indecisiveness IS a Hufflepuff trait. Also, while we're just assuming things, let's assume people in Hufflepuff really know how to fuck.

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets matches my personality, I'm more Dumbledore than Snape, my favorite spell is Reparo, blah, blah blah.

Most importantly, if there's a Harry Potter character I should get it on with, it's Dumbledore.

Which...is a bit of a problem. He's a bit of the older persuasion than I am. And to put it delicately, a bit more of the penis-having-persuasion than I'm used to. And even if I were to go that way, I'm more into Hagrid, the most magical bear ever.

Once we got through Harry Potter quizzes, I'd put the score of BuzzFeed's quiz masters at 3 for 11. Not abysmal, but not great.

Going Young Adult

If there's one YA Heroine I should be, it's June Iparis of *Legend*. According to BuzzFeed.

I'm going to have to disagree. I just don't think I'd be good in a dystopian situation. My plan, in the event of worldwide trouble has always been to forget my moral compass completely and see what happens.

I'd say I'm more of a *King Dork*. Okay, okay, *King Dork* isn't a heroine, nor is he heroic at all, really. And that's why he's the perfect choice.

A woman who nailed a perfect score on some kind of standardized test? No.

A guy who renames his non-existent band every week? Yep.

Which Book Should I Date?

Catcher in the Rye. Well, I bought the appropriate bit, and I'm drilling a hole in my copy of *Catcher In The Rye* right now. I'll let you know how it goes.



Listen, like many of us, I have an abiding love for *Catcher in the Rye*, but it's also a book I'd be a bit embarrassed to carry around with me. Also, if dating *Catcher* were possible, I feel like we'd have a lot of discussions about being against the establishment and stuff. Which is something I would be totally into when I was 22, and if I really was that 22 year-old BuzzFeed speculated I am, this would be perfect. But I'm way too old to talk about anything remotely establishment. The only establishment I care about is establishing a sweet dent in the couch.

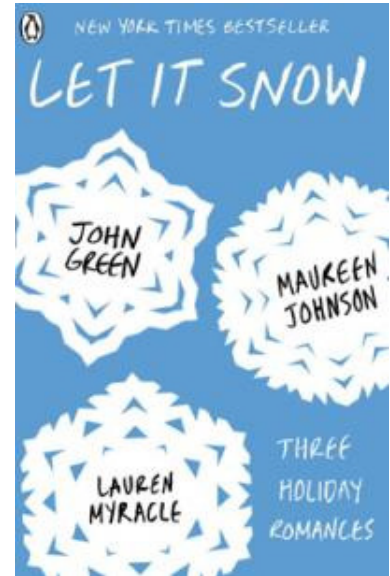
Which John Green Novel Are You?

Let It Snow? I've never heard of...oh, a collection of three holiday romances? Well, that's a combination of two things I loathe. Maybe I could read it while combining two foods I hate, Hawaiian pizza dipped in Hawaiian Punch (sorry, Hawaii).

But wait. It's which book I AM, not which one I should read. And I DO hate myself...

You win this round, BuzzFeed.

BuzzFeed's Score: 4 for 14.



Which Book Should You Read This Winter/Spring/Summer/Fall?

There's a quiz for all the upcoming seasons. A whole year of predicted reading.

Winter:

We Love You, Charlie Freeman follows an African-American family who is hired by a New England research institute to raise and teach sign language to a chimpanzee — only to discover that the institute has a shockingly dark past.

I normally have a rule that applies to books and movies. No monkey/ape-centric stuff UNLESS space is involved or there is a monkey uprising. *Planet of the Apes*? Yes! *MVP: Most-Valuable Primate*? Hell no. *2001: A Space Odyssey*? Yes. *Any Which Way You Can*? No, but WILL totally watch the last 15 minutes when drunk.

However, one review for *We Love You Charlie Freeman* said this book features some sections that seemed to be less about plot, more about just making it weird. Combine that with a chimp, that's a win in my book.

Spring: To Rise Again At A Decent Hour by Joshua Ferris

Joshua Ferris, finalist for the National Book Award, delves into the life of Paul O'Rourke, a dentist whose world is turned upside down when someone begins impersonating him online. Paul becomes even more disturbed when he begins to wonder if this "fake" version of himself is better than the "real" one. Read this complex tale of internet identity and self-perception on your iPhone as spring is sprung all around you.

A previous Joshua Ferris outing didn't work out too well for me. Maybe because what some people see as outrageous cubicle culture, others see as a typical day at the office. Pass.

Summer:

The Beautiful Bureaucrat follows a young woman named Josephine who, after a lengthy unemployment, does not question her new job entering numbers into something called "The Database." But as her feelings of unease and anxiety grow, she begins to figure out just what the numbers mean and must make a terrifying decision.

It sounds okay, but Karen, who makes me laugh as much as just about anyone online, says it's skippable for some pretty compelling reasons. I trust Karen with my life. And collection of monster porn. Pass.

Fall:

Ben Lerner's 10:04 takes place in an increasingly chaotic New York as seen through the eyes of a narrator grappling with his own mortality and the implications of fatherhood. Throughout the novel, Lerner skillfully captures the essence of what it means to be alive. Complex and provocative, "10:04" is the perfect read for feeling revitalized this season.

Here's an excerpt:

So this is how it works, I said to myself, as if I'd caught an ideological mechanism in flagrante delicto: you let a young man committed to anticapitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent and, while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of a bourgeois household, that almost caricatural transvaluation of values lubricated by wine and song.

I'm less into the \$10-dollar words, more into spending about a buck-fifty on a word and using the rest to buy bourbon and Pez. Pass.

For my 2016 reading list, BuzzFeed scores an abysmal 1/4. 5 for 18 as we move forward.

But Who ARE You?

Let's get into the big question. Who am I, really?

Which Roald Dahl Character Are You?

CHARLIE!?

Some may mistake your calm, quiet nature for weakness, but you have them all fooled. One day you'll be running the show and they will all wonder what hit them. Even if you fall on hard times your heart of gold will get you through.

At first I was pissed. But I like this one. Not because I'm a big fan of Charlie. Everyone knows Mike TV

is the best guy. But I can dig this answer because it involves being virtuous for the purpose of coming back and rubbing it in everyone's face that they suck. Score one for BuzzFeed.

My Personality Based On My Taste In Books

The Classic. You love nothing more than curling up with a classic novel and getting lost in it. Whether it be romantic, gothic, or modernist, the best part about classics is that there are so many to choose from, and you've read an awful lot of them! That's why people always come to you for book recommendations.

Haha, whoa. This is pretty far off. If there's one thing I don't like in the book world, it's classics. If there's two things, the second one is people who really love to tell you how much they love classics. Frankenstein was alright, but there were some real third act problems. What's with the Arctic Ocean stuff? Did Mary Shelley just want to take a vacation and write it off as a business expense?

No points on this one.

How Much Of A Book Addict Are You?

28 out of 77 symptoms on display. Which means I'm doing fine. I'd give that one to BuzzFeed. I like books, but I can quit any time I want to. I just don't want to.

Which Superhero are you?

Luke Cage. I love everything about Luke Cage. Nothing would please me more than to wear a yellow pirate shirt open to the navel. But while Luke Cage is cool, I'd say I have a more sniveling weakling quality. While Luke Cage's catchphrase is "Sweet Christmas!", I hate Christmas and would be much more likely to go with "Oh My Halloween!"

As much as I'd like to be described as "Luke-Cage-esque" I think I'm more like a certain cigar-chomping fowl, trapped in a world I never made.

Score Check:

BuzzFeed clocks in with an 7 out of 22.



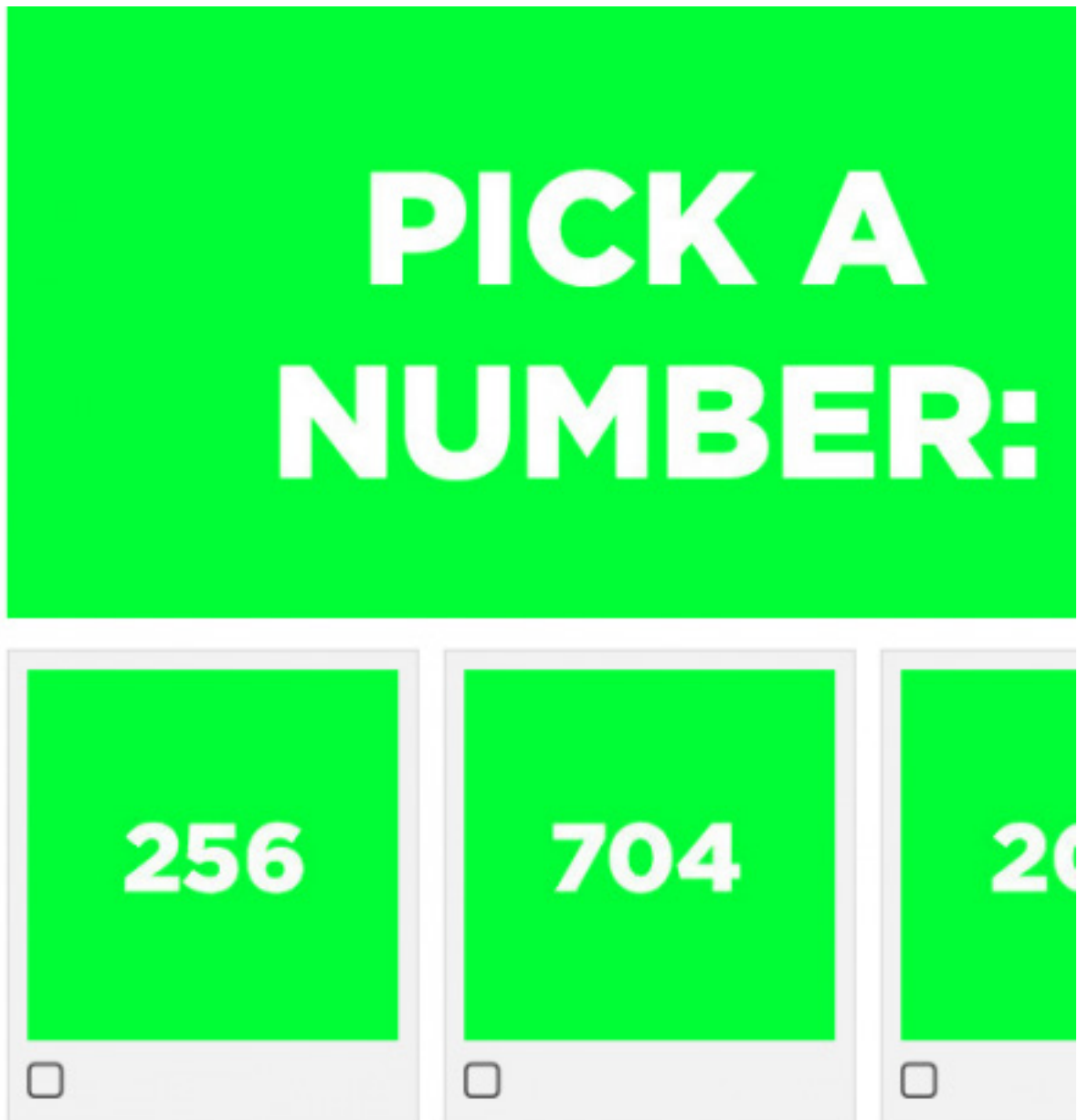
Finally

I'm the book of Revelations. I'm a committed companion. I should read *Angry Man Pounded By The Fear Of His Latent Gayness* by Chuck Tingle (agree! Although I've already Tingle'd this month). Of *Donkey Kong Country* characters, I'm Donkey Kong. Okay, that one has nothing to do with books. Life's not all books, you nerds.

With all of this in mind, the final score for BuzzFeed is 9 out of 26. Not great, BuzzFeed.

Some might say it's the journey, not the destination that makes these quizzes fun. But if that's the case, hoo boy.

Some of these quizzes were blindingly hideous. Look at this!



I apologize if that has burned holes in your screen. For reference, if you'd like to include this color in an upcoming project, the hexadecimal code is #hailFFSATAN.

Some quizzes didn't really provide options that had a single relevant choice to me. One quiz even forced me to pick between two Kardashians and the Knowles sisters. I went Kardashian because I had to pick something, and "Solange" sounds like the medical term for when you feel an itch, go to the bathroom, wipe, and there's matter on the paper. That matter is "solange."

Ultimately, I think there's a chance that these quizzes could be designed to work, but they're created by individual BuzzFeed users online, and therefore the options tend to skew towards the cultural

preferences of BuzzFeed power users, who we normally refer to as "That annoying dork who should consider getting a full-time gig."

Final Judgment?

BuzzFeed: You don't KN00000000W me!

14 Things That Prove Tyra Banks' 'Modelland' Is The Craziest Book Ever



Where to begin? That's the real challenge here.

Let's re-state, just in case:

Tyra Banks' *Modelland* is the most batshit crazy thing I've ever read in my life.

It's 560-some pages of absolute, balls-to-the-wall insanity. And that's coming from someone with bona fides. I've read more than my fair share of bizarro and bizarro-adjacent books. I've read dinosaur-related Kindle erotica professionally. I have a favorite fanfic that involves Leonardo DiCaprio having sex with a Goombah from *Super Mario Bros*.

None of this compares the weirdness of Tyra Banks' *Modelland*.

The only way I could think to explain the crazy of this book was to pick my 14 favorite things about it.

Also, I guess, spoiler alert. If you're the kind of person who thinks something like an acid trip can be spoiled for you by being told you're about to trip balls, then this alert is for you.

The Quick Summary

Modelland is your typical part 1 of a 3-part teen dystopian series. It draws from a lot of familiar stuff—*Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*—but mostly, it's reminiscent of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Here's how it works.

Modelland is this weird, mysterious place that everyone kind of knows about. Girls go there to become models. And also to have superpowers. Sometimes. It's complicated.

One day every year, girls parade around in this ceremony called TDOD (The Day of Discovery. Tyra LOVES shortening shit), are selected by Modelland scouts, and whisked away to Modelland. In a giant, gossamer ball sack. I know, I said this summary would be quick, but the hilarity of the main characters flying to Modelland in what is DEFINITELY a huge ball sack, a ball sack that even fills with "fluid" at several points, is not to be skipped over.

Our main character is Tookie, who is obviously teenage Tyra. Tookie doesn't think she's going to be selected to go to Modelland, but then she totally is. And when she gets to Modelland, she deals with crazy classes, weird people, her second crush, her first period, magic lightning that turns things transparent, people transformed into cats, and a conspiracy theory that wraps up in the strangest, most bizarre fashion. You could say it's a book about friends, fashion, and growing up. But it would be more accurate to say this book is about seeing how crazy a thing can be put into print before the ink just refuses to adhere to paper.

We good? Let's get to it.

1. What's in a Name?

You've never seen a book with names like these.

I did just read a little news piece about a real-life Florida woman named Chrystal Methany. That's a real person's name. And of course there are famous names like Le-a, [supposedly pronounced 'luh-dash-uh.'](#) But when it comes to *Modelland*, fiction is stranger than truth.

We've got our main character, Tookie de la Creme. We've got her father, Chris de la Creme. We've got Tookie's mom, Creamy de la creme, which is a hilarious name until you find out her full, maiden name: Cremalatta Defacake.

There's a Theophilus Lovelaces, a Zarpessa Zarionneaux. There's not a Joe or a Matt in sight, although there IS a man named Guru Mattjoe. There's even a magical black man named Wingtip.

But the ultimate taker of cake has to be Ci~L.

Yep, that's a tilde. The wavy dash thing that's near the upper-left of your keyboard. Usually it appears above another letter, but here, screw it, right in the middle of a name.

You might be wondering what the proper pronunciation of this name is. Well, about 90% of the way through this book, after you've struggled over it for hours, or maybe you did like me, gave up, and called her "Seal," just when you're reaching the home stretch, Ci~L's mom drops the knowledge on us that it's "see-ell." The explanation? Because when momma saw baby Ci~L, she could "see love,"

The hilarity of the main characters flying to Modelland in what is DEFINITELY a huge ball sack, a ball sack that even fills with "fluid" at several points, is not to be skipped over.

and therefore named her daughter a shortened version of "see love."

Personally, I see that tilde, and I see red, rage. Death. This:



But I'm just one man.

2. Chris Gets Creamed

In a slew of crazy things, one of the early events that...caught my eye was the way in which Tookie's father, Chris, lost his...eye.

Chris was once known professionally as Chris-Creme-Crobat because of his great acrobatics. Sort of like how I'm professionally referred to as Pete-Pasturbate.

But Chris' acrobatic days are long gone due to a tragic accident.

FLASHBACK!

Here's what happens.

Chris is doing a high wire thing way up in the air, suspended over the circus ring, which is encircled by swords just to up the tension.

During a crucial part of Chris' performance, Creamy, Tookie's mom and Chris' wife, takes out her makeup mirror to do a little touchup. She accidentally flashes light right in Chris' eyes, and he falls from whatever the hell it is he's on.

Now, you might think the fall is where Chris lost his eye. Just wait.

The crowd gasps, and just when we think we're going to get a new Robin out of the deal, Chris lands

on his back, does some kind of tumbling maneuver, and ends on his feet, perfectly fine.

The crowd goes apeshit. And Chris runs around the ring, bowing like crazy, bowing deep and hard until he bows in the wrong spot and he skewers his eye on one of the aforementioned swords lining the circus ring.

Goodb-eye.

Let me summarize why this is so great.

I *think* we're supposed to be getting that Tookie's mom is so vane and horrible, and it's ruined everyone's lives, as evidenced by the partial blinding of her husband. But what we get instead is a weird situation where the ultimate idiocy cost a dude his eye.

If you lost your eye that way, wouldn't you have to lie? Tell people it was, a bar fight? An industrial accident? Something less embarrassing like, I don't know, you were a kid and you walked around a corner really fast and your mom's naked, erect nipple poked your eye out? Wouldn't you tell a story like that, one that's a little less humiliating?

3. Judy Blume This Ain't

What coming-of-age story would be complete without a visit from Aunt Flo? Flo Henderson? Flo and the Machine? Flo Nightingale?

Periods, okay? I'm talking about periods.

When the girls arrive at Modelland, their periods all synch up instantly, and they all find themselves bleeding on day two.

Now, Tyra is VERY careful to point out that periods can synch up after women spend significant amounts of time together, but that the magic of Modelland allows for all girls to immediately be on the same schedule. This is stated twice in a few pages, very clearly, and I think it's so we all know that Tyra knows how periods work.

Cool.

I was reading this, thinking, "Hey, I get it. These girls are becoming women. This is a big moment. And what an interesting idea to juxtapose something far-fetched like Modelland, a place of weird magic, with something very grounding like menstruation. That works."

And then a magic statue comes to life, tells all the girls that, thanks to Modelland magics, they'll never have periods again, but will be able to reproduce.

This happens all of an hour after Tookie's first period starts.

What's fascinating to me is that Tyra chooses to bring up periods in her own book, and then can't seem to dismiss them fast enough.

4. Superpowers

Some models get superpowers. It's complicated. Let's just talk about the possible powers.

Chameeleone: The power to change what you look like. There's an accent on one of the letters in the word "Chameeleone", but I'm not going to dignify this whole thing with the effort. This is already going to take hours to spell check.

Multiplicity: Cloning, basically. And none of the important questions are answered. Does each clone have a mind of its own, or is it a hive mind, or a single, controlling mind? Does each clone have the equivalent strength of the original, or do they split attributes between them, meaning each time a new clone is made they all get weaker. How do they feel about the Michael Keaton film *Multiplicity*?



ThirtyNever: Age to 29, the revert back to 17, and you do this over and over until you die. I feel like this is a realistic version of the X-Men where some of the powers would seem more like ancient curses or something. Like a person would ask a genie for this power, but then learn a lesson. I hate when someone in a story learns a lesson.

Excite-To-Buy: If you have this power, people around you want to buy stuff. Not necessarily stuff you're selling. People around you just feel the sudden urge to purchase things they were already interested in.

Seduksheon: Dudes want to bang you. Apparently, if dudes want to bang you, congratulations, you're a superhero in Modelland terms.

Then, screw it, we've got another worthless power of knowing what will be in fashion in a few years, and also we've got teleporting. Bamf.

5. Tookie's Friends

I didn't mention it before, but when Tookie is ensconced in the giant gossamer ball sack and taken to Modelland, she does have to accompany the Modelland scout on a couple other stops to pick up other girls.

There are so many girls in this book, all with their own insane back stories, but my favorites are Dylan, the girl from a country that's a giant retail store, Shiraz, who comes from a country that has an entirely candle-based economy and way of life, and Piper, who is albino and lives in a country where the people are constantly terrified that hunchbacks are gonna bust their doors down and eat their livers.

I know, that last one sounds made up. Like I took a couple things from the book and added my own, much crazier thing. No, my friends. This is all too real.

In fact, a hunchback journeys to Modelland on foot to try and eat Piper's liver. It's an epic struggle, sort of like *The Revenant* if Leo didn't get to eat that liver until the very end, and the liver was the whole purpose of the struggle, and also he passed several other livers on his way to the one he ended up eating, but arbitrarily decided that this one, special liver was the only one for him.

Oh, and because names remain fun throughout the book, this brave hunchback is affectionately referred to as "Hunchy."

6. Underworld

At one point, our hero, Tookie, has to go to the hospital. Which is called the Drama Trauma Center or DTC because this is *Modelland* and nothing can be called a normal name.

We meet a nurse [what nurses are called in Modelland for NO reason] who has a giant pair of scissors on top of her head, which are an organic extension of her body.

It gets better.

The doctor rolls up, and I mean that literally because she has roller skates instead of feet. And this is not by chance.

All doctors here at Modelland have them...[Modelland] was a blessing for my kind, because the powers that be at Modelland recognized that skates for feet would be put to good use in emergency medical situations...they figured we could get from one patient to the next with speed and ease. So they trained us all and...here I am. They take good care of us...My daughter, Camina Marche, she's about your age. She's just like her mama. Got roller skates for feet too. She wouldn't have a chance in life without this place. She's in medical school right now.

But wait, there's more:

Modelland isn't just what you see when you go from class to class. There is a whole underground world here. Parts of it are still a mystery to even me, and I was born here.

Pick up that phone and hold it. Because this is confusing.

There is an entire city of people underneath Modelland. This is where all the Modelland staff lives. Doctors...I guess janitors? I don't know. You don't really see much staff lurking around.

In a semi-competent book, you would be certain that this underground society would play a part in the story moving forward. At some point, we're going to see this underground land, or the residents will revolt, or Tookie will befriend a little underground girl and see that, hey, we're not so different. If this was anything like the Best-Picture-Nominated (nope) *Demolition Man*, we'd journey underground, eat a rat burger, hear a Denis Leary rant, and then chase a bad guy through tunnels with lots of steam.

NOPE! Alas, this is no *Demolition Man*. The above quote is the one and ONLY mention of this underground society. It never comes into play again. Case closed.



This is the equivalent of seeing one Oompa Loompa, then he goes into a little door, and then we never see them or hear from them again. Except also the Oompa Loompa would have, I don't know, an orbital sander for a head or something.

7. Bravo

Bravo, a boy who is in Bestosterone, the male equivalent of Modelland, is involved in a lot of great stories, including Tookie's ideal kiss, which involves being sung to, having a message written on naked mens' chests, and having whipped cream shot into her mouth.

But the best story is Bravo's tale of woe.

I'll sum it up: Bravo just too damn hot.

When Bravo was a boy, he had grown women proposing marriage to him. He could barely walk the streets without being ooh-ed and aah-ed over. In fact, he was so hot that an orchestra conductor saw him in an audience, wrote an entire symphony dedicated TO HIS FACE, and demanded Bravo stand on stage during the entire performance.

And the real sad part is, Bravo has a simple dream: to be an architect.

His problem? He's too hot. Nobody wants to hear him talk about buildings. They just want to talk to him about how hot he is and what's it like to be so hot?

There's a really weird theme that crops up a few times in Modelland, which is a character explaining that it's really hard to be hot.

I get it, I'm sure there are some really annoying things about being super hot. But...boy do you have to write the shit out of that story to make me feel it.

Kudos to *Modelland* for going the opposite route, trying to get us to see how hard it is to be hot. But Boo-dos for the execution. My god did I not feel sympathy for the world's hottest man.

8. Lightning Strikes Thrice

This one is tough to explain, but it's worth it. This is Tyra's oddest, most-involved literary backflip in the entire book.

At some point, Modelland becomes like a prison, and Tookie and her friends decide to mount an escape.

They have two options. Option A is to climb the wall, which puts them in the Diabolical Divide, a total horrible place of death and dismemberment.

Option B is to try this portal thingie, which has about a 50/50 chance of putting them either in the Diabolical Divide or in a town, the exact town they want to be in.



Astute readers will notice that the options are to go with A and absolutely, for sure, end up in a horrible place, or to go with B and MAYBE end up in the horrible place, maybe end up in a good place. Astute readers and planners would note these odds and outcomes and say, "Screw it, might as well try the portal."

If that's what you thought, you haven't been reading enough *Modelland*. Because the girls opt for the wall and the absolute certainty they'll end up in a horrible place.

That is, until they see what happens to a girl who tries to escape.

Alright, Tookie is in a tower, and she sees this girl climb the wall, get to the top, and drop down to the other side.

The Belladonna, the god/queen of Modelland, knows this has happened, and the girl must immediately be punished.

The problem, story-wise, is that we can't SEE this girl because she's on the other side of a massive wall. We can't see what is about to happen to her, unless...unless there's some way Tyra could help us see what's going on.

Deus Ex Modellandia, magical lightning strikes the wall, rendering a small portion of it transparent. No, the lightning doesn't blow a hole in a wall, it makes the wall see-thru.

Then, thanks to our new window, we watch as the girl on the other side of the wall is transformed into an old crone as punishment for attempting an escape.

And now we have a new problem. We need the girl to see that she's become an old crone, but we also need Tookie to see the girl's reaction. How to work that out...

Ah! A SECOND bolt of lightning hits the wall and turns the wall into a two-way mirror, meaning the girl/crone can see herself, and Tookie can see the girl.

At this point, if you've accepted that lightning can turn a wall see-thru, you must also accept that a second bolt could turn it into a two-way mirror. Neither of those things is more impossible because they're both 100% impossible. There's no such thing as 110% impossible.

Oh, also, a third bolt hits the wall eventually and turns it back into a regular-ass wall. Because why not?

9. Too Many Tyras

Throughout the entire book, it's totally clear that Tookie is teenage Tyra. If it wasn't obvious from the book itself, Tyra said as much in [a recorded Google Hangout](#) that served as a *Modelland* release party of sorts.

Yes, that's a thing I watched. I'm in deep, you guys.

But as we get further in the book, the focus shifts to Ci~L. This was a strange, uncharacteristic move. For Tyra to talk less about her Mary Sue and more about another character, it was just not her style as displayed up to this point.

What brought it all together was when I learned that Ci~L is ALSO Tyra.

See, what Tyra did is to write her teenage self in as Tookie, and her adult self in as Ci~L. Forget Mary Sue, this is Mary Two.

It's not bizarre in the same way magic lightning is bizarre, but it's very telling of this book that just when I thought Tyra wasn't writing about herself for a second, she totally was. Twice as much.

10. A Rampaging Monster is Defeated By The Power of Dance

I feel like describing this any further only takes away from how bizarre it is, so let's leave it there.

11. The Cafeteria in Modelland Features Elevators That Travel Sideways and Showers That Shoot Out Desserts

The architecture of *Modelland* is unbelievable, but nowhere is it more so than in the cafeteria. If that's what you want to call it.

To give it some connection to reality, I like to imagine the contractor who was called in to do the job.

Step one, create giant harnesses to hoist girls up to huge vats of food and lower them inside.

Contractor: "Okay, you're the boss."

Step two, make the vats transform into elevators, which travel sideways into another room.

Contractor: "Well. Alright. I mean...I could save you a lot of money here if we look at a couple things. First of all, do these vats need to also be elevators? I'm just picturing that as tough, and that's before you throw in a couple hundred gallons of lasagna. Second, I've seen a couple sideways elevators before, and the the low-tech solution I prefer is something we call a hallway."

Step three, showers that shoot out desserts such as chocolate and caramel, and one that's completely stopped up because it's supposed to spray pralines.

Contractor: "I got my plumber here, and he thinks he can do chocolate and caramel. But the pralines...I don't...they're not a liquid. To achieve pralines spraying from a shower head, there'd have to be some kind of air pressure or something. And the shower head has to go. There's no shower head with holes big enough to fit a praline. Also, this is just a really horrid idea. The drainage alone for the mixture of chocolate, caramel, and pralines, I give that two months."

12. Nobody Takes A Crap

Might be just me, but a big disappointment was that no one takes a crap at any point. In this book with praline showers and magic spells that banish periods, god help me, I wanted to see what a Modelland toilet was all about.

13. There's Actually ALMOST A Good Idea In Here

Every once in a while, you get a glimpse of the book that could have been. The book that encapsulates Tyra's experience. How strange it must have seemed to live a normal life and then be in foreign countries, having your picture taken for money before you could drive.



There are brief moments in *Modelland* where that good book comes through. The one that uses outlandish and amped-up versions of Tyra's reality to show us what her life might have been like.

But then a group of cats offer Tookie pills and everything is blown to hell.

14. Tyra Totally Wrote This

Modelland came out smack in the middle of an era when bookstores were jammed with ghostwritten teen novels. Hilary Duff, Snookie, a Kardashian or two. This was a thing.

But after reading *Modelland*, the craziest part of all, I'm 100% sure that Tyra wrote this book, this ENTIRE book, by herself.

The reason?

If you were a ghostwriter and you turned in a manuscript that remotely resembled *Modelland*, you'd be fired immediately. Any publisher with half a brain would not accept this as material to be attributed to a celebrity. You'd be turned down. They'd say, "We are trying to create a good relationship with Tyra Banks, not besmirch her name."

Tyra said her original manuscript was over 1000 pages, and she said the stress of writing gave her alopecia. And I totally believe it.

The craziest thing about this book is that it's real.

7 Tips on How To Write a Better Open Letter



Based on the last couple months, looks like we're in for a long year of open letters. And I can't take it anymore.

Look, I get it. You spilled takeout on your expensive jeans. Your least-favorite football player did something that pissed you off. Or maybe you have a kid who has a disease and you want to tell everyone about some jerk who made fun of her. Or maybe, shooting in the dark here, there's a political candidate you have opinions about.

Up to now, the quality of open letters stinks. Let me help you get your point across. Please. I can't take this nonsense anymore.

Here's what you need to know and what you need to do.

What's An Open Letter?

No, this isn't the thing where you move into a new apartment and open the previous resident's mail.

Here's how Merriam-Webster defines an open letter:

A published letter of protest or appeal usually addressed to an individual but intended for the general public.

Now, we're talking the internet, so let's go to the real source, Urban Dictionary:

A method of writing in which an insecure attention whore tries to make it seem as though they care about the person to whom they're writing the letter when really they're just trying to draw attention to themselves.

To synthesize, a letter you write to someone, but more because you want the whole world to know how you feel.

Accept That Your Letter Will Not Accomplish Anything

Not in the traditional sense, anyway. If open letters worked, there would be a *Beetlejuice 2* DVD on my shelf right now instead of a Cease and Desist from Tim Burton's lawyer. Yes, it's on my shelf. Yes, it's framed. I don't appreciate the judgment.

It's like this: write an open letter to the guy who practices his guitar inside the coffee shop, but don't do it because you actually want him to stop. Do it because writing the letter will make you feel better. If you want the guitar guy to stop, my suggestion is to get really good at guitar yourself, show up and guitar battle the guy, and then shame him into leaving with your incredible acoustic rendition of the solo from Dio's "Rainbow in the Dark."

Writing letters doesn't fix much, but it can make you feel better, you rainbow in the dark, you. Keep that in mind.

Answer This: Who The Hell Are YOU?

So many letters contain phrases like this:

"As a parent..."

"As a man of god..."

"As a man with two, side-by-side buttocks..."

Wait, that last one is just a fantasy I came up with because I WOULD BE EXCITED TO READ THAT LETTER, regardless of the topic. I don't really care about alternative energy, but I care about solar power when it's written by someone with two buttocks.

If you're going to criticize an NFL player's post-touchdown dance, you know what would be a lot more effective than the phrase "As a parent"? How about "As someone with deep dance experience" or "As someone who has been swept up by the spirit of dance and fallen off a raised platform at a country/western bar while attempting to Dougie..."

If you're going to get pissed off about Trump, how about you do it "As a person who has sampled Trump Wines..."

Tell me who you are, and tell me why I'm interested in your angle.

tl;dr

Too many open letters are too damn long.

Take for example, the recent, viral letter from a Yelp employee to her CEO. Let's start with paragraph

3:

I left college, having majored in English literature, with a dream to work in media. It was either that or go to law school. Or become a teacher. But I didn't want to become a cliché or drown in student loans, see. I also desperately needed to leave where I was living...

Thanks for the life story. Electrifying.

Look, the phrase "Too long; didn't read" is FOUR words and a semicolon, and we've agreed, as a group, that's too much. The Yelp writer makes good points, but she makes them over the course of 8 pages of 12-point, double-spaced text. That's too damn long, and too damn long is bad and dangerous.

It's bad because people won't read long enough to hear your real point.

It's dangerous because people who DO have time to read your whole letter and respond to it will cherry pick the lines that make you sound like a fool, and then they'll write their own open letters to you.

Keep it brief.

Don't Reinforce What People Already Don't Like About You

There was this open letter to Jerry Seinfeld going around for a while where a college student was berating Seinfeld for saying that college students are too politically correct. Some cherry-picked quotes:

...comedy in our progressive society today can no longer afford to be crass, or provocative for the sake of being offensive.

While it's not the sole role of comics to be social commentators on every issue through their comedy, I believe there is a responsibility, especially when a well-known comic is talking about sensitive topics like race and gender politics, to have an underlying message to be said.

Progressive, responsibility, sensitive topics, underlying message. Regardless of who's right and wrong here, this kid sounds like a TV movie, and not the good kind where a lady inherits a mansion filled to the brim with tiny demons. The boring kind. With lessons.

Writing a humorless open letter about how you're not humorless is the worst way to get your point across. Writing a letter to Jerry Seinfeld about how you, college student, know the most about comedy's role in society confirms what people don't like about you going in.



I'm not saying this kid is wrong. I'm saying that he wrote a humorless, know-it-all letter explaining

that he's not humorless and a know-it-all. Not a great way to represent your concerns.

Don't Try To Rap With The Kids

When you write an open letter and try to be sassy, I picture you in a chair turned backwards, your hat turned backwards, and anything that can be backwards on or around your body is backwards. You're really going to get into it with the kids.

Give it a rest. Writing an open letter is not a cool thing to do. It can be a heartfelt thing to do, it can be a meaningful thing to do, it can even be a funny thing to do, but let's not pretend you wrote this shit while blasting across Nevada on a motorcycle or something. Let's not pretend that writing an open letter is the same as throwing a brick through someone's window. You're a dork who typed a couple hundred words about something into a computer. Own that shit.

Don't Make Up A Thing To Write An Open Letter About

People who are single and hate Valentine's Day? Not a news flash. Also, non-problem. I don't think they're blowing up Hallmarks or poisoning chocolates or anything like that.

Don't write an open letter to people who are single and hate Valentine's day. Don't write an open letter to people who spend too much time imagining if dragons were real. Don't write an open letter to people who wear cardboard boxes and pretend to be robots.

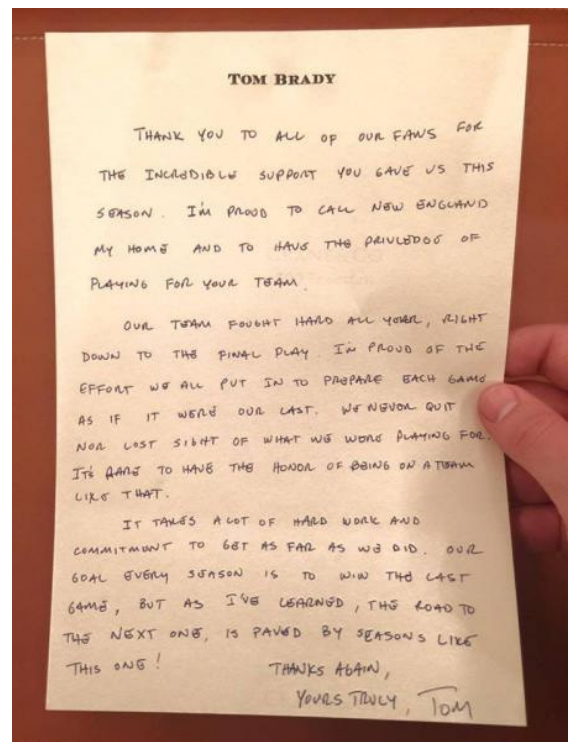
Stop inventing recipients for open letters. There are plenty of a-holes out there who deserve a nice, literary punch to the stomach.

Or, if you insist on making something up, make it something interesting. Stick it to, I don't know, Captain Crunch or something. That guy thinks he's so awesome with those stupid brush things on his shoulders...

Don't Write A Letter By Hand If You Write In All Caps Like A Stooge

C'mon, Tom Brady.

Also, what the hell with the commas in the last sentence. And the double signoff. Gah!



The Joy of Writing Negative Book Reviews



If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

Isn't it convenient that the stupidest quote ever also provides its own defense against critique?

But more to the point, I'll respond to this quote. Why say something mean? Because it's fun to say mean things sometimes.

There's a bit of a backlash against the negative book review at the moment, and I'd like to make a case for why it's good, clean fun to get dirty in your reviews.

You Have My Permission

Buzzfeed made some news a while back for banning negative book reviews from its site. They just weren't going to waste the time bashing on bad books.

The literary world went nuts, defending the practice of writing bad reviews, talking about the necessity of honesty.

Forget that. The debate on whether or not bad reviews are necessary isn't what we're talking about today. Because since when is necessity our guiding principle for everything? Did Voltron NEED to be a giant robot comprised of several smaller robots? No, he didn't, and he was probably a lot harder to build that way, but they did it because it was awesome. Did all four Ninja Turtles NEED to have different weapons? Couldn't they all just use swords? Of course they could have. Nunchucks are never a necessity, but they're always awesome (most quotable thing I've ever said).

Life isn't all about necessity. So whether or not negative reviews are necessary to write isn't the point. It's whether or not it's okay to write them.

I'm telling you, Yes, it's okay to be negative. The right someone has to write a crappy book is the same right someone has to critique said crappy book. Simple as that.

But The Author Worked So Hard!

This is the silliest argument against an honest negative review. We never defend other things with the "They worked so hard!" argument. Donald Trump is the ultimate target right now, and I'd say, day-to-day, he's working pretty hard. Okay, he's not busting concrete, but he's busting his ass. He's working a lot harder than I am, I'll say that for sure.

The point being, nobody defends a politician by citing how much effort he's putting into something awful. Nobody hangs a picture in an art museum based mostly on how long it took to make. Do we keep going to the same mechanic who sucks at fixing cars but tries really hard? Hell no.

I know the author worked hard. But you work hard too. Your time means something, and you're allowed to have an opinion on how you spent that time.

A negative review is a way of taking some of that time back.



Everyone Loves Conflict

Let me give you two scenarios.

When you go home today, your partner or roommate or whoever is going to tell you about her day. And you have a choice.

She could tell you about her day, which was fine. Good, pretty much. No real complaints.

Or, she could tell you about a frustrating, horrendous day. She didn't get hit by a car or something like that. Nobody escaped from a cryoprison and killed all her coworkers. There were just some minor annoyances that stacked up, and the person waiting to tell you about them needs to get them off her chest in a way that starts with the phrase, "You ain't gonna believe this shit."

Now, the question: Which of these days are you more excited to hear about?

Face it, we love that shit. It's conflict. We love conflict. Because when there's conflict, there's something to talk about. Only crazy uncles tell dumb stories that go nowhere and have no conflict.

When you review books, don't be a crazy, boring uncle. Be you. When you write negative reviews, you give people the conflict they want.

People Read Negative Reviews

I've reviewed 540 books on Goodreads. Know which reviews are the most popular? The negative ones. I hated *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and apparently a lot of other people felt the same way I did, that the tree grows way too slowly and with too much detail. I hated *The Scarlet Letter*, and boy am I in good company there. I slapped a none-star rating on *Merchant of Venice*, and that one...okay, that was met with mixed reactions. Probably because I started with the line, "Gorehounds rejoice! This is the one for you." I've learned that Shakespeare fans are not, generally, gorehounds.

You know which reviews aren't popular? My gushing reviews. I can talk about Chuck Klosterman and Patrick DeWitt until I'm blue in the face and chest and all over my body, and meh, nobody really cares all that much.

Part of the joy of writing a review is that someone will actually read what you write. You can say almost the same thing at the same volume and with the same fervor, but if it's positive, nobody is going to care.

Look, it's like hearing your neighbors through the wall. I could listen to my neighbors verbally spar all day, but if I was listening to them say how much they love and cherish each other? I'm calling the cops. That's a disturbance, and I don't have to tolerate that. Some of us are trying to be lonely and morose over here.

If you have trouble writing book reviews, try reviewing a bad book. I bet you'll have a lot more to say.

The World Is Too Polite

Any writer out there knows it's hard to get honest feedback. Why? Because anyone who likes you enough to read your stuff probably likes you enough to lie about your manuscript.



Ever walk into someone and it's totally your fault and the OTHER PERSON apologizes?

Ever sit at work with an email open all day because you're trying to phrase everything just right so nobody has their feelings hurt?

Damn, it's okay to be a little mean once in a while. Stop torturing yourself with niceness. Unshackle yourself from the rock of kindness. Let yourself be mean. Let the hate flow through you. Give yourself to the dark side. Other *Star Wars* quotes.

If none of this sounds familiar to you, then I guess you're just naturally a very nice person, and I look forward to your comment below where you apologize to me for being too nice to understand my anger.

It's Easy

It's a lot easier to talk smack than it is to compliment. Look at late night comedy. How often do late night hosts talk about how great something is? Ever? Well, Fallon does, and that's what we like least about him, yes?

If you have trouble writing book reviews, try reviewing a bad book. I bet you'll have a lot more to say.

And just because something is easy doesn't mean it's bad for you. There's a lot of smack talk going around about "the easy way out." Hey, sometimes the easy way out is easy because it's well-designed and intended to be that way. Sometimes the easy way out just feels right because it is.



You Don't Have To Read The Whole Book

Negative reviews are a great way to put a book to bed when it's not going well. Put it down, rate it, review it, give it the business, and walk away from the aftermath like a dude in an action movie who just blew up a huge warehouse and doesn't even care enough to look back at the carnage.

You Can Be Negative About A Book And Still Have Fun Reviewing It

Going negative doesn't mean being Eeyore. It doesn't have to. You don't have to be an old curmudgeon to dislike things, and you don't have to be spiteful about it.

If there's one thing I learned from *Ghostbusters*, it's that ghosts can and will provide oral sex to living humans.

But if there are TWO things I learned from *Ghostbusters*, the second, less gross lesson is that you

can take a serious thing, like death, and make it pretty fun.

Go off topic, tell a good story, and make it silly. It's okay to have fun while you're saying something negative.

The Ten Commandments of Writing Negative Reviews

Maybe you want to try it, but you want to be good about it. Alright. I'll help.

- 1. Don't attack or threaten the author personally.** Don't say you want to throw the author down a well. That's no fun. Okay, it's kind of fun to think of how you would trick someone into actually going anywhere near a well in 2016, but keep it to yourself.
- 2. Have fun with it.** Instead of being an unassailable snob, be a fun person. It goes down smoother.
- 3. Don't try to defend your cruelty as highbrow criticism or doing a favor to the world of readers by steering them away from bad books.** Own what you write.
- 4. Don't punch down.** When a tween with cancer releases a chapter book about dragons who take people to heaven, leave the kid alone, eh?
- 5. Be honest about how you felt, and tell us about those feelings instead of the plot.** This one is good for relationships too. Sexy relationships.
- 6. It's pretty much open season on long-dead people.** This one is NOT good for relationships.
- 7. Don't get all pissed off when someone goes negative on a book you love.** Sometimes fans are worse than the authors themselves. Don't be that person.
- 8. Don't pick up a book to hate-read it. It's not worth your time.** Trust me on this one. As someone who has made this mistake in a big way, trust me.
- 9. Don't engage with people who comment negatively on your review.** Also not worth it.
- 10. Remember, there will be comeuppance.** Someday you'll write a thing, and someone will dislike it.

Why You Should Write Something Pointless



Have you ever heard of water calligraphy?

Here's how it works.

Basically, a person, often an old man, goes to the park. He brings a water bucket and a stick with a sponge strapped on the end. He finds a spot of concrete, and he dips his sponge in the bucket. Then he writes. Beautiful, ornate characters on the sidewalk, carefully formed.

The characters last for only a short time before they dry out and disappear.

The man in the park doesn't have any tangible product to walk away with. No lasting results to tinker with and improve. Just a dry patch of sidewalk where there used to be something.

In a lot of ways, it's a really pointless pursuit. But that depends on your definition of pointless.

A little pointlessness might be just what you need in your writing life.

You should try a pointless writing project. Something with no planned outcome, no goal. Something where you write, and then you burn the pages. Delete the files. Let the work dry out on the sidewalk.

You need pointless writing in your life. Here's why.

You Can Write Without Thinking About How To Sell

I used to be in this writing group. And there was one member of the group who brought in her manuscript for a teen ghost story. The story wasn't bad, the writing wasn't bad, but something about that manuscript was...off.

It turned out that this writer had gone to lots of writers' conferences, and she'd shown these opening pages to lots of different people, agents and publishers and people who do lectures. They'd filled her head with their different rules, and then this writer, she filled her pages with the same rules. This must happen by page X, otherwise you'll end up on the slush pile. If we've gotten to page Y without X happening, slush pile.

Dozens of people told her dozens of things about the slush pile. That's all this writer talked about. The slush pile.

This writer, she wasn't wrong to want to stay off the slush pile. She was wrong because she spent all her energy keeping her book off the slush pile before the book was even written. And that's impossible. It's like trying to shoot a basket in a field where a basketball court hasn't even been built yet. There WILL be a basketball court here, someday, and I'll just keep tossing this ball in the air in hopes of scoring points. That's madness.

That's the chorus for this essay. Fuck it.

There's a lot of advice about writing for publication, but I don't know how much that helps the actual writing part. And the pressure on writers to find a home for their own work is worse than ever. Self-publish, digital, agents. It's all on you.

When you write something pointless, you're free of that. When your project will never see the light of day, you don't have to worry about whether your work is bound for the slush pile. You don't have to worry that you're digging a hole by writing something that goes against all the rules. Fuck it.

That's the chorus for this essay. Fuck it.

You can write something you want to write, something you were meant to, and you don't have to consider whether it will have a home when you're finished.

You Can Make Switches And Keep Momentum

You're halfway through your project, a play about Spider-Man and Daredevil (tentatively titled Spidey N' Magoo), and then you decide it should be a musical about Spider-Man and Wolverine (tentatively titled Thwip!/Snickt!). Guess what? You can do that. Make the switch. You don't have to ask anybody, you don't have to worry if it makes sense.

And the best part, you don't have to go back and erase what you've done. Fuck it. Just keep moving forward. Keep the momentum.

For a lot of writers, making a fast switch is not an easy thing to do. They feel the need to go back and catch everyone up. Going back and refreshing everything to fit your new idea, sometimes it's so much work that you'll stick with a bad idea. God knows I'm guilty of that one. "Spidey N' Magoo" isn't something I made up just for this essay.

With a pointless project, there's no need to do the boring stuff. Just switch gears right where you are and keep going.

You Can Write Something Truly Awful

I mean that in more than one way.

You can write something that's garbage, technically. You can piss all over Strunk & White, make them Stink & Yellow instead. Because it doesn't matter. Nobody's ever going to see it.

But when I say "awful," I mean that in ways that go beyond misspellings and clumsy sentences.

Maybe you have something to say that's not societally acceptable. Or that would lose you friends. Or maybe you have something to say about your partner, and maybe you want to say it in a fictional way, but it's still too hurtful.

Maybe you want to write a sex scene and you want to base it on something too close to home.

Guess what? If you're burning the project away, you can. Fuck it.

In the immortal words of Nelson Muntz, writing something awful that never goes anywhere is "...a victimless crime, like punching someone in the dark."

Rob Hart's Great Advice

LitReactor staple Rob Hart shared an outlining trick he learned once upon a time:

Go chapter-by-chapter, and then trash it. A day or two later, do it again. You remember the good stuff and forget what doesn't work. I do that three or four times, until I feel good, and then it's all typing.

It's simple. You write something pointless, toss it in the garbage. Fuck it, right?

But then, those good things, those gems will stick in your head. You'll keep polishing them in your brain. It's those gems that you want in your finished work anyway.

You won't forget the gems.

The Spelunky Truth

Let me explain a little bit about a game called *Spelunky*. If you haven't played it yet, you really should.

In *Spelunky*, you're an explorer working your way deeper and deeper into a series of caves.

Each cave is a level, and each level has randomly generated terrain. This means that no two levels look alike. The walls show up in different spots, the enemies in different spots, and each level features different enemies, traps, and so on.





This is really frustrating at first. You can't learn a level. You can't figure out the tricks to getting through certain, defined, tight spots. Each life, each playthrough seems pointless because there's so much luck involved. You can end up with a really difficult level or a really easy one. Why even play the tough ones? You might as well reset until you get a string of easy levels, right?

Wrong.

After you play for a while, you figure it out. *Spelunky* is a game that's not about beating levels and progressing in the traditional sense. You don't collect items. You collect skills. It's a game that rewards being so damn good at *Spelunky* that you can handle anything the game throws at you.

That should be your goal as a writer too. It's not always about finishing this or that piece, turning in this or that work. It's about practicing, working on craft, and getting so good that you can handle everything. You can bust through blocks, no problem. When you run into a flat character, you know what's missing. You can have a deadline, be sick as hell, and write the damn piece while you're night-sweating through your pajamas.

When you can stop collecting word counts and pages completed, when you can say "fuck it" and collect skills instead, you can make huge, fast improvements as a writer.

Ask Yourself This

I was with my brother on this front porch in New Mexico last summer when he asked me a hypothetical question:

If you could live here, on a stipend, you're totally comfortable, and you have to write a few hours a day and do nothing else, and you could do this for two years, BUT, at the end of two years you couldn't use any of the work you produced...would you do it?

On the one hand, it's what we all want, time to write. On the other hand, the idea of burning all that work would be tough to swallow.

I'll say this, though. You'd walk away with skills. You'd walk away having written a lot of brave shit that you might have skipped over because it's got nowhere to live in print or online. Saying "fuck it" before you sit down to write every day for two years could have its advantages.

Think about it. Would you do it?



What An Author Reading Is And Why You Should Go To One



Last week I went to an author reading with my partner, PoonMasterFlex. That's her chosen nickname, by the way. For the sake of this column, I'll just call her "Flex." It's shorter, less fratty, and I live in fear of the kinds of Google searches this column might pop up under if the term "PoonMasterFlex" is overused.

Flex and I were walking to the reading, and when we were about halfway there, she said, "So...what's going to happen? How does this work?"

And that's when I realized, Oh yeah, going to readings isn't something that everyone does for fun and leisure.

But it's something everyone totally should do for fun and leisure.

I also realized that going to a thing for the first time can be a little harrowing. You don't know what to expect, you don't know how to behave. This isn't a problem for me personally because I know how to behave in any uncomfortable situation: drunk. However, I understand this doesn't work for everyone, especially uptight people who care about their health, safety, and the opinions of others ("Who was that drunk guy and why did he keep calling his girlfriend "Poon Master Flex?").

That's why we're putting out this author reading FAQ. Consider this your guide to the Why's and How's of an author reading. By the time you finish this, you'll know exactly what to expect.

If you've never been to an author reading before, you're in the right place. Sort of. The REAL right place is at an author reading, but this column is a good first step.

If you've been to many author readings, take heart. You'll still learn something.

Q. How should I prepare myself?

A. Good news, you do not have to prep for an author reading. At all. It's good if you go see an author you like, but hell, you can see an author you love and have a boring time, and you can see an author you hate and have a great time. It kinda depends on the author's personality.

But it's not a class. You don't have to read the author's entire oeuvre before you go. You don't have to read anything, frankly. There's no quiz. There's no priority seating for people who can answer author trivia or something.



Q. How Should I Dress?

A. I asked this question recently during a first trip to a musical theater production. The answer I got was a snarky "Nobody's going to be looking at you", but that didn't answer the real question. What should I wear so I look like someone who has done this before? What allows me to blend in? Will I be embarrassed when I wear my "Sleeves Are Bullshit" tank top because I stand out, or because three other dudes are wearing the same thing?

Casual dress is totally fine for a reading. It's kinda like going to the art museum. If you don't like to go to the art museum, if you choose to bore yourself more like the common man as opposed to boring yourself like an academic, wear what you would wear to sit-down dinner at a very average place. You can't go wrong with jeans and a shirt that is free of logos and slogans.

Q. What time should I arrive?

A. If the reading starts at 7 PM, plan to be there at 6:45. Once the reading begins, it'll be fairly quiet in the room, one person speaking, so it's really noticeable when you walk in late. Also, chances are any introductions will be brief, so it's not like a movie where there will be previews and you can scoot by with a huge bucket of popcorn.

Q. Wait, there's huge buckets of popcorn?

A. Sadly, no. However, I've sent Random House SEVERAL letters on this topic, and I'll let you know about any progress we make. #FreeTheKernels

Q. What Do I Do When I Get There?

A. You'll probably be faced with a bunch of chairs. Very likely empty chairs because the written word is dead. My advice is to pick something in the second or third row, if possible. This is the voice of experience talking. The reason you want to go front-ish is because if very few people show up, an agent or bookstore employee is likely to try and move the group to the front of the room, and if you're already kinda at the front, you're spared sitting up at the REAL front.

Q. Wait. There's a chance that not very many people will be there?

A. There's a chance. But, I'll say that the authors I've seen have never commented on a crowd being too small in anything but a joke-y manner. Authors are smart, and they know that YOU came to see them, so what would be the good in berating you? More than bands or other performers, authors seem pretty pumped to have people in the room, and you're still gonna get a great show.

Q. Okay. I'm In My Seat, Everything's Cool, Now What?

A. Everything is NOT cool. Turn off your phone. I mean off, off. Not vibrate. Off. You don't need notifications. You're not a doctor. Or, maybe you ARE a doctor, but in that case you should ignore the above fashion advice and wear your lab coat and a stethoscope around your neck. That way, if you have to answer the phone, everyone will be like, "Well, he's clearly a doctor or very crazy, so either way, best that he answers the phone call from the hospital or message from a demon that somehow lives in his phone, whatever the case may be."

Q. Okay, okay. Geez. My phone's off. Now what happens?

A. Typically, someone will come up and introduce the author. Then the author will take the podium and read to you. Oftentimes an author will read something from the book they are currently promoting or another piece that may or may not be published. Many authors will also read multiple pieces, especially if the author is a poet. The reading portion typically lasts somewhere in the

Go to a live event, buy something, and bring two friends. You're supporting the arts WAY more than some jerk who gets an Arthur tote bag by donating to PBS.

neighborhood of 30 minutes.

Q. Whoa, poetry? Nobody mentioned poetry. Are there any special rules with poetry? Do I snap my fingers?

A. You can. The big thing with poetry, normal etiquette is to not clap or whatever between each poem. Because the poems are likely to be so short, you'd spend half the time clapping and waiting for the clapping to stop. However, if something really moves you, it's okay to clap. It's not strictly verboten to clap, but it's also not required between each poem.

Q. So...the authors just reads? Out loud? What if I get bored?



A. This can happen. This can totally happen. Hey, sometimes a great writer isn't the most engaging person to be in a room with. But whatever you do, don't leave. Walking out on a speaking author is tough. The author is going to see it, and there's a good chance the author has friends and family in the room.

I recommend playing the New Best Friend Game. This is a game I've invented whenever I attend sporting events, which happens every so often and always results in boredom. The game goes like this:

You look around the room, and based on looks alone, pick your new best friend. The person you'll have to hang out with every Saturday for the next year. Choose carefully, and make sure you've got good reasons worked out. Do you want your best friend to be handsomer than you? Do you want to hang out with that lady because she has a good-sized handbag that'd be handy when you steal silverware?

By the time you've imagined you and your new best friend running out of a restaurant with a

handbag full of those seafood forks that look like tridents, the reading will be over.

Q. The author reads, they finish up...then what? We just silently stand and shuffle out?

A. After the reading portion, there's usually a Q&A. This almost always goes very slowly at first, and then picks up speed as more people get brave and ask questions, or as the author's responses prompt more questions. This is often the best part of the night. Especially because it's almost guaranteed that some weirdo will ask a weird question or make a weird statement. For example, the time I saw Chuck Klosterman read and an audience member claimed that Lewis and Clark were the first people to discover bears. Have you ever seen someone be confronted with a crazy statement and have to deal with it nicely in front of a group of strangers? THIS is high drama, folks.

**Readings
are almost
always free.
It's a great
cheap date
that doesn't**

Q. Can I ask a question during the Q&A?

A. Certainly! However, I will caution against asking one of these questions. You'll out yourself as a noob.

1) What are your influences? (Just Google it or ask, "What have you read lately and really liked?" instead.)

2) What advice do you have for a starting writer? (99% of the time, some form of "actually write stuff.")

3) Did you know that Lewis and Clark were the first people to discover bears? (Not really a question, also outs you as a weirdo.)

Q. Now the official part is over. Can I get an autograph?

A. Totally. Unless the author pre-signed, you can totally get the autograph, plus a little face time with the author.

When it's signing time, a line will form, you'll wait in the line, and then the author will say hello, personalize the book to you, and you'll have about 5-10 seconds to chat with the author. My advice is to think about something you might want to say ahead of time. You'd be surprised how much pressure you'll feel when you're standing in front of an author.

Q. If the reading is at a bookstore, do I have to buy a book to get it signed?

A. You are, almost all the time, welcome to bring books from home, however the bookstore really appreciates it if you buy one from them. The more books the author moves, the better the chances the bookstore will host that author again. I will say, however, most authors get very excited to sign worn books that have clearly been loved.

Q. Can I take pictures!?

A. This totally depends on the author, but most are down for it. Just ask politely, "Would it be alright if I took a picture with you?" Also, try and have your camera 100% ready to rock before its your turn. That speeds it up for everyone waiting behind you.

Q. I got my reading, I got my autograph, now what?

A. Well, this depends a lot on the size of the reading. At smaller readings, you'll often find that the author and a small group of folks will head to a bar or some other spot to hang out for a while afterward. At big, gigantic readings, you go home and think about what a great time you had. Either way, I recommend booze.

Q. Alright, I know HOW to behave, but WHY should I bother?

A. Going to readings is a great way to support authors. Think about the music industry. The way you support bands you love in is to go to live shows and buy a t-shirt. That's how they make money these days. You can do the same thing for an author. Go to a live event, buy something, and bring two friends. You're supporting the arts WAY more than some jerk who gets an Arthur tote bag by donating to PBS.

Q. Supporting the arts? No, no, hippie. What's in it for me?

A. Readings are almost always free. It's a great cheap date that doesn't make you look cheap, and it's a win-win date because it'll either be great and you'll have a good time together, or it'll be a train wreck and you can talk about it after. Once in a while you'll have to buy a ticket for someone like a Stephen King, but even those events are generally around \$30, and with that price you get a copy of his new book.

Q. Alright, I'm sold. What are some good starter readings?

A. Multi-author readings are great. If someone stinks, you don't have to wait very long to hear someone else. Things keep moving, and chances are you'll find a new author you like and/or make a new friend.

Readings in bars are another good start. Generally, bar readings are a little more beginner-friendly. Because, well, they're in a bar. Readers who work in bars expect to have to compete for attention a bit. And you can have a drink out in the open instead of hiding bourbon in a Mountain Dew can. Check out a Noir at the Bar near you!

If you're of the easily-bored variety, of course, a Chuck Palahniuk reading is not to be missed. Way more excitement and movement than most.

Q. How Do I Find A Reading?

A. Check your closest bookstores and colleges. Those spots are likely to have visiting authors. Oh,

and your local library is your ticket to authorstravaganza!

If those options don't apply, ask a bookworm friend. They'll know.

The 10 Most Compelling Hitlers in Fiction



Before we get started, let's just be clear about one thing. This is not an endorsement of Hitler, not a loving memorial.

Let's face it, for better or worse or a whole lot even more worse, Hitler made an impact on the world, and the world of books is no different. Hitler's one of the few taboos left. What happens when writers go there?

1. 'Look Who's Back' by Timur Vermes



You know how in bodyswap movies they always have to figure out some asinine way to get the bodies swapped? Fortune cookie, pissing in a fountain, whatever?

Well, this is a problem in Hitler books too. How do we get Hitler in another place, another time, or what have you?

Look Who's Back makes it pretty simple. Hitler just wakes up. He's on his back, in a field, and he just wakes up. He remembers everything up to being in his bunker at the end of WWII, and then it's all blank.

Over the course of the book, Hitler is mistaken for a Hitler impersonator at every turn and becomes somewhat of a celebrity. Everyone assumes this is some sort of Borat thing, and people play along. By the time Hitler goes viral and gets his own TV show, his re-rise to power has begun, and people are actually listening to Hitler

AGAIN.

A comedy through-and-through, *Look Who's Back* was even adapted for TV.

2. 'The Last Girlfriend On Earth' by Simon Rich

Simon Rich explains how he came to write about Hitler:

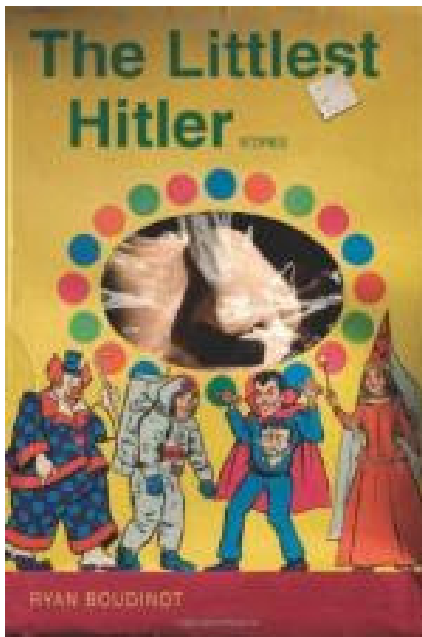
I spent years trying to write stories about my own [actual] dating experiences, but they always turned out really boring and low-stakes. There's nothing that's been unusual or unique in my own romantic history – it's the same as everybody else's, you know? But for me, when you're in the middle of dating someone, it feels like the fate of the world is resting on every text and every phone call. So I decided, instead of writing about things the way they happened, I would write about the way it felt. Because when you find out your ex is dating somebody new, it feels like she's dating Adolph Hitler.

And that's exactly what happens in the story "Is It Just Me?"

Simon Rich is hilarious, and this book is kind of brilliant. At first, the stories feel like a gross simplification, stuff like "men be all like this, women be all like that." But when you scratch down further, the whole book is an exploding of emotion, manifesting some of the darkest, strangest, but true crap people feel in relationships.

3. 'The Littlest Hitler' by Ryan Boudinot

Granted, this one doesn't have a REAL Hitler, but an impersonation.

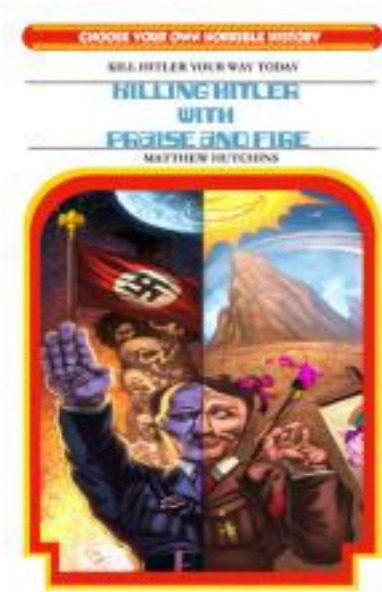


Then there's the time I went as Hitler for Halloween. I had gotten the idea after watching WWII week on PBS. My dad helped me make the costume. I wore tan polyester pants and one of his khaki shirts, with sleeves so long they dragged on the floor unless I rolled them up. With some paints left over from when we made the pinewood derby car for YMCA Indian Guides, he painted a black swastika in a white circle on a red bandanna and tied it around my left arm. Using the Dippity-Do he put in his hair every morning, he gave my own hair that plastered, parted style that had made Hitler look as if he was always sweating. We clipped the sides off a fifty-cent mustache and adhered it to my upper lip with liquid latex. I tucked my pants into the black rubber boots I had to wear whenever I played outside and stood in front of the mirror. My dad laughed and said, "I guarantee it, Davy. You're going to be the scariest kid in fourth grade."

The title story in this collection ends up being prescient in a time when we debate the moral values of Halloween costumes like never before. Certainly some readers were turned off by this book's title, but the title story itself takes a great turn when another student shows up to class dressed as Anne

Frank, and the voice of a pre-adolescent is dead-on throughout.

4. 'Killing Hitler With Praise and Fire' by Matthew Hutchins



Hey, if *The New York Times Magazine* can take a poll about whether people would go back in time and kill baby Hitler, the idea is fairly mainstreamed. Which makes way for the next step, *Killing Hitler With Praise And Fire*.

It's your standard Choose-Your-Own-Adventure, but in this version, the endings regard different methods of preventing Hitler's rise to power. These options range from murderous (biological weapons) to diabolical (getting Hitler married with multiple children so that he puts his aspirations to rest, much the way many of us buried our dreams of playing professional ultimate Frisbee).

If you're not satisfied to stand idly by while someone else kills baby Hitler or tries to con teen Hitler into thinking art school has a purpose, this is the book for you.



5. 'Saving Hitler' by Jack Hayes

Of course, we've all been subjected to a question about whether or not you'd go back in time and kill Hitler.

But what if you had to go back in time and SAVE Hitler?

This book is the action movie of the bunch with more twists than a Dairy Queen cone of the chocolate/vanilla variety. Action, tension, double-crosses, look-alikes, this thing has it all.

6. 'Hipster Hitler' by James Carr

Mostly an attack on hipster culture, the best quality of this comic is seeing Hitler dressed up in little outfits.

Perhaps this is the real goal. Hitler killed a lot of people, and he also killed the world's ability to pull off a certain kind of mustache. Maybe he can destroy skinny jeans too.



7. 'The Man In The High Castle' by Philip K. Dick

Definitely one of the most famous on this list, *The Man In The High Castle* won Philip K. Dick the Hugo Award in 1963.

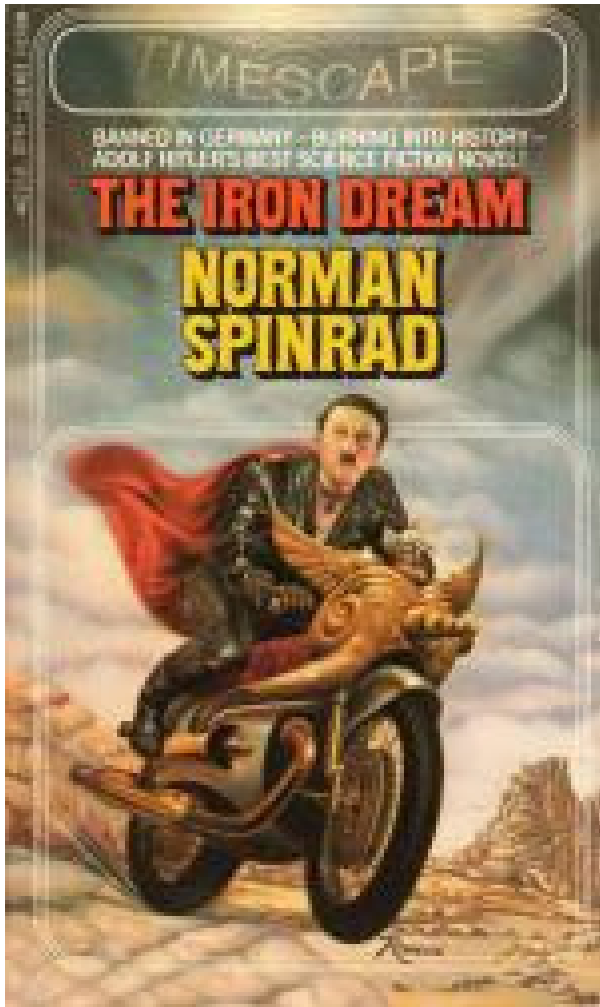
The premise is a Marvel *What If?* You know, that series with issues like What if Spider-Man joined the Fantastic Four? (totally happened later, was totally awesome), What if Conan The Barbarian Walked The Earth Today? (totally happened, basically, in Hercules In New York), What If Sgt. Fury Had Fought World War 2 In Outer Space? (I don't think this has happened because Marvel is afraid of money).

The Man In The High Castle asks, "What if Hitler had won World War II?"

Interestingly, Dick had planned a sequel, but his attempts to dive back into the world of the book were stymied by the research:

I had to read what those guys wrote in their private journals in order to write The Man In The High Castle. That's also why I've never written a sequel to it: it's too horrible, too awful. I started several times to write a sequel, but I had to go back and read about Nazis again, so I couldn't do it.

8. 'The Iron Dream' by Norman Spinrad



Imagine this: Hitler, feeling that the politics of Germany are all about talk, no action, moves to the U.S., starts illustrating for pulp sci-fi novels and magazines, and eventually gets into writing himself with his novel *Lord of the Swastika*.

A gutsy piece of satire, *The Iron Dream* sets itself up as a reprint of this fictional Hitler's work. *The Iron Dream* is almost like a book that fell through some kind of cosmic wormhole and ended up on used book shelves in our world. The book even goes so far as to include a fake academic paper at the end.

And holy crap, this cover.

9. 'Making History' by Stephen Fry

Okay, okay. What if, instead of killing baby Hitler, you could just create a device that could alter history in minor ways? For example, adding birth control to the water supply of Braunau, making it so Hitler was never conceived.

As you might expect, because the book is not 8 pages

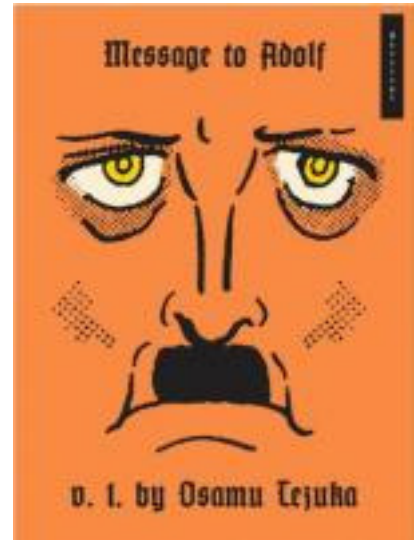
long, a couple of do-gooders grind up some pills, timewarp the contraceptive dust, and then things go awry when a person even more calculating and cunning takes Hitler's place in history.

This is why time traveling should only be attempted by charming people in strange vehicles doing completely unimportant things. Michael J. Fox in a DeLorean, John Cusack and Craig Robinson in a hot tub. Keep it simple, people.

10. 'Message to Adolf' by Osamu Tezuka

Most famous for *Astro Boy*, Tezuka is the king of Manga. And although *Astro Boy* is a lighter book where a young robot achieves every boy's dream of having machine guns in his butt, Tezuka has never been one to shy away from bigger topics.

Message To Adolf is part murder-mystery, part alternate history, all Tezuka, but a darker, crueler Tezuka than most of us are used to. If you've never watched an author slap around his protagonists before, buckle up.



11 Chumptastic Reasons That Book Clubs Are For Chumps



1. You Never Get A Cool ID Card When You Join A Book Club

It took like 10 seconds to make this:



Okay, it's not exactly high quality. And Bill Clinton is the signer, but hey, why in the hell don't you get a rad I.D. when you join a book club? How is that not a thing?

2. Wine is Vile Poison*

Wine is a total book club mainstay, and it's total garbage. There are three liquids you should put

in your body: Water (because it's for survival), Coffee (because it's delicious), and bourbon (because it's delicious AND for (emotional) survival). Wine is shit. And don't even get me started on tea. Why would I drink something that's made with the primary ingredient being a sack of hot, wet garbage you dip in and out of hot water while holding a dainty string? Did the Boston Tea Party mean NOTHING to you? Does America mean NOTHING? Get it together, book clubs.

3. Your Horizons Won't Expand**

It's what everyone says. *Oooh, this book club will expand my horizons.*

What do people even mean by that? "Expand your horizons." What a bunch of happy horseshit. The only horizon you're expanding in a book club is the horizon that shows you how many terrible books are out there. That horizon, my friends, is infinite.

4. It Seems Like It's Always "That Person's" Turn To Pick

There are always members who, rather than picking something good, want to inflict something on the group. Oftentimes, these people seem to pick memoirs by children. Most of the time these children supposedly spent a bit of time in heaven. And none of the time do these children reveal anything cool, like saying that heaven is pretty much a carbon copy of old Vegas or that heaven uses pneumatic bank tubes all over the place.

Big deal. I almost died like 10 times today. I'm a terrible driver. You don't see me writing books about it.

The only thing that pulls you through the stupid book is waiting to eviscerate it with your friends, which is totally unsatisfying because, guaranteed, the person who recommended this stupid book about this jerk kid who almost died won't be at the meeting.

5. When You Slide A Book Into The Rotation, The Other Members Tear Down Your Favorites With Their Stupid, Jackass Opinions

There are things that are matters of opinion, and the books I like being awesome are not. The books I like are awesome. If I want someone to tell me that my opinions are wrong and dumb, I'll turn to my REAL friend, which is all of the internet.

6. Can You Really Not Decide What To Read For Yourself?***

I gotta read these pages by tomorrow or else these other jerkoffs in my book club will know I'm lazy and stupid. I AM lazy and stupid, but I don't need everyone else to know that and be able to prove it factually.

I have like a thousand books on my to-read list. And none of them are by Toni Morrison. Okay, one of them is. Okay, two. But I'll read them when I damn well want. Do you want to dress me too? Tell me which order things should be put on? Yes, the conventional wisdom is underwear before pants, but you know what? I didn't survive to adulthood just to be told what to do all the goddamn time. And yes, I'm aware that my underpants have massive holes in the crotch.

7. The First Part Of Every Meeting Goes Like This:****

Person A: So, what did everyone think of the book?

Person B: I only read the first 25 pages, so don't spoil anything for me.

Person C: Ugh, god, enough talk about the book. Here are pictures from my vacation.

Person D: I didn't get the book because it didn't come in at the library, and I'm not going to buy it on Kindle. \$9.99? Ridiculous. But hold on, let me get my iPhone out of my expensive bag and make sure it's synched up with my iPad so when I get home one of the 5 services I use to stream movies is primed and ready to go. And I need to call a plumber because we were trying to flush hundos down the toilet and it got clogged.

Person E: I'm really only interested in talking about the ending. So...

8. Grownups Don't Need Homework

And that's what a book club becomes. Grownup homework. I gotta read these pages by tomorrow or else these other jerkoffs in my book club will know I'm lazy and stupid. I AM lazy and stupid, but I don't need everyone else to know that and be able to prove it factually.



9. Book Clubs Never Read John Swartzwelder Books

How can you go wrong with a book that starts like this:

As my exciting story began I was being punched in the stomach.

10. The Last Part Of Every Meeting Is Like This:*****

Person A: What should we read for next time?

Person B: I think we should read this 3,000 page tome. That's only like 100 pages per day.

Person C: I'd really like to dive into the classics. I find it much easier to struggle through the excruciating detail of classics when I know someone else is being tortured by them as well.

Person D: I think we should each propose a book and vote. [tallies votes] Oh, c'mon. Everyone voted for their own book?

Person E: We should read this one book that I read like 8 years ago. I remember it being funny and won't read it again, but I'm sure you all would probably like it 50%.

11. Nobody Ever Asks Me To Be In Their Book Club

I guess there might be ways to have fun at a thing where I'm not there, but I doubt it. And I've never heard of these fancy, stupid ways. Therefore, those ways are either stupid or nonexistent.

Your move, book club chumps.



Notes:

**LitReactor's official book club is online, so it's BYO(EBO)B. Bring Your Own Entire Bottle of Bourbon.*

***LitReactor's book club gets you reading some pretty rad stuff.*

****No, you can't decide what to read for yourself. That's why there are 5 books on your nightstand.*

*****In LitReactor's book club, there is no real "first" part. Online discussions just start and meander and keep going.*

******Ditto last part.*

Basically, everything I said does not apply to this one, awesome book club. And I'm not saying that because they pay me. I'm saying that because they pay me HANDSOMELY.

30 Reasons Spider-Man Is the World's Greatest Hero



When we talk about the greatest comic book heroes, we usually talk about that one A-hole billionaire industrialist who turned into a vigilante, or that other, B-hole billionaire industrialist who turned into a vigilante with a robo suit.

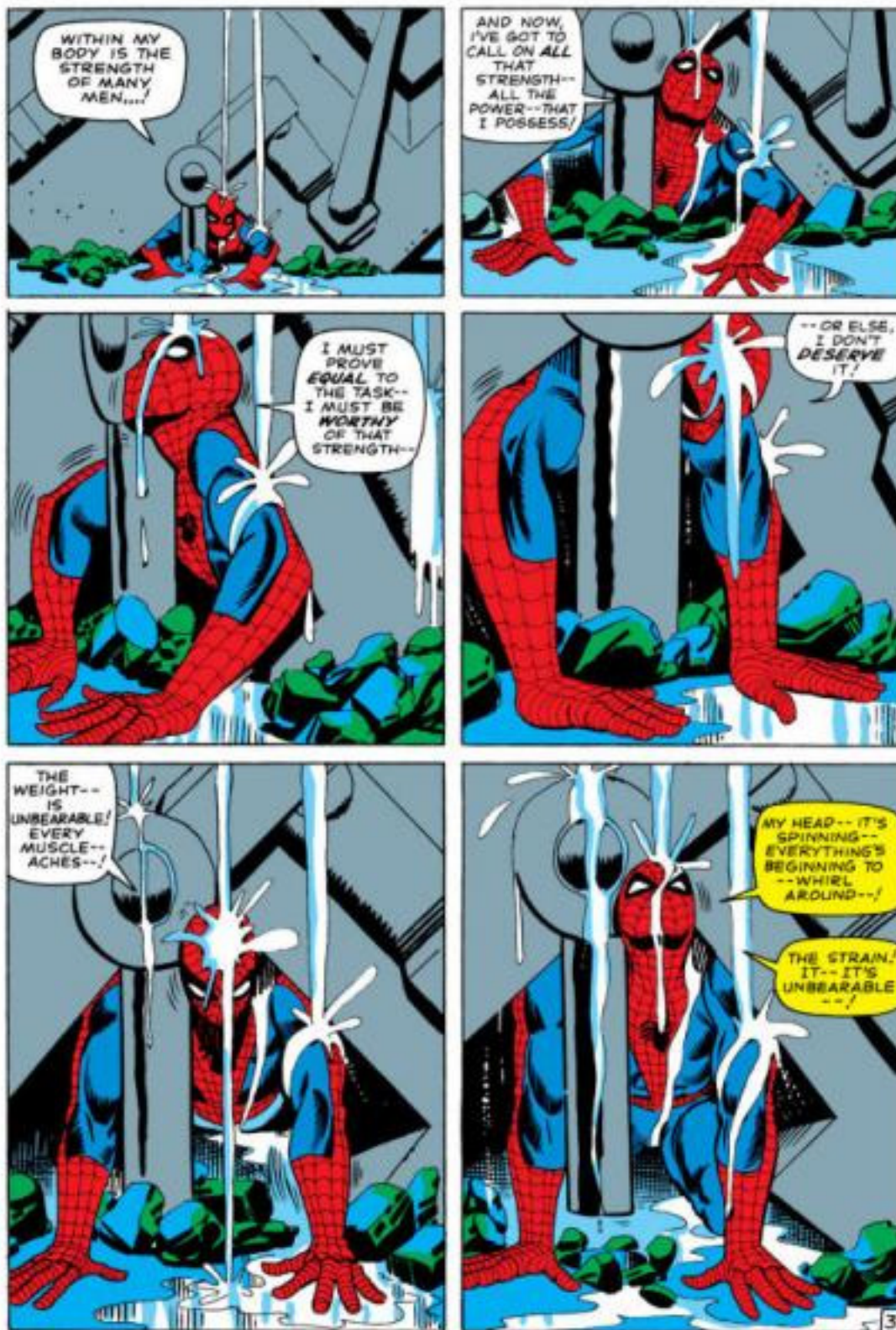
There's the guy with the red cape, the lady made out of clay.

All of them pale in comparison to the one, true, hero, the best part of Captain America: Civil War and of comics, in general.

I'm talking about the Amazing, Spectacular, Superior, Sensational, Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man!

He's the world's greatest hero. Here's why.

Because Spider-Man Was The Perfect Embodiment Of Steve Ditko's Art And Stan Lee's Bombast (Amazing Spider-Man #33)



Because He Stopped The Unstoppable Juggernaut (Amazing Spider-Man #230)



Even if the best he can do is pull on Juggy's leg like a toddler, there's no quit in Spider-Man. It took two issues, but Spider-Man played immovable object to Juggernaut's unstoppable object.

He's A Broke-Ass Fool Who Shamelessly Accepts This Offer To Join The Avengers (Avengers Vol. 5 #2)



He Let His Nerd Flag Fly In Front Of She-Hulk (Avenging Spider-Man #7)



And Then There's This Overjoyed Reaction To Being Published In A Scientific Journal (Double Nerd Flag) (Amazing Spider-Man #663)



One Spider-Man Panel Perfectly Sums Up Every Time I've Made An Angry Social Media Post (Amazing Spider-Man #589)



Oh, How About During 'Civil War' When Spidey Single-Handedly Tore Iron Man's Team A New One? (Marvel Civil War)



There's The Time Spidey Made-A-Wish (Amazing Spider-Man #248)



Few stories in web-head history are as small and personal as the time Spidey visits a child with the most thorough Spidey scrapbook of all time. Spider-Man even takes his mask off, letting the kid in on the joke that J. Jonah Jameson has been paying Peter Parker for all the Spidey photos all those years.



It's pretty rare to see this kind of story in a superhero comic, for this kind of thing to take up an entire issue. Rare and wonderful.

And There's The Time Spidey Messed Up Another Make-A-Wish(Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man Annual #1)



We only get to know Leah for a few, short, wordless pages before she curls up in an alley, under a pile of Daily Bugle's covered in Spider-Man pictures, and falls asleep. She dreams of Spider-Man...



I'M SORRY...THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO EXCEPT MAKE HER COMFORTABLE AND WAIT FOR THE END.



SHE WAS ALREADY UNCONSCIOUS WHEN I CAME ACROSS HER...GOD...I MUST'VE SWUNG PAST THAT ALLEY A HUNDRED TIMES... MAYBE IF I'D NOTICED HER SOONER...



SHE HAD NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS OF ME...TONS...

OBVIOUSLY YOU MEANT SOMETHING TO HER, BUT EVEN YOU CAN'T SEE EVERYWHERE.

DO WE EVEN KNOW HER NAME?

SHE HAD A NECKLACE TUCKED UNDER HER SHIRT. IT SAID "LEAH" ON IT.



IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, LEAH...SWEET DREAMS.



"SWEET, SWEET DREAMS."



End

There's The Time Spider-Man Dark-Knight-ed Before 'Dark Knight'

We all saw Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* and it's ending where Batman shoulders the burden of Harvey Dent's disgrace, preserving his legacy for Gotham.

But did you know Spider-Man did it first?

In *Amazing Spider-Man #118*, Spidey goes up against the Disruptor, a run-of-the-mill baddie who has it in for a local politician, Richard Raleigh, who just so happens to be tough on organized crime.



Well, turns out, the Disruptor and Richard Raleigh are ONE AND THE SAME!

The Raleigh/Disruptor die in a building collapse, and in order to preserve Raleigh's legacy and work against organized crime, Spider-Man burns all evidence that Raleigh was the Disruptor!

Mr. Nolan, you got some 'splainin to do!

There's The Way Spidey Announced His Return From The Dead By Mocking Green Goblin's Choice of Accessories (Superior Spider-Man #31)



And The Moment When It Was Confirmed For The Whole World That Spidey Was Back For Real (Amazing Spider-Man #1 2014)



Here's The Thing: When A Bunch Of Crap Falls Down, Spidey Runs In With No Real Plan (Peter Parker: Spider-Man #98, Amazing Spider-Man #694)



This happens a lot.



**When The Human Torch Dies, Spider-Man Is On Deck
(Amazing Spider-Man #657)**



I-I WISH I TOLD HIM THAT WHILE HE WAS STILL AROUND.

IT'S OKAY, PETER. IN FACT, MAYBE IT'S TIME WE LET JOHNNY HAVE THE LAST WORD?

HERE, ALL OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR HAVE MADE HOLD DISC RECORDINGS.



...ON THE OFF CHANCE SOMETHING LIKE THIS EVER HAPPENED,

AND HE LEFT A SPECIAL APPENDUM...JUST FOR YOU.

TESTING. THIS THING ON? UM... PETER, YOU THERE?



WAIT... THERE WAS MORE? SO THIS IS THE LAST THING I'LL EVER HEAR HIM SAY?



UM... MAYBE WE SHOULD WAKE THE KIDS UP FOR THIS?

PETER? IF YOU'RE HEARING THIS, I'M SORRY, PAL.



SORRY THAT I'M GONE, 'CAUSE... WELL... I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL WHEN IT COMES TO LOSING FAMILY.



AND THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE TO ME, FAMILY.

SO... IF YOU'RE THINKING OF THIS AS MY LAST WILL AND ALL...

...I'M NOT LEAVING YOU MY SPORTS CARS OR STUFF LIKE THAT... I'M LEAVING YOU THE BEST THING I EVER HAD...

...MY SPOT ON THIS TEAM, A PLACE IN THIS FAMILY, THE BEST SISTER, TWO BROTHERS, NECE, AND NEPHEW A GUY COULD ASK FOR.

THEY-- WE ALL LOVE YOU, PETER.



He Earned, And Survived, An "Attaboy" From Thor (Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man)



Spider-Man Actually Wrote Down A List Of Fat Jokes For The Kingpin (Ultimate Spider-Man #12)



**And There Was The Time Spidey PUSHED THE BUTTON
On The Ultimate Nullifier, A Device That Is Supposed To
Wipe Out All Existence, ON A DARE! (Marvel Adventures
Avengers #26)**



**Spidey Made Captain America His Superhero Dad (Amazing
Spider-Man V2 #50)**



They bond over their similarities.



Even though accidents will happen...



Spidey manages to make up for them (Avengers Vs. New Ultimates #4)



And he draws out perhaps the best Captain America speech EVER: (Marvel Civil War)



Spider-Man Will Always Be A Dork Who Doesn't Fit In
Sometimes it's funny.
(New Avengers #61)



And sometimes it's just sad.
(Ultimate Comics Spider-Man #153)



But it means he can relate:
(Spider-Man And The X-Men)



He Isn't Afraid To Go Toe-To-Toe With Gods (Avengers vs. X-Men 9, Avengers: Infinity War)



That's Gods. Multiple. (Avengers And The Infinity Gauntlet)



He Can Play The Heavy When He Has To (The Amazing Spider-Man: Back In Black)



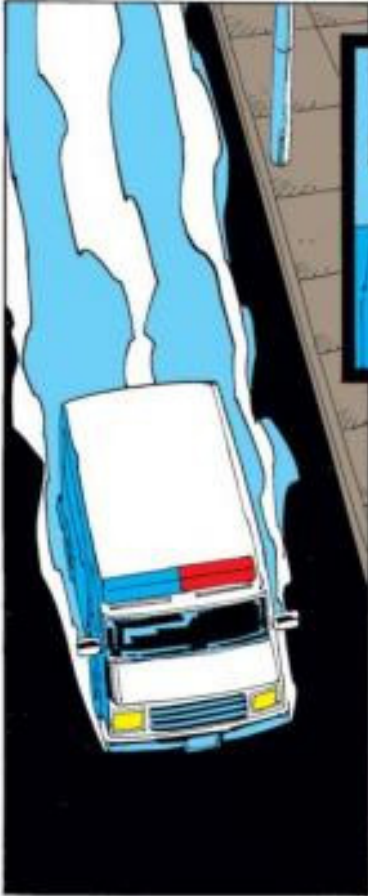
And Yet, He's Made Me Laugh More Than Any Other Comic Book Character, Ever (Spider-Man And The X-Men)



And Spider-Man Stories Are Ever Breaking My Heart (Like This One, From Ultimate Spider-Man's Funeral) (Ultimate Fallout #1)



**Because Spider-Man Loses More Than He Wins
(Spectacular Spider-Man #200)**



And He's Always Out Of His Depth (A+X #16)



But He Never— (Ultimate Spider-Man: Ultimatum)



Ever—



NO MORE!

I'M NOT GOING TO LET IT HAPPEN ANYMORE!
NOT VENOM... OR DOC OCK... OR GALACTUS HIMSELF ARE GOING TO HURT ANYONE I LOVE!



AND CERTAINLY NOT YOU!

SHE'S COMING BACK!

I KNOW IT!

I DON'T CARE WHAT THE PAPERS SAY!

IT'S A TRICK! NORMAN OSBORN CAME BACK! EVEN MY AUNT MAY CAME BACK!



SOMEHOW...

...MARY JANE IS ALIVE!

Ever— (Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 2 #35)



Quits.



Well, y'know. Not Permanently.

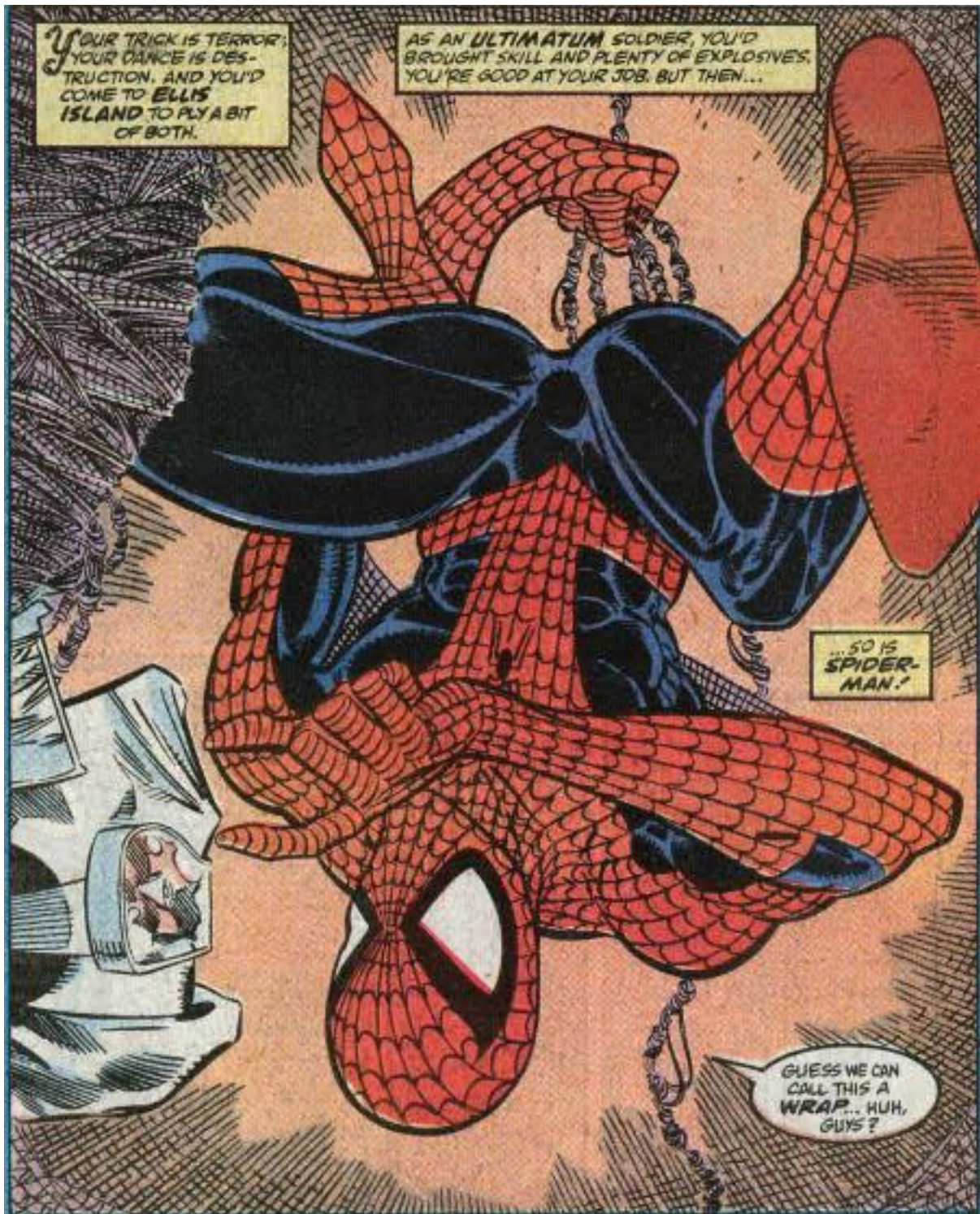
...there's something else too. Something that this column's been building to...something about Spider-Man that's REALLY amazing.

Oh, yeah. I remember.

Spider-Man Butt = ON POINT!



Move over Beyoncé.



Step aside, Minaj.

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And Sir-Mix-A-Lot? Keep doing what you're doing. But maybe add in a line for your ol' pal Spider-

Man.

Wanna Get Started With Spidey?

There's The Unbelievably-Underrated *Untold Tales Of Spider-Man* series by Kurt Busiek

The Hilarious *Spider-Man And The X-Men* By Former *Daily Show* Head Writer Elliott Kalan

And Then There's Any Time Dan Slott Has Touched The Character, Ever

12 Superman Stories You And Zack Snyder Should Read



I saw *Man Of Steel*. I saw *Batman V. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. I've seen what Zack Snyder has made of Superman.

The fanboy side of me was frustrated.

And when I say fanboy, I don't mean that to evoke a guy screaming into his computer in all caps about how this or that character would never do this or that thing.

I mean a fanboy who collected action figures deep into his teens. And by "collected," I mean played with.

I mean a fanboy who cried a little bit when Superman died in the 90's. Not because I was angry or thought it was a marketing ploy. Because I didn't want to be in a world without a Superman, even a fictional one.

I guess by fanboy, I mean soft-hearted lover of comics.

And when I say I was frustrated, I guess what I really mean is that I was heartbroken.

I just...I think that in making Superman this cold, militant character, the real joy of Superman is lost.

It's not that things were changed, origins altered, storylines tampered with. It's that at the core, the Superman I saw on the screen, was one who was missing all of his best qualities.

And so, I put together a reading list for myself. To remind me what it is that makes the Man of Steel great.

1. Superman For All Seasons

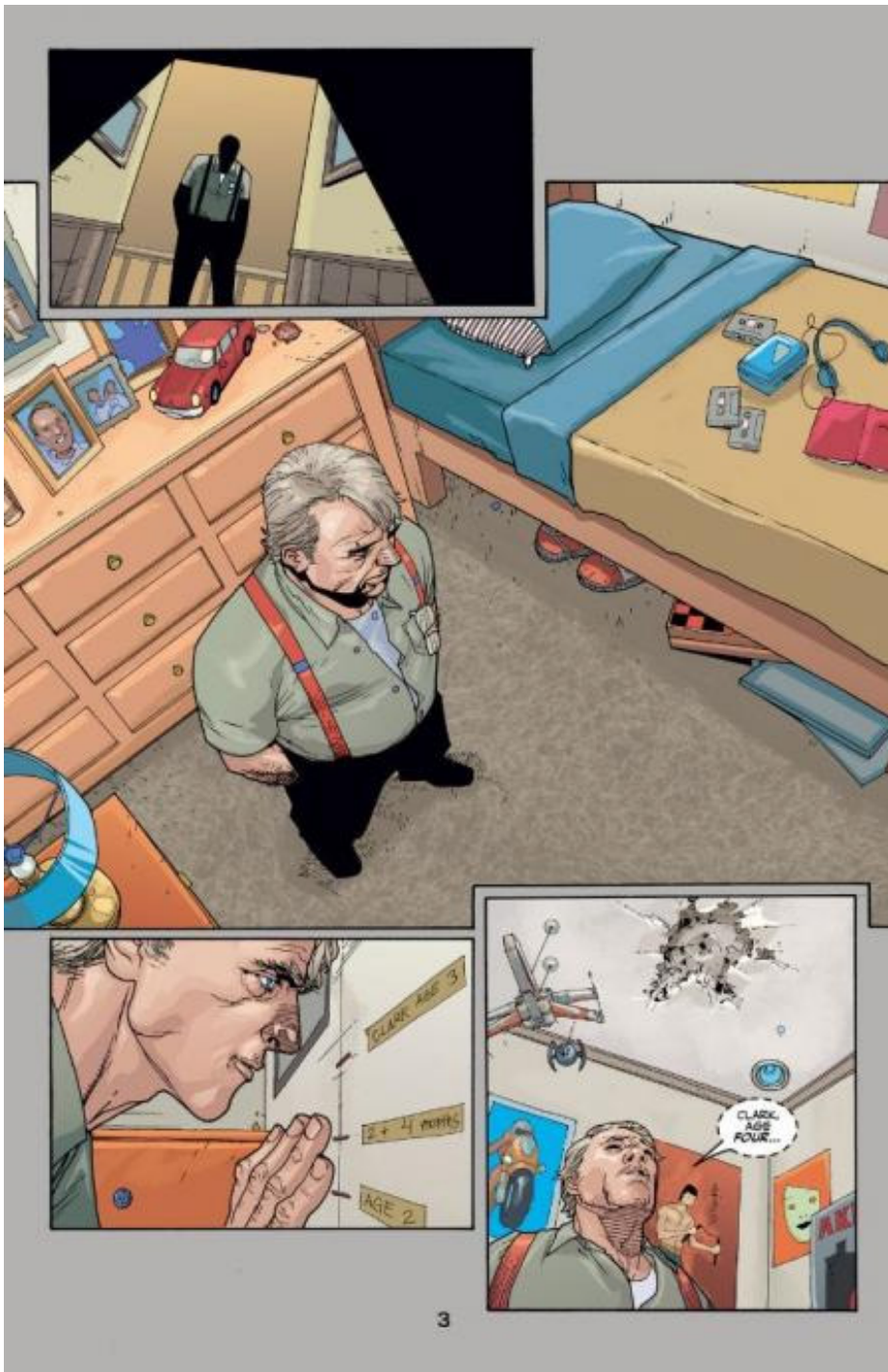
This book gives us what's really lacking in the on-screen Superman: kindness. The Superman in this book is a generous person. Someone who really does care about people. It's a truly great introduction to the character, the Clark Kent whose parents made him what he is today.



It certainly borders on cheesy, but in the best way. It reminds readers that seeing a man who can fly really means something.

2. Superman: Birthright

Another origin story, this one covers some of the same ground as *Superman For All Seasons*, but with a more modern feel. What I love and respect about Birthright is that it proves that "modern" and "grim" are not the same thing. And holy crap, Jonathan and Martha Kent are REAL CHARACTERS. The relationship between Superman and his father is developed and worked so much better here than it is in *Man Of Steel*. You understand Jonathan Kent. You understand that for Jonathan Kent, it's about his own fears of inadequacy as a father, and feeling like he's Clark Kent's dad, but not Superman's.



3. Grant Morrison's JLA

Superman works even better when he's part of a team. When you can see him contrasted with Green Arrow and the Flash, when you see how the other heroes regard him, it really clarifies what a big pair of red boots Superman fills.

Grant Morrison's run on *JLA* could show up on any number of top 10 lists for any number of moments. There was the moment when Batman took on 3 god-level baddies on his own. There was the time Superman and Batman switched bodies, and Superman had to learn how to fight for real. There was the time Superman wrestled an angel and pushed the moon back into its proper orbit.

Superman is all about scale. When he can do things other heroes can't even dream of, we really get to see the guy from a new perspective.

This book isn't only a must-read because it's damn awesome, it provides the scale that's hard to find with Superman.

4. All-Star Superman

There's one scene from this book that always stays with me. Superman stops an out-of-control train, and during the aftermath, there's a woman exiting the train, talking to someone on the phone. We don't know who she's talking to, and it's easy to dismiss this as background noise.



Now, throughout *All-Star Superman*, Superman is dying. It's complicated, but he knows he doesn't have much time, and he's trying to wrap things up, to make the world as safe as he can before his imminent death.

But he still has time to save a single life. He makes time:



This is the Superman I've been missing in the theater. The one who isn't only the most powerful man on Earth, but the best one.

5. The Death of Superman

It's easy to forget, with comic book deaths and rebirths being almost a constant, what a big deal this was in 1992.

It was a big, big deal.

The story isn't the best read ever, but there are some definite highlights. For one, the monster was played right. Doomsday arrives on Earth, partially shackled by cables, fully jacketed from head-to-toe in a bizarre, green jumpsuit. As the battle plays out, Doomsday is slowly revealed as his green jumpsuit is torn and the cables are ripped from his body. Take the lesson from *Jaws*, from *Alien*, the monster is ALWAYS scarier and better before he's fully revealed, and the longer you can tease that out, the better.

Second, the layouts. Over the four-issue battle with Doomsday, we see the action blow up on the page. The first issue had 4-panel pages, the second had 3-panel pages, and so on until the ultimate battle, when we were given all splash pages, single-panel pages packed with action.

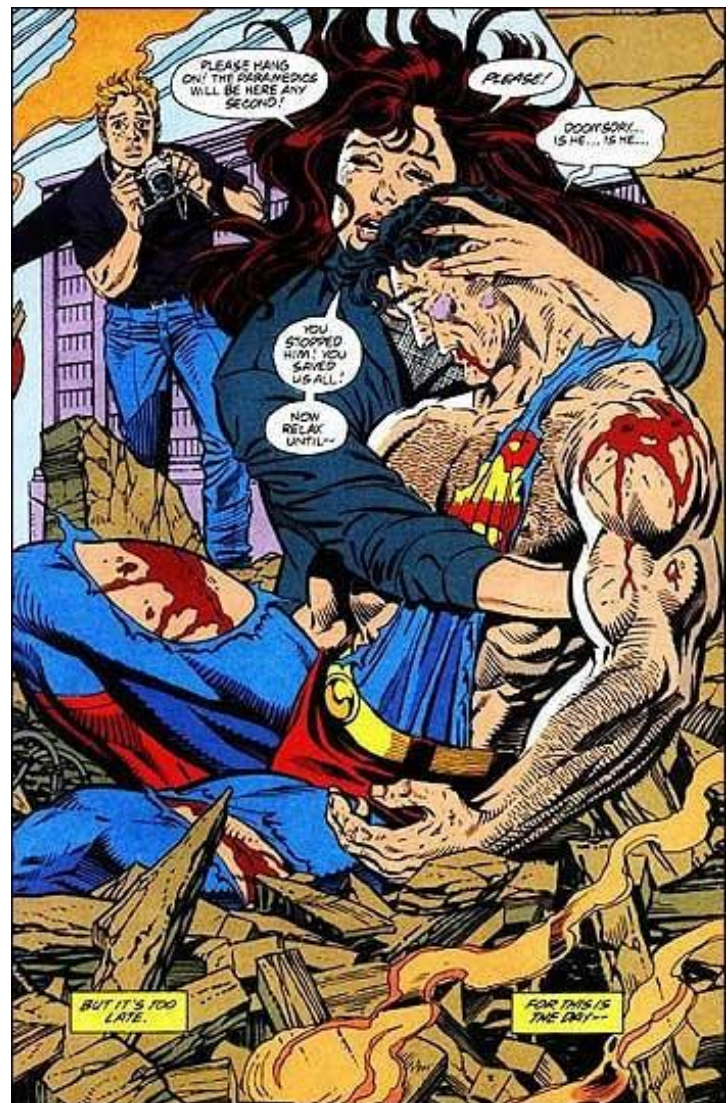
What *Death Of Superman* does well is treat Superman's death like a big deal. At the time, it seemed like maybe he really wouldn't come back. At the time, characters and citizens in DC comics saw Superman as an absolute force for good, and the loss was a huge blow to that fictional world.

At the time, comic lovers were given a moment to breathe and imagine a world without a Superman, and to imagine our world, the real world, and how it would go on without even the fiction of Superman.

6. Superman: Secret Identity

This book is a different take on Superman lore. A boy named Clark is born into a world like ours, where Superman exists as a fictional character. In fact, his parents named him Clark after the character of Superman. And then, just like that, this real Clark suddenly manifests Superman's powers.

The book follows an interesting thread you don't see too often in comics, which is the idea that the comics of our world actually exist in the comic book world as well. And it



follows a character through his entire life, the moment when he manifests powers, young adulthood, parenthood, and all the changes that we don't often see in comics because the characters tend to remain ageless.

And what it does for Superman is really showcase how powerful and pervasive the Superman lore really is. By incorporating this second layer of fiction, we not only get a Superman story, we get a story ABOUT Superman stories.

7. Superman: Whatever Happened To The Man of Tomorrow?

Most of the time, when you hand something over to Alan Moore and kinda say, "Do what you want," the results are pretty strange and spectacular. Swamp Thing, Green Lantern.

And with Superman, no exception.

After DC's massive continuity-correcting event, *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, DC was left with a couple transition months before *Superman* and *Action Comics* were rebooted by the *Man of Steel* comics.

Which is why editor Julius Schwartz decided the last two issues (one of *Superman*, one of *Action Comics*) should be treated as though they told the last Superman story ever. Alan Moore was brought on board, and the rest is history.

The story, told by Lois Lane to a reporter, explains the last acts and eventual end of Superman, who, at the time of the story, has been missing for ten years.

There are lots of Superman stories that make the bridge from Man to Superman, showing Clark Kent becoming a superhero, but very few that then create a bridge that goes the other way, from Superman to man.

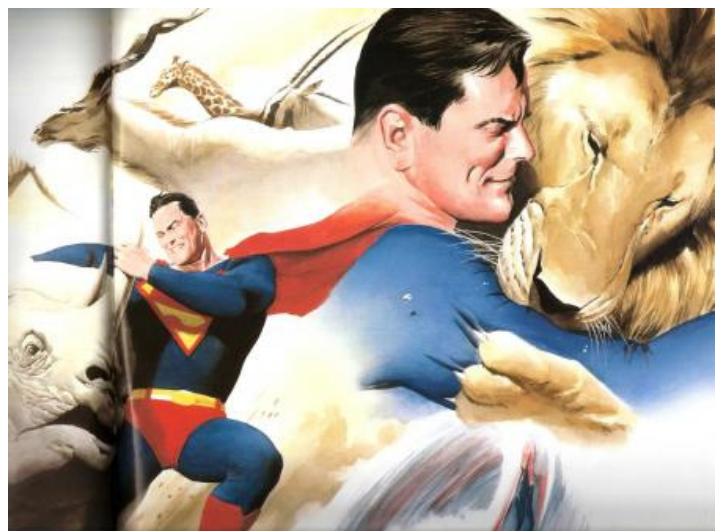


8. Superman: Peace On Earth

Perhaps the ultimate in cheese factor, but it's an oversized book filled with Alex Ross' painted Superman. It's hard to go wrong there.

It also takes a shot at answering the question, "Why doesn't Superman start using his powers to feed the hungry, help the poor, and so on?"

It's a hard answer, but the book ends with Superman's summary: Patiently and gently, I share with others the way to scatter the seeds a few at a time, evenly between the rows so that each one will have enough space. I tell them not every seed will make it - but all of them deserve



the chance to grow.

9. Superman: Up, Up, And Away!

The premise here isn't too complicated. Superman has lost his powers, and he's flexing his Clark Kent, journalistic muscles to try and do good in the world. Luckily, his powers slowly begin to return, and we see Superman kicking ass before too long.

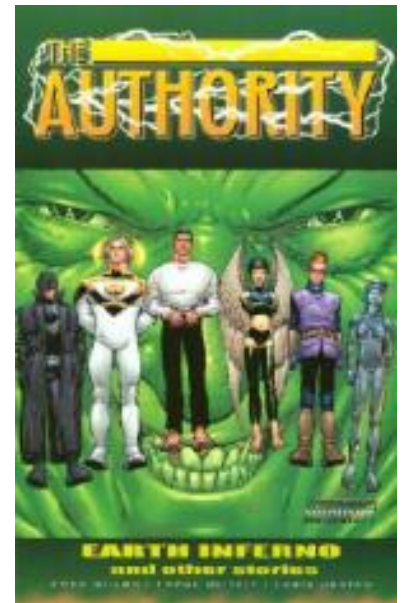
The beauty here is that this is actually a pretty good Clark Kent story. If there's something I haven't seen on screen in the recent movies, it's Clark Kent. Who is Clark? What does he think about? Truly, Clark Kent is just a disguise for Superman as opposed to being a person.

Plus, these are totally readable, fun comics. If you like comics without the baggage, this is a great arc.

10. Mark Millar and Frank Quitely's *The Authority*

Although Superman doesn't appear in this book, a super-powered man whose powers are enhanced by the sun plays the heavy. And his partner is a super-fighter dressed in all black. A dark knight, if you will.

Besides the fact that these two men in *The Authority*, unlike their better-known cousins, can actually get over their differences and just make out already (really!), *The Authority* presents a superhero book with a distinct difference. The heroes decide to exist outside the world of geo-politics, doing what they think is right.



11. Irredeemable

Mark Waid's *Irredeemable* was brought about by an interesting question. What if a superhero existed who had great power, but didn't have the emotional maturity to handle the power?

Not a Superman book, per se, but I feel like *Irredeemable* presents the dark side of a Superman, and does so in a more interesting way than the recent movies. What this captures well is how difficult it would be to be Superman. If you could save a stadium full of people, and as thanks hear them whispering to each other about how your hair looks stupid or rumors that you're gay, if you could be the world's greatest hero, save countless lives, and yet the media is always trying to ferret out your secret identity, how well could you handle it?

12. Hitman #34

Garth Ennis' *Hitman* is a comic that has a deep disrespect for superheroes. Green Lantern is a tool. Tommy, the titular Hitman, vomits on Batman's boots and uses x-ray vision to peer at the full Wonder Woman monty.

But when it comes to Superman, Tommy (and the writer behind him) shows a different level of respect.



Superman's appearance in *Hitman* is brief, but it provides a concise, clear, sensible explanation of why Superman is great. Why even bad guys like Tommy have respect for him and what he represents.

In a weird way, the respect Hitman gives Superman is more meaningful than the respect Superman gets from his comrades. It feels more earned. Because *Hitman* is a book that's so hard on superheroes, you know that Superman must be someone special to catch a break.

6 Game Development Lessons For Writers



When I read *Spelunky* by Derek Yu, the book about Yu's development of the game by the same name, I expected to be entertained, elated, and maybe a little lost at times. After all, I'm not a video game programmer. I tried to program *Tetris* into a calculator in junior high, and those wasted hours and pages of printed code represent the extent of my programming knowledge.

What I didn't expect was that the book would have so much good advice for writers.

Below I've highlighted some of my favorite bits. This is by no means thorough or complete. Trust me when I say you should read this column, and then go out and get yourself a copy of *Spelunky*. The book, I mean. And, what the hell, the game too.

Lesson 1: The last 10% is 90%

Derek Yu attributes this concept to Tom Cargill of AT&T Bell Laboratories. Cargill's rule, in full, being that "The first 90% of the code accounts for 90 percent of the development time. The remaining 10 percent of the code accounts for the other 90 percent of the development time."

Basically, the last 10% of the work on a project takes as much effort as the previous 90%. Which, if you've ever tried to finish a long project, you'll know is true. Getting those last parts sewn up, finishing those last sentences, it's always the hardest. But you've got to finish. You're only 10% from the project's end. Sort of.

You'll also notice, if you're even a little good at math, that 90% plus 90% equals well over 100% (see that? I'm a writer AND I can math). Why the funny math? Well...

Lesson 2: We Always Underestimate How Long It Will Take To Finish A Project

There are lots of reasons [we do this]. The biggest reason is that we tend to come up with estimates assuming that we'll be working under perfect conditions the entire time: perfect health, working all day and all night without distractions, and everything going smoothly on the first attempt. We don't plan on getting the flu or getting burned out. We put aside loved ones who deserve our attention. We don't think about getting stuck on a programming bug, or being paralyzed by the sheer number of tasks that lay before us. We're not human beings when we estimate how long something will take—we're unstoppable robots fueled by caffeine and passion.

Oh, god. So true. How easy it is to make an unrealistic estimate of a deadline for yourself?

I that Derek Yu has managed to frame blowing a deadline as the fault of optimism as opposed to slacker-ism. And I think he's right. There are always unforeseen events that make us late, then later, then even later. Do yourself a favor, OVERESTIMATE your next project, and then if you finish early, consider it a pleasant surprise.

Lesson 3: Don't Forget The Grind

As Yu puts it in the context of games, designers think of all the fun stuff. Designing levels, characters, things like that. What they forget, what he forgot while making *Spelunky*, is stuff like making menus and load screens, and...yawn. These things all need to exist, but man are they boring.

When working on a writing project, it's easy to think about the fun parts and forget the grind. It's why outlining is such a breeze! It's all new! Shiny! Full of that magic where it seems like a good idea to give a hardboiled detective an affectation like, I don't know, drinking Squeeze-Its all the time.

But you must grind. Without the grind, there's only an outline. No finished work.

Never forget the grind. The grind is who we are!

Lesson 4: Miyamoto's Saying

A good idea is something that does not solve just one single problem, but rather can solve multiple problems at once.

From the master who made *Mario* and *Zelda*, some very wise advice Derek Yu tried to follow at all turns. And you should too.

Not sure if your idea is a good one? Give it the Miyamoto test. If it solves more than one problem, you're on the right track. If it solves many, you're probably doing something super (Mario) right.

In truth, the only way to learn how to summit mountains, run marathons, and finish making games is to actually do those things.

I'm so sorry I did that Super Mario thing. I'm sorry, everyone.

Miyamoto's rule applies to your writing too, whether it be plot mechanics, introducing a character, or managing an exposition-heavy scene. Hey, if you need a character to lay something out, that's great. Go ahead and have that scene do something else too, take care of some other business. When your work starts solving multiple problems at once, it'll really come to life.

Lesson 5: Why You Shouldn't Restart Halfway Through

The reason why people restart a project becomes obvious once you feel the temptation yourself. At some point in any project, you will look back on everything you've done and feel like you could do it all much better...sadly, it's the talented creators that get hit the hardest by this, because they're the ones that are most critical of their own work.

Naturally. Like Yu says, if you keep starting over, you'll never finish. Instead, you'll just hit the wall at different points, which will cause you to restart again, which means you'll just hit another, DIFFERENT wall at some point in the new version, and then start ANOTHER new version, and so it goes.

Your prose will change in the initial phases of a project, your intimacy with the characters, all of that. But don't go back and restart from the beginning. Keep moving forward.

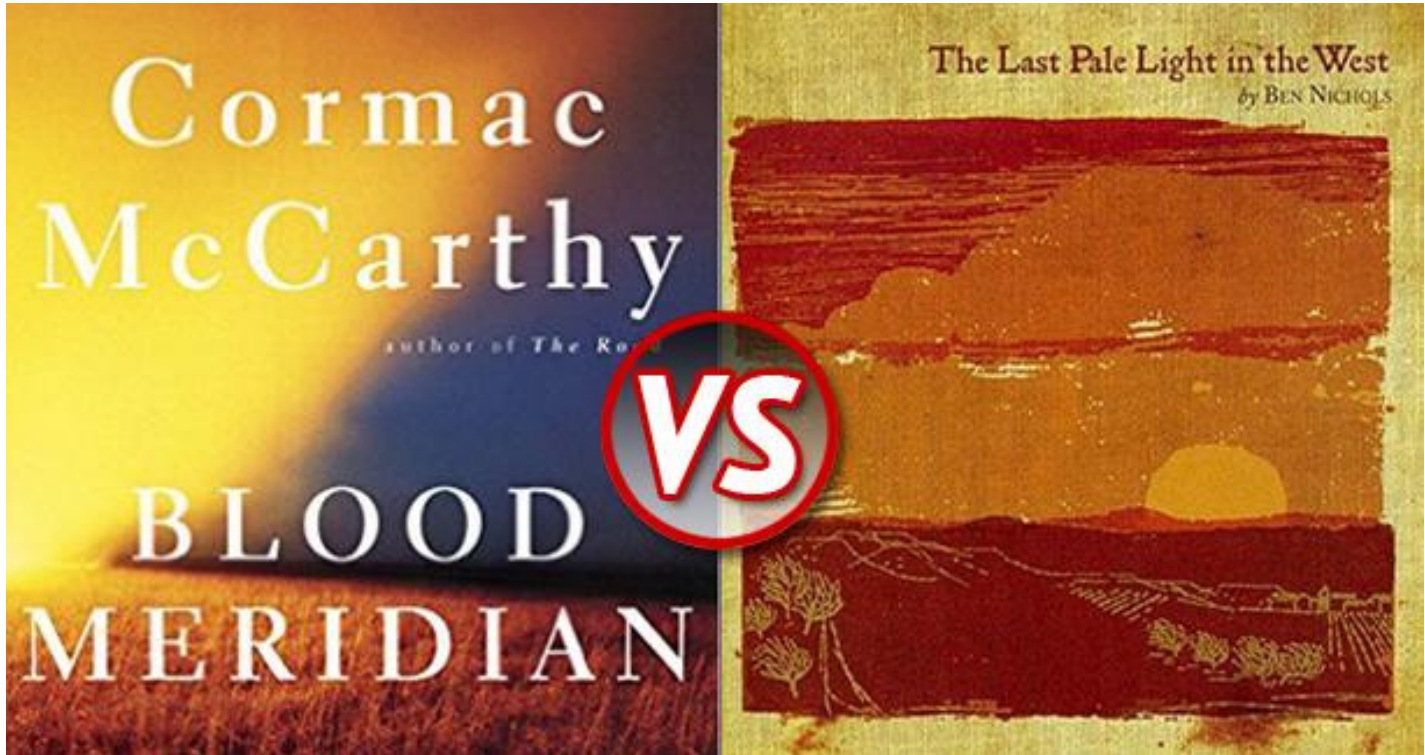
Lesson 6: The Importance of Finishing

Most creative people are familiar with the first part of making something, and it's easy to mistakenly assume that the rest is just more of the same. It's akin to repeatedly climbing the first quarter of a mountain and thinking that you're getting the experience you need to summit. Or running a few miles and thinking you can run a marathon. In truth, the only way to learn how to summit mountains, run marathons, and finish making games is to actually do those things.

Word.

[Yu wrote an entire blog post about this, including 15 tips](#) to help you finish a project.

Book vs Album: 'Blood Meridian' vs 'The Last Pale Light in the West'



With the recent news that a *Blood Meridian* movie is NOT in the works, and the recent news that I'm sad about that, I decided to take a look at a different kind of adaptation.

In 1985, Cormac McCarthy published *Blood Meridian*.

In 2009, Ben Nichols, frontman for rock/southern alt-country outfit Lucero, put out a short album titled *The Last Pale Light In The West*, featuring tracks based on McCarthy's book.

How does the album compare to the source material? And can an album ever be a worthy adaptation of a book?

Origins and Departures

For McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* was a bit of a departure from his formula at the time. Rather than writing with an Appalachian setting, McCarthy moved his story to the Southwest and into Mexico, settings that would serve him well for his upcoming Border Trilogy. *Blood Meridian* was also a novel he worked on while living off of the MacArthur grant he was awarded in 1981. Y'know, that grant they call a "genius" grant.

For Nichols, *The Last Pale Light In The West* was also a departure. He explains in an interview with NPR:

I've always found that, basing the songs on things I have firsthand knowledge of, it was easier to make the songs ring true. When I've tried to just make stuff up out of thin

air, you can tell. It doesn't have the sincerity...It was nice to have [the Blood Meridian] material to go back to. I think I was able to ... find the same kind of sincerity in these songs that I'm able to do with songs about myself, just because the book made such a big impact on me, and it was always there to reference. I think the songs came out in a very honest way.

Tone

Blood Meridian has a dark, unforgiving tone. I was trying to describe McCarthy's books to someone, the central feelings. And I almost said "perseverance," but that seemed too positive. Too much silver lining.

For me, McCarthy's books feel like they all speak about the moment before we got to where we are today. We live in a time where human life has value, and it's strange to be reminded that this was not always the case.

Violence plays a big role in building this feeling. McCarthy's violence is always unexpected, brutal, and very often pointless. By which I mean the violence doesn't exist to move the plot, and it rarely represents a showdown between good and evil. It feels random, like a force that exists and just so happens to be pointed in one direction or another.

Nichols captures this hard-to-describe tone in a few different ways over the course of 7 songs, but the rawness of the first track, "The Last Pale Light In The West," probably does it best. There's an ominous feeling to the opening, and a stark bleakness that bleeds into the next song, "The Kid." Some of the tracks feel more *Blood Meridian* than others, but Nichols definitely nails down something hard to hit in the first track.

I have to give points to Nichols for taking on such a big, beloved book and making a version that's accessible without feeling dumbed down.

Characters

Each track after the self-titled opener on *The Last Pale Light In The West* is named for a character in *Blood Meridian*. There are two in particular I want to talk about.

The Kid is a central character in *Blood Meridian*, maybe the closest thing the book has to a hero. He leaves home in his early teens and falls in with various groups of murderers who are scalping Native Americans for cash.

The song "The Kid" is probably the most direct in terms of describing the character as set forth in the book. The song really does capture a certain sorrowful, fatalistic quality. It feels a lot like another Lucero track, "The War," which is based on the experiences of Nichols' grandfather in WWII.

The character track "Tobin" is Tobin's recounting of his encounter with The Judge. Lyrics:

*I've seen
The hoof prints cloven in the stone
Now tell me what kind of devil
Trode there long ago*

With a sack of sinners' souls

What really comes through in the songs is that, although they're ostensibly named for different people in the book, The Judge is a specter that haunts every line. He's as inescapable in the album as he is in the book. The tracks really do serve their named inspirations, and The Judge ties things together on the album just as he does in the book.

Source Material



McCarthy's book has a strong base in the real-life exploits of the Glanton Gang, a group of mercenaries hired to kill Apache in Mexico.

As McCarthy puts it:

The ugly fact is books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.

Many portions of *Blood Meridian* are based on *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue* by Samuel Chamberlain, a member of the Glanton Gang. McCarthy did some heavy research, and critics have noted that even small, unimportant interactions and pieces of the book are based on historical material.

Nichols' source material is McCarthy's material, which means it's a third-hand story. It takes a lot directly from the book.

If you look at the lines quoted above:

*I've seen
The hoof prints cloven in the stone
Now tell me what kind of devil
Trode there long ago
With a sack of sinners' souls*

You can find their source in *Blood Meridian*:

*For the earth is a globe in the void and truth there's no up nor down to it and there's
men in this company besides myself seen little cloven hoof prints in the stone...*

While the book is a strong source of raw material, Nichols moves things around, telling the story in a different order, and even taking lines regarding one character and applying them to another. He also does some trickery, seemingly using The Judge to narrate "The Kid," which is not how things go down in the book.

In both cases, book and album, the pieces are true to the source material, true to the emotion of the source material, while making art in the places where there's room to play.

Accessibility

I love Cormac McCarthy's books dearly. Let me be clear about that upfront. I think they're near to perfect.

That said, they aren't the most accessible pieces. McCarthy doesn't care much for punctuation, and his dialog isn't set off in quotes. It's a testament to his skill that it works so often, that when you read, you can feel where the dialog starts and stops. But this, combined with the never-translated Spanish peppered throughout *Blood Meridian*, do make it a read that, though great, feels a little bit like, well, school.

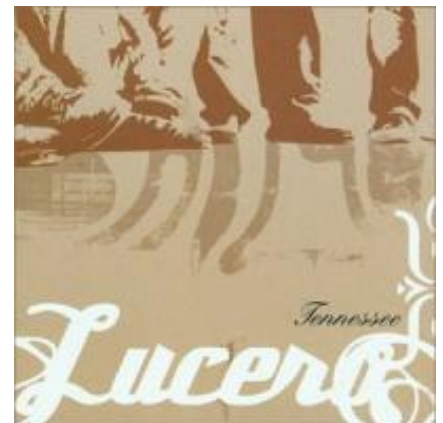
Nichols' album is supremely accessible. It's just under 30 minutes, and you get a quick, but mostly spoiler-free outline of the book in that time. It's like Cliff's Notes if Cliff's Notes had some emotional punch and made you really, really want to be drunk next to a campfire.

I have to give points to Nichols for taking on such a big, beloved book and making a version that's accessible without feeling dumbed down.

Comparison To Other Works

McCarthy followed *Blood Meridian* with his Border Trilogy. Lots of folks call *Blood Meridian* McCarthy's magnum opus, but then again, lots of folks call lots of McCarthy's books his "magnum opus." For me, personally, it's way up there as one of his best, and even if you disagree on that, it's hard to dispute that *Blood Meridian* is essential McCarthy.

Nichols got back with the band after *The Last Pale Light In The West*, putting out the full-length *1372 Overton Park*, which is just wall-to-



was great shit. *Women and Work* followed, and it's grown to be a personal favorite of mine at times.

What you have to know and understand about Lucero is that they're a band. Which means fans have STRONG opinions about which era is best. Are you someone who loves Tennessee? Someone who caught on with their more western-y *That Much Further West*? Or maybe the more punk/rock-oriented *Nobody's Darlings*?

What's most notable about *The Last Pale Light In The West* might be that it's basically a solo record, but it's not polarizing like so many other attempts by a frontman to go it alone. Fans love it, and it's experienced similar success to Lucero's bigger albums.

Lightning Round

Abbreviation:

The Last Pale Light In The West: TLPLITW. A bit long.

Blood Meridian: BM. Which is commonly associated with "bowel movement."

Length:

TLPLITW: 27 minutes.

BM: Depending on reading speed, 6+ hours.

Copy-Ability:

TLPLITW: Many covers are available on YouTube, some not bad.

BM: Eesh. Is there anything worse than a bad McCarthy ripoff?

Who Would Win In A Fistfight?:

Nichols: Much younger, but a wiry dude.

McCarthy: Much older, but it feels like his type always have one solid punch left in them.

Recommendation And Final Judgment

It's stacking the deck to compare a huge, canonical classic of American Literature to an indie album that's 27 minutes long. Of course the book has more impact. But I'll say this of the album: this is the best transfer of *Blood Meridian* to a different format that exists, and I'll be floored if we ever see a better one.

I'll also say something else. If you haven't read *Blood Meridian* yet, I highly recommend it. And if you haven't read it yet, I HIGHLY recommend listening to *The Last Pale Light In The West* first. It's the perfect setup to read the book, like a better version of the inside flap that tells you just enough of the story. The hardest thing about reading a McCarthy novel is getting your bearings in the first few pages. Let Ben Nichols be your navigator. You won't regret it.

10 Lessons Learned From My First Grown-Up Writing Job



Last month I had, for one week, a real, honest-to-god, grown-up writing job.

It involved some writing, and a whole lot of editing. Some social media stuff. Getting stuff in from other writers. The whole bit.

I learned some shit.

1. Editors Earn Their Pay

I'll admit, when the gig came along, I saw dollar signs.

Just to provide context here, I'm not totally broke, but I did have a dream last week where I opened up an envelope with a \$3,000 check inside, and I'm embarrassed by how hard I tried to will myself back to sleep after I woke up from this dream.

I've heard people have sex dreams like this, so good that they try to go back into them after waking up. Me? A dream about a couple thousand bucks in an envelope has me squeezing my eyes shut and folding the pillow around my face.

So while the writing gig wasn't huge money, it was nothing to sneeze at, and I was pretty excited. Until I realized that editor money is earned. Holy shit is it earned.

Editing other people's stuff is hard work. And it takes time. And it never happens at your convenience.

I found myself working harder than I did for my 9-5, setting my alarm earlier, staying up later, sweating. It was damn hard work.

No wonder J. Jonah Jameson is always in such a lousy mood.

2. Proofing stuff you know nothing about is really hard



When it's 1 A.M. and you're proofing a piece you know nothing about, a piece about theoretical physics, or more likely but just as confusing, a piece about the appeal of Ariana Grande, that's when you're truly knee-deep in the damned.

There are two ways you can go about editing something you know nothing about. You can stay up for another hour, learn all about a subject and fact check, or you can just say "Screw it!" and blindly hope everything's accurate.

My advice is to go the learning route. You'll probably still be proven wrong by an internetter's snarky tweet at some point, but when that happens, you'll be able to mount a more insulting, knowledge-based comeback. And that's what really matters.

3. Set a limit for how long you'll berate yourself when you fuck up

Because believe me, you will fuck up. It probably won't be earth-shattering, but you'll fuck up.

I won't say that you shouldn't beat yourself up at all. When you fuck up, you have to fix it, and you have to try and prevent it from happening again. A light beating is standard operating procedure.

But I will tell you to seriously cut yourself off from the self-flagellation after an hour or so. Beating yourself up like that, it's like masturbation. By the time you hit the one-hour mark, you've done the deed, the passion's gone, and you're not learning anything new.

And while you're busy beating yourself up over your last fuckup, you're distracted and committing your next fuckup.

4. Organized flexibility

A writing job is where the world of art and the world of work collide, as Powerman 5000 would say (by the way, the Powerman 5000 page on Wikipedia has an incredible chart that shows which band members were active when. Highly recommend).

I should have known this collision between writing and job would happen. The words "writing" and "job" are pretty front and center in the phrase "writing job."

The only way to stay sane is something I call organized flexibility.

Pretend you're working for a web site that puts up two pieces of writing a day, all by different authors. Piece Of Writing A isn't in yet and you're up against the deadline? Then you need to put up Piece Of Writing B. Which isn't a problem, except now you've gotta change around your social media posting schedule, squeeze something else into a different spot, and generally move a bunch of shit around.

You can handle it. The trick is to plan a little bit, but not down to the minute, not planning so much that when one thing changes, your whole house of cards collapses.

Art happens when it happens. Work happens on a deadline.

5. My god, if you're editing something, check where the writer is from

Before you, let's just hypothetical-ize here, expunge the UK-ness from someone's writing voice, it's probably a good idea to check if they are actually from the UK. Because they might be, and then you feel like a real asshole.

6. Your first week on the job is not the time to break the mold

You know how in old Superman comics Lois Lane was really ambitious, but her ambition meant that

When someone asks if you'll take on a writing gig, say "Yes." You'll never know if you can handle it until you say "yes" and then stay up too late and piss off your partner and screw up someone's non-American phrasing.

she was always falling off of a tall building or something? That's what your ambition does your first week on the job. It sends you flinging off heights with no safety net. Instead of being cradled to safety in the muscular arms of Superman, you're face-first into the pavement. Or possibly a hot dog cart. Which makes you both a dead person and a monster who ruined hot dog lunch.

You might want to do things differently when you start a new job. You might have lots of ideas of how the joint could run better. But trust me, the first week is a terrible time to change things up. You'll be too busy doing the minimum that's required to keep the ship straight.

7. When someone makes a list of X things, you actually have to count that those X things are present

That sounds dumb and easy, but it's not. Granted, I'm a product of a public education system where we watched Channel 1 News every day, a program which was mostly a vehicle for Gatorade Frost commercials. So I might just be an idiot.

I recommend making a paper list off to the side where you write out each item next to its number. You'll feel stupid, but trust me, you'll feel stupider when you (and all of the internet) realize that a list of the 5 best Powerman 5000 songs only has 4 songs on it.

8. There are only 24 hours in a day



If you take on a job, you have to cut something else out of your life. And I would strongly advise that you don't cut out sleep, personal relationships, or meals. Unless you're eating at Subway, because

you might as well not even bother. Also, don't bother with the personal relationships if you're taking your dates to Subway. Anything Subway-related doesn't count.

Make a conscious decision about your cuts before you get started. Don't just figure you'll wedge everything in. Because wedge it in you will, and it's not going to be fun. No one likes a wedgie.

9. Moving up the ladder really does change things

There are times, in my regular career, when I long for the days when I had less responsibility. And in stepping up to a new level in the realm of writing, I saw that part of me is right to be wistful for a more carefree past.

When you're doing something mostly for love or for fun, you're free to get a little wilder. When you've got a couple people above you, you can cut loose and count on someone else to reign you in if that's what's needed. If the person above you hates the Powerman 5000 reference you slipped in, then they can clip it right out.

But when you're nearer the top, you're responsible for everything. There's no one to put you in check. That's a big ass deal.

There's a definite advantage to being an underling sometimes.

10. Saying "Yes" is important

When someone asks if you'll take on a writing gig, say "Yes."

You'll never know if you can handle it until you say "yes" and then stay up too late and piss off your partner and screw up someone's non-American phrasing.

If you want a writing job, you have to say yes to writing jobs. You can't wait for the perfect, ideal gig to come along. Say "yes" to some things, try them out, and if they don't work out, then you learned something about yourself. And you can always quit and do something else. I saw that Powerman 5000 has an opening for someone who can operate turntables...

What A \$5 Book Cover Looks Like



Self-publishing isn't the scarlet letter it once was. Okay, there's still some stigma. But I'll admit, some of that stigma is earned by people like me who crank out some weird, stupid garbage and slap it onto the Kindle store. You can't write *3 Ninjas* fanfic and feel like you're free of guilt there.

Because amateur idiots like myself have the same publishing access as the big boys, the need for a good cover matters more than ever. A good cover might trick someone into thinking your book is legit. A lousy (honest) cover will get you zero sales.

While I've learned some things about writing trash, I haven't learned a lot about graphic design. Which is why I need help to make my Kindle garbage pop. I've got a finished writing project that's just a hair better than trash, and I figured that maybe putting a little more effort into the cover would be a good idea.

Enter Fiverr.com, a site that lets you contract with people around the world to do different gigs for \$5 bucks.

And so, I embarked on a journey to see just what \$5 is worth in the world of book covers.

What I Wanted

I wrote up a short description of what I wanted, which was required for most of the graphic designers on Fiverr. Basically:

Here's the title (Pete's Unsent Love Letters), here's the theme (Pete's unsent love letters), so something with letters or mail would be fine. I prefer fairly minimal stuff. I'm open to pictures, drawings, or even words used as art. Whatever works.

That's more or less what I wrote out for potential designers.

What I told myself while I wrote that, over and over, is that I was spending 5 bucks. 5 bucks of a graphic designer's time seemed almost worthless, to me. How much could they possibly get done in \$5 worth of time?

My goal was a low bar. I wanted a book cover that looked better than one I could do myself. That was the real issue. If the cover I got wasn't better than one I could do, then it wasn't doing me a lot of good. If it was even slightly better, then the experiment would be a success.

The Search Begins

I rolled over to Fiverr, typed in "book cover" and swept through the potential designers. There weren't as many as I expected, and a lot put up "samples" on their seller page that were clearly books designed by other people.

★★★★★ (15)

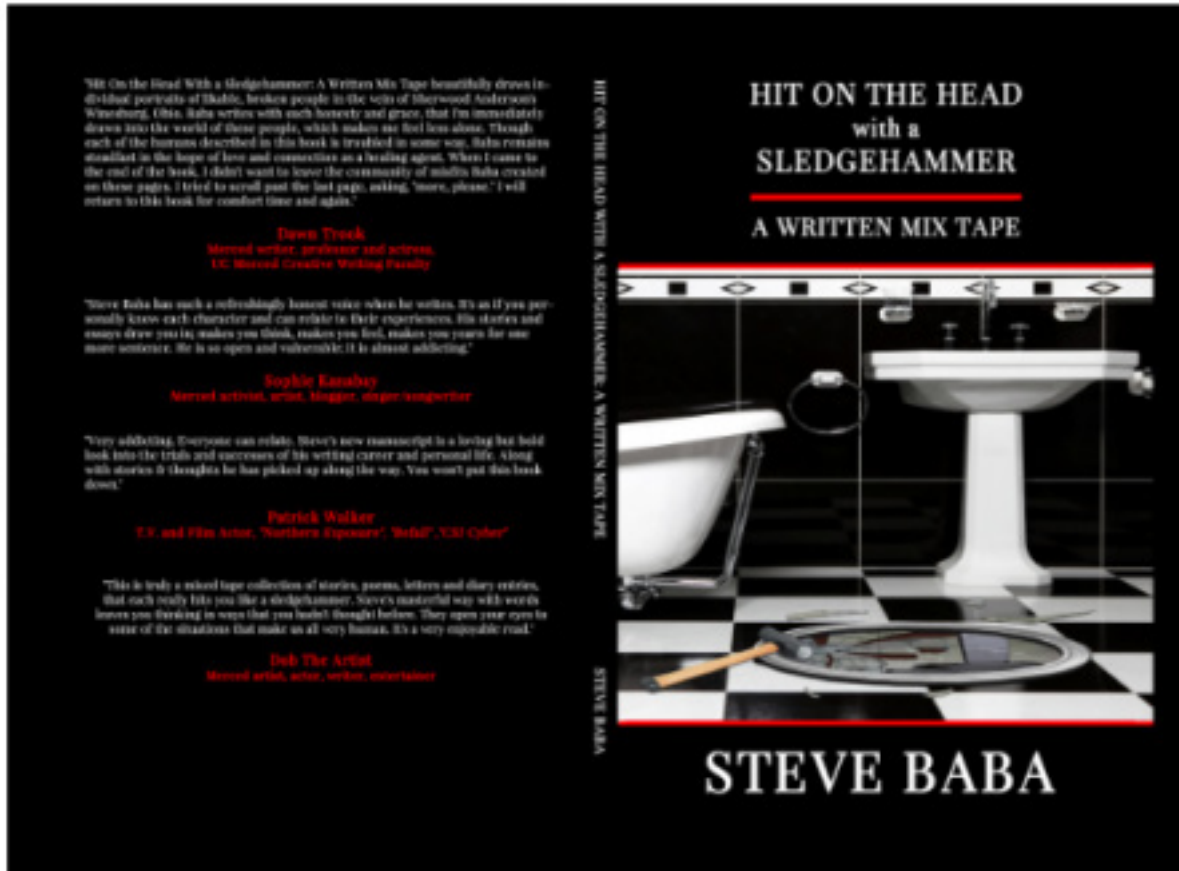
Graphics & Design / Book Covers & Packaging



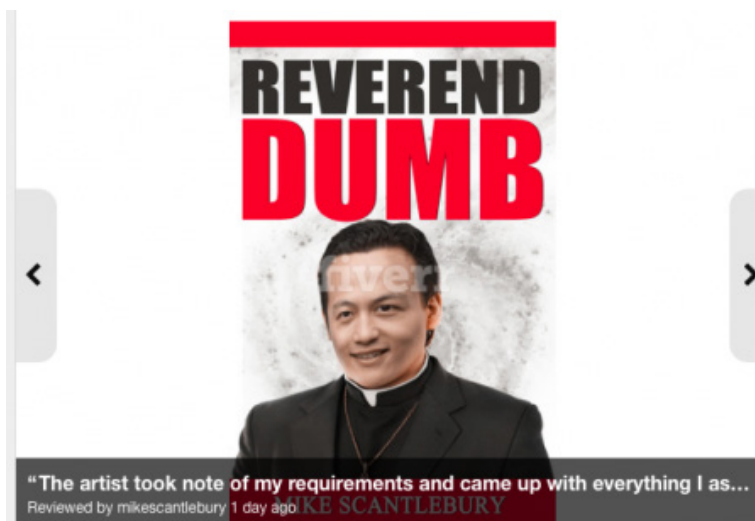
Okay, to be fair, I don't know for certain that the designer for Meg Cabot and Sophie Kinsella isn't offering book design services for \$5. I don't KNOW that this isn't a moonlighting thing. But I think I'd have to be kinda stupid not to suspect, right?

In the end, I booked the person who listed these covers as samples anyway. Because, eh, it's worth \$5 to take the chance, right? Besides, I'm a big fan of chutzpah.

The good news is, I did find a few sellers making covers that looked a little closer to something I'd like.



Not 100% my jam, but I liked the use of color and the cleanliness. And good on anyone who manages a cover with the subtitle "A Written Mix Tape." I don't even know what that means.



You kinda have to contract with this person, right? *Reverend Dumb*? (note: in the process of writing this column, I tried to find *Reverend Dumb* online. I couldn't find it, which leads me to believe it might be a title invented by the designer to demonstrate his abilities. Which only made me happier.)

I ended up picking a total of 5 contractors who caught my eye or who, well, were actually in the neighborhood of \$5. This is rarer than you'd think. Let me explain...

When \$5 is really more like \$70

Lots of 5 dollar services advertised on Fiverr cost a lot more than 5 dollars.

For example, a lot of book cover artist will do a mock-up for \$5. But if you want a finished file, that's an additional \$10. If you want to be able to ask for revisions, that can be an additional cost. Some will even charge for the rights to the image. So for \$5 you get an image, but no real ability to use it. For many sellers, \$5 is basically the price of admission, and what you really want goes up from there.

For example, here's a price list of "extras" from one contractor:



Extend your order with Gig Extras.			
Print-Ready	1	No Change	Add \$10
3D Image	1	+ 1 day	Add \$5
Commercial Use	1	No Change	Add \$5
Additional Revision	1	+ 1 day	Add \$10
Back & Side	1	+ 3 days	Add \$40

Really, for a full-wraparound, all-encompassing cover, I'm on the hook for \$70. \$75 when you include the initial \$5 to create the image.

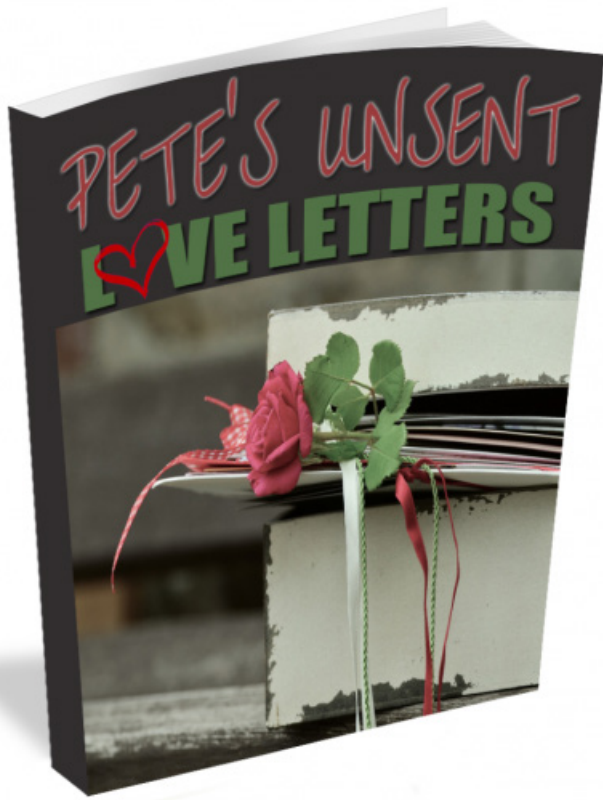
Again, I think graphic designer time is really valuable, and \$5 is probably way underpriced for what most offer. BUT, before you get too excited about the \$5 option, like I did, you really should know that it's more like \$75.

For my 5 contractors on Fiverr, I plunked down a total of \$37 dollars for basic service. I won't make you do the math, that's an extra \$12 over the expected \$25. Which isn't outrageous or anything, but it's almost one-and-a-half times what I first figured.

What I got

Let's go in the order I received the covers.

Seller #1 gave me two options:

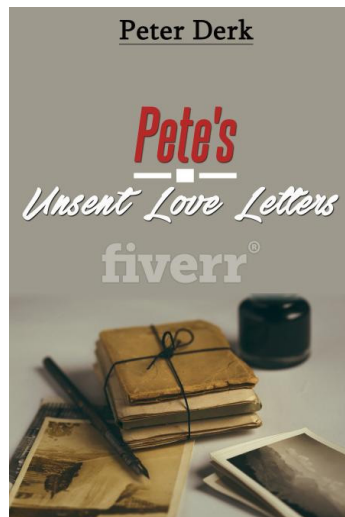


What do I have to say about this?

Well, the first cover made me wonder if there was truth to what my mom said, that it's illegal to just cram stuff in someone's mailbox. Turns out, it's illegal to put mailable material in a mailbox if you're not a letter carrier. And it's illegal to put unmailable material in someone's mailbox. From my limited understanding of the law, it's pretty much illegal to put anything into a mailbox unless you're a letter carrier and the thing you're putting into the mailbox is mail. So with that first cover, there's the issue of advocating federal crime right off the bat.

The second cover, it's just not my style. The loopy handwriting, the words on it, the font choices. Also, the red lips to seal the envelope? No thanks. The only kiss-sealed envelope I'd ever open would be sealed with black lipstick. This is a personal thing. A sex thing, okay? Let's not get into it.

Seller #2 made this:



This one was better. Closer. It just felt like...maybe I was sending letters from the frontier or something?

Dearest,

It's a lonely country. Kind of like how it is in Cormac McCarthy novels. The fucked-up ones that are mostly about killing and don't have a love story in them. My 3DS ran out of power almost immediately. Please accept this lock of my hair as a token of my affection. I'll know you really love me if you have this hair when I return. Because giving someone a lock of your hair is gross, and now you have to keep it.

Best,

Pete

Seller #3 offered this up:



This was a strong contender. While it's mostly a stock photo and some text, I did feel like this designer read the description of the book and read what I was asking for.

I like this one. I don't love it the way I love *Demolition Man*, where most of the time when I open the browser on my phone it turns out the last thing I looked at was something Demolition-Man-related. While not perfect, I think this cover is \$5 worth of work.

Seller #4 came in next.

This seller was a little more price-y, but he was doing sketches. For the initial price, I got a couple B&W sketches.



These, I like. I like the way they look, I like the feel of them. I like that the seller clearly read what I asked for, and what he delivered is something I wanted: a cover for a self-published book that makes a person, at least for a second, unsure whether the book is self-published.

Lastly, Seller #5.

Seller #5 didn't deliver a cover. I don't think they did, anyway.

Fiverr is a little complicated. What the status of an order is, where the order goes. I was a bit baffled most of the time.

But I'm pretty sure it's not entirely my fault. And while I didn't get a downloadable image from seller #5, I DID receive this message:

Dear sir,
Thank you for getting my service.
your book cover design is ok.if you want any changes,
please inform me soon.i'll redesign for you.
if this ok,please complete the order with full 5
star positive feed back with your Great idea about my
service to up my gig.it is very helpful for me.
you are great and valuable buyer for me.
all the best!

If I were to be a jerk about it, I might suggest that this seller partake of the other services available on Fiverr and ask someone to copy edit this little stock message. In fact, just so we all know there's no hard feelings, here ya go, Seller #5. This one's a freebie:

Dear Purchaser,

Thank you for using my service!

Your book design is here. Probably. I'm assuming it is. There was this one time when the design never came through, and I apologize like hell to that guy.

Let me know about any redesign ideas you might have. I'll be happy to do them.

If you like what you see, I'd love it if you'd be so kind as to close out the transaction with a full 5-star feedback rating. That helps me provide the same level of service to even more people.

Thanks, and again, I am so sorry to that one dude who I never got a cover to. He seems like a champion of life, however, and I'm sure he'll be fine.

Would I do this again?

Yes, totally. But not the same way.

There are a couple things I'd look at before contracting with anyone on Fiverr.

1. If the seller doesn't ask you a good number of questions, forget it. If all they wanna know is your name and the book's title, then they probably won't deliver something of quality. If they ask about the dimensions of the book, font preferences, and if they ask for attached images that show the kinds of things you like, you've found a good seller.
2. I wish I'd identified two sellers I liked and spent my \$37 on them, using the extra cash to buy more revisions or other services, rather than spreading the money so thin. I'd be happier with the results, and I'd rather my money had gone to paying people who did a good job.
3. If I'd known I might spend a total of \$75 for a finished product that I had the rights to, I would have looked into some other graphic designers to see what \$75-\$100 would get me. When the price is \$5, it's hard to ask other graphic designers to do anything. But when the price is \$75, I think there's more room to talk to someone without being insulting.

John Swartzwelder Is The Funniest Writer You're Not Reading



As my exciting story opens, I am being punched in the stomach.

And thus begins the career of Frank Burly, and thus begins *The Time-Traveling Detective*, the first novel by John Swartzwelder.

True *Simpsons* nerds will probably recognize the name John Swartzwelder. Swartzwelder is credited as having written more episodes of *The Simpsons* than any other individual, 59 in total, beginning with season 1's "Bart the General" and ending with season 15's "The Regina Monologues."

But when it comes to humor, it's not just about quantity. It's about quality.

Swartzwelder didn't just write a lot of Simpsons episodes. He wrote the best ones. Just in case you don't believe me, a brief list of Swartzwelder-penned episodes (with quotes):

"Itchy & Scratchy Land": *Attention, Marge Simpson, we have also arrested your older, balder, fatter son.*

"Homer The Great": *Why won't those stupid idiots let me in their crappy club for jerks?*

"Radioactive Man": *My eyes! The goggles do nothing!*

"Homer Vs. The Eighteenth Amendment": *To alcohol! The cause of... and solution to... all of life's problems.*

"Homer To The Max": *Nobody snuggles with Max Power, Marge. You strap yourself in and feel the G's.*

The more you look into it, the more difficult it becomes to separate Swartzwelder from the core of what made *The Simpsons* great during the period when the show was at its greatest. Hobos, carnies, the Prohibition era, and basically, anything old-timey—all of these are Swartzweldian touches, and all of them are deep in *The Simpsons'* DNA.

And yet, for all he's given the world, there's not much information out there regarding the man himself. Other than one story that surfaces time and again. It goes like this:

Swartzwelder was eventually allowed to write *The Simpsons* away from the office, an unusual setup which was accommodated partly because his scripts came in so close to finished, partly because Swartzwelder insisted on chain smoking. Swartzwelder took to working in a diner booth until a smoking ban was passed in California, at which point Swartzwelder purchased his favorite booth and had it installed in his home.

Since leaving *The Simpsons* behind, it would seem Swartzwelder has been putting that diner booth to good use, writing over a dozen novels, many of which feature slow-witted detective Frank Burly.

Now, these novels are pretty atypical. Wikipedia calls them "absurdist." I call them fucking bonkers.

Frankly, Swartzwelder writes the funniest books I've read in a long, long time. It's my opinion that John Swartzwelder is the funniest working writer today. I know humor is subjective, and Swartzwelder's jokes aren't for everyone. And hey, you know what else isn't for everyone? Being right about comedy.

But that's enough from me. Here are some of my favorite Swartzwelder passages pulled from his many books.

Let's start with this bizarre, stupid chapter opening:

I didn't have to go far to realize this was no ordinary money cave.

How about this bit on the rigors of police work:

There are all sorts of "procedures" you have to follow before you can actually start blasting anybody. A whole long checklist you have to go through. You don't have to actually get your victim to sign anything before he can be shot; it hasn't gotten that bad yet, but it's getting there. And after you've gone through all your "procedures", and finally gotten to fire off your gun, then there are all sorts of "reports" you have to fill out, and "hearings" you have to attend and "trials" you have to sit through, and defend what you did, even though you can't remember half of what happened now, because you were in a kind of frenzy when you did it, and there was a kind of red mist in front of your eyes, with everybody yelling "He's gone crazy!" and "Somebody take his gun away from him!" and "He's shot the Postmaster!", while you're blasting away in all directions. You have to justify every single thing you did, from the time you started firing to the time you said: "Where am I?" It adds up to an incredible amount of paperwork. And that's if you shot the right guy.

On sleep (take that, Arianna Huffington):

I was sleeping like a baby — waking up every three hours screaming and crapping my pants.

On business:

I told my co-workers: "What we need around here, is somebody with common sense. Right now, all we've got are people who know what they're doing."

On talking to a superior:

I entered the Chief's office, my excuses all lined up and ready (worst excuse first; that's the way to do it)...

Presented for your enjoyment, a Swartzwelder history of the United States:

In 1776 a small group of super-intelligent visionaries—some say they were visitors from space, others say that they just lived around here—created a perpetual Federal Union of the original thirteen colonies—a perpetual Union which lasted for 13 years. Then, when that fell apart, they met again in 1789, with a little less enthusiasm this time, but with the same super-intelligent vision, to create another, more perfect, Union, which lasted for almost 72 years before it blew itself in half, killing a large percentage of us. The buildings we are passing now are lasting symbols of our perfect Union #3--lucky number 3.



On the difficulties of holding onto an arrested suspect while time traveling:

Unfortunately, he got away from me in 1912 when I had to let go of him for a second so I could scratch my ass with both hands.

On Respectfully Disagreeing:

"That's not the way it happened, asshole," I said, gently correcting him.

On more challenges of police work:

After the chief inspector had arrived and listened to my story, he asked me where the item was that these men were supposed to have stolen. I said that in all the excitement I had forgotten it. It was probably on the sidewalk somewhere, maybe in the Uptown area. Then he asked what proof I had that these two men had ever stolen anything from anybody. I said I didn't need any proof. He said the police department did. I said well that's the police department's problem, isn't it? And he said yes, that has always been a big problem for the police department.



On violence:

Fortunately, most people aren't cops, so my mask wasn't really any of their business, and I told them so, in no uncertain terms. Never mind my mask, I told them. Be on your way. Unless you want a mask up your ass. Or a mask sandwich. Or some other kind of

sudden violence involving a mask and you.

On car chases:

...my pursuers thought they'd be able to run down a lumbering truck in no time with their jet-powered police cars, flying motorcycles, and double helicopters. But if you've got a lead foot like I've got and if you don't care about red lights or whether you stay on the road or not, you can outrun just about anything.

So the chase kept on going all over town, with me pushing my truck for all it was worth, and barreling around corners on eight wheels, with the cops following me on two, and yelling at me over their bullhorns to stop. But I don't think they really wanted me to stop—at least not right away. This was way too much fun for them. This was what they had become cops for. I could hear them giggling over their bullhorns and telling each other how great this was. And it was great, too. (I wish somebody had been filming that chase. Me and the cops could have shared a cool million dollars, if the producers of the film didn't screw us out of our shares, which they probably would, now that I think about it. Thieving bastards.)

About halfway through the chase I temporarily lost my pursuers by cleverly rolling end over end down a hillside when they thought I was going to stupidly stay on the road.

And one of my favorite scenes, after traveling through time, an attempt is made to sink the Titanic in order to win a \$100,000 bet. This is a long one, but totally worth it:

Once the betting slip was safely in my pocket there was nothing for me to do but sit back and relax and wait for the boat to start sinking and the money to start rolling in. The only problem was I couldn't remember what exactly had caused the Titanic to sink in the history books. And the farther we steamed across the Atlantic without incident the antsier I got about it. The Titanic was supposed to run into something, I remembered, but what? Could we have already missed it somehow, whatever it was? Maybe my arrival here from the future without a ticket had altered history enough to cause us to miss it. So not only would I lose my bet, it would be all my fault, too. The more I thought about this possibility the antsier I got. With \$100,000 at stake I couldn't afford to get this wrong.

I finally decided the best thing to do was to just start running the boat into everything. Then we'd be sure to hit it, whatever it was. Of course I'd have to clear my idea with the captain first. Fortunately, he and his employers were just as anxious to get this bet over with and start spending their winnings as I was, so after a quick phone call to them he said okay, sport, let's go.

At my direction, we began running the ship into reefs and rocks and every other navigational hazard we could find. We rammed into lighthouses, backed over fishing boats, and drove up on beaches and knocked over those lifeguard things.

Everything we hit was either severely damaged or destroyed, but the Titanic steamed away without a scratch every time. I knew it was waterproof, but now I was finding out that it was unbreakable too. The captain said that all of the parts that went into building it were just too big to break, that's why. How do you sink something like that? What a

ship.

I insisted we keep trying, at least for awhile. For \$100,000 I figured I should get at least 100 crashes, maybe 100,000. The captain didn't mind. He was supremely confident in his ship. Plus, he'd never had so much fun in his life. He said he wished he'd met me before.

But after we had wrecked a coastal town in France and one of our passengers had shot Teddy Roosevelt and we found ourselves hiding in fogbanks and telling all the passengers to keep their voices down for God's sake, as police boats patrolled slowly back and forth within 100 yards of us, and we could clearly see the cops looking at a wanted poster with a drawing of our boat on it showing me and the captain on the deck jumping with excitement, we realized that maybe we'd gone a little too far with all this.



Finally, the phrase that's currently a frontrunner for my tombstone:

When I'm trying to be funny, you'll know it. Because you'll be laughing your ass off.

James Patterson: The Best Author I've Never Read



I love James Patterson. Even though that love has never translated to me actually reading one of his books.

Let me explain a couple things here.

Skipping over Patterson's books is not a point of pride. I know there are many circles in which never having read James Patterson, or reading him in order to make educated jabs at him, would probably be a badge of honor.

For me, it's pretty simple. I'll never forgive the casting of Tyler Perry as Alex Cross.

Kidding!

In truth, thrillers and romance-y books just aren't my bag.

So how is it possible that James Patterson is still one of my favorite authors?

How He Hooked Me

The love affair began when I read a book called *My Ideal Bookshelf*. Basically, the authors of *My Ideal Bookshelf* went to different creative types—directors, musicians, writers, people like that. The interviewees then described their ideal bookshelf and which books would populate it, and the *My Ideal Bookshelf* people painted it. Then, the interviewees wrote a little piece to go along with their painted bookshelf.

Some pieces were interesting, some were pretty run-of-the-mill. And my god, if you want to get the biggest dose of pretension you've ever had in your life, grab yourself a copy of My Ideal Bookshelf and flip through to the bookshelves of designers. I'm here to tell you, based on what was in this book, designers do not take dumps.

It was in the midst of this pretense-fest that I got to the piece by James Patterson. Which ended up being my favorite out of all the pieces in the book:

Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude floored me as a younger reader. I think it drove me into writing thrillers, because I realized I couldn't do anything at his level. So I decided to try something that I might be capable of doing well. I had read a few thrillers and liked them, and thought I might be able to write in that genre....I think it'd be disastrous if everyone wrote the way I do. But I think it's good that somebody does.

Given one page to talk about books, the man was entertaining, made me laugh a little, and he clearly knows his place in the world.

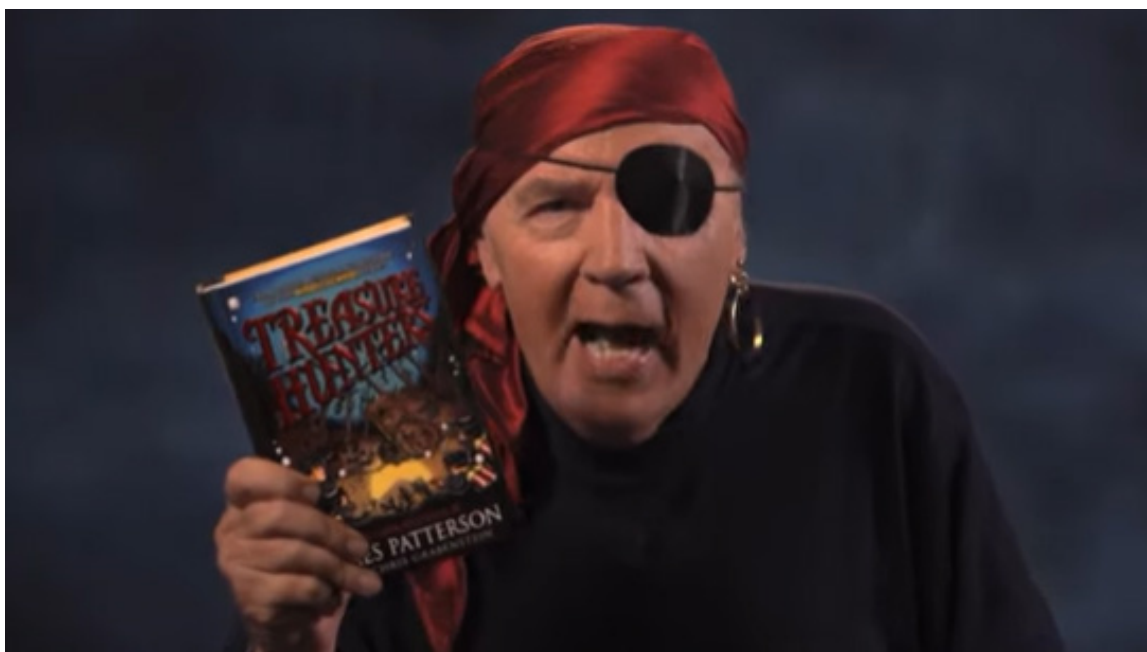
This is when I started to think there might be something more to this Patterson fella.

The Commercials

If you haven't seen one of James Patterson's book commercials, then you're in for a...thing. I don't know if it's a treat so much. It's not like these artsy, fan-made book trailers you see on YouTube. Patterson's commercials are usually just Patterson in a blazer holding a copy of his book, pretty much saying, "Here's a new thing I wrote. Buy it!"

At times it almost feels like Patterson is trolling the rest of us. I'll admit it.

Although this one has a pretty good pirate hook gag



They're less than 30 seconds, they barely give you any info, and the production value is low.

And I fucking love that he's doing this.

Think about the last novel that you saw a television commercial for. Be honest.

When I try and think of one that's not by Patterson, I can't. I can't come up with a single book that I saw a television commercial for other than Pattersons! This isn't to say they don't exist, I'm sure there are exceptions, but Patterson is far and away the primary user of television for book advertisement.

Why?

Why is James Patterson the only one who gets it? Why is he the only one who knows that his readers want to know when his new stuff is coming out? Why aren't other authors and publishers looking at what he's doing, looking at the fact that he's selling books by the truckload, and making an effort to replicate his success?

Why!?

Mini Novellas

It's a simple concept. Make a book that's less than 150 pages and costs less than \$5. The writing is simple, the plot moves quickly. That's it. A book that's about as long as a plane ride or maybe a week of commuting on the train. Easy to keep up with, designed to be read quickly. That's the concept behind Patterson's newest venture, Bookshots.

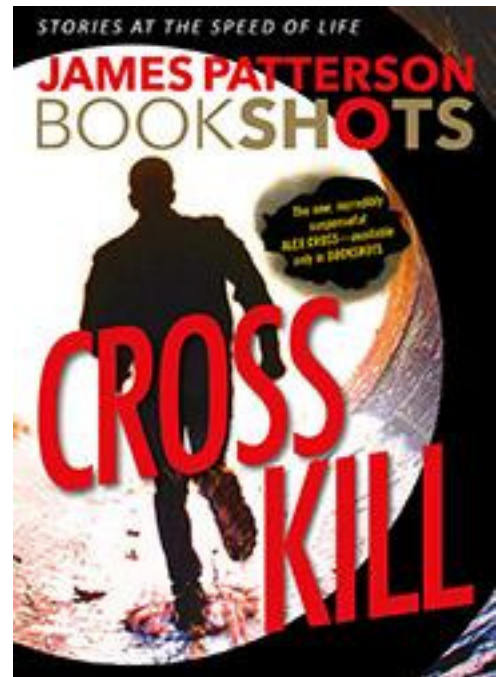
On one hand, it makes sense that nobody has tried this. It's an idea that requires a name like James Patterson to make it fly. As Michael Pietsch, the chief executive of Hachette Book Group, puts it:

Little tiny books don't stand out in the store...They're hard to see, and they're hard to get media attention for. They're economically difficult.

On the other hand, while an idea like this requires a big name, it also requires someone who isn't so comfortable in his niche that he's not willing to take risks. As Patterson puts it:

Publishing doesn't innovate...It's kind of weird, in this world where everything is changing every 10 minutes.

And this is the big thing, for me. Because let's be honest, dude is set. James Patterson does not need to change his game plan. He does not need to write comedic novels for kids. He doesn't need to care about the fact that a quarter of adults didn't read a single book last year.



I think James Patterson actually gives a shit that people are reading.

As big as a lot of people talk, I think he cares, and he's doing something about it.

My hope is that [Bookshots] increases the habit of reading...We have this country of nincompoops now...You go to Sweden and they have books that sell a million copies there. Gas stations sell books. It's good for people.

Even if he's not doing it with his prose, or doing it the way you might like with his prose, Patterson's doing something about the fact that people don't read. A few things, really. He's honest about his place in the world of words, he's putting books on TV, and he's taking a publication risk to make something new happen.

That's why I love him. As much as we all talk, as much as we all bellyache about literacy and reading, James Patterson is doing, and doing a hell of a lot more for books and readers than he has to. He cares. And he's making a difference.

How about you?

The Weird World Of Marvel What If's



Here's the deal with Marvel's *What If?* series:

Imagine a bunch of comic book dorks sitting around, arguing about what would happen if the Fantastic Four hadn't beaten Galactus. And when you imagine this, I recommend only your visual and auditory senses. Skip on the olfactory.

These nerds start asking each other deeper, weirder questions. "What if Gwen Stacy had a rocket launcher?" someone asks. "What if the Silver Surfer was a pansexual robot?" someone else suggests. "What if Spider-Man fought a vampire?" another says, and then he's roundly mocked for forgetting the seminal *Amazing Spider-Man #101*, the first appearance of Morbius, a vampire made possible by the Comics Code Authority lifting its ban on vampire characters, not to mention the fact that issue #101 was the first ASM written by someone other than Stan Lee.

cough

Anyway, *What If?* is a cool concept. Existing parallel to the Marvel Universe we know, the mostly non-canonical series is allowed to ask questions, ponder alternate histories, and generally shake things up without raising too much fan ire. Every issue starts with a question, and then we get 20-some pages of an answer.

The Uncanny

Volume one of *What If?* ran from 1977 to 1984. The most interesting thing about the first few years of *What If?* is the number of issues that asked a hypothetical question only to have that question answered several years down the road in the regular Marvel U.

Indeed, they kicked off the entire series with "What If Spider-Man joined the Fantastic Four?"

something that TOTALLY happened a few years back.

The questions asked in early *What If?* issues almost read like a grab bag of future Marvel U plots.

"What if the Hulk had the brain of Bruce Banner?" Happens on and off almost constantly.

"What if someone else besides Spider-Man had been bitten by the radioactive spider?" Happened.

"What if the world knew Daredevil was blind?" Happened. Slantways. The world knew Daredevil was Matt Murdock, and they knew Matt Murdock was blind. Even the low level of combined brainpower of Montana, Ox, and Fancy Dan would be able to put that one together. If you're not a comics fan and you're unaware of those gents, just think of them as the Beagle Boys from Ducktales. If you don't like Ducktales OR comics, I have nothing further to talk to you about.

"What if Jane Foster found the hammer of Thor?" What!?! Totally happened! When we were all pondering the mystery of who the new lady Thor was, it turns out that the answer was buried in a comic that was near 30 years old. A huge announcement/event from the 2010's was made decades earlier!

What We're Skipping Today

I'm not super interested in going through all the *What If's?* to find out which ones came true. Because it would probably be something like 30%.

There are also a couple other things I'm mostly not interested in, and because I'm the columnist here, we're not going to waste time on them.

What if [character X] died? I swear, every other issue from the 90's is Wolverine dying or the Punisher blowing someone away.

What if [character X] was a bad guy instead? Eh. Almost all of them die at some point. The answer is they come back, and the way they come back is usually unsatisfactory, but good enough for the sake of getting the character back.

What if [romance X] had occurred? I want these to be cooler, but they're not. It's not like Galactus and The Watcher give each other handjobs on the moon or anything like that. It's never like "What if Ben Grimm joined JDate?"

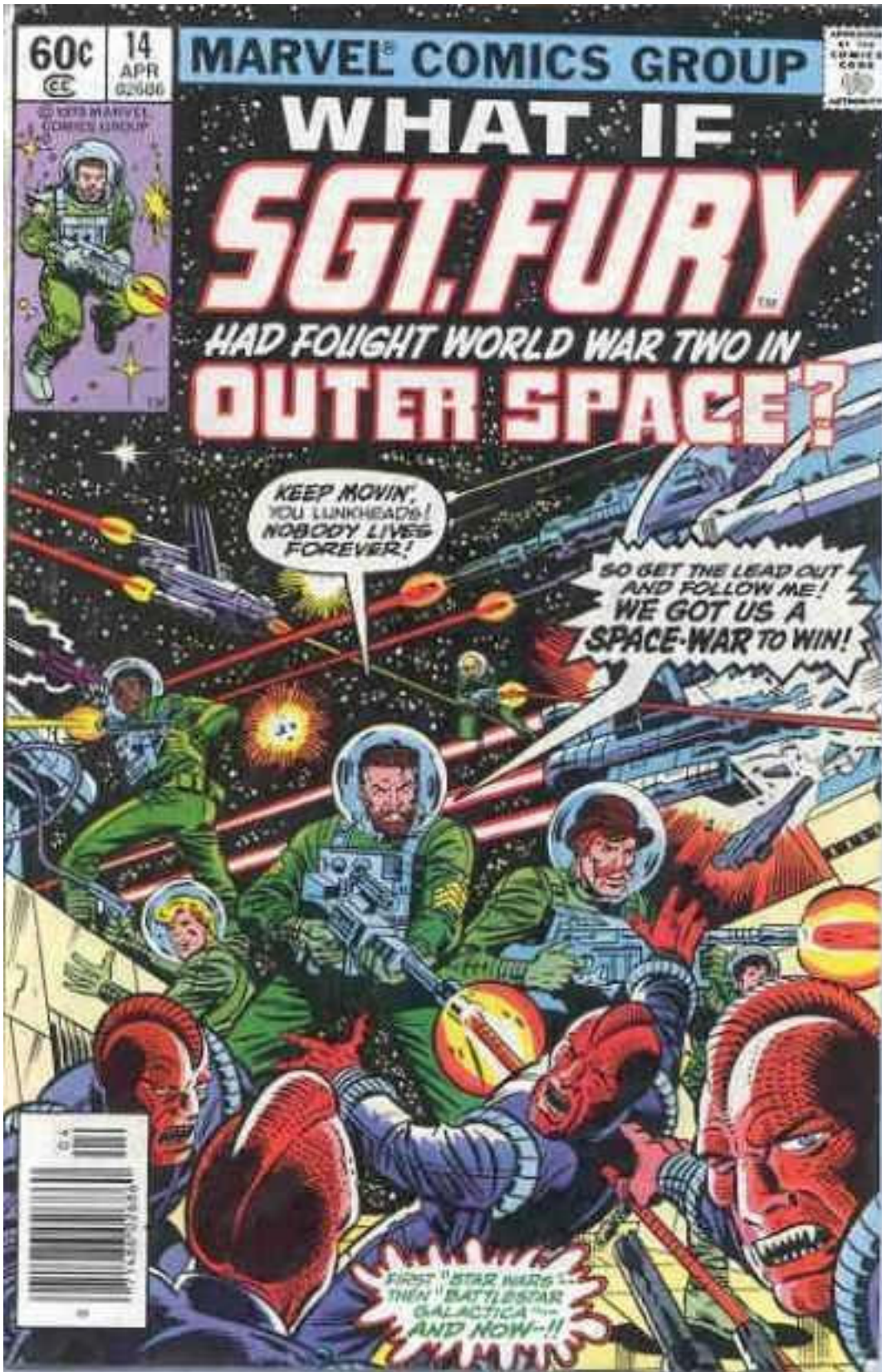
There are some other categories too, but you get the idea. I'm interested in showcasing the stuff that sounds weird as hell. So, without further ado...

Issue 14

Rather than explaining all that stuff up above, I should have just posted this cover. I feel like this image explains *What If?* and its appeal way better than I can. If a picture is worth a thousand words, this cover is worth a couple billion-thousand, and those words are space words.

This issue mostly took WWII events and locations and put them into space. Which is smart because it opens up the option of placing "space" on every word. "Space-war." "Space-Rifle." "Space-Panini-

Press." Plus, you KNOW Nick Fury was having nicotine fits since he couldn't chomp cigars in that astronaut getup.



Also, the alien in the lower-right of the cover...what's that guy doing? Winking? Or is he saying, "Eh, it's a space-living?" Why is he looking straight at me, straight into my soul? Why does he have such a beautiful blue eye?

Issue 11



A group of mysterious strangers sends a box to the Marvel offices, and it turns out this box contains...

cosmic rays? Can those be contained in a cardboard box? I feel like this is EXACTLY the kind of thing they're asking about at the post office when they ask about liquids, perishables, all that stuff. Cosmic rays are probably on that list somewhere.

Anyway, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Stan's secretary Flo and Marvel's Sol Brodsky are all bathed in cosmic rays, and they gain the powers of the Fantastic Four.

Little hint, terrorists: Probably a bad idea to send your enemies a box that gives them superpowers.

The most interesting part of this story is that Stan Lee, as Mr. Fantastic, grows a sweet mustache for some reason AND gains Reed Richards' inventing prowess. I'd always assumed that Reed Richards was a great inventor all along, even before the cosmic rays hit him. But it brings up the question, what sorts of characters would have been invented if Stan Lee had the mind of Reed Richards? Probably not Stripperella. Probably not that.

Issue 33

We're skipping over the Iron Man story. That seems like some holodeck bullshit that I just don't care for.

I always felt like this issue asked the wrong question about Dazzler. The real question, wouldn't a disco-based superhero who could create lasers and incredible light shows, not to mention being an outstanding singer and performer, not to mention that she does it all on ROLLER SKATES, wouldn't the existence of that person extend the disco era in the Marvel Universe at least a handful of years beyond our own?

But no one asks that question. Not enough space travel involved, I guess.

Dazzler becomes the herald of Galactus, which means she roller skates through deep space, searching for planets that can satisfy his appetite for planets. Which sounds really stupid, but the Silver Surfer is riding an actual surfboard. These are both beach-adjacent modes of transport. I think we're just used to the board.

Of course, as is always the problem



with heralding, Galactus likes planets that are inhabited. And of course, Dazzler tries to lead him towards planets without intelligent life because she's not a total monster.

Without getting too bogged down in the details here, Galactus feels a sort of love for Dazzler and releases her from her duties after a long-ass time of heralding. She goes back to earth, but it's been like a thousand years and everyone is dead. So she decides to go back and try and change Galactus' ways, see if she can get through to him and get him to stop eating entire planets.

This story is crazy for two reasons. Well, for a lot of reasons, but let's focus on two.

First, Galactus is a real ass. His employee works really hard, he sort of loves her, and he releases her, but it's been so long that everything she knew and loved is dead. Wow, what a gift.

Second, how did this turn into a story about a lady getting back into a bad relationship? "No, I can fix him. He enslaved me and made me find planets for him to consume, wiping out entire species. But I think he can still change." Ugh, read He's Just Not That Into You already, Dazzler. You're better than that.

Issue 42

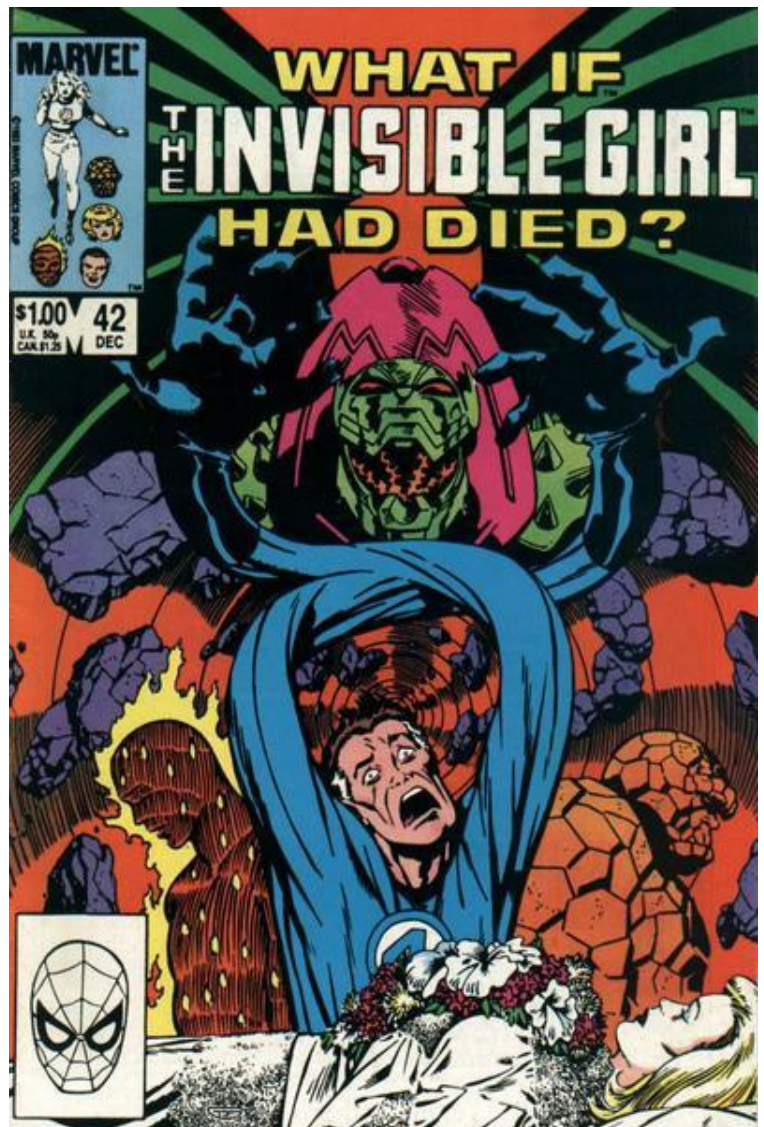
What this leaves out is that the Invisible Girl dies while giving birth to Reed Richards' baby.

Yep, it almost happened in the regular comics. Sue Storm almost died while giving birth to Franklin Richards, but the Fantastic Four managed to pull together and save the day with some kind of weird ray or some bullshit.

But what if they hadn't? Ever think of that, smart guy?

Well, smart guy, Sue Richards dies, the funeral is depicted, everyone is sad as hell, The Thing makes everyone cry, and Reed Richards eventually goes to the Negative Zone and kills the man responsible (sort of) for Sue's death by grabbing onto him and flying both of them into a star. A classic murder/suicide happy ending that leaves every reader with the joyful question, "Did Reed Richards die when he flew into that star, or did he die long before that, when the light went out of his life?"

On the one hand, what the hell, comics? This is not cool. On the other hand, if you can start a Pixar movie with the premise, "What if an old man lost his barren wife before they



accomplished any of their life goals?" I guess we can let this slide, right?

Vol. 2, Issue 10

As you likely know, Frank Castle's family was killed during a mob shootout in the park. After that, he became The Punisher.

In this version, the Castle family is saved by clouds. Yep, they're in the park, doing whatever the hell people do at the park, and then the clouds come out and they leave. Because it's cloudy, Vietnam vet Frank Castle is like, "Oh, my. Clouds. This does not bode well. Family, let's leave."

I'm not sure if the mob shootout still happened in this universe or if they took a cue from the Castles and decided to wait for sunny skies.

The Castle family was spared, but only temporarily. Frank is a cop, and he starts to uncover more and more corruption in the force until someone decides to shut him up, killing his entire family. And then, this Frank becomes The Punisher. Pretty much.

This issue is almost a statement on fate. Like the Punisher really had no choice, and there is no possibility of a cosmic re-ordering of events. Frank was doomed to be the Punisher. Clouds be damned.

The premise is kinda weak because, hell, everything ends up the same. But what interests me is the addition of the clouds. They could have done ANYTHING to change things that day. There could have been no shootout. The Castles could have decided to play laser tag instead (and Frank discovers he's got a real knack for it and becomes the laser tag league's must ruthless player). ANY member of the family could have said, "Wait, the park? Screw that. The park's boring." With any number of choices there, they went with one that's both bizarre and boring.

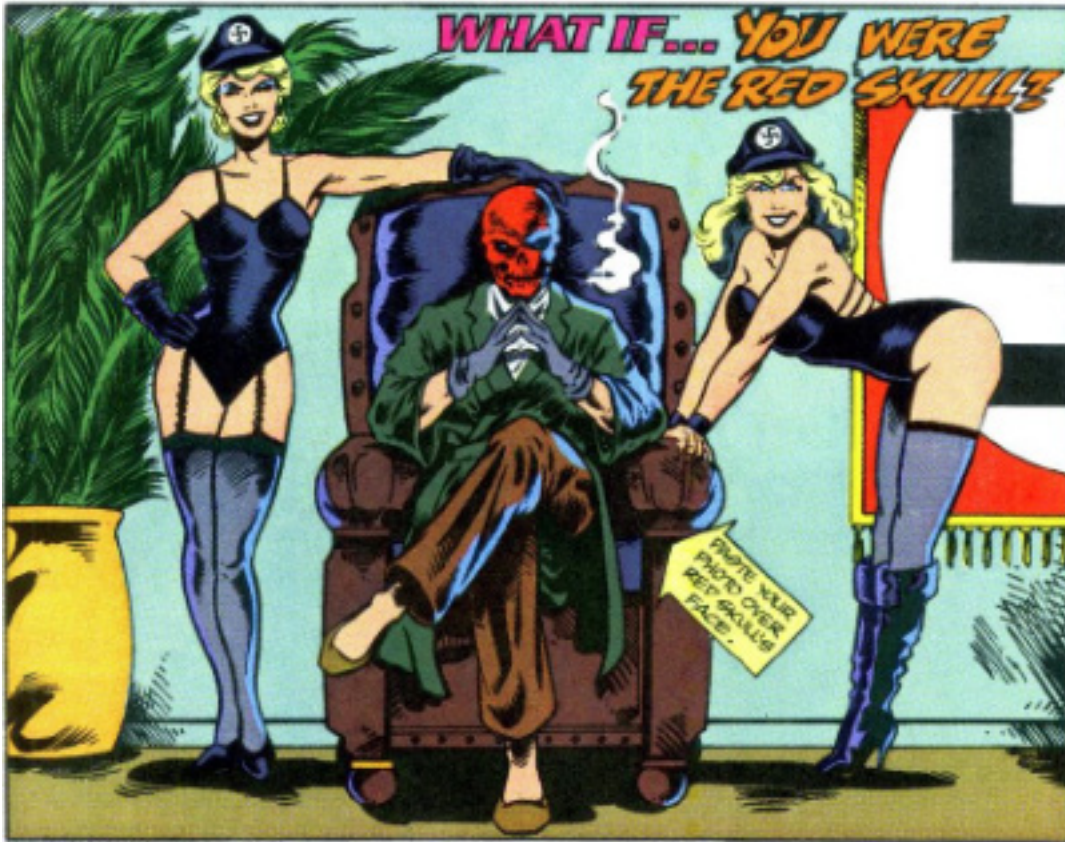
Vol.2, Issue 34

The guy's got a grotesque baby head, but those gams ain't half bad.

In this humor issue, Galactus becomes Elvis. Which sounds pretty weird, and then you flip to a page that asks what would happen if Dr. Doom were a pediatrician, and it looks like he's got a kid hooked up to a death ray machine that's



performing the world's most terrifying bris. There's also an option to paste your face on Spidey's face to imagine yourself as a hero, or to paste your picture on the Red Skull's to imagine what it would be like if you were...a hideously disfigured Nazi war criminal (Nazi babes included!).



Vol. 2, Issue 24

Now it's time to get crazeballs.

Wolverine becomes Lord of the Vampires, which I didn't know was a thing, but apparently you become Lord of the Vampires when you kill the previous Lord of the Vampires. I didn't know any of this information before, and now I'm wondering about this "landlord" I see once a month and how he became lord of the land.

Wolverine starts killing heroes, converting some into vampires, including the Juggernaut, who crushes Dr. Strange.

Enter the Punisher, who is possessed by the spirit of Dr. Strange. Yes, this means we see the Punisher wearing Dr. Strange's crazy red cape on top of his skull jumpsuit thingy.

Anyway, it all works out, pretty much. Who cares? When I saw that cape/skull combo, I'd gotten more than I needed out of this one.



Also, Wolverine did not have three fangs to match his three claws, which felt like a missed opportunity.

Vol. 2, Issue 42

At one time, Spider-Man had six arms. But then he was cured. You know, as happens to many of us when we don't have the right number of arms.

In the *What If?* version, the cure is not to be found, despite attempts to talk to all the science nerds Spidey can find, which is a pretty big number of people in Marvel Comics.

Peter Parker starts spending ALL his time as Spider-Man. He can't live as a normal person anymore, so he might as well Spider-Man it up, right?

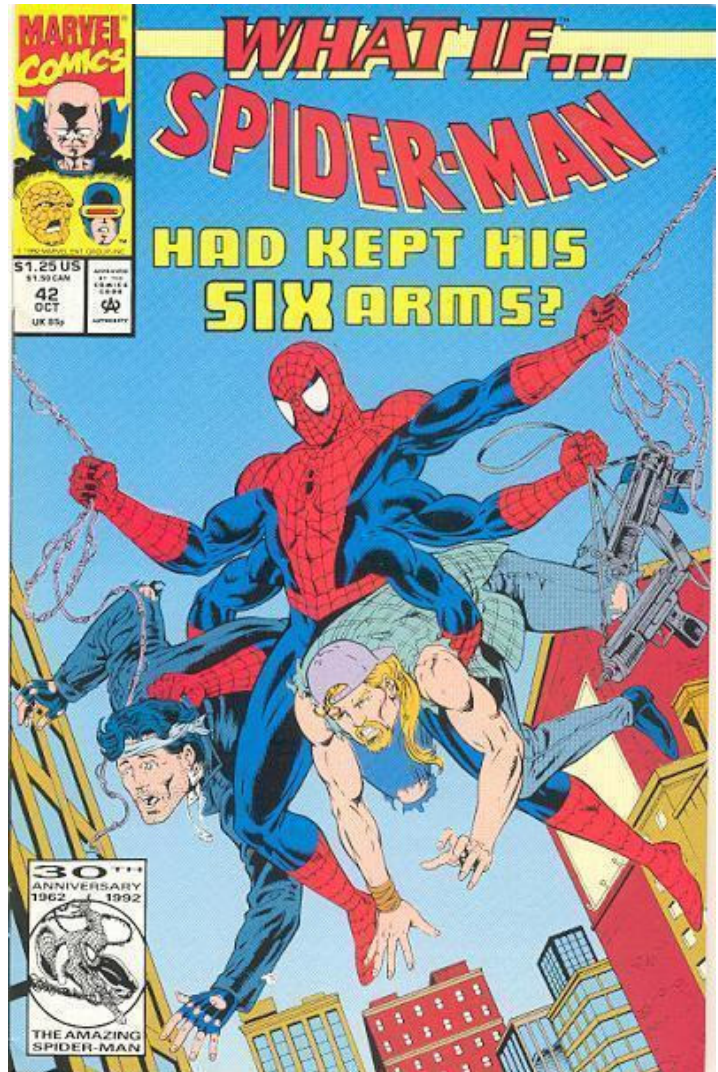
And what he finds out is that his six arms, though preventing him from living a normal life, make him a way better superhero. Dr. Octopus? More like Dr. Only Has The Same Exact Number Of Hands As Spider-Man Now. Not as catchy a name, that one, but Dr. Octopus will have plenty of time to contemplate a better name on his way TO JAIL.

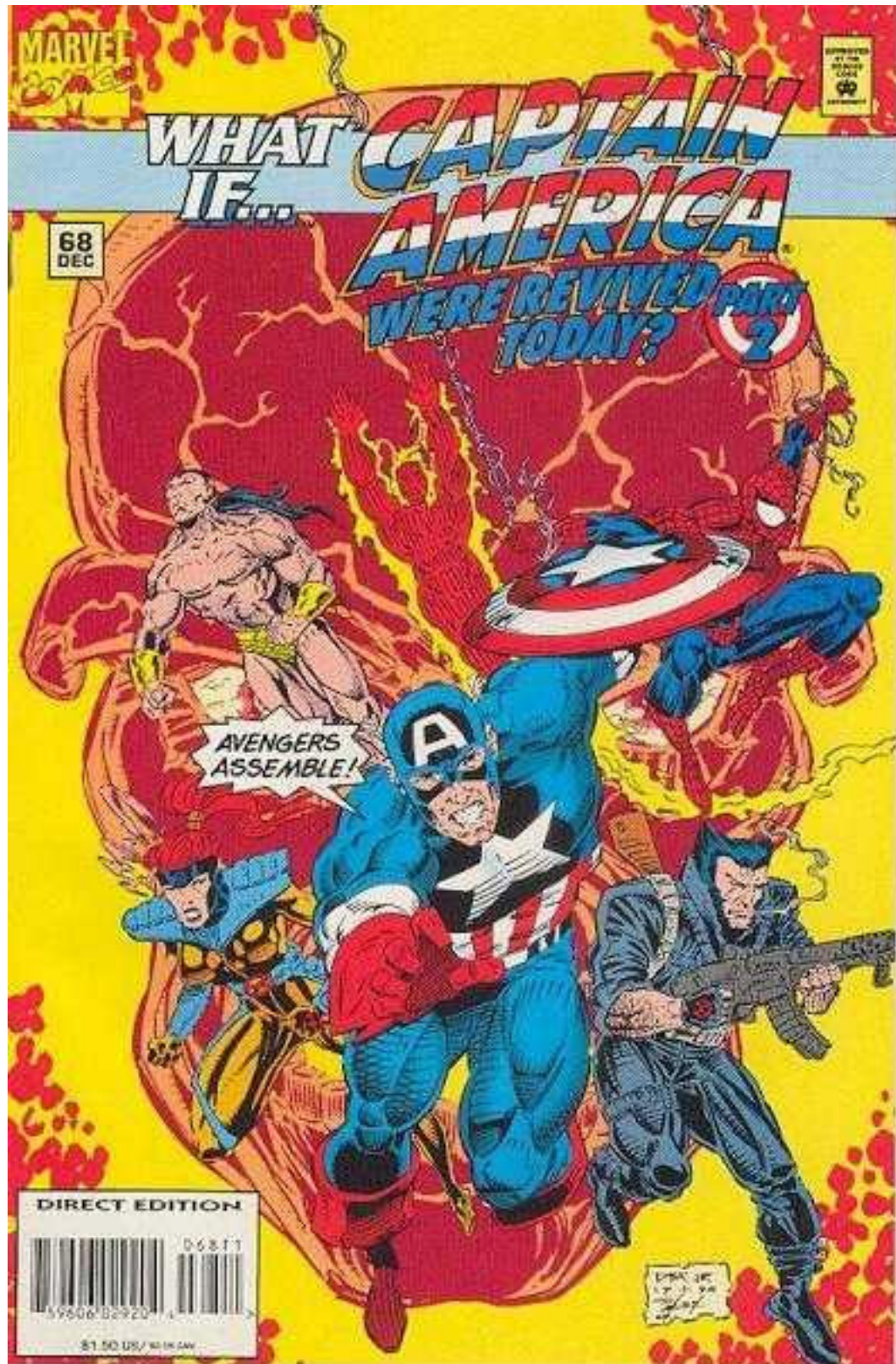
Spider-Man keeps all his arms forever, although Reed Richards invents a gizmo that turns the 4 extras invisible, which is something, at least, and Spider-Man becomes some kind of outspoken advocate for the disabled or something.

What I like about this one, the premise isn't that exciting, but it actually turns into a pretty good story. It's an ambiguous story. Is this better? Is it worse? And it's not a world-ender like so many others. It's a smaller story about the life of one character.

Another weird twist in the world of *What If?* is that you can never predict the quality of the story from the premise. A cool premise can be crap. Throw a couple extra arms on a guy, you might just have something. Who knew?

Vol. 2, Issue 68





Well, he would have come back in 1994, in this case, which means he would have been poised to really enjoy Tag Team's "Whoop! (There It Is)" during the peak of its fame. I assume Cap has heightened senses as a result of his Super Soldier Serum, which would allow him to enjoy the song on an even deeper level. Honestly, every way I look at it, this is the best possible scenario.

I Tried. I Just Don't Like Harry Potter



Before you start waving a wand at me and yelling "Fuckemupus!" or something, please hear me out.

I don't hate Harry Potter. I don't hate that this thing exists. I just don't like it. Don't enjoy it.

But I'm not sure whose fault that is. Mine or Harry's.

Let me explain.

Why I Read The Books

The two-word version of this section: a girl. If you want more than two words, keep reading.

Let's go back to the year 2004, near the release of the penultimate sixth Harry Potter book. I worked in a library by this time, and I saw my high school girlfriend's mom there from time to time.

This sort of things happens in small towns. You see your high school girlfriend's mom once in a while. She finds out you haven't read the Harry Potter series and she decides to buy you ALL the hardcovers because "you'll want them for your kids someday."

This sort of thing happens in small towns. Your high school girlfriend's mom gives you books for kids that you don't even have yet.

I started in on the first book, and I kept reading Harry Potter throughout the summer. Partially because the books were such a nice gift, partially because there was some rekindling going on between me and my high school girlfriend, and I thought reading Harry Potter, the one thing my high school girlfriend and her mom could agree on, would help this situation in some way. I don't remember thinking, "This is gonna get me laid." But what I did have was a realistic sense of self. I

didn't have incredible looks or charisma, but I had the work ethic to read a couple thousand pages in order to increase my make-out chances by even 1%. And while this isn't the purest of motivations, it carried me through five books.

Unfortunately, this "rekindling" ended up consisting of one kiss, one time sleeping in the same bed together (EXTREMELY platonically), and me getting heroically drunk with my high school girlfriend's grandfather, which was kind of fun and also even weirder than it sounds.

Also, my high school girlfriend's mom never bought me the last two books. Cheapass.

Why I Didn't Finish The Damn Series

It is a certain kind of insanity to read only five of the seven Harry Potter books. I'll admit, it doesn't make a lot of sense. But there were some things about them I didn't love.

This is where things get bitchy.

I didn't love Quidditch. I never understood the purpose of that. You're in fucking wizard school. You can fly. Why would you use these abilities to play a sport? That seemed nuts to me. An infinite world of possibility, and you're like, "Okay, but let's shoot hoops or something." Believe me, I didn't shoot many hoops as it was, but I would have shot even less if I had a book at home that would show me how to transform into a goddamn snake. In a world of snake men, do sports even matter?

I'm also not a fan of magic, in general. There's basically always a thing to fix a thing. What problem cannot be solved when magic is real? Eat this thing and grow gills. Use this gizmo and be invisible. Magic can feel, to me, like one deus ex machina after another, except it's really not traditional D.E.M. because, rather than being an overly-convenient fix every time, the overly-convenient fix is woven into the fabric of the world.

Why is there even a Slytherin? They should sort people to that house and then immediately a trap door would open under their dining hall table and dump them into lava. Duh, guys. Duh.

I find stories where the characters are in constant mortal danger to be exhausting.

Magical creatures aren't that cool to me. Because we've already seen them. Centaurs, unicorns, 3-headed dogs, adorable owls. How about, I don't know, a pig made entirely out of eyeballs or something, or a porcupine with human male genitalia in place of spines? A pornupine, if you will.

Because of the way I binged the books, I found the resetting of characters and setting to be pretty tedious. I 100% understand why the books are set up that way, and if I'd read them as they came out this wouldn't be a problem. But I didn't, so it was. J.K. Rowling should get into making an omnibus



edition, a version of the books in one giant tome, all the repetition and other stuff edited out so that it's meant to be read in one go. Has anyone on the internet made this? Surely someone on the internet has made this.

Finally, is there no Child Wizard Protective Services in this universe? How did Harry get sent back to live with those jerks all the time? I guess instructors at wizard schools don't have that whole mandatory reporting of abuse thing.

You don't have to agree with me on any of these points. But you can't convince me that I enjoyed any of these things about the books. It's all petty bullshit, but 90% of my life is dictated by petty bullshit. Why should reading choices be any different?

Let's Make Excuses

I'm not the first person to float the theory that some things have to enter your life before a certain deadline. This is easy to accept, in general, and very difficult to accept when things get specific.

For example, I say that if you haven't seen *The Princess Bride* before the age of, let's say 13, it will never occupy the same space in your heart that it does for someone who grew up with it. *Goonies*, same deal. If you don't read Jack Kerouac before you're 25, chances are you'll see him as a shiftless layabout. By the way, a good sign that you're too old for Kerouac is the use of terms like "shiftless layabout." If you didn't hear Nirvana's *In Utero* before 2005, I can't imagine "Rape Me" will ever make it into your regular rotation.

There's a certain window for these things.

Harry Potter wasn't a huge phenomenon in the U.S. until about 1999 or 2000. Yes, I know it was first published in 1997. But, according to this timeline, it wasn't until the 4th book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, that a Harry Potter was released simultaneously in the US and the UK. 2000 was also the year of the first film's casting and director announcement.

With that, I think it's fair to say that Potter Fever really hit the US somewhere around the year 2000, and didn't peak for several years more. Hell, the first Leakycon wasn't until 2009.

Here's my personal problem with this timeline. In 2000, I was just old enough to not want to do anything that could be remotely perceived as being "for kids." Did I watch *Pokemon* when I was in high school? Yes. Did I watch it at 6:30 AM and tell NO ONE? Also yes.

If Harry Potter had hit it big five years earlier or five years later, I think things would have been different. As it stood, I could drive a car when Harry Potter hit it big. I could go wherever I wanted. That, to me, at that age, was a magic that overpowered boy wizards and thick books.

It's Hard To Not Like The Stuff Everyone Else Likes

The painful truth here is this: I don't think I'll love anything the way many, many people love Harry Potter, and I did not enjoy being confronted with that.

For me, for about a decade, the world was filled with references and reverence for Harry Potter that, though inoffensive, weren't my jam.

This sort of thing doesn't bother me too often because I don't travel in the world of pop culture. Pretentious as it sounds, I travel more in the world of books, and even "popular" books are fairly marginalized in pop culture. For example, *The Da Vinci Code* was insanely popular as books go, and in 2006, the year of its release, that James Blunt song "You're Beautiful" came out. Is there anyone who hasn't heard that song? Is there anyone actively trying to avoid that song who has been successful? Maybe there's someone who hasn't been to a wedding since 2005, but it seems unlikely. Meanwhile, avoiding *The Da Vinci Code* was easy. Not to avoid its existence, but to avoid most of its contents, all you had to do was never pick it up.

Harry Potter transcended the world of books and became huge in the world of pop culture. It was the first book I experienced as unavoidable.

And there were times you almost felt like a traitor for being a bookish person who didn't like Harry Potter. It was the biggest thing to happen in books in forever. It got people reading. This was a book that had people lining up for a midnight release, which is something I can't EVER remember happening for a book. I remember a time when people lined up for concert tickets, I remember waiting in a line outside the theater to see the first Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie. But a book? Who waits in an outdoor line in the middle of the night for a damn book?

Only the true book fans. The truest of the true. Only they will be able to say that, once upon a time, they waited in line for the release of a book.

I wanted to be a part of something like that. Not that exact thing, but something from the world of books that was so undeniable that it invaded pop culture. Something that spoke to me deeply enough to get me to dress up in nerd glasses and carry a stick around.

The painful truth here is this: I don't think I'll love anything the way many, many people love Harry Potter, and I did not enjoy being confronted with that.

What Was Missing From Me?

It's a big question to ask based on a series of books about a boy wizard. But let's go with it for a second.

A few years back I was with a partner, and we were book shopping for her nephew.

We looked at loads of different books. I'd gotten to know her nephew just a little bit, and I had some pretty good ideas of what he might like. But each book I suggested, my partner would read the description and say, "...No. Not quite."

After we did this with half a dozen titles, she put one down and said, "I think he wants something mysterious. Like an adventure. Something that makes him think there's still exciting adventures out there in the world. Something like Harry Potter."

As a librarian, you start to recognize something in people. Once in a while, when talking about books, people will say something very guarded about themselves. Something about how they want the

world to be.

When I heard my partner say that, I heard that voice. The voice that says, "This is what I want the world to be like."

She didn't believe there was adventure in the real world. But she wanted to. And she wanted a book to do that. The way Harry Potter had for her.

This is where my problem comes in. I don't believe in magic. And when I talk about magic here, I'm talking about it in broad terms.

I don't think I've ever believed there was another world outside of our own. Another, hidden world of adventure. I don't think I ever really believed that going on an adventure to a Mushroom Kingdom was something I wanted. The idea was terrifying. I suck at jumping.

I've never been very interested in fantasy, and I think that has a lot to do with the kind of person I am. A sad, cynical person.

In Harry Potter, there's life and death, but life and death with purpose. A character's death always means something. Their life always means something.

In Harry Potter, there's something a tiny, weak character can do to save the world.

In Harry Potter, your parents might die, but they die protecting you from an evil wizard.

In Harry Potter, your pet dies, but it's not like when a real pet dies, where your cat sits on the sidewalk and just won't get up one morning when you call it, and by the time you get home from school that afternoon, your cat's gone.

When your pet dies in Harry Potter, it dies in spectacular fashion while saving your life.

In Harry Potter, the future is great. It took some hardship to get there, but it was worthwhile. You have a family. Your friends married each other, and that's perfect. You're happy. You see the happy future and its exact parameters, and it's good.

In regular life, I don't know what the future holds for me, or for anyone. Hell, I don't even know for sure whether or not I'll go back and finish Harry Potter someday.

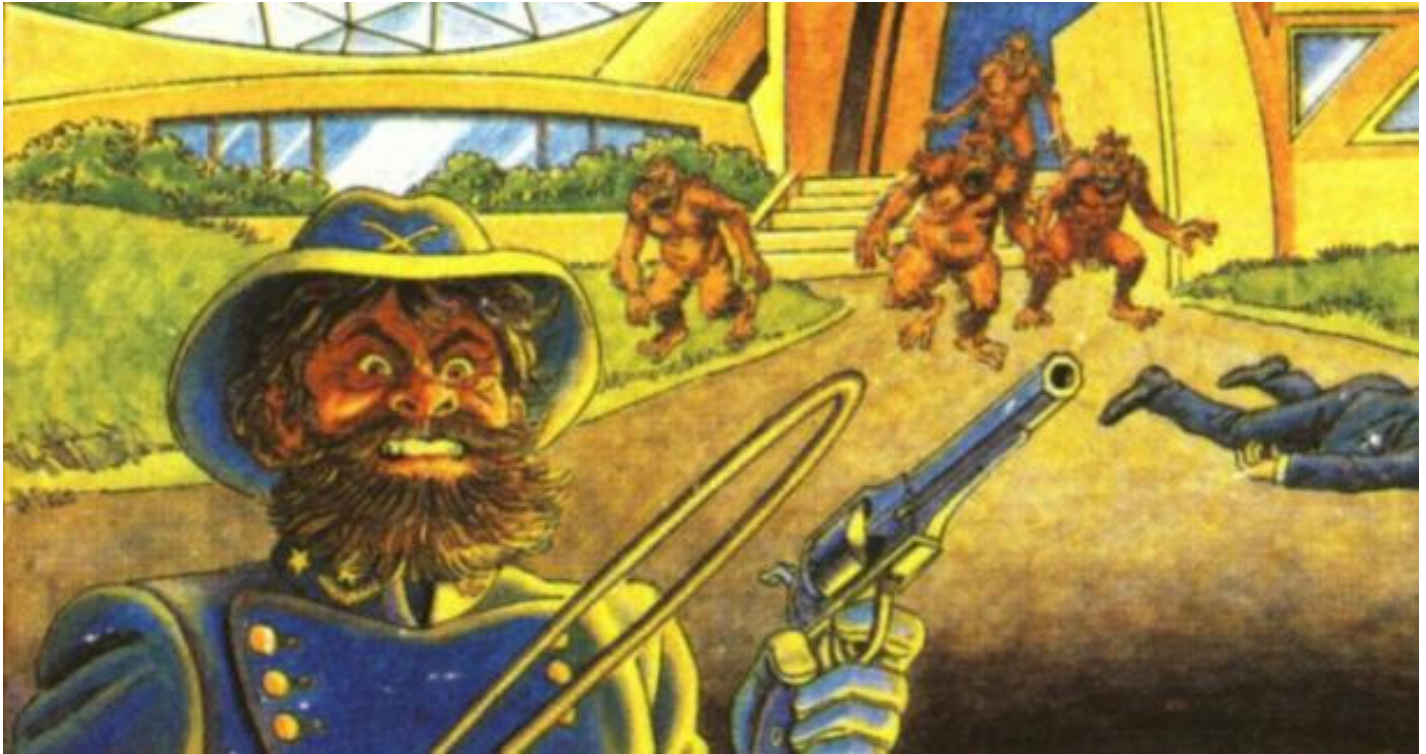
But what I do know is this: Harry Potter proved to me that I don't believe in magic. And it proved to me that, in my eyes, "magic" is things turning out good and wonderful more often than not. It proved to me that my definition of "magic" is pretty sad.

This is some corny shit, but here we go:

Harry Potter had magic in it, but its success was in drawing out the magic people already had inside. Their belief that adventure was somewhere to be had, their ideas of the importance of life.

But if you didn't have those things inside, there was nothing to draw out. There was no connection. No spark. There was no magic.

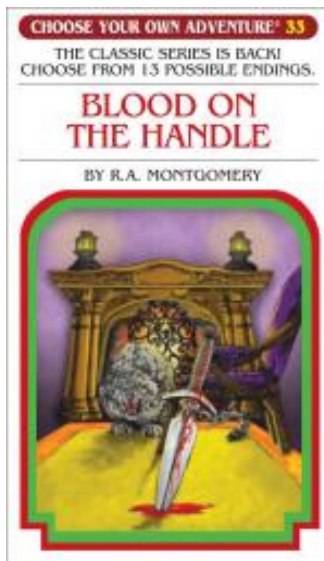
Can I Survive ONE Choose Your Own Adventure Book?



My experience reading Choose Your Own Adventure books as a kid was probably a lot like yours. I picked up a book that seemed more exciting than a regular book, made about three choices, and then saw my character consumed by fire. I picked up another one, made about three choices, and my lifeless corpse was flung into outer space.

But that was decades ago. Surely, now, as an adult, and as an adult who reads a lot and understands what writers are trying to evoke in children, I can survive one of these things. Right?

Attempt #1: 'Blood On The Handle'



In this book, my parents have vanished mysteriously on a sailing trip, and I now live with my uncle in his New Orleans mansion. My uncle calls his mansion "Swan Song," which tells you how rich he is. Poor people name their houses, but they don't name them things like "Swan Song." For example, I call my place "Over by where they found that dead lady in a trunk" (This really happened. I am the 99%).

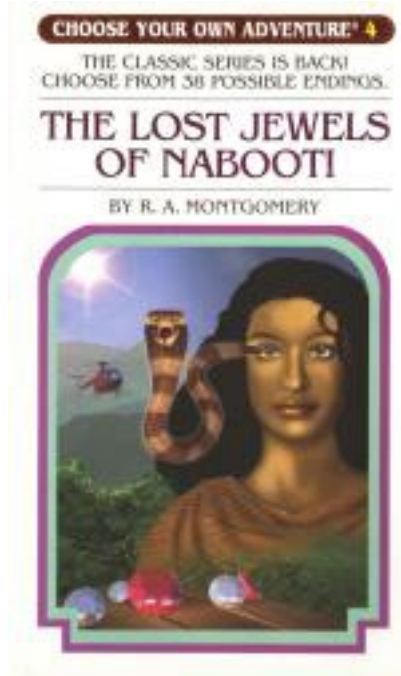
Anyway, the story starts off when I get dropped off by the school bus and have to walk the mile-long driveway up to Swan Song. Which makes me really angry right away. I have this super rich uncle, and nobody on his staff can pick me up from school? I have to walk up a road like a commoner? What the hell kind of rich kid walks? This is my chance to live a fantasy, rich lifestyle, and here I am using LEGS to get around.

When I get to the house, I find a bloody dagger in the floor! Then I look out the window and see some people packing my uncle into a car, and I run out, jump on my motorcycle (which my uncle gave me) and give chase.

From here, I make exactly four unimportant choices before I die, burned alive or possibly shot in a hayloft. It's unclear.

I wanted to skip to the end here because I'm still pissed off that I had to ride the damn bus and no one picked me up, and all along I had a goddamn motorcycle? Did the person who wrote the endings to this story read the beginning? What was I even doing on the bus? I was the Screech, riding the bus like a geek, when I could have been the A.C. Slater showing up to school on a Harley.

In all seriousness, I tried to make the choices that I felt would continue the plot of a lousy action movie. That method failed. Lesson learned. Let's see what's next.



Attempt #2: 'The Lost Jewels Of Nabooti'

This was an obvious next step. The woman with a snake in her eye is completely without reason and completely awesome. And who doesn't want to walk around saying "Nabooti"?

For a bunch of stupid reasons that don't matter other than "Jewels of Nabooti", my cousins need me to come to Morocco. So I hop on a flight to France. On the flight, I'm seated next to a dude who has no fingernails, and he's scribbling the word "Nabooti" on a paper over and over. I'm told by the book that this behavior seems suspicious, and I agree. Although I can't put my finger(nail) on it...

Hint to bad guys: If you're going to have a creepy appearance, don't give yourself away further by writing what you're pursuing on a piece of paper over and over. If you're going to assassinate Weird Al, don't get on a plane and write "Weird Al" over and over and draw a bunch of guns pointing all over the place. This is a dead giveaway.

Also, don't kill Weird Al. That would be a loss, and also the internet would be unbearable for like three weeks. "Seventeen Reasons Why 'My Bologna' Is Great." #WeirdAIRIP. Heartfelt tributes from a bunch of jerks who just like writing heartfelt tributes. Ugh.

Anyway, back to the story.

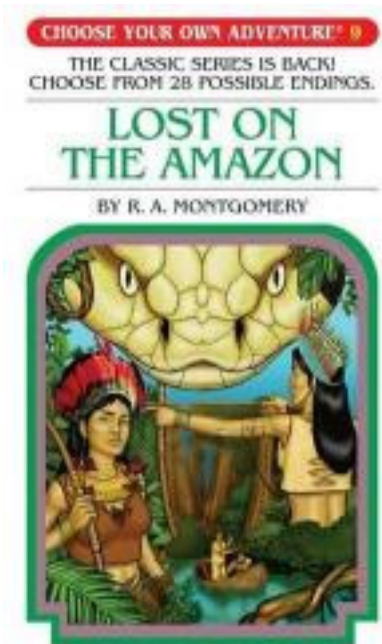
When I arrive in France, I can choose to go with the no-fingernail creep, who invites me into his taxi. But I pass on that one. Then I meet up with "a tall woman with intense eyes and a muscular midget in a track suit." They try to convince me to go with them. The "midget" "grins in an evil way."

I decide not to go with them either. Which turns out to be a mistake because I'm seized by customs, they find a diamond sewn into my clothes somehow, and I get extradited to the states.

I feel manipulated. Couldn't the book have said, "The midget grins and you see a gold tooth" and then

I could have thought Hm. Gold tooth. Sounds evil? But no, the book straight-up told me the "midget" was grinning in an "evil" way. Why would I possibly think he might be up to anything good? I only have the information provided by the book, and that information was all pointing towards this dude being bad news.

Lesson Learned: If you're going to smuggle diamonds through customs, you know where you need to put them.



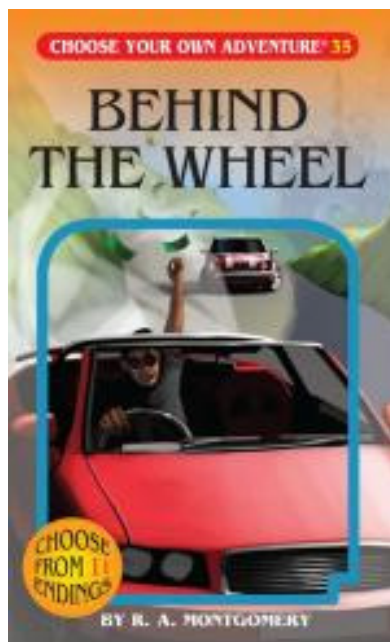
Attempt #3: 'Lost On The Amazon'

I wanted so badly to mock this book. But you know what's crazy, a sure sign of how stupid I am?

Why, as an adult man, did I think the Amazon river was in Africa? How am I that dumb?

I mean, sure, in the book I'm a doctor who specializes in leprosy and has spent many a day in weird canoes going up and down horrifying rivers in order to cure diseases, but if I, the reader and decision maker, don't know which CONTINENT I'm on, what are the odds that I'm going to get out of this alive? If I don't even have that one piece of information in my brain, what are the odds that I'm going to finish this adventure without being devoured by piranhas?

I died by piranha, by the way. But I can't blame the book for this one.



Attempt #4 'Behind The Wheel'

Ultimately, a fellow rally driver is killed, and it's kind of my fault. So no biggie as long as living with a death on your conscious isn't a problem. I guess that's an adventure? You semi-caused a man's death, and you're not going to prison, but you DO have to live with the guilt. I'm not sure that was the intended adventure, an adventure of emotion, a slog out of deep depression and guilt. I kind of thought this would be like a vroom vroom car race thing.

Most interesting, in this volume the author had to show what was happening in a secret conference between the bad guys, but the book is written in second person. How do you maintain the fourth wall, maintain the perspective, and show me a conversation I wasn't present for?

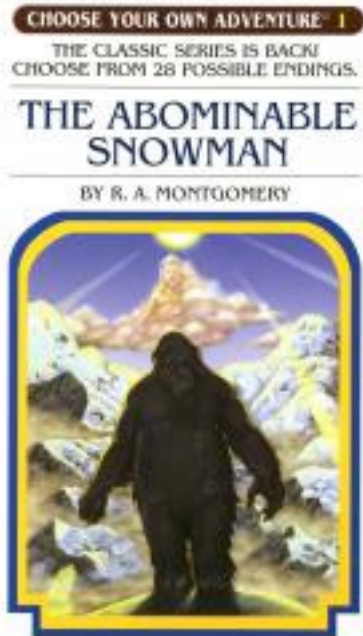
Watch the master at work:

"What would you say if I told you that these people were planning your death?" a voice inside your head asks. "That's right, your death. Right here in this little out-of-the-way cafe, your fate is about to be decided. Come, let's listen in."

At first you are jarred by this voice, its tone strange and yet familiar. Then you realize that it is your thought guide, and you give into it, allowing yourself to go along for the

ride. [cut to inside of cafe]

Oh, riiiiight. That's just my lil ol' thought guide. Nothing to get excited about. Just that thing that happens where I go outside of my own body and watch little real-time movies in my head regarding people sitting in a cafe and plotting my death. Seems reasonable. It's not like only a crazy person would think something like that was happening.



Attempt #5 'The Abominable Snowman'

I'm on some kind of expedition, and my idiot buddy gets lost. Some other idiots tell me that I can look below base camp, where the Abominable Snowman usually hangs out, or climb up higher.

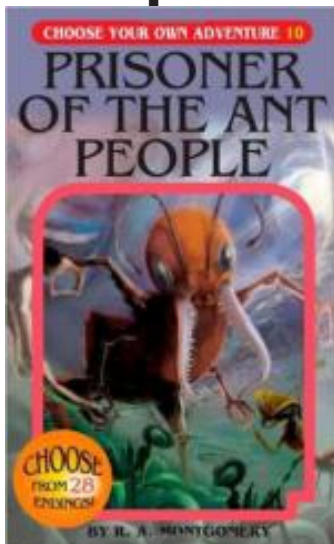
By the way, I'm calling the Abominable Snowman AbS from here on out. I'm not typing that over and over. You can't just attach an adjective to your name and expect others to go along. I don't force people to call me "The Semi-Admirable Pete" all the time.

To get through this adventure, I decide to Costanza the whole thing and do the opposite of what I think is right whenever a decision is presented. Original me would have said, "If the mythical creatures usually show up below camp, it doesn't make sense to waste energy climbing up when we could walk down. Screw it, let's coast." But this is the new me. We climb.

The climb starts okay. I manage to engage the services of an Asian slave through a bizarre incense-guessing ritual. I think that's supposed to be a good thing as opposed to a commentary on slavery. But then, in camp, AbS shows up, and though I manage to snap several pictures and use the flash to scare him off, the shutter on my camera doesn't close and the pictures are ruined.

And that's the end. I SAW AbS, but no evidence. So, on the plus, I didn't die. AbS didn't drink my spinal fluid at any point, so that's sort of a win. On the minus, I'm now part of a vocal minority who show up on Dean-Cain-hosted television regarding whether or not crap like AbS is real.

Attempt #6 'Prisoner Of The Ant People'



This one takes place in the future! I live in a dome, the classic sure sign of living in the future.

Anyway, I leave the dome almost immediately, at which point we get Futuristic Bit #2 which is that I travel by tube. The future is really into tubes. I guess somewhere around 2050 everyone will say, "What if we did your idea, but as a tube?" Sort of how everyone did with apps for a while.

Future Bit #3 is the fact that I have a Martian friend whose name is consonant heavy. Aliens hate vowels, perhaps because they have misinterpreted *Wheel of Fortune* and believe that one must actually purchase a vowel in all contexts.

I've got a dome, I've got tubes, I've got a Martian friend. Here is where things go off the rails.

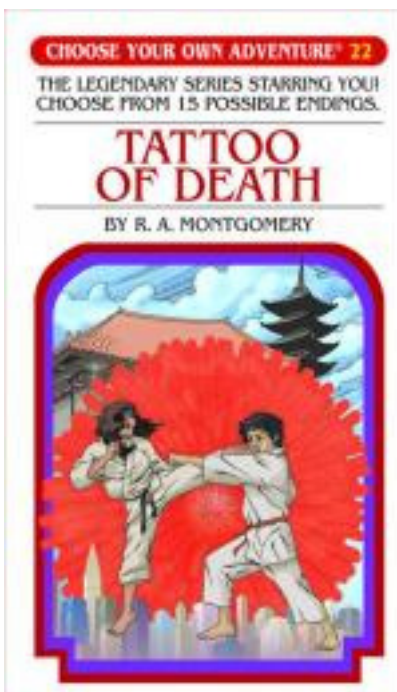
There is this evil dude called the Power Master. He's figured out something about molecules that has given him the power to disintegrate planets. So I, as a smart dude, am trying to stop the Power Master. For some reason my plan involves working with miniaturization, and when other portions of the research team disappear we decide to miniaturize ourselves and go looking for them.

I'd like to point out that making myself tiny is not my choice. This has to be the most idiotic plan when it comes to searching. When someone is lost in the woods, I bet there are very few rescuers who think, "If only we could miniaturize ourselves and effectively search a leaf as though it were the size of an entire PLANET."

After we get smalled, it takes me exactly two decisions to piss off my Martian friend and discover that I have misplaced the de-miniaturizer. After a brief argument along the lines of, "Smooth move, Ex-Lax" followed by a resounding, "Hey, don't call me Ex-Lax, Dum-Dum" my Martian friend decides to sit down and meditate (ignore me), and I'm all by myself, tiny and screwed.

This is the end of the book. So again, I didn't die. Not exactly. But I was the size of a grain of rice, and I pissed off my only friend.

Oh, and the title? *Prisoner Of The Ant People*? I only met one ant who died almost immediately. This makes me suspect that I made it a very short distance into the potential story. I guess the dying ant made me a sort of conversational prisoner. He was pretty boring. Maybe a more appropriate title for my adventure would have been *Social Prisoner of One Ant Person*.



Attempt #7 'Tattoo Of Death'

THIS time I figure I'll shoot for the big idea, which appears to be a karate fight in Japan. So whenever there is a choice, instead of being responsible or taking the light risk, it's balls to the wall.

And again, I don't die. But the book ends with me about to be taken to Japan, where the boss of this whole operation, Big Guy, is probably going to murder me. And that's it. Basically, it's like *Man On Fire*. You don't see me die for sure, but it's pretty thoroughly implied.

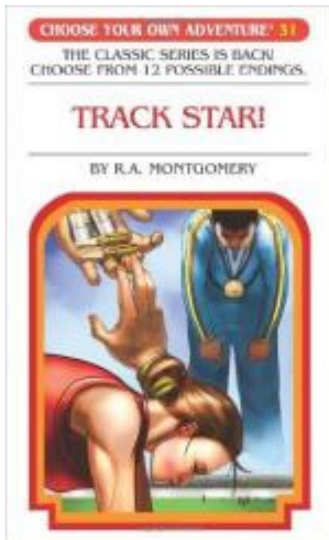
Just as a quick note, the main bad guy in this book is called Big Guy. Your friends are Ben and Sprazzle. And, my personal favorite because it's insane and also because it absolutely did not need to be in the book for any reason, the name of your father's attorney is Marvelous Marvin Carmichael.

Also, the dedication in this book is fucking excellent:

This book is dedicated to the concept of freedom, liberty, and justice to all. Thank you, founders of this democracy.

Yes indeed. You were the TRUE choosers of this great adventure we call America.

Attempt # 8: 'Track Star!'



I figure I have a decent chance on this one. Unlike seeking the yeti or getting along with Martians, running track is something I've actually DONE. And I didn't die while running track. Not even once. So this should be a snap.

I can't be sure where exactly things started to go wrong in this book, but as far as I can tell, making the decision to continue running track as opposed to taking a paid teaching job (as a high school senior, by the way) results in me taking drugs. The part where I took the drugs? No choice! One minute I'm making the decision to not work a boring job teaching dumb youth about whatever, the next I've somehow acquired steroids and injecting myself all to hell, which somehow results in me fracturing my own leg.

Oh, and BY THE WAY, I guess I must have really sucked at track in real life. Movies have led me to believe that coaches are always trying to convince players to do dumb shit to enhance their performance. Which never happened to me. I guess my performance wasn't even worth enhancing.

My main problem with drugs is that I think the kids who suck, the ones who would really benefit from drugs, aren't being offered them. That's bullshit. I mean, here we are, talking about how Lance Armstrong may have done some space age shit to shave 1/10th of a second off his times, meanwhile I was working really hard to not get LAPPED in the 2-mile. Who needs the drugs here, people?

**Death
truly
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damn
books.**

Attempt #9: 'Chinese Dragons'

The room where you sleep is small and cramped. In one corner is stored the sacks of seeds needed for planting. There are not as many sacks as usual and your uncle and his wife are worried.

OH MY GOD SO BORING! Who starts an adventure book for kids like that? "In the struggle to feed a family, commodities like seeds had to be carefully portioned out and rationed."

This is called Chinese Dragons. I want to see some dragons. Or at the very least, martial arts masters who are referred to as dragons. I don't think that's asking a lot.

Because I need a reason to push through, I challenge myself. Not to survive or get a good ending, but to see how long this book will last. If I survive for 15 minutes, I'll count it a victory. If it's less than that, failure.

Ready. Set. Go.

56 Seconds: I get out of bed. That's a start, I guess.

3 min 36 seconds: I haven't made any choices yet. And just to confirm, it sucks to be a Chinese farm kid whose parents are dead, especially if your cousins are a bunch of assholes.

4 min 10 seconds: I make a choice! Probably a bad one. I kind of have to decide if I'm going to watch a battle or work in a field. I abandon my work and head for the battle.

4 min 53 seconds: Ugh, now some dweeb is offering me a job. Leave me alone! I want to get to the battle! No, I don't want job security assisting some pot painter. I want a damn battle. Where is the battle? Where are the dragons?

6 min 31 seconds: I'm waiting in line to sign up for the army. For 45 minutes. The text ACTUALLY SAYS that I wait in line for 45 minutes. Wow. Choose your own adventure. How long will YOU wait in line? 45 minutes? 32 minutes? Choose and find out!

7 min 20 seconds: "You decide to stay with the army. 3 months later, you are a trained soldier." Time is so elastic in this story I can't even.

7 min 46 seconds: And as I'm walking around, having never spotted the enemy, I get shot in the chest with an arrow and die immediately.

Now, on the plus, the book ends with me in the afterlife, and my dad makes a little joke like "You didn't even see him coming, eh?" Thanks, pops. Good one.

On the minus, I made it about half the goal time.

And what the hell, R.A. Montgomery? I do almost nothing, and then an arrow hits me out of nowhere and I'm just dead? That's cheap, man. I read all your nonsense about grain and farming and blah diddy blah, and then you skip right over my warrior training, which was probably awesome, and just go straight to my death? How did I not get to fight anyone? How was there no "If you swing your sword high, go to page 42. If you swing low, go to page 77"?

Death truly stalks us all in these damn books. Even with a lower standard of "Winning" I couldn't make it. Damn, Damn Damn.

Attempt #10: 'Moon Quest'

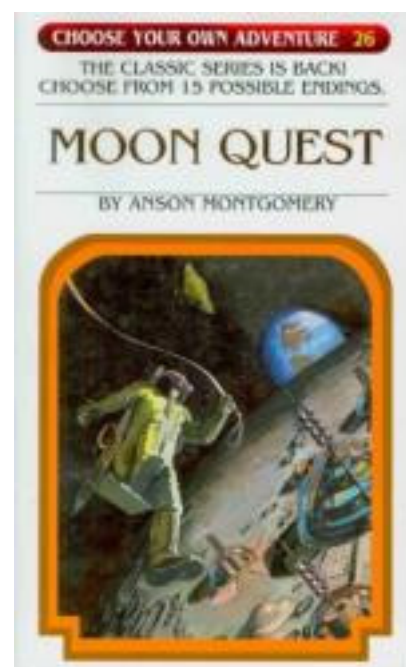
Two factors in my favor here.

1. This book is by ANSON Montgomery, not R.A. (Raging Alcoholic Montgomery, I assume). Maybe Anson is more reasonable.

2. I've decided that if I die in a way that's relatively cool, ON THE MOON, I'm counting it as a victory. Explosion, mutant, SEXplosion. These sorts of things count. Impaling myself on the original moon landing flag. You get it.

Here we go! The Moon!

The book starts with some important background information, which is the fact that my parents like to watch Earth sports and mock basketball players who are hampered by stupid Earth gravity. Fools.



They should come get some less gravity on the moon. Your Earth slam dunks pale in comparison to our lunar dunks.

Then I get choice one, and it's a doozy.

One option is to work leading around a crew of diplomats. If Lethal Weapon movies have taught me anything, it's that you can do whatever you want and then yell "Diplomatic Immunity" and not get in trouble. Until one sensible person is like, "Dude, I just watched you gun a bunch of people down. I don't think you know the laws totally right, and I'm going to take my chances here."

Option two is to go on a mission to the far side of the moon. Which is like 3,300 miles away. I'm just praying, begging to not have to actually read a lot about this drive. Please, if there's a (Moon) god, let this be a part where the book says, "And then, after a long drive we don't need to expand on, you were there."

I opt for the Moon road trip. My goal is to die on the moon. Eyes on the prize, Pete.

Conclusion: I end up alive, and nothing cool happens.

Damn it.

Anson Montgomery spared my life, but was it worth it? I mean, I was on the moon in a spider bus thing, but then I was back in the colony, and I went to bed and that was it.

And, unfortunately, I did not make it within my parameters of winning, lowball as they were.

You win this round, Montgomery II. You win this round.

Summary

Books read: 10

Victories: 0

Screw: Adventure in all forms

7 Things That Are Ruining Amateur Book Reviews



Amazon, Goodreads, LibraryThing. I was excited when these outlets for amateur book reviews showed up. Finally, I could tell these snooty book reviewers, these Kakutanis, to take their five-dollar words and...ingurgitate them wholly.

But that excitement came and went a long time ago. It was a different time. I was young. Excited about the future. I hadn't yet seen the horrors to come.

My mistake was thinking, for a brief moment, that something could be turned over to the crowd, and that the crowd would handle this new power well.

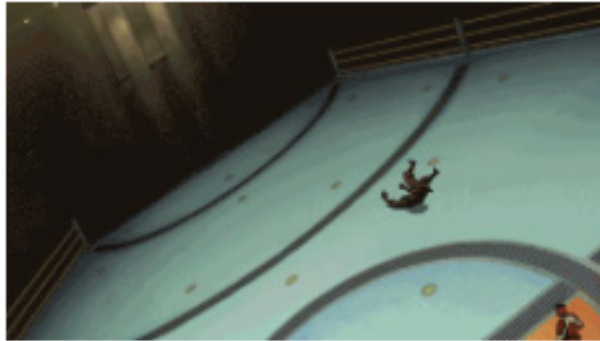
You all are screwing up your amateur book reviews. Here's how.

GIFs

I don't care how you pronounce this word, just quit using GIFs in your book reviews. Notice I said "GIFs," as in "multiple." I can handle a GIF here and there, but it's getting a bit out of hand.

Take this review, for example:

FEELS



All told, 8 GIFs. 8! All expressing the same thing: *The Fault In Our Stars* is sad.

No shit!

We get it, you're a millennial, you're uh-mazing, technology is woven into the fiber of your being, you love saying someone is "woke as fuck." 4 soundless, out-of-context seconds of *Supernatural* can express the things you never dared say.

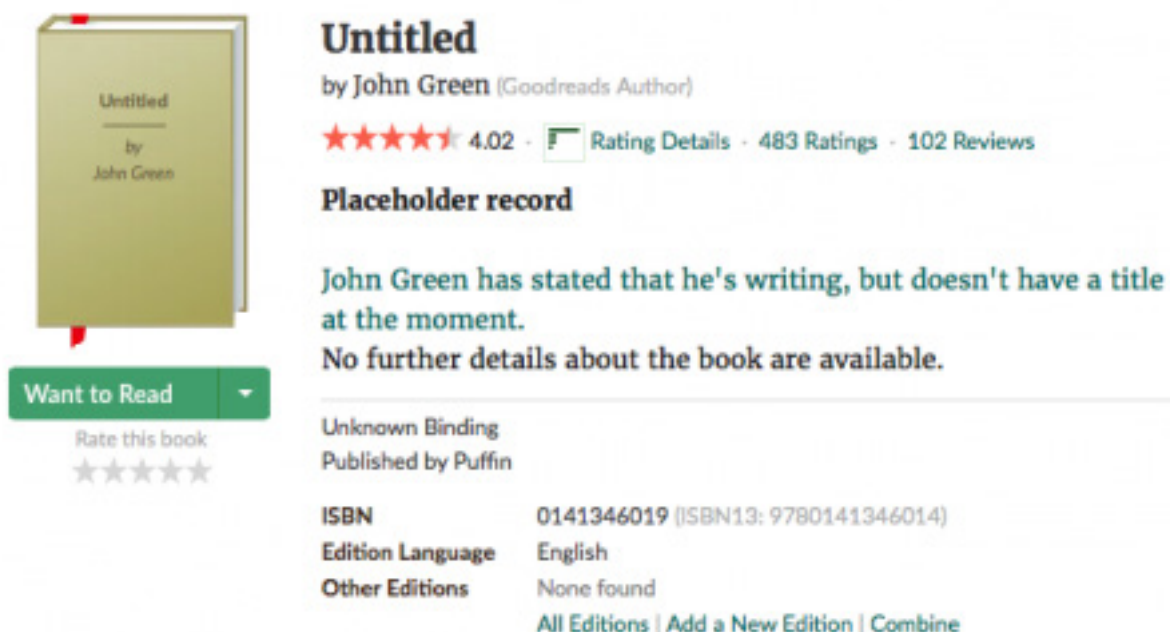
But can we compromise? Can we do a book review with less than 8 GIFs?

I know it feels like work to slap a bunch of GIFs around on a page, but this is not giving me ANY useful information about whether or not I'll enjoy the book. Imagine if we were talking, I asked you what you thought of *Catcher In The Rye*, and you just started quoting Simpsons lines. Yes, I'd be somewhat delighted, but I wouldn't learn anything about the book.

GIF it a rest.

Pre-reviews

Let's take a look at how the newest John Green book is doing on Goodreads:



The screenshot shows a Goodreads book page for an untitled book by John Green. The book cover is a plain olive green with the text "Untitled by John Green". The page displays a 4.02 rating from 483 ratings and 102 reviews. A "Placeholder record" section states that John Green has stated he's writing the book but doesn't have a title at the moment. Below this, there are fields for "Unknown Binding", "Published by Puffin", "ISBN 0141346019", "Edition Language English", and "Other Editions None found".

Untitled
by John Green (Goodreads Author)

★★★★☆ 4.02 · [Rating Details](#) · 483 Ratings · 102 Reviews

Placeholder record

John Green has stated that he's writing, but doesn't have a title at the moment.
No further details about the book are available.

Want to Read

Rate this book
★★★★☆

Unknown Binding
Published by Puffin

ISBN 0141346019 (ISBN13: 9780141346014)
Edition Language English
Other Editions None found
[All Editions](#) | [Add a New Edition](#) | [Combine](#)

4.02. Did I mention that this book doesn't exist yet?

John Green's newest, writing that's not even finished, is a 4.02.

How? To who? Is it that the idea of John Green having a new book is a 4.02? Is 4.02 a good score for the idea of a book?

Why are people doing this? Who are you, people who've reviewed this already? What's the point?

The fact that it's possible to do this is strange, but the fact that 483 people have gone ahead and rated a non-existent book, a book that's not even written yet, is just mind-blowing.

And the most baffling part is deciding who the worst offenders are here.

Is it the people who give the book 5 stars? They're optimists, which is good. But they're undeniably cooking the books here.

Is it the 3-star people? They're the most confusing, because why even bother to share this non-opinion with the world?

Is it the 1-star people?

Actually, it's not that baffling a problem. It's definitely the 1-star people who are the worst. What the hell is wrong with you? You 45 people sicken me.

The question it begs, what integrity do these reviews have? Hell, this 4.02 rating puts this untitled novel as John Green's third best! John Green's third-best book is one he hasn't even written. Do I even need to talk about how profoundly stupid this is?

Free Copies

"This reviewer was given a free copy of the book in exchange for an honest review."

I believe in the goodness in all of you, but I don't really believe in free copies for amateur reviews. And I'll tell you why.

If a publisher is giving out free copies, it's because they want good reviews. Not honest reviews. Nobody wants feedback. They want affirmation. And a publisher worth its salt is giving out these free copies to people who are likely to give the book a favorable review, based on their past reviews and interests. While you may have accepted the book on what you perceived to be fair terms, you really didn't. The publisher is hedging bets here.

And while you may dutifully type in the text about fair reviews, be honest. We all know that reviewing a book favorably means more free books. There's something to be gained by both parties here.

I'm not saying it's wrong to be compensated or even to be given free books. I'm saying that this makes you a pro, not an amateur, and you've got no business pretending otherwise. And there are some inherent issues when you switch roles and become a professional reviewer.

It's something that's crippled film critics for a long time. It's rare to find a professional film critic who is reviewing a movie on the level of, "Was this worth my twelve bucks?" Because they aren't usually paying that twelve bucks. They're mostly looking at whether or not a movie made some impact on the world of film, a factor I couldn't care less about. And they very rarely acknowledge that their position as film critics, and the fact that they watch movies professionally, has taken them away from the opinion possessed by most audiences.

There are plenty of movies where the review chasm between amateurs and pros is huge.

John Green's third-best book is one he hasn't even written. Do I even need to talk about how profoundly stupid this is?



TOMATOMETER ⓘ 20% Average Rating: 4.2/10 Reviews Counted: 25 Fresh: 5 Rotten: 20	All Critics Top Critics Critics Consensus: A juvenile, ugly movie that represents the worst tendencies of directors channeling Tarantino.	AUDIENCE SCORE ⓘ 91% liked it Average Rating: 4.2/5 User Ratings: 334,594
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TOMATOMETER ⓘ 16% Average Rating: 3.9/10 Reviews Counted: 112 Fresh: 18 Rotten: 94	All Critics Top Critics Critics Consensus: Tyler Perry's successful play can't make the move to the screen; this mix of slapstick, melodrama and spirituality lacks a consistent tone.	AUDIENCE SCORE ⓘ 87% liked it Average Rating: 4.0/5 User Ratings: 88,995
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ADD YOUR RATING

★★★★★

Add a Review (Optional)

And this cuts both ways, critics liking a movie that amateurs don't:



TOMATOMETER ⓘ 93% Average Rating: 7.2/10 Reviews Counted: 127 Fresh: 118 Rotten: 9	All Critics Top Critics Critics Consensus: A kinetic and fun movie that's sure to thrill children of all ages.	AUDIENCE SCORE ⓘ 46% liked it Average Rating: 2.6/5 User Ratings: 426,737
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ADD YOUR RATING

★★★★★

Add a Review (Optional)

Post

I saw *Escape Plan*. I was drunk. Stallone and Arnold blew up the Jesus guy with a rocket launcher. While this didn't change my life in any way, it was well worth the price of admission. But I'm not a film critic. I'm just someone who watches a movie.

Here's the ultimate point. The distinction between amateur and professional critics is important, especially when it comes to certain genres and targeted audiences.

By accepting free copies, you're crossing over into the territory of a professional, but without seeing yourself as a professional. It's dishonest and disingenuous, and it takes away from the purpose of amateur reviews.

Quibbling About Stars

"I gave this a 3, but it's really more like a 3.5..."

Stop with this. Your stars are not that precious.

Essentially, a 5-star rating system with half-steps is a 10-step rating system. So let's just pretend a 10-star system exists.

Tell me, what's the difference between a 3-star book and a 4-star book? Which books would you put next to each other as examples of what delineates a 3-star book and a 4-star book?

Furthermore, what's the useful distinction here? I'm not going to read a book that's a 3 out of 10, and I'm also not going to read a book that's 4 out of 10. Both are pretty far away from a passing grade. Flip side, I'll read a 9 or a 10.

So why bother? Nobody cares about your half stars.

Maybe the problem is that the current system is not clear. Let me help by clarifying the 5-star system.

1 star: Garbage. Do not read. If there's a choice between being on fire and reading this, consider that skin grafts have come a long way.

2 stars: Pretty much also garbage, but I feel bad giving this 1 star for some reason. Most likely because the author is still alive.

3 stars: Passable, inoffensive, but didn't light a fire. Maybe had a shining moment like Jesus being blown up by a rocket launcher.

4 stars: Good to very good. Would read again if I got Men In Black mind-wiped.

5 stars: Fave.

Done.

"Full Review At My Web Site"

I don't give a damn about your web site, and I'm not clicking over there. You and your screwy web sites.

I can barely click the thing that shows me the entire review. If you think I'm going to your completely separate site with its crazy layout and Google AdSense nonsense, you're out of your mind. Don't bother.

Not Reading Any of the Available Information

I read a review of Anthony Doerr's *Memory Wall*, a book which has fossils on the cover. The reviewer

was mad because the book had nothing to do with fossils.

Here are a few other books that have covers that might confuse this reviewer:

Catcher In The Rye is not about the science of rainbows.

The Godfather is not a treatise in marionette operation.

The Hunger Games is not a book about a golden bird that carries an arrow around.

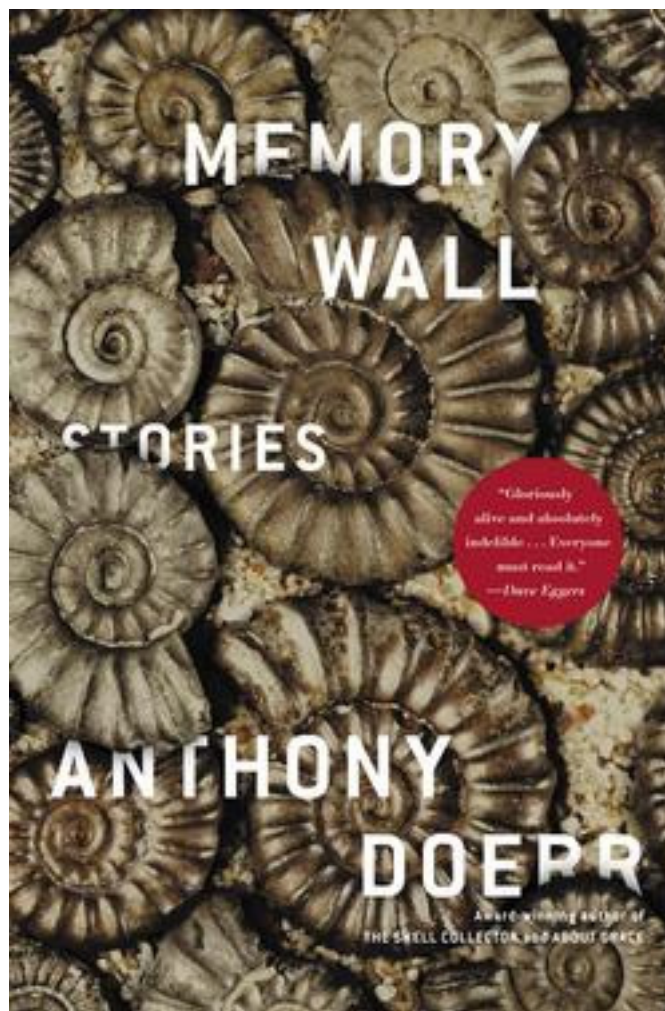
But let's not just pick on this one person. Let's look at another dum-dum who was ALSO confused by *Memory Wall*:

Not quite sure what I expected but what I got wasn't it! For one thing - I thought it was a novel when, actually, it was a novella plus short stories. Really liked a couple of the short stories, though. Will probably check out other books by this author.

1 like · [Like](#) · [comment](#) · [see review](#)

[flag](#)

Um, should we take a closer look at the book's COVER?



Computer: Enhance!



It's slightly obscured by the aforementioned fossils. But the word "stories" is definitely right there, on the cover.

In general, there's not a lot of reading required to know what a book is about. You've got the cover, you've got the flap/online description. And yet, this kind of thing comes up in amateur reviews ALL THE TIME. Can you all please, for the love of god, please read this very small amount of text before picking up a book and reviewing it?

Wasting Everyone's Time With Summary

I wrote an entire column about this once, so I won't get too preachy about it. But damn, there's a summary of the book right above the spot where your review shows up. Not to mention the fact that most other reviews are summary-heavy, so why do we need yours? We have plenty of outlets for summary, and the thing is, summary isn't as helpful as you might think when it comes to reviewing a book.

Let me make a comparison. I live in Colorado, home of the craft beer. Which is awesome, except sometimes you just want to drink a goddamn beer and not hear the entire story of a beer.

When you mosey into a taproom and ask "What's Beer X like?" you'll hear two different kinds of answers.

The Good Kind: It's light, refreshing. A hint of citrus. Maybe a little like a Blue Moon, if you've had that.

The Bad Kind: The story of this beer starts with the water. Fresh Rocky Mountain springs sluice through the natural world all around us. Meanwhile, on a nearby farm, hops are growing with the perfect mixture of sun and shade, creating an ideal plant structure for extracting the beautiful flavors for this beer..

The good kind of beer review tells me a little bit about what it tastes like. The bad kind is all plot, A to B to C, and no flavor information.

Hearing what makes something good is different from hearing what it's all about.

Teenage Wasteland: Please, No More Teenage Superheroes



Look at this. The image above these words is the cover to *Ms. Marvel #007*. Selfies with Wolverine. Ridiculous.

I'm old. I don't want to see teens anywhere, but there are two places I ESPECIALLY don't want to see them: on my lawn and in my comics. They're screwing up both. And it seems like there are so many teen heroes now.

Kamala Khan, new Ms. Marvel, is in high school.

Miles Morales, new Ultimate Spider-Man, was 13 when he started showing up in comics.

Riri Williams, the new Iron Man, is 15.

Nova is almost too young to be called a tween.

The world of comics is brimming with teen superheroes. And although Marvel and DC NEVER read my letters, as evidenced by the fact that *Lobo The Duck* was not made into a regular series, I hope that someone out there will read these words and stop with all the damn teen superheroes already.

Are young heroes attracting young readers today? It's not like everything we did in the 1940's works now. Looking at you, Germany.

Teenage Superheroes Don't Do What They're Meant To

How did this whole teen superhero thing start?

To find out, let's go back to the late 1930's. The U.S. was on the brink of war, people were drinking something called an egg cream, which sounds super gross. And Batman was fighting crime alone.

It's hard to imagine Batman without Robin. It's like imagining Captain America without his shield. Wait, maybe that's a bad example. Although I would enjoy a version of Batman that used Robin mostly as a human shield and occasional projectile.

But it's true. Batman once existed without Robin. In fact, Batman was caped crusading for about a year before it was decided that he needed a younger sidekick to "make [him] a more accessible character to kids and grow young readers." That's how we got Robin, the teen sidekick with a heart of gold and the smoothest legs in the biz. Seriously, that guy could have made a mint endorsing razors.

And it worked. Robin hit the scene in 1940, and sales went up. Bucky was introduced in 1941, Superboy in 1945. Things just kept rolling from there, and before long, you couldn't throw an America-branded shield without it smashing into a superhero too young to drive.

Here's my question: Are young heroes attracting young readers today? It's not like everything we did in the 1940's works now. Looking at you, Germany.

In all seriousness, you would think with the increase in teen heroes, we'd see an increase in teen readership, right?

Well, in a study conducted this year, readers under the age of 17 accounted for only 5% of comics readers (granted, this study was conducted via Facebook, which definitely muddies the waters). A similar study conducted by DC comics a couple years ago found that fans under 18 accounted for about 14% of their buyers. The highest number I could find for buyers 18 and under was around 20%, so it's probably fair to say that teenage buyers make up something like 15% of the market.

Those numbers seem pretty weak. And I think I can tell you why.

The Philosophy Behind Teen Heroes Is Bunk

Alright, fine, there may have been an increase in teen readership in the 1940's. However, as much as we might want to attribute this to Robin's gams, it's the post-war era of the 1950's that really saw the birth of the American teenager. This is when businesses started to respect and seek the purchasing power of the American teen. There's a good chance that the increase in teen readership was more a result of the increase in dollars in the pockets of teen readers, or perhaps the fact that teens were hardly considered a demographic previously.

The numbers are as questionable as Power Girl's boob window, but I think the philosophy guiding the creation of teen heroes might be even worse.

Here's the philosophy behind putting so many teens in capes:

"Teens want to see an aspirational character, but in order for a character to be aspirational, they need to be of a similar age."

In other words, Batman wouldn't be aspirational for me, as a teen, because he's an adult. Does that seem dumb to anyone else?

The mistakes here are assuming that teens:

A: Do not see themselves as adults.

B: Would say to themselves, "You know, I would like to be like Batman, but my age. And with the shortest of short pants. And I'd smile more. Someone who is just generally less cool."

Now, here's my question: Is there a teen on the planet who would prefer to be Robin as opposed to Batman? Superboy as opposed to Superman? Is there a teen who aspires to be Bucky as opposed to Captain America?

I don't think so.

These Teenagers Aren't Real Teenagers

Let's move away from the business-based reasons teen heroes are dumb and move into the more narrative reasons they're dumb. Or really smart. Too smart, even.

Riri Williams, the new Iron Man, is 15. And she's attending MIT. And she rebuilt an Iron Man suit from scratch. When I was 14, I built a "robot" out of my dad's old beer cans and hot glue. And I wrecked a pair of his prescription sunglasses, popped the lenses out to make eyes.

Peter Parker, same deal. He developed web shooters and a web formula as a teen, and he's a science genius. I developed a web fluid of sorts in my teens, and let's just not talk about it anymore.

If teen heroes aren't science geniuses, they're something else. They're morally perfect (Peter Parker and Miles Morales). They're witty as hell (Kamala Khan). They're athletically uber-talented (Robin). They are ALWAYS good-looking. Always. When I was a teenager, I looked like a C.H.U.D. but greasier.

These are not real teens. They're not. They're not even real people. I'm going to just say it, teens have flaws. About 40% of those flaws are related to leaving empty bags of Flamin' Hot Cheetos everywhere. I work in a building used by teens quite a bit. Trust me on this one.

Comics definitely require suspension of disbelief, but living in a world where all teens are so perfect, that's too far for me. I'm apt to believe in a world where men have claws made of a fictional metal, but a world of perfect teens is too far-fetched and, frankly, kind of boring.

There's No Wrong Choice

Part of the deal with superheroism is the increase in power also comes with a mandate to use that power responsibly. If only there were some shorter way to say that. Maybe uttered by an old man who got carjacked.

As readers, we kind of expect adult superheroes to behave responsibly, and a lot of compelling stories come out of the fact that adults don't always behave like adults.

2 prime examples:

Green Lantern John Stewart kind of screwed up and kind of blew up an entire populated planet. It was his mistake. And it was a tough one to deal with. Things got a little...out of hand.



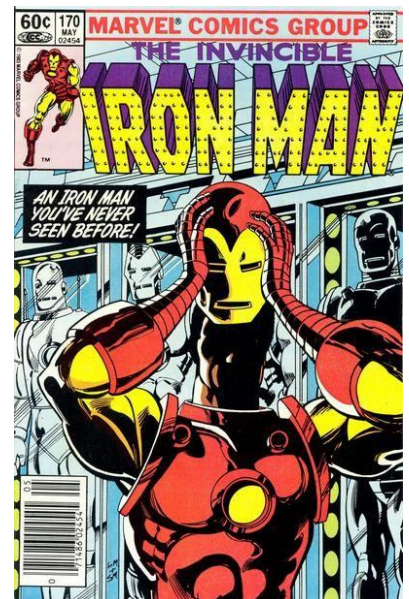
This was a defining moment for Stewart. It was a monumental screw-up, but has long been the impetus that pushed him to be a great Green Lantern.

Second example, Tony Stark's life fell apart, he became a drunk, and that's when Jim Rhodes stepped in and took over.

You chumps paid like \$4 to see Sam Wilson take over for Captain America, meanwhile you could have paid 60 cents to see Jim Rhodes as Iron Man. Suckers.

Tony Stark was an adult who should have known better. John Stewart was an adult who should have known better. But they were flawed human beings. It's what made them interesting. Even with all of their power, they still had some shit to get together.

The issue I have with teenage superheroes, if they did these same sorts of things, are they flawed, or are they simply teenagers? If a teenager made a bad call like John Stewart's, it's easily chalked up to "teenagers think they know everything." If a teenager got drunk and messed something up, again, "dumb teenager does something dumb" is not



an electrifying headline. Being young isn't just an excuse for doing something kind of stupid. It's a legitimate reason.

The question here, what are the stakes when it comes to a 13 year-old making a bad decision? Or to put it another way, do 13 year-olds make GOOD decisions ever?

I didn't. I'm almost certain that there was not a single decision I made when I was 13 that I would defend today. I had Hanson hair and spent a lot of time doing maintenance on rollerblades.

Teen Superhero Stories Too Often Devolve Into After School Specials

I really liked most of what I read from G. Willow Wilson's *Ms. Marvel*. But boy did I dislike the end of the Inventor arc. *Spoilers*

Ms. Marvel is fighting The Inventor, some guy who builds evil robots. It turns out he's using real teens as living batteries to power his robots. When Kamala finds out, she confronts one of the Duracell Kidz and asks him why they do it. He says,

We're parasites, basically. Kids are, I mean. The planet is overpopulated. We're an extra generation—we shouldn't even be here. But we can do this—we can give our lives to something good.

Okay, so these kids are making a point about the environment and how their generation cares and so on. They're doing it in the stupidest possible way, but it's a noble stupidity.

Kamala then asks them about their skills and whether they might find a better use for themselves, something beyond being batteries.



After this, another kid says he makes stuff out of recycled materials. Basically, a bunch of teens with rad haircuts rap about the fact that their skills and contributions matter, and that pretty much wraps things up.

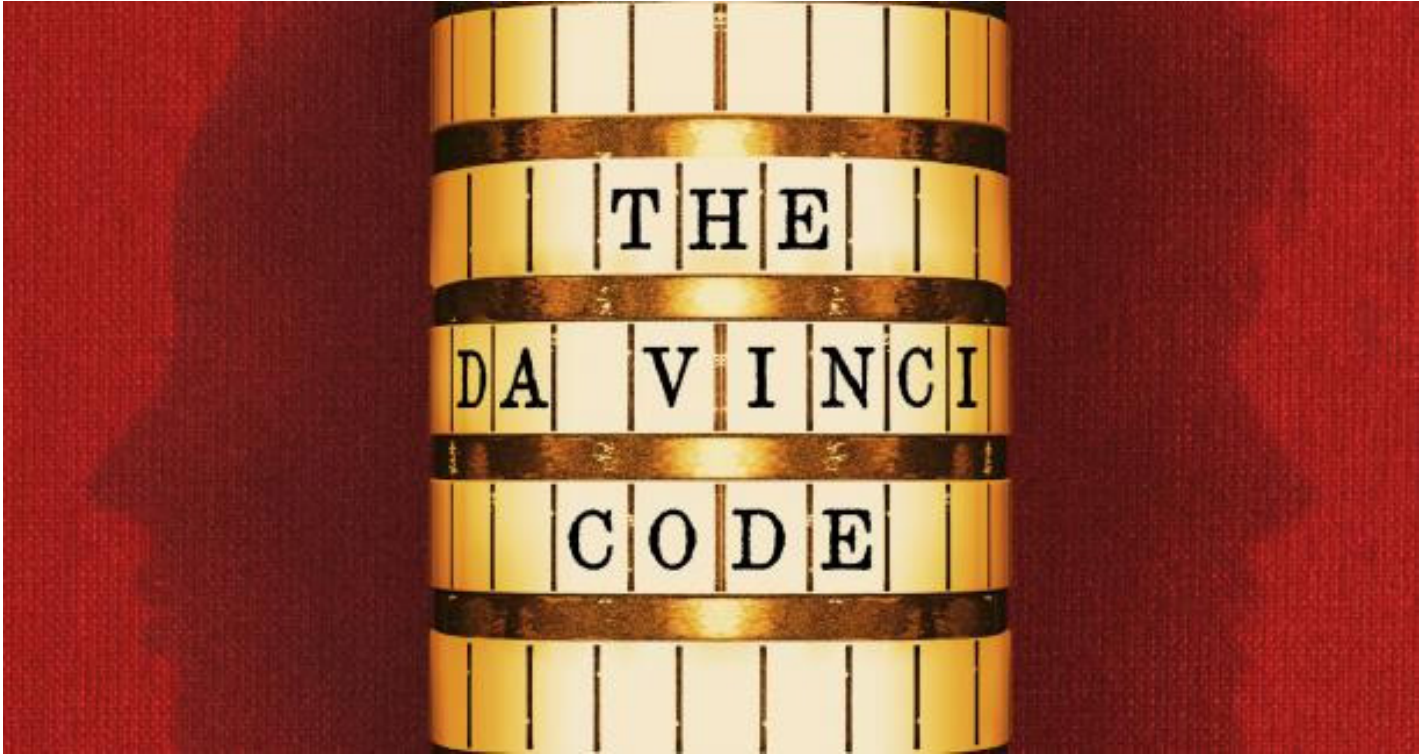
Okay, I can dig the occasional superhero story that doesn't end with someone's face smashed in. But I feel that, all too often, these teen heroes lend themselves to this kind of resolution, something affirmational and exhaustingly positive. A call to action telling teens that we care and your voices matter and we are totally fine with your haircuts. (We are not. Teens, I speak for the world, we are NOT fine with your haircuts. They make us feel old and frightened.)

For me, something that ends with this sort of call to action, it's not really a story. It's an essay. With pictures. Really great pictures, but not great enough to hide the stink of a "very special message" jammed into the story.

Drugs, gangs, drinking, these are things that people should talk to teens about. I'm just not totally convinced that comics are the right medium or that they've got a good track record when it comes to this stuff.

Tell you what, let's make a deal. If issues with special messages are free, paid for by the Council For People Who Think Teens Don't Already Know Drugs Are Bad or whatever, then I'll never complain about them again.

10 Super Weird Things About 'The Da Vinci Code'



Let's start this off with an admission of guilt: I decided on this column because I thought 2016 was the ten-year anniversary of the release of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

It turns out 2016 is the ten-year anniversary of the movie's release. The book came out in 2003.

However, there are so many weird things surrounding this book and its author, the list had to be written. There was too much good stuff to pass up simply because it wasn't the book's 10-year, tin anniversary as opposed to its 13-year, lace anniversary.

On that sexy note, let's do this!

1. Author Dan Brown was once a pop singer

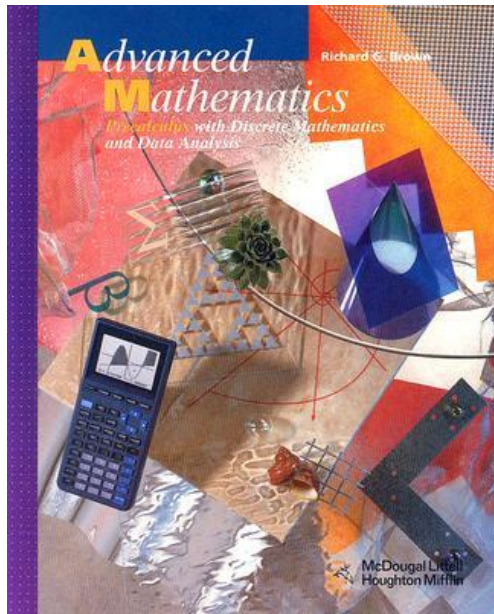
Yes. Does he have a song called "976-LOVE"? Yes. Is it about phone sex? Yes. Do you want to jump over to his web site and hear a snippet? YES. Does he have a lot of other songs? Totally.

It turns out that before Dan Brown decided to go ahead and write one of the best-selling novels of all time, he had aspirations to be a pop singer. But it didn't pan out for reasons Brown sums up pretty simply:

The world isn't ready for a pale, balding geek shaking his booty on MTV.

Is there a secret clue to some shady Vatican dealings hidden in these songs? I didn't listen long enough to find out. If you want to take on that task, Godspeed.

2. Dan Brown's dad probably wrote your math textbook



Recognize this bad boy? Were you ever tortured by this one? I was. I can remember staring at that calculator longingly. Looking at that shell and thinking it looked like a shiny dog turd.

If this cover brings you right back to math class, you should know the contents were written by Richard G. Brown, father of Dan Brown. It turns out that Richard was quite the mathematician, and at one point he was even approached to be in the NSA, a gig he turned down for family reasons.

What hidden clues might be present in this mish-mash of objects? What's going on with that cone stabbing through that purple plane? Is it possible that the shell really IS dog crap? Is this a case of like father like son, and are there secrets hidden here that lead to some kind of underground bunker? I doubt it. Like Freud said, "Sometimes a piece of something that might be dogshit is just dogshit."

3. There was a whole cottage industry of books debunking 'The Da Vinci Code'

Am I the only person who finds this fascinating? I've asked around, and nobody else finds this interesting, that there were multiple books and high-level discussions that involved debunking the facts contained within *The Da Vinci Code*, a work of fiction. It feels like...imagine if you saw a book on the shelf debunking Tron. Why? How?

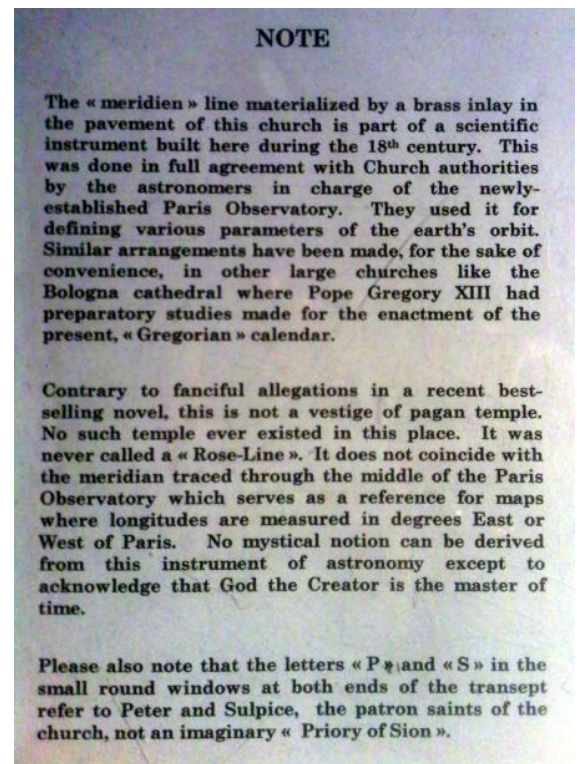
Granted, Dan Brown claimed that the book was 99% historically accurate, and while that's a stretch, it's hardly the first time "Based On A True Story" has been used to heighten drama.

There are three basic areas in which the truth of *The Code*, as us cool kids call it, has been attacked.

First, religion. This is a tough one. Certain things about the book are disputed by religious scholars, but from time to time, the evidence is something like, "The Pope said so," or there's a lot riding on different interpretations of Bible passages.

Second, history. A little more solid as evidence goes, especially when it comes to the architectural history of the Church of Saint Sulpice in Paris, where this sign was put up at one point. [see right]

The third category of attacks come from the realm of astronomy. Apparently, a lot of the stuff written about Venus in *The Code* is just not accurate. These points are fairly easy to prove and have been substantiated by a number of critics because they involve, you know, tilting your head back and looking at the sky.



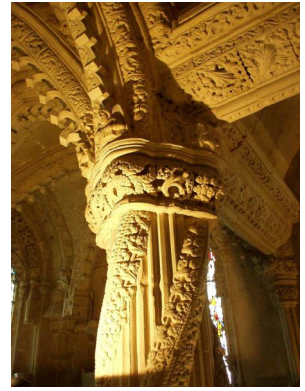
4. Rosslyn Chapel is real and weird

Making an appearance in the book and the movie, Rosslyn Chapel is a real place with a strange history. Conspiracy theories abound—everything from strange carvings to possible connections to Freemasonry and the Knights Templar, to theories that the chapel is a connection to an underground network of tunnels where the mummified head of Jesus Christ has been kept.

Mummy Jesus. You heard it here.

All that aside, my favorite story about Rosslyn Chapel goes like this:

Supposedly, there was a mason and an apprentice working on a pillar. The mason thought the pillar could not be completed until he'd traveled to see the original column upon which this new column would be based. The mason leaves to go see this far-away pillar, which sounds like an excuse to take an expenses-paid business trip to me, and by the time he gets back, the apprentice has completed the pillar. The mason is pissed that he was shown up by this young upstart, and he smashes in the apprentice's head with a hammer. The mason's punishment? The mason's face was carved into a corner opposite the pillar so that he would be forced to stare at the apprentice's work FOR-EV-ER. Man, justice was poetic as hell back in the day.



5. Tom Hanks' Hair



Tom Hanks had a visual in his head for *The Code's* main character, Robert Langdon. And then he had to follow through and put that vision ON his head. Hanks conjured up an image of Langdon's long, flowing hair, and he was determined to make it happen despite the fact that his hair is normally curly:

We talked about a wig, but that ends up taking a huge amount of time...So I went to these guys who know about hair chemistry and found a way.

Better living through chemistry. I guess.

6. Kryptos

Hidden in the dust jacket of *The Da Vinci Code* are some numbers.

It turns out those numbers, plugged into a geolocation program, will lead you to Kryptos.

Kryptos is a sculpture on the grounds of CIA headquarters in Langley, VA. It contains 4 encrypted messages, three of which have been solved, one of which remains unsolved as of this writing.

The artist responsible for Kryptos, Jim Sanborn, has given out several clues that are supposed to help sleuths decode Kryptos' last section, most recently suggesting that the answer is to be found somewhere on a clock in Berlin.

If you're in Berlin, look around. Also, if you're in Berlin and get tired of looking at clocks, just go to the sex museum. There's a diorama, much like there are nature dioramas in a regular museum, but this one is of a guy painting a picture of a woman's butt. I swear this is true. Sometimes you have to solve a vast conspiracy to find treasure, other times it's simply waiting behind a velvet rope.

7. Brown's Routine

Much is made of the work routines of successful business people, and authors are no exception.

When he writes, Brown gets up at 4 AM, and he writes in spurts, using an hourglass to time out his intervals. When the hourglass runs out of sand, he does push-ups and sit-ups. He's also a believer in inversion therapy, which is a fancy way of describing the act of hanging upside-down.

8. Yep, there was a 'Da Vinci Code' video game

If you were lucky enough to have a PS2, Xbox, or PC in 2006, you could play the adventures of Robert Langdon.

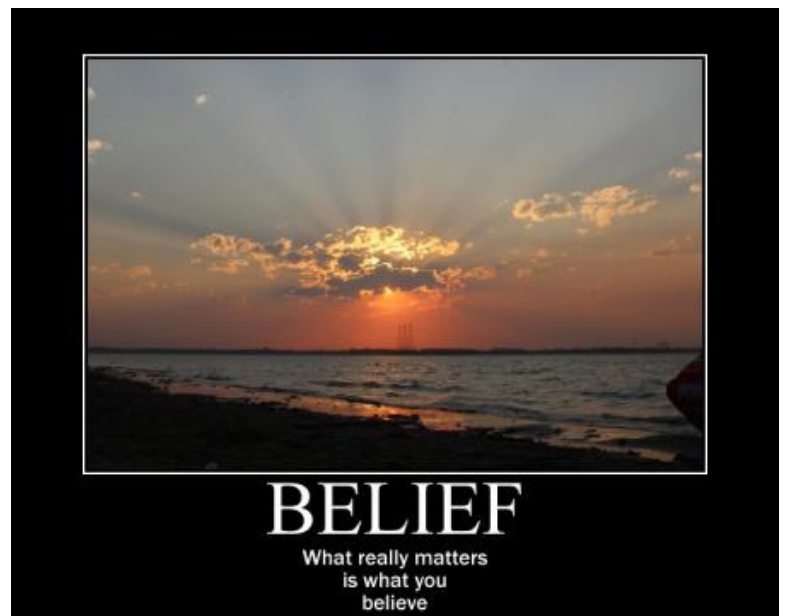
"It's just like being IN the book," said no one.

The game consisted of puzzles (makes sense), searching 3D environments (sounds reasonable), and melee combat. Wait...okay, yes, that's correct, melee combat.

Perhaps the most interesting fact about the game, the Wikipedia plot summary is 1250 words long. The summary for the book's plot is less than 900 words.

9. Quotes from the book and motivational posters sound almost identical

See if you can tell which of these three is NOT from *The Code*:





TODAY

Today is today
but there are many
tomorrows



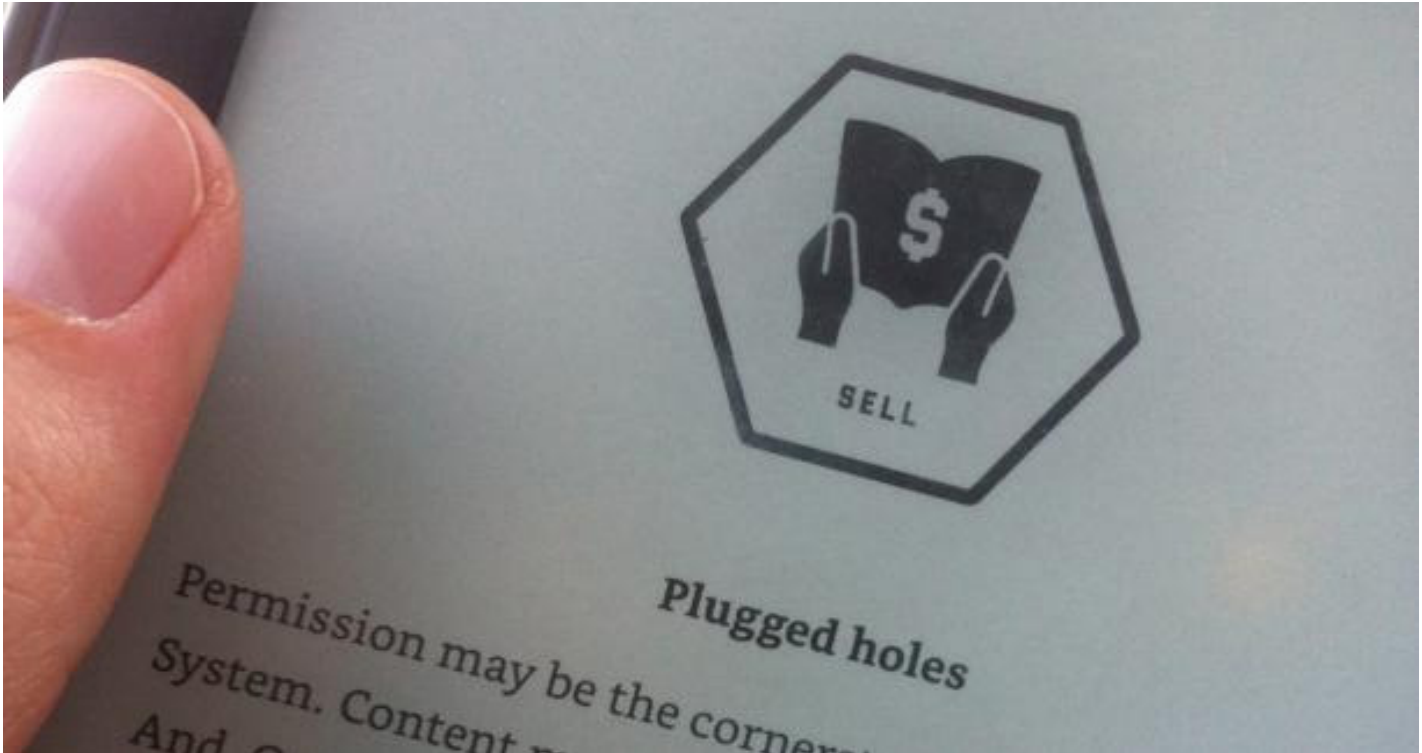
MONEY

someone will
pay you it
to write about Dan Brown

10. There is a young adult version of the book coming out this month

That's right. 13 years in the making, *The Da Vinci Code* for the younger set is finally coming. Why did this take so long? What secrets does it hold? Which yacht is Dan Brown going to buy next? These are the burning questions.

What \$100 Of eBook Marketing Advice Is Really Worth



I had a windfall. If \$100 counts as a windfall. I'm not sure what the exact definition of "windfall" is, but for me, it's any amount I'd stay overnight in a haunted mansion to get. \$100 is WELL within that boundary.

And because I'm bad with money, I decided to "invest" this \$100 windfall into eBooks that contain advice about marketing and selling eBooks. I know, it's a stupid idea. But haven't you ever thought that maybe, just maybe there are a few tricks that would boost sales? I know I have. It's the same desperation exhibited when you Google "key to happiness" and look through more than 3 pages of results. You think maybe, just maybe, some hidden gem is out there somewhere.

#SquadGoals

[one of the books I bought told me to use more hashtags]

There were two goals in mind here:

1. Sell more of my dumb eBooks.
2. Find out just how much \$100 of advice was REALLY worth.

The Purchase

In total, I bought 33 books. That's what \$100 gets you in this case. In fact, I don't think I quite spent the full hundo. It was just too hard to find enough titles to bring me up to that number, if you can believe it.

Titles were selected by the highly scientific process of typing "eBook marketing" into Amazon, finding some books, clicking on them, and then following the chain of "Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought..."

The Plan

The plan for this column was to go through these books, pick out the good advice and apply it. Then be rich. Rich as hell. And THEN I would tell you about it, we'd be rich together, and everything would be rad.

Garbage and Shit: Where The Plan Went Horribly Wrong

It turns out that almost all of the books I purchased are garbage and shit. Which means that, instead of writing about the great lessons I applied, I'm going to spend most of this column talking about why these books are garbage and shit. But take heart, I DO have a few recommendations, near the end, of books that actually had some goodness to them, not to mention a few pieces of helpful advice.

But the bad news is that the vast majority of what I read was garbage and shit, and a lot of them exhibited the same bad behaviors. Such as...

Numbers In The Titles!

Let's start with the titles.

A LARGE portion of these books have some kind of number in the title. 50 ways to do this, 63 ways to do that. And this titling scheme has turned into an escalating battle. Sure, I could buy a book titled *Your First 1,000 Copies*, but why waste time on that when I could buy *HOW I SOLD 80,000 BOOKS?* Not only is 80,000 more than 1,000, it's in all caps. That shows belief. And gumption!

One book would promise 5 secrets, the next promised 33, and the one after that promised 69 (that's not just a cute number I made up. Blame *Hans Zimmerman for Marketing: Small Business Marketing - 69 Marketing Tips to Boost Your Profits 40% to 125%*).

The First Taste Is Free

If you're looking for a good way to burn some time before you shuffle off to the grave, and you want to make sure you do NOTHING productive in this time, my recommendation is to read the first 10% of a bunch of eBook marketing books.

When you hear the words "Passive Income Stream" I want you to picture those words coming out of the mouth of an unholy baby created by sexual congress between Matthew Lesko, the re-animated corpse of Billy Mays, and someone from Mary Kay who has one of those pink Cadillacs.

Without fail, the first 10% of these books consists of quotes about why the book is so great and lead-up by the author about everything you're going to learn.

Imagine if Stephen King's *Christine* started like, "Oh, man. You are gonna be soooo scared. Pee first. Pee now. Because if you don't the pee is still going to happen, but it's going to be involuntary."

This intro style isn't without purpose. The authors are taking advantage of Amazon's "Look inside" feature by allowing us a peek inside the book, but neglecting to reveal any actual content. Wouldn't want to give out all the great secrets for free, after all.

I'm going to tell you the biggest secret: If a book had valuable advice, the author could afford to give away 10% of that advice for free.

Structure

After you read a couple of these, it becomes pretty clear that these writers haven't written a whole lot since high school, and they're still married to the 5-paragraph format: Tell them what you're going to tell them, Point #1, Point #2, Point #3, Conclude by telling them what you already told them. And then hit the Fruitopia machine on your way to chemistry class. You earned it.

In fact, almost all the chapters within the books are structured this way too, and what you end up with are 5-paragraph essays within a giant 5-paragraph essay. It's like a nesting doll, except instead of being painted to look like smiling ladies, the dolls are painted to look like business book authors who are pointing at you and laughing because you, my friend, are a chump.

Go Get My Printables

So, so many of these have printables available. Business plans, marketing plans, all this crap. Worksheets is what they are. You remember worksheets, those things teachers sent home with you because somehow they couldn't fit a full day of school into a full day of school. And we wonder why American's take their jobs home with them.

The worksheets provide a great metaphor for the experience of reading these books. It feels like you're accomplishing something, but you're not. You're working towards your goal, but not really. You're being productive, but not actually producing content.

You're reading about selling eBooks, but you're not writing or selling any eBooks.

Manufactured Stories

Many marketing books are filled with stupid made-up stories. Let's start with a sample of what I mean. Here's a manufactured story that caught my eye:

At one end of the spectrum, there's Pete the plumber who works sixteen-hour days, weekends, and never takes holidays while barely making enough to keep his head above water.

Hmm. I'm intrigued by this well-named, hardworking, but foolish plumber. Go on...

On the other end of the spectrum there's Joe who runs a plumbing company with twenty plumbers working for him. It seems like his primary business activity is counting the huge sums of money that keep rolling in.

I see. I see. Seems that this Joe's business activity is one I'd like to replicate. Possibly while having my feet on a desk and smoking a cigar.

What happens in these books, you're told a story like that one, then you're told that there are some good reasons Joe is living the high life while Pete is trying to hang himself in the back of his plumbing van using a toilet snake. And by the time all the reasons are explained, we've forgotten that THIS WHOLE STORY IS MADE UP! There IS no Pete. There IS no Joe.

It turns out that, in marketing books, you can just decide something is true or a good idea and then invent a story to illustrate your point. You don't even have to pretend the story/proof is true.

Who In The Hell Is Zig Ziglar?

You can't flip through one of these things without seeing a quote attributed to Zig Ziglar. Who or what is a Zig Ziglar? There's barely any info on his Wikipedia page, and what little there is only confirms my suspicion that he's not a real person.

Fact 1: He was born in "Coffee County." Yeah, that sounds real. Not at all like some dork looking around a room, grasping for a fake location name and seeing a pack of Folgers.

Fact 2: His name is Zig Ziglar, but he was allegedly born Hilary Hinton. Someone call Stan Lee, because somebody has ripped off TWO of his best comic book names.

Passive Income Streams

I don't really even want to go into this. The suggestion of passive income streams, which crops up in a lot of these books, is that there are ways to make money constantly without doing anything, and that selling eBooks is a good way to set this up for yourself.

When you hear the words "Passive Income Stream" I want you to picture those words coming out of the mouth of an unholy baby created by sexual congress between Matthew Lesko, the re-animated corpse of Billy Mays, and someone from Mary Kay who has one of those pink Cadillacs. It's crap.

The Dumbest Of The Dumb

Let's do a quick lightning round of the dumbest advice culled from the pages:

If you think the 80/20 rule is exciting, the 64/4 rule will blow your mind. You see, we can apply the 80/20 rule to the rule itself. So we take 80% of 80 and 20% of 20 and end up with the 64/4 rule.

And THEN we could apply the 64/4 rule to the 64/4 rule. Which is when it becomes difficult to focus on the math because I'm so aroused.

When I had my wedding DJ company...

If you want me to stop reading your book and taking your advice immediately, slipping in this phrase is a guarantee that I will comply.

My name is Michael Kawula. I'm the CEO of Social Quant...

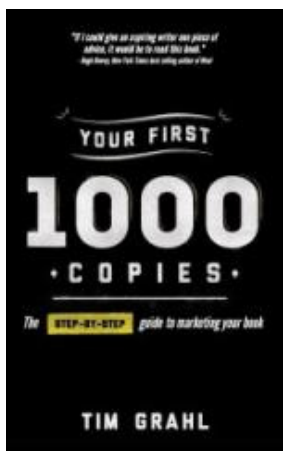
It's nice to meet you Mr. Koala, CEO of Social...I feel like I'm going to pronounce that one wrong.

If you have no writing skills or simply hate writing, you can hire a ghostwriter to draft the book per your instructions and notes/outline.

If anyone is willing to ghostwrite my novel about an arcade that's about to be bought out by evil businessmen in order to build condos, and the only way to save the business is through a topless beach volleyball tournament, CALL ME.

The Good

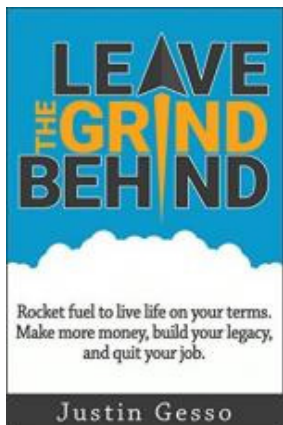
Alright, it wasn't ALL bad. As fun as it would be to say I got no help from these books, a few ideas caught my attention.



Your First 1000 Copies

This one sold me on the idea of setting up an email newsletter for my little eBook business. The reason being, when someone subscribes to your email list, the conversion rate is WAY higher than that of social media. This is, of course, due in part to the fact that social media is malarkey and buries your linked content. But it's also just common sense. Who is going to be interested in buying what you're selling? Probably someone who subscribes to your newsletter.

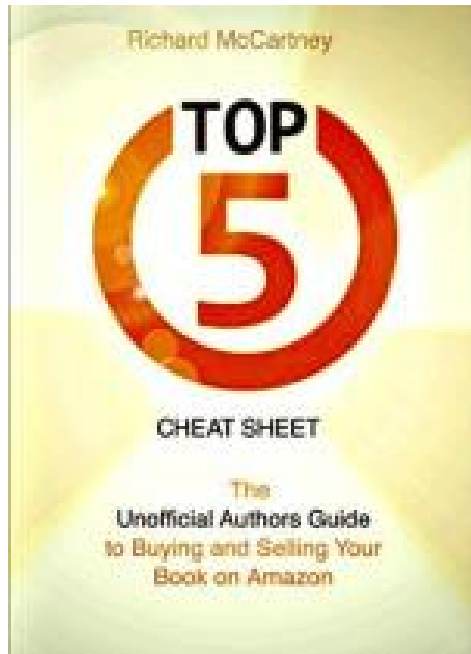
Plus, I always wanted to work on The Blaze like Brandon Walsh.



Leave The Grind Behind

This book talked a lot about what it means to grind, to work your ass off and leave your job working for The Man and start working for yourself.

A little more in the motivational category than the practical, but I respected that about this book. It was realistic about the fact that selling eBooks involves working your ass off.



Top 5 Cheat Sheet

This one I didn't love, BUT it had a pretty intriguing piece of advice.

Anyone who has set a book on the Kindle store knows that you've got to put it in a couple categories. And, according to this little gem, the best categories for your book probably won't show up as suggestions. You've got to ferret them out for yourself. And if you spend a little time researching, and if you categorize your book in a shallow pond, you can climb to the top of the charts.

The Ultimate Last Piece Of Advice

Instead of marketing your stupid little eBook, the one that's an emotional exploration of your feelings and yadda yadda, write an eBook about marketing eBooks. You don't have to have any evidence, experience, or know-how. Just look up a few Zig Ziglar quotes, make all the mistakes listed above, and watch the passive income roll in.

6 Annoying Things Writers Are Asked To Do And How To Ask Anyway



"Hey, you're a writer, right?"

Whenever I hear that, it's not because someone recognizes my name or photo (although I have been mistaken for Stephen King. Whether or not the Stephen King I was mistaken for is the one from before or after his accident, I refuse to say). When people say "Hey, you're a writer," it's because they're about to ask me to do something for them.

Writers are asked to help with a shocking number and variety of things. I'm not even kidding, in the last two weeks I've been asked to edit a letter, edit a memoir, and write a short bio for someone. All for friends and family, all for free.

Are you thinking about asking a writer for help with something? Read this first. We'll go through the most common requests, why they're problematic, and how you can ask anyway.

Hey, will you help me edit my book?

The Problem: Let's think about this request in terms of another, similar request: Will you help me move?

Asking someone to edit an entire book, that's not like asking for help carrying a couple boxes. That's asking for help finding a new place, packing, renting the truck, negotiating the number of cats with the landlord, and arranging a time for the landlord to "meet" the cats (this is a thing for everyone, right? My cat isn't just an exceptional jerk?).

It's a big, big ask that involves A TON of work and a U-Haul-load of time on the part of the person being asked, and all too often, like moving, the offer for compensation is something like, "I'll buy you a beer."

How To Ask Nicely: Let's stick with the theme of moving. Rather than asking for open-ended moving help, asking someone to help you with the big, heavy shit is a way to get the help you need without forcing someone to help you move all your junk.

When it comes to your book, ask for edits on a short portion. Rather than asking someone to edit your entire book or essay or whatever, ask if they might read a section. Especially if there's a chapter that you're struggling with that can be read as a standalone. That's a lot less time commitment and a lot less pressure.

Or, you know, you could always offer to pay.

Also, just a heads-up, the answer is an automatic, 100% NO if your book involves a wizarding school, sexy vampires, a dystopia where teens become the stewards of society and also shoot each other with arrows... basically anything that is your version of the new hot whatever.

When you ask a writer to pump the shit out of your pages, consider it work, and consider paying them.

Hey, will you help me with this letter?

The Problem: Letters, open or otherwise, almost always involve a stance on an issue, and they almost always come from a very personal place. As a writer, I might not share your opinion on or passion for an issue. In fact, I assure you that I don't share your passion unless your letter is about greenlighting *Beetlejuice 2: Beetlejuice Goes Hawaiian*.

How To Ask Nicely: Polish, polish, polish. And that's "polish" as in "polishing silver" not as in "relating to Poland." Do all the polishing you can before you hand something like an open letter over to a writer. It doesn't have to be perfect. But if you're asking me for copy edits as opposed to asking me to come up with arguments or stances, that's a little easier, even if I don't totally agree.

And, you know, you can always offer to pay.

Hey, will you help me with this assignment?

The Problem: Whenever a writer signs up to help out with an assignment, they're in over their head immediately. If I don't already know much about your topic or thesis or area of expertise, I'm not going to be a lot of help. Sorry, but I'm not going to study Viking audiology to help you with a paper. And frankly, papers are really, really boring to write.

How To Ask Nicely: People pay good money to cheat on assignments. Why not pay someone a little cash to help you do an assignment legitimately? Consider payment. Think about it like this: If you lived in a house where the plumbing was screwed up, and if your buddy was a plumber and came to pump the shit out of your basement, you'd offer to pay this person, yes?

When you ask a writer to pump the shit out of your pages, consider it work, and consider paying

them.

Hey, will you help me with my resume/cover letter?

The Problem: Applying for jobs is just about the worst thing ever, I know. It's like dating except you have to keep it very professional and there's a very low probability that your cover letter will be good enough that the interview ends with sex. However, if you DO have sex as a result of your great cover letter, keep that job forever. Or maybe run away. Not sure. See, this is what I'm talking about. I know nothing about employment. Or sex.

Writing a resume or cover letter is different from most types of creative writing. It's like asking someone who rides a bike to teach you how to ride a motorcycle. It's like asking me a question about sex.

How To Ask Nicely: The way to ask nicely is to not ask at all on this one. Find someone who is good at this specific thing. There are people who are good at writing resumes and cover letters, and you should seek them out.

And, you know, offer to pay.

Hey, will you help me with this speech?



The Problem: Almost every time I've helped someone with a speech, I regretted it. I really believe that the thing that separates writers from non-writers isn't talent or artistry as much as it is the willingness to sit down and write. And when someone who doesn't write has to write, it seems they ask writers for help, but what they really need is someone to motivate them to sit down and do the damn work. I have enough trouble motivating myself. I was supposed to work on this column the other night, and instead I sat in front of the computer, screen blank, and ate an entire box of Mike & Ike. I don't even like Mike & Ike.

How To Ask Nicely: When you ask for someone's help, make good use of this person's time. When you meet, be on time. Ask good questions. Have your ideas ready. Write a draft first. Don't force your

writer friend to motivate you. Be a goddamn adult and drive this thing.

Or, you know, offer to pay.

Hey, will you write a little thing for my new web site (that doesn't exist yet)?

The Problem: There is an entire imaginary internet comprised of web sites that exist only in the minds of people with good intentions. Many, many writers get this request very frequently.

How To Ask Nicely: Don't ask until you know what your site is going to look like, in detail. And keep the writer in the loop. Tell them exactly when their work will show up. Tell them how you're going to spread the word about it. Show them that it's worth their time to do this.

Or, you know, pay them.

A Few More Tips On Asking For Writing Help

Provide A Workable Format

I was shocked at one time to see how many publishers and agents specify "Please do not send us the only copy of your manuscript." Who would do that?

TONS of people, it turns out.

Don't give someone your only copy. And honestly, if you can ask about their preferred format, all the better. If they prefer print, you really should go to the trouble of getting it printed. If they prefer digital, it's nice to send the digital file in an editable format.

Respect the Timetable

Give the writer some time. Don't hound your writer when they've had your work for a day. And don't pass something off to an editor when you need it tomorrow.

Don't Offer Your Friend's Services To Others

If you think your writer friend might be of help to someone, do your writer friend a favor, tell THEM about it first, give them the chance to turn it down, and THEN tell the original asker, "Hey, I was thinking about what you said the other day, and I might know someone who can help."

Consider Payment

Seriously. Offer it up front. Say you'd like to pay, and say how much you can manage. I know I hammered this one over and over, and I'll boil it down simply: Either you need this writer's help, in which case their help is valuable enough to pay for. Or you don't need their help, in which case you can skip the help entirely and skip paying for it.

Take The No

Sometimes, someone will tell you No. Don't make them defend this. Don't haggle. Even if you offer payment, the writer has every right to turn you down.

Asking someone to help you with a writing project, consider it like asking someone on a date. If you

ask once, nicely, and the person says No, then that's it. You don't have to know why, they don't owe you a reason. The answer is No, and asking someone to justify that answer isn't going to change anything.

10 Reasons Why Social Media Doesn't Do A Damn Thing For Writers



"I did all this hard work, built up all this social media, and still no one's buying my book? What's up?"

We've all been there. And what's up could be that your book sucks (likely) or your social media sucks (likely), but it could also be that social media is worthless for writers.

That's my premise. You knew that from the title, right? Let's get to it.

Your Book Is Your Baby

This is not a good thing in this context.

You know how it is when someone you know has a baby, and the first couple days online are fun, then it gets tedious, then the kid is like 8 years old and you're thinking, "When is this person going to stop posting all these damn pictures of this kid?"

You are bothering people with your constant talk about, pictures of, and links to your book.

Your book, it's your baby. I get it. When it's your baby, it's special. But it's only special to you and a very small circle of friends and family. Your baby is not special to the population, in general. Unless you're a huge author. When Stephen King shoots out a baby every couple months, people care. They want to see the cord get cut, they want to see this new, afterbirth-smearred resident of the world. But when you do it? Who cares? More to the point, who cares enough about your baby that they'll lay down cash?

I'm going to set up a hypothetical for you. Imagine if you will, an acquaintance of yours on Facebook has a baby.

Now, imagine that, in order to see pictures of this baby, you have to click over to Amazon and pay 99-cents. They're great, studio pictures, the kind they take where a family goes to train tracks or an old barn or whatever bullshit, but they ain't free.

How many people are going to pay that 99-cents? How many people would you expect to do this? Your mom, your close friends, maybe? And after that? Maybe a couple weirdos?

Same shit for your book.

The Ghostbusters Mistake: We've Crossed Streams

Am I following Pete the Author? Pete who's my buddy? Pete the Book Marketing Machine? Pete who tweets a *Demolition Man* joke-of-the-day?

I think I speak for most authors when I say we've cross-pollinated and put all these things into one. If you follow an author, you're going to get book updates, writing stuff, their political opinions, what they think is funny, all this stuff, and it's all intermingled.

And that means our followers are intermingled too. My Twitter followers are people I know, people I followed who followed me back, and women who seem to know about other women in my area who are mostly naked. Listen, spambots, I'm aware there are women in my area. I live on Earth. Tweet at me when there's a werewolf or a cursed mummy out and about. THAT'S news.

What does this mean? Let's say you have five-hundred Twitter followers. How many of those followers have followed you specifically to hear about your books?

When I tweet a joke, I please a segment of my followers. When I tweet a link to some political story, I please a segment of my followers. When I tweet a book-related thing, I please a segment of my followers. So, in reality, I might have 500 followers, but when I tweet about my book, I'm speaking to a small audience that gives a hot damn.

Your number of followers don't mean shit.

Do You Want To Click A Link Or Stay Where You Are?

Link me to your book on Facebook? Link in your Instagram profile? Great.

I don't want to click a link. I could be wrong here, but I think that most people, when they look at a Facebook or an Instagram, they're not all that interested in clicking a link that takes them FROM the thing they like to a different, unknown thing.

Sorry, but even if I want to buy your book, what I really want to do, when I'm on Instagram, is look at more Instagram.

This problem is mitigated on a computer, but if I'm doing app-based social media-ing, like most 2016 humans, I don't want to open a browser to look at your stuff. I want to keep looking at what I'm looking at. Sorry, but even if I want to buy your book, what I really want to do, when I'm on Instagram, is look at more Instagram.

Algorithms Are Our Enemies

It's no secret, most social networks operate via algorithm, which means the more popular something is, the more popular it becomes. And it's no secret that photos and videos make the most popular, most shareable content. And you're a writer, right? Working in words? Not as many pictures and videos?

And I assume most of us are linking to a longer piece or book, and most social media is not in love with that. In fact, Facebook, for one, has taken to eliminating clickbait headlines from its streams. Why? Well, if you're an optimist and believe in the good in people, you could choose to believe it's because they're helping us out, because there really aren't 17 Ways To Be #Blessed This Summer, and because #12 won't blow your mind. Or you could use your brain and realize that it's in the best interest of Facebook to keep you on Facebook (and Twitter to keep you on Twitter, Snapchat to keep you on Snapchat...).

Social media is actively working against you linking people to your content.

Is Anyone Saying They Want More Ads In Any Venue?

Because that's what you're giving them.

I certainly prefer to see ads for stuff I believe in, like books, but that's mostly due to the fact that there actually IS a book behind that ad. Believe me, there is no job where you dress up as the Halo guy and play video games for money, despite what Facebook has told me for the last 15 years.

The sidebars are full of ads. Ads pop up on so many sites. The internet is full of ads. You're putting them in yet another spot. You're part of the problem.

You're In A Phone Instead Of In The World

As a writer, are you going to come up with better material by looking at your phone or by paying attention to what's going on around you?

It doesn't have to be all one or the other, but I'd encourage you to look at things as a writer, not an Instagrammer. When you see something awesome, instead of thinking, "That will look amazing once I throw in that X-Pro II filter," maybe you should just keep looking at that awesome thing and thinking about it instead.



Instead of posting things and putting them away in the social media box, let them stay on your mind. Let them keep tickling a different part of your brain.

We Confuse Social Media-ing With Working

It's too easy to get on social media and make posts and feel like you've accomplished something.

You're not. It's not important.

This is not helpful to you as a writer. This other thing to check on, this additional outlet for your attention, it's not helping you write. And when we confuse anything but writing with the work of writing, we're making a mistake.

The Best Thing You Can Do Is Not Screw Up

The most important thing to do on social media is not screw up. The most important thing is not to make something great, not to make people laugh, not to do something that entertains people. It's to not screw up.

That's a pathetically low bar. Think about it like this: if I apply that goal to my real life, I've had a good day when I didn't just shout offensive stuff aloud all day at work. Big deal, pat on the back. I do that like...more than half the time.

When the best outcome is not blowing it, why do we spend time wondering why social media isn't doing more for us?

You're Posting 2016 Election Jokes

It's too easy, everyone. That's low-hanging fruit. Leave it for those who can only reach that high. You're better than that.

Steps To Make It Bearable

You might not agree with me here. That's cool. I'd still encourage you to use social media with a few caveats.

1. Consider the ratios. How many book links are you posting versus other things of interest?
2. How are you going to post about your book in such a way that it's interesting to someone who doesn't know or care about you?
3. What makes your book posts different from every other author's?
4. Can you incorporate something besides text and a link, and can that something be good content in and of itself?
5. Are you doing social media because you like it? Awesome. Just quit pretending it's a business thing.

A Book Reviewer's Bill Of Rights



I'm guessing most of us are familiar with the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, which give us the right to be harassed by journalists, the right to be terrified by the presence of firearms, and then a bunch of other stuff about quartering soldiers, excessive bail, and stuff that's not exciting because none of it involves using swear words or shooting stuff.

I'm also guessing many of you are familiar with the Reader's Bill of Rights. And if you're not, all you need to know is that it's a thing some people made up that asserts that readers have the right to read whatever the hell they want, if I can be allowed to nutshell the thing.

But what about a Bill of Rights for book reviewers? What rights should we have as people who not only read, but form opinions about what we read? Well, I'm glad you asked.

Amendment I: The Right To Like Or Dislike Anything For Any Reason

Yes, any material, for any reason.

Let's get this out of the way early—when we're talking about books, we are talking about something subjective. There's not really a way to be objectively "right" when it comes to reviewing a book, and therefore there's also no such thing as being wrong. There's popular opinion, and sometimes popular opinion can be overwhelming to the point that it feels objective. But it's just not. Dr. Phil is a popular guy. 'Nuff said.

Amendment II: The Right To Not Have To Defend Your Feelings

The acts of having a feeling about a book and expressing that feeling do not obligate you to defend that feeling to anyone for any reason.

Amendment III: The Right To Review Something You Haven't Finished

If you start a book and it's awful, you don't have to finish it to tell everyone what was awful about it.

I've walked out of movies. Because they sucked. And if someone asked me whether or not the movie was good, I would not answer by saying, "I cannot say because I did not see the film in its entirety." I would say, "It sucked badly enough that I walked out."

I walked out of the movie *Machete*. Because I thought it was crappy and didn't really deliver on what I wanted, which was over-the-top violence, over-the-top Danny Trejo, and basically feeling like the movie *Over The Top* but bloodier. I was boooooored. I shouldn't be bored during *Machete*.

Is it possible I would have been rewarded for sticking it out? Totally. But to me, a story has to be good enough that readers/viewers are motivated to get there. If the story can't do that, then that story is not successful.

Amendment IV: The Right To Click One Star

Writers work hard. It's true. And when you click one star on a book review, it can feel like a personal attack against the author.

But it's not an attack, and it's okay to do it.

Part of the game of being an artist of any stripe is accepting that there are people who will not love your book. I can tell you from experience, a shitty review stings. But if you can't take a shitty review, you need to do something else with your life. And by "take" I don't mean ignore completely and put it out of your mind, I mean fixate on it in an obsessive fashion for a couple weeks but don't do anything about it.

Amendment V: The Right To Review Material Not Intended For You

Can you review a children's book as an adult with no children? Yep. Can you eviscerate it? Yep. Will someone tell you, "Of course it's not very good, it's a children's book"? Yep.

The thing to understand, many people define themselves by the things they like and dislike. So when you dislike something by which a person defines themselves, they get pissed.

We need to read outside the things made for us. If I can only read books that are intended for me, then I'll be stuck reading the novelization of *Demolition Man* over and over. And as paradisiacal as that scenario sounds, I'll pass.

All readers should be encouraged to step outside their comfort zone in any number of ways. And part of that stepping out is forming opinions on what they read.

Amendment VI: The Right To Write A Mean-Spirited Review Of A Book (Not An Author)

It's allowable to eviscerate a book. It's not good to get mean about the author as a person. That's the line.

Amendment VII: The Right To Be Inconsistent

Did I ding a book for its comic book feel and then praise a different book for the same thing? Of course! I'm human. As a human reviewer working in a subjective medium, you have the right to be inconsistent.

Consistency is for assembly lines. It's for McDonald's. Being an overly-consistent reviewer means readers of your reviews will likely already know how you're going to feel about a book. And what's the point of your reviews, then?

Amendment VIII: The Right To Change Your Mind

Perhaps, on a re-read, I discover something that I'd previously hated was actually pretty good. Do I have the right to change my mind? Absolutely. This is the entire basis of science, you know. We laugh at the things scientists thought in the past, and we encourage science to change. We don't force scientists to keep thinking that a rock stays on the ground because it "wants" to just because that was a scientific thought at one time.

As you grow as a reviewer and a person, different books will hit you in different ways. I read *On The Road* when I was 19 or so, and I appreciated things about it that would make me full of rage now.

If you can't change your mind about books, it means you can't change who you are. It means that you'd have to be the same, static person you were when you started reviewing. You can change as a person, and this will almost certainly change your feelings on books.

Amendment IX: The Right To Hate A Book Other People Love

This might sound like it's covered by having your own opinions, but it's different. There are books that, if you read and dislike, can cause you some grief. Or, more accurately, the fans will cause you grief. The thing to understand, many people define themselves by the things they like and dislike. So when you dislike something by which a person defines themselves, they get pissed. But that doesn't mean you're wrong to hate the book, and it doesn't mean that you're simply contrarian.

Again, it's all subjective. Popular consensus does not change matters of taste into matters of fact.

Amendment X: The Right To Like A Book By An Author Who Is A Shithead (and the Opposite)

Jonathan Franzen pops to mind. He seems to be getting in trouble all the time, sometimes because he brings it on himself, sometimes, I think, because he's just a fun person to pile on.

Even if you think he's a shithead, it's okay to like a book he wrote.

Likewise, it's okay to dislike a book by an author who is a great person. Let's look at it this way, who are some of the most philanthropic bands? Dave Matthews, Incubus, U2, Moby. They are doing good. Does that mean I like their music more or that it's good? No way. I don't care if Hoobastank invents a time machine and goes back and rights history's worst wrongs, I'm still not going to buy their new album (or...maybe I would. If they had the ability to master time travel, it would warrant another look at their musical career, no?).

A great person can write a shitty book. A shitty person can write a great book.

22 of the Best And Worst Promotional Products For Your Book Release



I played in a golf tournament recently (or, I should say I was very drunk for several hours and there was golf happening around me), and was given the customary goodie bag. Golf tees, coupons, and, of course, a stress ball that was made to look like what I assume is part of a human spine.



As I squeezed away at this bad boy like I was a victorious Mortal Kombat character, I thought to myself, "Maybe I should get some giveaways to...give away as book promos." I've got a book on the Kindle store. Why not do it right?

And the hunt was on!

Smoked Turkey

Let's just do this in whatever order lets me start off with the fact that I could buy branded, smoked turkey carcasses to promote my book.

This is clearly a bad idea and a lost cause. The minimum order is 6 turkeys, and they would cost \$89.90 apiece (\$500 or so total). If I ordered 288, I could get that price down to \$58.50 apiece or \$16,848 in total. Which sounds like a lot, but keep in mind that I'm SAVING \$8,928 when I order in such bulk. I'd be an idiot not to. That's a lot of math and A LOT of meat.

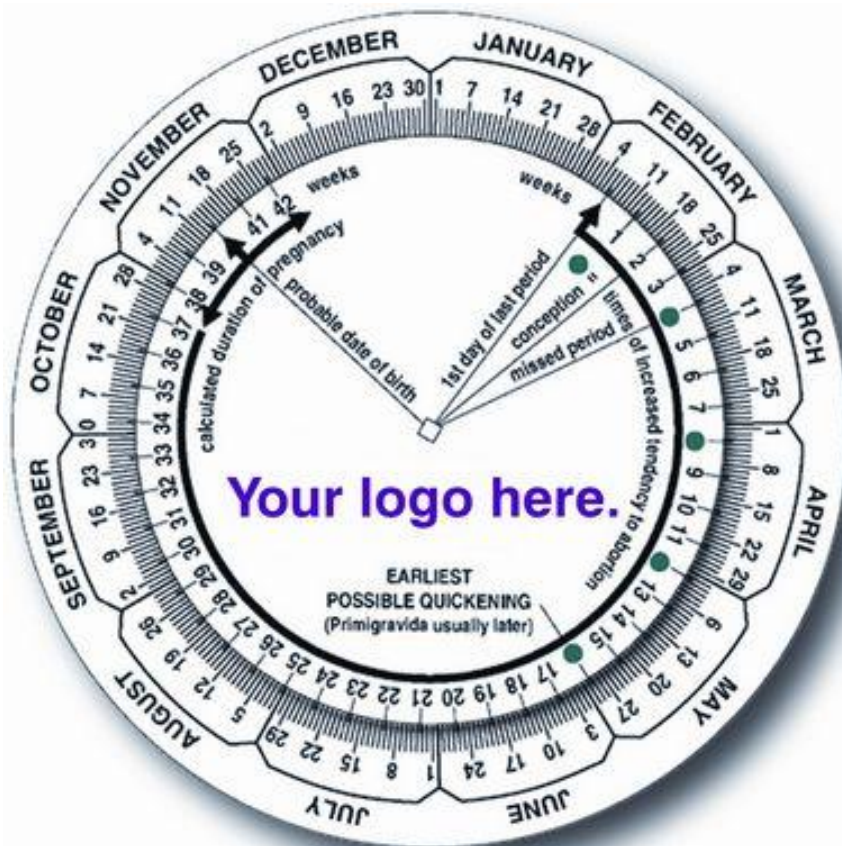


Here's what sucks about this product: my brand is burned into the cutting board as opposed to being burned straight into the turkey flesh. That feels like a cop out. I want that turkey to go into a deli slicer, and I want every slice to have a meaty version of my book cover emblazoned on it.

Pregnancy Wheel

I hope I'm not the only one who had no clue what a pregnancy wheel was. I thought it might be a game show that was like Wheel of Fortune but for couples who were having trouble conceiving and needed a way to pay costly assistive reproduction technology fees that...you know what? Let's just leave it at, "I didn't know what a Pregnancy Wheel was."

It's this thing:



As the web site puts it, "Why not brand a pregnancy wheel with your logo and use these products as a handy freebie?"

Why not? Probably because it's a terrible idea. That would be my primary reason.

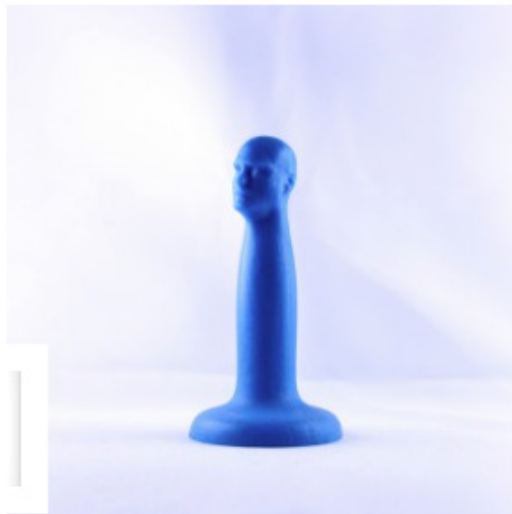
When I write a pregnancy guide, I suppose this will be a winner. But until I've lost all sense and embarked on a project that poses me as an expert in something I'm clueless about, this one stays on the back, back, back burner.

Shit Bag Dispenser



I know there's a logic about people hearing your name 5 times, but I wonder if there are any rules about when they hear your name. You know, like if the effect is weaker when the person is feeling the warmth of fresh shit through a thin plastic bag when they hear your name.

Custom Marital Aid



The product you are looking at is called a Dickhead. As the web site says, "3D scanning technology has the ability to 3D scan heads to add to the tip of the sex toys." Well, it's about time.

There are so many problems with this. But I think the main one is that my mom knows how to use the internet, and she does have a small amount of pride for me to this day.

Really Hard Game



Though slightly better than those stupid slidey puzzles where you have to move the pieces around to remake a picture you never cared about in the first place, this has to be one of the most frustrating, pointless games ever. "Amaze your friends! Kill time at your desk! Ask yourself over and over whether it went in or not!"

And what the hell. "Chaise?" Like "Chaise Bank?"

Propeller Beanies



The only thing I think needs to be said about these is that under this item, in the "You May Also Like" section of the web page, custom berets were offered.

Custom display with...ME!?

For a measly \$500, I could have a book display with a cardboard cut out of ME alongside my wares, casually entreating you with my dead eyes. "Please god, buy a copy."

And for \$800, this display can become a TALKING display. Won't the bookstore employees just love that? I wonder if there's



a discount if my cutout just makes that standard, moaning/whining sound of every Halloween decoration ever made.

While this idea really sounds great, I've seen what becomes of cardboard cutouts where I live. They appear to be the medium of choice for some kind of Penis Drawing Championship.

Ice Scraper

Seems like kind of a good idea. Until I remember that I spend most of the winter cursing my ice scraper, which broke the second time I used it. I'll get you, Gary DeTrois of whatever Real Estate. I'll get you if it's the last thing I do...



Lip Balm

Not a bad idea, although I've had promo lip balm twice now, and I would categorize the flavor as reminiscent of...if someone somehow bred coconut with those wax vampire fangs, and then those things had a baby thing, and that thing had a butthole that was regularly slathered with expired, raw chicken cutlets, that's as close as I can come to describing the flavor.

Fortune Cookies

I get enraged when a fortune cookie has advice rather than a fortune. That rage would spill over into a blind fury if a fortune cookie contained an ad.

Toothpaste Extruder



I own one of these and use it, and I am not proud of this fact. Although it might not be the worst ad. "This gizmo saves you a couple cents for every tube of toothpaste used. Use it about 100 times and buy my book!" Then it's a simple matter of convincing the American Dental Association to up the number of suggested brushings per day from 3 to...let's call it 10.

Swedish Fish



The problem I have is not with this product. It's that there is ONE fish in each thing. One fish? And the promo is on the wrapper, the part that you tear away to get at the fish as quickly as possible. "What happened to my promo items? Well, I kinda used them as jackets for candy, barriers to what people wanted, if you will."

Ping Pong Shooter



At least it's useful. I mean, it's useless, but it could result in that buzz, the kind that goes "Oh, that line in the employee handbook? It's because this idiot bought like 20 ping pong ball shooters and sent them to our office."

Custom Weed Grinder



Unfortunately, I don't know enough about Mary Jane to say how useful this is. I didn't even know weed grinding was a thing that people did. I'm not going to say anything else because people get really mad when, like me, you live in Colorado and don't really give a damn about marijuana.

Energy Drink

All I can think of is the poor bastard working at the Spirit Halloween Store whose boss is like, "Here, drink these! I have a whole case! You don't need to sleep. You NEED to sell more of these Harley Quinn costumes, pronto."



Table Tents



Well, well, well. Aren't you a handsome devil?

This is where we get to products that I think might be a good idea. Most of them are pretty inexpensive, easy to schlep around, and they get bonus points if they're actually useful.

Table tents...might be a good idea. How many restaurants do you go to where there are like 3 of these on the table anyway? And they can go on any flat surface. Bars, liquor store shelves, other places they have liquor that goes on a flat thing.

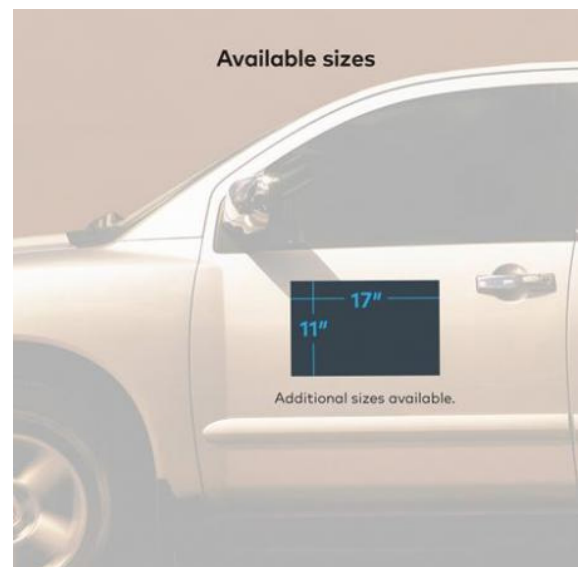
Bottle Openers

I DO feel like this product represents my people. My audience. They don't think of themselves as my audience, but I know who they are, and I know they drink.

We've all been in that spot, no bottle opener in sight. Maybe mine could save the day.

But I do wonder who actually uses one of these things to open a can. Who is sitting around, looking at a can and wondering just how they hell they're going to get it open? I know that long nails are a problem here, but I have a better solution: Make one friend. One. Or, barring that, get friendly enough with someone that they'll open a damn can for you.

Giant Car Magnet



I feel like I might actually be able to convince people to stick these to their cars. Not for any length of time, but it's kind of the perfect answer for people who are too cowardly to use bumper stickers.

Pens



The world is full of lousy promotional pens. But this particular brand is actually pretty decent. And again, easy to pack, not too pricey, and they're useful. At the very least, I could use them, and with the number of pens I lose they will pretty quickly be distributed.

Quick thing. These pens advertise Goebers? Might want to re-think that name.

And while we're on the topic, these stress balls advertise a company that sounds suspiciously like "Dahmer."



Slap Bracelets

They meet most of my criteria. And they're kinda fun. And they could be used as bookmarks, which are the ultimate utilitarian promo item. Although rather than just putting something about my book on there, I'd want to put something fun, something that made people want to wear the bracelets. So I guess what I'm really saying is that I want to get out of writing and into the slap bracelet industry.



Whoopee Cushions



Surprisingly inexpensive, stores and ships flat. And is it useful? Well, I guess that depends on your definition of the word. But if you don't think it'd be useful to have custom whoopee cushions, then I don't fully understand how you've gotten this far into this article. And you should probably quit now because it only goes downhill from here.

Custom Toilet Paper



There you have it. We've scraped the barrel. We've wiped the depths, if you will.

But...not crazy expensive. Useful, for sure. And while it's not the easiest thing to haul, it's not super heavy, and it's okay if they get squished a bit.

Plus, these could become collector's items. If most of them get used and there are only a couple left out there, who knows?

40 Years Ago, Howard The Duck Ran For President



I've got a piece of election history for you, and I'm betting it's one you didn't hear about yesterday, no matter how much news you watched.

Let me take you back 40 years. Yes, 1976. America was tooling around in automobiles powered by 59-cent/gallon gas. NASA released the famous Face on Mars photo. A baby named Joseph Lawrence Mignogna, Jr. was born, and little did we know that a scant few years later, he'd be "Whoa"-ing his way into our hearts.

And a lovable, cigar-chomping duck that I dare call plucky made a bid for the presidency.

Howard History

Howard the Duck made his debut in *Adventure Into Fear* #19 in late 1973, barging his way into a Man-Thing story and quickly developing a solid, if cultish, following.

Howard was your basic cartoon duck, but with a few differences. For example, you know how a typical cartoon character, if flattened by a steamroller, would blow on his thumb and re-inflate? Howard's writer/creator Steve Gerber said that were Howard to be steam rolled, "the result [would be] blood on asphalt."

Of course, Howard's resemblance to Disney's duck of



note didn't go unnoticed. There was some back and forth, and eventually an agreement was reached: Howard would wear pants. While Disney's wholesome duck kept his freeballing lifestyle, Howard's corkscrew would be clothed. And after all that trouble, Disney ended up purchasing Marvel, meaning both duck dynasties are now under the same roof anyway.

Howard's been in and out of publication since the mid-70's. Even when he's not helming his own solo title, he's continued to appear in mini series and cameos. Perhaps more interesting than dates and issue numbers, here's a brief list of things Howard has done or had done to him in the last few decades:

- Eaten by Devil Dinosaur
- Worked as a cab driver
- Mastered the martial art Quack Fu
- Built a very crappy Iron Man suit
- Clashed with Dr. Bong
- Fought the Circus of Crime with Spider-Man's clone
- Fought Hydra alongside Santa Claus
- Found not the Infinity Gauntlet, but the Abundant Glove

And whatever the Marvel event, Howard's been on the periphery. Even during Marvel Civil War, Howard was right there. Okay, he wasn't throwing fists. He was doing paperwork. Howard tried to follow the rules and register as a superhuman, but it turned out that the government had previously decided to officially deny the existence of "The Duckman of New Jersey" due to Howard's continued weirdness having become a bureaucratic nightmare.

Of course, we can only dance around the fact of the Howard the Duck movie for so long.

Howard the Duck was the first movie featuring a Marvel character (with the exception of some serialized 1940's Captain America nonsense). Yes, before the Hulk smashed Loki, before Thor (beThor) flexed on-screen, even before Dolph Lundgren busted out the hair dye and skull t-shirt to play the Punisher, Marvel created a movie where a duck tried to have sex with Lea Thompson, which would be gross if Thompson hadn't played a role the year previous in which she was trying pretty hard to get it on WITH HER OWN SON.

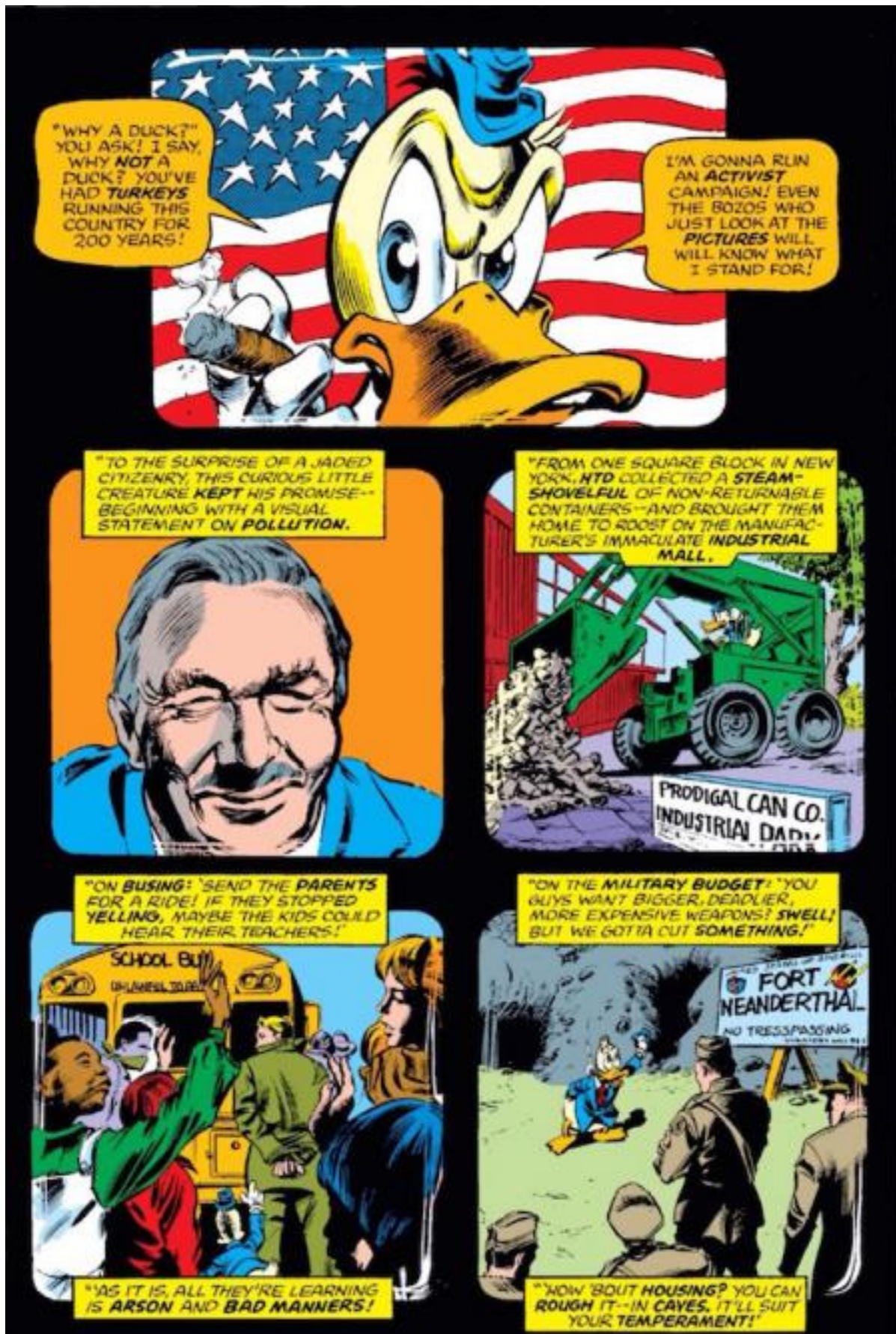
As cartoon-y, silly characters go, Howard hit it big. And in the midst of his rise, he ran for president.

The Election Story

The in-comic narrative of Howard's presidential bid started by chance, like most of Howard's adventures. Howard was working security at an election event, thwarted an attempt to bomb the place, and wound up being carried around on the shoulders of political movers and shakers, who decided to nominate Howard as their candidate.



Howard ran under the banner of the Up All Night Party, and his campaign slogan, "Get Down, America!" sounded empty, but this fowl had plans:



The most coherent version of Howard's politics comes from this mock interview between Howard and writer Steve Gerber, which appeared in *Marvel Treasury Edition #12*:

Steve Gerber: I can't picture a fellow with your sardonic bent plodding away at a workaday job.

Howard the Duck: How true, how true. I never kept one job more than three an' a half weeks. Which is another advantage of the presidency. They can only fire ya for high crimes an' misdemeanors. That stuff, I don't pull. I just mouth off a lot...

SG: You've expressed dismay at certain trends in popular culture, particularly the glorification of the rogue and the glamorization of violence. Are we to infer from this that you'd advocate some form of media censorship?

HTD: You gotta be kidding! Ya don't eliminate garbage by turnin' it into a black market commodity, an' ya don't elevate tastes by gagging writers an' artists. Look, there's nothin' wrong with makin' heroes outta non-conformists. I'll even admit to a rebellious streak myself. It's just—at the risk o' soundin' pompous—what seems to distinguish today's anti-hero from yesterday's is the former's willingness to callously exploit other people to achieve his own independence from the system. It's the difference between a poet an' a vulture, basically.

SG: That's pretty heavy.

HTD: Yeah. Nearly collapsed under its own weight, didn't it?

SG: I mean, do you think the American public is ready for that degree of subtle reasoning from its president?

HTD: They better be. If you turkeys can't even think that deep, this nation's had it!

SG: We seem to be gingerly approaching the core of your political philosophy, Howard. You want human beings to think.

HTD: Yeah, well, I know its askin' a lot from a hairless ape, but... !

Of course, Howard's in-comic run at the White House was thwarted. No, not because Howard failed to produce a birth certificate, even though he's a duck-man not of this Earth. Howard's downfall came after a leaked photo showed him in a bath tub with a woman.

America: The land where it's fine to be a duck-man president, but being in a bath tub with a woman is just too bizarre.

Fiction To Reality

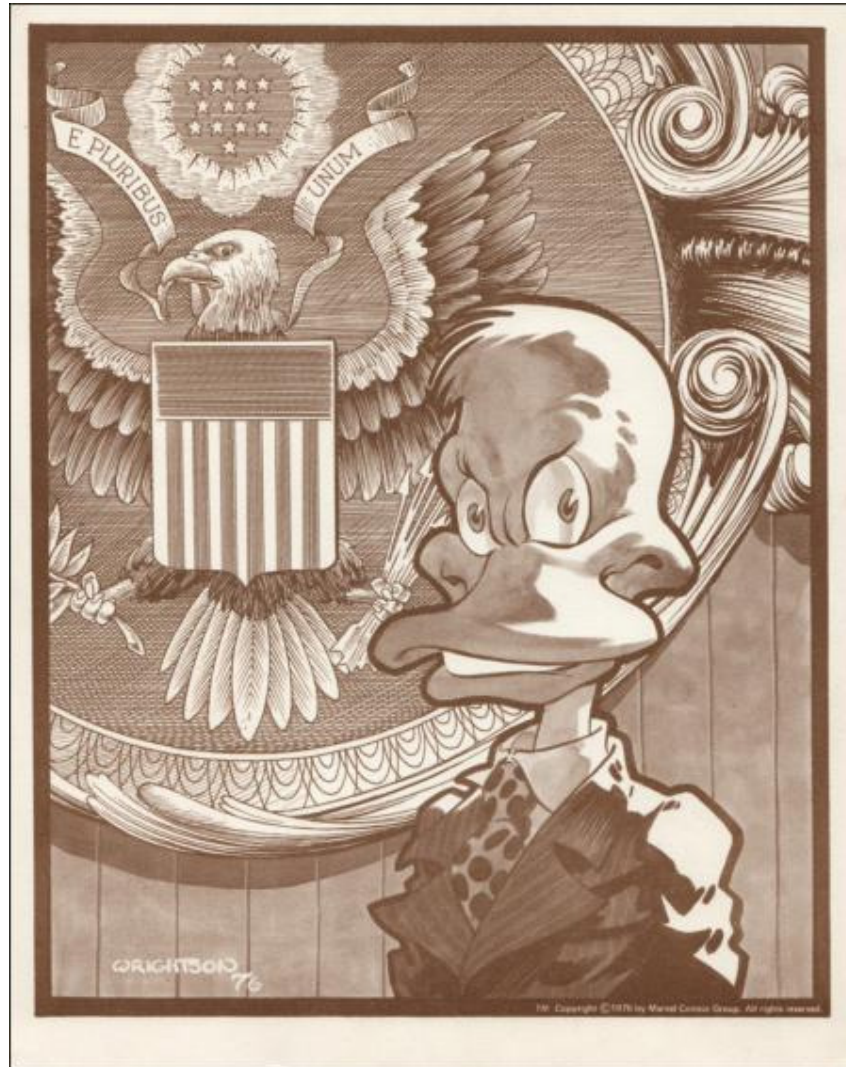
Alright, what's the big deal? Another comic book story come and gone. Howard runs for President, loses, then probably ends up in space, fights a giant gingerbread man, maybe teams up with ROM Space Knight or something. We get it.

What makes this story special is that, this time, the story didn't live and die entirely between the stapled pages of the comics.

Howard's campaign started to bleed into our world in the back of *Howard the Duck issue 4*, where it was announced that Howard would be Marvel's first candidate for President, and that for \$1.25, you could have your very own Howard election kit, including this sweet button:



And a short while later, a limited edition, very Presidential print by Bernie Wrightson was made available. Now isn't that a handsome addition to your collection?



Note the eagle's jealous stare. It was supposed to be me, damn it! If it was gonna be an animal, it was gonna be me!

Here's where the rumoring begins.

The legend may or may not have started with Stan Lee, who in *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics*, claims that Howard's in-comic and real world campaigning earned him thousands of real-world write-in votes.

Yes, Americans allegedly stepped into the booth, wrote in the name "Howard The Duck," and then stepped out of the booth and rewarded themselves with a nice phosphate or whatever the hell they drank back then.

Since 1976, this rumor has spread all over the world. But is it true?

Well...hard to say. My internet sleuthing couldn't turn up a single testimonial of someone who voted Duck in '76. God knows I wanted it badly, but I just couldn't find anyone who even claimed to have turned in a vote for Howie.

What I DO know, in the year 1976, 33,795 votes were write-ins.

Is it possible that some of them were for Howard?

Is it possible that Howard received more votes than Frank Taylor, who ran under the United American party and got a total of 36 votes?

Totally. Yes. In the America I want to live in, it's not only possible that Howard received 37+ votes, it's certain.

I guess what I'm saying is, having Howard anywhere but last place is good enough for me, and it's pretty damn respectable for a duck. I, for one, can't claim to have gotten a single write-in vote, and I'm an actual human!

That said, this has become a new obsession of mine. If anyone knows anyone, if anyone can find anyone who voted for Howard in '76, please comment below. Put the word. Make your voice heard. I want to verify that ONE person voted Howard. I want to believe in truth, justice, and the American "Waugh!"

The 11 Best And Worst Comic Book Things I Did This Year



In 2016, I wanted to fall in love with comics again. I'd always loved comics, and I still do, but you know how it is. Old love is comfortable love. Love that doesn't need to be revisited and re-upped quite as often. Until it does, anyway. Until someone involved in the love is asking why there's less romance and more Netflix now (this applies to both comics AND romantic love, conveniently).

I decided to try some things to rejuvenate my love for comics, and more to the point, to try relating to comics in some new ways.

Did it work?

Good: Visiting A Piece Of Personal Comic Book History

When we pulled up outside Mile-Hi Comics, my partner laughed. She said it didn't seem like we were anywhere near any kind of store, and she was right. We were in the middle of an...industrial wasteland? It was a bunch of warehouses, a bunch of loading docks, and a bunch of train tracks. We parked in a chainlink-surrounded dirt lot. As we walked in the back door, it definitely had the industrial, slightly odd vibe of a place that might inspire a Saw sequel.

It was weird. And great.

Mile-Hi comics was the place to be when I was a youngster. That is, if you didn't have access to the REAL places to be, such as parties, social gatherings, or anywhere geographic as long as you were there with someone you wanted to make out with.

This will date me a bit, but when I was in the serious throes of nerd-ery, you could not buy graphic novels and trade paperbacks at your average Barnes & Noble. AND, companies like DC and Marvel didn't put all their stuff in these formats either. The only way you could get this stuff was to make a journey to a place that actually carried the goods.

The store I visited with my partner wasn't the same as the one I made trips to 20 years ago, but the visit took me back to the time when buying comics wasn't an easy endeavor. You had to drive to another city, unaided by GPS. You had to deal with the people who ran comic book stores, who almost always seemed to be the ultimate example of people who loved a thing and absolutely should not have built a career around selling that thing. You did not see superhero t-shirts at Target, and when a comic book movie came out, you prepped for disappointment. Comic fandom was subculture. Sub-subculture.

Now, don't get me wrong. I know that I probably sound like someone who is nostalgic for a New York City of the early 80's, with its grime and porno theaters and whatnot, but who's forgotten that it was no picnic. I don't think that comic stores have to stay the same. I don't even think they were better back when. They were just different.

Imagine moving into a tiny, crappy apartment with someone you loved when you were younger. You wouldn't want to live in that shit hole today. You're not wishing that things were the same as they were then. But you can still be nostalgic for that time, for some of the feelings from that time.

Me and comics once lived in a sort of cultural shit hole, but we had each other, and it was enough.

It was good to revisit that time, just for a little bit.

Bad: Talking About Comics On Twitter

Here's a piece of advice, take it or leave it:

Unless the entirety of your thing to say about a comic is "It's great!" you can go ahead and skip Twitter for comic book conversations.

Think about your own Twitter life. Have you ever walked away from a Twitter conversation/argument feeling better than when you went in?

Let's put this another way. I read a comic book's worth, nay, a graphic novel's worth, no, an Alan Moore novel's worth of Tweets about comics this year when I could have read actual comics instead.

Good: Reviewing All The Comics I Read On Goodreads

This, I've found, is a much better venue for talking comics. Because most people who will talk with you have also read the same book or books, and you can discuss things in more detail than you can on Twitter.

Old love is comfortable love...Until someone involved in the love is asking why there's less romance and more Netflix now.

But it's not just that. I think reviewing comics on Goodreads is a great thing to do because it helps comics be part of the larger discussion of books. They fit in just a little bit better with their wordier brethren.

Bad: Joining A Group Of Comic Book Enthusiasts On Facebook

I should clarify, it's not so much the group. The group is pretty nice, and they post pictures of cool books, great costumes and the like. BUT, reading the comments on things, THAT was a mistake.

What is it about Facebook that seems to bring out the worst in people? My god, I don't think the phrase, "Well, agree to disagree" has EVER been used on that site. Is it filtered or something? Is this part of Zuck's plan to throw the world into chaos and bring on the scourge that is Dormammu?

It's almost like Facebook has become the place we go to get pissed off. We all follow a relative or a co-worker or someone, almost solely because we want to point to their posts and say, "Can you believe this shit?"

That's been my experience, as of late, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to find that a Facebook group was not the answer to re-igniting my love for comics.

Good: Starting A Regular Review of Old Comics

I like Spider-Man. And I decided to do a podcast where we go through every issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*, one show at a time.

Why was this good?

Honestly, the old, old issues of comics are rough. They read like radio plays or something. You half expect someone to break in with an Ovaltine ad. But when you're looking at them closely, you can appreciate both the things that are good about them and the things that are bizarre. For example, in an early issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*, Flash Thompson and Peter Parker are arguing, and a teacher at their school tells the boys to strap on boxing gloves and sort out their problems that way.

Put that in context. Imagine someone at work saying, "Yeah, my son was arguing with another kid at school, so a teacher threw them in a boxing ring and had them go a couple rounds." How strange is that? How strange is it that this is the product of the world we live in from not that long ago?

Frankly, I started reading old comics the way some people read classics, which is to say I started appreciating what they say about the past and the accomplishments they managed, and I accepted that sometimes they won't be the easiest or most pleasurable things to read.



Bad: Delving Into Digital Comics

Digital comics aren't without their advantages, but I still don't think they've hit on the right formula.

When you have a two-page spread in a paper comic, you can use the space in a lot of different, exciting ways.

When this two page spread is on an iPad, not so awesome.

A two page spread in a print comic is about 13" wide and 10" long. The 12.9" iPad Pro has a 12.9" screen when measured diagonally. I'm not going to bust too much geometry (sorry, Mr. Winegar), but with the iPad on its side, you're missing 26 square-inches of real estate. Something like 20%.

Digital comics aren't a bad thing, but if a comic is being printed digitally, it'd be nice to see it built around the format. Currently, it would seem that comics are designed to be read issue by issue, not in trade paperback or digitally.

For me, the excitement for digital comics will come when they not only match the goodness of reading paper, but when they find a way to exceed it. When the format becomes an advantage, not a hurdle.

Good: Read A Top-Selling Book Of 2016

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther #1* was a top selling book of 2016, which is exciting for a lot of reasons that a lot of people have spoken about, but I don't know if I've seen consideration given to just how huge the sales were.

In April, the book sold 253,259 issues. That's like early 90's numbers, when people thought that comics were a solid investment. Which they weren't, by then. There's the occasional high-value book, but somehow most people involved in the collecting bubble did not put together the fact that older books were WAY more valuable because A) far fewer were printed, B) they featured early stories of iconic characters, and C) most people back in the day didn't give a rip about comics' collectability, so there weren't a ton that survived in collectible condition.

Black Panther ushered in a huge summer for comics. This June was the comic book industry's best-selling month since 1997.

Other books showed big numbers as well, *Civil War II*, some *Star Wars* books. But it felt like the path was set by *Black Panther*. It was great to read something that was at the forefront, and to see good comics setting the tone for such a profitable summer. Reading a top-seller let me be a small part of that.

Good: Collecting Cover Art

This year, I decided to start collecting comics again. But not for bagging and boarding in stacks of

Just a warning, if your mom is like my mom, she will be concerned by this idea and may start asking questions about whether you think you'll ever get married.

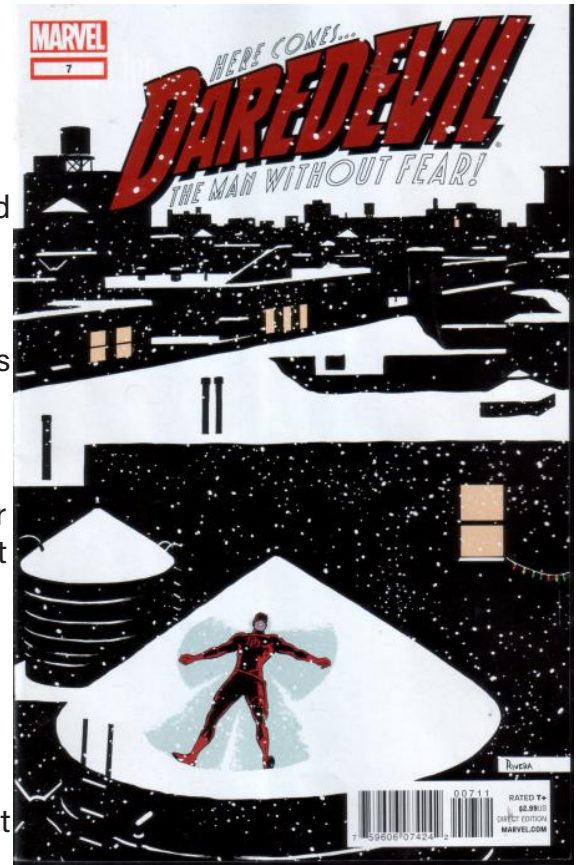
long white boxes. I started collecting for display.

I don't have a ton of cash to spend on comics, but I have enough to start seeking out books with great covers for hanging in my home. Which is something I really recommend. There are SO MANY great covers out there, and they can be had for a great price.

When you collect covers that you like, you don't have to buy anything expensive. First appearances and significant events don't matter. It doesn't even matter if you like the character. It's all about getting that great art.

And it's a new way to find some joy in your collection. Rather than putting books in a box, let your collection breathe. Let it be something that you can look at and admire. By changing the composition of your collection, by collecting the things that bring you joy and deploying them in a different way, you can really take the act of collecting comics to a new level.

Just a warning, if your mom is like my mom, she will be concerned by this idea and may start asking questions about whether you think you'll ever get married.



Good: Watching Comic Book Movies While Totally Ignoring ALL Peripheral Conversations About Them

I made a mistake with *Guardians of the Galaxy*. I didn't watch it until everyone was saying how great it was. And then, by the time I watched it, nothing could live up to the hype.

I think *Guardians* was a perfectly good superhero movie that benefited greatly by being the superhero movie that had almost no expectations going in. It seemed, on paper, like a mistake. We cast Andy Dwyer as a hero? We had a pro wrestler? We cast Bradley Cooper, a world's sexiest man, and used only his VOICE? The post-credits sequence features the cinematic return of Howard the Duck? What about ANY of that sounds like sound decision making?

Well, it turned out pretty good.

But hearing how great it was over and over, it soured the experience. I knew what to expect. My bar was high.

This year, I corrected the problem, and I went to see comic book movies with almost no expectations. I tried to ignore the trailers because they almost always show me the most exciting shit. Sometimes I was rewarded (*Deadpool*). Sometimes I was less than thrilled (*Batman V Superman*). But ultimately, I liked excusing myself from the conversations, attacking or defending a movie (*Suicide Squad*) three months before it's come out, based mostly on 3 minutes of trailer.

A bad movie is still bad, regardless of how much you talk about it. A good movie is still good, but it's got a little something extra when you let the surprises be surprises.

Bad: Purchasing And Listening To The Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark Cast Recording

While everyone else was pissing themselves over *Hamilton*, I went to a dark place. I attempted to turn the dark off, but I'm not sure I succeeded.

I don't know a lot about musicals, so it's hard for me to be judgmental. That said, this is a rough one. I mean...there was one song I found memorable. And it DID result in a new song for me to sing to the cat, which is kind of a hobby of mine. But I could've just stolen another Adele song.

Good: Talking To My Comic Book Bestie Drunk Until 4 AM

This was, easily, the best comic book thing I did this year. If there's one thing I can recommend doing, it's this.

To be clear, I don't recommend talking with MY comic book bestie. He had a kid this year. He's busy. But YOUR comic book bestie? Talk to them. Have a couple drinks and talk about comics.

Comic book nerds have taken to the internet like a (Howard the) duck to water (eye-droppered into whiskey). And I don't think it's outrageous to say we've replaced a lot of our in-person conversations about comics with online conversations. And I don't think it's outrageous to say that online conversations often turn into online arguments.

If you want to love comics, whenever possible, replace comics conversations online with in-person talks. Even if you only get to talk 10% of the amount you used to, you'll be happier. And drunker. Which is basically the same thing in my book.

Confession: I Paid For Book Reviews



No author worth their salt would pay for book reviews, right?

Right. I'm here to prove it to you. And I'm uniquely positioned to do so because I'm an author NOT worth my salt.

I stand (sit) here before you (my computer) and say it proudly (through a mouthful of donut): I paid for book reviews.

Here's what happened.

Overcoming The Stigma

Let's be honest. There's a stigma when it comes to buying book reviews. Paying for a book review is a mark of disgrace. Only a scumbag would pay for a review. Only the lowest of the low. Only a real piece of—

Stop it. I'm blushing.

I'm not above paying for a book review, which probably has to do with the fact that I'm not above most things. For me, most normal standards of behavior are too high-falootin' by a factor of about 100. 5-second rule? Try 500-second rule. That rule about dating someone half your age plus 7? I'd date someone more than half my age plus 7, and I'd do it by a factor of 100...that means they'd be like 5,000 years old. And I would STILL date that person because they're clearly immortal and have something to teach me.

For me, the stigma of paid reviews wasn't a big hurdle. But why does the stigma exist?

I have theories.

One theory is the moral issue, that paying for reviews is like paying for sex. The perception being that, if you're a good person with a good... product, you should be able to find sex/reviews without paying, and that this is the morally superior way of doing things.

The second theory is a little more insidious, and it has to do with what it means to be an artiste.

Most writers have experienced the difficulty of going from creator to carnival barker. To pouring heart and soul into a thing, and then turning around and being totally willing to do anything to sell a copy of that thing, even if that thing is used to correct a table's wobble.

I believe there's a stigma about being a writer who wants to sell a thing. That to some, the desire to make a buck taints the original product, or the motives behind the product's creation. Hell, for me to call a book a "product" is probably enough to get me pre-kicked-out of literary history.

Oh, and there's a third theory about the stigma, which is that reviews you pay for are utter garbage. While the other two theories are just theories, I'm here to tell you that this third idea has graduated from theory to fact.

What I Did

I used a site that rhymes with Fiverr.com to find reviewers. When I say the site name rhymes with Fiverr.com, I mean it's a very close rhyme, sort of like when Killer Mic rhymed "moss" with "Moss" in an Outkast song, one moss being the plant growth, one being the Randy. This song is now 15 years old and I'm still pissed off about that rhyme.

The results were less than stellar. And I found out that nobody will post a review on Amazon (more on this later).

The first person I attempted to contract, apparently, doesn't review your book so much as post a review YOU wrote of your own book on some blog or another. That's garbage.

One reviewer posted a "review" to their blog AND tweeted about it (0 likes or retweets). The "review" consisted of the book's description. And I couldn't help but notice that the sidebar ad on the blog featured a totally unlicensed Game of Thrones image, and I had no idea what the ad was for. This blog lives that deep on the internet. I wanted to click on that ad for the sake of this article, but I was too scared that this action would destroy my computer.

Finally, one reviewer hit the Goodreads scene hard, adding my book to several lists including "Nerdventure," "Funniest Novels of All Time," "Entertaining Books for Teens! :)" and "Books For Guys."

On this last one, "Books For Guys," my book fell below Janet Evanovich's One For the Money. I never thought, I could outsell Janet Evanovich, nor would I claim to outwrite her, but when I can't out-GUY her with my story of saving an arcade through bikini car wash fundraising, I've clearly failed in some way.

Buying reviews is a waste of time in 2016. I sold exactly zero copies after doing so.

Oh, and about a week after I paid, my book disappeared from these lists. Go figure.

Where Have All The Farmers Gone?

My results were pretty underwhelming. And I found the lack of reviewers surprising. When I started the search for review farms, I thought I'd be swimming in them. I was under the impression that you could find someone to review your ebook, no problem.

I clicked on linked site after linked site only to see that telltale page letting me know that the domain was for sale. Even a site that was big-time enough for a full story in The New York Times a few years ago seems to have gone bust.

It turns out that this lack of shady reviewers-for-hire has to do with the Rudy Giuliani of the internet, my lover and my nemesis, Amazon.

In 2015, Amazon started cleaning up the streets, cracking down on reviews for pay, including bringing in the long arm of the law to deal with sites that were offering starred reviews for money. And this year, Amazon went further, stamping out reviews made by reviewers who received products for free or at a discounted price.

Which all sounds fair. I get it. Paid reviews DO compromise the value of customer reviews.

But there's more to the story.



Ugly Truth Time

You've probably seen Amazon reviews that end with something like, "This reviewer was given a free or discounted product in exchange for an honest review." And you're probably thinking that this is the

sort of thing Amazon was trying to get rid of.

Well, it was, sort of.

It turns out there's this program called Amazon Vine. You can read the official version, but my dumbed down version is that Amazon will let reviewers post reviews for products they've been given or received at a discount, but only if those reviewers are part of a secret cabal of special reviewers who have been deemed worthy by Amazon and probably have some kind of a secret handshake and decoder ring.

If you're part of the review elite, then it's all kosher.

And while we're on the topic of the elite, dig this:

While you can't add your own customer reviews to a product, you CAN add an editorial review so long as it's from a "reputable" source. And these reputable sources WILL review your book for money.

How much?

Kirkus will review your book for a measly \$425.

IndieReader is far more reasonable at \$225.

Blue Ink: \$325. San Francisco Book Review: \$150.

Lessons Learned

What I learned here is that you can totally pay for a book review, and Amazon is totally fine with it, just so long as:

A) You don't try to pass it off as a customer review

and

B) You pay a lot for it

What I also learned is that incentivized reviews are NOT COOL...unless they're the ones that are totally cool, a distinction made by some shadow organization that rivals the secrecy of the C.I.A.

Oh, and I learned that buying reviews is a waste of time in 2016. I sold exactly zero copies after doing so. I guess my best option is to find that 5,000 year old sugar mama, romance her, and hope for the best.

Ridiculously Extravagant Gifts For Writers And Their Cheap Alternatives



'Tis the season! To buy some stuff for the writer in your life!

I'll be the first to admit, writers can be tough to shop for. Especially if you don't want to indulge some bad habits (booze), overindulge medium-bad habits (coffee), or do that copout thing where you give something like a certificate for 30 minutes of interruption-free time.

But what if the problem, when shopping for writerly gifts, is that we're not thinking big enough? What if we stopped thinking with our dumb brains and our wretched hearts and started thinking with our wallets?

Maybe it's time to look at some expensive stuff, THEN let reality set in, cry a little, and look at the cheaper alternatives.

Freewrite

This is the Freewrite, which is really nothing more than an electronic typewriter that wirelessly sends your work to Google Drive, Evernote, or wherever. The idea being that you can write without distraction.

Call me a hipster asshole. I think this thing is kind of cool. I like the clickety-clak of a mechanical keyboard, I



like the idea of writing that isn't hampered by my own inability to stop myself from looking up bizarre permutations of Bee Movie on YouTube. The Freewrite (formerly Hemingwrite) gets a lot of hate, but it occurs to me that this is, in essence, a Kindle for writers as opposed to readers. Long battery life, simple function, quick startup/shutdown. All the things we like about Kindle, but put into a device for creation as opposed to consumption.

Everything about this makes sense. Except for the price. The most distracting thing about this device is that I'd be in constant fear that someone around me would know that I paid \$500 for the damn thing.

The Alternative

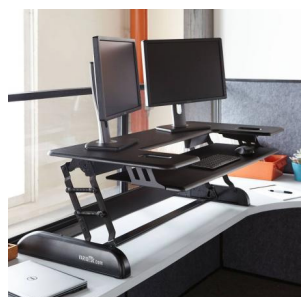
There's a pretty simple and much cheaper alternative to the Freewrite.



This is the Alphasmart Neo. Which is basically the same thing as the Freewrite except it has a USB cable instead of a wireless connection.

It's distraction-free writing, stores somewhere between 80 and 200 pages of work, and gets about 700 hours of writing time out of 3 AA batteries. Oh, and it's about \$30, which is a steal when compared to the Freewrite (and damn it's just occurred to me how backwards the "Free" part of "Freewrite" is).

My advice: head over to eBay, Amazon, wherever, get one of these things for a fraction of the cost, and if your writer REALLY loves it, then you can justify the Freewrite later on. Or you can consider the fact that the Alphasmart Neo cost \$249 in 2004 when it was released, and perhaps the Freewrite will be affordable eventually. In a decade.



Standing Desk

This is the Varidesk.

Chances are you've heard about standing desks, and that you've heard about studies that say people who sit at a desk all day are more likely to die young.

By the way, science, has it ever occurred to you that this isn't a coincidence, that those of us who sit at a desk all day may be WILLING ourselves to check out early?

Standing desks are the new-old thing. And while there's certainly some merit to the idea, the price tag is, again, preposterous. \$375? If I could afford that, I could just afford to work a little less, stand a little more, and buy some human growth hormone.

Plus, who wants to have this thing in their house? It looks like something made by NordicTrack.

The Alternative

What's the solution?

1. Buy a tall desk or table that suits your writer's standing height (or raise the legs of your desk with chair risers, which are totally a thing).
2. Buy a tall chair or adjustable stool.

Done.

For the price of some plastic and a tall chair, your writer can stand when they want and sit when they want. And lucky you, their life will be extended and you can enjoy their curmudgeon ass for a couple extra years.

Writing Cabin

HEY! HAVE YOU HEARD THIS THING VIRGINIA WOOLF SAID ONE TIME!?!?!?!?!?

Yes. Yes we have. We've ALL heard the thing about the room and whether it should belong to a bunch of people or just one person.

Let's ignore the metaphorical implications of Woolf's essay for the moment. Wouldn't it be nice to offer your writer their own writing cabin, an office of their own where they can write without distraction or care as the snowflakes fall softly on blah blah blah...



Of course. That'd be great. For a couple of tens of thousands of dollars in land and building costs, you could have it.

But that's not realistic for most of us, right?

The Alternative

Former Poet Laureate Ted Kooser wrote a lot of his early works in a large cardboard box he found in the alley near his home. He'd get inside, type away, and then tape his poems to the walls.

I looked for large-ish cardboard boxes online. They're a tough find, believe it or not. But here's what isn't:



Now, hear me out. I know this thing is not attractive. But it does provide some needed privacy. It does cut your writer off from the distractions of the inside/outside world. It does add that small barrier, unzipping the door and stepping out. It does cost less than \$50. It does allow for a writer in a studio apartment to have a room of their own.

Writing Retreat

Yes, a room to write, a bunch of people to write with. Usually nestled in an idyllic setting. What better gift could you give your writer friend?

For a thousand bucks? Probably a lot.

A retreat might be life-changing and great, but most of us just can't afford it.

The Alternative

What about helping your writer friend create a submission for a residency?

Some are even cost-free. You just have to apply, hope for the best, and if you get in you have to get yourself there and buy your own food.

A lot of residencies are free or low-cost, and while it's not quite the same as a full-blown retreat, it could be a great learning/writing experience.

This is definitely a good way to go if you don't have a lot of cash this year. Pull all the submission info together, fill out the application as much as possible. Print a couple things you think your writer would like to submit. Address an envelope and add postage, but don't seal it. Make sure your writer is cool with it and likes the things being submitted. Do this for 3-5 different residencies and you've got yourself a really great gift on the cheap. Because not only do you have a chance at something pretty cool, you're demonstrating faith in your writer friend.

Stallone Montegrappa Chaos Fountain Pen



Beauty. It's like if you took a t-shirt created by an MMA fighter, turned it 3-dimensional, and then smooshed it down into a pen. It's like you're writing with the music of Drowning Pool. If their music was somehow turned into a writing implement, this would be it.

Let me share with you the description of this pen, just in case its greatness does not come through in the picture:

- Montegrappa Chaos is the pen designed by Hollywood icon Sylvester Stallone.
- Made of black pearlized celluloid pen and a masterful artwork crafted in 18K gold.
- The cap and body overlay is finished and antiqued by hand and depicts snakes and lizards, swords and skulls. A juxtaposition of life and death.
- All is highlighted by fire-colored translucent hard enamel ribbons.
- The pen bears a fist and a skull and a sword in the form of the clip.

Snakes, swords, skulls, a fist, another sword. This pen has it all. Unfortunately, this pen runs \$5,000. Yeah. Believe it. For one pen!

However, it makes an important point about buying your writer friend a super fancy pen. (Also, the Amazon reviews are pretty great.)

Alternatives

The real problem with a fancy pen is that it's worthless. Who is willing to carry a \$5,000 pen? Who is this person? Even when you get down to a price that's relatively reasonable, say \$100, most writers will keep it in a drawer at home because, damn, the last thing you want to do is lose a \$100 pen.

A pen in a drawer at home is a worthless pen.

I've got options though. Two of them, to be precise.

The first is this.



This is a Muji fountain pen. If you want to get into the world of fountain pens, this is the way to go. It's not ostentatious, but it's still a very nice pen. The body is metal, the nib has some designs on it, and the pen itself costs \$18.

The second is this.



This is a Tombow rollerball pen. Also about \$18. The difference is that this isn't a fountain pen, and also that it's a thick, heavy bastard. This thing feels like a sap, like you could club someone over the head with it and they might not ever get up. Heavy and metal, when translated into pen, feels fancy.

And here's the real trick to buying a pen for your writer friend. Buy two. This is your way of telling your writer, "It's cool if you lose this thing. Not a big deal."

Only caveat, I don't KNOW that either of these pens was designed by any celebrities. But let's say the Muji pen was crafted based on a design by Cynthia Rothrock and the Tombow...Wesley Snipes.

Notebooks

There are two purchasing pitfalls when it comes to journals.

First, there's artisanal bullshit. "Ooo. Look at these handsome journals."



And ooo, being handsome ain't cheap.

Here are some red flags to watch for when looking at a web site that sells notebooks:

If the first image that pops up is someone in an apron who appears to be hand-forging notebooks, do not buy. If the company is in the United States and spells "color" like "colour," do not buy. If the company's web site opens to a page titled something like "Our Story," do not buy.

The second way to go wrong with a notebook gift is to get something like this:



This is a "Smart" Writing Set. Which means you write by hand, then take a picture with your phone and transfer your work to the computer. It costs \$200. And it violates the basic rule of using a notebook, which is K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple, Stephanie. I know most people don't use the name Stephanie at the end of that acronym, but I know a Stephanie who needs a lot of reminders to keep it simple).

The Alternative

My advice is to skip the notebooks completely. Your writer knows what they like, and trust me, if you write, you will get no shortage of notebooks from others and as gifts you give yourself. I have Rhodias, Moleskines. I have a journal where the pages are made out of elephant poo. I have a notebook that's apparently meant to be used in a science lab. I have a whole big pile of journals, and they all sit in a box because I only use one at a time.

If someone in my life followed the gift guide here, I realize that I'd be writing on a keyboard straight out of a 90's classroom, in a tent normally used as a shelter for a composting toilet, with a decent pen, an old notebook that's been in my closet for 10 years, and while waiting to hear back from a residency.

Why You Need A Snow Day Writing Pact



A snow day is coming.

And before you tell me that you live in a place where it doesn't snow, let's define what a snow day is.

A snow day is a day's worth of time that falls into your lap. A completely unexpected chunk of found time that came about with no effort or machination on your part. It just sort of...happened. Maybe because of the weather. Maybe because the power is out at your work. Kaiju attack. Whatever. It could be just about anything, but the point is, when we're talking snow days here, we're talking about a day that you didn't have until you did.

Or, time to work on your writing that you didn't have. Until you did.

And here's why you need to be ready for those days. Here's why you need a snow day pact.

How A Snow Day Usually Goes

1. You wake up early and find out you don't have to work.
2. You cheer or possibly weep with joy and relief. Depends on your relationship with your current job and/or life.
3. You say to yourself, "I'm going to get a lot of writing done today. Right after I do some other stuff."
4. You accomplish almost nothing.

Why It Goes That Way

Found time is hard to manage. Because when you're in the midst of a day of found time, you're in a sort of magical time loop. You'd already planned the entire workday, but now, now you've got LOADS of time. Which means you can make a slow breakfast while you half watch a movie. And then another movie. And then afternoon and you don't know how it started, but you've watched 5 out of 7 *Saw* movies.

And you shave away the entire day like this. "Eh, if I work on my projects for 6 hours, that's still way more than I would have on a normal day."

"Eh, four hours is still a HUGE work marathon."

"Eh, 2 hours is what I would've gotten in anyway."

"Eh, *Saw VII* is rated higher than *Saw VI*. Why stop at a low point?"



it's

Why Is This A Problem?

You're a writer (or an artist or someone who does photography or whatever). And if you're like most of us who pursue these things, what you want more than anything is a little more time. Just another hour in the day.

But because this is found time, it's easy to waste it. Because it wouldn't have gone towards your writing anyway.

This is the kicker: Today is a snow day, but tomorrow won't be.

When you return to your regularly-scheduled life tomorrow, you want to be at your desk and thinking, "I got a lot done yesterday."

In the middle of the snow day, it feels good to lay around and do nothing. But every day after, it'll feel better to have gotten in some quality work.

How Do You Change That?

Make a Snow Day Pact. Duh. It's the title of the article. I can't make this clearer.

What's a Snow Day Pact?

A snow day pact is simple, and it's got two parts.

Part one is a deal you make with yourself. A deal about how you're going to use found time.

Part two is making sure you have everything you need to make that happen.

Part One: The Deal

Here's mine:

When you have a snow day, you will use no less than half of it to write. NOT "to get writing-related stuff done." Not to research. Not to do writing-adjacent work. To write.

And that's it. This means, when a snow day comes, I have to spend no less than four hours of it writing. And you'll notice my pact addresses my specific problems. I tend to veer off into doing "writing-adjacent" tasks and then feel like I've been writing. Which I haven't.

Part Two: Making It Happen

You need to be able to fulfill your pact even if there's no WiFi. Because if the weather is bad enough to keep us all indoors, there's a good chance the power is going down. You need to be able to fulfill your pact without power. You need to be able to fulfill this pact whether you're at home or not.

Some quick tips to this effect:

1. Every so often, print a copy of your work in progress. Having this on hand will give you something to edit in any situation.
2. Carry a pocket notebook, and when you finish writing for the day, copy the last sentence into the first blank page on your pocket notebook. That way, wherever you end up, you can pick up where you left off.
3. Save versions of your WIP locally as well as in the cloud. See if you can do this weekly.
4. If harsh weather is coming, plug in your laptop and get a full charge the night before.
5. Apply normal winter precautions. This means having some easy-to-prepare food in the house, having some candles around, all that crap.

The Template

Are you lazy? A worthless, lazy piece of crap.

Me too.

Which is why I made a template for you. Print this out, fill it out, and put it somewhere you'll see it.

Snow Day Writing Pact

I, _____
will use _____ hours of the next
snow day that occurs to work on
_____.



Final Thoughts

A snow day is a gift. But it's a gift you have to be prepared for.

Imagine you're standing outside a fancy restaurant and a waiter carrying a delicious, expensive steak slips on a banana peel (or plantain peel, if that fits in better with the offerings of fancy restaurants) and the steak goes flying out an open window and into your mouth.

You have to make a choice. And it's a tough choice if you're unprepared. Your natural instinct is going to be to spit that steak out. Something flies out of nowhere and hits you in the face, that's the natural next move.

But if you're ready for it, you can make a choice. Are you going to spit it out on the sidewalk, or are you going to be ready? Are you going to start chewing?

A little preparation goes a long way when it comes to snow days. Be prepared.

The Guide To Building Your Own 2017 Reading Challenge



It's that time again. The time of year when we all decide to get in shape, stop being jerks, and start a new reading list.

That means finding a gym, finding a path to inner peace, and finding a reading list.

And for most of us, that means abandoning the gym after a few weeks, deciding it's better to be an asshole (more fun, too), and forgetting entirely about that reading list.

I'm not here to tell you to exercise, and I'm not here to tell you to stop being a jerk. I'm here to talk to you about reading lists, though. I'm here to tell you that it's time to stop finding reading lists and that it's time you made your own, that building your own reading challenge is the key to happiness and fulfillment that will last throughout your year of reading.

Why Bother?

You're right to ask this question. There are TONS of reading lists out there. Why re-create the wheel?

Because one wheel doesn't work on every car. The wheel needs to be re-created once in a while.

Most reading lists have problems. The difficulty is off, the challenges aren't exciting, and it all comes down to the same thing: It's not yours. Some other joker made this, not you. This reading list doesn't reflect your interests. It doesn't reflect your weaknesses. It's just a list that someone out there put together in order to have a thing to write on the internet, not because they care about what your

reading experience will feel like over the next year.

Having something so impersonal, it's like taking a checklist for intercourse from the internet and applying it in real life. "Step 1: Indicate to your partner that you are aroused, either verbally or through non-verbal cues, such as putting on the *Beetlejuice* soundtrack." It's boring AND gross. Don't be boring AND gross.

Get out a sheet of paper. Right now. Let's do this together.

Stop consuming and start creating.

Step 1: Handwritten And Handmade

I really recommend going the handwritten route. Write out your reading challenge by hand. Add illustrations. Color if you want. Add stickers. Make folds. Orient things however you like on the page. Make this list a living, personal thing, something that's special to you.

You'll connect with this list if it's written out. And as the year passes, you'll see the list age and crinkle. It'll become something of a marker of a specific year, a tangible artifact of your year of reading in a way a digital list just can't replicate.



Step 2: Get Away From Numbers

I dislike numerical challenges like "Read X Books This Year." If you get behind, you give up. There's no reason to go on. You get so overwhelmed by how much you suck that you give up entirely.

AND, when you have a numerical reading challenge, then you're not incentivized to read longer books, even if something catches your eye.

Let's get away from numbers. Instead, let's talk challenges.

Step 3: Challenges

My advice is that you create a list of challenges for yourself and then fill in those challenges with self-selected titles throughout the year.

For one thing, it gets you away from titles you picked early in the year. Why limit yourself to books you were excited to read in January of 2017? Leave room for something new.

For another, challenges can act as prompts that help you out of a reading rut.

And to speak to flexibility, create your challenges and then give yourself the option of calling it a win if you complete 75% of those challenges. Or 25%. Or whatever number of challenges you think will

feel like a win. That way, you don't have to do absolutely everything.

What sorts of challenges should you set? Read on!

Step 4: Diversity And Even More Diversity

Reading books with diverse authors, characters and settings is something that many reading lists will challenge you to do. And this is a good thing. For a lot of reasons. But the way I've gone about it isn't working, and I'll share the problem I've created for myself. If these challenges don't cause this problem for you, then feel free to ignore.

In the past I've tried lists with challenges like "Read a book by someone who identifies as LGBTQ+" or "Read a book that takes place in Asia." What ends up happening most of the time is that I complete these challenges by reading only books labeled as literary fiction. That's my tendency, my pattern. And when I see a pattern, I want to SMASH it. Building my own challenge allows me to do so.

Horror novels by people of color? Yes, please.

What's happening in the world of Chinese romance? Let's find out!

LGBTQ+ comics artists? Let's do this!

When it comes to building your list, take a look at the potential for diversity and see if there's a pattern there. Look at what you're reading to fulfill your challenges. Then, if there is a pattern, disrupt that pattern.

Step 4: When Traditional Genres Aren't Enough

Genres are another staple of reading lists. Maybe traditional genres are too prescriptive for you. Maybe something like "Read a Horror Novel" doesn't quite cut it.

I have a theory about this, and it's that we confuse a book's genre with the effect it's meant to have on a reader. Who's to say what horror does to you? It may not be the same thing that it does to someone else.

If that sounds like you, replace genre challenges with something else. For example, you could replace genre challenges with challenges regarding the emotions a book is meant to evoke in a reader.

Read a book that you've purposely avoided out of fear.

Read a book that makes you feel uncomfortable.

To speak to the above diversity piece, Read a novel that takes place in China and has a character you're likely to fall in love with.

Step 5: The How

We don't just read books. We have experiences with books. Think about it. You've probably heard

someone start to tell you about a book they read, but the synopsis veers off into a story about an experience. "Oh yeah, I read that. I read it in one weekend. I was visiting home for the holidays, and I was in my old bedroom. It was so weird because..."

When you build your challenge, build in the opportunity for experiences too.

Listen to an audiobook at minimum 2X speed.

Read a book entirely outdoors.

Step 6: Consumption

Reading is consumption. It's always a good idea to consider how you're consuming what you read. Where your money is going. What your role in the marketplace is.

Buy an eBook that costs less than \$1.99.

Buy a book directly from an indie press.

Read something out-of-print.

Step 7: Serendipity

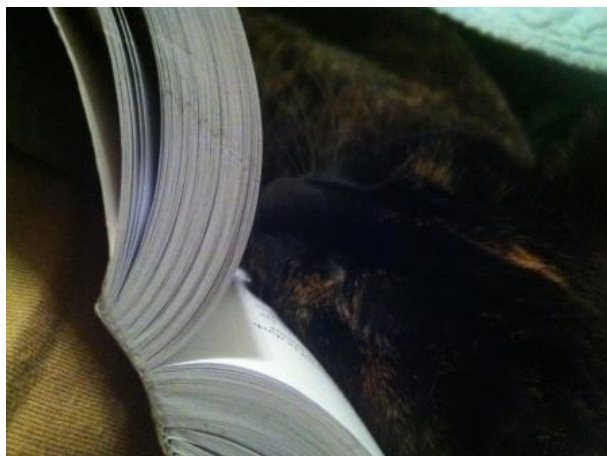
Building in some chance is a great way to keep your reading list lively over the year. It's a whole year! Give yourself the chance to be surprised.

When your reading list is overly structured, you'll find yourself slogging through. When there's some built-in surprise, you'll have some options to break out of a reader's block.

Go to the library and pick a book off the shelf. One you've never heard of before.

Roll some dice, virtual or analog, add up the numbers and read whichever book is in that position on a bestseller list (or reading list of your choice).

Choose between three or more books by placing them on the floor and allowing your pet to choose. (Okay, you got me. I just wanted to put in a picture of my kitty.)



Step 8: Get Personal

One of the best ways to make sure your reading list doesn't look like anyone else's is to make the titles personal.

Ask your best friend what their favorite book is and read it.

Find out one of your favorite authors' favorite books and read it.

Ask someone who knows you well to pick your next book.

Step 9: Spread The Love

If you're someone who cares enough about books and reading to create an elaborate reading list, then you're someone who has strong feelings about books and reading. Why not add some challenges to your reading list that aren't necessarily about reading?

Why not contribute to a crowdfunding campaign to get a book published?

Why not do something free like tweeting about five books you loved this year?

Why not write a 5-star review of a book you really like this year, whether you read that book this year or not?

Step 10: The Grab Bag

Listed below are a couple dozen ideas for your reading list, including some of the ones listed in the categories above and variations on those ideas. Feel free to use all of these or some of them or none of them, but I hope that they get you thinking about how you might build your own reading list this year.

- Pick a book you're only allowed to read on days when the high temperature goes above 95-degrees.
- Read something you'd normally be embarrassed by in public.
- Read something only while you're in motion.
- Find the The Room of books.
- Speed read by only reading the first 50 pages and then the last 50 pages.
- Read something by an author who died last year.
- Read something by an author who was born the same year you were.
- Read a book in less than 24 hours.
- Read only the first half of a book. Never finish it.
- Choose between three or more books by placing them on the floor and allowing your pet to choose.
- Select a book to re-read every 5 years.
- Ask someone who knows you well to pick your next book.
- Read a book with a repulsive cover.
- Read a book everyone but you seems to have read in high school.
- Read erotica set in another country.
- Roll some dice, virtual or analog, add up the numbers and read whichever book is in that position

on a bestseller list (or reading list of your choice).

- Read a horror novel that was originally published in another language.
- Read a comic book with art by a black artist.
- Read a book that you've purposely avoided out of fear.
- Read a book that makes you feel uncomfortable.
- Listen to an audiobook at minimum 2X speed.
- Read a book that describes a sexual experience you've never had.
- Read a book entirely outdoors.
- Buy an eBook that costs less than \$1.99.
- Buy a book directly from an indie press.
- Read something out-of-print.
- Go to the library and pick a book off the shelf. One you've never heard of before.
- Contribute to a crowdfunding campaign to get a book published.
- Tweet about 3 of your favorite books this year.
- 5-star review a favorite book.
- Read a comic from a publisher with a CEO that identifies as LGBTQ+
- As with any sort of list, there's a ton of stuff I've missed. Comment below. What would you add? What have you done in the past that you liked? What didn't work for you?

Paul Neilan, Soiled Underwear, and The Best Book I'll Never Read



This is a column about something we've all experienced, which is KNOWING a great book is out there but wondering if it's ever going to be in here [gestures at brain].

And it's also about the best poop story I've ever heard.

My mother always told me to lead with a poop story whenever possible. My mother's weird, but I respect her. Which is why I'll follow her advice, die alone, and lead with the poop portion of this story.

The Good Shit

It was Wordstock in Portland, OR, November 2007. I was there to see Tom Spanbauer (who I stood nearby at a urinal before we officially met, kicking off the day's excitement). Monica Drake was there too, and I humiliated myself by giving her a hand-drawn missing rubber chicken poster, sort of a Clown Girl fanfic project gone wrong. She seemed (rightfully) lukewarm on the whole thing.

And Paul Neilan was there.

Paul Neilan is the author of *Apathy and Other Small Victories*, one of the rare books I'd call a truly funny novel. When I say funny novels are rare, it's because I don't think the books people call "clever" or "witty" are all that funny. I liked *Confederacy of Dunces*, but damn if that's not a safe answer for book snobs when asked about funny books.

Apathy And Other Small Victories is straight-up funny. The narrator is brutal on his assessment of the world, but on the plus, he's pretty hard on himself as well:

They didn't know that I didn't know anything, and I was hoping to use that to my advantage. The only thing I had going for me was my ignorance. This was the story of my life.

I loved *Apathy and Other Small Victories*, so when Paul Neilan stepped on stage to read at Wordstock, I sat down and listened.

Paul gave the funniest reading I've ever heard. Bar none. No contest.

He read an excerpt from something he was working on. In brief, the narrator talked about crapping his pants. He crapped himself at camp and had underwear full of his own excrement that needed to be disposed of discreetly so as to avoid an entire summer of mockery. Using terrible, desperate logic, he sealed them in a plastic bag, put them in a manila envelope and sent the package home to his parents, his parents' address being the only one he knew.

Chekov hid a gun. Paul Neilan hid a pair of shitty underwear.

I laughed like a madman through the whole thing. Others were laughing pretty hard too. Paul's reading was gross and funny and charming, and it felt like we were all witnessing a real moment. We were all seeing something very different, very unusual for a literary festival. It was a moment when you find your people. The people who can sit in a room full of wonderful, lauded literary authors, and in the midst of all this, they can laugh at a poop story.

I couldn't wait for Paul's next book. If it contained ONLY this story and the rest was a reprint of Paul's bowling scores, I'd still be satisfied.

I couldn't wait for Paul's next book. But then I did.

Where's The Book?

...thanks to everybody who wrote email or left comments here saying how disappointed you were in me that I wasn't putting up anything new. Imagine feeling that way every day for thirty years and you'll have some small idea of what it's like to be my parents. God help them.

This entry is from Paul's blog, which was on and off through 2008. And then it stopped. It still exists, but no new action since 2008.

Paul's poop story has never been published, online or otherwise. To my knowledge, that one Wordstock reading was the only opportunity I had to hear it.

Don't get me wrong, this isn't a "Where the hell is Paul Neilan?" column. He seems to still be alive. I don't think he owes the world anything.

What this is, it's a lament. Because I KNOW that Paul Neilan's book exists. Some of it is written already. The rest of it is in his head. He's got ideas, and he's got the chops.

Check out these blog entries:

On Buying His Book:

Buy it for a friend of yours that you don't really like and say "The dentist guy really reminded me of you." Or Mobo, or the deaf girl. You can use any character and it will still be mean. Everyone in this book is a mess, and your friend will never know if you were being serious. It's passive aggressive and fun.

On Fate:

After sleeping on my friend's couch for a few weeks I finally found a place in San Francisco, and I had to buy some chairs so I went to the Office Max down the street. I worked in an Office Max back in Jersey one summer. My favorite memory is of the time my boss asked me to take a floor model desk set out behind the dumpster and break it into pieces with a hammer. There was some minor flaw in the wood and it couldn't be sold. When I asked him why I had to destroy it he said "So no one else can have it." It was one of those sad and important life lessons that stays with you even though you don't want it to. I left the store without buying anything—not because of my conscience really, it was more that the dude behind the counter was prohibitively ugly and I didn't feel like waiting in line—but then a few days later I found two chairs on a street corner for free. If there's a moral in the story I have no idea what it is, but at least I don't have to sit on the floor anymore.

No, this column isn't about what happened to Paul Neilan or what he owes anyone. It's about the frustration readers know.

There's a great book out there, somewhere. Maybe half-formed. Maybe finished. And you may never get to read it.

Good Company

Paul Neilan and his fans aren't the only ones in this boat. The LitReactor world crosses over with tons of authors who have books the world is waiting for. Craig Clevenger's *Saint Heretic/Mother Howl* has been on the cusp of release for...like forever. This photo was tweeted with the caption "Finished" in September 2013:



Will Christopher Baer's *Godspeed* has existed as a stub on Amazon for almost a decade. It's still there! Baer's web site has vanished, but Amazon stubs are eternal!

Let's be clear about one thing: This is not a fan's demand that Paul Neilan write and/or publish a book. Nor am I demanding that Craig Clevenger or Will Christopher Baer do anything. At all. I'm not one of these people who think George R.R. Martin needs to get to work. He can spend the rest of his days doing whatever he wants, far as I'm concerned. He can have a gyro spindle installed in his home, burn every stitch of clothing he owns and never leave if that's what makes him happy, and the same goes for any other author.

What this column is, what I'm doing here is expressing a fear.

I have this irrational fear. I have this fear that all my favorite stuff will happen after I'm dead. That right now, there's a couple kids who got guitars for Christmas, and they will be my absolute favorite band. Only problem, they start making music after I've been in the ground for a decade. I fear that a great movie will come out, and it'll be perfectly suited to me in every way. Except for the fact that it came out the Friday after I die.

Life is short, and that fact is cruel, and damn it, I just really wish that the things I'd love would have the cosmic sense of decorum to bring themselves into existence before I'm dead.

Life is short and cruel, and I could definitely use a Paul Neilan poop story to get me through.

Your Lips To Google's Ears: Voice Typing On Google Docs



Let me tell you about this notebook I've got.

The notebook itself is nothing special. A Mead 5-Star, college-ruled notebook.

What's special about it is that it's full of one-sentence story ideas. Ideas I've written down for the last ten years or so. This isn't a brag. For the most part, the ideas are terrible (one is some illegible nonsense about a geode), unwritable (an entry that simply says "Oak Park") or SUPER terrible ("Journals of Lewis And Clark except L&K are total dicks").

All that aside, I've been looking for a way to get these ideas on paper. Once I have drafts, it's easier for me to carry around the paper and do little edits during the day. And it's probably easier to accept how profoundly stupid most of these ideas are ("bed bugs carry plague").

Which is why I thought Google Docs' Voice Typing feature might be the perfect way to go. I could just talk my ideas into my computer, edit them, and then all would be good. And everyone could enjoy a book about Oak Park, whatever the hell that ends up being.

Here's How It Works

If you have an up-to-date-ish version of Chrome, the Voice Typing feature is already available. Just open up a document in Google Docs, click on the Tools menu, and Voice Typing is about halfway down.

As long as your computer has a microphone, built-in or otherwise, you have everything you need to type with your face.

And yes, I know dictation software isn't new. Dragon Dictation is probably the most famous option, however it's \$300! This is a problem because A) I'm not that rich and B) I decided to combat not being rich by never buying anything with the word "dragon" in the title. As a nerd, this can be an incredible savings on fantasy novels, video games, and mostly bad movies.

The Basic Test

First things first, let's talk and see what happens.

I started a story out loud and watched my computer do the typing for me. It was kind of magical, and Voice Typing interpreted things pretty well, even with my tendency to warp some words ("back" can sound a little like "beeyack").

I had some nitpicks. I didn't like that Google put in the digit "1" instead of the text "one" when I used the number, but no biggie, right? Homophones were confusing ("right" v. "write"), but we've all made that mistake. Overall, cool. Seemed to work just fine, and I have to say, it was pretty easy to bang out half a page of text in short order.

The Slightly Higher Function Test

Getting a block of text on the screen was one thing. Punctuating and paragraphing was another.

The first hurdle here is that you don't realize how unnatural it is to say "period" after every sentence until you're forced to do it. It made me feel like some weirdo who is very sure of himself. Standing in my kitchen, talking to my computer with a clear voice, and ending every sentence by saying "period" was turning me into some kind of insane gym coach. "And then we go outside. Period. The doormat under my bare feet is scratchy. Period."

And then there were other problems.

Indents, for example. Here's a quote: "Indent the ring box is big..." Yeah. I didn't mean to use the word so much as have the thing happen.

Here's a bold issue: "balls no bold turn off bold okay now we regular?" I'd said "balls" but I guess I said it with such verve that Google heard "bold." And then the bold was on. I had a hard time turning it off because it didn't occur to me that you turn it off the same way you turn it on, which is to just say "bold." Which also brings up the question of how you use the word "bold" in a piece of writing, but maybe you just learn to avoid it.

I have a lot of personal problems that make this a poor option for me, but that shouldn't limit you from giving Voice Typing a shot. After all, if everyone did only what I do, that would excise sober dancing, shorts, and general happiness from the lives of everyone.

There's a boatload of commands that you can use to format and punctuate text, but I have to be honest, that didn't seem too productive to me. I was here to generate text, not learn a new system. It was easier to make a big ass block of text and then go back and fix it up later.

I guess voice commands might be a good option if you're unable to type, but if your goal is to get a whole bushel of dumb ideas ("sweaty butt crack 5K picture"?) in print, you're not going to save much time.

The Dictation Test

Having done a couple interviews, I want to out a piece of common writing advice as a total farce:

Write like you talk.

Now, maybe I'm being too harsh in saying it's a total farce. I like writing that sounds like talking. But if we all wrote exactly how we talked, it would be a nightmare.

Anyone who has transcribed an interview can tell you this. There's a lot of um's and uh's that don't stand out in speech, but they look weird on the page. And oftentimes speakers will swirl around an idea with a couple of different sentences before landing on what they want to say.

For example, here's the above idea as spoken directly to Google:

The thing is if you've ever done like an interview with someone on the phone you know that's what people say isn't always exactly how you want to right but they say they tell you to talk to write how you talk but we don't really write how we talk we write how we wish we talked you know.

Google is good at pulling out uh's and um's. Which is interesting. And part of the problem is my way of talking. If you've got a little punctuation phrase you use while speaking (mine is "you know") it will quickly become apparent.

The Doing The Dishes Test

Ideally, if Voice Typing worked, I could "write" while I was doing other things. Like the dishes. If I could write while I washed dishes, that's another 10 minutes of writing time I've bought for myself every day. Is that a long time to do dishes or not enough? Have I just outed myself as a slob?

Sadly, this didn't work. For one, I found that I had to talk to my computer almost like it was a person, face-to-face, to get it to understand and register what I was saying. Google caught bits and pieces, but then I had to go back in and see where



entire huge chunks had gone missing. This is a lot more difficult than typing it out in the first place.

The other thing, it seemed like noises threw Google off its game. Dishes rattling together while they're stacked in a cabinet, for example. Google heard that, knew it wasn't a word, and just stopped even though I was still talking. Which is a shame. I'd like to hear various noises interpreted as words. Oh, if these dishes could talk. They'd probably say, "This is an unhealthy amount of chili for one man to be consuming annually. I'm a dish and I don't know much, but I'm fairly confident in what I'm telling you right now."

The Phone Dictation Test

Imagine if you could make a quick voice note on your phone and play it back for your computer, and then those notes would be converted into text.

Will it work? Do we live in such a wondrous fantasy world?

It totally worked. We totally live in a wondrous fantasy world.

This was big. I know it doesn't sound big, but I think we're often in situations where we have a spare five minutes and we have our phones. Bam. You could dictate five minutes of story and have that zapped right into your computer.

The Sh*t Test

Look at this:

*all the time and the s*** s*** there was*

Voice Typing censors your words! Which is weird because it doesn't do this when you type. It lets you type "shit" all day. And "fuck." I could go on.

Google Docs lets you type all the words. But it doesn't let you SAY them. This seems like such an odd limitation to me. Were they worried about kids huddling around a computer, saying bad words and giggling as those words were typed onto the screen? And on the flip side, did they consider for one second adults like myself and how excited they are to talk to a computer and see bad words come out, only to have their dreams shattered?

Overall

This s*** is totally worth f***** with. I'm a sloppy speaker. And a sloppy eater of chili. And a sloppy doer of dishes. I have a lot of personal problems that make this a poor option for me, but that shouldn't limit you from giving Voice Typing a shot. After all, if everyone did only what I do, that would excise sober dancing, shorts, and general happiness from the lives of everyone.

My advice would be to try it with an open mind, a sheet of the commands in front of you, and a recognition of the fact that sometimes a censored swear is funnier than the real thing.

6 Unorthodox Fundraisers For Your Self-Publishing Venture



You need money for your self-publishing project. You need it bad.

I know what you're thinking. Isn't that what Kickstarter is for?

Yeah, maybe. But it's also for people who are raising money to build a \$50,000 potato salad.

Let's face it, crowdfunding is a punch line. When someone makes a \$50K potato salad, when the makers of Cards Against Humanity raise \$100,000 to dig a giant hole in the ground for no reason whatsoever, it's not only evidence that crowdfunding isn't as genius as we thought, it's a good reason to be down on yourself when your efforts fail. They raised \$100,000 to dig a hole for NO REASON, meanwhile you can't raise 1/100th of that for your art?

Meanwhile, something like the Ice Bucket Challenge managed to raise a ton of cash. Why? Because it was fun, simple, and it gave donors a way to do more than shovel cash at a cause.

It's time to stop simply asking for money. It's time to try something else.

.005K Fun Run

I've done this twice now to raise money for a couple dogs who had surgeries. I've never owned a dog, but they seem to love surgeries.

A .005K is a great way to raise awareness. Awareness of the needed funding and also awareness of how short .005K is. Seriously, it's so quick that someone could die halfway through and, if they had

any momentum, their lifeless body would still finish the race.

.005K is a lot better fundraiser than a 5K, and I'll tell you why. You don't need to get permits, you don't need waivers, you don't need all that nonsense. Just a little over 16 feet of terrain (preferably outside a bar), a finishing tape, and a jar to collect entry fees. You can run .005K with a beer in your hand, no problem. You can walk .005K and finish only seconds behind the overall winner.



You don't have to do a .005K. You could do any variety of running events. A beer mile, a regular running club that collects a small fee. I bring up the idea of an athletic event to make the point that your fundraising events should stick to the KISS rule. No, not like the band KISS. Their fundraising involves merchandising that includes KISS coffins. Don't start a coffin company. No, I'm talking about the other KISS rule: Keep It Simple, Shithead. Don't get overly complicated when a simple option is just as effective. Don't host a marathon when you only need 16 feet of pavement.

Take whatever fundraising idea you have and see if you can make it simpler. You shithead.

Mini Golf Tournament

When a big time charity wants to raise some cash, they host a golf tournament. Which is smart. Want to target a bunch of old dudes with disposable income? Golf. Believe me, I've seen this firsthand. Golfers are almost all old dudes who have tons of cash to waste on \$9 Michelob Ultras and \$500 clubs that don't do shit. This is the perfect audience to hit up.

Inspired by big time golf tournaments, I decided to make one for the common man. Which sounds like a terrible idea at first. The common man doesn't have \$150 to waste on a tournament entry fee

and hates Michelob Ultras.

What the common man DOES have is five bucks, and this gets into fundraising philosophy.

If you're putting out a book, you need the money to print books, but you also need the crowd to buy the books. When you're fundraising, you're also promoting your book. Which is why you're better off courting 30 people to the tune of \$5 apiece than you are courting 3 people for \$50 apiece.

That's why the mini golf tournament is the way to go. All you need is a couple dust pans (these are surprisingly effective, movable "holes") and those foam golf balls. Then, plan out the "holes" in your hood. I recommend areas outside of churches, alleyways, and basically anything that takes advantage of architecture and allows for several bar stops. We had a great time in an alley that was filled with broken TVs.

Give your donors an experience they won't forget, and get them hyped up about your book. And for the love of god, don't buy Michelob Ultras.

Vulfpecking

Ever heard of the band Vulfpeck? Doesn't matter.

What Vulfpeck did was pretty clever. They put up an album called *Sleepify* on the streaming music service Spotify. *Sleepify* consisted of 10, 30-second tracks of silence. Vulfpeck then encouraged their fans to play the album on a loop whenever they were sleeping.

The trick comes in because Spotify pays artists fractions of a cent for each track that's played. Vulfpeck figured that their fans could play the tracks on a loop, collect the cash, and the funds could then be used to bankroll a free tour.

It totally worked. Vulfpeck made \$20,000 before their silent album was pulled for unspecified (but easily guessed) reasons.

It's not that hard to get your music on Spotify. And while Spotify seems to have caught on to the idea of the silent tracks, who's to say you can't create some tracks with audio, or a spoken word album, and get that up there? All your fans have to do at that point is stream your music while they sleep. Maybe at a very low volume or with headphones plugged in if you're not, uh, super talented. A single person streaming your album all night should result in approximately a \$7 donation. Get one person to do this for a week and you've made \$50.

Same thing applies to YouTube. Make a set of videos, put them up in a playlist and enable ads. Then just ask your fans to stream the playlist.

I'm almost positive that me suggesting this violates terms of use. But I'm a rebel that way, Dottie.

The beauty here is that you make it incredibly easy for people to help you out. They don't have to

It took two days to raise \$1,000. The lasting trauma has yet to be fully understood and researched.

show up somewhere, they don't have to put in cash. All they have to do is click a couple things on the computer and BAM, you're rich(ish).

Suffer The Children

A high school in Illinois wanted to raise \$1,000. How'd they do it? Between every class period, Justin Bieber's "Baby" played over the intercom, and this continued until the fundraising goal was met. Which meant each student in the school would hear "Baby" something like eight times every day.

It took two days to raise \$1,000. The lasting trauma has yet to be fully understood and researched.

The thing about needs that aren't yours, it's easy for other people to forget about them. You need to remind people of what you need. If you have a need, then create a way for people to suffer with you until that need is fulfilled.

Post obnoxious political crap online until you reach your fundraising goal. Post pictures of weird diseases. Hey, if you do a podcast, you could rip off that Illinois high school. Promise that you'll be covering "Baby" in every episode until your goals are reached.

This one is tricky because it involves having something like a captive audience. But if you've got that audience, don't be afraid to make them squirm just a little bit. "Oh, is it annoying you that I put a picture of a hated political figure in the middle of every blog for no reason? Because it's annoying ME that I don't have the cash to publish my book. Seems like we could figure out a way to remedy this situation..."

Craigslist Gigs

Okay, a job is out of the question because jobs are for dorks. But how about a one-time gig here and there?

I found this one with almost no searching at all!

I am looking for a younger attractive female to help me out with household tasks and to provide nice conversation. I am looking for someone who can work in the late afternoon into evenings or on Saturdays. You would mostly do cooking, baking, and clean the kitchen but there could be other household tasks if you were open to it. It would be a bonus if you wore revealing clothing, sexy outfit, lingerie, bra & panties, or even less. If interested, message me with the days and times you are available to work and tell me why you would be the perfect person for this job.

On closer inspection, all Craigslist gigs involve sex stuff or carpentry, and carpentry may or may not be a clever disguise for sex stuff. And if you were doing sex stuff, you wouldn't need my help funding your work.

Gaming For Dollars

Many a gamer has raised cash by marathoning video games. Usually, this is for charity, so if you go this route, you might consider going 50/50 with your favorite charity, be it a donkey shelter, homeless

horse fund, whatever.

I bring this up for two reasons: One, as writers, we're often trying to fund ourselves in writerly ways. Which is cool, but sometimes we may miss out on options that appeal to non-writers. Two, the idea of giving as part of getting. There's a wisdom to the idea that the people who give the most also have the most. It doesn't ALWAYS work that way, but think about it like this: if you give a lot and end up with a lot, there's your proof. If you give a lot and don't get a lot, you still gave a lot.

Other Advice

The Biggest Pitfall

It's easy to spend more money throwing your event or doing your stunt than you actually derive from it. So keep the costs very, very low. Ask yourself over and over, "Can I make this equally fun without spending as much?"

The Biggest Advantage

If your crowdfunding effort fails, you walk away with nothing. If you rent out of a theater for the screening of your favorite terrible movie, and if you don't make any money on it, you still had a damn good time. So did your donors. And when your donors have a good time, they show up for the next thing. They bring friends.

Done right, if you put the FUN in fundraiser (yes, I went there), your funds, and your audience, will grow.

Time Out: Don't Write Time Travel (Unless You Do It Right)



Time travel. It's such a popular, big idea. Everyone wants to put their stamp on time travel, take their swing at it. See how I used two metaphors there, one for jocks who like baseball and one for nerds who like stamp collecting?

While I appreciate the excitement and enthusiasm for time travel tales, I think we could take a break, rethink some of what time travel really is, and then come back with better, more interesting stories.

What do I mean?

Problem the first: Infinite Possibilities, 5 Realities

I'm going to ask you to accept a principle: Time travel, being a big unknown, could present itself in any number of ways.

Is that acceptable? Seem pretty reasonable?

Why, then, do we only get about 5 flavors of time travel? Why are there six times as many flavors of ice cream, a substance created from Earthly materials, and we only have 5 versions of this hypothetical thing that doesn't actually exist?

Oh, by the way, you'll notice I mostly talk about movies here. I heard sci-fi great Connie Willis (more on her later!) talk writing, and she used movie examples, saying, "I use movies to talk about story because it's more likely we've seen the same movies." If it's good enough for Connie Willis, it's good

enough for me.

What are the 5 Flavors Of Time Travel?

Flavor 1: Character travels through time and must attempt to have as little impact as possible in order to maintain the integrity of the future

The character inevitably screws up and has to fix things. This is boring because having a character whose primary goal is to do nothing is a pretty bad setup. Also, we all know this character is headed for an inevitable screwup, so the first part of the story is a guaranteed waste of time.

Flavor 2: Character travels through time and is charged with some action that will either maintain or “fix” the future

Terminator. This one is okay, but the big flaw is that these stories end up explaining themselves a lot. Why not travel even further back? What impacts will all your character’s other actions have?

Flavor 3: Character travels through time and is not specifically charged with a task but has the opportunity for a do-over or to make improvements

Groundhog Day. This has high potential for universal appeal as we’d all like a do-over, but it’s hard to shake the stink of wish fulfillment as being the driver of this story.

Flavor 4: Character travels through time only to discover that events are inevitable

The issue here is that this story type is highly dependent on the shock of the ending, and the ol’ “time can’t be changed” being an ending many of us are familiar with, that shock is difficult to manufacture. It leaves viewers with a story that they’ve puzzled out long before the ending, and they have to watch the characters come to the same realization in painfully slow fashion. Also, it leaves your characters with no real agency.

Flavor 5: Relative Time

Rip Van Winkle, for example, didn’t actually time travel so much as perceive time as never having passed. *Encino Man*, same deal. This stinks of time travel somehow, but ultimately, if Rip was a time traveler, then we all are. If our perception of time’s passage is the only measure, and I assume we all perceive time differently, just as we do colors and flavors, then we’re all time travelers to a degree.

And yes, I made you think about *Encino Man*.

By my math, those five flavors account for *Back to the Future*, *Looper*, *Donnie Darko*, *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, *Time Cop*, *Army of Darkness*, *Edge of Tomorrow*, *Hot Tub Time Machine*, and just about any number of time travel stories. *Timecrimes*, *Primer*, *The Butterfly Effect*. *Flight of the Navigator*, *Deja Vu*. We could go on and on, and the fun would be me slipping in a couple fake titles (*Time’s a Tickin’*, *Fools Of Us All*), but let’s drop it.

There’s nothing new under the sun. We all know this. That’s why Kurt Vonnegut was able to summarize every story ever with a couple of single-line graphs. I’m not crapping on your time travel story because it falls into one of these categories. What I’m saying is, if it DOES fall into one of these, you’d better offer something pretty good on the periphery. Oh, and avoid the mistakes from the next

section.

We Get Micro: Commonly-Ignored Issues In Time Travel

Here are some things that piss me off, and they happen ALL THE TIME in time travel stories. All The Time is another great fake movie title. Don't steal that one. Mine.

Why Is Time Travel Cloning?

Typical scenario: A guy travels back in time, looks in his own window and sees himself in the house.

How does this work? If that IS me, then there are now two of me, correct? If that's NOT me, then I've not just traveled in time, but to an identical dimension of sorts. Which means I haven't traveled back in time so much as I've traveled across dimensions. My time machine didn't so much move me along a timeline as it split my timeline into two.

This is something we take for granted in time travel. How does this happen, and why does it happen so often? Why do we think our characters are so intriguing that the best idea we've got is to have TWO of them?

Why Is Time Travel Space Travel?

This is an idea I totally stole from *Atomic Robo* comics:

If you were to jump in a time machine that took you 3 hours into the past, but you stayed in the same spot, you would arrive 3 hours in the past and the Earth would be about 200,000 miles away from you. Hope you brought a space suit and some snacks.

Your position in space would need to be accounted for very, very carefully in order to time travel and end up in the same spot where you left. And very, very rarely is this accounted for in time travel.

Time Travel Almost Always Involves Stupid, Arbitrary Rules

You can't time travel with clothes or guns, but we can send organic and synthetic beings into the past?

How does that work? In what system are we able to send an entire human back in time and yet we're somehow unable to send back a pair of sweatpants?



The obvious answer is because it's 1984 and we cast Arnold Schwarzenegger in our time travel movie, and if he's not nude we've wasted a tremendous amount of time and money.

There's rules about how far back you can go, why you can't just go back again, why there aren't time travelers popping up all over the goddamn place.

The time machine is kind of treated the way cell phones are treated in modern horror movies. You HAVE to address why they only work when it's convenient, and these reasons are often boring and a matter of checking the box. We're all sitting around waiting to hear some character explain the stupid reasons that make the plot work.

The Struggle Is So Often About How To Get Back

You made some crazy futuristic gizmo to travel in time. And now you're in the old west and don't have any nuclear material? Oh, shit!

When the story of time travel is mostly about "We time traveled, how do we undo it?" I'm gonna get bored. We did this exciting thing, and now we want to undo it? BORING.

The Jokes Are Too Often "Ha! That's the 80's for ya!"

Back to the Future was probably the last one to do this well. We could laugh at the idea that Marty McFly was the original inventor (or the original thief) of rock music.

But it gets old. *Oh my god, can you believe people dressed like that in the 50's?*

Something like *Hot Tub Time Machine* is totally guilty of this one, but even *Mad Men* plays this card at times. *Oh, isn't it funny that we used to drive drunk and let neighbors smack our kids around. What a different time it was!*

The fact that things were different at one time is not, in itself, a joke, people. Or maybe it is a joke, just not a very good one.

The Mechanism Of Time Travel Gets Too Much Play

Frankly, I don't care how you're doing it. It's like a body swap movie. The whole point is you swap bodies with someone else, which is a silly premise. Pissing in the same fountain, opening a fortune cookie, these ideas provide a reason for waking up in another body, but the reason is stupider than having no reason at all. Likewise, making some gadget that takes you through time is stupider than having this just sort of...happen.



When Time Travel Works

Here's the key to a time travel story: It can't be about time travel.

Let me be more specific here.

Time travel works when it's about something besides time travel. When I'm not meant to look at it and go "Whoa, time travel! What a concept!"

A time travel story is all about suspension of disbelief. For me, suspension of disbelief only works when there's a purpose, a payoff. I don't really enjoy stories about dragons where the reason for the dragons in the story is: DRAGONS!

The way to surprise and interest a reader is to use time travel to evoke something seemingly unrelated to time travel. To use time travel as a tool to pull genuine emotions out of a reader.

I can totally buy the premise of time travel, but what helps it work a bit better is when you've got a good reason for the time travel. When the story is not so much about constant time traveling as it is about something else. When time travel is the tool to tell the story, to unlock something, not the story in and of itself.

For example:

Connie Willis

Personal sci-fi hero Connie Willis (see, I told you she'd come up again) tells time travel stories, but they're a little different.

In *Blackout*, we've perfected time travel, and the past becomes the playground of historians. Which I like because if there was one group of folks who would want to travel to the past, it'd be history nerds.

Time travel is proven to be safe because we're totally sure that there's nothing you can do to screw up time. It's inevitable. Historians can't go back and change the future. They can just go back and experience it firsthand to better understand our world.

Until, holy crap, maybe we were wrong.

Here's what's great (other than the whole book and everything about Connie Willis): Willis' book comes at the common tropes head-on. The characters in the book, like we do as readers, take it as a forgone conclusion that time travel works a certain way. Until it doesn't. At which point the story is about the idea of being wrong about time travel while also keeping things high-interest with the backdrop of The Blitz in London.

Charles Yu

A typical customer gets into a machine that can literally take her whenever she'd like to go. Do you want to know what the first stop usually is? Take a guess. Don't guess. You already know: the unhappiest day of her life.

Explaining Charles Yu's *How To Live Safely In A Science Fiction Universe* is almost impossible. I'm not sure I completely understand how time travel works in the book. And that's okay because

time travel is used here to talk about something else entirely. Using time travel, setting up an entire universe to tell the story of an absentee father, is a long way to go, and the effort pays off.

How To Live Safely In A Science Fiction Universe has to be the biggest slap-together of emotion and sci-fi, and it's so charming and geeky that it manages to take readers somewhere brand new.

Joe Haldeman

Haldeman's *Forever War* uses time travel of the Rip Van Winkle variety. Soldiers fighting in a super faraway war are, in essence, plucked out of time. When they return home, home is unrecognizable. Everyone they cared about died decades before, and everyone else has moved on despite the fact that soldiers are returning directly from the battlefield.

The point here is pretty obviously to explain Haldeman's experience and views on the Vietnam War. He and his fellows went far away, were involved in a conflict very few people understood, and returned to a world that thought of them as barbarians and had moved on without them.

It's a beautiful, painful use of not only time travel, but science fiction to show us something about our reality. By stripping away the biases, emotions and ideas of our reality, Haldeman gives us a the chance to see reality from a completely different perspective.

Octavia E. Butler

Kindred earns points right away for not fucking around with the how of the time travel. Instead, it uses those energies to focus on the purpose of the time travel. Also, the book is circa 1974. While it engages in one of the above tropes, maintaining the future, the reason certain time travel tropes are overdone today is because writers like Butler made them so intriguing.

To summarize it quickly, *Kindred*'s main character, a black woman, finds herself transported back to antebellum Maryland. Through a short series of events, she figures out the rub: she's gotta preserve the life of a young, white slaveholder because he is one of her ancestors.

Not only does a single difficult choice have to be made, but a series of them. This character doesn't have the luxury of making one difficult choice but instead has to make the choice over and over.

Kindred makes good use of time travel, creating a situation that gives us a character with modern sensibilities and ideas experiencing, and actively participating in, the shittiness of slavery. The book is so readable and pitch perfect that you'll be pulled through even the tough spots where shit gets very real.

On the surface, the story is about the old saw of preserving the future. But when you dig just a little bit, the story and time travel serve to remind us that the past is very real and more closely related to the present than we think.

By the way, I NEVER do this, never get into the commerce in the middle of a column, but *Kindred* is three fucking dollars on Kindle. C'mon.

Douglas Adams

Why does it work for Douglas Adams to do time travel? Because it's in the name of a goof.

The book *The Restaurant At The End of the Universe* is set up with the premise that, hey, if we have the ability to travel in time, why not witness the end of the universe? And, as is the case with most of

Adams' stuff, the book comes to the logical conclusion that if there's an end of the universe to watch, someone's going to figure out a way to make a buck off it.

Adams' and the work of others (Bill and Ted, John Swartzwelder, Dr. McNinja, Futurama) use time travel mostly in the service of joke telling. Which works because you're acknowledging the inherent goofiness of the idea, and because if there's one thing an overdone idea is still good for, it's as a setup to a great punchline.

Write Exciting Stories About Boring Things



I'm sitting in the \$2 theater watching *Arrival*. My mouth is full of sub sandwich because, like I said, this is the \$2 theater, where bringing in a sub is overlooked because it's better than bringing in beers. Multiple.

My seat sucks because we got there just before the movie started, and *Arrival* is not a movie that's meant to be viewed at a 45-degree angle. Most movies aren't, I'm learning.

And as I sit there and watch someone who's not an action hero never pick up a gun to deal with aliens, I'm thinking to myself...Why is this riveting? Seriously, how did someone take the story of watching a professor learn a foreign language and turn it into a totally watchable, interesting story?

How do you tell an exciting story about something boring?

Arriving

Arrival is a prime example of an exciting story about a boring thing. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying it's a boring movie. But c'mon. A college professor does Rosetta Stone for like 2 hours? Since when is that an electrifying plot?

How do they do it?

One standout technique is building tension by setting the water to boil.

Think about it. You're not at home. You're visiting a friend or staying in a cabin, and you set a pot of water to boil. You know it's going to boil eventually, you have an idea of how much time it MIGHT take, but there's no definite answer.

In *Arrival*, you know that world politics are going to boil over. There are multiple things that can fall through and cause a very sudden change to the action. If faction A decides to make a move, our heroes instantly run out of time. If Event B transpires, time's up. If Forest Whitaker can't convince his boss that this whole endeavor is a good use of time, then boom. By the way, I don't know what kind of jerk remains unconvinced by Forest Whitaker, but c'mon, dude.

The pot is boiling, and you know the water will reach a boil. It's just hard to say exactly when.

This is a little different than putting your story on a timer, setting a bomb to blow or having a countdown, and it's a bit more compelling.

Think about it like this. When you have a bomb with a timer on it, or when there's some weird countdown clock, then you've got the exact time. As the characters get close to the end of the allotted time, things get more and more tense. However, by having a boiling pot, you can be less specific about when the thing is going to boil over, and that means there's tension THE WHOLE TIME. Which is very necessary if we're telling a story that is, on the surface, less than thrilling.

The boiling pot is a lot more like a slot machine. We've all read the research regarding response to scheduled rewards (I get something every 5 times I pull the lever) versus intermittent rewards (I might get something the first time, I might not get something after 20 times). We're total suckers for intermittent rewards. Take a lesson from Vegas. Other than the lesson about attempting air travel when your body composition is 4% alcohol consumed from a foot-tall tube.

Forget the clock, go for the boil.

Social Networking

I was reluctant to watch *The Social Network* because I thought "How exciting is it going to be to watch people type on a computer all day?" We already have the ultimate version of that movie. It's called *Hackers*, and it features Fisher Stevens as a corporate stooge on a skateboard. Second place, *Johnny Mnemonic*, where the hackers are replaced by super dolphin hackers. I was 100% certain *The Social Network* would not feature Fisher Stevens on a skateboard and 90% sure it would not have dolphin computer hackers.

Who wants to watch a bunch of non-dolphin, non-skateboarding nerds type on computers all day?

Well, nobody, it turns out. Which is probably why the movie has almost none of that.

The Social Network writer Aaron Sorkin:

There's not a doubt in my mind that there's a parallel universe where they got a boring, shitty Facebook movie that has a lot of typing, a lot of description of the inner workings of early versions of Facebook, and it has a soundtrack that's NOT by Trent Reznor.

What attracted me to [the film project] had nothing to do with Facebook. The invention itself is as modern as it gets, but the story is as old as storytelling; the themes of friendship, loyalty, jealousy, class and power.

The movie is centered around the creation of Facebook, but that's not what it's ABOUT. It's about the human themes, the emotions, stories that couldn't be more classic.

There's not a doubt in my mind that there's a parallel universe where they got a boring, shitty Facebook movie that has a lot of typing, a lot of description of the inner workings of early versions of Facebook, and it has a soundtrack that's NOT by Trent Reznor. In our universe, we got a great Facebook movie. And what made it great is that the creators focused on the exciting parts of the story, the reason the story needed to exist.

When your story starts to get boring, remind yourself what it's really about. If a particular scene is boring, remind yourself why this scene exists. If your story is about the way in which business and friendship rarely coexist, and you have a scene of someone typing on a computer, ask yourself whether that scene can include more of the core idea, and ask yourself whether it needs to exist at all. If a scene is not about your core idea, if it's just moving characters into place, figure out a way to connect it to the core or lose it altogether.

If you're looking for a more bookish example of this, Wells Tower's *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* is a great set of contemporary short stories, and the title story takes a weird turn into the world of Vikings somehow. While the story seems out of place in the collection at first, when you finish, you realize that the story HAS Vikings, but it's not nearly ABOUT Vikings. The story is almost an exercise, a challenge to tell a story by first setting the table in this unusual way and then keeping the story focused on not what happens but what it's ABOUT.

The American Test

The radio show that all others are compared to, *This American Life* routinely tells stories that, on paper, should be really super boring. Stories about the economy? Snooze. Stories from the 1996 Democratic National Convention? C'mon. A guy recounts a school play he saw? What are the odds of that being any good?

And yet, week after week, the show is pretty damn compelling.

This American Life is based on a lie. Ask just about anyone, and they'll tell you "Everyone has an interesting story to tell!"

That's bullshit. It's not that simple.

The real secret of *This American Life* isn't that everyone's got a good story. The real secret goes back to something I heard Tom Spanbauer say:

You can tell an exciting story about a boring person or a boring story about an exciting person. Just don't tell a boring story about a boring person.

The stories on *This American Life* pass this test all the time. They might be good stories, in which case they're successful. Or, they might be so-so stories in terms of the actual events, but damn, the

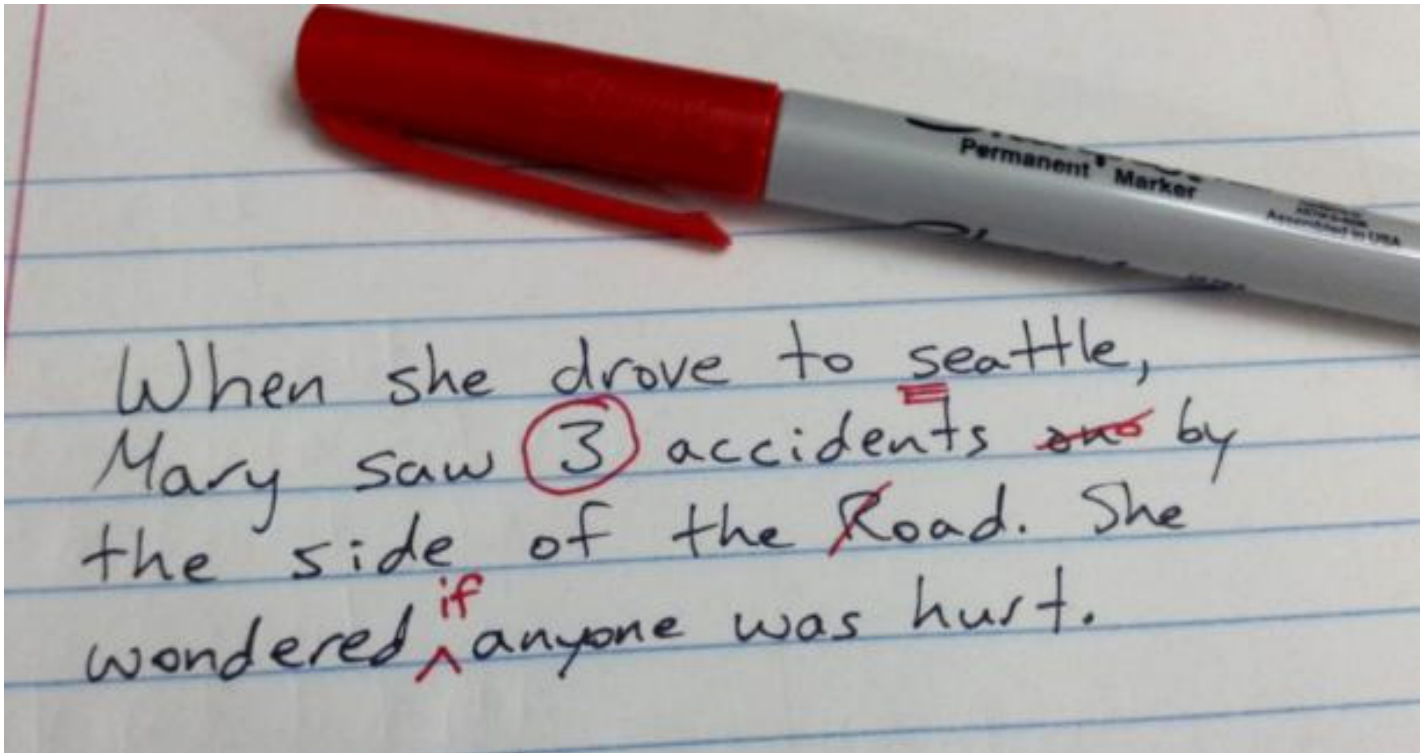
people involved are good storytellers.

It's a really easy test to apply to your own work, and it's a really great one. When you're thinking about your story, if the story is boring AND the characters are boring, your story will be boring. But, if just one of those two things, the characters or the story, is exciting, then you've got a win on your hands.

This is especially great to use when you're writing memoir. Lots of writers work on memoir-like pieces and wonder whether anyone is going to care. Is this boring? Is this only exciting to me because it's my life?

Those are the wrong questions. Give your work the *This American Life* test: Is it a boring story about a boring person, an exciting story about a boring person, a boring story about an exciting person, or an exciting story about an exciting person? As long as it's not the first one, you're golden.

Why We Love To Hate Grammarians



Hold on. Hold that phone. Before you grammarians get all defensive, let me tell you that I'm on your side. Sort of.

What I mean is, I know it's not easy to care deeply about something that almost nobody else cares about. Believe me, I've been on dates and seen someone's eyes glaze over while I'm talking about how Marvel's Heroes Reborn storyline really wasn't the disaster everyone thinks.

I know what it's like to care deeply about something no one else cares about, and I know how it feels to be vilified because of that care.

If you're a true grammarian, if you've often been compared to a certain Germany-based group of people from the 1940's just because you think semicolons should be used correctly, I feel you. It's unfair.

But let's be honest. Have you ever, even once, corrected someone's grammar and heard, "Thank you. I was not aware of this rule, and I thank you for making me aware. I will strive, from now on, to do things correctly"?

No way.

I'll tell you why.

Most People Don't Agree On Grammar's Purpose

Most of us have a working, very utilitarian purpose for grammar: I want you to understand the stuff I'm saying.

Let's be honest, most of you can understand what the writer of this sentence is saying: **Your a jerk, grammarian.**

A chill may have gone up your spine, you may have bit down on your tongue, but the meaning comes through clearly.

For you, the grammarian, grammar is about more than just getting your point across. I get that. If communication is a city street and grammar is your driving, you're driving with elegance, parallel parking and following the rules while the rest of us treat the road like a playground, scooting around on mopeds without a care, driving on the sidewalk and crashing through storefronts to save the hassle of walking inside.

What you have to understand is, from the perspective of someone who doesn't care much for grammar, it seems like we're arriving at the same place. You arrive with more elegance and class, but the rest of us are wearing flip-flops, blasting sweet jams, and having a great time.

From that perspective, correcting grammar seems like nothing more than killing someone else's fun.

You're Not Really Listening

I'm going to steal an example from my buddies Strunk and White:

I feel nauseous.

You've probably heard this phrase, and the grammarians amongst us probably know that this is entirely incorrect. What you should really say is, "I feel nauseated." When you say, "I feel nauseous," what you're really saying is "I feel sickening to contemplate." What you're saying is that you might feel fine and dandy yourself, but you understand you're having a nauseating effect on others.

However, the correct answer, when someone says they feel nauseous, is not to tell them about this subtle difference in language. The correct next step is to find them a garbage can tout suite.

From this side of the conversation, grammarian, I can tell you that when your grammar flag shoots up, sometimes it blocks your view. You stop paying attention to the fact that someone has just told you something important, something personal.

It's like this. If we're at my father's funeral and I say, "I ain't got no parents now," can you live with that? Because you need to live with that. You need to address what I'm saying, not how I'm saying it.

Don't ignore what people are saying.

Correcting Grammar Is The Easy Win

How many times have you seen a discussion online where an argument breaks out, and then one

**Go a day
without
correcting
anyone. Then
another. See
how you feel
after you've
strung a few
days together.**

person slips up grammar-wise? Happens all the time. I'm pretty sure it'll happen in comments on this column. Someone will take a grammar thing I screwed up and use that as proof that I don't know what I'm talking about. Rather than addressing the totally valid, if incorrectly expressed, points.

Someone tweets the wrong version of "your" and loses all credibility.

A Reddit commenter makes a bad call when it comes to affect/effect.

And then, regardless of how compelling the content of their point may be, we shit all over it.

It's a very lazy, very easy way to dismiss someone.

Grammar Is Too Often Used For One-Upping

Grammar is the nerd's tried and true method of oneupsmanship. "I may not be a CEO, but I can mock a CEO who makes an error in an email." "I may not be a great joke teller, but I can mock a comedian who makes an error in a tweet."

C'mon. Is it really productive to mock other people in this capacity? Who is this helping? Do you really think your grammar-based reply is making ANYONE feel better? Is it making anyone better in any way? Or is it simply a way for you to feel better about yourself?

Grammar Is A No-Win Game

You can either do it right and get no credit, or you can screw up and be ridiculed.

It's not like we give credit to books and short stories and tweets that have perfect grammar. I've never read a book review that said, "While Author X's writing may be a bit boring, his grammar is immaculate." Nobody gives a shit when it's done right. You can either screw it up and get a boatload of crap, or you can do it right and receive absolutely no credit.

A situation in which perfection is the minimum qualification is an unwinnable situation.

Where The Hell Were You On The Oxford Comma?

Never have I seen an issue regarding the way we write come into the public sphere the way the Oxford comma did. And what the hell, it's just gone now? How did this happen? Who decided that?

This was the world's hour of need. You know that moment in *Demolition Man* when someone is like, "Get me John Spartan"? This was that moment.

And then you blew it! The Oxford comma is gone! Now I have to read a headline about Gandhi that says, "... highlights of his global tour include encounters with Nelson Mandela, an 800-year-old demigod and a dildo collector." While I'm confident that Nelson Mandela isn't an 800-year-old demigod dildo collector, I wouldn't have needed to



consider this possibility if you'd, I don't know, gotten a famous grammarian out of cryo-prison and handed him some futuristic guns and kicked some ass.

Sometimes We Need You

That's the worst part. Sometimes, we need you. We need you grammarians to read manuscripts, proof things, and remind us about apostrophe rules so we don't always have to write our way around by concocting sentences like "Let us go to the house owned by Bob."

There's nothing worse than coming to someone and groveling for help. Especially after you've called them a grammar Nazi, a grammar nerd, a grammar dork, a grammar geek, a grammar dweeb. I could go on. Maybe just a couple more. Grammar butt, gramm-hole...

We hate to admit it, but we need you. It's a real love/hate thing.

The Road To Recovery

Grammar correction is a two-way street. It takes someone to screw it up, and it takes another person who can't tolerate that screw-up.

You've got a choice. A whole lotta grammarians seem to think that choice is between letting grammar completely go to hell or thanklessly correcting someone. But that's not the real choice. The real choice is about you. You can correct someone's grammar or not. You can love grammar without forcing your love on others. You don't have to be a martyr. You can recover in 12 easy steps.

1. Admit to yourself that you are powerless to control anyone else's grammar.

2. Make a searching and fearless inventory of yourself.

Have I ever screwed up? If the answer is in the affirmative, then lighten up.

3. Make amends when you do harm.

Imagine someone's reaction when, after a correction, you say, "You know what? That was unnecessary. Please continue your story."

4. Don't correct people face-to-face.

Look, tell someone they have a stain on their shirt, they'll get pissed off at you. You didn't put the stain there, but you pointed it out. People don't like or appreciate this. Letting it go doesn't mean everyone's going to run around in stained shirts from now on.

5. Assume that most errors are typos or slip-ups rather than patterns of bad behavior. Give benefit of the doubt.

6. Whenever you go to correct a comment on anything online, say an affirmation instead.

I'm smart. People know I'm smart. I do not need to prove that I'm smart.

7. Take it one day at a time

Go a day without correcting anyone. Then another. See how you feel after you've strung a few days together.

8. Don't take photos of signs and share them online so you can laugh about hilarious apostrophe placement.

Here's a tip: If you told the story out loud, if you said, "I saw a sign today and the apostrophe was in the wrong spot," how hilarious and engaging is that story? Not at all? Then skip it.

9. Be honest about whether you're correcting grammar for the sake of grammar or for your own feelings of self-satisfaction.

A good test here, are you correcting privately or publicly? Is correcting someone privately as satisfying? If not, then you might be in the danger zone.

10. Find healthy ways to engage with grammar.

Read your favorite books on the topic. Re-read them. Buddy up with Grammar Girl. You don't have to cut proper grammar out of your life.

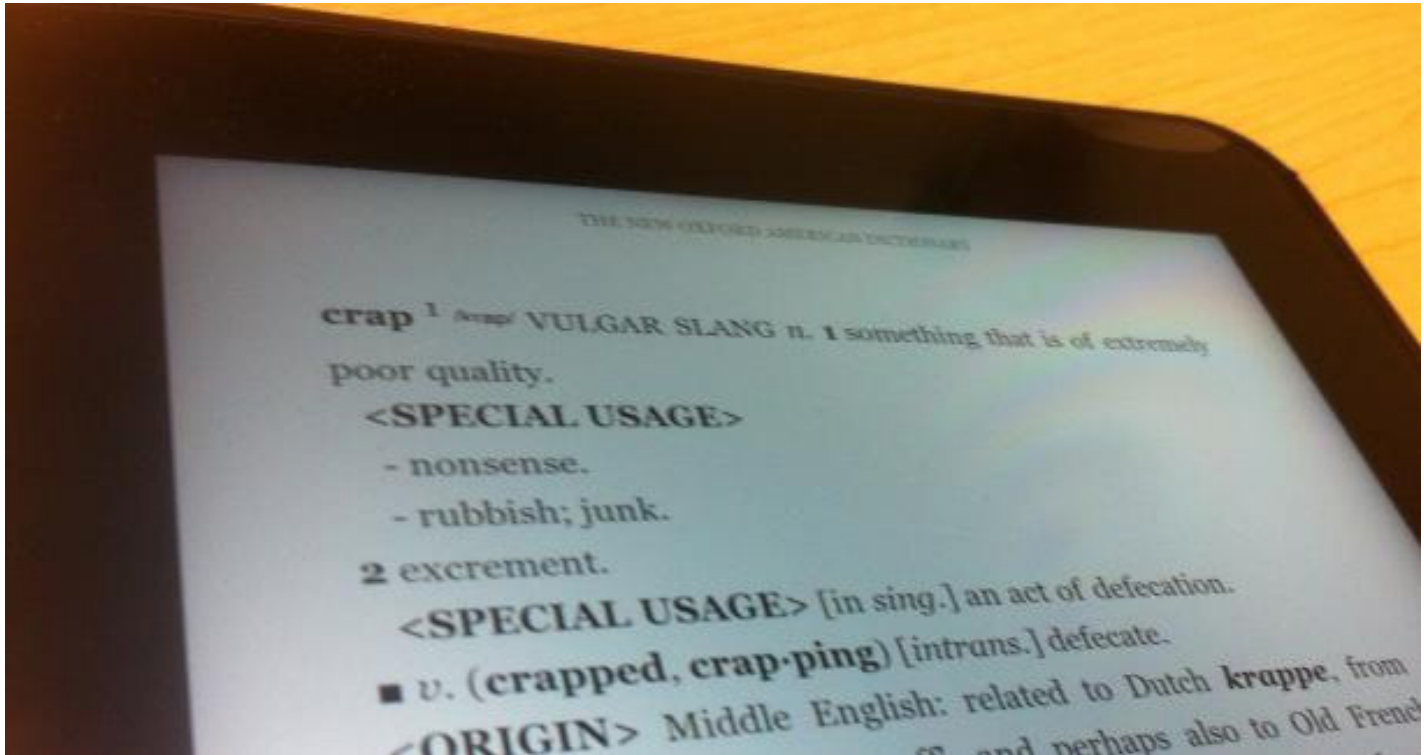
11. Carry the message to others: Pt. I

If you want to keep people sharp, write a decent blog about grammar, write a great book. Make it interesting. Be proactive instead of waiting for others to mess up. Give me rules that rhyme. Give me an acronym.

12. Carry the message to others: Pt II

When you see someone attacking someone else with a grammar-tipped spear, it's okay to tell the attacker that being correct and being right aren't always the same thing.

9 Crappy eReader Features We Don't Need



I got my first Kindle about a year ago, and although I spend a good chunk of my work days troubleshooting eReaders and eReading apps, this last year has provided a true, intimate experience with an eReader.

The honeymoon is over. I've got some complaints.

I'm not alone. EBook sales are declining. And a good chunk of those surveyed said they wanted to spend less time with digital devices, which doesn't bode well for digital books. The group that expressed this most consistently was the youngest group surveyed, those between the ages of 18 and 24, which suggests a dark future for eReaders.

Why hasn't digital reading technology found the firm footing of digital music and streaming movies?

Because digital reading technology stinks. It's packed with a bunch of stupid features we do not need or want.

Let's get specific.

Enough With All The Dumb Menus

On a basic, e-ink Kindle with a touchscreen, when I'm looking at a plain ol' book page, I can do the following:

Touch the screen anywhere on the right-ish to turn the page.

Touch the screen on the left 15% to turn the page backwards.

Touch the screen near the bottom to change what's displayed near the bottom.

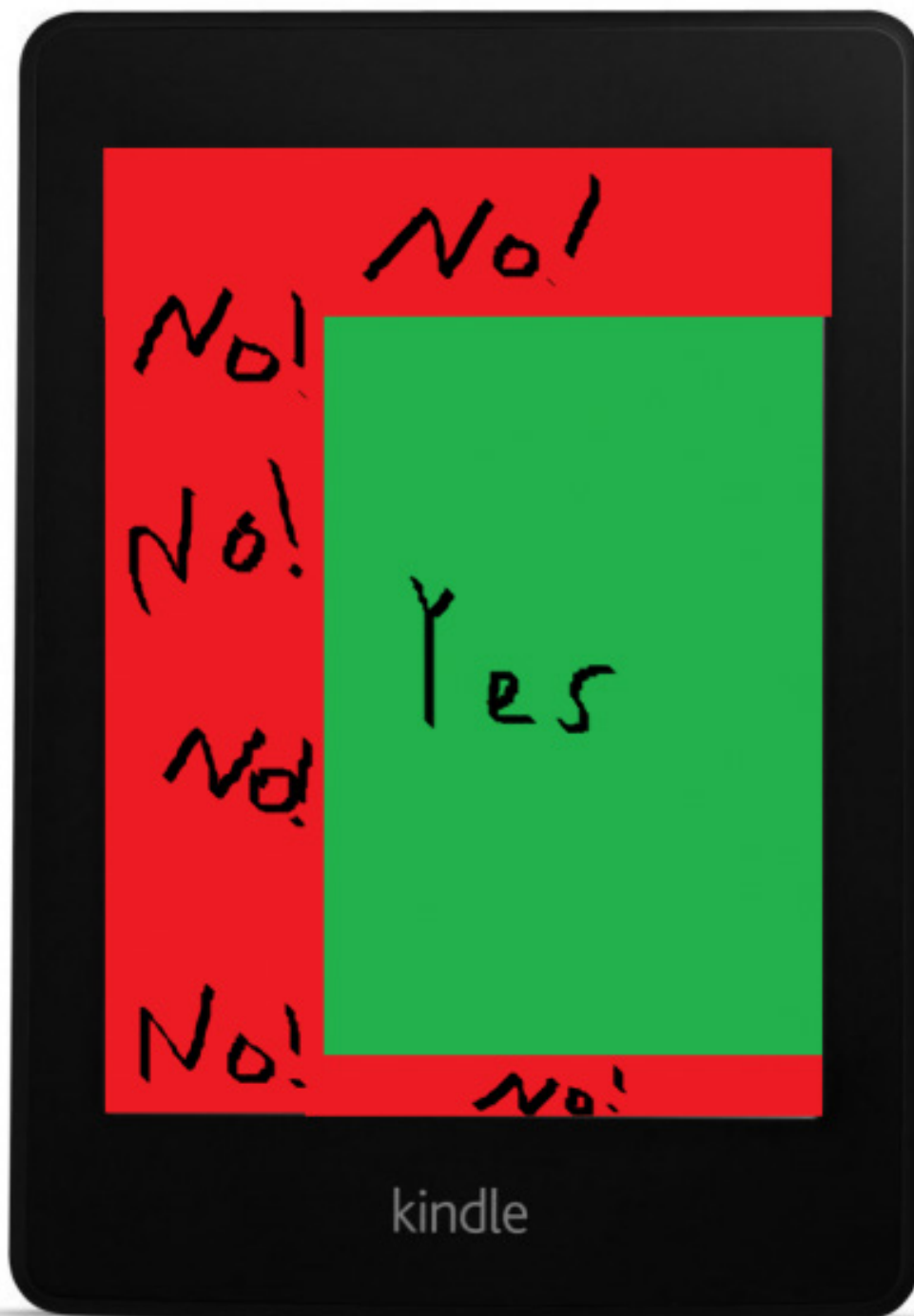
Touch the screen near the top to bring down a menu.

Touch the screen near the top, on the right to place a bookmark.

Touch the screen with the tip of a hammer really hard: feel better.

Oh, and there's a button on the bottom of the Kindle too. An actual analog button that does stuff too.

Here's a quick diagram:



C'mon, guys. I don't need to have ALL of these options in the middle of a book. Think about it. What options do I need with a print book? Turn the page. That pretty much covers it. I don't need to have the option to go back to the table of contents. I don't need the option to change what's displayed on the page. I don't need to see whether there's fucking wifi in the area. I damn sure don't need to do some kind of sharing on social media.

Are these good options to have? Totally. Could they be in a menu that's more than a single touch away? Yes.

And the real issue here is how this disrupts one-handed reading. How am I supposed to crank it to my favorite books for crankin' if one-handed gestures result in me going back a page, opening a menu, or placing a bookmark?

Wait, I'm Not Done. Single-Touch Backwards Page Turning

I can't tell you how many times I've been reading, tapped to turn the page, and then realized, a couple lines in, that I accidentally went backwards.

I can say, with confidence, that this has NEVER happened to me with a print book. It's not like I go to turn the page, read a couple lines, and then say, "Holy shit. I just went backwards on accident!"

Why? Because turning a physical page forwards and backwards is a completely different motion.

I'd estimate that 90% of my tapping on the Kindle screen is for the same purpose: turn the page forward.

5% is navigating menus, and 5% is turning the page backwards. And of those backwards turns, nearly all of them are accidental and anger-inducing.

Seriously, just make a swipe the only way to turn the page backwards. Tap forwards, swipe backwards. I don't need this ease of turning the page the wrong way. I don't need an easy way to screw up. I've got that covered, thanks.

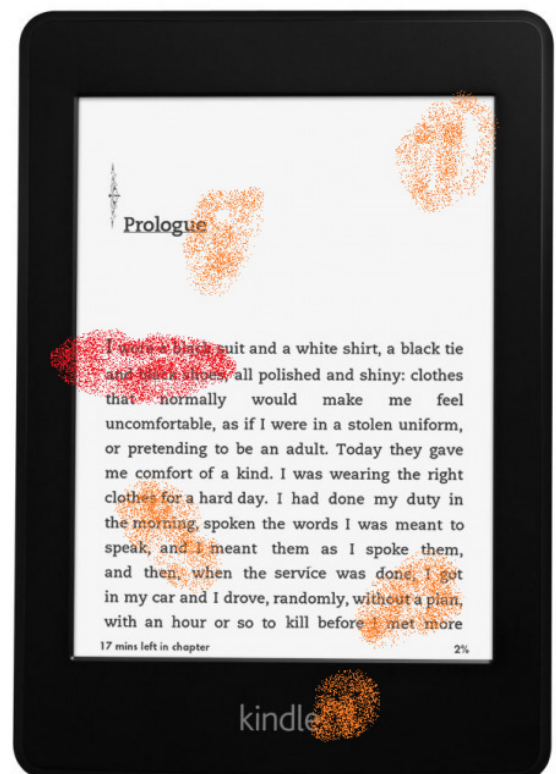
Who Decided Touchscreens Were Such A Fabulous Idea?

You know what I love about touchscreens? I can put my dumb greasy finger right on the surface. That's really awesome.

Finally I have a tangible, awful proof that I eat too many Cheetos for an adult man.

Uh, the lipstick is from a reading of *The Internet Is A Playground*. I quite liked it.

Why did we all agree that the best way to turn pages is by



touching them? Why is the trend moving this way? What happened to buttons that turn the pages, leaving the screen fingerprint free?

I Don't Care What You Care About

For some reason, Kindle is so kind as to place a dotted line under text that's been frequently highlighted by other users.

I knew this guy in college who highlighted the shit out of his psych textbook. There was so much highlighter on the page that when he opened the book, it was like looking inside the briefcase in Pulp Fiction. The dude should've been reading with sunglasses on to protect his vision.

Do I care what some anonymous dope thought was important in the erotic tale Santa Steps Out? Hell, no. This is just another needless feature that's designed to make me feel connected or some such nonsense.

I'm reading a book. I want to be connected to the book. Not some dope.

"Take A Moment To Rate This Book"

When you get to the end of a book, Kindle immediately brings up a screen that allows you to give the book a star rating.

As an author, I like this idea. But that's only because I'm a whore. Seriously, buy my books. I'd tell you they're great, but I don't care. Buy. Click on Amazon, type in my name, and click "Buy Now" until your mouse wears out.

As a reader, however, this rating thing is stupid.

Do we really need to eliminate the period between finishing a book and then telling the world what we thought about it? Isn't it better to think about it for a minute? For yourself? Does this thing have to pop up the moment I finish (or once, frustratingly, BEFORE I was finished so I had to keep closing it to read the final pages of a book), or couldn't we give ourselves a moment to decide how we feel about something? Or, to put it another way, are we really in need of options that bypass the filter from first thought to internet posting? I feel like we're already pretty good at bypassing that filter, but maybe it's just me.

KINDLE

I bought a Kindle. I use a Kindle. I shop in the Kindle store. Why does my Kindle need to have the word "KINDLE" emblazoned on the front? Why does its flesh have to be branded like that? How many times do I need to see the word KINDLE?

It's the equivalent of putting RANDOM HOUSE at the bottom of every single page of a book. In larger type than is present in the rest of the book. It's obnoxious. It's stupid.

Just look at this. I took the actual "kindle" branding and put it into the text. It's twice as big!

I wore a black suit and a **kindle** a black tie and black shoes, all polished and shiny: clothes that normally would make me feel uncomfortable, as if I were in a stolen uniform, or pretending to be an adult. Today they gave me comfort of a kind. I was wearing the right

I've seriously considered ways to buff it out of my Kindle or possibly fill it in, and these discussions have resulted in my partner using a phrase that she uses sparingly with me because if she didn't, she'd have to use it ALL THE TIME: "Maybe you're being a bit obsessive."

We don't want this. We don't need it. I'm aware I'm using a Kindle. Message received.

What's With The Bookmarks?

I've got highlighting, and eBooks pick up where you left off. What are the bookmarks for? I don't get it.

The convenience of a bookmark is to pick up where you left off. That convenience is already provided in no less than two ways. How many redundant systems do you need to perform this same simple task?

Progress Markers

This is one some will disagree with me on. Hear me out.

The progress markers on eReaders come in a few forms.

First, there's "Loc 234354 of 348798237." That's utterly useless. Is this meant for people who want to do the math? Or maybe it's people who want to feel like they're blazing through pages. "I read at a rate of 2,000 Locs per minute. That's a lotta Locs."

Then there's the time left in book/chapter thing. Which is always off for me. The same way it works with Google Maps where the walking speed seems to be set to someone with one half of one leg dragging their battery-dead mobility scooter behind them down city streets, time estimates on the Kindle seem to be built for third graders who are riding a Gravitron and have partially blinded themselves by eating too many off-brand crayons that get their colors from lead.

They're never right, so why bother?

Plus, it turns reading into a needless contest. You think it'll take me an hour? I'll show you, Kindle!

And finally, there's the third method of tracking, the percent of completion or "Page X out of Y," which most people seem to like, but I loathe.

When I bring up my hatred of this, I inevitably hear the same thing: "It shows you how much you have left in a book, which is needed because you're not holding a physical book and can't count pages."

Yeah, I get it. I know WHY it exists. It exists because manufacturers of gizmos had to replace really good technology (books) with something newer, more expensive, and that connects directly to a marketplace. And so, they had to address some of the downfalls.

**The shape
and size of
eReaders,
frankly, sucks.**

Has the drawback of eReading been addressed by giving me a percent or a page count? Sure. Has it been satisfactorily addressed? Absolutely not.

What this solution has done is take very simple, received information of page weight and turned it into another piece of information that's constantly displayed, noted, and re-absorbed. It's another thing amongst a bevy of things that takes you right the fuck out of the story.

Why, when I go to a movie theater, don't they have a clock at the bottom that counts down to the end?

Is it really important to most consumers to know exactly how long a song is?

Isn't there a reason that, in an art museum, the little card that explains all the nonsense is off to the side rather than having it stapled to the bottom of the painting?

There is a reason for all of these omissions, and that reason is because the artist is creating something, and being highly aware, in a numerical way, of the duration of that experience detracts from the actual experience itself.

Do eReaders probably need a way for readers to gauge how far they are in a book? Yes. Do they need these particular solutions? No way.

Slavish Devotion To The Single Page Portrait Format

Why is every eReader approximately the same shape and size?

Why have we decided that the rectangular, portrait-orientation tablet is the way to go? Or, better question, have we decided that, or is that the only option we've been given?

Dig this: magazines are all bigger than eReader pages. Comic books. Hardcover fiction. Almost every non-fiction book ever made. All significantly larger.

Comic books and magazines also like to experiment with layouts that cross over two pages. As do art and photo books.

The shape and size of eReaders, frankly, sucks if you're reading anything other than plain text.

Features We Do Need

Are you listening, manufacturers? Because this is some crap we actually want.

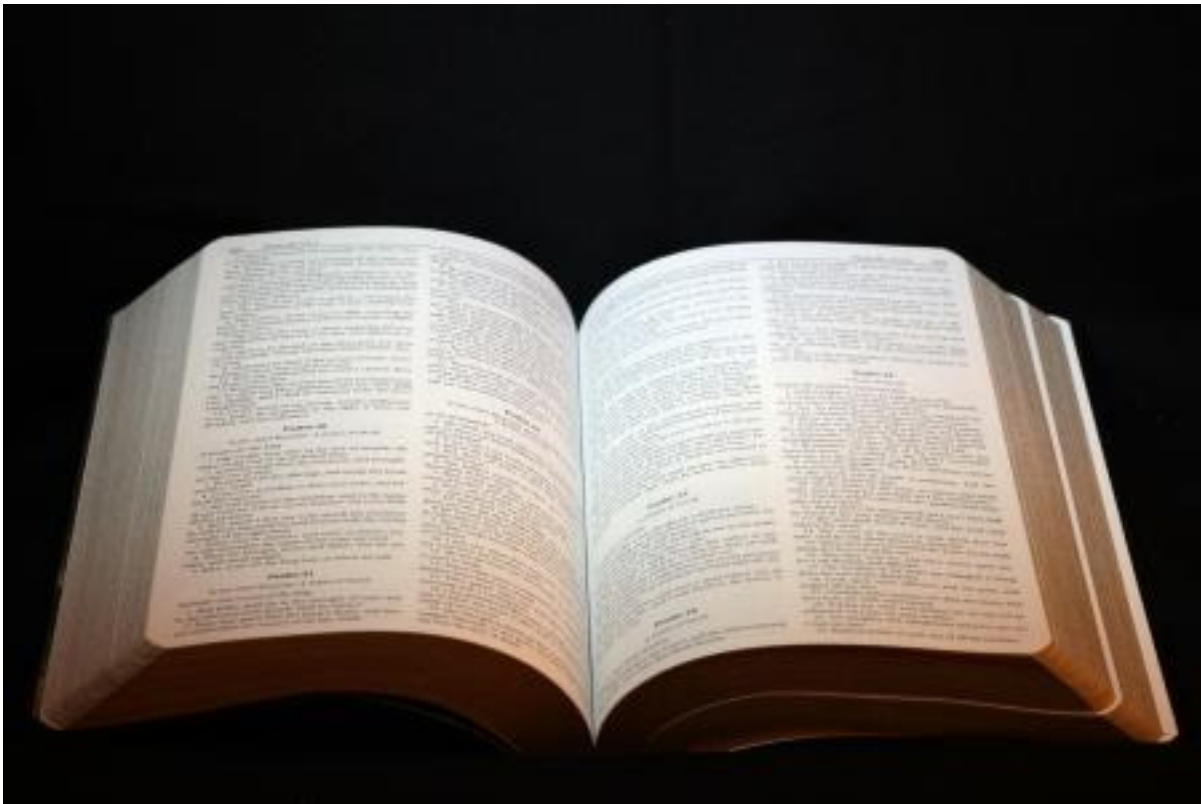
Waterproof: Because duh. If it's waterproof, I can light a candle, jump in the tub, and read great romances like *License to Love*, the story of Vegas magician Rock Powers. I won't spoil the ending, but I WILL say it involves a villain who has a bayonet affixed to a rocket launcher. Plus, if eReaders are waterproof, that means they're probably also coffee proof, sand proof, and easier to clean Cheeto dust off of.

Comic Book Format: Make an eReader that's killer for comics. Comic book size. Portability is good, but seeing comics displayed as they were meant to be would be so, so awesome, and it would make reading older comics a much better experience.

Text To Speech: I know there are lots of issues here. But get cracking. This is something we can use.

Author Personalization: I don't have a vision for how exactly this works, but if you're hoping the world will move away from print, figure out a way to get this going.

The Future: To me, here's what the future of an eReader looks like:



Yeah, it's a book. It's e-ink, and what happens is you purchase an eBook, and that eBook's text is downloaded into your physical book. The words populate the pages, you read the damn thing, and then you download something new.

To me, the future of the eReader looks like the past.

Some jokers make a mint selling, basically, typewriters. Don't tell me you couldn't make bank selling, basically, books. EReaders with all the advantages of eBooks and print? Sign me up.

8 Lessons Bookstores Could Learn From Comic Book Stores



Consider the comic store and the bookstore. Their relationship has been one similar to that of a snob and a slob in a snobs versus slobs comedy. Bookstores, represented by snobs, have been on top for a long time. But now, now that time has moved on and the movie has nearly finished, the slobs are on top. Alliances have been re-formed, Camp Whatever has been saved, and the snob looks to the once lowly slob to figure out how to exist in this new, topsy-turvy world.

Indeed, June 2016 was the best month for comic book sales since 1997! And not only are comic books flying off the shelves, but more and more, comic book stores are thriving. Nerd culture is huge, comic conventions are busting at the seams. Things are going swimmingly for the once slovenly slob.

I love a good bookstore, don't get me wrong. But there's always room for improvement, and there are a handful of lessons bookstores could learn from their colorful, superpowered, continuity-obsessed cousins.

Bookstores: What's Your...Thing?

Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash was a place I wanted to visit since I was a teenager. On my first trip to NYC, I took a train from the city out to New Jersey for the sole purpose of walking through the front doors of The Stash. Think about that. My entire reason for leaving the city that never sleeps, my entire reason for entering another state, my entire goal was to hit a comic book store. Not to buy a specific thing, not to seek out certain key issues. To hit a destination.

Atomic Books in Baltimore, besides having some cool comics, collects John Waters' fan mail. It's a

thing.

Meltdown Comics in Los Angeles has a podcasting studio, home of none other than the Nerdist Network. It's a thing.

More than one comic store is attached to an art gallery. It's a thing.

Comic stores have learned the value of having a thing. Something that brings people into the store, possibly for reasons unrelated to the books.

Bookstores, far too few of you have a thing. What's gonna be your thing?

Some suggestions?

A Skee-Ball machine is like \$1,000 bucks on eBay. Just sayin'!

Is there room in your shop to be the last holdout for pogs? Just sayin'!

Could you, for a pretty reasonable investment, devote a corner of your store to becoming the first Demolition Man memorabilia museum in the world? Could you PLEASE do that so I can come to your bookstore?

Could you have a hermit crab who does fantasy baseball predictions? Just sayin'!

I'm just sayin', you can have a thing.

You Can Have Events That Have Almost Nothing To Do With Books

Author readings, book clubs. This covers most of the events at your average bookstore.

"Snooze." "BO-RING." That covers most of the reactions I have to those offerings.

I'm looking at my local comic book store, and they have gaming events 3-5 times A DAY! Including some game nights they sponsor at a local distillery. Their event calendar looks like the fantasy social calendar of the world's busiest, most intoxicated dweeb.

My town is not that big. We have no business having a store with this many events.

The aforementioned Meltdown Comics has a small theater attached, and they do comedy shows, open mics, acting classes. They host all kinds of different stuff, most of it barely related to comics.

Events bring people into the store. When they're in the store, they buy things. This is simple math.

Why wouldn't you hold a cat rescue adoption fest in your bookstore? Oh, right. Because you're a monster. I forgot.

You may not be able to support 3-5 events a day, but you might look at increasing both the quantity and variety of your events.

Get That Pre-Order Game Strong

Anyone who's been in the comics-buying game for a while knows how it works. You get a *Previews* guide, check out what's coming in a few months, and then make your orders through your comics shop.

This is the preferred way to buy comics. You get your books in hand the day they come out, you know they haven't gotten all fucked up from being on the rack, and most times you'll get a discount.

Bookstores, ya'll need to get that pre-order game together.

Put out a sheet every month that tells me what I can pre-order. I want covers, I want synopses. Hell, you might even take the route of some comic stores and create your own newsletter, do some hand-picking and generate excitement that way.

Pre-ordering is such a great way to both please and trap your audience. Make it a big part of your business.

Your Staff is EVERYTHING!

When I visited Midtown comics in NYC, I wasn't sure what the staff would be like. I have expectations about comic store people ("Uh, you haven't read Jodorowsky?"), and I have expectations about New Yorkers ("Hey, I'm walkin' here!"), and I figured the mash-up of the two personalities might be a bit much ("Hey, I'm readin' Jodorowsky's Metabarons here!").

The people at Midtown were nothing like my made-up Jodorowsky jerks. They were so, so nice. Someone welcomed me into the store, and when I couldn't find what I was looking for, not only did the staff member know where it should be, but when we didn't find it, someone knew who to call and how to get what I wanted within a couple days.

There was this article I read in library school that I've never forgotten. It described a study of information seeking, and there were two types of transactions evaluated: one type where the information-seeker was given the correct information they sought, and a second where the information-seeker did not get what they wanted, but the giver was kind, helpful, and very sympathetic.

Those that didn't get what they were looking for consistently rated their interactions higher, and they were more likely to seek help from the same resource again **EVEN THOUGH THEY DIDN'T GET WHAT THEY NEEDED.**



Take heed, bookstores. The experience is a lot more than the books on the shelf. A great staff can

make a repeat customer of someone, even if they don't always get the books they want.

There's no room in the comics game for the surly comic book guy anymore, and the days of the surly bookstore clerk are coming to an end.

One of Us! One of Us!

Be part of the community. It's important.

Isotope Comics in San Francisco did a comics-making class for Girl Scouts. Whose cold heart isn't warmed by that?

Every protest needs a staging area. Why wouldn't you provide a warm place for people to start or finish, and maybe some materials and know-how to make kickass signs?

Why wouldn't you hold a cat rescue adoption fest in your bookstore? Oh, right. Because you're a monster. I forgot.

Get Over Yourself

If you're a comics shop owner, you're used to the slings and (Green) arrows that come along with dudes in their underpants being the main draw to your store. You've almost certainly made peace with the idea of *Maus* being shelved next to *My Little Pony*.

What gets prime real estate at the comics shop? Whatever sells.

Meanwhile, far too many bookstores are all caught up in Lit-Ra-Tour being front and center. They push their ideas of which books are big and important, and they stuff some of the highest-selling books into the back corners. Romance, thrillers, horror, sci-fi.

If you visit bookstores, and if you read genres that come in mass market size, you've been in a lot of bookstore basements. You've perused many shelves near a bathroom. You've feared for your life in dank corners that make you wonder if you accidentally opened a Hellraiser puzzle box. I'm not kidding, I was in a pretty nice bookstore last year, and when I was standing near the books I liked, there were two dead roaches on the floor. Well, 1.75 dead roaches. It looked like maybe the one died and the other one...you know what? Never mind.

Bookstores, get over yourselves. If you have the shit on the shelf, then you should be willing to put the shit front and center. Don't roll your eyes at a purchase, and don't do an eye-roll-by-proxy by cramming stuff out of sight.

Don't be afraid to send the message that your store is for all kinds of readers.

Collectors and Readers

In the world of comics, there's this spectrum. You have your collectors who care about the condition and value of a book. And you've got your readers who mostly want to read the shit. As is the case with most spectrums, most of us fall somewhere in the middle, doing some reading and some

collecting.

Comic book stores sell to this entire spectrum. Any comic book store worth its salt has new books, trade paperbacks, and then some wall books, valuable books displayed up high so that we can all see them, pine for them, and maybe buy them.

Bookstores seem to want things one way or the other. You go into bookstore A, and it's for readers. Nothing collectible, no first editions or signed copies. Then you go into bookstore B, and that's ALL they have. Everything is in a case, everything is hundreds of dollars.

We want both. We want our cake, and we want to eat it. I mean, what else are we supposed to do with cake? Stare at it? Duh. That's a stupid saying.

Get your high end stuff, and get your low end stuff. Get you an inventory that can do both.

Face Front!

This one's quick. When you go into a comic book store, almost all the books are front-facing.

Sideways books send the message that they're filed away, already in the place where they belong. Front facing books say "Pick me!" Or, sometimes they say "Miss Jane" because that's the title of the book. Plug.

Zines: Dead Or Alive-er Than Ever?



Why We're Asking The Question

Because the internet was going to kill everything.

The internet was going to kill record stores. The internet was going to kill bookstores. The internet was going to kill brick and mortar banks. The internet was going to kill the telephone.

Surely, if the internet was going to kill those other things, the internet was going to kill zines. Zines are so often painstakingly hand made. Zines have problematic distribution. These are exactly the sorts of problems that were going to be solved by the internet.

The internet was going to kill everything. What chance did zines have?

How We Were Wrong

The internet didn't kill record stores.

The internet didn't kill print books. Or banks. Or everything.

Let's be frank. If the internet was going to kill one thing, stab one thing in the heart and leave it for dead, it was brick and mortar purveyors of pornography. And it hasn't. It's dealt a mighty blow, brought many a merchant to his knees, but the brick and mortar porn store isn't dead.

And if that's not dead, then nothing is.

Record stores are a powerful combination of nostalgia, knowledge, and cool factor. Print books are often cheaper than ebooks, and none of us are looking to get in more screen time. As long as we

have cash, we'll have banks. As for pornography...I have no earthly idea, and I'm too scared of the "8th Avenue Arcade" to go inside and ask how the hell they've survived. I'm scared of the store itself and of the answer to my question.

Each of these endangered things survived the internet. What is it about zines that has kept them alive?

Nothing Can Kill the Grimace, and Nothing Can Kill The Zine

Sometimes, a medium can't be killed because it's like a hydra. There's no way to kill it. Or, at least, it's pretty damn difficult. Hercules killed a hydra, but he's Hercules. If we were calling things accomplishable by Hercules "possible" then I guess we should all be running around killing boars and lions, and we should be cleaning out stables (that one I think anyone could do, and I feel like Hercules got suckered).

Take radio. Once upon a time radio was a medium. There were thousands of different stations. Then, Clear Channel bought EVERYTHING. 1,200 stations, 130 venues and promoters, 770,000 billboards. Radio under Clear Channel wasn't a medium. A mode of transmission. A way to express. Radio was Radio©. Clear Channel took the many-headed hydra, consolidated it into one very stupid, boring head, shaved its teeth down, blinded it, bound it— you get the idea.

Once radio was consolidated into one thing, it was killable.

The zine doesn't have this problem. Because most zines are the product of a single vision, an individual or small group that decides what they want to do, does it, and then has their own way of distributing it, there's really no way for a Clear Channel to come in and consolidate the zine. There's no way to turn the medium into one thing.

Medgar Evers put it best:

You can kill a man, but you can't kill an idea.

And, of course, Star Wars said it the nerdiest:

Here's why you can't exterminate us, aruetii. We're not huddled in one place—we span the galaxy. We need no lords or leaders—so you can't destroy our command. We can live without technology—so we can fight with our bare hands. We have no species or bloodline—so we can rebuild our ranks with others who want to join us. We're more than just a people or an army, aruetii. We're a culture. We're an idea. And you can't kill ideas—but we certainly can kill you.

Zines are still alive. The first part of our question is answered. But are they alive-er than ever?

The World Is Waking Up To Zines

Let me provide a short (and incomplete) list of public libraries that have zine collections:

Austin, Jacksonville, San Francisco, New York, Multnomah, Barnard College, Chattanooga, San Diego, Baltimore, Temple University, Berkeley City College, Seattle, Long Beach, Richmond, St. Louis,

University of Texas, Texas A&M University, Duke University, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Iowa, Vancouver.

How about (another incomplete list of) cities that have a zine fest?

Denver, Washington D.C., Phoenix, Chicago, San Francisco, San Jose, Toronto, Pittsburgh, Austin, Geneva, Houston, Melbourne, New York, Chicago, Rome, London, Dublin, Barcelona, Paris, Berlin, Albuquerque, Newark, Boston, Cleveland, Charleston, Dallas, Indianapolis, Grand Rapids, Kansas City, Memphis, Miami, Omaha, Buenos Aires, Tokyo.

What is your most likely source for zines? Indie bookstores. And indie bookstores are on the rise.

Zines are around, they're gaining credibility. But that's not necessarily what I mean when I ask whether zines are "alive-er than ever." What I mean to say is, are zines livelier, more interesting, maybe even more dangerous than before?

Yes, Because Analog Is Freer Than Digital

I think we all suspected that the internet would be a great step forward for freedom, equality, social progress and free speech. The place where we could be our authentic, genuine selves, and a way we could connect with other people who felt similarly.

However, that doesn't seem to be the way things shook out.

Most of us express ourselves online within the bounds of hundreds of pages of Facebook usage rules, Twitter's pages and pages of guidelines, or take-your-pick of blogging platforms and their reams of regulations. These rules are sometimes used to squash jerks, and they're sometimes used to hamper genuine and important artistic expression, as was the case for Dennis Cooper last summer.

You might think that the give and take of living in an online environment with a lot of rules is that it would be boring and homogenous, but at least it would be fairly safe, right? Ha! Instead, the online environment has become the realm of extremes. Forget posting anything heartfelt and genuine. Forget important, deep self-expression. You can't have an opinion on Demolition Man without being called a bunch of names that send you running to Urban Dictionary so you can decide how offended to be (hint: very).

Online, there are the usage guidelines imposed by the outlet of your choosing, and then there are the social rules imposed by whoever else happens to be online (aka everybody).

Now, consider the humble, analog zine.

Consider that when you make a zine, you make the rules. You and only you.

Consider that there's no button someone can push to wipe your zine out of existence.

Consider that an analog zine doesn't have a comments section. Doesn't invite a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down.

Consider that you don't have to know anything about computers to make a zine. Skills most of us take for granted, typing, operating a mouse, all that stuff, trust me, these are not skills everyone has.

Consider that, while there are some issues, analog provides a very, very high level of freedom for creators.

And consider that this freedom for creators may be more needed than ever.

Marginalized Voices

The zine is still a voice for the voiceless. Wait, not that. It's a medium of transmission for those voices. It's a way of making them heard.

Whether those voices come from marginalized populations or are talking about subjects that can't get mainstream attention, it's hard to deny that the zine is a great choice for someone who might have a hard time being heard or have a hard time finding acceptance elsewhere.

The racks of zines at a comic shop or bookstore are not only the place where marginalized voices and ideas are tolerated. It's the place where people seek them out.

Proof? Okay. Let's look at some subject matter descriptions for zines published by Microcosm:

"Travestis" are a third gender in Brazil (though some identify as women). Pajubá is their "anti-language," a coded way of speaking that prevents outsiders from understanding them. The language is a mix of Yoruba and other African languages on a Portuguese structure. -Pajuba': The Language of Brazillian Travestis by Eloisa Aquino

The anonymous author writes about their decision to drop out of high school and live independently, and shares the resources they learned so others can do the same thing. It's a practical guide to resisting the institutions that oppress us, be they schools, families, jobs, or capitalism, and not just surviving but thriving under the radar of society. -Dropping Out (for students) Issue #1 by CrimethInc

Now that the country has "TRULY WRECKED ITSELF" the zinestresses behind the Native American Musings series get back to roots with a second volume of their original Empower Yoself zine. The title is an homage to the spirit and underground culture of hip hop, and the contents are informed by Indigenous Feminism. -Empower yoself before you wreck yoself: VOL. 2: Native American feminist musings by Melanie Fey and Amber McCrary

[This is] a booklet intended to help people take back the homes that have been taken away from them by government and business...It's a step by step guide to setting up a squat from a perspective of living in New York City. It's broken down into chapters including how to form a group, finding a building, getting in, emergency repairs, lights, heat, and fire safety, makeshift toilets, and legal hassles. -Survival Without Rent

Authenticity

Holy shit is it nice to read something that's not selling anything.

Look at your favorite news source, podcast, whatever, and look at what they're doing to make money. Your favorite YouTube creator, this super-independent person with a very distinct vision, has checked a box that says, "Yeah, it's cool if you advertise WHATEVER YOU WANT before I do my thing."

Look at Instagram. Half of Instagram is someone selling supplements. At least, half of my Instagram. I don't know why Instagram thinks I want to buy a bunch of weird powders and jugs of liquid egg product.

If there's one rule of the modern world, it's that anything created will be turned into a way to sell pills that either make you shit less, shit more, or shit in a different way.

Zines are so rarely selling something other than themselves. And this authenticity means that, for once, you don't have to be on your guard when you're reading. You don't have to constantly ask what the author's agenda is. What's their product? What's their brand? None of that matters. Just enjoy what they're doing.

Zines provide a trust-based experience between consumer and creator, which is more and more difficult to find.

Why The Future of Zines Is Bright

Even if you could kill the paper zine, you can't really kill the ideals behind the zine.

In his *Make Your Thing* talks, Jesse Thorn speaks about how *Boing Boing* started as a zine, how it changed, and how it stayed the same:

The story of Boing Boing is about the recognition that in the digital world, it pays to be medium-agnostic...Rather than defining yourself by the medium you create, define yourself by what you offer to your audience. In [Boing Boing founders] Mark and Xeni's case, they are curators of fun, creative geeky stuff.

[Mark and Xeni] have allowed their interests and talents to define their subject matter and their subject matter to define their media – and vice-versa. Xeni's great on camera, so it's natural she should curate on-camera. Boing-Boing on the web is about links. In Zine form it was about stories, on camera it's about sharing videos. The form is different, the content is different, but the brand and the soul are the same.

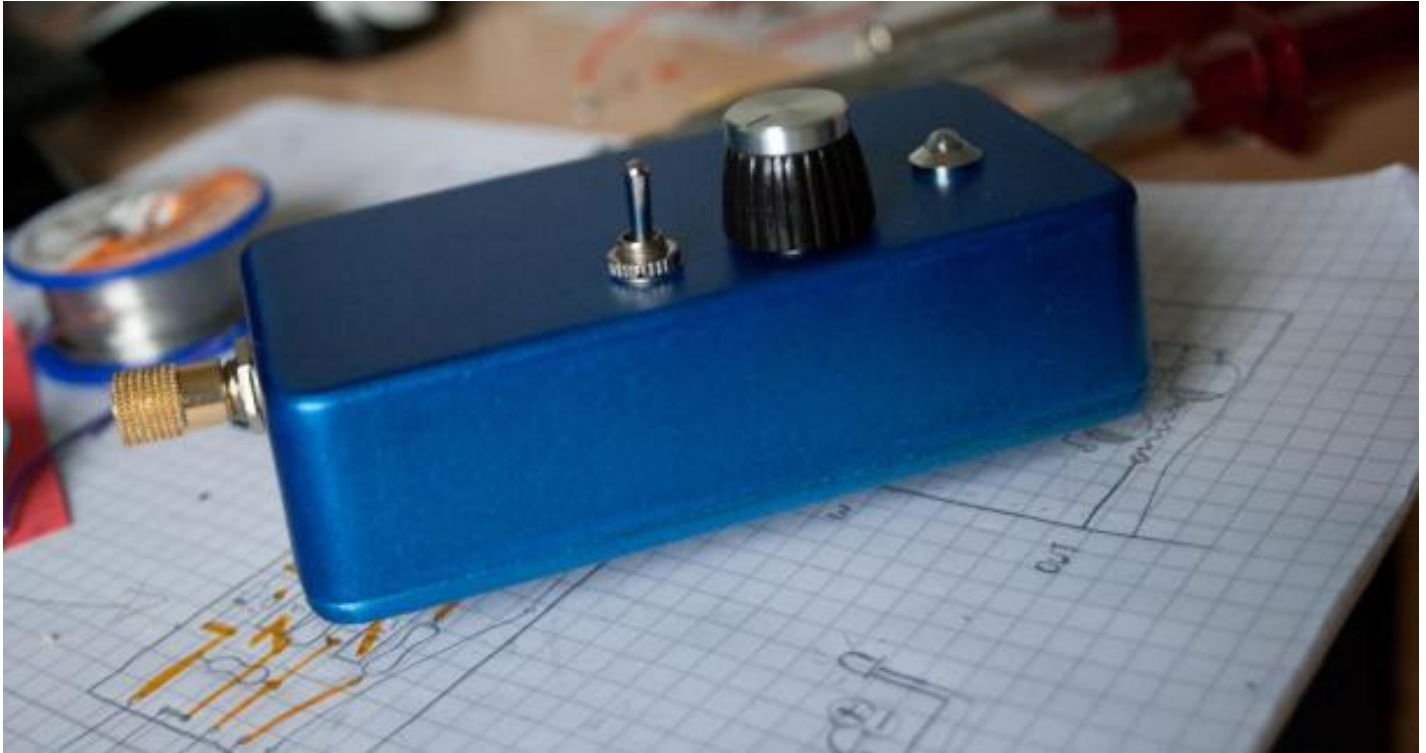
Zines have always been typified by stapled copy paper, but they've also accommodated lots of different formats. Stacks of cards, cassettes, all kinds of good stuff.

As long as someone has something to say, the zine will live on.

Want To Start Your Own?

No time like the present.

9 Imaginary Gizmos For Writers Someone Needs To Hurry Up And Invent Already

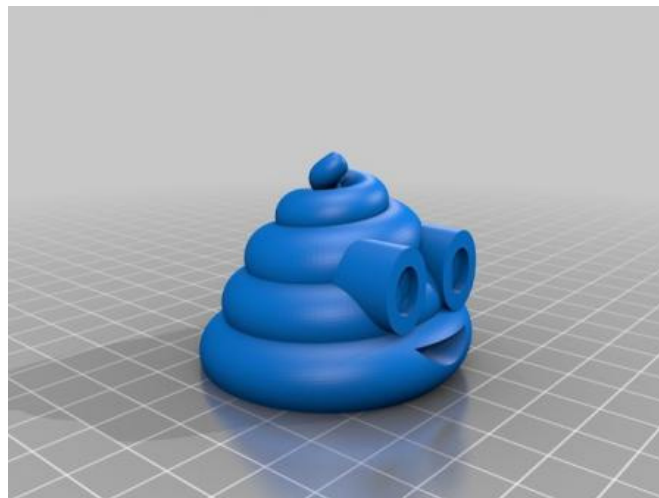


Most writers are of the opinion that the last thing we need is another gizmo. Another screen, another device, another drain on our time.

But I think most writers are being a tad narrow-minded. I think they'd be apt to embrace technology if it offered us some things we could actually use.

The Consumer-Level Self-Publishing Machine

It's 2017. We have consumer-level 3D printers! This was something that I couldn't have ever imagined being possible. Now I can process and extrude materials to make a pile of crap at home!



Okay, bad example. On a basic level, turning raw materials into piles of crap was always possible for those of us with functional GI tracts. But you know what I mean.

And yet, the old-ass technology of printing a book, cutting the paper, binding and getting it in a cover isn't something that's available on the consumer level. The Espresso Book Machine is probably the closest thing, but according to the rumors I've read, a brand new 3D printer costs a bit less than 2 months of the maintenance fee for The Espresso.

How great would it be to hack out a book, slap it together and take it to the streets? How nice would it be for gift-giving, the adult writer's equivalent of that shitty ceramics class ash tray?

If it's possible to put 3D printing technology in the hands of average dum-dums like me, then home book printing doesn't seem wildly implausible.

Holofriend©

This one is simple, A little projector makes it appear that, while you're writing at the coffee shop, you're actually with a friend. For some reason, this seems to dampen the hate others feel for you when you choose to write in public.

Writing by yourself is lame. Keep your loneliness at home where it belongs.



But with Holofriend©, you can make it appear as though you're not only working on a collaborative project, but also that you need to take up that entire table.

Super Fold-Out-Able Keyboard And Mouse

The only thing that's really keeping your phone from being a useful word processor is the lack of a keyboard and mouse.

Typing on the phone stinks, and editing on the phone is almost impossible unless there's a part of your finger that's so skinny it can slip between letters. By the way, I have a doctor's appointment for some...old man stuff next week, so if you ARE the owner of one of these skinny fingers, let's talk.

Some foldable stuff exists, but here's the real trick: The keyboard and mouse should be small enough to carry around in a pocket, with your phone. They should be as small as the phone, and if they could somehow fold out from the phone, that'd be even better.

Once this is invented we'll never be without a decent word processor again.

Ninja Escape Smoke Bomb Pen

This is mostly for parties. When someone says, "Oh, you're a writer? Anything that I would know?"

If you've ever been there, you know that the only options are to say, "Only if you've heard of Girl On The Train!" and then hope there are no further questions because you haven't read Girl On The Train, or you could click a pen, enveloping the room in harmless smoke, and then make your escape.

At one time I would have hoped that people would just learn to stop with the personal questions. But then I watched a co-worker ask another co-worker whether she was pregnant. For the record, she was not pregnant.

If people can't avoid asking that question, there's no way they're going to avoid the writing question. Which is why we need the ninja smoke bomb pen.

See Also: The New And Improved Cyanide Capsule Tooth.

The Hangover Cure

Am I stereotyping writers and saying that they might hit the sauce now and then? Sure. Am I also, as I type this, wishing I could take a pill and wake up in the morning fresh as a daisy (daisies being the agreed upon freshest flower)? Also yes.

So where the hell is it? How have we gone this long without the cure? We still have booze, we still overdo it, and yet we're still left with the headaches, the vomiting, the strange desire to go to church or maybe just eat at Chik-fil-A because we don't really know anything about church, and a sandwich from a religious-ish chicken place is as close as we can get.

I don't know what it is, I don't care how it works. Just please get on it, science.

The 'Men In Black' Mind Wiper

Not only could I see a great, twisty-plotted movie again for the first time, ("I don't know anything about this so-called *Demolition Man*, but it looks like quite a romp!") I could edit my own crap without the fact that I wrote it getting in the way. It's a true opportunity to read something as a reader and edit as an editor.

Of course, this gadget would have to be a little more sophisticated than the one in the movie. You'd need to be able to wipe not just by increments of time, but specific events that may have occurred in bits and pieces over time.

Plus, if you had a recent low point, like eating jelly beans off the floor because you spilled them everywhere and then got down to pick them up and decided eating them was better than putting them back in the canister, you could erase and live like a man who doesn't eat jelly beans off the floor. Twice.

The Shakespeare Reviver

This gizmo allows us to revive Shakespeare, have him talk to 8th grade English classes and apologize. The dude ruined 8th grade for me, and he made me 100% sure that plays were boring.

I say we dig him up and give him the chance to say he's sorry. Also, we could settle a bet between me and a co-worker as to whether that thing Shakespeare wears around his neck is some sort of air

I don't know what it is, I don't care how it works. Just please get on it, science.

filter.

The Cone Of Silence



This should be a real thing. *Get Smart*, for all its silliness, had some good ideas. Electric Grass, Bazooka Broom. Why not the Cone? Why not a device that blocks out all sound, even the ones you're trying to hear?

We have earplugs, and they're alright unless you're trying to block out bass. Which is what EVERY annoying neighbor is all about. Seriously, it's like living next to Meghan Trainor over here.

I did find one effective way of reducing bass. It involves a well-sharpened pencil and a hint of madness. And eventually learning ASL. But sometimes you just can't take anymore Yeezy played as it was never meant to be heard: through the goddamn wall at 1:30 AM.

Where's my cone, where's my silence, and where do all the other people who don't care for music live?

Legion Of Super-Heroes Flight Ring

I think half the reason we kept reading Legion of Super-Heroes comics was because of the cool flight rings. Why the hell else would we read a book about Bouncing Boy? Or Matter Eater Lad? A guy who can eat ANYTHING? Wow. Great power.

No girlfriend you say? Imagine that.

But the flight rings issued to all members were pretty badass. Slip one on your finger and bam, you can fly. Way better than a jetpack or a glass airplane or needing your parents to die on your home world and rocket you to Earth as a baby.

**MATTER-EATER
LAD**
REAL NAME:
TENZIL KEM
HOME PLANET:
BISMOLL
ORIGIN: FOOD OF
BISMOLL WAS
GRADUALLY
POISONED BY
MICROBES, SO
INHABITANTS
EVOLVED ABILITY
TO EAT AND
DIGEST ANY
SUBSTANCE.
OTHER DATA:
PARENTS LIVING,
NO SPECIAL
GIRL FRIEND.



You might be asking yourself how this helps writers specifically. Well...you could...okay, this would just be awesome for everyone. I'm trying to be less selfish. Sue me.

7 Tips for Donating Old Books Without Being A Jerk



I work at two places that accept donations of used books: a library and a bookstore that serves as a front for a non-profit. Okay, the bookstore funds the non-profit. It's not a "front." But "front" sounds more crime-y and thrilling.

When spring rolls around, both places are inundated with book donations. Especially now that we've all learned the life-saving magic of throwing away a bunch of our bullshit. (Thanks a lot, Marie Kondo. I'll curse your name as I succumb to the sentient pile of dust mites that comes in with the 150th box of books from someone's attic).

Donating books is a great thing to do. Most of the time.

The thing is, it can be a big help, it can make your space more calming, but you can also create more work for an organization you set out to help. If you donate books without taking a couple steps first, you can do more harm than good. Which is sort of fun in its own way, and if you wanted to be the Joker, the "let the world burn" person of your local library, I guess this is a relatively good option.

But if you really want to tidy up your life while also benefiting a local organization, here are some steps.

Do No Harm

Most of what's here is not to be judgmental. It's about advising you how to not hurt the organization you're trying to help.

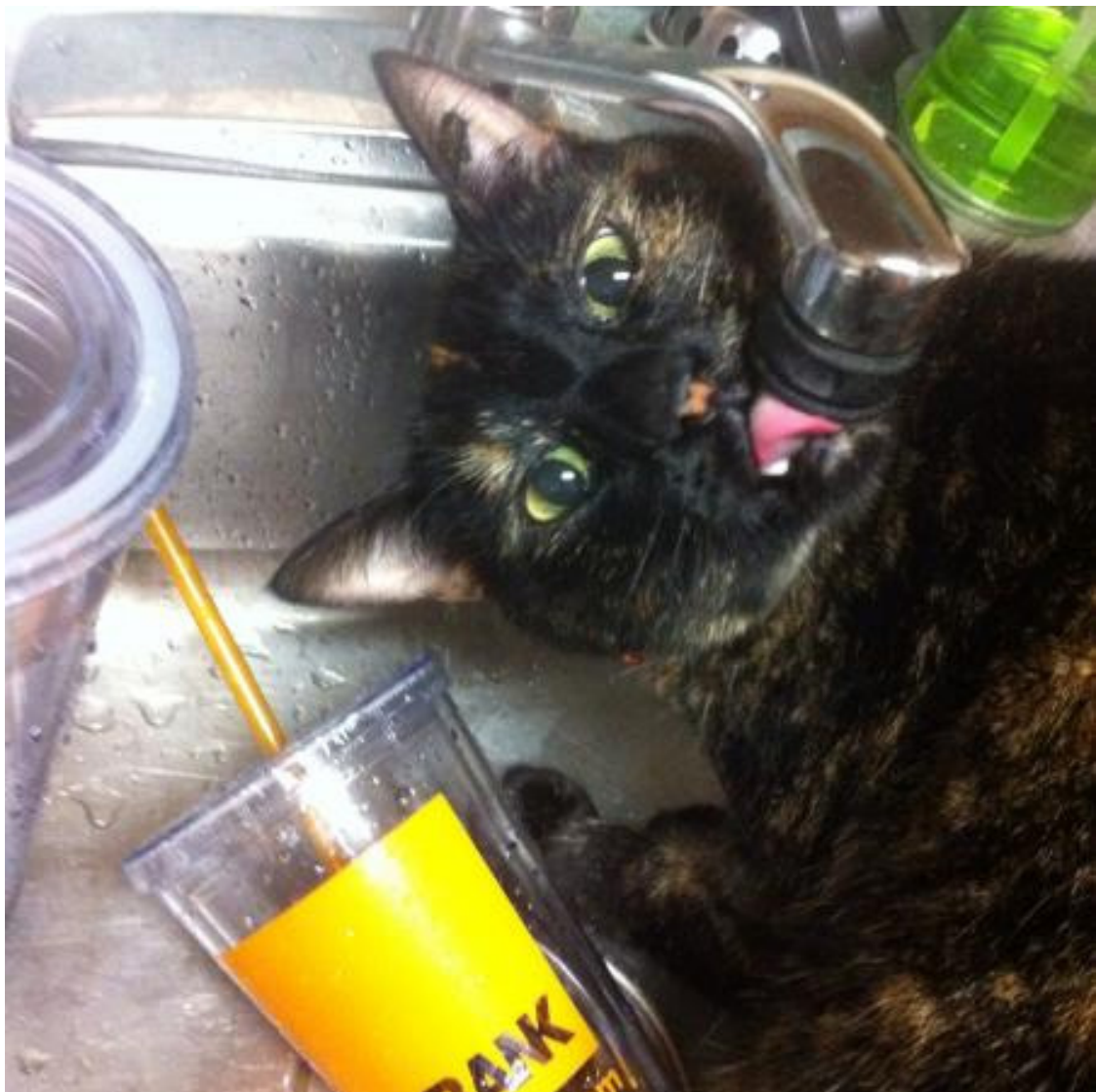
Harm comes to those who accept book donations in two primary ways.

First, books that cause physical damage to other books because they are physically damaged. On that note, let me tell you what you can go ahead and throw away right now.

Anything water-damaged. That includes anything that's moldy or has visible water damage, even if there's no mold you can see. Water is the enemy, and even old water damage can spread molds that ruin other books and even cause sickness! Do you want to be responsible for the death of the sweet old lady who works at your library? Or the death of the strapping younger gentleman who is in generally good health but also does not want to die?

Anything you've smoked around. If you smoke inside your house, no offense, no judgment, but I would prefer that you keep or dispose of your books. Your books are going to make other books smell like old cigarettes, making more of the inventory more difficult to move. If you're not sure if your books smell, ask a friend who is a good enough friend to tell you the truth.

Cat Stuff. If you have cats, and if I can tell you have cats by the smell of your books, I do not want them. I love cats. I love A cat, anyway. Here's her picture:



This is me giving her water in the sink, which she's totally not supposed to have. This is to prove to you that I love cats and it's not about me not loving cats. It's about what I can sell, and it's about what I can shelve without wrecking more inventory.

Don't Waste Someone's Time

The second way organizations are harmed by donated books is through wasted time. Donations that are not of use are a waste of an organization's time and resources. And A LOT of the donations we get are not of use.

I know what you're thinking, "But going through and figuring out what's good, that's your job!"

Which is the same line of thinking that lets people leave their empty popcorn buckets in the movie theater on the floor. Is someone paid to sweep? Sure. Does that mean you should make their job more difficult? No way! That's like hiring a dog walker and then making sure your dog doesn't walk AT ALL until the dog walker shows up, just to make sure you're getting the most for your money.

By the way, if you go on a movie date with someone, and if that date leaves their popcorn bucket on the theater floor, run. Or, play Time Crisis in the movie theater arcade, show your date what's up, and THEN run.

Start By Sorting

Look at your pile of books and decide what you don't want anymore. Make good decisions. And handle the books. Not to see if they spark joy, just to see if they spark the feeling of, "Wait, this book belongs to my kid's school library!"

Because once you donate it, it's gone.

I've seen lots of what I call "death donations" come through in my time. Donations that seem to belong to a recently deceased relative. And sometimes, when I go through those donations, I find things like photo albums. Yearbooks. Handwritten recipe cards. Things that I feel like the donor may have wanted.

Take the time to go through everything.

Things We Just Don't Want

You might come across the rare organization that takes the items I'm about to list, probably because they're going to mangle them for an art project or make little cutouts to hide pistols or nail files to help people break out of jail. If you support nail-file-based jailbreaks, more power to you. But for the most part, you can just keep this stuff:

We do not want Reader's Digest Condensed Editions.

Part of the peace that comes with getting rid of old items is the act brings you closer to the acceptance that, one day, you'll have to let go of your own life.

We do not want old encyclopedia sets. "Old" meaning more than 5 years old.

We do not want old textbooks. If your college bookstore wouldn't pay you anything for them, we don't want them either.

We do not want old *National Geographic* magazines.

We do not want your bootleg copies of audiobooks. You'd be surprised how many of these we get and how few of them are Patrick DeWitt books.

We do not want *Wild Animus*.

Ask Yourself The Right Questions

Once you've got your pile down to the stuff you want to get rid of, and now that you've removed some real problem children (OH! We don't want copies of *Problem Child* either), ask yourself the right question.

The right question is not "Can I conjure, in my mind, an imaginary person who might want these?" Sure, there is, in the world of pure imagination, a historian who is researching the way textbooks taught traditional and modern grammars in the late 20th century. Congratulations for conjuring her. You guys should date. She seems fascinating.

The right question is not "Can I get away with dropping these off?" At one of my locations, we have a regular who drops boxes of books at the front door, waves, and takes off. I have no idea why he has all these books he's unloading, but every time I wish I could catch him, stop him, and tell him that he can use our book recycling bin. Just stop leaving junk at the front door.

The right question is "Would someone pay \$5 for these?"

If you can answer yes to that last question, we're good.

Call And Ask Before You Donate

Donation policies are like speed limits. Not knowing the speed limit in a particular area doesn't get you out of a ticket.

Likewise, being purposefully unaware of the donation policies at various spots doesn't mean you shouldn't try and find out.

Some places take certain things, and some don't. Some places will take mass market paperbacks, some won't. Some haven't shoveled their share of *Problem Child* DVD's, and some have wept at the waste of plastic and non-biodegradable materials used to commit that



movie to disc.

Vessels

If you can, bringing your donations in a vessel you don't need to take back with you can be a big help. Sometimes the recipient appreciates the ability to go through the books at a later time. However, keep in mind that the above rules apply. Don't bring me a box you used to store your cat pee jars.

Great. Now I Can't Donate Anything

It's okay. Believe me, you're better off.

Figure out where you can recycle your stuff instead.

I know there's a sacredness to books for most of us, but believe me, we will be able to move forward without your copy of *Windows NT for Dummies*.

And the dirty secret here is that if you bring in the above items, they're going to be recycled anyway.

Part of the purpose behind tidying is to come to grips with the fact that some things are ephemeral. Things in your life, things about your life, and even you, friend, are ephemeral. Part of the peace that comes with getting rid of old items is the act brings you closer to the acceptance that, one day, you'll have to let go of your own life.

Don't cheapen that experience by forcing someone else to do the dirty work. If something needs to be tossed, have the guts to do the tossing yourself.

The Case For and Against Bob Dylan's Nobel Win



Maybe it's been long enough that we can talk about Bob Dylan's Nobel win with clear heads?

Before we start, I'm going to tell you this: I'm not a Bob Dylan fan. When I set out to write this, I felt one way about it. By the time I finished, I felt differently.

Perhaps you can join me. Open your mind a bit, maybe have a drink or seven, and really consider the possibilities. Let's look at the various arguments for and against Dylan's win for the Nobel Prize In Literature.

The Controversy, In Brief

In 2016, Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize In Literature. For those who don't know, Bob Dylan is primarily a songwriter, and the award was in recognition of his contributions to literature via his songwriting.

For those who didn't know Bob Dylan was a songwriter, I'm sorry you were trapped in that cave/underground bunker/cryosleep chamber/whatever, and I welcome you to the present. My number one piece of advice to you is to avoid the food known as "scones" if you're in the U.S.

Dylan's win is a controversy because other Nobel In Literature winners are fiction writers, poets, and non-fiction writers. Dylan is known as a musician.

Does Bob Dylan write? Yes. Would most, when asked who Bob Dylan is, respond, "He's a writer who..."? Probably not.

That, in brief, is the kerfuffle.

Are Songs Literature?

It's the first question that we have to answer. Are songs "literature?"

Those who say yes look to the dictionary definition of literature:

...written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit.

A definition that certainly accommodates songs. The works are written. They are of superior or lasting artistic merit (more on this later).

Pro-Dylan advocates are also quick to cite old ways of doing things, saying that old-timey poets would recite epic poems aloud without ever writing them down. This practice is at the root of literature, therefore, Bob Dylan's writings easily qualify.

There are also some compelling arguments against Dylan's songs being called literature.

Yes, the dictionary definition tells us what literature WAS. But what IS it? When we think of literature today, what do we think of?

Because the thing is, "literature" is a term that, like many others, has changed, and the version in common use is different from the traditional definition. For example, what if I told you that your vegetarian diet involved eating meat? After all, "meat" was once defined as "solid food." "Furniture" once meant "equipment, supplies, or provisions." I think if I stopped at a Subway to get "furniture" for our road trip, you'd wonder what the hell I was thinking.

As Judith Herman puts it:

People sometimes tell you you're misusing a word and cite the Latin origin as proof. Don't fall for the etymological fallacy. What a word means depends not on its origin, but on how speakers of a language understand it.

Have you gone into a record store and seen a "rock" section, an "R&B" section, and a "literature" section? If you take a literature course at a college, would you be a little surprised to pick up a stack of CD's as your texts?

If we buy into that logic, "literature" probably doesn't include songs.

There's another problem with the traditional definition as well: if lyrics are literature...what ISN'T literature?

Those who like the old-timey, strict definition of "literature" have to acknowledge that this definition also includes "leaflets and other printed matter used to advertise products or give advice." Which means a brochure about visiting Reptile Gardens in South Dakota is, in fact, literature. I feel confident in saying that most of us, even those of us who like our definitions staunch and official, are not fans of saying that the operation manual for a television is literature. Or of saying that "Did somebody say McDonald's?" is in the same category, is the same sort of thing, as Old Man And The Sea.

If literature is all of these things, the definition is almost worthless. The purpose of categorization is the useful sorting of things, and when a definition moves towards being all-encompassing, it's not all

that useful. It's how we end up arguing whether the game of darts is a sport, which is how someone ends up with a dart in their eye.

Judgment:

Here's what Dylan said about his own work:

But, like Shakespeare, I too am often occupied with the pursuit of my creative endeavors and dealing with all aspects of life's mundane matters. "Who are the best musicians for these songs?" "Am I recording in the right studio?" "Is this song in the right key?" Some things never change, even in 400 years. Not once have I ever had the time to ask myself, "Are my songs literature?"

Great. Thanks for the help, Bob.

I'm of the opinion that both sides are kind of right on this one. Yep, Dylan's work falls within most definitions of "literature," including that of the Nobel committee. BUT, the official definition of "literature" is divorced from its common meaning. So, while those who cite the definition are correct, those who were surprised about Dylan's win, from a categorization standpoint, are also correct.

No winner on this one.

Wait. Is This About High Versus Low Art?

I don't think so.

The primary argument regards the form, not the execution. I don't see a lot of people arguing that Bob Dylan sucks. I see a lot of people arguing that this is like ordering pancakes and getting waffles. We don't have to hate waffles in order to be disappointed by their arrival if what we were expecting was pancakes. Likewise, preferring pancakes doesn't mean one dislikes waffles or is questioning their value.

The argument about music being low art seems like a straw man argument to me, and an easy way to dismiss detractors. I don't see a lot of people arguing that music is less than. I see the arguments being about music being a different beast.

Judgment

This one doesn't favor Dylan. I'm sure some see Dylan's win as validation of a form, but there are lots of ways in which musicians, especially Bob Dylan, have been recognized for their work. And I don't think Dylan is in a category of people who are accused of making dumb music. This doesn't strike me as a blow in the debate over high versus low art.

We're quickly becoming a world where sweeping generalizations about high and low art are hard to make. TV shows were once pretty firmly in the low category, but that's changed. Comic books were once seen as being for kids, but *Maus* won the Pulitzer. Music has long been seen as above TV and comics, especially singer/songwriter music of the type Dylan does.

What if the Nobel committee is wrong? What if, 25 years from now, we look back on this as a bad choice?

If the Nobel committee wanted to make a point about high and low art, eh, too little, too late.

Was Dylan The Most Deserving? Who Else Was In The Running?

Lots of great writers. That's the thing. Haruki Murakami, Joyce Carol Oates, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Jon Fosse, Ko Un, and Syrian poet Adonis were all likely candidates.

Reading these names, it's hard to say that Dylan is the most deserving. It's impossible to say, really, because this is a subjective thing. I have a really tough time saying that Dylan, up against these others, is the most deserving of an award in literature. He's had a huge impact. He's inspired a lot of people. But so have these others. And if I have my choice of books with the word "chronicle" in the title, I'll take Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* over Dylan's *Chronicles* any day.

Judgment

I have to favor Dylan on this one simply because this category is totally subjective, and therefore I can't really say he doesn't deserve it. I might not be his biggest fan, but that's no more a compelling argument than some OTHER yahoo writing a column about how Joyce Carol Oates sucks.

No matter what the award, there's always going to be something that you, as a consumer, think is more deserving. Best Picture in 1993 was *Unforgiven*. Not *Jurassic Park*. Not *Schindler's List*. Not *Demolition Man*. The thing is, it's not really up to us, which brings us to...

Waitamminute. It's THEIR Damn Award!

I have to give the Nobel committee this: It's their goddamn award to do with as they wish. If they find someone they think is deserving, and if that person checks all the boxes, then what argument can be mounted, really? Because the Nobel can't be given to the commonly-acknowledged best person in literature. It's given to someone who the committee thinks is the best fit for their award in a given year. It's probably a bit arrogant of us common scumbags to say we know better who deserves the award. Indeed, I can't say I've read the works of all the likely nominees, and even those I have, I didn't experience in the context of deciding which was most deserving of an award.

I'm not one who often says, "Trust the professionals." But in this case, I kinda trust the professionals.

Judgment

This one's definitely in favor of Dylan. It's their award, they gave it to the person they thought deserved it.

Waitamminute. IS It Their Damn Award?

In the late 1970's, one of the guidelines added to the Nobel In Literature was bringing attention to unknown masters:

A growing number within the Academy wanted to call attention to important but unnoticed writers and literatures, thus giving the world audience masterpieces they would otherwise miss, and at the

same time, giving an important writer due attention.

This portion is a bit damning when applied to Dylan, or most musicians of note for that matter.

The issue here is that we've taken an award usually reserved for writers and given it to a well-known musician, which means the committee has fallen short when it comes to highlighting an unknown artist.

Musicians are just better known than writers. Indeed, if I named the winners of the Grammy for Album of the Year from the last ten years, I'd be willing to bet most, if not all of the names would be quite familiar to just about everybody. But what about the name Tomas Tranströmer? J.M.G. Le Clézio? Are these names anywhere near the level of Adele? Beyoncé? Taylor Swift?

Bob Dylan is a known quantity to most. Although it's unusual for him to win this award, it's highly unlikely that anyone has been introduced to Dylan as a result of his win. Conversely, when it comes to Svetlana Alexievich, this award will make a difference.

When you've got one or two potential spotlights in the world of books, it seems wasteful to point one at the already well-lit Dylan.

Judgment

On this one, I go against Dylan. It's not the responsibility of the Nobel Prize to to be the memory for the world of literature, making sure nothing important falls through the cracks. Or, at least, it wasn't until they put that standard on themselves.

The committee fell a little short of their own ideals on this one, and that's gotta go against Dylan.

Is Dylan's Writing All That Good?

In college I had a poetry professor who had us do an assignment: take a song you like, take the lyrics, and break them up into lines and stanzas so they look like poems.

This assignment opened my eyes to something: lots of the power in songs comes from their musical qualities.

Exposed, there naked on the page, the lyrics of some of my favorites were not nearly as strong. You could see how often word choice was sacrificed in the name of rhyme. How few songs contain a narrative, really.

A lot of songs looked to me like the worst of SNL sketches: a premise stated over and over again as opposed to a series of expansions on a premise.

I checked Dylan's *The Lyrics 1961-2012* out from the library, and I flipped through it.

A lot of songs looked to me like the worst of SNL sketches: a premise stated over and over again as opposed to a series of expansions on

Some of the stuff was pretty good:

*Does it take much of a man to see his whole life go down
To look up on the world from a hole in the ground
To wait for your future like a horse that's gone lame
To lie in the gutter and die with no name?*

And some of it...if a poetry student brought this to me, I would suggest a bit of workshopping:

*I went into a restaurant
Lookin' for the cook
I told them I was the editor
Of a famous etiquette book
The waitress he was handsome
He wore a powder blue cape
I ordered some suzette, I said
"Could you please make that crepe"*

When I read the lyrics to a lot of these songs, I felt there was something missing when their performance was removed.

Indeed, critic Michiko Kakutani felt the same way on reading Dylan's lyrics:

Simply reading a song, we miss the ways in which the words interact with the music—how, say, the sardonic lyrics to many of the songs on "Highway 61 Revisited" counterpoint the upbeat, even exuberant tracks—and we are deprived, as well, of the point of view supplied by Mr. Dylan's raw, insistent inflections and distinctive phrasings. Numbers like "Lay, Lady, Lay," "Blowin' in the Wind" and even "Like a Rolling Stone" feel considerably more trite as prose poems than as songs, and many of Mr. Dylan's weaker efforts — "New Pony," say, or "Emotionally Yours"—simply collapse into pretentious posturing when separated from their propulsive tracks, which at least helped to endow them with a modicum of conviction on the records.

All of this leaves this writer asking the question, can a song really be separated from the music? Once you've heard "Blowin' In The Wind" can you read the lyrics without having the meter, the rhythm, and the instrumentation creep in? Can you really separate the performance from the content?

How can we evaluate Dylan's work as written words when this separation is so difficult?

Judgment

I've set myself up to judge the work of Bob Dylan here, thumbs up or thumbs down. Smart, Pete. Real smart.

Here's what I'll say: I think the judgment by the committee was a lie. If I honestly believed that anyone on the committee had the experience of reading Dylan's work without hearing the songs, if I thought that there was any way in hell the committee wasn't remembering the rhythm and sonic qualities of the work while they were reading through the lyrics, I'd feel differently.

What I want to say is that I think it's difficult, if not impossible, to separate Dylan's words from his

music. Once you've rung that bell, you can't unring it. Once you've heard the song, it becomes impossible to simply read it.

I know someone who works on an awards committee for books, and they are asked to read everything, not to do audiobooks, because an audiobook can be a very different experience depending on the narrator and production quality. In order to judge books equally, one should experience them the same way.

And so, I feel the same way about literature. Apples to apples comparison involves judging them the same way. Which, in this case, seems impossible.

I'm going thumbs-down on this one. Not because I think Dylan's work is bad. Because I think it's got the unfair advantage of having an inseparable performance component. It's impossible to see Dylan's work as words on a page. While it's possible to say Dylan's songs are very good, I don't think it's possible, at this point, to say whether his writing is good when separated from the music.

Have We Opened A Door Best Left Closed?

There's an argument as to whether opening the door to music is a good decision, in general. Is Smashmouth the next Nobel winner? How about Stallone for the *Rocky* screenplay? Where does it end?

However, having just made the slippery slope argument, I can't say I find it too compelling. Sure, it could happen. But it won't. I don't think we've seen the last novelist win the Nobel prize for literature. I honestly don't believe the prize will now be dominated by songwriters.



And the other thing is, I don't know that opening the field is a bad thing. Indeed, I think if someone asked about the idea of widening the field in a general sense, we'd all be cool with it. If someone said, "Would you be in favor of the Nobel committee opening the field of Literature in an effort to increase the pool of potential winners in some interesting ways?" I think a lot of people would be in favor of that.

Judgment

Pro Bobby. The slippery slope isn't as slippery as we think in most cases. I have a tough time imagining we'll look back on this decision and say, "And that's the precedent that allowed Kim Kardashian to win a Nobel Prize In Literature."

Dylan Doesn't Deserve It Because He Doesn't Give A Shit

When the win was announced, it took Dylan a bit longer than normal to respond. We made a big deal out of this. We live in a world where a non-response to a world event by a celebrity can be interpreted as a negative thing, and Dylan's slow public reaction was taken as another sign of his arrogance. But, his speech suggests that he wasn't making a statement through not making a statement. He was simply shocked. Which is understandable. I think it's fair to say most of the world, whether they agreed with the announcement or not, was quite shocked.

And, to my reckoning, there's nothing that requires a Nobel winner to be a nice guy. It's not really

about that.

Dylan has since said he's planning to officially accept the award, and he will fulfill the requirement of providing a lecture, even if he does so by tape. Which sounds like another dick move, but this is apparently quite common and was the way Alice Munro did it in 2013. You can call it a dick move, and thereby say Alice Munro also made a dick move, but I'm not going there.

Perhaps we were a little hard on Dylan, a usually-standoffish person, for being exactly who he is.

Judgment

I'm in Dylan's corner on this one. As someone who didn't campaign for the award, he owes us nothing.

Should Large Impact Be A Deciding Factor?

There's a phrase that comes up over and over again when you read up on the way the Nobel committees make decisions: the greatest benefit to mankind.

There are a couple ways of interpreting this. One is to say that the work is of the highest quality and has really changed the lives of those touched by it. The other is to say that the work has made the largest impact on the most people. We could say that eye transplants have provided the greatest benefit to mankind, taking those who can't see and allowing them to. But we could also say that eyeglasses, which have smaller impact case-by-case, have made a much bigger dent in the world.

If I look at the potential nominees, I have to admit that Bob Dylan has probably made the largest world impact. But if impact or quantity is so important, then the "greatest" album every year was the one that the most people bought. Or the "greatest" song of the year would be the one most people heard, which means the best song of 2010 was Katy Perry's "California Gurls."

Wait, sorry. That's not the greatest song of 2010. It's the greatest piece of literature from 2010.

The greatest movies of 2010, in this case, include Alice in Wonderland and Shrek Forever After. In fact, 7 of the top 10 greatest films that year were for children.

If one views "greatest" in a quantitative way, we get some interesting results when we look at the arts.

However, "greatest benefit" may be a qualitative thing, in which case Dylan is tougher to argue for.

*I was wounded early,
and early I learned
that wounds made me.*

Lines from Adonis, one of the other likely candidates. How about some Murakami?

*Why do people have to be this lonely? What's the point of it all? Millions of people
in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating
themselves. Why? Was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness?*

While less widespread, the work of these authors has an undeniable quality and potential impact. I think one can make a very compelling argument for the experience of reading a novel being of deeper, more lasting impact than hearing a song on the radio.

Judgment

Again, I have to go with Dylan.

The thing is, if we look at it both ways, "greatest benefit" being quantitative OR qualitative, Dylan can potentially win either way. While I can argue that Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a writer of greater quality, I can't mount as strong a quantitative argument for him. While I can argue that Adonis' work is the work of a Syrian poet and therefore an important voice in the context of current events, I can't argue that he's touched the same number of people as Dylan.

The qualitative argument will always be there, and it's completely subjective and winnable by any writer. The quantitative argument is a bit simpler, and I'm afraid there's only one outcome in this case.

Is This Genuine, Or Is This Drumming Up Interest?

I have to say, it's the first time in a long time that I've seen this many people care this much about the winner of the Nobel In Literature, a likelihood of which I'm certain the committee was aware when they made their choice.

It's not hard to imagine the committee making this decision as a way of increasing interest in the Nobel In Literature. The question before us today, is that a problem?

While some might see this as naked advertisement, I can see how it's a benefit. Next year's award will be watched more carefully. Candidates and likely winners will be examined more closely. Everyone will go in with the feeling that the unexpected could happen.

Which means that the winner will get a little more ink and a little more notice. Which is part of the point. If next year's winner is relatively unknown, Bob Dylan winning this year will only help. Sure, the stories will be half about Dylan winning the previous year, but we'll still be a bit more interested.

Judgment

Hate to say it, but Bob Dylan takes this one. I would love to fault the committee for going this route, but I have to admit I haven't really put a lot of thought into the Nobel up to now. If it's a dastardly plan, it succeeded.

But What If We're Wrong?

After reading Chuck Klosterman's book *But What If We're Wrong*, whenever a situation arises, I like to ask myself, "What if we ARE wrong?"

What if the Nobel committee is wrong? What if, 25 years from now, we look back on this as a bad choice? Is it a huge deal?

Eh. Not really. Was Patrick White the “right” choice in 1973? I don’t know, and the more I look it over, I have to admit that I don’t particularly care. As I look through the list of past winners, I have to be honest and say that all the names, except for Dylan, fall into one of two categories: “Makes sense” and “Never heard of ‘em.” Dylan is the ONLY name that falls into a third category for me, a contested entry. Which makes me feel like the decision seems a lot more important now than it actually is, in reality.

Judgment

Another one for Dylan. Even if it’s wrong in retrospect, we’ll get by.

Final Judgment



I told you at the beginning that I’m not a Dylan fan. I’m still not. I don’t know what to say about it. Fight me?

I have to admit that my lack of love for Dylan probably has more to do with my feelings on his Nobel win than his work does. My personal taste was more offended than anything, and I was doing things backwards. I don’t care for Dylan’s stuff, and there must be a reason. A calculable, measurable reason. I love Murakami, I don’t love Dylan, therefore Dylan shouldn’t win something over Murakami, especially in the realm of literature.

It’s a silly way to think about things.

When you get down to it, Dylan’s made an undeniable impact on the world. He’s inspired a lot of people, writers included. Holy hell, how many books begin with a Dylan epigraph? How many writers, artists, and regular folks have been inspired and impacted by a Bob Dylan song here and there?

Immeasurable.

There's a decent case against giving the award to a musician. But that case won't really prove itself for another 20 years or so as most of the arguments are based on what the decision means for the future of the award and awards like it, and some of the bigger problems have to do with whether some of the snubbed authors will have lasting impact regardless of whether or not they win a Nobel. All of which remains to be seen.

While there's a decent case against giving the award to a musician, there's not as good a case against giving the award to Bob Dylan. When we get specific, it's different. Bob Dylan is not typical of the person we think of as a hit-making musician. He's written a massive amount of good stuff.

For now, I have to concede that I'm on Dylan's side. But I sure as shit hope to see Joyce Carol Oates nominated for a Grammy next year.

Comics And Comics Movies Need Good Villains



I'm going to spell out the problem here, right up top, so we can spend most of this column talking about the solutions.

Comic books and comic book movies are filled with an ever-growing roster of great heroes. What hasn't grown proportionally is the number and quality of the villains.

Don't believe me?

If we look at some of the recent-ish comic movies, they have a lot of utterly forgettable villains who amount to "some asshole."

Guardians of the Galaxy: Some asshole wants to blow up a whole planet because of a treaty and something something.

Thor: The Dark World: Some asshole wants to make the Earth all red and dusty because where he's from it's all red and dusty and it sucks.

Batman V. Superman: Some asshole wants Batman to fight Superman because...no wait, he wants to make a Doomsday out of a corpse and his blood because...because.

Doctor Strange: Some asshole wants to come and destroy the Earth because it's just sort of his jam.

Suicide Squad: Some asshole wants to end the human race because she's mad at some people for imprisoning her or something.

What all of these villains have in common is they're just "some asshole." They don't have a lot of personality, they don't have a lot of logic or emotion to them. They just aren't interesting to watch.

I have to admit, in most of these movies, I got swept up in something else. The effects, what the good guys were doing, a cape that was like the magic carpet from *Aladdin*, Kat Dennings. Something came up and I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to the villains. It wasn't until later, on the way home, that I thought, "Wait. What?"

Some folks will tell you it's a story problem. Not like a Wayside School story problem where they try to trick you into math, a problem with the way the story is written.

But I say nay. I say the problem isn't the story, it's the villains.

Let's talk about what good comic book villains are and why they're needed.

A Good Villain Is Not 2-Dimensional

I have two ways to test the 3-dimensionality of comic book villains.

The first one is about the emotional dimension, and it's in the form of a question: Is there some part of me that understands the villain, as a person?

If the answer is yes, then there's potential in the villain.

Mr. Freeze is a good example of this, when he's done well. Mr. Freeze doesn't particularly want to fight Batman. He doesn't want to amass wealth. He wants to cure his wife. This means he often ends up doing some bad shit in order to amass the needed resources, but it's all in service of his goal. That makes sense. It's just a more exciting version of stealing bread to feed your family.

Here's the other test, more about the visuals: The Silhouette Test.

Really distinct comic book characters are recognizable in silhouette.

Let's look at the villain from some of the movies. Travolta from *Punisher* in silhouette. And that dude from *Ghost Rider*. And Bullseye from the *Daredevil* movie.



Pretty much just some asshole.

The movies want to be gritty and real, and they forego wilder costumes for reality. But that doesn't mean your character has to be so bland as to be mistaken for a weather pattern (lookin' at you, Galactus).

The silhouette can include posture too. A well-done Spider-Man almost never stands around. He's crouched somewhere, on the wall, on the ceiling.

Let's look at Heath Ledger's Joker.



Look at the posture. His chin was often tucked into his chest. His head was almost always tilted to one side or the other. Just the way he carried his body made him different.

Like I said, lots of good characters break the rules. But if your character doesn't pass either of these two tests, your movie might be in 3D, but your character probably isn't.

We Love A Villain With Charisma

Loki.

If you traveled back in time to 2010, before Marvel's *Thor*, and if you asked them who the Avengers should fight in their first movie, you'd have heard Ultron, maybe Thanos. Kang? Doctor Doom?

After *Thor* came out, the choice of Loki was a slam dunk.

Tom Hiddleston's performance took a fairly middling villain (Ah! Opinions!) and made him into a true adversary, despite the fact that a lot of the things I don't like about Marvel villains are true about Loki as well. His plans aren't super clear, his reasons aren't super clear. He's just so damn watchable! He's

smug, he's sure of himself, and he's the smartest person in the room. He personifies these villainous terms that nobody uses in real life, stuff like "diabolical" and "dastardly."

Sometimes I think filmmakers are afraid that a charismatic villain will steal the show. It almost feels like there's someone saying, "No, this movie is called *Captain America*, not *The Red Skull: Red And Loving It*. Not *The Red Skull: Red Head Redemption*. Not anything with the Red Skull, so don't make him all that interesting, please."

The Red Skull: Skullvengeance. Okay, that's enough.

Go ahead and make the villain more charismatic than the hero. If it turns out that you did so in error, eh, you've got a *Dark Knight* on your hands. Worse things have happened. Just, y'know, try not to wipe out your villain until the end of the movie. When the Joker leaves *Dark Knight*, that's when I start folding laundry. Sorry, Two-Face.

A Good Villain Wants Something

No, blowing up the universe doesn't count.

No, turning our dimension into some crappy, windswept, red-tinged dimension doesn't count.

No, destroying Gotham via the water supply because...you feel like folks there are too big for their britches, that's not really a thing.

A good villain wants an outcome. Something beyond the horizon of today's goal.

The important thing here is the sequence. A good villain wants something, and that's what makes them a villain. Not the other way around. A person wants something, does some bad stuff to get it, and becomes a villain. That's a story. Having someone who does bad stuff because they're bad, that's not so much a tale as old as time.

The Villain Needs To Be Threatening To The Hero In Some Way

This can take a few forms. One is obvious, the physical threat.

This is why it works when *Captain America* and *Iron Man* fight each other. You honestly can't say which character will win. They are both legitimate physical threats, and they're on a similar level.

There's also the other kind of threat, the threat of power. Which we might find in someone like *Lex Luthor*. *Luthor* obviously can't defeat *Superman* in a fistfight, but he can create a situation in which *Superman* may be forced to cross a line he doesn't want to cross. *Luthor* is smarter than *Superman*, and he's actively using his intelligence to hurt *Superman* in any way he can.

Was it all that exciting to watch Superman fight the physically-equal but mindless Doomsday? Was it satisfying in any way?

The best villains are probably a bit of both physical and emotional threat. The worst villains are only one of these two things, set to the extreme.

In *Batman V. Superman*, we had a Lex Luthor that was not physically threatening in the slightest. He just wasn't imposing at all. Not even to me, and I'm threatened by trees that make scary shadows at night.

Likewise, was it all that exciting to watch Superman fight the physically-equal but mindless Doomsday? Was it satisfying in any way?

Both villains were ends of the spectrum. Lex was not physically threatening in the least, Doomsday posed no threat beyond the physical. Two villains defeated, and the outcome just wasn't satisfying.

Good Villains Make Good Use Of Talent

Christopher Eccleston. Mads Mikkelsen. Lee Pace.

Why would you bother hiring Mads to be in your movie only to make him a lifeless zombie? It seems like such a waste of a genuine talent.

If you're making a movie and wondering whether it was a good investment to pay a good actor to do almost nothing, alarm bells should be going off. If an actor is going to waste and is the main villain in a movie, you can almost bet that villain isn't all that interesting.

A Good Villain Isn't Just Opposite A Hero

A good comic book villain doesn't just exist to be the opposite of a hero. A good villain seems to be someone who would exist regardless of the hero's existence.

Let's look at Magneto and Professor X. The two are not opposites. It's not like Magneto has super strong legs or something. It's not like Professor X manipulates all plastic objects. It's not like Magneto has awesome hair and Professor X is bald.

Wait. Just kidding on that last one.



Magneto and Professor X aren't simple opposites. They want the same thing. They want an end to the struggle between mutants and humans. The difference is one seeks peace while the other seeks dominance.

In reality, they're more the same than they are different. They just go about it in very different ways, which puts them at odds.

It's what turns a hero/villain conflict into something more meaningful than a constant, "Nuh-uh," "Yes-huh!"

A Good Villain Narratively Exposes The Hero's Weakness

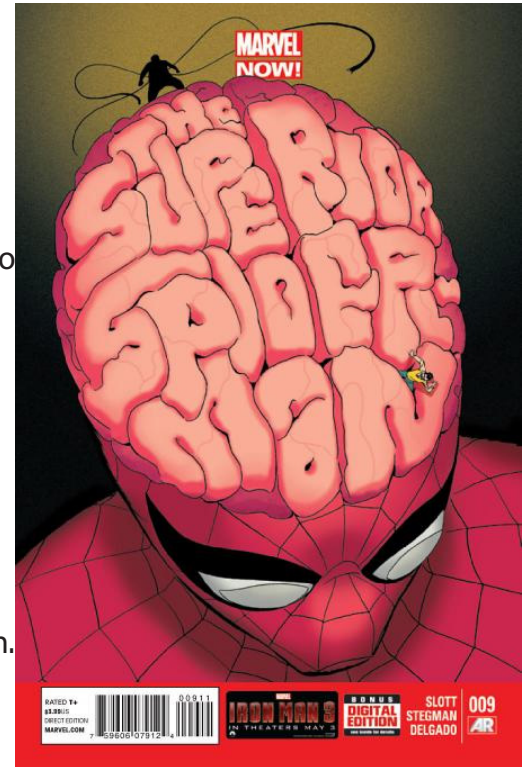
The perfect example of this is the *Superior Spider-Man* series.

The basics: Spider-Man and Dr. Octopus do a body swap. Let's not worry about how that all works for the moment.

When Dr. Octopus takes over Peter Parker's body, you'd expect him to just wreck everything. But he doesn't. Instead, he wants to live life as Peter Parker. And as Spider-Man.

In the early stages of the transformation, Dr. Octopus proves himself to be the titular Superior Spider-Man. He shows that Peter Parker's been relying on his superpowers, punching his way out of bad situations, when he should have spent a little more time thinking through his crimefighting, using his mind to create better solutions. He shows how ridiculous it is for Parker to carry on romances that inevitably end in tragedy. He makes Peter Parker, who's supposed to be very smart, look like a moron.

The story is less about a body swap, more about highlighting and eliminating Peter Parker's weaknesses as Spider-Man, one by one.



A Good Villain Attacks A Character's Strengths

In *The Fighter's Mind* by Sam Sheridan, Sheridan exposes wisdom from some of the world's best fighters. One of the pieces of wisdom I'll never forget is the idea of attacking a fighter not by exploiting their weakness, but by defeating them in their area of strength. The idea being, if you can defeat an opponent in whatever realm they think they shine, their confidence will be blown. To be defeated by a great puncher isn't as big a deal if you've never been a strong puncher yourself, but to be defeated by a grappler when grappling is your thing, that's a whole different story.

Bad villains come at the hero's weakness. For example, Mr. Mxyzptlk uses magic, which Superman can't defeat. And so, every time we get the same story. There's a sequence of Mr. Mxyzptlk breaking stuff and Superman fixing it, then Superman tricks the guy into saying his own name backwards and he disappears.

Is that really more exciting than this:



My Favorite Good Villain Done Right

If I had to go back in recent-ish history and pick one comic movie villain, it's an easy pick.

J. Jonah Jameson as played by J.K. Simmons.

Probably more antagonist than villain, Jameson shows us that being a good opponent for a superhero isn't about having cool powers or a rad costume.

Sure, there's been many a contrived reason for Jameson to hate Spider-Man over the years. Most of it nonsense. But as early as *Amazing Spider-Man issue #10*, we got this:



This is an overly simplified version of what's going on, definitely not screen-ready. But isn't this a lot more interesting than, "I'm going to blow up the Earth"? Doesn't it make a lot of sense? And doesn't it do a good job of showing the different paths taken by people in power? You can try to live up to greatness, or you can try to bring it down so that the bar is lowered for everyone.

And because it gives Jameson places to go, he remains an interesting character. He can change.



He's a rare villain who's genuinely funny. The comic relief of his ridiculousness combined with his being a prick is a great and rare combo.

And through newer titles like *Silk*, we can see Jameson as not just Spider-Man's enemy. He's also a journalist. And sometimes he's even a good boss.



More than anything, his dastardly, diabolical plans are in line with his skills, abilities, and scope. He's not trying to blow up the world. He's just occasionally creating some weird super robot to beat the crap out of a Spider-Man.

This, people, is a good villain. There's room for him to change. He's charismatic as hell. He wants something (money). He's threatening to the hero, at least in secret identity form. He exposes the hero's weakness (the hero's inability to be a top-tier, non-menace hero and/or doing what's best for him versus doing what's right). And it's super satisfying when Spider-Man takes him down a peg.

J. Jonah Jameson. The World's Greatest Supervillain. You heard it here.

100 Bits Of Advice Gleaned From Writing 100 LitReactor Columns



By the time you read this I'll have over 100 LitReactor columns under my belt.

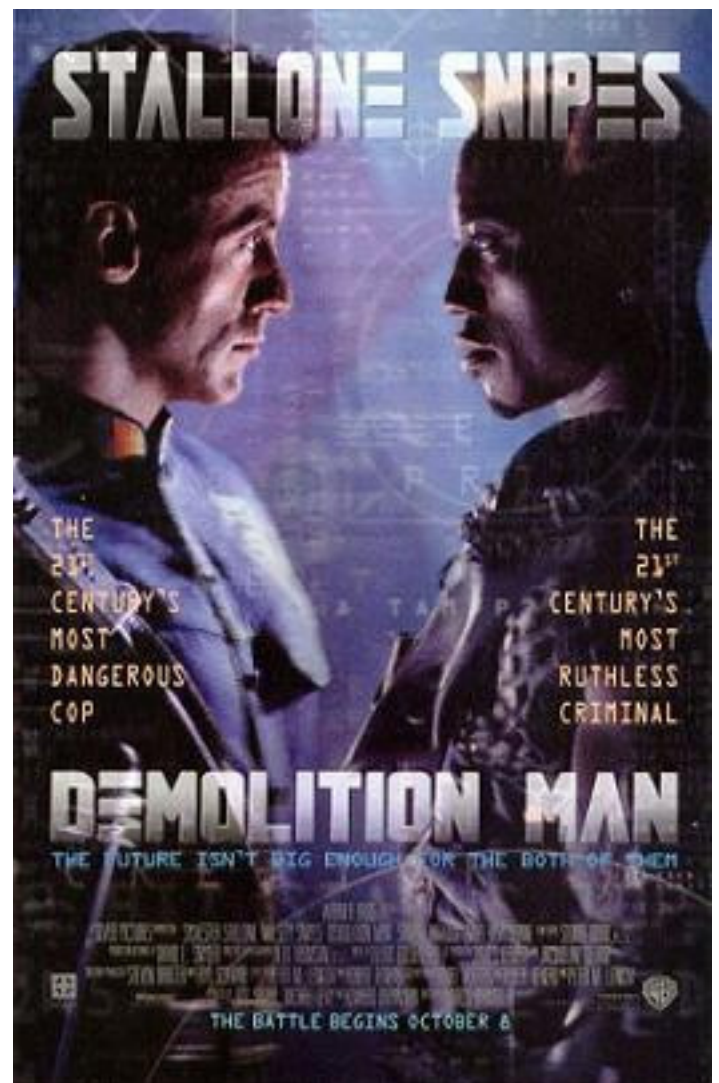
There have been some successes, some failures, and a whole lot to learn for someone new to the freelance writing game. Some of the lessons are about writing, pitching column ideas, productivity, and a good portion are about Demolition Man.

Let me narrow it down to the 100 most important things. Which are in a particular order: the order in which they came to me.

1. tl;dr is the realest shit ever.
2. Don't rail against tl;dr. Time is in short supply for most folks. Whatever you're writing, make it worth someone's time.
3. Like all rules, tl;dr is good to keep in mind, but it's not the end-all, be-all. If you're tackling something longer, go longer.
4. Make introductions as short as possible. By the time most people hit your column online, they have an idea what they're getting. That's what brought them to your column. Get on with it already.
5. Good titles mean you can keep the intro really short.

6. There's an important difference between creating an enticing title and making clickbait. The difference is in whether the article fulfills the promise of the title.
7. Clickbait titles also tell the reader how to feel, not what you're going to provide.
8. Titles and one-line descriptions are the hardest parts. Do those last.
9. Making a list of "Best [blanks] Of All Time" is the fastest route to hearing, "No, asshole! What about X!"
10. Every writer sort of hates social media, sort of feels like they need it for promotion, sort of has a guilty enjoyment of it. It's a confusing world.
11. It's going to be a column you never expected that gets you the most notice. Which means you'd better do a good job on all of them.
12. Neil Gaiman is right with his advice for freelancers: be on time, do good work, and be liked.
13. Neil Gaiman is also right in that you only really need to do two of those things to get by.
14. If I was ranking them, to get a new gig, I'd go 1.Be Liked, 2.Do Good Work, 3.Be On Time.
15. If I was ranking them, to keep an existing gig, it'd be 1.Be On Time, 2. Do Good Work, 3.Be Liked.
16. At my day job we deal with potential book bans. One of the questions you're supposed to ask someone who's looking to ban a book is whether they've read the entirety of the material. This is also a great thing to ask anyone who has a problem with your work.
17. People you haven't spoken to in decades will read your stuff. Be prepared for that.
18. Learn to take a compliment. They come sometimes, and taking them well will help you remember compliments better.
19. There's something very rewarding about connecting two disparate worlds, like bodybuilding and writing. It gets your work into a new realm.
20. And it brings atypical people (bodybuilders who write) out of the woodwork.
21. And it makes those people feel less alone.
22. There's an entire book out there in finding out what the deal with *Wild Animus* is. Or maybe a *Best Worst Movie* sort of documentary.
23. In fact, I'm going to do that. Forget I said it.
24. You are going to lose a column here and there. You'll close a tab, you'll delete a file. It'll happen. Be a grownup about it.
25. Losing a column can be great. You'll only remember the absolute best stuff when you start over.

26. When every fifth column you write can be about poop, you've found the right place to write.
27. Making a little money for writing is REALLY different from making no money for writing.
28. People who like your stuff will "offer" you the chance to write for their site for free. There is no such thing as exposure equaling pay. Do you hear me, HuffPo? This is a much-debated thing, but I'm telling you, you are being exploited when you let someone take your work for free.
29. By that same token, don't shit on writers who work for free. We've all done it, we've all been in a place where we didn't have other options. It's not the fault of writers.
30. All that said, doing work for yourself for free can be better than working for someone else for pay.
31. When you're doing some freelance writing, ask about your rights to reprint or republish your work at a later date.
32. Keep copies of your stuff. If you work for a site that goes under, you might want that material.
33. If you think *Ms. Marvel* is like a 7 out of 10, just keep your mouth shut. It's not worth it.
34. Lots of people read articles to confirm what they already believe. Lots of people read articles to get mad at what someone else believes. A very small number of people read to challenge their own beliefs, to ask themselves a question, or to explore something they're not sure about. These are the people you're writing for. Never forget that.
35. Find a running joke for yourself. Squeezing a *Demolition Man* reference into a column is a great motivator.
36. In all seriousness, Stallone is a personal hero of mine. People make fun of that dude. They say he's a moron. He wrote *Rocky*. We should all be so stupid.
37. Stallone turned down a huge offer for the *Rocky* script because he wasn't going to be allowed to play the role of Rocky Balboa. He hit big by first doing something great, then believing in that thing's greatness.
38. No matter how weird you might pride yourself in being, Max Booth's shit is way weirder.
39. Don't get into arguments about the right to have your own opinion. It's not about rights. It's



just that it's generally okay to have your own opinion.

40. Want to get your writing done? Take your social media off your phone. That's probably the easiest thing you can do to reclaim a good half hour of every day.

41. You will never, ever win a Twitter argument no matter how right you are, and it's a waste of your time to try.

42. When someone shits on your work by hitting the part you're most proud of (sense of humor, grammar, etc.), those ones will hurt.

43. Keep track of all your column ideas in ONE PLACE. Keeping track of the ideas you have is almost as important as writing them.

44. The ideas you were most excited about pitching will be the ones you most often regret pitching. I don't know why it works this way, but it totally does.

45. Keep track of the ideas that don't make it through. They're not always bad ideas. Sometimes it's just the wrong place or the wrong time.

46. Cut a paragraph that makes a good point before you cut a paragraph that has a great joke. You can make all the great points in the world, but a great joke will help people actually finish reading.

47. Learning a lesson about writing and applying the lesson are two very, very different things.

48. If you're going to start writing as a gig, you need to sit down your loved ones and explain that this is work. It's not just a hobby. It's a job. There will be times you need to sacrifice other things to get it done.

49. Jeff Garlin gives some of the best artistic advice:

Take what you do seriously, but don't take yourself seriously.

50. When you start to figure out the difference between taking what you do seriously and taking yourself seriously, you'll be better off.

51. That said, there will always be those who don't understand this separation and think you're a clown.

52. Remember, if you're writing for Outlet A, when you start writing for Outlet B, you're starting from scratch. Outlet B doesn't give a damn about the good rep you built with Outlet A. You can't get away with as much nonsense right off.

53. If I could do it all over again, I'd make my author bio really, really short. Maybe two lines.

54. Because a good bio shouldn't be about you. It should be about what you make.

55. My favorite author bio is Chip Zdarsky's Amazon bio:

Straight up? I've never been scared of spiders. You come at me with a rubber spider

and I'll just be, like, "so what."

It tells me nothing about him and everything about the stuff he makes.

56. Everything on Pinterest is 1000 times harder than it appears.

57. Sometimes you'll write something deeply personal and it'll seem like nobody heard it.

58. Sometimes you'll write something deeply personal and it'll work out. Just depends.

59. The point being, don't write something deeply personal if you're concerned with being heard. Just write the thing. There are no guarantees other than the guarantee that if you don't write it, no one will read it.

60. Revisiting stuff you loved as a kid is almost always a disappointing experience.

61. There's a rumor about Guillermo del Toro doing something completely fucking awesome like every 3 months. Almost none of these things will happen.

62. All writing software is pretty much the same. Which is to say, you will get out exactly what you put in.

63. "First thought, best thought" is the biggest crock for a columnist. Proof your shit. Rewrite. Think twice. Think five times.

64. When you're starting out with a new outlet, saying Yes is the way to go. Even if something sounds a little out there or not exactly suited to your interests, screw it. Say yes.

65. You'll get better column ideas if you leave the house. When someone suggests you come along and do something that's not up your alley, consider doing it just for the sake of getting out of the house.

66. Deadlines that are enforced by someone else will help you grow as a writer.

67. I've never started a column and then backed out because it wasn't going well. Plowing through and writing something difficult will give you tools to use when you hit the same wall again. Which you will.

68. Sometimes you'll have an idea that'll cost you a couple bucks. Go for it. Do it. Do a bunch of these and then decide if they're generally worth your while.

69. You won't miss those few dollars months later.

70. In fact, set aside a couple bucks every month for a "column supplies" fund. If you don't use it, just buy drugs!

71. If you want to save money, learn to cook.

72. You want to save money. The less money you need, the more time you can spend working on stuff you like.

73. There's a lot of debate about writing as a profession versus having a day job. I think both things and any mixture of both works. What you really want is to be in a position to say No to anything that you don't want to do, whether it be in your day job or writing gigs. Being able to say No, that's the goal.

74. Take the time to set up an email for yourself through your own site (pd@peterderk.com, for instance). Everyone will be fooled into thinking you've got your shit together.

75. A remembrance column about someone recently deceased does not need to bring up their problematic aspects. Someone's death is a great time to apply the rule about saying something nice or saying nothing.



76. A column never turns out worse when you write it by hand first.

77. If you're going to write something, read things in that style. If you're going to be a columnist, find a few columnists you like online and keep up with them through whatever they do.

78. Don't forget to read those other columnists AS a columnist. Don't finish and say, "I liked that." Find out what you liked about it, how the writer accomplished their goal, and figure out how to apply all that to your own work.

79. When you don't get a gig somewhere, check out who they DO hire. See what it is about their work that made them the better choice. Learn something.

80. The second you start writing freelance, keep track of your stuff in a CV format. You'll be glad you did.

81. Keep track of columns that really generate a lot of hits, or columns that turn out really great. You'll need these when you're making other pitches, and it's a lot easier if you've got these ready in your back pocket.
82. Don't ever, ever, ever, ever think about your pay as a writer in terms of dollars per hour. You'll just get depressed about how many hours you'll have to work to buy a revolver.
83. I don't give a damn what your list is, books or authors or whatever, you need a non-white, non-dude person on there. If the lineup is all white men, that will become the most important thing about your list.
84. Try to work it out so you can leave your computer at home when you go on vacation. The hassle of hacking out a column early is way easier to manage than the hassle of carrying a laptop through the airport. Twice.
85. Also, if you're visiting someone, they probably have a computer you can use.
86. You don't have to write exclusively about things nobody's written about before. When you're covering an oft-covered topic just make sure you bring something new to the table.
87. On that note, don't avoid reading articles about topics similar to yours. Just because you don't KNOW that what you're working on has already been written doesn't mean others who read won't know.
88. Give yourself a break on your Work In Progress when you spend a couple hours on a column.
89. If you don't like your column, nobody will.
90. If you do like it, that's still not a guarantee that anyone else will give a hot damn.
91. In fact, whether or not you like your own work might be the most important thing. There's only one person you can guarantee pleasing: you.
92. Transcribing an interview is probably the most tedious, difficult thing you'll end up doing.
93. Plus, if someone is willing to do an interview via email, they will "sound" more the way they want to.
94. It's tired, old advice. Read your stuff aloud. You'll catch a hell of a lot more mistakes.
95. The Ivy Lee Method is the only productivity method I've found successful. It does the most difficult things: maintains focus, creates hierarchy, and it takes no time to start using it. Plus, no shit to buy.
96. After writing a couple columns about it, I'm 100% convinced that the perfect gift for writers is something unrelated to their writing.
97. It wasn't that long ago that typing in a coffee shop was a show-y, weird thing to do. Now, you're almost a throwback if you're on a laptop in a coffee shop and using a word processor.

98. If I'm pitching to an editor, I try and do it with the same ideal that I do when recommending books to someone. I'll pitch one column that I think is very closely aligned with things they like, one that shares a mix of similarities and differences, and one that seems totally left field but my gut likes it.
99. If you're making a debate of some kind into a column, see if you can be neutral on the topic at the start and make your decision at the end. It makes things a lot more interesting.
100. Don't commit to a number of things for a list. Just pitch it as "X things that..." Otherwise, you'll make a list of 100 goddamn things.

9 Signs You May Have Over-Edited Your Work



Is it possible to over-think your book? Make TOO many changes to an essay? Is it possible that there's a point of diminishing returns when it comes to editing?

Is it possible to over-edit your work?

As someone who's in that boat, I'm telling you it floats. Like a log of crap, the over-edited story will float along in the toilet waters of...you get it. Let's try a different comparison. Less toilet-adjacent.

Think of your raw, unedited piece like a stained shirt. Yes, if you wash the shirt enough times, the stain will lighten, maybe even lift. Yes, you've got to make an effort, maybe ask someone whose life is put together if you can borrow a Tide pen, work that Tide in there, wash that sucker, and pray.

But there's a threshold. Once you've washed the damn thing 50 times, the stain is almost sure to be gone. And the shirt's buttons start to wear, the threads start to pull themselves loose, and what you end up with for all your effort is a stain-free, totally wrecked shirt.

How do you avoid overworking your writing, over-editing and polishing to the point you have a stain-free, useless piece of work?

By watching for these signs.

1. Making and Unmaking the Same Thing

Are you editing the same sentence time and again without changing much? Removing a scene and then putting it back in over and over? Debating over whether a chapter or a whole character needs to be in your story?

Writing isn't the most linear thing in the world. Sometimes a character comes and goes during the writing and editing process. But if you're constantly going back and forth on the same thing, plucking it out and then dropping it back in, you're overthinking it.

The Fix: Remove the item(s) in question, commit to keeping it out, and move on. Nobody but you will know there's something missing. Nobody's going to say, "This scene would have been perfect if only there'd been a party animal dog in a Hawaiian shirt." Nobody but you, anyway.

2. You've Completely Lost Touch With How You Felt When You Wrote It

Losing some of the original emotion behind your work is a good thing, to an extent. A little detachment can make you more honest with yourself. But if you're too far gone, it's hard to make editing decisions that keep your original intent in mind. It's hard to hear the voice that got the story down on paper in the first place.

The Fix: Time heals all wounds, and writing does too. If you're trying to write from that sore place, you need to make sure it hasn't quite healed before you can get everything on the page. Set yourself a time deadline for your revisions. ALL of your revisions. And stick to it.

3. The First 10% Is Fucking Amazing

Of course it is! You always start an edit at the beginning, full of pith and vinegar, chomping a cigar like a newspaper editor from comic books, pacing the room, arguing over whether this is brilliant or SUPER brilliant.

By the time you get a few pages in, you're over it. You're slumped in a chair, and you've remembered that you hate cigars because they taste like 10 cigarettes rolled in a paper grocery bag and dipped in varnish.

It's really easy to over-edit the first part of your work, leaving the rest a bit under-edited.

The Fix: Start each edit a bit later in the story. Say you've got a 10-page story. First edit, go start to finish. Second, read the first page/section/chapter, but don't make any changes. Keep your pen capped, and then make edits starting on page/section/chapter two. Make each entry point, each chapter, paragraph break, whatever, as good as the intro.

4. You Give A Character A Jetpack

This could be literal or figurative depending on the type of story you're writing and how bored you get and how awesome a jetpack would make your story. Little-known fact: Owen Meany had a jetpack in one draft of John Irving's novel [note: this might be pure speculation, but how unlikely is a jetpack compared to some kind of baseball prophecy?].

If you've been editing your work over too many months or years, you're going to have a lot of other ideas in the meantime, ideas that just don't fit in with your project. And the longer those ideas simmer and go nowhere, the better they seem for your current work. "Maybe I CAN cram in a

character who collects old bath tubs."

Trust me, your protagonist in a thriller doesn't need a jetpack. Your romance doesn't need a quirky friend who collects bath tubs out of nowhere.

The Fix: Finish your current work and THEN get started on Ace Jetpack: Jetpack Detective (With Jetpack!). Jetpacks and bath tubs are great ideas, and you need to wrap up your work in progress so you can start using them.

5. You Start Realizing How Long You've Been Editing This Thing

Editing feels like it takes forever. And sometimes, it really IS taking forever. You remember working on this damn story in a coffee shop that doesn't even exist anymore. You remember editing it on an airplane to take a trip to visit someone you don't talk to anymore. Way too much life has happened in between the beginning and now.

The Fix: Print out a page from your first edit and keep it around. Write a little, dated journal entry on it. Just talk about your life, what you're up to, all that good stuff. It'll serve as a great red flag for just how long this has been going on.

6. People Who Don't Usually Ask About Your Work Ask About This Piece

Your girlfriend's best friend's boyfriend, who you see twice a year at a New Year's party, is like, "How's that detective novel coming? Did you ever give him that jetpack?"

When people who shouldn't remember what you've been working on remember what you've been working on, it's gone on too long.

The Fix: Stop talking to that guy. Seriously, he sucks anyway. Thinks he's so smart just because he doesn't think a detective needs a jetpack...

7. You Are Only Changing Tiny Elements

Words are important. But if you are catching only single words you want to change, it might be about time to walk away. If you aren't altering plot, characters, or even paragraphs, you might be hitting the point of diminishing returns.

The Fix: Print out your work. If it's big, have Kinko's do it. They'll even put a comb binding on it for you. Start an edit, then flip through your copy and give it The Finger Test.

Don't be gross. Here's the finger test:



When a kid asks me if a book is too hard or too easy for them to read, I say, "Open it up to a random spot, read the two pages you can see, and hold up your hand. For every word you don't know, put up one finger. If you get to the end of the page and you've got five fingers standing up, it might be too tough."

As you're going through your draft, look at a page, hold up your hand, and see if you made 5 significant (to you) changes per page. Try to average it out over 10 pages or so. If you are lower than 5 per page, that's a red flag.

8. You Still Think The Perfect Piece Is Attainable

You want your work to go out exactly as you intended. No misplaced words, nothing that can be misinterpreted.

Look, it's just not possible. This will never be attainable. Look at the most-respected pieces of literature out there today, and you'll see there are dozens of credible interpretations, and almost across the board, the authors have a regret or two. 20 years after its release, Tim O'Brien revised *The Things They Carried*, making tiny changes and corrections that would never be noticed by the casual reader.

And he could do that because, at some point, he stepped away and let the book be released. He had to reach a point where the book was "good enough" for him.

The Fix: "Good Enough" isn't a phrase we use a whole lot in the world of writing, but it's real. Stop trying to perfect your book, start asking yourself if it's good enough. Does it do what you want it to? Are you mostly happy with the way it sounds?

Recognize that "good enough" for you might be more than good enough for everyone else. Learn to live with "good enough."

9. You're Afraid To Finish

This is touchy-feely, so ignore it if it's not you.

An edit might go on too long because you're afraid to let a piece go. Sometimes, when I'm working on something really personal, I feel like wrapping it up means giving something up. This personal thing I was doing, it feels like I'm giving up the last part of it once I finish editing.

I wrote a piece about my grandmother's death. When it was done, the loss felt very real. Although my grandmother was gone, I still had this thing. This work to do. And it felt like, once it was over, I had nothing.

The Fix: I get it, the loss feels very real when you finish something deeply personal. But face facts, the world moves on whether we've written it all down or not. Your grandmother dies whether or not you say goodbye. So you might as well do the right thing, finish the work and say goodbye properly.

An edit might go on too long because you're afraid to let a piece go.

When Bad People Write Good Things



Ender's Game is a good book. Let's start right there. At the very least, it's a crowd pleaser, and if we want to get grandiose, it's not hard to find a reader willing to call it a foundation work in science-fiction.

That said, the author is a problematic person. "Problematic" doesn't even scrape the surface in some opinions, is overblown in others. For now, let's go with the blanket term "bad." Because "bad" is three letters and there's a lot to cover here.

What do we do when a bad person writes a good thing?

Horrible People Can Do Great Things

Before we can even begin untangling bad people from good things, we have to accept that bad people can create good things.

Let's move away from books for a moment.

It seems Einstein was kind of an asshole. But we don't have much trouble recognizing that the dude was pretty damn smart.

Was the world pretty pissed off at Michael Vick? Yeah. Can we also look back and say that he was pretty great on the field? Yes.

If you've been out dancing once in your life, it's a statistical certainty that you've danced to and enjoyed a song created by someone who is a total bastard.

Have you ever enjoyed a meal made by someone who is a jerk? Maybe had a nice make-out with someone who turned out to be a real ass? Maybe given the best years of your life, the flower of your youth, to someone who took that flower and stamped it into the dirt? And you're totally not bitter about it except every once in awhile when you add it into a column?

Yeah, me too.

Your life might be really different. But it's been my experience that the assholes of the world are responsible for a portion of the great stuff. People who suck can (and do) make stuff that doesn't.

Why Is This So Difficult To Accept In Writing?

Books are different. To those of us who love books, reading something can make us feel very exposed.

I think, when it comes to art, we feel a sense of culpability in identifying with artists through their work. That if someone terrible creates something, and if we find that something beautiful, there must be something wrong with us. Or, when it comes to a terrible person, there's no way for them to make something without their terribleness seeping in.

I think we're afraid of what it says about us if we enjoy a work created by a bad person.

The idea that there's something wrong with us for enjoying something created by a prick is pretty easy to dismiss. See all the above. Songs, meals. Eating a great meal made by a jerk doesn't mean you identify with jerks. By that same token, you might enjoy a book written by a jerk. It won't turn you into a jerk. It doesn't mean there was this latent jerkhood laying dormant inside you, just waiting for the right book to come along and unleash it.

As for the idea of jerkiness seeping into a work...let's assume some of the rumors are true, and Michelangelo (the artist, not the party dude) was a jerk. Do I think that looking at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, I'll somehow have his bad vibes seep into my brain and become a changed person? Not really. It all feels too, I don't know, too much like the idea of records having subliminal messages that you only hear when you play them backwards.

What does enjoying a great work by a big bastard say about us? Not a whole lot. Liking some stuff made by jerks is normal. We've all done it. We all do it in every aspect of our lives. Books are no different.

I Think I Want To Read A Book, But The Author Is A Jerk

I hate to break the bad news, but in order to find out whether or not you like a book...you might have to read it.



Look, if you have no desire to read Franzen, if what he does just doesn't appeal to you, that's cool. Don't waste your time. If Author X is just too awful, if their awfulness will prevent you from enjoying a book, move on to someone else. But if there's a part of you that is curious what Author X's work is like, I say give it a go. If you hear negatives about Lena Dunham's memoir and you're still curious, read it and make your own decision. If you've heard a lot about Ender's Game, and if you've also heard a lot about Orson Scott Card, the choice is yours to make.

It's okay to want to read something by someone who sucks.

It's okay to like something created by someone who sucks.

It's okay to read something, find out for yourself, and form your own opinion. You already know that, but sometimes it helps to hear someone say it.

It's okay to have an opinion on a person and to then form a separate opinion on their work.

I Want To Read This Book, But I Don't Want To Support The Author

There are a lot of ways around the idea of supporting someone you don't like. You can borrow a book or buy it secondhand. You could buy the book and then make a charitable donation that offsets the damage. You could buy the book and then buy two other books by people you DO like. Ebooks are a good answer too. Authors usually make lousy money from eBooks, plus you're not carrying around a branded book and showing that author's name all over the place.

Not to mention the fact that you can still buy a book and then skip the other stuff, reviewing, promoting, all the things that you SHOULD be doing for authors you love and can go ahead and skip when it comes to authors you hate.

If you need a little more help, let's talk about it like this: Using something doesn't imply full-on endorsement. You're not getting a tattoo of the author's face. You're not getting a signed headshot. You're not starting a fan club.

The one thing I'll draw the line on, I don't think it's justified to steal a problematic author's work. You might feel like Robin Hood, but you're not. Remember, Robin Hood was stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. You're stealing, but then you're just keeping the material for yourself. That whole giving to the poor, redistribution of wealth thing is pretty key to the whole Robin Hood ethos.

I Want To Read A Book, But I Know Nothing About The Author. What If They're A Jerk?

Let's talk ignorance. Finally, a subject on which I'm an expert.

At one time, it would be ridiculous to expect anyone to actually know if an author was reprehensible. It's not like you could just type their name into a magic box and know within seconds.

Today, it's actually that easy. Type a name into the magic box. Know within seconds.

What is the obligation of readers now? What is the obligation of consumers to make use of this tool?



I'm looking at my bookshelf right now. I can honestly say I have no earthly idea whether or not Charles Yu is a great person. I can only speculate on whether I'd enjoy sharing a beer with Charles Yu. I don't even know if he likes beer. (Charles Yu, if you're reading this, consider it a standing offer). I've never read interviews by Charles Yu, never been to readings he did. It's all guesswork.

Should I Google Charles Yu to find out more before I read? Am I putting my head in the sand if I skip the process of Googling for dirt?

Everyone has to draw their own line on this one. I don't think there's a wrong place to draw that line, and I don't think it's wrong if that line moves around a bit.

I'll share the line I use for now.

The short version: more book readin', less internettin'.

The longer version goes like this:

I'm not a huge fan of the internet muckraking expedition.

If, as a parent, you go through the drawers in your kid's room from time to time, for no reason other than to check up, then I think you will search until you find that unnamed something bad. If you're looking for nothing in particular, just "something," then I think you'll find it. You'll find a journal entry that's alarming. You'll find some internet history you don't care for. You'll find something that, before

you searched, wouldn't have struck you as bad. But once you're in the mindset of finding something bad, you will succeed.

If I decided to look for things an author said or did with the goal of finding something I objected to, I could find something. And I did. In researching for this article, I absolutely found some things that I didn't like. Not about Charles Yu, mind you. He seems like a good dude.

Oscar Wilde made a really good point about this whole thing:

The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art, though they may serve as an excellent advertisement for second-rate artists.

There's a truth there. Multiple truths. Bad people can make good stuff, and good people can make bad stuff. Good people can make bad stuff. It's all over the map. I think the big truth is that someone's personal life doesn't generally serve as a good predictor of whether or not their book is any good.

If I was looking up book reviews, and if in the course of doing that I found out a few things about an author, then ignoring those things, pretending they didn't exist or that I didn't know, that would be putting my head in the sand. Some authors are notorious enough that you just end up hearing about them, and ignoring all that stuff might be head-in-sand territory. Not actively seeking scandal when I'm completely unaware of whether there's anything in existence or not...that feels okay to me. I don't work for fucking *TMZ*.

There's A Book I Want To Read, But The Author Is Just Such A Bastard

Hey, we've all got a line. Everyone's got their different deal breakers. If an author listed Buffalo Wild Wings as a favorite restaurant, I don't know if I could ever get over it.

If you know something about an author that you don't feel like you can get past, that's cool. You don't have to get past anything. Nobody is obligated to ignore their feelings, "get over it" and read something by someone terrible.

Anyone who thinks you're weak for skipping an author you hate is a fool, and probably a hypocrite. Everyone has their list of offenses that they can't overlook.

Don't torture yourself. Don't force yourself through a book that, line by line, serves to remind you why you hate the author. There are more books in existence than you could ever hope to read. Don't waste your time on a bad experience.

If you're opening a book, sighing and saying, "Here we go..." then I'd encourage you to close that book, throw it in the fireplace, light said book on fire, and then use the light from the burning book to read something else.

My Friend Is Reading A Book By Someone Problematic. Should I Say Something?

A couple years after I graduated from college, I went back to campus because the school was

hosting a visiting author. I ran into one of my professors, someone who helped me out a lot in school, and we talked books. She asked what I was reading, and I said, "I'm about half-way through *The World According To Garp*."

She then told me that when she was in school, John Irving was visiting faculty. And he was an awful, unapologetic womanizer.

It was a disappointing thing to hear. I was really liking the book quite a bit. And I was pretty deep into it. Beyond the point of no return.

The point of this story is, being aware didn't change my behavior as far as Garp was concerned. I finished the book. I thought it was really good. Although the experience was tainted a bit.

So here's my opinion on the idea of informing others. Just mine.

If you think the information will change the person's behavior, go for it. For example, if someone was considering going to school where Irving was visiting faculty, this would be great info to have. If someone came up to me, holding two books, and said "Which one should I buy?" I might go ahead and inform them if one of the authors was a dipstick.

If you don't think the information will change someone's behavior, then my personal move is to hang onto the info until the person finishes the book. If, at that point, I feel like it's necessary to have a talk, I can. If the book doesn't seem to change my friend or to be a life-changing experience, if it doesn't come up again, then we can let it be.

That's me.

Conclusions/Opinions

Art does not fit neatly into our world of with us or against us. We can find truth, beauty, heartbreak, all of these things in works written by people that we'd never want to share a meal with. I can enjoy the shit out of a book that I read on a plane, but that doesn't mean I would also enjoy sitting next to that book's author on a plane.

Do I care for Orson Scott Card's personal belief system? Not one bit.

Do I think it's okay to read something by a problematic author? Yes.

Do I think it's okay to like something by a problematic author? Yes.

Do I think you're obligated to find out what an author is like, as a person, before reading their stuff?
No.

The important bit, I think it would do all of us good, consumers and non, to be open to discussing our decisions. Not defending, not attacking the decisions of others, but to be able to say, "Yes, I will read so-and-so's work, and here's why" or "No, I don't consume so-and-so's work, and this is why."

When doing so, I find it helpful to use "I" statements. "I find the book to be really good," or "I find it more offensive than I do good."

Yes, I read *Ender's Game*. Because I was curious. Because I like a good sci-fi story, and it's a good sci-fi story. And yes, because it felt like a hole in my reading, something I probably should have read in junior high and missed.

No, I won't be going out of my way to promote *Ender's Game*. Even though I enjoyed *Ender's Game*, you won't see it listed as a recommended title below. Nor will I be recommending Garp. I'll spend that energy on something else.

5 Writing Lessons You Can Learn From Pop Punk



Just about every web site has articles about lessons learned from the punk music movement. Start Your Own Business The Punk Rock Way, Grow Herbs The Punk Rock Way, Find The Right Long Term Care Facility for Grandma The Punk Rock Way. Whatever the need, there's almost certainly an article about how to do it based on the lessons learned from the punk rock movement.

But what about punk rock's cousin, pop punk?

I would say "bastard child" or "bastard son" or something like that, but it's hard to say that pop punk didn't capture the world's attention in a big way for a few years there.

What can writers take from the world of pop punk?

What, Exactly, Is Pop Punk?

If you ask someone who's really into music history, there are a lot of technical definitions that separate things into pop punk, punk, post punk, emo, screamo, etc. There's some goth culture thrown in there from time to time, although that seems to happen most often in cases of "parents just don't understand."

For the purposes of this article, I categorized bands as pop punk with a simple 3-step verification process:

1. The general time period they were MOST popular being mid-ish-90's to late 2000's.
2. An overall sound that was pretty similar to pop punk.

3. Was it something I would have loved deeply when I was about 20? If yes, then it was probably pop punk.

I spent my young, enthusiastic, desire-to-wake-up-alive days going to a lot of pop punk shows. I attended more than one Warped Tour. I crowdsurfed. I moshed to songs that, in retrospect, really don't seem to encourage moshing at all. So I know a little about the idea of pop punk, but I can guarantee that won't stop someone from shitting a brick when I list Bad Religion as a pop punk band.

Keep in mind, I'm not using the categorization of "pop punk" as an insult. I know any band you like has no business being associated with the likes of Fall Out Boy. My advice to you is to write an extremely angry comment about what a moron I am at the bottom of this article.

The Future Sounds Ridiculous

Any useful statement about the future should at first seem ridiculous.

-Jim Dator (by way of Jane McGonigal)

Indeed, when Panic! At the Disco hit the scene, we were hearing something strange. It was a little like a group of chipmunks were on speed singing, dressing in bizarre clothes, and giving their songs titles that were impossible to remember. Titles like, "There's a Good Reason These Tables Are Numbered Honey, You Just Haven't Thought of It Yet."

There was nothing about Panic! At The Disco that seemed reasonable.

And yet, it worked. It all worked. Panic! At The Disco was (and is) a huge band, and what once sounded Pretty Odd has become a sound we're all used to, a sound countless others imitate.

The lesson: Like McGonigal/Dator said, a good, forward-looking idea is almost guaranteed to sound crazy. For Panic! At The Disco, that truth was very literal. For you and your writing, it might not be as literal, but the lesson still applies. Don't stop what you're doing because it sounds ridiculous. You might just be hearing the future.

It's Okay To Be Fun

The first exposure most people had to Blink-182 was a music video that featured the band running around naked.

Blink-182 was a big contrast to a lot of the punk bands that came before. Punk music, it was like a shot of bourbon, which is awesome most of the time. But every once in awhile you're sitting outside, it's 90 degrees, and you're thinking, "Something boozy and fizzy and cold sounds pretty refreshing right now." So you order that cucumber limeade and quickly dispose of the umbrellas and fruit wedges and other stuff adorning the glass. Because, you know. You're a tough boy.

Whether you consider pop punk to be a product of the punk movement or think it's got more to do with the rise and fall of grunge, bands like Blink-182 reminded a lot of us that it was alright to create music that was fun.

The lesson: Fun is a legitimate purpose for writing. Not only does something fun have potential on

its own, but it can add poignancy to your serious stuff (as it did for Blink-182 with "Adam's Song"). A lot of us write with groups that do very serious work about serious stuff, and that's awesome. We'd all do well to remember it's alright to have fun too.

Don't Let Your Last Work Define Your Next One

There are a lot of bands out there who struggle with this. On the one hand, they created an album that people loved, it sold a ton of copies, and there's a huge, built-in group of folks who want more of the same.

On the other hand, that band might want to make something new.

I look to the band Brand New on this one, the group from Jersey who became quieter and quieter on the personal front as their albums grew louder and louder. Each time Brand New released an album they sounded like a completely different band. The five-year span between *Your Favorite Weapon* and *The Devil And God Are Raging Inside Me* might as well be a lifetime.

For my money, both are great albums, as is the one between, *Deja Etendu*, and so is *Daisy*, and I really like Brand New, you guys.

The Lesson: If you write something really good, people will expect more of the same from you. They'll want it, even if they don't say it in so many words. That said, you shouldn't feel tied to doing something you don't want to do. If you wrote your thriller and it's out of your system, it's okay to move on and do something totally different. It's okay to have more than one fanbase. It's not the easiest road, but it's A road.

You Can Be Trendy And Still Do Something Meaningful

In 2004 Bad Religion released *The Empire Strikes First*. It was their 13th studio album and their highest-charting at the time.

This is the one I feel like people will have the hardest time seeing as pop punk, so I'll keep it quick: in 2000 Bad Religion spent three months touring arenas, opening for Blink-182. They also played Warped tour in 2004 (amongst other years). In 2004, "Let Them Eat War" from *The Empire Strikes First* appeared on the album *Rock Against Bush vol. 2* alongside some decidedly punk bands in addition to pop punk staples like Sugarcult and Yellowcard.



I'll give you this, it's a mixed bag. Two years from now Bad Religion will be 40. If it were a person, it would be time to schedule regular prostate exams. To categorize them as any one thing is tough.

If we can put aside our musical differences, there's a great lesson to be learned from *The Empire Strikes First*.

The Lesson: Something being popular and trendy doesn't preclude its being meaningful. There's a Venn diagram where one circle encompasses things that are trendy, one circle encompasses things of substance, and then there's a healthy swath where those two things cross over. There's also a brown spot on the diagram. Ignore that. That's sauce I spilled.

Bad Religion is a great example of that swath where trend and substance meet. Bad Religion has always created music that's energetic, melodic-ish, and their stuff always sounds like, well, music. There's an undeniable whiff of pop, even in some of their earlier stuff.

When you're writing, you can write in any style, or you can write about something that's trendy (sparkly vampires, anyone?), and you can also write something important and meaningful.

Goodbye To Romance

My Chemical Romance announced their breakup in early 2013:

We've gotten to go places we never knew we would. We've been able to see and experience things we never imagined possible. We've shared the stage with people we admire, people we look up to, and best of all, our friends. And now, like all great things, it has come time for it to end. Thanks for all of your support, and for being part of the adventure.

It seemed like a bit of an odd move, like they were quitting when they were at the top.

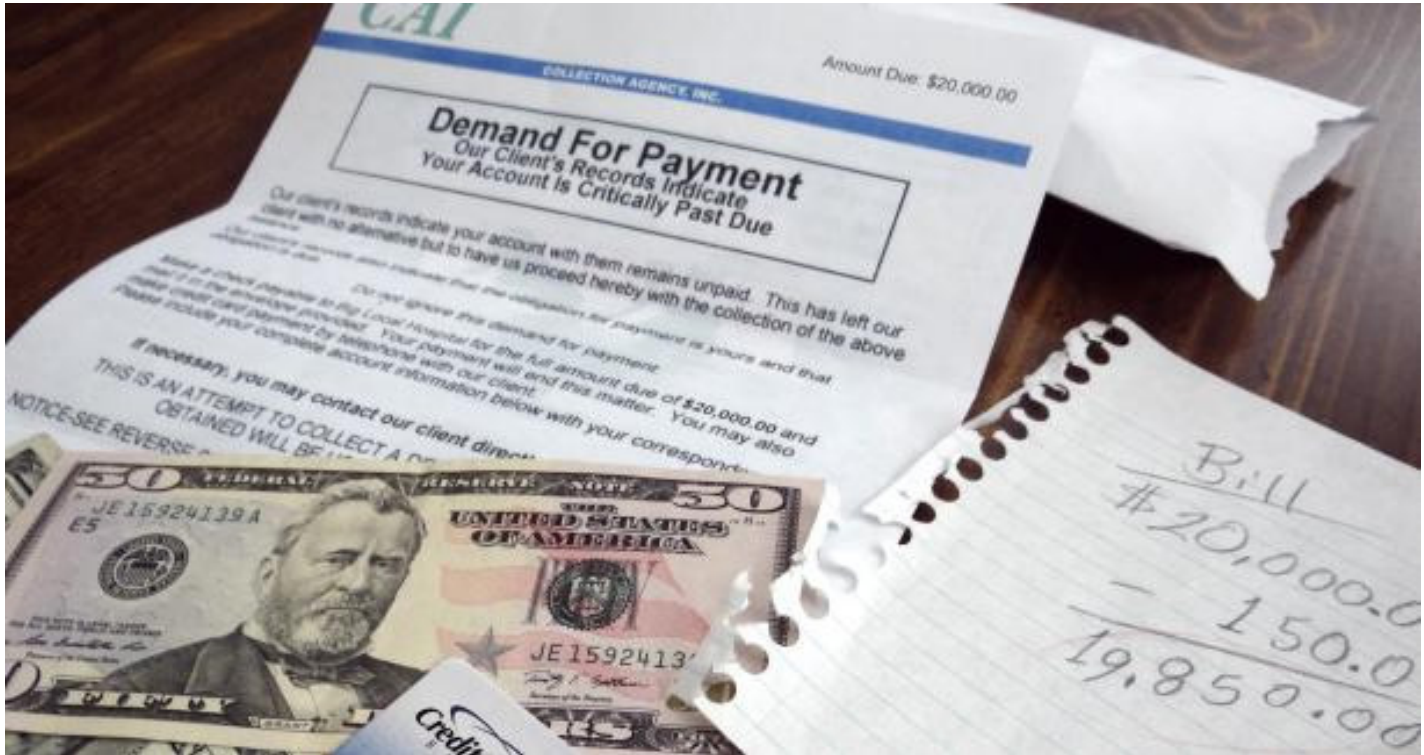
Lead singer Gerard Way explained it like this:

Many a band have waited for external confirmation that it is time to hang it up, via ticket sales, chart positioning, boos and bottles of urine—input that holds no sway for us, and often too late when it comes anyway.

The Lesson: I don't think I've ever seen this piece of advice given to writers before: It's okay to hang up your spurs. If you're done, if you feel like you've accomplished what you wanted to accomplish as a writer...it's alright to do something else. Or nothing else.

The lesson here, the important bit, is that My Chemical Romance called it quits when they were finished. Not when the world was finished with them. I'm not advocating that any struggling writers give up. I'm saying that if you've struggled on the page, triumphed, and if you feel your struggle is complete, then it's alright to let go.

Writing Showed Me How To Pay Off Student Loans



If you're here, I'm assuming you've got student loan debt. Welcome. And I'm sorry. We'll get through this together.

If you're here, you may or may not be a writer already. Either way, I'm here to help. Whether you're a writer looking to pay off a debt or a former student desperately Googling for advice, let me show you how a writing habit will help you pay off your debt.

Why You Need This Advice

Paying off student debt is about a few different things. It's about having SOME money, it's about being somewhat financially aware. But more than anything, it's about changing your mindset. I know that sounds really stupid, and I wouldn't believe that kind of nonsense coming from me either. Let's start off with some advice from people who know what they hell they're talking about.

Suze Orman:

The most dangerous debt you can ever have is student loan debt because student loan debt is not dischargeable in bankruptcy. So I want you to change your attitude — stop feeling like you're drowning in student loan debt and start feeling like you're swimming in the future of your life...and that your student loan debt allowed you to get there. Change your attitude and you'll see your financial life change, too.

Yeah, like she said. Take a swim in Lake You.

And what about Dave Ramsey?

Dave Ramsey's method for paying down debts, as he says,

...is about behavior modification, not math.

Two financial gurus, both saying the same thing: paying off debt isn't about waiting for a rich uncle to die and leave you money provided you stay in his haunted house. Which, by the way, I advise you do should the situation arise. If the house was really haunted, he would want you to stay there BEFORE he died so he could watch ghosts scare the bejeezus out of you. Therefore, if you get this offer, assume the house isn't really haunted or that your uncle isn't really dead. This is all common sense and what I assume people mean when they use the phrase "financial literacy."

Anyway, the experts agree. Paying off debt is all about changing the way you think about money. Easier said than done.

While the Ormans and the Ramseys of the world can tell you to change your mindset, they are a little quieter about how to do it. Which is where I come in.

Writing gave me the tools to change the way I think about money, and those tools helped me pay off my student loans. Yes, you're hearing from a debt free man right now.

It's kind of awesome. I've never really impressed anyone with physical ability, handsomeness, morality, intelligence...

I've never really impressed anyone, but when I paid off my loans, I became this rare, admirable creature. Like a centaur. A slightly richer centaur.

Narrative-ize Your Debt

The biggest problem when the piper came a-pipin' and it was time to start paying off my student loans was that the amount I owed was staggering. It wasn't even a real number. There was no way in hell I'd ever pay it off, so why even try? Why put in one cent more than I absolutely had to as required by my income-based repayment plan? (By the way, if you want to take a blow to your self-esteem, apply for income-based student loan repayment. Ouch.)

I had to make the number real. I had to make it seem like putting money towards my loan mattered. I had to change my mind, and what I did was draw on some storytelling skills. After all, we're all a lot better at doing something when there's a good story involved.

I decided to write out a story for myself.

In this story, my loan was given to me through a time portal by Hitler. And Hitler was funding the war effort off my interest. Now, obviously he wasn't winning the war with my cash, but every cent I could rob him of, that was one less Nazi bullet.

There's more to the story. As it usually goes with Nazis. There was a giant mechanical war machine that needed some sprockets or something, a mystical power from realms beyond our own. That kind of Hellboy nonsense.

As stupid as it sounds, imagining my loan in this weird scenario helped. Really! It made paying back my loan feel like something important. Something that mattered to more people than just me.

I'm not saying you have to make up a time-loan Hitler story for your loans. What I'm saying is, build your own debt narrative. You can make it some kind of Dungeons & Dragons nonsense, a Star Trek thing. You can ground it in reality and think of how much you'd like to be donating that cash to your favorite charity. Make it whatever works for you, but whatever you do, don't skip this step. Really do it. Write it out for yourself. Be detailed. You need to change the way you're thinking about your student loan debt, and this will get you started.

Writing Is The Ultimate Cheap Pastime

When I think of cheap hobbies, I think of fishing first. Just a couple kids by a river, cheap poles, ritualistically goring worms and drowning them. Wholesome fun.

Then I start thinking about the aisles and aisles of fishing stuff at your average Wal-Mart. And let me tell you, I was disturbed to discover, on a recent flight, that the giant pyramid in downtown Memphis, visible from the air, was a Bass Pro Shop. I'm not kidding.

Somehow, someone is making enough money off of fishing to fund a goddamn pyramid.

Even something deceptively cheap, like jogging, can get expensive. Shoes, gym membership for the winter, clothes that look really cool until you're outside and realize that reflectors are cool in theory and not cool on your body.

There's no hidden cost to writing. I don't think you could support an entire pyramid through sales of writing stuff. Because there just isn't that much to buy, and because many writers actively discourage spending a lot of cash. You're a lot more likely to come across writers using completely outdated technology or purposely downgrading their high tech stuff than you are to find someone buying the latest and greatest.

Writing truly is a cheap pastime. There's very little to buy, and within writing circles it's known that buying pricey writing stuff is for chumps. You're not only signing up for something that's cheap, but there is no reward within the social group for spending a lot of money.



Writing Is A Good Time Killer

When you're trying to pay off debt, gobs and gobs of free time are your enemy. Think about it: what do you do in your free time? Shop? Shop online? Hit up a concert? Go out and drink? Eat out? Catch a movie? Play a video game? All this stuff, it's spending money to kill time. That's not helpful. That's exactly what you have to stop doing.

Writing is killing time to SAVE money. Writing takes FOREVER, and it eats up huge chunks of time where you can't multi-task. Can you Netflix and shop? I would hope so. Can you write and shop? Not really. They're separate. Goodness knows I'm dying to finish writing this column so I can switch over to Amazon and buy a couple different portable urinals. I don't want to talk about why. Which makes it seem like I should have left out that detail.

Write a lot, kill a lot of time, save a lot of money, get out of debt.

You Can Make A Few Bucks

You're not going to pay off your student loans by writing a book and getting it published. Even if you do get a book published, when you look at the hourly, you're much better off working at Arby's (plus, all the Horsey Sauce you can chug). But what you CAN do is make writing your side hustle.

For those unfamiliar, a brief explanation of the side hustle: a side hustle is a job you take on, separate from your 9-5, for a little extra cash. The hallmarks of a good side hustle are that it allows you to set your own schedule, allows you to take on as little or as much work as you can handle, and that you're doing something that wouldn't support you completely but makes for a nice little bonus.

While we're at it, the hallmarks of a bad side hustle are that they're Mary Kay, LuLaRoe, or anything that involves you throwing a "party" and forcing your friends to buy stuff.

Writing is a great side hustle as long as you've got reasonable expectations about what you'll earn. If you can make \$25/month writing, set a lowish goal like that, it makes a huge difference. I know it doesn't sound like a lot, but over time it makes a huge dent in your student loans.

We weren't going to get out of this without doing some math. Sigh.

Put in \$25 bucks every month. Times 12 ends up being \$300/year. Which, over the normal, 10-year repayment period, is \$3,000. Put it all together and you've finished off your loan a year earlier than you otherwise would have. All because of an extra \$25 you made on a side hustle.

The real beauty of the income from a writing side hustle is that it's extra, earned cash. It's not a huge windfall. It's a little bit of something, which can be more helpful when it comes to paying off debt. It's tough to get a \$1,000 bucks and put it all towards your student loan. It's pretty easy to throw \$25 bucks that way.

Remember, it's about changing your mindset so you see the value of kicking in those little extra bits of cash. Generate the cash, put it into your loan, and give it some time.

You'll Learn To Love The Slow Drip

Loan payments feel like drops in the bucket. And they are. And not only is the bucket huge, it's increasing in size at a monthly rate of 6.8%. And you get constant letters and emails reminding you of this bucket. Lousy, stupid bucket.

You need to get used to the idea of putting a lot of work into something for a small, almost unnoticeable result.

Writing will get you used to that. It's a habit that involves lots of small input over an extended time period. Editing a manuscript feels like an impossible task. But you get yourself into the mindset of doing a little every day and watching something build.

This is why writing and a writing mindset will help. Writing speaks directly to the most difficult part of paying off loans, which is getting used to the idea that this is the long, long, interminably long game, and it won't feel like you're making progress most of the time.

Start writing, get yourself used to the long game, and apply that same mindset to your loans.

Other Concrete Advice

Okay, okay. You started writing, and you've changed your mind about the way money works. Congratulations, you!

But maybe you'd like a couple other pieces of advice that'll help you pay down your loan a little faster. I have two of them.

Online Spending

Whatever I spent online, I had to put that same amount into my loans. That's it.

So, if I bought a quick, \$1.99 Kindle book, I had to log into my student loan account and kick a couple bucks in there. If I bought concert tickets online, I had to put the same amount into my loan.

This was most painful during the holidays because I bought a lot of my gifts online, and I had to throw money into my loans even though the shit I was buying wasn't for me. Seemed like a scam. Which it was. A scam to trick myself out of my own money.

It works because it's a double-whammy. You not only put the money into your loan, but you start making better spending decisions when everything costs twice as much. "Do I really want to buy these concert tickets if they're \$80 apiece thanks to the system I've set up for myself?"

Get A Round-Up Going

I use an app that takes what I spend on a debit card, rounds it up to the next whole dollar, and then invests it. I haven't made a damn thing from the investments, but rounding up is awesome. It's a way to trick yourself into saving, the modern day equivalent of a change jar. You can probably do this through your bank, or you can go the route I did. I recommend investing because it's fun to check your phone and act like you're being all important when you really have almost no idea what's going on and therefore couldn't be certain if Bane's attack on Gotham's stock market in Dark Knight Rises was totally plausible or totally stupid.

Happy saving!

What Happens When You Stop Writing Negative Book Reviews



It was an idea that first showed up on my internet doorstep in 2013. A certain web site's decision to no longer post negative book reviews had the internet abuzz(feed) with, let's be honest, mostly critical responses to the lack of critical responses.

I'll admit, I thought the idea was very stupid. Profoundly stupid.

Part of it was the source. Okay, they weren't doing negative book reviews, but BuzzFeed isn't exactly the paragon of journalistic integrity. I still think of BuzzFeed as that friend you had in school who was always starting shit and yet always outside of it when the punching started. "I didn't say Person X is the worst person ever. I said that 'the internet' is saying that."

Buzzfeed hate aside, the seed was planted in my mind. What would the world of books look like without negative, critical book reviews?

What if I stopped writing negative book reviews?

Where I'm Coming From

You have to understand, I wrote an entire book that is a negative review of another book. Maybe not negative...look, *Modelland* is, to me, the *Troll 2* of books. It's fascinating that it exists, baffling at every turn. There's an audience for it, but I don't think it was the intended audience. I would probably not hand this book to someone looking for a good, dystopian read that has something to say about body image and real life problems, and I would proffer the theory that only someone who had never read *Modelland* would choose to do that.

It was a big switch for me. Going from writing book-length negative reviews to skipping negative reviews altogether.

What I'm getting at here is this didn't come naturally to me, but I decided to give it a whirl.

This is what happens when you stop being real and start getting polite.

You Become A More Discerning Reader

It's counterintuitive, but it's true. You become a better reader when you stop writing negative reviews.

One of the great things about blogging, journaling, podcasting, whatever, is that it gives the lousy parts of life some meaning. What I mean is, when something crappy is happening, when you're in a terrible, uncomfortable situation, you can always say, "This is going to be great content." Let's just say some idiot animal is having a colonoscopy and wanted to podcast his colonoscopy prep. He can! He did! I did.

Reviewing lousy books worked that way too. If I was reading something crappy, there was something worthwhile coming. I'd be salivating, waiting to trash the book. I paid more attention when I was in the midst of a crappy book than if I read a good one, and it was because I wanted to do the best possible job talking smack about it.

But if you can't write that trashy review, you do what you probably should have done to begin with: quit. Quit reading a bad book.

This guy came up to the desk when I was working at the library once. He had an enormous stack of books. I asked him how he read so many books, and he said, "Oh, I only read the first few pages most of the time. When they're bad, and most of them are bad, I quit and move on to something else. There's no prize for reading bad books."

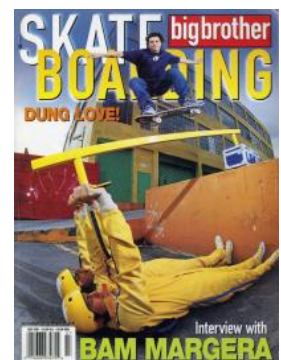
That dude was totally right. There is no prize for plowing through bad books, although it would be great if there were, and we could call it the Peter Derk Award For Undaunted Courage. (Hey, I made it up. If you want someone QUALIFIED to have their name attached to an award, make your own.)

With no negative review at the end, no incentive to read through garbage, you're less likely to waste your time reading through garbage.

You Might Write Something Much Better Than A Book Review

You might not know about *Big Brother*, the skateboarding magazine that (d) evolved into Jackass. But you should. For so many reasons, one of them being the way they did things like album reviews.

My best estimate of what happened at *Big Brother* was this: Someone was like, "We should do album reviews." And then someone started doing them, got bored almost immediately, and started, instead of writing album reviews, using



the space to write whatever the hell they wanted.

These "reviews" were hilarious. It was a little bizarre to see an album cover, a rating, and then a small block of text that had almost nothing to do with the album in question. Or music in general. But if I'm being honest, I got a lot more enjoyment from those non-review reviews than I would have from another rinse-and-repeat album review.

This is what I did when I came upon a book that I just couldn't say anything nice about. It's like the rule, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all," but altered to "If you can't say anything nice, completely change the subject and entertain someone."

Part of the goal when writing reviews, for me anyway, is to write something I like. I wrote stuff that was a lot more entertaining when I went Big Brother, stopped slagging on bad books and started using the space however the hell I wanted.

You Get A Realistic Idea Of Just How Important Your Reviews Are

A lot of us see our Goodreads feed or book blog (or Twitter feed or Instagram or whatever) as being US. That Goodreads, that represents ME. Therefore, it's important to me that it accurately reflects ME. Because what would happen if I reviewed a book incorrectly?

Stop. Ask yourself, what do you think would happen if you reviewed a book with 5 stars instead of one? Or, more accurately, if you didn't rate a lousy book at all?

The answer is probably nothing. If you want to find out for sure, try it. Get online, head to your outlet of choice, and review a book you hated by slathering it with praise. See how your life changes. See how many messages you get about how you steered someone the wrong way.

I hope this isn't the first revelation of this fact: your opinion on stuff really isn't that important. Neither is mine. It's really about the combined opinions of everyone, and there's never going to be a shortage of people willing to talk shit.

Before this gets upsetting, I think this is a good thing. You aren't single-handedly responsible for warning people off a bad book. And because there are plenty of people willing to crap on a book, you don't have to. I hereby release you from this duty.

You Think About WHY You're Reviewing Books

Why do I write book reviews? What's the purpose? What am I going for?

For a time, it was to get those Goodreads notifications. I'd crowd about mostly quitting Facebook and Twitter, and then ended up getting my fix from Goodreads instead, seeing who liked my reviews, commented on them, started little fights with me.

Lighting up a notification, that's a pretty terrible reason to do anything. It's a really bad reason to review a book.

Lighting up a notification, that's a pretty terrible reason to do anything. It's a really bad reason to review a book.

Other bad reasons to write bad reviews are because you think you're doing something heroic (you're not), think you're expressing a really contradictory opinion (you're not), or because you think that the writer of a bad book somehow deserves this feedback (they almost certainly don't).

Stop and think about why you're writing book reviews. Who are they for? What do you want them to get out of them?

You Learn It's Easy To Criticize, And It's Hard To Make Something

I say this not to defend bad books. Some books suck, and the fact that someone struggled to create them is almost certainly true, but it almost certainly doesn't change the subjective experience of reading them. I don't necessarily believe that hard work means something is above criticism because, by that logic, anything that was written with relative ease would be terrible, and we all know that's not true.

When I say it's easy to criticize and hard to create, I'm not talking about being easy on an author. I'm talking about being hard on myself. What I mean is that, for me, it was taking the easy way out to criticize something crappy when I should have been putting the energy into creating something good of my own instead.

Making something of quality, something completely original, that's tough. That's the real work.

Tommy Wiseau, Charles Hinton, and the Non-Existence of Ironic Joy



Most of you are probably familiar with Tommy Wiseau, auteur *behind The Room*.

The Room is a fascinating piece of work. It's become the defining version of the "so bad it's good" type of thing. Loads of people come out to midnight showings, throw spoons at the screen, and engage in the sort of shenanigans normally reserved for screenings of *Rocky Horror*.

I didn't think it was possible to have a "so bad it's good" experience with books. I thought that books required too much buy-in, too much participation. Books are difficult to enjoy while you're really, really drunk.

Then I found Charles Hinton, the Tommy Wiseau of books. And now, I believe.

A Cold One

Let's dive right into one of Hinton's books. Full title: *Agent Cold Beer On Assignment (Live It Up Mr Beer Book 2)*.

The description:

Beer, three-hundred pounds of muscle and fat, standing six feet tall in his late thirties was a former bouncer, a truck driver, and a security guard. Now he was a secreted agent for the government. Action, drama, adventure, humor.

300 lbs of muscle and fat. Aren't all of us some total amount of those two things? Isn't it the ratio

that's really descriptive? There are a lot of people who weigh the same amount as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. It's just that pesky muscle/fat ratio that makes most of us less eligible to relaunch the *Baywatch* franchise.

Normally I don't like to do plot summaries as a review, but the naked facts of *Agent Cold Beer On Assignment (Live It Up Mr Beer Book 2)* are necessary to explain the book's greatness.

Here we go.

Beer (the agent, not the beverage) is tasked with taking down Jack Knife Joe, a guy who operates a bar where he holds a monthly beer drinking contest, the winner of which receives \$1,000 and free drinks for a month. Jack Knife Joe, in a scheme that can only be described as either VERY complicated or MASSIVELY stupid, always wins his own beer drinking contest, pays himself \$1,000, and drinks for free for a month.

Let me reiterate: Jack Knife Joe sets up a contest where the winner gets \$1,000 (of Jack Knife's money) and free drinks (from Jack Knife's bar) and then Jack Knife wins his own contest month after month. All logic would dictate that this is, at best, a zero sum game.

Nonetheless, Agent Cold Beer is called upon to put the kibosh on Jack Knife Joe's scam. If you're skeptical about what the government has been up to in our reality, imagine a world in which a secret agent is tasked with stopping a small town scammer who's destined to be brought down by his own bad business sense inside of six months. Imagine manpower and spy gizmos being deployed to stop this non-problem.

Oh, did I forget to mention the gizmos? There are gizmos. Courtesy of Shorty.

Shorty is the Q of the Agent Cold Beer universe, the Beerniverse, if you will. Shorty arms Beer with:

Beer Can Grenades: A six-pack of grenades that look exactly like beer cans. Armed by pulling the tab.

A Knife That Shoots Bullets: Contrary to what you might be picturing, this works by the user holding the blade of the knife (which isn't sharp), pointing the handle at the target, and firing. I think what's most important to note here is that this is not a gun disguised as a knife and is never referred to as such. It's a "knife that shoots bullets."

A Recording Cigar: A cigar that records audio when lit.

Multiple Bulletproof Jean Jackets: One white, one blue, one brown, one black.

Beer then uses exactly none of these devices to win Jack Knife's drinking contest. Which is the big scene, kinda what this whole story is building to, and it lasts for all of two sentences.

At this point the story meanders a bit. Beer has sex with a waitress near his trailer home, which



explodes because Jack Knife's goons accidentally open a beer grenade. Some cops hit Beer on the ass with their nightsticks. The recording cigar comes into play somehow. Not important.

What IS important is that Beer and Jack Knife Joe sign a contract that says Beer and Joe will have a knife fight, and the winner will get the bar forever. The legitimacy of such a document would be suspect if you weren't already reading about a guy wearing a brown, bulletproof jean jacket.

Jack Knife figures this plan is foolproof because, hey, he's called Jack Knife Joe! Of course he'll win a knife fight.

They square off, and then Beer shoots Joe with the knife that shoots bullets. Beer wins the bar, and he changes the name to "Beer Rock And Roll Place."

In the end, Beer reports back to his supervisor, who gives him another assignment.

Beer: What's my new assignment?

Boss: I'm going out of town for a week. Your assignment is to babysit my nine kids.

What Is Love?

I love Charles Hinton. But I'm not totally sure why.

Many people would say I'm enjoying Charles Hinton ironically, and that might be true. But what if it's NOT true? What if I don't believe in ironic love?

Does anyone marry their partner out of ironic love? A love that's really a sneering, mocking sort of thing? "Wouldn't it be totally lame/awesome if I married this person?"

Does anyone have a favorite food that's pure irony? A dish that tastes terrible, that they would never eat on their own, but that they claim to love because it's so bad?

If people enjoyed things ironically, wouldn't this work in ways other than comedy? Wouldn't someone enjoy *The Room* ironically, recognizing it as a failure and then finding deep pathos in the fact that Tommy Wiseau, who is clearly passionate and trying pretty hard, is incapable of expressing himself on screen in such a way that his message can be received as he originally intended? It never works that way, ironic reception of art coming across as an ironic sense of sorrow, anger, or anything but joy.

If the definition of receiving something "ironically" meant that you received it in a way other than it was intended, or that it had an effect on you other than what was intended, wouldn't that mean that my boredom during *Transformers: Revengeance Of The Moonstruck* was ironic? I'm certain the intent wasn't for me to be bored, but that's how I felt. If I was aroused by a rewatch of the 90's Spider-Man cartoon, would that arousal be ironic? Hydroman was ripped, but I think it's fair to assume that it was

If someone prepared me a nice bowl of clean, wholesome quinoa, and if that quinoa made me super gassy, would I be farting ironically?

outside the project scope of that particular cartoon to arouse a 30-something man in the year 2017. If someone prepared me a nice bowl of clean, wholesome quinoa, and if that quinoa made me super gassy, would I be farting ironically?

Nope. I'd be genuinely bored by *Transformers*. I'd be genuinely passing gas (it's the only way I know how to pass gas).

It's only joy that is branded ironic. Which makes me think this whole "enjoying something ironically" thing is a bunch of nonsense.

The Japan Assignment

There is another book in the Agent Cold Beer series, and its full title is *Live it up, Mr. Beer (The Japan Assignment) (Agent Cold Beer.)*. While normal titling conventions would suggest that *The Japan Assignment* is the first book, the description reads:

AGENT COLD BEER IS BACK AGAIN, BUT THIS TIME IN JAPAN. HE ON A MISSION TO DESTROY THE BAD TEMPER NINJA, ACTON, DRAMA, ADVENTURE, HUMOR.

Agent Cold Beer is back, which means this is the second book, right? Because in order to be "back" one has to be "here" at some point.

This book felt a little like Charles Hinton took a trip to Japan and wrote it off as a business expense. As "research" for his next novel. Is that possible? Could this be the greatest scheme of all time, indie writers doing super-short Kindle books and then using them as a way to write off travel expenses? If that's possible, I have to applaud Mr. Hinton. It's a damn good scheme.

Most of the book is unimportant, "importance" being a slippery concept in this case, but it picks up steam when Beer kills his mark, Bad Temper Ninja, using a Conan-style broadsword. Which, it turns out, is actually a shotgun in disguise.

The lesson learned from Beer, for the second time, is never bring a knife to a gunfight. Instead, bring a knife that's really a gun to a knife fight.

Epilogue: Beer flies back to the States in a private jet with a naked stewardess who brings him chicken nuggets, peanuts, and beer.

The Irony of A Fish In The Nuts

Maybe what we tend to call ironic love is more like the joy derived from this:

This is from a video of a guy water skiing, and a fish jumps out of the water and tags him right in the nuts. I saw this video, and I laughed.



I have to assume the guy didn't set out to have a fish jump right into his testicles. I have to assume he didn't set up a camera intending to record that. But then it happened.

I have to assume that Tommy Wiseau didn't set out to make people laugh with *The Room*. But laugh they did. Same thing for Charles Hinton.

There's a simplicity to the funniness behind something like *The Room*, a potent combination of absurdity and reality.

When something absurd happens organically, there's a lack of construction. There's no laugh track, no narrative build to a joke, no space for anyone to gauge the joke as successful or not.

If this same clip of a guy getting hit in the nuts by a fish was from a Ben Stiller movie, it wouldn't be funny. Because it wouldn't be real. When a clip on *America's Funniest Home Videos* was staged, it was never as good as the clip of a hapless dad falling off the roof. Because that hapless dad was real. A real rapping granny, if that was your grandmother, she would be funny. But the staged concept of a rapping granny isn't funny.

Absurdity alone doesn't make something funny. Absurdity + Reality = Comedy.

Something absurd is ONLY funny if it's real.

Charles Hinton's books are absurd, and I suspect they're real. Which, according to my (highly unprofessional) math, makes them funny. Not ironically funny. Actually funny.

Other Hits From Hinton

Charles Hinton has a couple dozen titles available. The adventures of Beer just scratch the surface.

Here are a few others.

The Billion Dollar Lottery

The book that best asks the question, Is Hinton a comedic genius or not?

"Son, get my life savings out of the closet."

"You mean the hundred pennies in the jar?"

"Yes, son."

Get Him Off ATTORNEY AT LAW

You thought the Twinkie defense was outrageous? What about defending your client, a shooter who killed a nun in broad daylight after shooting her, by saying the shooter was merely trying to kill a bat that was hovering above the nun when he lost control of his gun, and the gun went off on accident? Nine times.

The Racist Time Traveler

A professor decides to quit his job, buy a tractor and convert it into a time machine so he can live happily in the pre-Civil-War era. This guy REALLY dislikes black people.

Are the professor's motives impossibly flawed and stupid? Absolutely. Is it brilliant or stupid to convert a tractor into a time machine rather than building one from whole cloth? I don't know. Does he get his comeuppance? Boy howdy.

Good And Bad Are Constructs

I think that we tend to like stuff or not. We like a piece of art or we don't. We like a song or we don't. And then we reverse-engineer the reasons why.

We take something we feel subjectively and then come up with objective reasons we love it. Because we feel like we have to justify our love (Madonna!).

The enjoyment of a Charles Hinton or a Tommy Wiseau is genuine. It's when we try to explain that enjoyment that we get into the idea of irony. Because enjoying something, that's difficult to explain. If you asked me to explain why a video of a fish hitting a water skier in the nuts caused a physiological reaction in me (laughter), I couldn't begin to explain the base mechanics. I don't even know HOW that works, let alone WHY.

Likewise, I can't explain why Charles Hinton is great. Or Tommy Wiseau.

All I can really say is that laughs dubbed "ironic" and laughs dubbed "real" sound a hell of a lot alike. They sure feel a hell of a lot alike.

Those laughs sure seem real to me.

Books at These Speeds: Sped-Up Audiobooks



Let me take you back to the days when I was part of a book club on television.

Yes, I used to travel every month or so to a TV studio where I'd sit with a bunch of other folks and talk about a book. Our hour-long chat would be clipped down to about 2 minutes and used to fill a slot on a slow news day.

Depicted here is my entire contribution to this endeavor after attending about half a dozen tapings:



Yep, those are my legs. The hardest working legs in showbusiness. Unless someone else already has that title, in which case I'll go with "Hardest Working Legs In Showcharity" because nobody paid me.

And because only my legs were shown, I decided a couple things:

1. More calf raises
2. Maybe don't worry as much about reading the whole entire book

The first one was hard because calf raises are really super boring and also because the gymnasium is one of the worst places on the planet. I was there last week and a bird got stuck inside. He smashed himself against the glass a couple times, left a blood spatter, and when another guy and I tried to urge him outside, he flew away, smashed into some more glass, and exited into the lobby. And all I could think was, "I know how you feel, bro." Also, that bird's calves looked like shit.

The second part of the plan was also hard because, you know, I consider myself a decent reader and reviewer, and I knew I'd be in a room with a bunch of people who'd read the book. So I had to find a way to sort of read the book, sort of not.

What I came up with was audiobooks.

Now, I know audiobooks are legit. I'm not trying to talk smack about audio here. The thing is, it was perfect for my needs. When you're being read to, the text just keeps coming. It doesn't matter if your concentration is broken or not. The text never stops. The tireless narrator will never stop. As long as that iPod has battery power, there is no end.

And so, if it's a book you're not really into, audio can be a way to sort of let the text pass by, like a wave that washes peacefully over you while you're grocery shopping, driving, and doing calf raises (seriously, you have to do like a million to see any results).

During one listening session I accidentally discovered how easy it was to double the speed of an audiobook. One tap on the iPod, and it was as though the narrator had taken a handful of uppers, drank a couple pots of coffee, and then had to tell me the entire plot of a book before a countdown ended and a bomb exploded.

At this point, the cost/benefit calculations didn't even enter my mind. Who cared? I would finish a book I didn't even want to read in half the time, buy some tighter pants, drive to the TV studio, and all would be gravy.

I've since quit the book club, either because it just wasn't worth the time or because I received far too many calf-related fan letters and felt guilty about not responding.

But I haven't quit double-timing audiobooks.

Why I Recommend Speeding Up Audiobooks

In the early 2000s speed listening was seen as a product of the Silicon Valley attitude. If you don't know much about Silicon Valley, people there like paying really high rent, working in offices with

furniture you'd normally see on an outdoor patio (silly geese!), and gathering as much information as efficiently as possible. Oh, and efficiency is not a way to save time here and there. It's a competitive way of life.

Why go at normal speed when you could listen to an entire business book over the course of just a couple commutes? If you're a podcast listener, you could get everything you need in half the time. TED Radio Hour? Ha, more like TED Radio Half Hour. This American Life? More like This American Half-Life. Hello From The Magic Tavern? More like Sup From The MT.

However, there's more to speed listening than nerds doing nerd shit twice as fast.

Speed listening might be more engaging for some listeners. For example, it turns out that blind people will sometimes have a vastly increased ability to comprehend super fast speech, speech faster than humans are capable of producing naturally. Imagine, if you will, that your capacity for speech comprehension topped out at three times the average. "Normal" audiobook pace would be painfully slow. It'd be like turning into The Flash, but instead of running you're driving an old Yugo. In a school zone.

There's even more. This whole speeding up idea, it's not just audio.

I came across this article about watching sped-up television. The article's author, Jeff Guo, says that the number of scripted TV shows has almost doubled in less than a decade. The only way to keep up with twice as much TV in the same amount of viewing time is to speed things up (or invent a machine that slows time, but that seems likely to cause some pretty serious paradoxes that you and I can't even imagine, and time paradoxes, paradoxically, rarely save anyone time).

Guo even went so far as to say that the benefits of doubling a show's speed go beyond time savings:

...speeding up video is more than an efficiency hack. I quickly discovered that acceleration makes viewing more pleasurable. "Modern Family" played at twice the speed is far funnier — the jokes come faster and they seem to hit harder. I get less frustrated at shows that want to waste my time with filler plots or gratuitous violence. The faster pace makes it easier to appreciate the flow of the plot and the structure of the scenes.

Why I Don't Recommend Speeding Up Audiobooks

If you skipped down to this part to hear about how you've been living life right, keeping things nice and slow, I have to reveal something to you: You're experiencing sped-up media already.

Yep, it turns out that many a network has sped up reruns in order to fit in more commercials. It's not double the speed, but if you kick up the pace about 7%, you can cut 2 minutes of runtime from a sitcom without missing a precious mother-in-law joke.

I don't know about you, but I hate that idea. It's completely irrational because I would never know that an episode of Seinfeld was 7% faster. But still, I hate it.

Doubling media speed feels a little like speedwalking through an art museum. I have to assume that art museums don't really work that way, and I assume this because nobody took me up on the offer

to make an art museum where you get on a moving walkway and never stop.

Most of the arguments against sped-up audiobooks come down to experiencing something in a way other than its creator intended. It's like Nate DiMeo of *The Memory Palace* podcast puts it:

You can listen to Abbey Road on 45, but I'm sure George Martin and the Beatles would not appreciate it.

I can make the argument simple. You're sitting down to watch the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I have no doubt that this is totally watchable at double the speed. But will you feel that Peter Jackson succeeded and brought this world to life if you spend half the time there? The whole idea is to trace an epic journey, to watch a very small character make his way through a big, big world. The lengthy runtime is almost certainly a way to increase the size of the world. One way of communicating the world's size in a movie is to show how long it takes to get across. This would almost certainly be lost with a doubling of the speed.

Something is lost when the speed of an audiobook is doubled.

Acceleration: Good or Bad

It's nothing new to say we're living in an accelerated culture. That's always the story, right? Everything is faster. We pack more into a day.

What's harder to say is whether this acceleration is good or bad.

However, whether it's good or bad is a dumb question. Asking whether something is good or bad is only useful if the thing in question hasn't been widely adopted yet. Sped-up listening is out there. There's no going back.

The better, more interesting question is whether you're going to try it.

Should I Speed Up This Audiobook or Not?

If you want you want to know whether speeding up a given audiobook is a good idea, here's a little quiz I made up for you.

Am I enjoying the book?

If so, keep it slow. If not, let's get it over with.

Is it highly narrative or is it more informational?

Note the difference between this and talking about fiction versus non-fiction. When we're talking



about something that's information-based, I find the acceleration doesn't seem to harm the experience much. When there's narrative, especially if it's emotional, speed kills.

What are the qualities of the narration?

Different readers will lose more or less from being sped up. It just depends on their style and how receptive your brain is to their particular style.

Is the book meant to be blown through?

It's simple. If you're drinking Natural Light, feel free to put it in a funnel. If you're drinking an expensive rye, don't. Figure out which books are your Natty Light, set 'em up, knock 'em down.

Am I using the book to kill time or am I trying to get through it quick

If you're reading for leisure and to kill time (for example, calf raise reading), then there's not a lot of benefit to blowing through pricey audiobooks.

Is it for a book club?

Double the speed. Triple it. You weren't going to finish this book anyway. At least now you'll have an interesting story about your attempt.

Is some A-hole telling you that if you speed up an audiobook, the timing and pauses will be off?

That A-hole thinks he's got a really good point, but he doesn't. Tell that A-hole that time is relative, and a pause in narration will still be a pause in narration, and though the actual duration of the pause is shorter, its relative impact should still be preserved. And listen to the audiobook at twice the speed just to spite him. Spite is ALWAYS a good reason to do something.

Conclusion

I can't believe I'm doing this, but I'm going to compare this whole issue to calf raises. Full circle!

You can do a few different calf exercises. Let's say there are 10.

Doing one rep of each exercise isn't going to provide the desired benefit.

And on the other hand, doing one of those 10 exercises exclusively isn't ideal either.

It's like everything in life. It sucks and it's disappointing because it's about daily balance. Nothing more boring than the idea of a balanced approach to something, right?

With sped-up media, it's the same deal. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's harmless, and sometimes it's bad. It's never going to be all one way.

Give it a shot.

99 Cents Is Too Cheap For Your Book



It's been a little while since I tried the persuasive essay, the sort of thing we did in school, but I'm giving it a shot here.

My recollection is that you're supposed to outline your premise, go through all the points, then remind everyone what the premise was one last time. Y'know, for the morons. Or the teachers, who almost certainly would have to be drunk to grade 30 essays on whether or not it's acceptable to wear hats in school.

Oh, and if you can start with a phrase like "Since the dawn of time," you probably should.

My premise is this: Since the dawn of time, I've seen a lot of indie authors selling their ebooks for 99 cents, and that is too cheap. You have to value your own work, low-pricing doesn't work, and you need to remove red flags that identify your book as self-published.

Let's take a closer look.

If You Don't Value Your Work, No One Will

Here's a life lesson: If you don't value your work, no one will. I would type it a third time, but you can just go back and read it again, either in the last sentence or the section heading. Do that now. I'll wait.

Luckily for you, I live across the street from a Dollar General, so I can make a nice analogy here. I say "luckily for you" instead of "luckily for me," because...eh, let's just say that a Dollar General being nearby is not something they really hammer on in real estate ads.

At the Dollar General, I can buy Kraft BBQ sauce for a dollar. Kraft feels that their bottle of sauce is worth one dollar. And I would say, from experience, that they are correct.

When you price your BBQ sauce at a buck, you are telling consumers, "Hey, this isn't going to blow your mind. But it's passable." Kraft doesn't BELIEVE in their sauce, but they don't have to.

You have to believe in your book, at least more than a dollar's worth.

When you price your ebook at a dollar, you're saying that, if a well-known book is a nice BBQ sauce, say a Gates or an Arthur Bryant (that's right, Kansas City styles. COME AT ME!) your book is Kraft BBQ sauce. Passable, sure. Maybe even delicious under the right circumstances (4th of July BBQ, mild heatstroke, overdose of patriotism, possibly stoned). But, no matter how good it ends up, you'll know you bought the Kraft for a buck. And when something's that cheap, the question is never about whether or not the sauce is good. It's whether it's 99-cents good.

You don't stand a chance of courting impulse buyers, if they even exist anymore.

When you price your book at 99 cents, you've put a ceiling on it. The best likely outcome, in the mind of a consumer, is that it will be worth 99 cents. If it makes that bar, then it's a success.

That bar is too low. It's too low for you, and it's too low for your work.

When you assign a price to your book, you're not just thinking about what some sucker will pay. You're assigning it a value. You're telling the world what you think your book is worth.

If you don't believe in your books more than 99 cents worth, nobody else will either.

The Idea Behind Ultra-Low Pricing Is Crap

We live in a world of abundant content. There's more than enough shit to fill anyone's Kindle without having to take a risk on an unknown ebook.

There's this idea floating around that readers will come across your book and say, "Eh, it's only a buck. What do I have to lose?"

Alright, fine. What DO readers have to lose?

Let's say it's a 50/50 shot that any random Kindle book is good (which is VERY generous, but let's go with it). That means I could buy 10 books for \$10, and half of them would be decent. Or, I could buy just about any goddamn book ever published for the same \$10 bucks, which means I can pick something I've been wanting to read. Which of these \$10 investments is smarter?

Add in the time investment, whether it's better to spend time reading a single good book or 10 books of mixed quality, and you start to get the picture of what consumers are losing when they take a chance on a cheap book.

The world of ebooks doesn't work like a used bookstore. In a small, physical bookstore, you might take a chance on something that's cheap because it's also right there. In the ebook world, EVERYTHING is right there. You can price out different stuff. You can be pretty sure that a book will still be there a year from now.

Buyers are unlikely to take a chance on your book just because it's cheap. They aren't going to impulse buy YOUR book. There's a lot of other shit they can impulse buy. There's no shortage of stuff out there, and no shortage of cheap stuff. Your book isn't going to show up on a ton of "Readers Also Enjoyed" lists. You don't stand a chance of courting impulse buyers, if they even exist anymore.



99 Cents Is A Red Flag

There are a few red flags that a book is self-published. There are only a couple reviews, and they're all 5-stars. The cover looks like shit. The description is distinctly bad. And the cost is 99 cents.

You might as well title your book *The Self-Published Book That Nobody Cares About: A Meditation*, if you're going to price it at 99 cents.

When you're putting your book on an online outlet, your goal should be to make someone look twice, to make them question whether your book is self-published or not. By the time they're investigating whether or not your title is self-published, you've got them hooked.

You don't have to hide the fact that you self-published. I'm a big fan of self-published work and think it's the wave of the future, if not the wave of the present. But there are a lot of readers who still haven't jumped on the self-publishing bandwagon, and lowering your red "I'm self-published!" flag is a way to open the door to people who might not take a chance on your book.

Imagine you're a pirate. You're at sea, and your goal is to get close to a ship that has a bunch of, I don't know, whatever the hell pirates wanted. You don't put up the jolly roger right away, even though that flag was metal before being metal was a thing. You put up some lame flag you stole off some sea nerds until the ship you're stalking gets in close enough to attack. That's how you operate.

Avoid anything that signals, from a distance, on first glance, from a list of search results, that your book is a self-published.

Conclusion

You know what I forgot? In a school essay, you're definitely supposed to end your essay with "In conclusion."

In conclusion, you can clearly see that because you have to value your work, low pricing doesn't sell books, and because it's a red flag, 99 cents is too cheap for your ebook.

11 Ways Marvel Comics Can Change To Attract Consumers



Marvel Comics sold a boatload of *Black Panther #1*'s in April 2016, but comics sales had already begun flagging across the board. Cut to October and things were less across the board, and Marvel was losing sales to DC. Cut to March of 2017 and Marvel's sales were sagging badly enough that they held a retailer summit to find out what was happening "on the ground" and how they might boost sales.

For the purpose of this column, let's pretend we're at that retailer summit. In this (really awesome) alternate universe, I own a comics store (Pete's Comics Hole), and I have a series of ideas, which I will express loudly and inarticulately through mouthfuls of cookies, which I assume were served.

Here are those cookie-spattered suggestions. And I apologize in advance for spitting cookie crumbs all over you.

Re-Re-Re-Re-Relaunches



Ms. Marvel #1 (Kamala Khan) came out in February 2014. We got 19 issues before the book was relaunched with a new *Ms. Marvel #1* in November 2015. Same creative team, same character, basically a continuation of the same series with a new "#1" slapped on the cover. I think that it might even be the same "#1" in terms of font, size, and placement. However, credit where credit's due, it IS yellow. Brave new world!

This means you can open two "Ms. Marvel #1's" published within two years of each other and find completely different content. You can pick up an issue listed as "Ms. Marvel #1," but if you want to read that same issue in trade paperback, you'll find it in *Ms. Marvel vol. 5*.

Ms. Marvel was selling, establishing a fan base, and defying the odds by pushing a newish character into staple status. Not to mention that nobody in their right mind is recommending new readers start in on this series with the second, relaunched #1. Issues 1-19 are good readin' and by no means a long slog. It's probably a solid afternoon's reading to be completely caught up with *Ms. Marvel*. Which begs the question, Why relaunch something that doesn't need it?

Because the larger relaunch of the Marvel Universe demanded it. They had to throw out the bath water, the baby, the washtub, the rag, and that yellow bottle of "No More Tears" shampoo. (Note to anyone, like me, who thought "No More Tears" meant this product was somehow emotionally soothing: There are no depression-fighting effects in that bottle. The bottle you want in that case is bourbon.)

Before we demonize the idea of relaunched, let's note that relaunched can be good. They can be purposeful and necessary. They can signal a change in creative teams, story arcs, characters, or what have you. Marvel has made good use of relaunched to diversify their lineup. If you were considering getting into Spider-Man at this point, a relaunched title would make it so you don't have to go back through 50+ years of funnybooks.

However, those are all reasons to relaunch individual books and characters, not the universe as a whole.

When books need a relaunch, do it. When there's a good story reason or character change, do it. If something in a given title is stale, fix it. But don't relaunch a title just because you're relaunching everything. Don't make a book that's working relaunch because all the other kids are doing it.

Sell Hostess

You used to sell Hostess products constantly. What happened? Hostess is probably desperate for something like a Spider-Man to sell fruit pies at this point. Seriously, you could give them a third-tier character, Trapster or Ghost Rider (face it, he's the coolest-looking superhero ever to have so many boring storylines). I hardly ever see kids eating wholesome Hostess Fruit Pies anymore, and I think when we look back at it, this dietary tragedy will reveal itself as an early warning sign of America's downfall, one we should have heeded.



Look, it's whoring, but so what? I'd rather see Spider-Man selling Twinkies than watch the Guardians of the Galaxy sell a Ford. What the hell would someone with a spaceship need a Ford for? Spidey's got super powers, but the guy's gotta eat.

Get back in the fruit pies game, make that money.

Promote Your Artists And Writers The Way You Promote Your Characters

Ask any adult to name five directors who are currently working. Ask any adult to name five authors who are currently writing. Ask any adult to name five athletes who are currently sports-ing. You'll get answers.

Ask any adult to name five Marvel characters. You'll get answers.

Ask any adult to name five authors or five illustrators who are currently working in comics. They probably can't.

And I don't think it's an issue of ignorance. I think it's an issue that creators aren't being promoted. I went to Marvel's subscription site, and I could search for subscription titles by series, character, by rating, by something called "Combo" and something called "New Readers." But there wasn't any "By Creator" tab.

Ta-Nehisi Coates brought new readers to the fold through the force of his prior work in prose. Kelly Sue DeConnick has been really good at creating a following for herself in addition to creating one for the books she's working on.

What makes these individuals alike is that they are popular as people, and what also makes them alike is that they had to cultivate this popularity themselves.

Start making a big deal about your top-tier talent. Talent which you have. Turn their names into big names, household names. Stop hiding that Chip Zdarsky under a rock! Let his beautiful light shine!

Have A Great Book (In Trade) Ready

Captain America: Civil War came out May 6th, 2016, and it was the first time we saw Black Panther kicking ass in a major movie. *Black Panther Volume 1*, which collected the first four issues of the new series, didn't come out until nearly 5 months later.

Why in the holy hell wouldn't you have PLENTY of shit for new fans to buy immediately upon leaving the theater? A couple issues is not enough. There should be a great, current trade available that showcases the Panther if he's on-screen.

Why let that love and curiosity have even one moment to be redirected? Capitalize on the early interest in shows and movies based on comics. Have some stuff people can read, in trade, ready to roll, weeks before the movie or the show.

Bring Back Dazzler

Screw Steve Rogers. I would love to find out that Dazzler was frozen in ice and is now emerging in 2017. You could go legitimate and serious, use the character to talk about the changes in society, feminism, and authentic music in the last 40 years. Or you could go completely bonkers, make the book totally bizarre and fun. There are endless ways to go with this one. You're a fool if you ignore it.

Enough With The Crossover Events Already

For the unfamiliar, a crossover event is something like *Civil War* where ALL Marvel books are involved for a while. This means you might be reading a title like *Fantastic Four*, and during the events of *Civil War*, the *Fantastic Four* are rerouted from whatever they were doing, and they get involved in the hubbub.

The theory here is that you, a reader who picks up a couple Marvel books every month, will be encouraged to read more, maybe even EVERY Marvel book during the crossover event in order to get the full story.

Theories are fun, but in practice, what we see is that general audiences are either confused, don't care, or just sort of give up on books they're enjoying during big crossovers. And when these events come too often, it doesn't leave enough room for different titles to be, well, different.

Tell big crossover stories, but make them their own thing.

Build An eReader

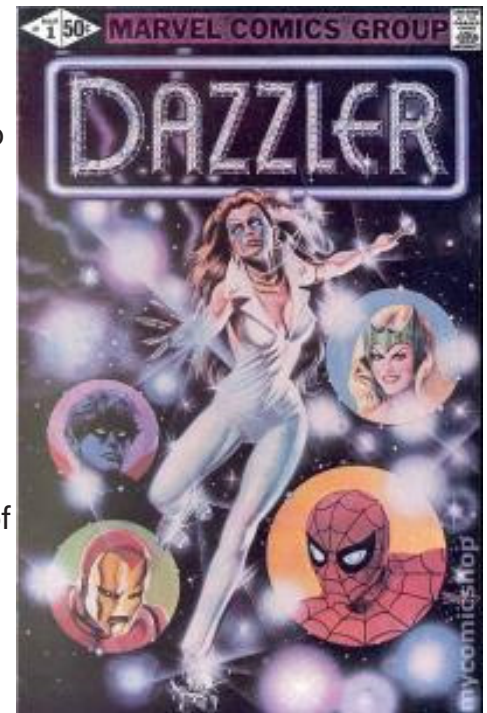
So far, I've been mixing it up, some ideas I think are good and some oddball ideas. This one's a little bit of both. Oddball because it's probably impossible to make money from dedicated eReaders, unless you're Amazon, but good because, well, I want it, damn it.

There's still no dedicated hardware, no solid eReader that successfully mimics the comics reading experience. Nothing of a size that can replicate a two-page spread. Two-page spreads are small on any screen. Being navigated through the panels is one way some apps work, but that takes the exploratory nature of reading comics and turns it into an on-rails experience that's just not as unique and cool.

This might sound unimportant to some, but big layouts, big art, and the way panels and balloons are placed really do matter to comics. They are part of the art. They're a big part of what makes comics different from movies and books, which is the visual interplay, the way time and action are represented visually. Comics are different from other reading in that a reader has to take an active role and decide where to look, unlike text-only books that lead a reader across the page on a leash.

These are some of the beautiful, important things that comics do, and they're rarely replicable in other media.

Why is it that, in the move to digital, nobody has created a device that preserves those crucial pieces



of the form?

Publish Some Books In Trade Only

Some audiences read in trade only. And some books probably attract more fans who read this way than others.

Comics, you done good in getting almost everything in trade. That was a big step in the right direction. Now I'm asking you to consider the next step, which is publishing some books **ONLY** in trade.

Why not have some books that come out in bigger chunks, or even better, as whole, complete pieces? I'm a lot more likely to pick up some books if I know I can read the entire story right there, beginning to end, and some writers and stories have a style that lend themselves better to chunked reading rather than monthly, bite-sized bits.

It's not just a new way of selling, it's a new mode of telling stories.

Put It To Consumers

I'll say it for you because I think you're afraid to say it.

We can write a billion think pieces about comics, we can make a billion comments online, we can have Twitter wars until we're as blue in the face as that Twitter bird is in his whole body, but if we don't go out and buy the comics we love, in single issues, the titles we love will be canceled.

That seems to be the model. If sales drop below a certain level, a title just isn't sustainable. My question to you: Why not put that out to the people? If it's new book day, and if I know that a title I've been considering is on the chopping block, maybe I pick it up. Maybe I think a book is not my cup of tea, but I think it's something that should exist, and I'll fork over a few bucks. Maybe I feel a book is like the early episodes of a sitcom and hasn't found its feet, but it's getting there.

With the current model, consumers don't know a book is on its way out until it's too late. It would be nice to have the chance to save a title.

Zeppelins

The Goodyear Blimp had its run, and now I think it's time for the Marvel Zeppelin to start kicking some ass.

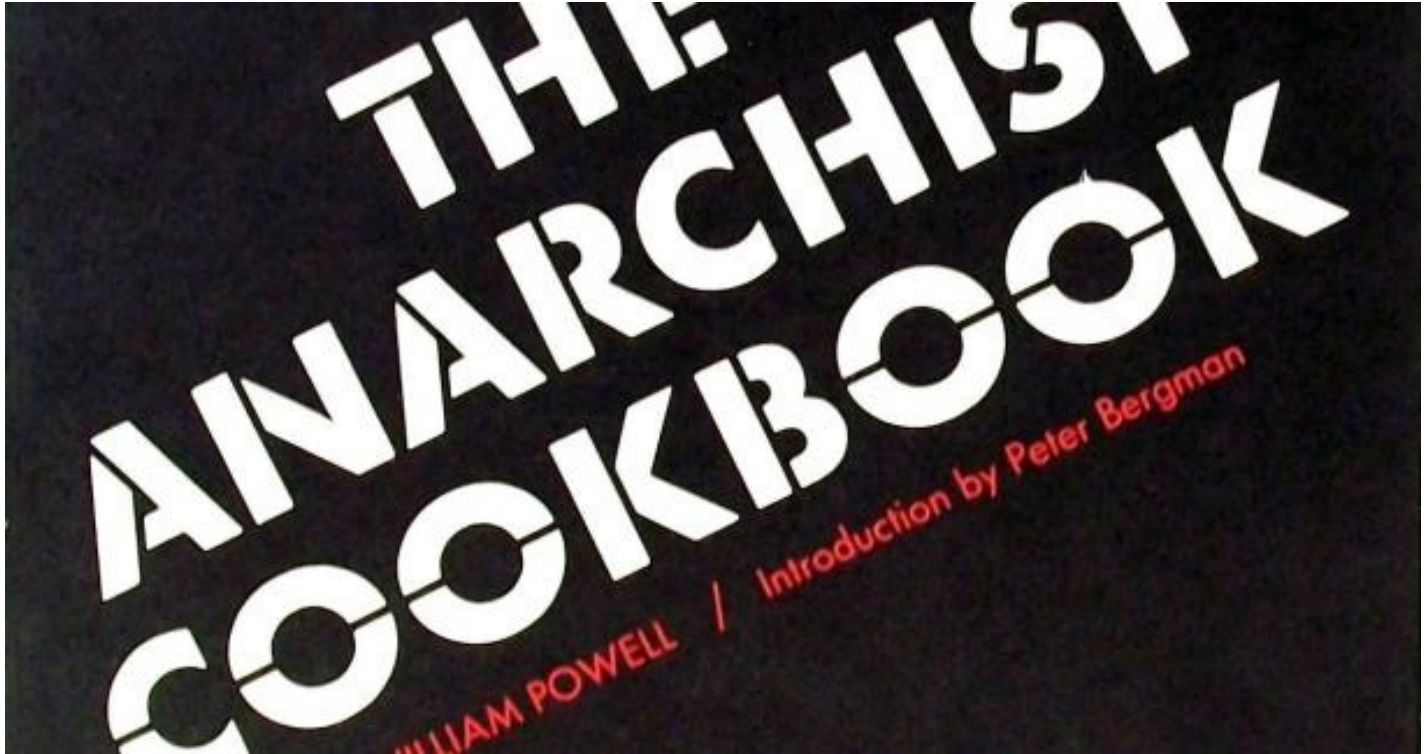
The Wienermobile is still going strong, the Batmobile is a draw at any con. Where's the Marvel novelty car? The Silver (Mercury) Sable? The Galactabus? Hell, you've already got the Kra-Van, and you turned your noses up at it.



Cheaper

I know. It's nearly impossible. But if you're spreading the seeds today, hoping to make new readers into lifelong fans, the habit's gotta be cheaper. It just plain has to. \$4 or \$5 bucks is a lot to fork over for about five minutes of entertainment. It's like a buck per minute. That would make a movie ticket like \$150 bucks, which isn't worth it unless they revive the *Beetlejuice* sequel, *Beetlejuice Goes Hawaiian*. For that I'd pay \$150 plus an additional quarter for each piece of popcorn consumed. Which, for me, is a debt I'd be working off the rest of my able-bodied life.

William Powell And "The Anarchist Cookbook": A Defense



You might not know the name William Powell, but you've almost certainly heard of his book, *The Anarchist Cookbook*, and you might have seen a new documentary, *American Anarchist*, about William Powell and *The Cookbook's* legacy of violence.

I watched the doc. We all use our platforms as we wish, and it seems the filmmaker used his to try and verbally beat a confession of wrongdoing from Powell. Through a series of interviews, it becomes pretty clear the filmmaker blames Powell for some of the violence that's come about with *The Cookbook* on the periphery. Or, at the very least, the filmmaker seems to feel Powell doesn't feel bad enough about the book's legacy.

This is my platform today, and I'm going to use it to defend William Powell and his creation of *The Anarchist Cookbook*.

In Case You Live Under A Rock

The Anarchist Cookbook is a famous manual of anarchy, protest, and very specific bomb and weapon making instructions. It was published in hard copy, but it was with the emergence of the internet that the thing, or various iterations of the thing, really took off. It was practically a rite of passage to download a version of *The Anarchist Cookbook* if you were a teenager in the 90's.

While the rebelliousness stopped at downloading and perhaps viewing *The Cookbook* for most, that wasn't the case for everyone. Timothy McVeigh, a bomb in Grand Central Station, another bomb in a reporter's car, The Weather Underground, a series of abortion clinic bombings, a white supremacist group plotting to kill Rodney King, the London 7/7 bombers, multiple school shooters—all of them

had copies of *The Cookbook*.

The 70's

Let's get into the reasons *The Anarchist Cookbook* came about.

What do you think of when you think of the 70's? Woodstock capping the 60's? The Sex Pistols and the Ramones? The Godfather? The Sears Tower? *The Exorcist*? Hank Aaron? Muhammad Ali? American muscle cars? Roots, Star Wars, and disco?

Do you think about the Vietnam War and what it meant to have an active draft? Do you think about the clashes between protesters and police, the tragedies like Kent State? Do you think about the prevalence of many, many radical groups who were willing to use bombs and arson to make their voices heard?

We have a tendency to dumb down the recent-ish past to a given time period's legacy of pop culture. Music, fashion, movies. When we do that, it's hard to understand where *The Anarchist Cookbook* came from.

If we look at the early 70's holistically, it's not hard to understand why a young man might be angry, frustrated, and looking to find a way to shift what he saw as an imbalance of power.

What Protest Looks Like

It's crucial to note that Powell never blew anything up. He never killed anyone. He was never directly involved with groups that did. The act of writing the book itself was where it started and ended for Powell. Writing *The Cookbook* was his protest. It wasn't about making bombs for him, and I would submit that it wasn't really his aim for others to make bombs either. In fact, I would postulate that the message sent by the book was not a message to his peers about bomb-making.

From the Los Angeles Times:

In a foreword, Powell advised that he hadn't written the book for fringe militant groups of the era like the Weathermen or Minutemen, but for the 'silent majority' in America, those he said needed to learn the tools for survival in an uncertain time.

I think Powell wanted to use the book as a tool to speak to the general populace. Not to encourage them to make bombs, but to help them feel empowered, to feel that they were on equal footing with authority figures.

This is giving Powell some serious benefit of the doubt. It's assuming that he was trying to express something and found a problematic, very flawed way to do so. But the rest of Powell's life would suggest that benefit of the doubt is worth exploring. Especially considering Powell's quick turnaround on *The Cookbook* and his desire for it to simply disappear.

Powell Thought 'The Cookbook' Would Vanish

Long story short, Powell's publisher always owned the rights to *The Anarchist Cookbook*. Which

meant that when Powell decided, only 5 years after *The Cookbook* was first published, that he'd like to see the book go out of print, he had no say in the situation.

However, Powell wasn't too worried because he thought his book would fade into obscurity. This seems naive, maybe even purposely so. But only because we're looking back.

The Anarchist Cookbook is the only book of its ilk that still maintains notoriety today. Have you ever heard of the book *150 Questions For A Guerrilla*? No? Interesting. Because the author sued Powell for copyright violation, saying Powell ripped off his book. How about Kurt Saxon and *The Poor Man's James Bond? Steal This Book* by Abbie Hoffman is probably the silver medal for notoriety, but despite being available for free online and also containing bomb-making recipes, you rarely, if ever, hear it mentioned in connection with a tragedy.

The Cookbook was one of a HUGE number of books of its type, and it's seemingly the only one of its type that hasn't faded from public consciousness. 9 times out of 10, books of its ilk vanished. While Powell was incorrect and his book didn't fade out, using the best information available at the time, he was totally right to think that it would.

And because Powell didn't have any control over *The Cookbook's* continued publication, the only real option available to him was to move on with his life and hope for the best.

The Bogeyman

Look at a tragedy and you'll find a bogeyman.

I was in junior high when Columbine went down. And there were a lot of bogeymen. Marilyn Manson, a convenient bogeyman because he looked the part. Doom. The misunderstood Goth scene. Trench coats, in general. And, of course, *The Anarchist Cookbook*.

The hallmarks of a media bogeyman are these:

- 1. The association is all correlation, no causation.**
- 2. The material or person in question is never really understood or explored, and only a very small percent of the whole is highlighted.**
- 3. The bogeyman diverts attention away from the people truly causing/allowing harm.**

The Anarchist Cookbook fits all of these to a T.

It's very natural to ask why. To wonder why something awful happens. And because the answer is almost always non-existent or difficult to really understand, we're often settling with an answer that's close enough. Something that will do for now. Something that doesn't force us to ask big questions we don't want to ask, questions about things like gun control or mental health. We'll settle for something that's easily compressed into a 5-minute news clip. Something with name recognition. Something like *The Anarchist Cookbook*.

Revolution Grew Up

Powell, unlike most of those who committed crimes associated with *The Cookbook*, lived into his 60's.

It was only 1976, 5 years after *The Cookbook's* initial publication, when he converted to Anglicism and tried to stop further publication of *The Cookbook*.

In 1979 he started a teaching career that took him to Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Indonesia and Malaysia, and he specialized in working with marginalized children and children with special needs. This is what he did for the rest of his life.



The only "editorial review" of *The Anarchist Cookbook* on Amazon is a message from Powell. A message of regret.

The central idea to the book was that violence is an acceptable means to bring about political change. I no longer agree with this...I want to state categorically that I am not in agreement with the contents of The Anarchist Cookbook and I would be very pleased (and relieved) to see its publication discontinued. I consider it to be a misguided and potentially dangerous publication which should be taken out of print.

Powell learned, grew, and based on what he found, he changed his mind. Which is something that we love in the sciences, something we'd like to see more in politicians. But with art, we treat a change of thought with skepticism. Artists are being hypocritical, untrue to themselves, or selling out.

In making art, artists surrender their ability to grow and change as people, and that's not right. We like to quote Whitman, say we "contain multitudes," but maybe what we want is for those multitudes to stay contained and out of sight.

Legacy

William Powell's legacy should be about empowerment. He wrote *The Cookbook* to empower people. It was a crude, early, flawed, failed attempt. He then spent the rest of his life empowering youth all over the globe. In all his acts, good and bad, he was championing the power, abilities, and capability of the people who desperately needed a champion.

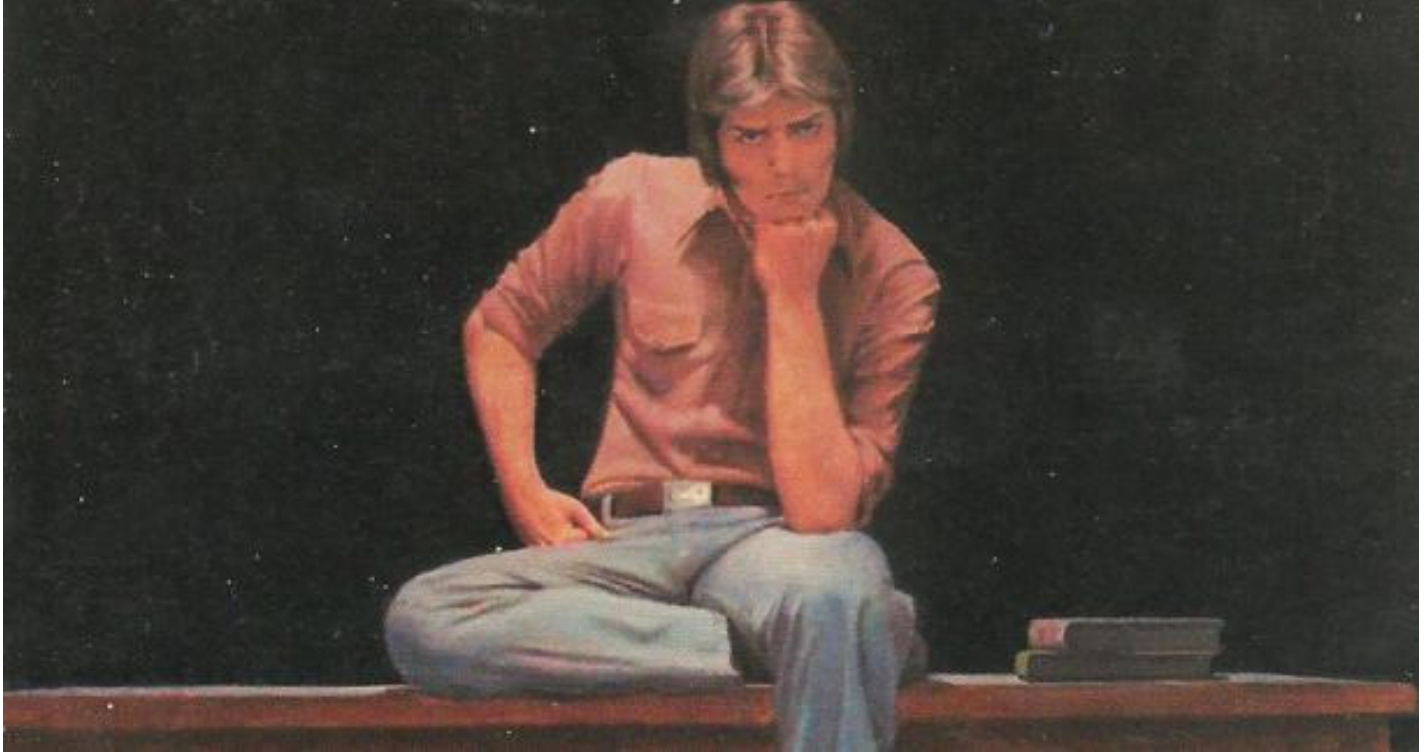
And yet, *The Anarchist Cookbook* proved that Powell himself was powerless. He was powerless to stop publication of his book, powerless to stop its proliferation online. He was powerless to stop any of the violence.

William Powell's legacy won't be his teaching and working with educators in impoverished, marginalized parts of the world. Even though that's how he spent 40 of his 60 years on Earth.

William Powell's legacy won't be *The Anarchist Cookbook* either.

The tragedy of William Powell is that his legacy will serve as a cautionary tale: When it comes to the top line of your obituary, the thing you'll be remembered for—you're truly powerless.

Should Stephen King's "Rage" Return to Print?



In Stephen King's *Rage*, a high school student with a gun shoots his algebra teacher and takes a class of high schoolers hostage.

King wrote the book when he himself was in high school. He let it sit, and after he'd published half a dozen bestsellers, he rewrote *Rage* and had it published in paperback under the Richard Bachman pseudonym. The book sold decently, and then it pretty much went away, as most books do.

Then:

1988: A high school student takes his class hostage. He was partially inspired by a book he read. A book called *Rage*.

1989: A young hostage taker says he was partially motivated by a book he'd been reading. *Rage*.

1996: School shooting, three dead. *Rage* is quoted by the shooter.

1997: Another school shooting. 3 dead, 5 wounded. Copy of *Rage* in the kid's locker.

At that point, King asked his publishers to pull *Rage* from publication. They obliged, and it's been out of print since.

The Choice

I understand that this is some thin ice I'm skating. Questioning Stephen King's decision-making isn't something I'm qualified to do. He chose to write bestselling novels, and I choose to eat Bugles from the coffee table with my face so I can play Nintendo without getting my fingers greasy.

This is not about proving whether or not King was "right" to pull *Rage* from publication. It's about revisiting the decision knowing what we know now, being in the place we are now, and talking about the reasons why it should or shouldn't come back into print.

Let's look at the yes's and no's.

Yes: The right book

Something that Stephen King is really good at, and perhaps underrated for, is his ability to tap into certain aspects of life. Reading *IT*, I didn't love it for the horror aspects so much as I loved the way it reminded me of what it was like to be a kid.

Rage is a book that taps into the frustration of being a high school student in a way that's honest, brutal, and unflinching. As good fiction does, it takes the feeling of something like high school, the feeling of being trapped, the feeling that everything is life and death, and makes those feelings into narrative reality. Stephen King is a writer who is uniquely suited to write something like *Rage* and make it an effective book.

If there's going to be a handful of school shooting books out there, *Rage* should be one of them.

No: King's choice

Had King waited longer, it's very possible that pulling *Rage* wouldn't have been his choice. Or, pulling it would have meant something very different.

By pulling it when he did, by making his own decision regarding *Rage*, King was in control. And his book didn't have to stand for some larger issue surrounding censorship, violent media, or school shootings. He could simply choose to pull the book, removing it from the larger discussion, and it remained his decision about his book.

Bringing it back takes away King's right to make his own decisions about his art.

Yes: Violence and media

I want to be fair to Stephen King. Here's what he says:

*My book did not break [school shooters] or turn them into killers; they found something in my book that spoke to them because they were already broken. Yet I did see *Rage* as a possible accelerant, which is why I pulled it from sale. You don't leave a can of gasoline where a boy with firebug tendencies can lay hands on it.*

King's walking a line. He's not saying that *Rage* caused violence, and he's not apologizing for the book's existence. But his words and actions send a mixed message.

Keeping *Rage* out of print lends credence to the idea that violent books make violent boys.

**Nothing de-
powers a voice
of rebellion
more than
that voice
becoming
mainstream.**

If you ask me, it's pretty hard to go on a shooting spree while holding an armload of books.

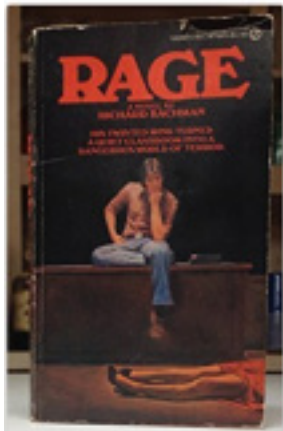
No: Part of the system, man!

It's like this. I might feel like negative book reviews provide a needed service, but that doesn't mean I have to write them. I might be glad they exist and feel they have every right to exist, but I might not want to participate.

Stephen King might feel a book like *Rage* has every right to exist, but that doesn't mean he needs to be that book's author.

There's something to be said for recognizing a system for its problems and merits and bowing out.

Yes: Scarcity can be enticing



Rage Mass Market Paperback – September 6, 1977

by [Richard Bachman](#) (Author)

★★★★☆ 29 customer reviews

▶ [See all 2 formats and editions](#)

Paperback
from \$300.00

8 Used from \$300.00
1 New from \$780.00

Mass Market Paperback
from \$650.00

1 Used from \$650.00

In some ways, *Rage* remaining out of print might make it all the more interesting and enticing for people who shouldn't read it.

If you're feeling like an outsider, if part of your identity is based on feeling like you don't fit in, then reading a book that the world has labeled "bad" might feel like exactly the kind of thing you SHOULD be doing. Pirating material that's not really accessible might feel like an act of rebellion. Telling Old Man King that he can't stop you from doing what you want might feel perfectly aligned with the way you see yourself. Exploring taboos might be right up your alley.

If King is concerned about the folks identifying with *Rage's* Charlie Decker, then I do wonder if they identify with him even more if they see his voice as a voice that's being silenced.

Nothing de-powers a voice of rebellion more than that voice becoming mainstream.

No: Stephen's subversive self

It's pretty easy to imagine, if *Rage* were in print, people combing through King's other works to find other objectionable material, finding other ways in which King is ruining the world with his violent,

horrific visions.

This is pretty common practice these days. Take a public figure, search through their work for objectionable stuff, write an article about how they should be ashamed and won't somebody please think of the children!?

By stopping *Rage* himself, King may have kept a door wide open. The door being the passage to writing subversive stuff and keeping his volumes of already-written, often-transgressive material in print. By sending one book to the slaughter, he may have saved others.

Now, I'm not saying this was King's intent. I think his intent was pure and real. But I think this might be a pretty useful and significant side effect.

By keeping *Rage* out of print, it helps Stephen King get a pass. It's like, "Hey, he's regulating himself. Saves me the work of reading hundreds of pages about a scary clown to make sure it's okay. Besides, there's probably not a weird sex scene in like the last 10% of this thing anyway..."

Yes: The development of a person

If *Rage* were accessible again, it would demonstrate the evolution of Stephen King as a writer and as a person.

In 2013 King published a Kindle single called *Guns*, an essay about the problems with and possible solutions to America's view on gun ownership. It was a very well-balanced and middle-of-the-road view. Honestly, everyone should read it.

The combo of these two books, *Guns* and *Rage*, and the significance of them being by the same person, says a lot. It shows how someone grew from an individual who wrote something like *Rage* into a successful, respected adult who made his own way in the world, who took an unusual path. It shows that you can have awful thoughts, but there still might be a place for you.

The existence of *Rage* presents a more complicated Stephen King, and that Stephen King could serve as a good example to those folks who are feeling very complicated themselves.

I can't help but wonder if *Rage*, paired with *Guns*, might be a less cheesy way of saying "It gets better."

Because it does get better. But only if you're still alive.

Verdict:

I started this column thinking I would want *Rage* back in print. And I still do. Sort of.

The thing is, it's pretty rare when artists retain control of their art. Whether it be books, music, movies. Once something is out in the world, once the genie is out of the bottle, it's almost impossible to put it back in. Your intent doesn't matter, your feelings don't matter. It's not about you anymore.

I like that King did manage to jam that genie back in the bottle and cork it, for the most part. I like the rare example of the artist exerting control over the art. And I do think that King did a good-hearted

thing, even if it's not the thing that I want.

That said...I'd still like to see *Rage* come back.

The reasons for *Rage* to stay out of print are King-centric. He got to make the decision. He did the right thing for himself, the thing that probably gives him a measure of comfort.

The reasons to bring it back into print are less about King. They're about everyone who isn't King, which is, statistically speaking, everyone.

Selfishly, and for the sake of my wallet and my reading edification, I'd like to see *Rage* come back into print. And at the same time, I'm willing to bet that keeping *Rage* out of print is a decision that helps King sleep a little better at night, and he's a dude who's more than earned a good night's rest now and again.

Woodshedding for Writers



Woodshedding comes up all the time in interviews with guitar players. Doesn't matter if it's Brian Wilson or Mastodon's Brent Hinds, most every guitar player will talk about this concept.

What is it?

Picture a young Eddie Van Halen. He's in his bedroom, and all he's doing, all summer long, is playing the guitar. Maybe trying to nail down one really tough, really complex 15 seconds of a song. Maybe learning every Cream solo note for note.

He gets two notes in and screws it up, starts over. And he does that again. And again.

That's woodshedding.

Woodshedding is easy to understand and tough to do. Especially for a writer. But it might be just the thing for you.

What We Have To Understand

Woodshedding looks really different from the way a lot of us write.

A lot of us work on a story or an essay or a poem. We don't pick out one small skill and try to figure it out. We don't spend a lot of time directly copying the work of others.

That's what's different here. That's what you have to understand. This is a really different way to work on your writing. It's practicing writing. Not the practice of writing. It's practicing your skill, breaking "writing" down into a bunch of very tiny skills and working through them until you've got them down.

It's not like a retreat where you shut yourself away and work on a piece or an edit. It's practice.

There is no gratification outside of that. There are no pats on the back. If you go into this thinking, "Alright, no pressure. But maybe I'll write something worth publishing while I'm at it," then you're getting into woodshedding for the wrong reason.

If you're someone who can't work in that kind of space, that's cool. This probably isn't for you. If you're someone who is excited about the idea, then read on.

Specificity

"I want to write shorter sentences." "I want to write in a voice that doesn't sound like mine." "I want to work on my dialog."

These are all examples of specific tasks tied to writing. These are the sorts of things that benefit from woodshedding, from long, focused practice sessions.

If you want to make good use of your woodshedding time, pick out something specific you need to work on and break it down as much as possible. "Fiction writing" isn't small enough. "Sci-fi" isn't small enough. Get micro. "Descriptions of sci-fi technology" is better.

If you're not sure what to work on, I'll give you a tip.

When I worked with runners, most of the time, the thing they would benefit from most was the thing they least wanted to do. If I had a runner who hated track workouts, then I made sure to get some track workouts in there.

If you hate dialog, if you hate writing sex, if you hate long sentences, then there's a good chance you don't understand those things the way you should. The places where you're weak make for great starting points.

Fail Away

Having a way and a place to fuck up is crucial. A place where everyone doesn't have to see you do it. A place where you can look and say, "Damn, that was all wrong," and instead of over analyzing what went wrong, try it again.

This is the beauty of the woodshed. You are in a place where the fuckups are expected. Doing it wrong is in the plan. Go out there, fuck up a lot, and get better through it.

Sustainable Effort

One key difference between playing guitar and writing is that with the guitar, you'll hit a point when you just can't play anymore without taking a break. Physically. When the fret board is getting bloody,

If you hate dialog, if you hate writing sex, if you hate long sentences, then there's a good chance you don't understand those things

it's probably time to put down the guitar and have a Snapple (or whatever the metal equivalent of a Snapple is).

When you're woodshedding your writing, you need to make a constant, mid-level effort that's sustainable for a long stretch. You don't have to work like mad, sweating and biting your lips. But you have to keep working, and you have to keep working for as long as possible.

Figure out the pacing that lets you put in a couple hours at a time. Figure out a pace that allows time to slip away from you.

Plan On A Long Haul

Assuming you'd never played guitar, if you picked one up today, how long would you expect it to be before you could play the opening to "Eruption?"

I'm guessing you'd give yourself a break if you weren't good at it in a day.

You need to do that with your writing too. Give yourself the time to get better. It's a skill and an art, and it takes a long, long time to be really good at it.

Don't get frustrated, don't toss your early efforts out into the world. Keep working and plan on being there for the long haul.

It's Not Just For Newbies

In a *Guitar World* article, an interviewer asked veteran guitar player Earl Kugh whether woodshedding was still necessary for him:

Oh yeah. I used to retain things better than I do now, so it takes practice. I enjoy the challenge. I practice to keep current and keep my hands agile, and it's interesting.

Woodshedding isn't just for folks who haven't played before, and it's not just for brand new writers. It's for everyone. Like Klugh is saying, new writers can woodshed to develop new skills. Veterans can do the same, and the woodshedding might be even more crucial for them. I know that the older I get, the more work it takes for new ideas to penetrate my skull.

Woodshedding Exercises

Are you convinced? Convinced enough to give it a try?

Cool. Here are some ways to get started.

Copy and compose exercises

Great woodshed fodder. All you do is find a sentence, copy it word for word, and then compose your own sentence using the same style. There's an oft-recommended book, *Copy and Compose* by Weathers and Winchester. Unfortunately, it's tough to come by, but their updated version, *A Strategy of Style*, can be had for less than \$10 bucks. And, you know, there's a pretty good chance someone

condensed it for academic purposes...

Roy Peter Clark's Newspaper exercise

Here's the first exercise from *Writing Tools* by Roy Peter Clark, which we've been discussing in the community a bit:

1. Pick up a newspaper.
2. Read it with a highlighter. Highlight the subjects and verbs.
3. Do the same with your writing.
4. Do the same with something you're working on now.
5. The next time you struggle with a sentence, rewrite by putting the subject and verb at the beginning.

The idea being that clear writing begins sentences with subjects and verbs, which is a pretty common practice in news writing.

Read-Alouds

Take something you're working on and read it out loud, out REALLY loud, sentence by sentence. Pick it apart and perfect everything. Make everything sound spoken. Take anything you stumble over and rewrite it the way you'd say it.

Get Friendly

Here's one I like to do, and it's about comedy, which you don't see too much in serious writing work.

Print off a couple scripts from *Friends*. Go through, and punch up the jokes. Or make it darker. Whatever you want. Pick a way to go, and then go through, line by line, and take the script in that direction. Punch it up, punch it down, but pick one thing to convey and slide it into the existing work.

Brunetti Modification

Ivan Brunetti does a drawing exercise where he has students draw an object. A car, a telephone, a castle, something like that. First they have two minutes to do it. Then they start a second drawing, same object, but they only have one minute. Then 30 seconds. Then 10. Then 5.

Then the students go back and see which version they prefer. Usually it's one in the middle.

Pick out a quick, compelling story from your life. Something simple. Write it out in two minutes. Don't stop your pen. Write the entire time, adding in details if you need to. Then, write the same story, but only give yourself one minute. And so on.

13 Tips on Plowing Through "IT" (or any long book) In A Few Days



Stephen King's *IT* is a big-ass book. Something like 440,000 words. That's like 75% the length of *Atlas Shrugged* (561,000 words) or *War and Peace* (587,000 words). When you've read *IT*, you've read almost all of a couple books famous for being ridiculously long.

I'm dumb, which is why I decided to read Stephen King's *IT* for a book club.

And because it was a book club book, I had about a week to read it. Okay, I had a month, but I'm not perfect.

Let's skip to the end of this tale: I made it. I was the only person at the meeting who finished, but goddamn it, I did it.

With the new movie coming out, you might be unsure of your ability to finish *IT* in time to see the movie and balk at how they left out this and that. Or, you might have some other big-ass book on your nightstand that you'll never finish.

I can help you. Follow these steps to read a long book in a short period of time.

1. Don't get out of bed

Whatever you do to start your day, don't do it until you've read some pages. The easiest time to stay still is before you've moved at all. I don't care what your morning rituals are, don't start in on them until you've read some pages. Set your alarm ten minutes earlier if you have to. If you develop open sores on your back, you're doing it right.

2. Cuffs

Wherever you go, whatever you do, bring the book and nothing else. If you're going to an appointment, bring the book. If you're going to the bank, bring the book inside. When you eat lunch, it's the only option you allow yourself.

Turn your life into one of those stupid movies where two dudes are handcuffed together for some reason and have to learn to get along. Sure, they don't like each other at first. But eventually, even Laurence Fishburne and Stephen Baldwin can become friends, given enough time and sturdy enough handcuffs.

Am I suggesting you actually handcuff yourself to a book? Hmm...I wasn't before, but now that I think about it: Yes, yes I am.

3. Move

This is an old therapist's trick. You have a client who seems unsure what to do in therapy or is very restless, so you talk to them while tossing a ball. It gives things a rhythm, takes their mind off things. It keeps part of your brain busy so it doesn't run around in a lot of different directions when you need it to focus.

I'm a big fan of the ol' walk n read. You hold the book in front of you, you start walking, and you walk in a direction and read. The best places to try this are the suburbs, on a treadmill, or on a track. The worst places include the woods, the haunted woods, and anywhere it's likely you'll bump into someone who will inform you that, hey, they're walkin' here.

It doesn't have to be walking. Just occupy your hands. Crumple and uncrumple a piece of paper. Fiddle with a deck of cards. Whatever. Just find something that keeps part of you busy.

4. Read in a faraway land

Okay, not in some fairyland or something. That would make things worse, what with all the questing going on. I just mean you drive 45 minutes away, plop down at a Starbucks and read.

Going out of your way makes the idea of a short reading session seem impossible, wasteful, and stupid. You've gotta read at least as long as it took to get there, right?

5. Don't be afraid to mutilate your books

Once I had to read some long textbook chapters on an airplane. I know, my life is pretty glamorous. Jetsetting, library school textbooks...

I didn't want to bring all my books, so I ripped out the pages I needed and brought them.

This worked out great. I got my reading done, didn't bring a bunch of extra shit, and I got the distinct pleasure of trashing the pages I'd finished.

There are lots of ways you can deface your books to help you in crunch time. Make marks on the page edges that show where you should be tomorrow and the next day. Keep a daily diary in the margins that will show you how fast or slow you're progressing. Make the book yours. Then you own it. Dominate it. And you can finish it.

6. Get in the bathtub

Listen. I know the downsides of baths, okay? You don't have to tell me about how I'm just stewing in my own filth. I already know. It's MY FILTH.

Anyone who takes baths for the purposes of cleaning themselves is taking baths wrong. That's like going to a water park to get clean. In fact, it's A LOT like that in you're mostly soaking in urine.

Let me tell you the upsides. Of stewing in my filth.

Once you're in, you're in. You're trapped. You've made this bed, and you might as well lie in it.

After all, you wouldn't want to waste all that water by only reading for 15 minutes, would you?

7. Shut off your phone

Can you remember the last time you turned off your phone, like ACTUALLY turned it all the way off? Turning off the phone can be a pretty powerful deterrent to Googling, music-ing, and doing all the other nonsense that's NOT reading-ing. When you go to read, shut that stuff all the way off.

8. Don't Allow For Cram Time

"Cram" and "crap" are off by only one letter for a reason.

Cramming is a great way to memorize some nonsense about Presidents (that's probably not even true) just long enough to pass a test. But it's a terrible way to finish a long book. Why? Because reading takes as long as it takes. There's a finite amount you can shave off your reading time. It's like trying to "cram" when you're late to a party by drinking bourbon spiked with coffee on the train (this sort of works, but as one of this method's practitioners, I wouldn't recommend it). Sure, you get some of the effect. But you're missing the point of the party.

I'm trying to help you avoid a pitfall here. When it comes to long books, planning to cram is planning to fail.

9. Change your social media passwords

This is a great way to get anything done. Have someone change your password, or change it to something you won't be able to re-create. Write it down somewhere, and then put it away until you

Cramming is a great way to memorize some nonsense about Presidents just long enough to pass a test. But it's a terrible way to finish a long book.

finish your book. The world is going to be just fine without you for the next week. Well, okay, the world is going to be terrible, but it's not getting any worse because you're not commenting on it.

If you need help coming up with a bizarre password that's impossible to remember, I recommend adapting the lyrics from any of Dream Theater's songs.

Now, all you have to do is take the little parcels of time you used on Twitter and turn them into reading time.

Besides, then you'll have a week's worth of stuff built up for your triumphant return to the world of the internet. It'll be a glorious 7 minutes.

10. Double-Team it with the audiobook

You read when you can, you listen when you can't. Get both the print and audiobook going at the same time to maximize your productivity. Bonus points if you listen to the audiobook at twice the speed.

11. Show up early for everything

Everything you've got this week, leave 15 minutes earlier than you should, and bring your book. Then you'll have 15 minutes of sweet parking lot time to kill. Plus, you'll feel good about yourself for being on time for once. This could be the start of a whole new thing for you! It won't be, us late-comers never change, but still, it's nice to live for a few days like a non-scumbag.

12. Remember, this is your last chance to read the book unspoiled

Once a book becomes a movie, it's over. You're never going to get that pure reading experience. The surprises are gone.

It seems like a no pressure situation, but it's not. Once you see the movie, the option to read the book without comparing it to the movie is gone. There are stakes here. Remember, there are stakes.

If what you're reading isn't about to be made into a movie, then I advise moving onto the next threat level: imminent death hounding your every second. Do you want to die before you finish that long book? Or do you, like Bill and Ted, want to beat Death?

13. Don't read anything else

Don't read articles. Don't read emails. Don't read texts. The only text that should be entering your brain is this book. That's it.

In fact, if you read on a Kindle, delete all your other downloaded stuff. Seriously, do it right now. I'll wait.

...

Now you don't have the temptation.

Return all your other library books, put all your other books on a tall shelf, and give yourself this one thing to focus on.

The Sex Scene In Stephen King's 'IT'



When I pitched the idea for this column, I was told it was cool so long as I kept it classy. After I found my monocle, which had fallen out of my eye due to my wide-eyed, shocked expression ("ME?! How could I be NOT classy?!"), I started thinking about how to tackle the topic.

With *IT* coming to theaters, readers and non-readers alike are becoming aware of a piece missing from the movie. I'm talking, of course, about the sex scene. The one that's (not incorrectly) referred to as a "child orgy in the sewer."

Before you throw away this column in disgust (by trashing your computer, which I don't recommend as a show of disgust as it's expensive, though it DOES demonstrate a high level of commitment), allow me to be clear about my purpose: share some context, theories, and what King has to say about it.

Because while I've seen and read a lot of articles that ask questions about this scene, questions like "Isn't that weird?" or "Isn't that gross?" I haven't seen a lot of folks asking other questions. My questions. Which are:

A: Why does this exist? and

B: Does the scene do what Stephen King wanted it to do?"

What is it?

Here are the basics. Spoilers from here forward (although you can skip to the final section if you're curious about whether or not you should read *IT*):

The Losers (a group of kids at this point in the book) go into the sewers and confront Pennywise/

It. The Losers all have abilities that combine and make them good candidates to defeat Pennywise, sort of a prophecy-meets-Voltron sort of deal. After they take on Pennywise and are trying to exit the labyrinthian sewers, Eddie, the group's guide, starts losing his preternatural navigation abilities. And the group starts falling apart. And somehow, Bev, the group's sole female character, figures that by having sex with all the boys in the group, one at a time, down there in the sewer, they will somehow strengthen their bond, regain their abilities, and exit the sewer.

She is 100% correct, and that's exactly what happens.

King's words

Why does this scene exist? Here's what Stephen King has to say about it:

I wasn't really thinking of the sexual aspect of it. The book dealt with childhood and adulthood—1958 and Grown Ups. The grown ups don't remember their childhood. None of us remember what we did as children—we think we do, but we don't remember it as it really happened. Intuitively, the Losers knew they had to be together again. The sexual act connected childhood and adulthood. It's another version of the glass tunnel that connects the children's library and the adult library. Times have changed since I wrote that scene and there is now more sensitivity to those issues.

What do I buy and not buy about this, personally?

Let's start with the idea that we don't really remember childhood. I buy that. For myself, but also in Stephen King's case. King, as a child, witnessed a friend be struck and killed by a train, and he blocked out the memory of the event almost entirely.

We don't remember childhood as well as we think? That, I buy.

What about the idea of times and sensitivities changing since King wrote IT?

The New York Times reviewed the book in 1986:

"It" is not only the unknown monstrosity hiding beneath the city of Derry; "It" is also excrement, the dark, the unconscious, the sex act, and everything else that is frightening or inconceivable to children.

This is the only mention of sex in an 800+ word review, and although the reviewer didn't love the book, the sex scene isn't really mentioned other than the above quote, and even in that case we can't differentiate it from the other sexual situations in the book. It doesn't seem to be a big deal for the reviewer.

Library Journal's 1986 review didn't mention the scene at all.

It's tough to say that NO reviews from 1986 mentioned the sex scene as a problematic aspect of the book. Between the movie adaptations and the book's title, it's difficult to prove definitively that this critique didn't exist at the time. But, swap to current times, and it's virtually impossible to find a review that fails to mention the scene. Even if there was mention of it in 1986, it wasn't the massive deal that it is in reviews today.

While I don't always buy the "changing times" argument...the little I found from 1986 does kinda agree with King. Which is to say, I doubt that children having sex with each other was no big thing in the 80's, but maybe a horror novelist putting a sex scene between fictional kids deep into an overly long book wasn't the thing it is today.

I also buy that Stephen King wasn't thinking of it sexually. The reason being, as sex scenes go, as Stephen King goes, it's not what I would call graphic, highly descriptive, or drawn out. It's not designed to titillate. I'd describe it as fairly mechanical.

What I DON'T buy so much is that it never crossed King's mind that OTHER people would take it that way, and I'm sort of surprised that nobody who proofed the book questioned the scene.

Overall, I buy Stephen King's explanation. I buy that he wrote the sex scene for specific, narrative-driven reasons. I buy the idea that it serves a purpose. I buy that, at the time the book was written, Stephen King thought this was the best way to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish.

As a summary, I don't think King's explanation is a bunch of horseshit.

But the portions I believe only explain WHY the scene was written. Not whether or not it worked.

Does the scene work narratively?

From this point forward we're going to be pretty subjective. Obviously I can't say, in an objective way, whether or not something "works."

Does the sex scene work within the narrative? For me, yes and no.

Yes, once I read King's explanation of it, I got it.

No, because I had to read outside the text to understand what was going on.

I'm not an expert when it comes to literary critique, and I think it's possible for more astute readers to understand the connection King was building with the sex scene. But it's not easy, and the taboo nature of the material makes it difficult and unpleasant to really think about or discuss.

If you dig into the book, de- and reconstruct the story, and if you look at it from a thematic perspective, the scene does make more sense. If you read IT as a book about the things we fear being the things that become our strengths, or as proffering the idea that confronting our fears is the only way to move from childhood to adulthood, then it makes a certain sense that sex is a necessary component of the book. Sex and intimacy are things many of us fear, but they can be sources of great strength. Moving from childhood to adulthood is frightening, and if there's a definitive line in the sand that separates adults from children, for a lot of folks, that line is sexual.

It's both literal and figurative, the way things work in /T: You might be able to do something good, but in order to do it, you're going to have to make your way through the sewer.

I think that's what King was going for. But the connection there could have been stronger. The scene would have been a little easier on the stomach if all of this had been spelled out a bit more. I'm not one who often says something could be dumbed down, but if this scene had been dumbed down, it would've been easier to understand why it was happening when it was happening and in the way it was happening.

And that's the real flaw of it. It's hard to read it and still feel inside the book. It's hard to read it without wondering whether it should be there or if the same work could have been done differently. And as soon as you're wondering that in the middle of reading a story, some of the narrative spell has been broken.

I guess what I'm saying is that this works on a theoretical level, but I didn't get there as a reader. But that's me. Author Grady Hendrix, in a series of Stephen King re-reads, gets there and then some. He's clearly smarter, more thoughtful, more successful, and probably handsomer than I am. I'd like to think that popular opinion is somewhere between Hendrix's (smart) and mine (dum-dum). Which means that the narrative success is a mixed bag.

Does the scene work outside the narrative?

I think, yes, in a few big ways, this scene does accomplish something outside the narrative.

One thing *IT* does is shatter some of the illusions we have about the 50's, illusions we as readers bring with us. This book presents a different 50's America. Yes, you could sling a fishing pole over your shoulder and head down to the creek. But on the way you might have your stomach slashed by a kid with a switchblade. The sex scene definitely goes against what I think about when I hear the theme song for *Happy Days*.

Second, the book is about taboo, and the way that taboo things permeate our lives, are always there and only sometimes visible. The sex scene in particular functions to bring the taboo, the ickiness, outside of the book and into real life. If you're reading this scene, you feel like you're seeing something you're not supposed to be seeing. I can't imagine reading this on a plane without looking around to make sure that nobody else was looking down at my pages.

As an adult, it's pretty much impossible to read the scene and not start cringing. Because you're an adult. You know how wrong this is. It's your role to prevent things like this from happening, step in when you see something remotely this bad happening.

Even if you don't think of the kids or the book as real on any level, you can't help but think, "Damn, Stephen King. I don't know if this is such a good idea." Even if the sex scene itself isn't taboo to you because it's not real, it's taboo and possibly dangerous because someone created it, committed it to paper, and you're here holding it in your hands.

IT is not a book that allows a reader to be passive. Readers are forced to establish a line, what's taboo and what isn't. To me, a moral line is crossed in the sex scene. However, getting to that scene forces me to reevaluate. Apparently I'm fine with a kid having his arm torn off his body in the opening of this book. With serious spousal abuse. With repeated, graphic murder. With a boy forcing sex acts on another boy, and with a monster taking the form of a "leper" and offering a child oral sex. But this is the line.

In these ways, yes, the content of the book does confront the reader in real life, outside the narrative. It does work inasmuch as it demonstrates that things that feel just plain wrong are all around us all the time. *IT*, the book itself, exists as a taboo object, even for people who know very little about it and have never read it. And this has a lot to do with the sex scene.

Is it totally out of step with the rest of the book?



For me? No.

Something very akin to the sex scene happens at least two other times in the book. By that I mean, we are presented with a scenario where something that's generally positive is possible because of something terribly, horribly negative.

We have the scene where George Bradley and members of the Bradley Gang, notorious robbers and murderers, are stopped. This is positive. However, they're stopped by regular folks arming themselves and shooting members of the gang. The shooting is not a last resort or done clean. It's a filthy affair that involves trapping the gang and opening fire, resulting in something that sounds like the opening scene of *Robocop*. This is negative.

We have the scene where some big business folks get their comeuppance for business practices that result in unsafe conditions for workers. This is good. The comeuppance comes in the form of these men being hacked to death by an axe wielder in a crowded bar where nobody lifts a finger to help them. This is bad.

And we have the scene where a group of kids, hopelessly lost in a sewer, figure their way out of the sewer and create a connection that allows them, unlike all the other adults in Derry, to remember Pennywise as adults. This is good. They accomplish this by having sex with each other. This is bad.

It's both literal and figurative, the way things work in *IT*: You might be able to do something good, but in order to do it, you're going to have to make your way through the sewer. It's a disturbing and depressing message, and it's a message I don't love. But it's consistent.

The sex scene certainly stood out because of the degree to which it's taboo, and because it demonstrates, more than anything else, a problem that could have been solved in a different, less

vile way. However, that seems to be a theme of the book. The Bradley Gang could have been stopped with a lesser degree of violence if the townspeople had been less bloodthirsty. The evil businessmen could have been thwarted without someone picking up an axe.

I'd like to think there was a different way for The Losers to get out of the sewer, but I can't say the method they chose was "off-message."

Does the scene work today?

No.

Literary criticism goes through phases, and as it goes through phases some things stick and others tend to fade away as new things come into mainstream criticism. Today, it's common practice to look at the way gender and sexuality are treated in a book and evaluate that, and this can be one of the more important aspects when a piece of pop culture is critiqued.

I think it's tough to have a book today where this sex scene goes down the way it does and not have it come under heavy criticism. The critiques of Bev being used, of female sexuality not really being understood in the story, and of having the sole important female character be most useful in a sexual situation, all of these are critiques that would not be ignored today. Most modern critics would find the sex scene problematic. The question wouldn't be about whether or not the sex scene is problematic. It would be about whether or not it's problematic enough to ruin the entirety of the book. For better or worse, the discussion of this huge, 1100-page tome would be overshadowed by the discussion of this one scene.

I'm not weighing in on this being a bad or good thing. I'm simply saying that I think this is a fact of modern criticism. The sex scene doesn't work today. I thoroughly believe that if this book were written today, this scene would be rewritten if not omitted entirely.

Is the scene the make or break?

I wish the scene wasn't in the book, or that it was different. I'm not going to rewrite the scene because I think Stephen King kicks ass, and me suggesting tweaks seems like me backseat driving during the Moon landing. Totally unqualified, totally unhelpful, totally stupid.

It comes down to the individual. Some people won't hate it, perhaps even feel it fits with the book. Some people will hate it, but like the book in spite of it. Some people will find it intolerable, and the book will be ruined for them because of it.

The only way I can think to end this whole thing, as the writer of this column and someone who recently read IT, is to pass on my thoughts for the two groups on the ends of the spectrum, as outlined above and one final time below.

If you're someone for whom the very idea of this is/was disgusting to the point that you're getting upset, if this column or its premise was upsetting, then I wouldn't read the book. I'd skip it. King has a lot of great books. As do a lot of other writers. I don't think you're making a bad choice by skipping something that's guaranteed to push your buttons. Plus, the scene happens so late in the book, you've invested so much time by then, that you'll feel resentment. I feel safe in saying that resentment is not a feeling intended by the book, nor is it a feeling that you should have when you finish any

book.

If you're someone for whom the book was good, or the idea of the sex scene doesn't extinguish your desire to read *IT*, then I'd say go forth and read. Discover for yourself. It's okay. I don't think reading *IT* will transform you into a monster, and I don't think liking the book makes you one either. It's a very WTF moment in what is otherwise a really good read.

The Worst Required Reading



It's back to school time. According to the aisles of stores. Man, I hated that as a kid. It's like, I KNOW we have to go back to school. You don't have to put up a big banner about it. That's like having a huge, enthusiastic banner at a funeral: "You're Dead!"

In fact, the more I think about it, the more I like that comparison. Those back to school banners do signify a death: The death of summer. The death of fun. The death of reading whatever the hell you want.

Fall is all about required reading. But not all required reads are created equal. Some really provide... special opportunities for pain.

Here are some of my least favorites.

Shakespeare (All Titles)



I'm sure some people are thinking, "No way, you uncultured swine!"

To which I say, Yes, way. You asshole.

The way Shakespeare works in school makes no sense. For starters, you READ plays. That's dumb. That's like reading the script for Austin Powers 2: The Spy Who Shagged Me instead of seeing the movie. (This is something I did as a youth. A boy with stupid interests and access to unlimited printing is a terrible, terrible thing.)

Second, teachers always think it's a great idea to have a class read an

entire play out loud. Some kid plays a king, some other kid plays a precocious young lady who impersonates a lawyer. You know the drill.

Cut to 45 minutes later...

Teacher: "Greg...Greg...it's your line, Greg."

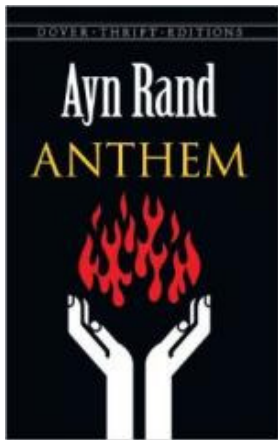
Greg: [sits up straight, starts reading]

Teacher: "Greg, that's way behind where we are. We're on...page 868."

Greg: [flips forward a shocking number of pages, finally gets there] "Forsooth!"

Totally worth the wait. A+ performance, Greg. Electrifying.

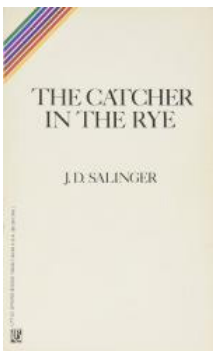
I guess I'm not saying all Shakespeare is bad. Macbeth seems pretty metal. But as required reading goes, the delivery of Shakespeare in the classroom leaves a lot to be desired.



'Anthem' by Ayn Rand

I thought this book was alright, but now I think it's just a gateway drug to Rand's longer work, which I've never read and doesn't seem up my alley based solely on the people I've talked to at parties who have "really connected with" *Atlas Shrugged*.

It's school where we learn that weed is a gateway drug to heroin. This lesson should be applied to the work of Ayn Rand as well. Damn this slim, easily-digestible novel about pronouns. It even has a pretty cool cover, which I now know is designed to entrap young people like myself.



'Catcher in the Rye' by J.D. Salinger

This is such a weird one to read in school. Holden Caulfield is total a non-conformist. And we're all forced to read about his exploits and write papers about them. Is it perhaps the ultimate lesson in irony? I don't think so. I think we're being snowed by a bunch of crumbums and phonies.

Also, what the hell is up with this, the semi-standard school version of the cover?

Was someone intentionally trying to make this book seem boring? Beige, boring font, and a little splash of color in the upper corner? "Class, you're welcome to use your entire seat while reading this book, but based on what we see on the cover here, I think it's safe to assume you're only going to need the edge."

'Frankenstein' by Mary Shelley

You know what? We get it. You read a damn book. Now stop bothering me about how a dude walking around with a big green head and bolts in his neck isn't "Frankenstein." Type "Frankenstein costume" into Google, hit images (safe search off. C'mon, live a little!) and see how many shambling giant green dudes you see and how many science nerds you see.

The creature's name is the least of the differences between the movie/pop culture Frankenstein and the book version.

It's not that the book is bad. It's just that it's wielded as a weapon in a bad way.

Sort of like the way people say guns don't kill people, people kill people? *Frankenstein* doesn't annoy people at Halloween parties. People who read *Frankenstein* do.

'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck

At least this one is kind of cool. You've got this big oaf, who's sort of like a *Frankenstein* (fight me). And you get a good life lesson for teens, which is that it's good to stick by your friends through thick and thin, but there's a line. And that line comes when your friend breaks a woman's neck, if not slightly before.

However, this one makes the list because of Curley, the book's antagonist, and his glove:

'Well, that glove's fulla Vaseline.'

'Vaseline? What the hell for?'

'Well, I will tell ya what—Curley says he's keepin' that hand soft for his wife.'

Yeah, there's a dude who keeps his hand in a glove full of Vaseline.

Now, that sounds exactly like something I'd like to read in a book today. It's weird and fucked-up. But it's not the sort of thing I like reading in 8th grade English where teachers seem woefully unprepared to talk about what exactly it means. If they're unprepared for that, they DEFINITELY aren't prepared to discuss it with a young Pete, who remembers almost nothing of the book other than this detail and has obsessed on it since first reading it. I could have written an entire paper called "My Top 505 Questions About Curley's Vaseline Glove."

My advice: print a version where the lubed-up glove is excised if you're not prepared to talk to 8th graders about the ways Curley is getting down.

'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

It's not the story itself. The story itself is cool. It's creepy. No, the problem is that this was my introduction to the idea of literary analysis. And what an introduction it was.

Later in life, I feel a division between useful and useless literary criticism. There's the kind that's about looking at how a scene functions and so on, what's happening and how it works on the page. That I have a use for. There's also the kind that talks about why something exists, what convinced the author to write it. That can be interesting if the initial story is interesting to you.

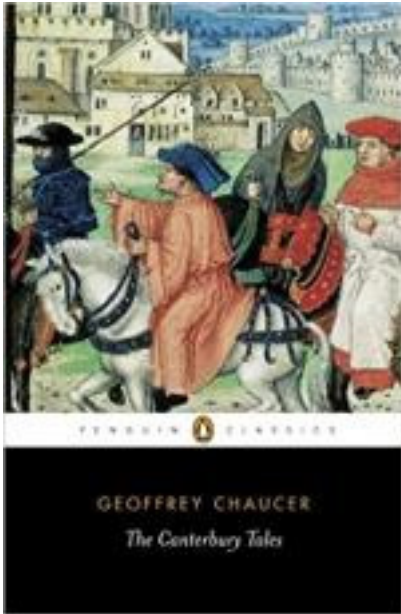
Then there's the other kind. The kind of literary criticism that's just about theories that can't be

proven or disproven. If you took any college English classes, you know what I mean. Theories about this or that character and their sex life. This character being attracted to his mother. Theories that have almost no basis in the text, theories that, if they're true, don't really change the meaning of the story, but one of your classmates is happy to drag you through it anyway. I mean, sure, there's something going on in "The Yellow Wallpaper," but the author explicitly said what that something was.

As an illustrative example of how I feel about this, I wrote out a dozen, fully-fleshed-out theories regarding the motion picture *Demolition Man*. Some had to do with the titular demolition man never waking from cryosleep. Some had to do with the entirety of the movie taking place within the head of main antagonist Simon Phoenix. One had to do with the entire thing being a *Total-Recall*-esque fantasy of Lenina Huxley (Sandra Bullock).

It's easy. Try it right now. Pick a book, pick a weird scene, and then make up some gobbledygook about it. Bonus points if it involves something standing in for a penis or penises.

Billy Collins had a great poem about this, which I'll paraphrase in saying that school teaches students to not enjoy books and reading, but to tie a book to a chair and beat a confession out of it. "The Yellow Wallpaper," we beat it, waterboarded it, shocked it with car batteries like Stallone in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. We were relentless. We tore this thing apart and went down false, invented roads when the text itself is really good and the actual reasons for its creation are also interesting, purposeful, and can create great discussion.



'The Canterbury Tales' by Geoffrey Chaucer

This is like punishment Shakespeare. Like if you thought Shakespeare wasn't impenetrable enough, good news, we have a dude who's EVEN OLDER! Do you just glide through Shakespeare, understanding all his neologisms and metaphors? Great, check out this Chaucer dude!

This was published in 1387, ya'll. Reading *The Canterbury Tales* is like watching Monty Python IN THE YEAR 2600! There isn't a single bit of it that makes sense without an equal amount of explanatory text.

The setup is cool. A storytelling contest, the best story winning a dinner. Then we get...25 tales!? I wouldn't listen to 25 tales for a free Wendy's meal. I wouldn't listen to 25 stories for a week of free Wendy's. That's entirely too many, and very few of them involve *Demolition Man* or demolition men.

I know this is an important historical document, that it tells us a lot about the social structure of the time. But...excuse me for potential blasphemy here, but maybe that means it belongs in a history class?

'Dracula' by Bram Stoker

Sorry, everyone. But this is nothing like *Castlevania*. This isn't even like *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*.

It WAS, at one time, until Bram Stoker left out this ending:

As we looked there came a terrible convulsion of the earth so that we seemed to rock to and fro and fell to our knees. At the same moment with a roar which seemed to shake the very heavens the whole castle and the rock and even the hill on which it stood seemed to rise into the air and scatter in fragments while a mighty cloud of black and yellow smoke volume on volume in rolling grandeur was shot upwards with inconceivable rapidity.

Then there was a stillness in nature as the echoes of that thunderous report seemed to come as with the hollow boom of a thunder-clap - the long reverberating roll which seems as though the floors of heaven shook. Then down in a mighty ruin falling whence they rose came the fragments that had been tossed skywards in the cataclysm.

From where we stood it seemed as though the one fierce volcano burst had satisfied the need of nature and that the castle and the structure of the hill had sunk again into the void. We were so appalled with the suddenness and the grandeur that we forgot to think of ourselves.

I'm not even kidding. That's a deleted portion from the ending. Stoker deleted the explosion at the end. What the hell was he thinking? Which story has been improved by REMOVING an explosion? That's ridiculous. One of the bigger miscarriages of literary justice.

'The Scarlet Letter' by Nathaniel Hawthorne

I swear, people who tell me they love this book must not remember it.

Presented here is an example of how the prose in this book sounds to me:

A man—who was born in a small town, which bore no resemblance to the town his parents imagined for him when they settled in the area over 40 years ago with every intention of starting a small business selling gift baskets online that sort of petered out after bigger companies like FTD caught onto the whole thing and ran the little guys out with predatory pricing—decided to go for a walk one day.

A man decided to go for a walk. THAT'S ALL YOU NEED TO SAY! I got it. Man on a walk. Check.

And the story? I'll sum it up: Havin' sex ain't so bad, everyone. Relax a little, eh?

There. I just saved you a couple hundred pages of text offset with dashes, commas wherever the hell Hawthorne felt like putting them, and the expectation that you can buy into the idea of letter A's showing up all over the place like it's Sesame Street.

Also, this was a confusing message as a young person. I went from a class where we saw a slideshow of diseased penises and vaginas (school in the 90's was weird), and then we get another message about sex ain't so bad. It's like PE class was always preventing me from having sex, both through godawful slideshows and putting on full display that I was no physical specimen, and English class was always telling me the opposite: Eh, go for it. Why not?

Well, school, which one is it?

'The Great Gatsby' by F. Scott Fitzgerald

I liked this one. But I was 26. This has to be impossible to relate to as a kid. It's difficult as an adult, but as a kid? Forget it.

There's something to like about the classics, about most classics, but maybe we're doing this backwards. Maybe we should be getting students interested in reading before we try to get them onto classics. Sort of like how young kids learn to like mac and cheese before they appreciate fine wine. Kids shouldn't drink fine wine until they're like 11, minimum.

'To Kill A Mockingbird' by Harper Lee

I was like 30 when I read this! And it was really fun! But if I'd read it in 7th grade, I would have hated it.

I can't speak for all students, but I'll speak for a type of student I represented. Which is a student that really likes reading and books, but they don't know it yet. They don't know it because the only things they've read are the things teachers put into their hands, and the only things teachers put into their hands are classics. There's not enough action. Not enough incident. There aren't enough explosions (and the explosions that were there are removed, Bram Stoker!).

Scout is a lovable character, as is Atticus. Being dressed as a ham during the book's climax is awesome. And all of that is wasted on a young Pete.



I think that you can show a kid *Citizen Kane* in 8th grade. But they're not going to like it the way they might if they came to it later, on their own, through an interest in film. Kids who are really interested in movies will be interested to take a dive into different kinds of movies, including those movies that set the foundation for modern movies.

Same deal with books. Those kids who end up liking classics...I think they'll find them. Meanwhile,

we're pushing every kid through these same books, which are hard to relate to, overly long, and hard to enjoy if you don't care about the history of books and writing.

'Beowulf'

This tale of a dude who fights a sea monster, then a land monster, then the land monster's mom...is actually pretty awesome. Beowulf is the first superhero. Get yourself a copy that doesn't rhyme, read it, and brag about reading a total classic that's like 50 pages long.

13 Reasons Charles Addams is an Unsung Master of Horror



When we mention masters of horror: the King's, the Matheson's, Tobe Hooper, George Romero, Wes Craven—

When we talk about The Mount Rushmore of horror heroes, we tend to skip one who brought the morbid and the macabre to so many.

I'm talking about Charles Addams.

Below we've got 13 of his creepiest, spookiest comics, plus some biographical info and stories. Get out your garlic, your crucifix, whatever you use to ward off evil, and let's take a look. Oh, and in the words of Gomez Addams (to a babysitter): "...keep your back to the wall at all times."

1.



The strange and unusual had a tendency to show up out of nowhere in Addams' work. Yes, it's creepy that this dude is looking for a silent rowboat. And when you look at the illustration, you can see the lights are on. It's nighttime, and this dude is just going out for a nice, quiet row?

But perhaps the creepiest thing is that this figure, this specter, is drawn differently than the other men. He's got a blurred, foggy effect going on. He's clearly not of this world. He's invading the world of the comic, our world. Addams had a way of making these different worlds intersect. No, that's not quite right. They didn't intersect. The world of Addams snaked its way into ours.

2.



"You certainly have a peculiar sense of humor."

Addams did most of his well-known work cartooning for *The New Yorker*. During his stint, a new editor, William Shawn, came on board. Although Shawn was well-liked (especially by writers—*Franny and Zooey* is even dedicated to him), he didn't care for jokes about death. Luckily for us, Robert Gottlieb, the editor who followed Shawn, felt death was never funnier than it was in Addams' work.

3.



"Dear Fellow Alumnus:

Your face was among the missing at our annual reunion last June. Won't you help us to keep 'tabs' on members of the class of '17 by telling us what you are doing now? . . ."

We've got a very average man. Suburban basement, receiving alumni letters. The way he's dressed is completely normcore. Oh, and he's got a huge store of dynamite and plans to blow up government buildings.

In Addams' work the horror isn't always in some far-off castle. It's next door. Or downstairs. It's not something readers have to seek out. It finds you.

4.



There's the horror here, which is obvious, and then there's the mastery, which is more subtle:

...if you look closely at the details and backgrounds in Addams' work, you will see what a punctilious draftsman he was...He was in love with the sheer thingness of things, and [Addams' wife] Tee Addams remembers some hours he once spent in an aquarium studying the differences between saltwater and freshwater fish, for a drawing in which it didn't really matter.

-Wilfrid Sheed

The icicles. The windows, all drawn with framing. The detail on the doors. The bushes and the way

the snow sits on top of them. The mixture of grays that shows you, so simply, that the sidewalk is slippery.

Addams wasn't just a guy with a dark imagination. The dude was a true artist. They say the devil is in the details, and Addams made good use of that devil.

5.



"Damnation, Forbes, stop looking at me like that."

This one's a personal favorite. The subject matter is pretty good, the drawings are competent and all. But it's all about that dude's face.



This is not a man who is joking, not a man who has vaguely considered taxidermying a human. This is a man transfixed, obsessed with the idea. This is a true weirdo, and he's the absolute best. You just know this guy is going to kill his co-worker before long. If this was a movie, we'd already be done shouting "Get out of there! Run away!" At this point, we'd feel like the co-worker deserved it. I mean, c'mon. This dude telegraphed his bizarre plans so clearly.

6.



Whether we know it or not, there's always something messed-up going on nearby. Addams was great at showing the spots where the unusual barely poked through from the other side (literally, in this case). His art made a person wonder what was going on in that old house, beneath that sewer lid, in the hotel room next door. No place was safe.

7.



Biographers have said that Addams felt his best stuff was the stuff he didn't have to caption. In this piece, you have to "read" it a bit to figure out what's going on, where the joke is. And by the time you see Fester, you've seen that the other people in the theater are deeply saddened. They're weeping openly. Something truly tragic is going on here. And then we have Fester, laughing his ass off. The more you look at the other faces, the darker and funnier this one gets.

It's common for folks working in horror to use the genre to turn the mirror on society, to say, "See, YOU are the weirdos!" A lot of writers and creators do that really effectively with horror, but Addams remains one of the few horror masters who could flip back and forth, sometimes showing us our own reflections, sometimes showing us something that was just plain wrong.

8.



If you want to talk about the limits of good taste, here you go. We have the Addams family on the roof, prepping to pour boiling oil on a group of carolers.

It's like...you know how we all hate telemarketers? And people knocking on the door to sell us something? I'd be lying if I said I'd never imagined them being brutalized in some way. But seeing

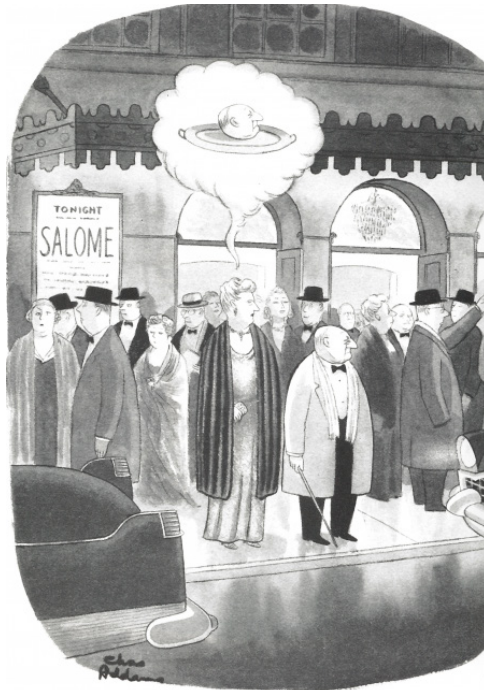
it here in black and white takes it to another level. It's like something from the dark part of my brain that I'd never admit, and yet here it is in front of me. And it's so much worse when it's made into a reality.

9.



Addams was not afraid to showcase the awful, evil potential of children. While he loved kids by all accounts, his work wasn't afraid to depict them as little devils. Nothing was off limits.

10.



While we're talking about taboo and transgression, husbands and wives fantasizing about killing each other was a regular feature of Addams' work. It went both ways, husbands killing wives, wives killing husbands. What sets Addams' murderous couples apart from your run-of-the-mill maniacs is that the murderous intent is not just about getting rid of the person. Our murderers are going about it in gruesome fashion. Take this couple. This woman is imagining not only a dead man, but his head is on a serving platter. Implying that someone is going to eat it.

11.



"To . . . hell . . . with . . . yogurt."

Okay, okay. This one isn't scary. I just agree with it on such a deep level that I felt the need to include it. For the record, "To hell with yogurt" is an acceptable epitaph for use on any materials memorializing me after I pass.

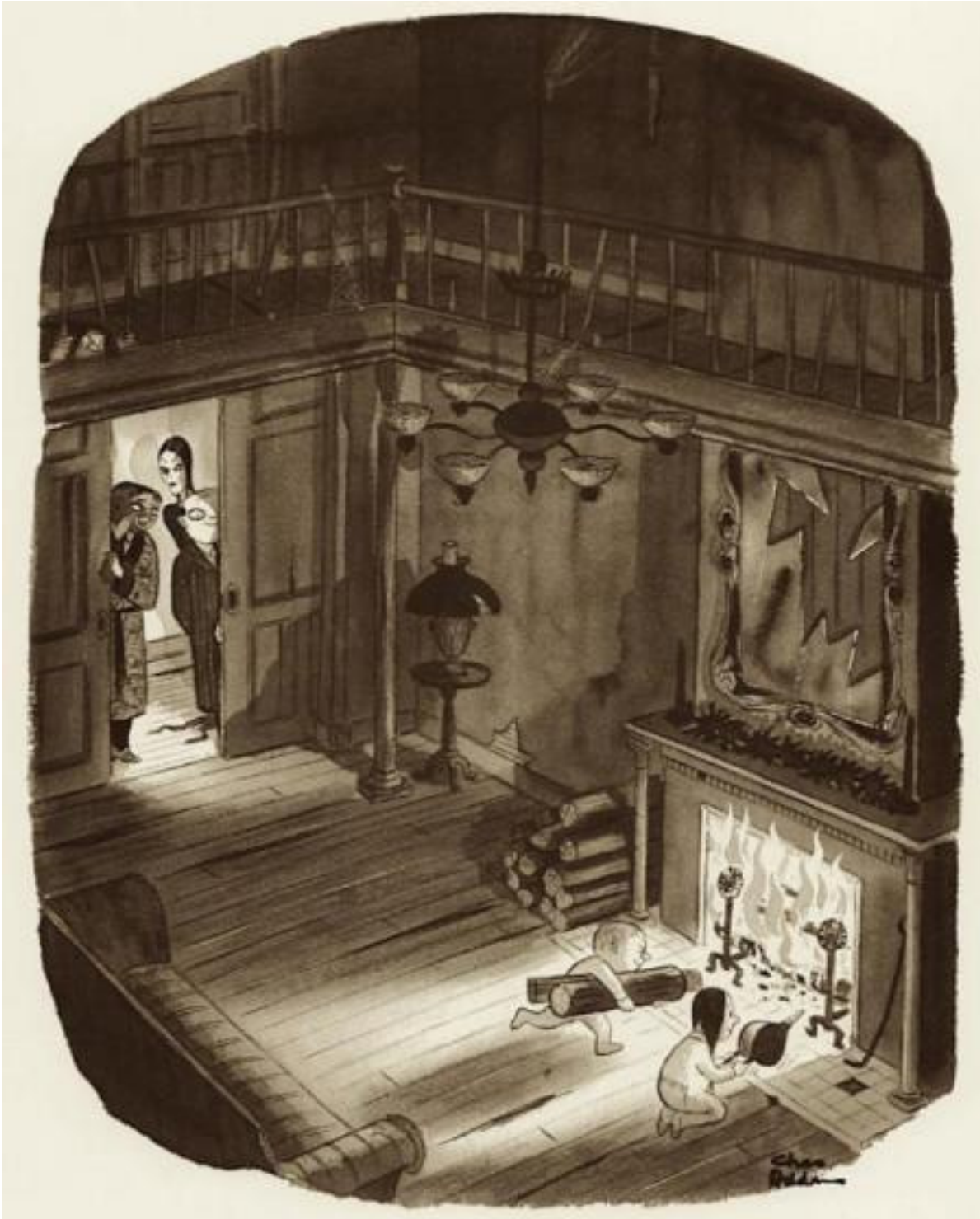
12.



This one isn't one of Addams' per se. It's a bonus. But I wanted to include this Google Doodle because it shows something Addams did, something crucial, which was bringing horror to the mainstream. Without Addams, there would be no Addams Family. Probably no Munsters. It was Addams' work, not only with the family but with all of his characters, that helped make the horrific mainstream.

For fuck's sake, how many Google Doodles feature a child in a guillotine?!

I don't think we can overstate the ways in which Addams' work permeated culture, especially during the monster craze of the 60's and 70's. Hell, his materials were referenced directly in creating Disney's Haunted Mansion. Here's an Addams piece:



And here is one of many Haunted Mansion planning sketches by Ken Anderson:



If you're not seeing it, look at the chandeliers.

13.

Why this one? Because it's important to show Addams' skill. He didn't choose horror because it was the easiest path, the open road. He chose horror because it's what he liked. What he loved.

Charles Addams. A true artist, a true craftsman. And a true master of horror.



The 18 Most Egregious Art Replacements From 'Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark'



It's been a few years since the *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* trilogy got a major facelift, replacing Stephen Gammell's art/living nightmares with Brett Helquist's tamer take on the urban legends, folktales, and general creepiness collected by Alvin Schwartz. People were incensed, but now that some time's passed, we should be able to evaluate it objectively.

Was the change a good one?

No. It was not. Usually I wait until the end of a column to make a judgment, but screw that, this was a terrible idea.

Okay, okay. Before we go burning down...whatever it is people in mobs burn down with torches and pitchforks (and before we go pitchforkin' for that matter), let's be clear about something: Brett Helquist, Stephen Gammell's replacement, is a really good artist. Take this comparison from "Just Delicious" (Gammell on the left, Helquist on the right, which will be the convention throughout this column):



Helquist's toad-y creep is just about perfect. The meat on the plate and skewered on his fork look vile. His grin, the juice dripping down his chin, it's all spot on.

But let's face facts. Helquist had an impossible job. Has there ever been a collection of illustrations that caused more nightmares than those by Stephen Gammell? Have you ever seen anything like them? Did you, like me, buy a Halloween sweater with an all-over Gammell print?



Thought so.

Let's gnash our teeth together and go through some of the worst replacements.

"The Hook"



There are some general differences in what Gammell did and what Helquist did. With this image, being a similar subject, we can see those differences at work.

One big difference, right away, is the high contrast black and white from the Gammell books and the more sepia paper in the Helquist books. The high contrast and the stark white pages are striking. Cold. They feel more "other" and have this weird contrast of cleanliness and filth where the Helquist stuff is more muted, more leveled-out.

The other biggie is the general style. Gammell is a lot wilder. His images feel...wet. Helquist's stuff is more direct and tidy.

Why is this a bad replacement? Because we took the dripping, vein-y debris attached to the hook's cup in Gammell's drawing and replaced it with torn fabric. Snooze.

"Alligators"

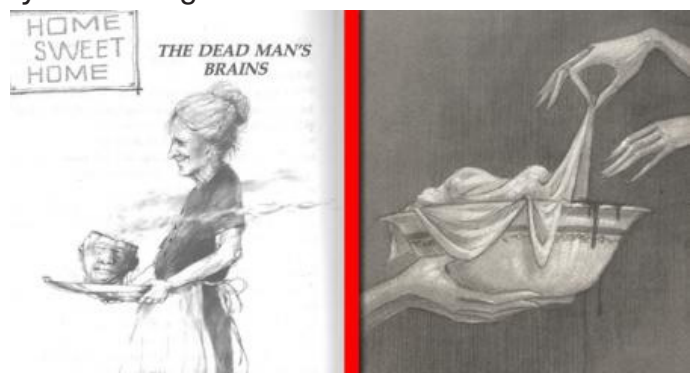


Neither of these gator drawings are overly accurate. Both give the gators a sort of facial expression, and as much as I love gators, I don't see them as having terribly expressive faces.

That said, Helquist's gators look a little sleepy, and their eyes are kind of cartoon-y. Gammell's gator? That looks like a disgusting killing machine. Look at its thick, sloppy arm. The malice. If I have a choice of going up against one type of gator in my nightmares tonight, and if I can choose between a Gammell gator and a Helquist gator, I know which way I'm leaning.

"Dead Man's Brains"

Helquist went for the more creeping horror. Gammell was balls to the wall. While Helquist has the cloth-covered bowl with a splash of blood, Gammell has the actual head with steam coming out the top, not to mention it's being carried by a grandmotherly type. This replacement is indicative



of one of the issues with the new art. These books, to a kid, felt like forbidden objects, things you weren't supposed to have. Which made them scarier. While Helquist's image has the blood, it's just not in-your-face enough that it would raise a lot of parental eyebrows. With the new images, Scary Stories is not the taboo book it once was.

"T-H-U-P-P-P-P-P-P-!"



When Gammell gives us something ghostly, he gives us something that's totally new and unfamiliar. Look at that thing. Crotch up at its neck, one arm branching into two hands, another arm that is connected up all wrong. The more you look at it, the weirder it is. You want to stop looking, but you can't. The Helquist dead-y is a good piece of art, for sure, but it feels like something we've seen before. It's more familiar, less disconcerting.

"The Appointment"



I wanted to include this one because I like the Helquist drawing quite a bit. That said, it's a great example of how the replacements really changed the tone of the books.

I had a photo teacher once who really discouraged photo projects based on songs. Why? Because students went SUPER literal most of the time. If you made a project based on Europe's "The Final Countdown," you'd probably have a clock, something indicating finality. Maybe a picture of a synthesizer.

Helquist's drawings are good, but they don't intrigue me or get me interested in the story so much as they compliment the story once it's read. Which may be why I like this one. I don't think that's a bad thing for illustrations to do.

But there's a good reason that people remember the illustrations in these books more than they remember the stories. And it's shit like Gammell's vision of Death. His abstract, non-literal stuff makes me more interested in the story than the highly-literal Helquist piece.

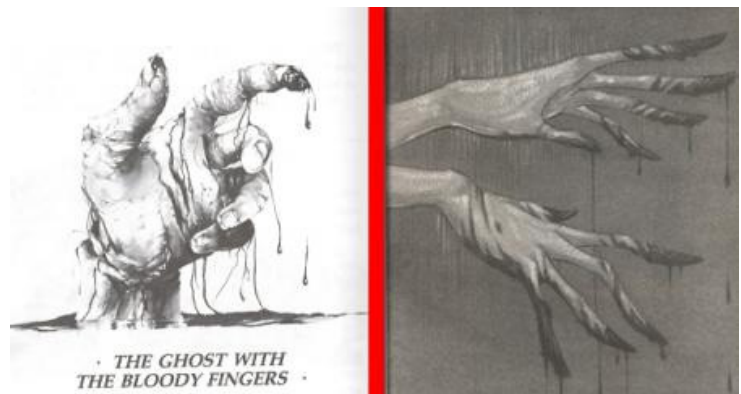
"Aaron Kelly's Bones"



The skeleton is good and all, but Gammell illustrated a dancing corpse. You are watching it fall apart in all its gory glory, right there on the page. It's a memorable Gammell drawing, and the Helquist is just no match. C'mon, your kindest, sweetest neighbor will hang a cardboard skeleton on the door in October. Nobody is hanging anything that looks like Gammell's Aaron Kelly.

"The Ghost With The Bloody Fingers"

Gammell knows how to draw gore. The hand is disgusting. The blood looks like blood. The posing of the hand is icky. Helquist's hand just isn't scary. It's cartoon-y. And the blood looks like a slick oily thing, something you could wipe



clean and walk away. Gammell's hand has a dirtiness to it that will never come clean.

"Hoo-Ha's"



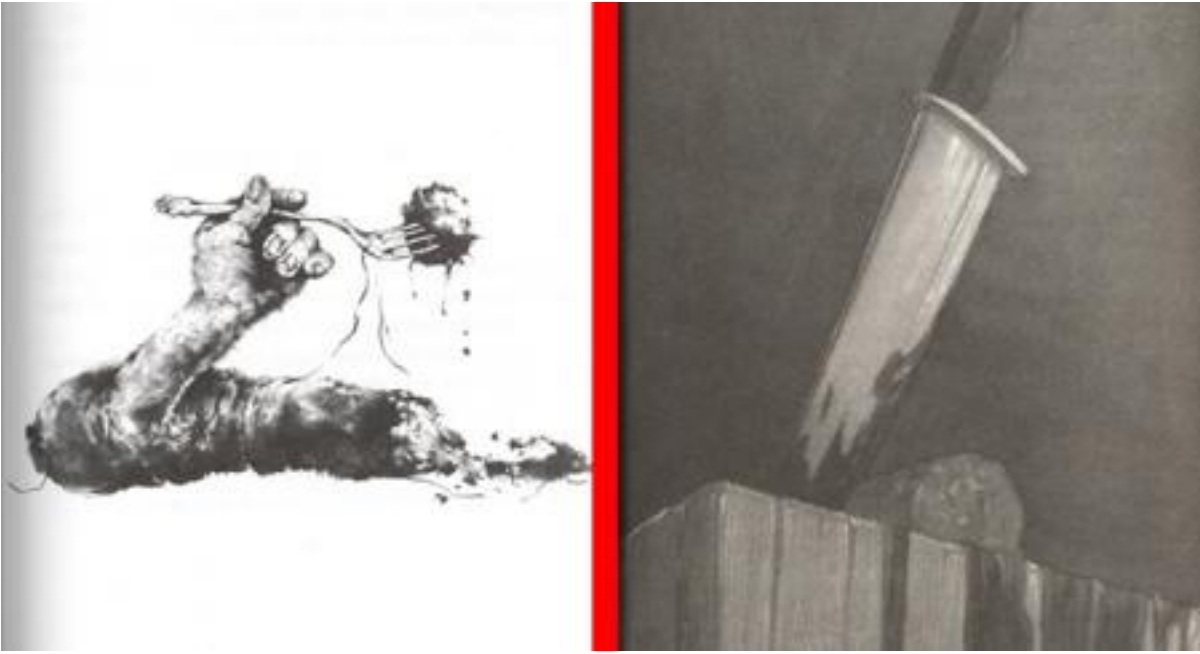
What? No replacement at all? I don't even know if I can count this as an egregious replacement as there was NO replacement. I will say it's an awesome Gammell drawing, and without anything replacing it in the new editions, it feels like an unanswered challenge.

"Somebody Fell From Aloft"



These don't even compare. The ship is an illustration that could fit into any number of children's books. The Gammell drawing would make a parent say, "What in the hell are you reading?" It's a powerful nightmare of an image. No contest.

"Wonderful Sausage"



I will see this Gammell image in my mind every time I think about these books.

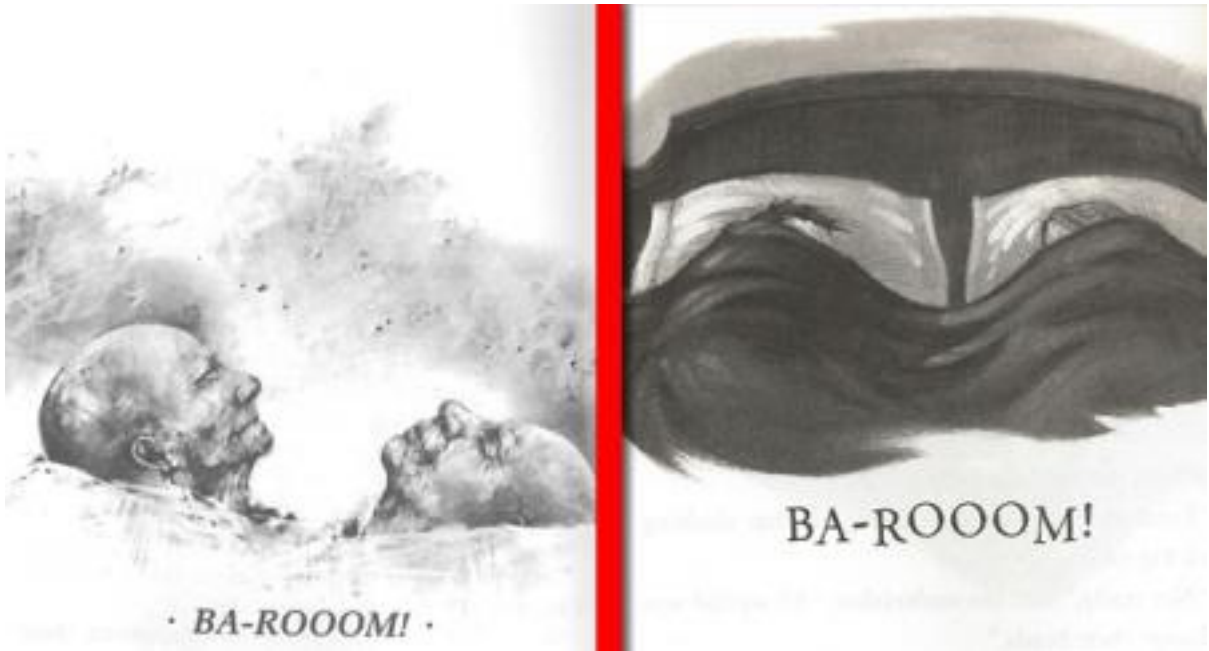
Look, the Gammell is just...gross. And it's a little better in terms of summing up the story. If we've got a story about sausage made of flesh, what better way to illustrate it than to show it being forked up by a severed arm? Makes sense to me!

"Oh, Susannah"



I feel like we're always in our world with Helquist's drawings. With Gammell's we're somewhere else. Gammell's willingness to go abstract is a big strength of his work in these books, and Helquist's mostly-accurate drawings leave me wanting a little bit of that uncanny horror, a little bit of that feeling when you turn to a page and go, "What in the actual fuck is that?"

"BA-ROOOM!"



C'mon. The Helquist drawing is creepy once you read the story and realize these are dead people in the bed together. But from a visual standpoint, how fucked up is this Gammell art? The Helquist is a drawing of dead people, but the Gammell is a drawing of dead people that LOOK dead.

"Footsteps"



One of these is nightmare fuel, feet coming through a suddenly soft ceiling. The other looks like leftovers from a Christmas book. No thanks.

"Harold"



Unspeakable body horror or a leftover from *Wizard of Oz*? Jesus, Gammell's Harold has a BELLY BUTTON! That's a man of flesh, and he looks the part.

"The Dream"



Something Gammell did that Helquist seemed to shy away from was stuff like this. The perspective here makes it seem like you, the reader, are waking up to face this oddly frightening character. Gammell's work didn't let you keep your distance. You always felt like you were right there, touching, seeing, smelling. It felt so unsafe because it was all so immediate. In this Helquist drawing, the character is going up the stairs, into the dark, but the reader isn't. We're smiling, saluting her bravery, and getting the hell out of there.

"Sam's New Pet"



Most of us probably remember this urban legend, the one where a kid gets a "dog" that turns out to be a rabid sewer rat. This Helquist drawing looks like a delightful unusual animal friend. Dare I call him "cute?" Seriously, with the collar, it's straight out of a Disney movie. Gammell's? THAT'S a walking, tumorous abomination.

"The Red Spot"



I mean, duh. A spider on the face is nothing to sneeze at. But if we want to talk Would You Rather, I'll take a big spider on my face over the moment when an egg sac bursts my cheek flesh open and spiders come pouring out. But I was raised with certain values, so maybe it's just me(?)

"Is Something Wrong?"



Just so gloriously weird. Also, an enormous, deformed skull with a melting eyeball. Did Gammell make squish noises with his mouth while he was drawing? He must have, right?

At The End of the Day

I think what chafes me, just a little, is that *Scary Stories to Tell In The Dark* was one of the few things, growing up, that I had access to that was too scary for me. It was in the kid's part of the library. It was a Scholastic Book Sale, teacher-sanctioned way for me to push the boundaries a little. These books were passed around between friends, and we would all try and outdo each other by finding the grossest drawings buried in the different volumes.

I grew up thinking books were boring. There were some notable exceptions, like *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. The change in the art, not the individual drawings, but the overall tone and level, prove Young Me right. We took a book that was scary, gross, gory, and disgusting, BUT DEFINITELY NOT BORING, and we made it safer, more appropriate, and totally boring.

That's me, though. I'm not a kid anymore, nor do I have kids. What say you, parents? What about you, folks who read these as kids?

Gory, Bizarre, Cheesy Horror Movies and Their Book Matches



I love horror movies.

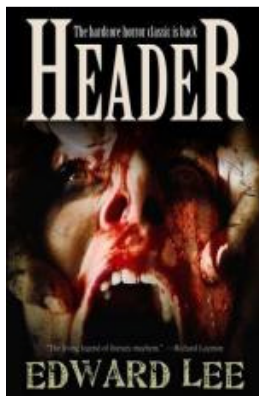
I also love horror books.

It's October, and you're on LitReactor, so I'm guessing you feel the same way.

Combining a love of horror movies and horror books seems easy, right? I mean, look at a good movie, find the book it was based on, pow.

But I wanted to do something a little different. I wanted to see if there were books suited to movies that were a little harder to match. I mean, how do you take stuff like, well, *The Stuff*, a horror movie about deadly yogurt that dissolves a dude's head, and turn it into a book recommendation?

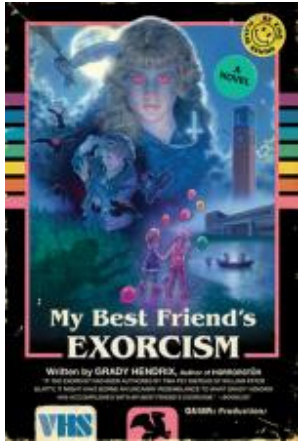
Like this:



Movie: 'Texas Chainsaw Massacre' Book: 'Header' by Edward Lee

Texas Chainsaw is less scary because it's gory and jumpy, more because of the creeping fear of a fucked-up family. *Header* goes the same way. Sure, it's got some of the most disgusting gore and sexualized violence you'll ever encounter (I'm NOT kidding on this one. Be warned. Don't come crying to me if you actually

end up reading Header), but, as Edward Lee himself says, the driving factor in *Header's* creation was a fear of country folk, which is also an essential element of *Texas Chainsaw*.



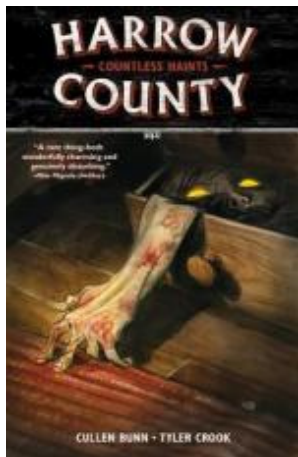
Movie: 'Night of the Comet'
Book: 'My Best Friend's Exorcism' by Grady Hendrix

Night of the Comet is a B-Movie that works because it's 100% committed to its premise. It's so drenched in the 80's you can hardly stand it. Some will tell you it's a loving send-up of classic horror movies, but I'm not convinced. Likewise, *My Best Friend's Exorcism* starts out seeming like an *Exorcist* parody, but it turns into its own thing pretty quickly. It has some of the same exploitation elements as *Night of the Comet*, and they share a certain charm.



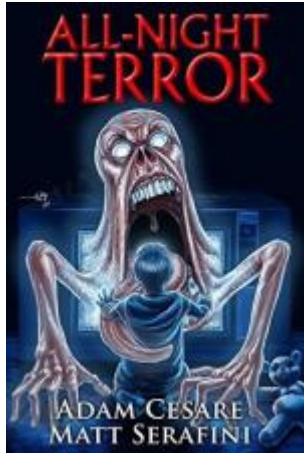
Movie: 'Beetlejuice'
Book: 'The Elementals' by Michael McDowell

Michael McDowell should be famous as hell. McDowell wrote books that, had a few things been changed around, would be total literary classics. He nailed the dark side of southern hospitality in *The Elementals*, and he was dead-on when it came to the *Beetlejuice* screenplay and its depiction of wealthy city dwellers fleeing to the country. McDowell wrote for *Tales From the Dark Side*, *Tales From The Crypt*, and he had a hand in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The good news is that a lot of McDowell's stuff has been re-released in the last few years. If you like the weird, (rotting) fleshed-out world of *Beetlejuice*, get into *The Elementals*.



Movie: 'The VVitch'
Book: 'Harrow County' by Cullen Bunn and Tyler Crook

Harrow County plays with a lot of old-timey stuff, takes us through the past, and will probably be enjoyed by anyone who liked *The VVitch*, aka everyone but me. Sorry, ya'll, but this is a total snobs versus slobs, critics (91% on RT) versus popcorn-chompers (56%) situation. Critics will say us slobs didn't get it, that we don't appreciate the slow burn, and that our brains were too primitive to understand the dialogue. To which I say, "Shut up, nerd." Anyway, that said, I understand a lot of you enjoyed *The VVitch*, so get up on *Harrow County*. It's got some old-timey scary stuff going on, and it's a comic, so you can say that it elevates "low" culture the way everyone was telling us *The VVitch* "elevated" horror flicks.



Movie: Whatever the Hell Joe Bob Briggs (or Elvira, or Vampira, or Zacherley, or Svengoolie) Was Showing
Book: 'All-Night Terror' by Adam Cesare and Matt Serafini

There was a whole collection of regional, late night TV horror hosts, but Joe Bob was my guy. He came up with one of my favorite movie critiques, "too much plot getting in the way of the story." If you're a filmmaker, get that shit emblazoned on a wooden plank and hang it above the door so you see it every day before you leave the house. In *All-Night Terror* we've got a TV station that's taken over by a late night host, and that host demands the station show non-stop horror movies. You get these short, scary stories, and you get the connective tissue of the horror that's happening in the studio.

By the by, if any stations are out there looking for trashy, late-night horror hosts with a gimmick, give me a call and I'll explain to you "Pete's Petrifying Video Store of Peril."



Movie: 'Goosebumps'
Book: 'Half-Minute Horrors' edited by Susan Rich

You want something you can watch with your kids that won't make you wish a steamroller had slowly crushed you into a lifeless sheet earlier in the day? *Goosebumps*. Look, it's not a fine film. But if nothing else you'll have a good time watching Jack Black and counting off the monsters you remember from the books. Likewise, for a kid's book that adults can get into, go with *Half-Minute Horrors*. Margaret Atwood, Holly Black, Libba Bray, Michael Connelly, Neil Gaiman, Jonathan Lethem, Joyce Carol Oates—just a few of the unexpected names that kicked in a story for this one. It's not 5-star entertainment, but have a couple fun size Twix bars and a couple fun size (40 oz) beers and you'll eat this one right up.



Movie: 'It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown'
Book: 'Dark Harvest' by Norman Partridge

Don't worry, *It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* isn't nearly the biggest stretch in this column when it comes to the definition of "horror." If you were getting all set to comment down below, hang on. *American Movie* is still coming.

These go together in my mind because they make for fantastic Halloween

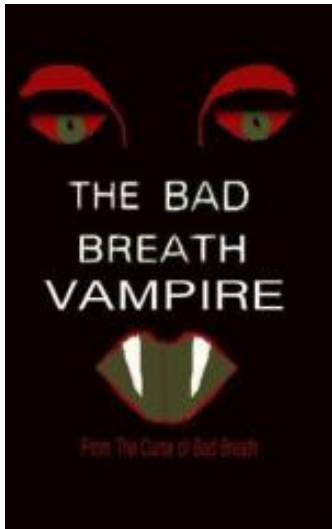
traditions. You watch *The Great Pumpkin* not because it's the best Halloween movie ever made, but because it's a tradition, and traditions are meant to help us get into the groove of the season. If you haven't read *Dark Harvest*, you should, and if I had to pick a book to read every October, it'd be this one. It's got some slasher elements, classic ghost story stuff, and even just a smidge of a *Hunger-Games-y* thing going on. You'll love it.



Movie: 'American Movie'

Book: 'My Favorite Thing Is Monsters' by Emil Ferris

American Movie isn't a horror movie, but it's all about horror movies. Or, that's what the box would tell you. The truth is, it's about passion. A filmmaker and his buddy will do absolutely anything to get their horror movie, *Coven*, committed to film. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* has that same level of passion, and it's also horror-adjacent. The detailed, incredible drawings will pull you through the entire book.

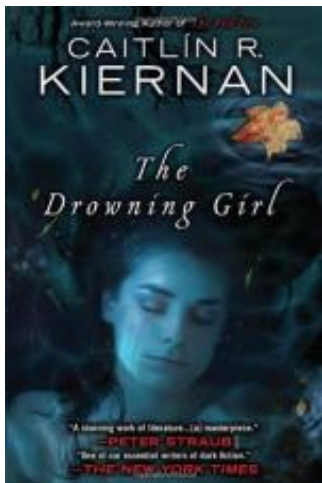


Movie: 'Troll 2'

Book: 'The Bad Breath Vampire' by Charles Hinton

Whenever I come across someone who likes the “so good it's bad” type of thing, I recommend Charles Hinton. He's the Neil Breen, the Tommy Wiseau of books. And he wrote a book called *The Bad Breath Vampire*. Let's just put it this way. The book opens with a Van Helsing type entering a bar. When the drinkers ask the dude's name, he says, “Dr. Stupid.” He's a vampire hunter, and he hears that a new vampire is in town, and this vampire's trapping people by disguising himself as a turd, flying into the toilet, and then when someone comes to flush him, BAM, he attacks.

At this point I'm assuming you know whether or not this one's for you, so I'll stop.

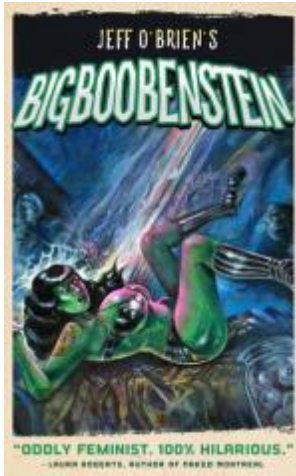


Movie: 'Martin'

Book: 'The Drowning Girl' by Caitlín R. Kiernan

Martin is an unsung George Romero classic. It's said that *Martin* is one of Romero's personal favorites, and it's the first team-up between Romero and horror staple Tom Savini. *Martin* is as much a character study as it is horror. It's hard to tell whether the titular Martin really is a vampire or not. He's convinced he's hundreds of years old, but the rest of the world isn't buying

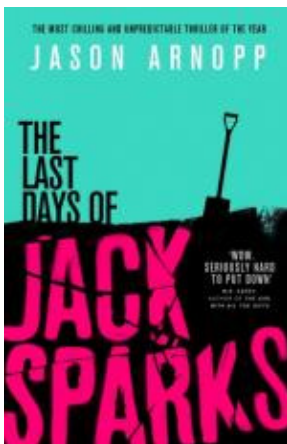
it. *The Drowning Girl* also gives us an unreliable narrator in an unusual situation. Blending horror and fantasy, we get something very strange, and something that wouldn't work in less capable hands. Which is why these two go together. They're stories that probably shouldn't work, but because their creators are just so damn talented, the results speak for themselves.



Movie: 'Frankenhooker'

Book: 'Bigboobenstein' by Jeff O'Brien

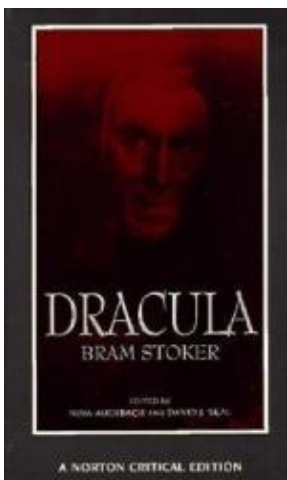
Oh, *Frankenhooker*. You hold a place in our hearts. Whether it's that wacky face or the talking VHS box, we always knew you were something special. What makes these two alike (other than the obvious) is that you can sit down with both, have low expectations, and find yourself surprisingly entertained and invested. Sure, *Frankenhooker* has exploding hookers, and *Bigboobenstein* has a talking hernia, but through these wildly curving paths we end up with something...pretty damn enjoyable. I hesitate to call these deep entertainment, but if you're the type of person who's willing to give them a shot, I think you'll find there's more here than you might have expected.



Movie: 'Shaun of the Dead'

Book: 'The Last Days of Jack Sparks' by Jason Arnopp

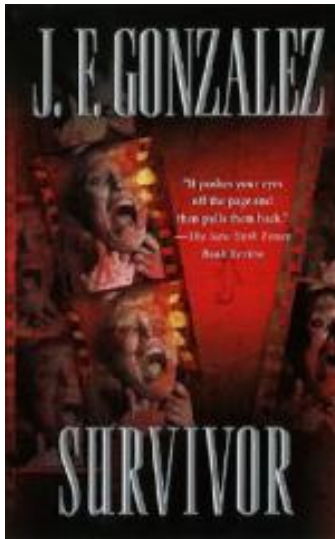
Horror comedy is something that's been done so many times, and done well about...three times? Maybe three? *Shaun of the Dead* is the agreed-upon movie exception, and *Jack Sparks* should be right there next to it. Jack, like Shaun, is a jerk, but not the kind of jerk like a jock in an 80's movie. Jack is the believable, enjoyable kind, the kind that you recognize right away as someone in your life.



Movie: 'The Human Centipede'

Book: 'Dracula' by Bram Stoker

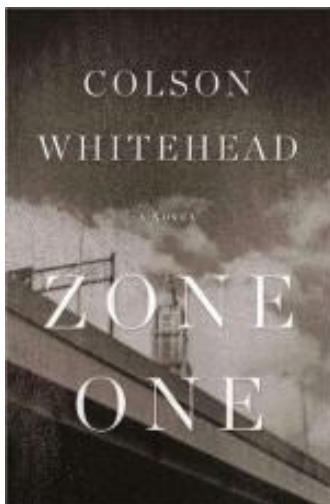
In both of these we all know the premise, almost nobody has actually plowed through the whole of either, and both are a little up their own ass. Norton Critical Edition indeed..



Movie: 'Pieces'

Book: 'Survivor' by J.F. Gonzalez

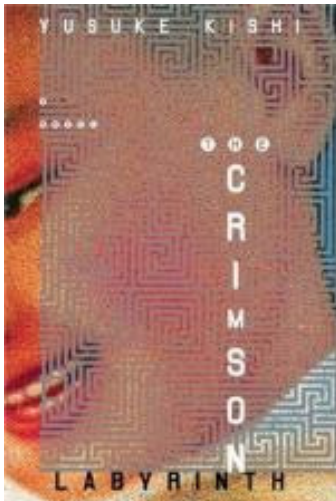
Pieces is an exploitation horror movie that goes for it. Violent as hell, more than a little depraved. It's also super dumb, featuring totally unnecessary martial arts nonsense. *Survivor* goes for it too. Gore, violence, sex. If there are boxes to check when making something transgressive as hell, *Survivor* checks all of them in blood and then opens another wound to draw some new, unheard-of, bloodier boxes.



Movie: 'Session 9'

Book: 'Zone One' by Colson Whitehead

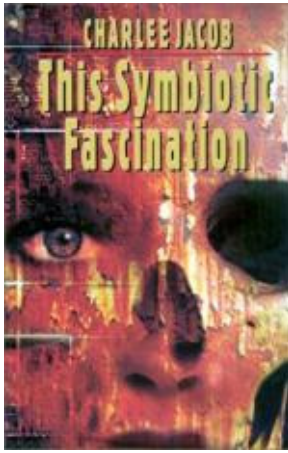
Both are a slow burn. Both have a mixture of the horror elements and the mundane. Both require a little patience, for sure. I think that's why these both have mixed reviews. They're an oddity in the world of horror in that they both work with a different sort of fear than the typical gorefest or jumpscare.



Movie: 'Cube'

Book: 'The Crimson Labyrinth' by Yusuke Kishi

Why are we here? What the hell? Hey, wait a second, why did that dude's face just get melted off? If you like an experience that throws you straight into the action, and if you're a journey over destination type when it comes to your horror, *Cube* is a movie you'll like, and *Crimson Labyrinth* is absolutely one to check out. Survival horror. Low on character high on action. Plus, they have their moments that are just plain weird.



Movie: 'Grabbers'

Book: 'This Symbiotic Fascination' by Charlee Jacob

Grabbers is constantly compared to *Shaun of the Dead*. It's got some humor, it takes place mostly in a bar. *This Symbiotic Fascination* is compared to *IT*, probably due in no small part to a scene where a victim is crammed into a drainpipe. While both are compared unfavorably, both have their merits and things about them that are better than the comparisons. Both deserve a shot at being their own thing.



Movie: 'Chopping Mall'

Book: 'The Menstruating Mall' by Carlton Mellick III

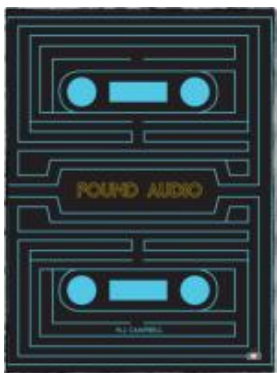
Hey, if you're looking to hold a contest regarding how much messy fun can be had in a mall, and if you're cutting out that one movie where it was all in a mall and everything after that was all about putting zombies in shopping centers, then check out these two.



Movie: 'Basket Case'

Book: 'Blister' by Jeff Strand

In both cases, you've got a horror story, but there's something hidden beneath the surface. It's giving *Basket Case* a lot of credit to say that there's a tale of brotherly love buried here, but damn it, I felt it. Hell, if my brother was mutated into a fleshy, murderous lump, I don't think I'd carry him everywhere in a picnic basket. I'd set him up in front of the TV in a hamster ball and hope for the best. *Blister* is also a story of a "monster" with some unusual stuff going on, but the more you get to know the monster, the more you can't help but feel for her.

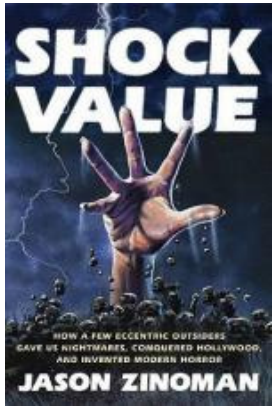


Movie: 'The Last Broadcast'

Book: 'Found Audio' by N.J. Campbell

Like a story where someone's putting together pieces of something to figure out just what happened? Then you're in luck. *The Last Broadcast* was a pretty good, mostly forgotten entry into the found footage category. But it's an early one, and it has a pioneering spirit. *Found Audio* is about putting together found media. It's just that this time we've got audio instead of video, and the

weirdness edges upward until it's almost too much to take. Probably a stretch to call this one horror, but it's weird, unusual, and interesting to say the least.



Movie: 'Room 237'

Book: 'Shock Value' by Jason Zinoman

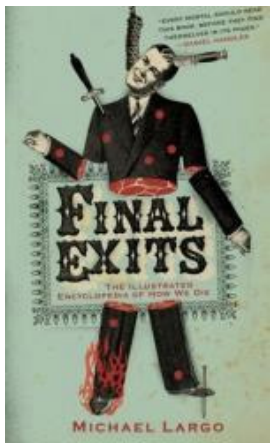
Room 237 is a hotbed of mixed opinion. But it's something that *Shining* fans can dig into, and god help you if you get two of them in a room together. *Shock Value* is a book that does the same. Imagine the discussions you had in English class, maybe film class, all the interpretations that were hard to nail down, all the heated disagreements about whether this or that signified this or that. If the very idea has you frothing, get a copy of *Shock Value*.



Movie: 'The Stuff'

Book: 'All You Can Eat' by Shane McKenzie

The Stuff has just a tiny bit of a message, maybe, possibly, about eating crappy food. I mean, sure, one could argue that the message is simple: If you find ooze coming out of a mine, you probably shouldn't just give it a taste, even if it looks like Oatmeal Cream Pie filling. And really, if you do that, I don't know that you're long for the world anyway. *All You Can Eat* has a food thing going on too, and like *The Stuff*, it doesn't screw around being message-y too long before turning awesome/disgusting.



Movie: 'Maximum Overdrive'

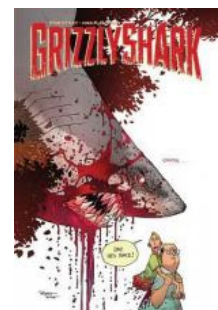
Book: 'Final Exits: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of How We Die' by Michael Largo

These go together because both are vastly improved by listening to AC/DC's *Maximum Overdrive* soundtrack at high volume while experiencing them. Let's be honest, very little is worse for having an AC/DC soundtrack, but these are particular improvements. *Final Exits* is an encyclopedia of sorts, and because there's no narrative to follow, you can rock out in between reading about the strange and wonderful ways people meet their ends.

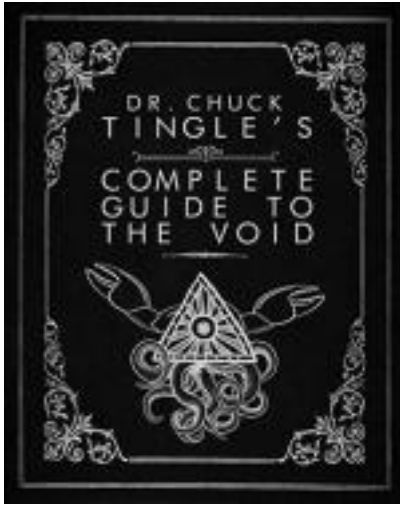
Movie: 'Society'

Book: 'Grizzly Shark' by Ryan Ottley

Both are just so damn bloody. Blood everywhere. If Lady Macbeth was trying to clean up after these two, she'd need a power sprayer, a couple tankers of bleach,



and a goddamn snorkel. *Grizzly Shark* not only features a grizzly shark, it's drawn by Ryan Ottley, who absolutely draws the best blood in the biz. Someday, when people analyze the art of the 21st century, they'll write volumes about Ryan Ottley's blood.



Movie: 'Sharknado'

Book: 'Dr. Chuck Tingle's Complete Guide to the Void' by Chuck Tingle

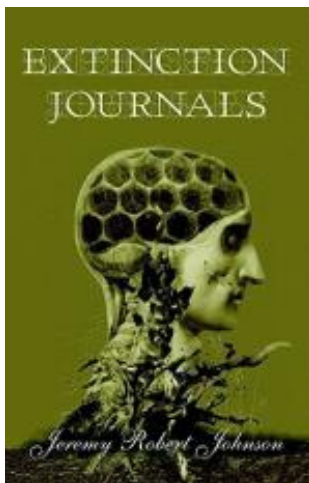
While the recent crop of intentionally bad movies seems a little cynical, I had to include at least one. And why not *Sharknado*? The movie that taught us...eh, nothing. But I didn't learn anything from eating an entire package of Oreos either. It's not always about education. Chuck Tingle, in this reader's opinion, also knows exactly what he's doing. Like the best version of a *Sharknado-type* movie, Chuck Tingle slams a couple things together, makes a hilarious title, and then puts out a decent book.



Movie: 'The Video Dead'

Movie: 'Daybreak' by Brian Ralph

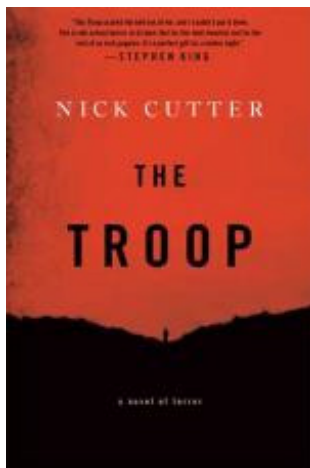
Are zombies dead? Is this a serious question or a joke opening? *The Video Dead* is a totally underrated zombie classic that got lost in the worship of Romero movies. *Daylight* is a second-person graphic novel that takes you to a new, affecting place when it comes to zombies. Like *The Video Dead*, it came out during a zombie glut, mostly represented by *The Walking Dead*, and it probably didn't get its due.



Movie: 'Critters 2'

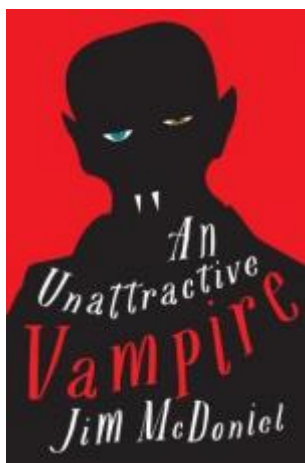
Book: 'Extinction Journals' by Jeremy Robert Johnson

First of all, why the sequel instead of the original? Because the sequel is where we get the giant ball of critters, which is what you really want. Giant ball of Critters destroying shit in *Critters 2*, suit made out of living cockroaches saving a dude's life during a nuclear holocaust in *Extinction Journals*? Disgusting creatures taking lives and saving them? Seems like two sides of the same coin to me.



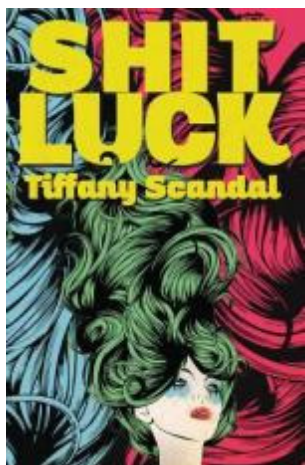
Movie: 'The Descent'
Book: 'The Troop' by Nick Cutter

In one case you've got a group of spelunkers exploring a cave woefully unprepared. In the other, you've got a small group of scouts who were prepared, but what they prepared for was spending a night on an island, not being terrorized by disgusting giant parasites. *The Troop* also has to feature one of the more sickening creatures you'll find in literature. And the "effects" as characters are transformed are so detailed and specific that you'll have a hard time forgetting them.



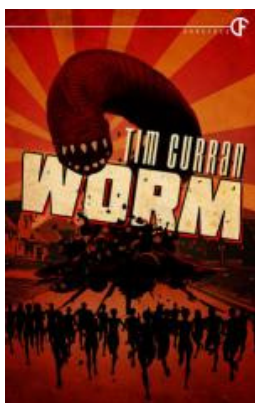
Movie: 'Near Dark'
Book: 'An Unattractive Vampire' by Jim McDoniel

If you were looking for something with vampires that was a little different, *Near Dark* was probably your jam. If you're looking for something a little different with vampires in it today, give *An Unattractive Vampire* a whirl. Yulric is an unattractive vampire who is old, curmudgeonly, and pissed off at all these studly vampires running around like the world is an issue of *Tiger Beat* come to life.



Movie: 'Suspiria'
Book: 'Shit Luck' by Tiffany Scandal

They've both got some bloody elements, and both are just so weird that you can't look away. *Suspiria* accomplishes this with colorful, strange visuals. *Shit Luck* does the same with the bizarre and experimental voice. Both stretch the idea of what horror can be, but more interesting than the stretching of definitions and genres is the ways they stretch what horror can do to anyone who picks them up.



Movie: 'Troll Hunter'
Book: 'Worm' by Tim Curran

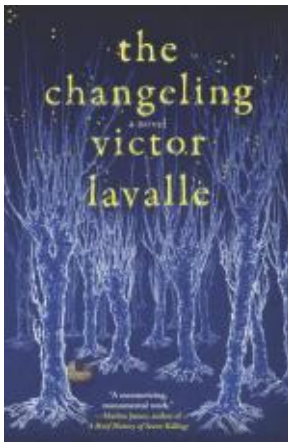
Troll Hunter totally shouldn't be good, and it totally is. Since when are trolls scary? Since when do we take someone who hunts them seriously? And since when were we scared of worms? For both of these, you have to be just a little in love with bizarre creatures that come to have a surprisingly awesome story.



Movie: 'The Void'

Book: 'Snowblind' by Michael McBride

Need something that doesn't waste a lot of time? Here you go. If you're someone who doesn't want to fool around, get *Snowblind* by Michael McBride. Get in, get scared, get out.



Movie: 'The Abominable Dr. Phibes'

Book: 'The Changeling' by Victor LaValle

Phibes is a very weird, somewhat forgotten classic. What makes it interesting is the killer who isn't totally nuts and running around with a drill or something. You can see where he's coming from, and Vincent Price makes the movie. In *The Changeling* you've got a great story, but it's the sympathetic characters and great writing by Victor LaValle that set this one apart. Both are totally great on their own, but a command performance (Price in *Phibes*, LaValle as author of *The Changeling*) makes these sing.

I'm done, but I badly wanted to find books to go with *Lifeforce* (space Dracula), *Death Spa*, and *From Beyond*.

The 11 Bram Stoker Novels That Aren't 'Dracula'



Bram Stoker was born November 8th, 1847. Then some other stuff happened, then we had vampires. That's the way it looks to most of us, anyway.

This being Ol' Bram-ble's (we're close, I have cute nicknames for him) 170th birthday, I thought it'd be good to write something about the man. But the last thing the world needs is another column about *Dracula*. What could I say about it that hasn't already been said a dozen times over by a few dozen English professors with a couple dozen bored students in front of them?

No, I'll bore everyone with something new, thanks.

It turns out the Stoke-ster wrote not one, not forty, but 12 novels! And only ONE of them is *Dracula*.

What's inside these other books? And which are worth your time? Using a sophisticated scoring system that's being made up as I go along, we'll find out definitively which of these books will get you...stoked. [Note: my normal editor is on vacation, so that's the level of humor you can expect for the remainder of this column.]

1. 'The Snake's Pass'

The Gist: A romantic thriller in the gothic style. Basically a dude and a lady fall in love, but there are complications.

Fun Fact: It's the only Stoker novel that takes place in Ireland, Stoker's home country.

Title for the Porno Version: Same.

Best Reason To Read: Probably the closest thing you'll get to a Stoker horror novel before *Dracula*.

2. 'Seven Golden Buttons'

The Gist: Maybe best described as a dark fairytale regarding a love that ignores the boundaries of life and death.

Fun Fact: This book was originally written on index cards. The material was refined for some other Stoker stuff, and it wasn't until 2015 that the index cards were transcribed and published.

Title for the Porno Version: 69 Golden Buttons. Or possibly 7 Brown Buttons.

Best Reason to Read It: Because so few others have. If you want to be the Stoker expert in your friend group (and if your friend group is somehow maintained by out-Stoker-ing each other), then this is the one to read.

3. 'The Watter's Mou'

The Gist: Maggie's father does a little smuggling. Maggie falls for William. It's William's job to stop smugglers. "But wait!" you say, "Didn't you just tell me Maggie's father is a smuggler!?" There you go.

Fun Fact: The book's title means "the water's mouth" and refers to a specific gorge. At some point, somebody decided "Watter's Mou" was a confusing name for a gorge, and the name "Watter's Mou" was changed to "Old Water Moo." Which makes a little more sense, but not a ton.

Title for the Porno Version: I don't know. I'm three books in and already regret this category.

Best Reason to Read It: A stormy night, some bad guys and good guys, and love caught in the middle. Pretty Shakespearean if you ask me.

4. 'The Shoulder of Shasta'

The Gist: Romance set in the American West.

Fun Fact: There is a character named Grizzly Dick in this one. Okay, fine. It was written after Stoker toured The United States with Henry Irving, an actor who was a heavy physical and spiritual influence on the character of Count Dracula.

Title for the Porno Version: The [any other body part, really] of Shasta.

Best Reason to Read It: Because you've already read the other classic soda-titled novels such as Dr. Pepper and Mr. Hyde and The Phantom of La-Croix-Pera. Also, it's pretty short.

5. 'Miss Betty'

The Gist: A Victorian cautionary tale/romance that...sorry, I fell asleep there for a second.

Fun Fact: Several outlets, drawing from the same mistake, give a synopsis for Miss Betty that involves a young man prostituting himself on the streets of London and providing his own account of London's gay underground in the late 1800s. It turns out this summary is for a book called *The Sins of*

the Cities of the Plain by Jack Saul, not Miss Betty. That being said, *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* sounds awesome.

Title for the Porno Version: Miss Betty Does A Bunch of Great Sex Stuff With People. (They're not all puns, you know. Sometimes it pays to be straightforward.)

Best Reason to Read It: Honestly, a lot of critics will say that this book was Stoker's attempt to appease some audiences after delivering the shock of *Dracula*. I guess if you feel shocked by *Dracula*, you could give Stoker a shot at getting back into your good graces.

6. 'The Mystery of the Sea'

The Gist: A political thriller dealing with the ripple effect of the Spanish-American War and the— Wait, wait, there's treasure! And psychic premonitions! There's some good stuff in here!

Fun Fact: In 1901 Stoker was on vacation and met an old woman who supposedly had supernatural powers. This woman was the basis for Gormala, a character with psychic abilities who shows up in *The Mystery of the Sea*.

Title for the Porno Version: The Mystery of the Three.

Best Reason to Read It: Look all over the internet, all you'll see is stuff about how this book has a lot of complex themes and is deserving of further scholarship, but everyone is obsessed with *Dracula*. While one might think that instead of writing about how criminally understudied this book is somebody could just go ahead and study it, it seems that this hasn't happened just yet.

7. 'The Jewel of Seven Stars'

The Gist: MUMMY! THIS ONE HAS A MUMMY! Sound the alarm, Stoker is back, baby!

Fun Fact: William Wilde, father to Oscar, was a hobbyist Egyptologist and shared tales of his exploits with Stoker, possibly inspiring *The Jewel of Seven Stars*.

Title for the Porno Version: The Jewel of Seven Porn Stars. That one's a gimme.

Best Reason to Read It: There's a mummy. And the mummy does some cool, creepy stuff. Let's face it, the last mummy flick wasn't what we were all hoping for. Take a hop back in time and see how they did it old school.

8. 'The Man'

The Gist: Before there was "A Boy Named Sue" there was a girl named Stephen in Stoker's *The Man*. This one's a love story of sorts, although there are THREE rejected marriage proposals in pretty short order.

Fun Fact: Sometimes this book is known as *The Gates of Life*.

Title for the Porno Version: Add a preposition to The Man and you've got your film.

Best Reason to Read It: If you're looking for one of Stoker's best female characters, you'll find her here. She's got a man's name, but she presents a pretty nice change-up, at least for two-thirds of the story or so.

9. 'Lady Athlyne'

The Gist: A romance. Again. Damn, Stoker! Can't a fella get a killer monster a little more often?

Fun Fact: The title ends up being a spoiler for the book's end. I guess that fact isn't all that fun.

Title for the Porno Version: Lady Asslyne

Best Reason to Read It: If you're studying the concept of the "New Woman" that was being tossed around quite a bit at the time, this one and *The Man* would be good picks. It's a pretty interesting concept, and Stoker dabbled in characters that played into the archetype, although his "New Woman" characters were not rewarded for their new womanhood.

10. 'The Lady of the Shroud'

The Gist: A guy gets an inheritance under one condition: He has to spend a year in his uncle's castle. Yes, this is real. He then falls in love with a mysterious woman who shows up in the castle and is possibly a vampire.

Fun Fact: The book is written in the epistolary style, which is the fancy way to say it's composed of letters, documents, and diary entries.

Title for the Porno Version: The Lady of the No Shroud

Best Reason to Read It: It's got some supernatural elements with some pretty nice twists. Plus, c'mon, this is the motivation for about half of *Scooby-Doo's* plotlines.

11. 'The Lair of the White Worm'

The Gist: Mesmerism! Deadly animal attacks! Murder! A woman tears apart a mongoose with her bare hands! Best of all, there's an actual giant, deadly white worm. With a lair.

Fun Fact: This one was adapted into a somewhat terrible, somewhat-filled-with-culty-goodness movie in 1988 starring Hugh Grant. Yes, if you've ever wanted to witness Mr. *Notting Hill* himself chopping down an old woman with a broadsword, this is the movie for you.

Title for the Porno Version: The Lay-er of the White Worm

Best Reason to Read It: This book made a somewhat notorious list of "The 13 Worst Stinkers of the Weird" published in Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* magazine. Others on the list included *Dracutwig* (a novel about a daughter of Dracula who turns into a vampire whenever she has sex), *Count Dracula's Canadian Affair*, and *The Vampire Tapes* (a trashy book that's fun if you're in the right frame of mind). If those sound up your alley, *White Worm* might be too.

18 Football Books for Football Haters



You go home for Thanksgiving. You stay in an uncomfortable room—maybe because it’s an unused guest room, maybe because it’s the living room, maybe because it’s your childhood room and you have to facepalm because that Heidi Klum poster is still on the ceiling. You eat some food, and inevitably, Dad or Uncle Bill or whoever sits down to watch about 418 hours of football.

Football season is not the most fun when you’re a man who doesn’t like sports. Especially if you’re a man who doesn’t like sports but also doesn’t get riled up about their existence. Which is where I’m at. I’m sports-neutral. Yes, I think there are some bad things caused by sports, especially in colleges and financially for big cities. But I think there are some pretty good sides to sports, too. It’s how I feel about religion. Not for me, but it seems to work for other people.

Sports-neutral is probably the worst thing you can be. If you’re anti-sports, you’ve got a group to hang with. They play good video games and listen to good music. If you like sports, you’ve got a group to hang with. They’ve got far-and-away the best snacks, and you’ll never hear “A beer? It’s 8:30 AM” from that crew.

The one good thing about being sports-neutral is you can look at sports books and recognize that there are some legitimately good football books out there. I know that those of you who are anti-sports are shaking your heads right now, but trust me, “football” is a genre of book just as much as sci-fi, romance, sad girls in pretty dresses, pop psychology, or books that I call “Why did I play God, create life, and make said life about 100 times stronger than it needed to be?”

My advice to you who hate football is this:

1. Read this list.
2. Read one of the titles.

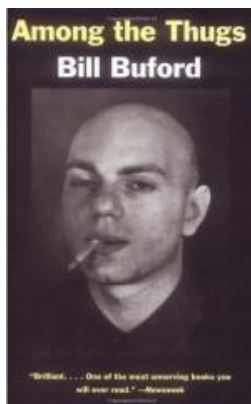
3. Get just enough material to do a flyby in the room where everyone's watching football on Thanksgiving. Check out the snacks (I cannot stress this enough. These are different snacks than everyone else is eating!) and skate out.

4. For the love of god, enough with the "sportsball" jokes. Nobody is going to say "Sportsball!?! You're a riot!" Never have I seen a joke so widely adopted by a group of people that purports to hate jokes based on feigned ignorance. Stop it.



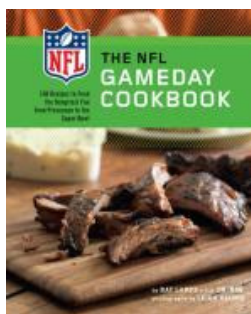
1. If You'd Rather Watch An 80's Horror Flick Than Football: 'Killerbowl' by Gary K. Wolf

In the year...well, I guess it would've been 2005, the sport of Professional Street Football combines MMA, armed combat, and football in a 24-hour streak of mayhem. If you threw The Running Man together with football (which isn't a big stretch), then you'd have *Killerbowl*. Fun Fact: Author Gary K. Wolf is best known for creating Roger Rabbit.



2. If You Want To Read A Great Book And Passive-Aggressively Piss Off Your Relatives: 'Among The Thugs' by Bill Buford

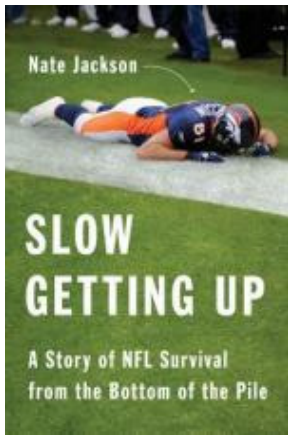
This one's all about the rowdy football/soccer fandom in the UK. Bonus points because you can pretend to be confused and force your family to clarify that they're talking about "American" football every time they mention it. Trust me, if you have a relative you want to piss off, the type of relative who has eagle paraphernalia on the mantle, this is the way to go.



3. If You Want to Be Involved, But Can't Care About Sports: 'The NFL Gameday Cookbook' by Ray "Dr. BBQ" Lampe

The author of this one is known as "Dr. BBQ." Not "Mister" BBQ. DOCTOR BBQ. These are not recipes for beginners to make or the faint of heart to eat. I wouldn't suggest eating apples with entire Snickers bars baked inside if you're on a diet, and by "diet" I mean you're generally aware of what's going in your mouth on some level beyond "this is one of the best flavors ever experienced by mankind."

If you can master Italian Beefs, Tailgate Chili, and Nutella Rice Krispy Bars, you'll be swarmed with invites to every game. Nobody gives a shit if you know football so long as you can master a nice garlic cheese dip.

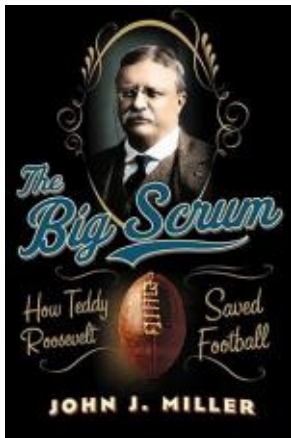


4. If You're Curious About The Non-Superstar Players: 'Slow Getting Up' by Nate Jackson

Lots of sports biographies out there are all about the greatest. And they have names like "The Greatest" or "The Greatest of All Time" or "Hide Your Erection Under a Table Because You're About To Read This Story About a Guy Who's Great At Football."

Slow Getting Up is a different kind of book. It follows a mid-level, average player. Somebody who isn't going to be on a poster in some kid's room.

This book is a lot more than a collection of "this sports thing happened, then that sports thing happened." It's more focused on life off the field for a struggling player. Plus, as writing goes, Jackson's is plain fun to read, which isn't always something you get in a sports memoir.



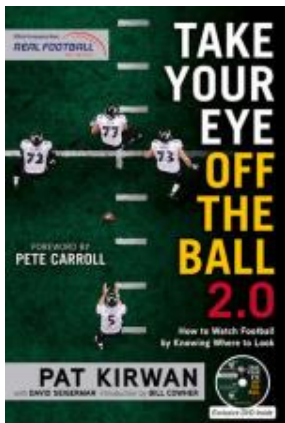
5. If History Is Your Bag: 'The Big Scrum' by John J. Miller

If you're going to talk football history, you might as well go WAY back. Plus, you'll be talking about Teddy Roosevelt, a President most football fans can get behind.

The story here is so weird. In one year there were 18 football-related deaths. 18! That doesn't sound like a lot, but can you imagine if the NFL season resulted in 18 deaths this year?

Teddy Roosevelt is, in no small part, responsible for some changes to the game that made it safer, including the forward pass. And like anyone who grew up in Colorado in the Elway era, I have to thank him.

Not to mention that this whole thing is kind of bizarre. How does the President end up getting involved in football? It would be like if Bill Clinton, in 1994, really pushed the NFL's adoption of the two-point conversion. Or if Barack Obama, in 2010, had taken a pretty strong stance on the specific rules of Arena Football. Or if Trump was involved on some oddly specific level with the ethics of professional football players...



6. If You Want To Understand The Game, Even If You Hate It: 'Take Your Eye Off The Ball 2.0' by Pat Kirwan

If you want a primer that'll let you get into the game, this is the way to go. Read it on the plane. Just take it easy on trying to impress Uncle Abe with your new, hard-won knowledge. Yes, he knows what a "screen" is, and if he comes back at you and you don't know how a shovel pass plays in, you're going to look like

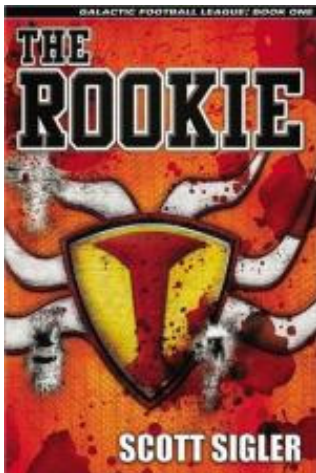
a fool.

Think of it as learning something that you can write or read about later. Maybe you'll never use this information. But maybe you'll want to write a football scene into a book, and just maybe you don't want it to look like a football scene from *The Room*.



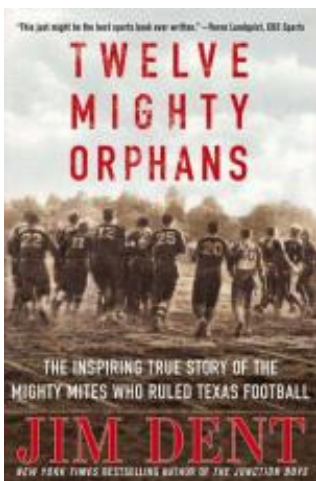
7. If You're Looking For Something To Tie Any Room Together: 'The Boz' by Brian Bosworth

Just for the cover. I flipped through several (none) issues of *Better Homes and Gardens*, and not one of those homes wouldn't be improved with this book, facing front, on one of the bookshelves.



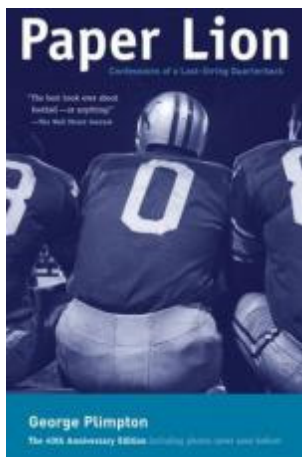
8. Because You Wish There Was A Real Mutant Football League: 'The Rookie' by Scott Sigler

Sigler is a Detroit Lions fan, and it shows. *The Rookie* (and the entirety of the Galactic Football League series) takes place 700 years in the future, features mutants and aliens, and draws heavily from current-day football. This book is in the rarefied air of being something sci-fi nerds and football lovers alike can agree on. Not to mention that if you fall in love with it, you can buy Krakens jerseys, meaning you could finally wear a sports jersey with pride!



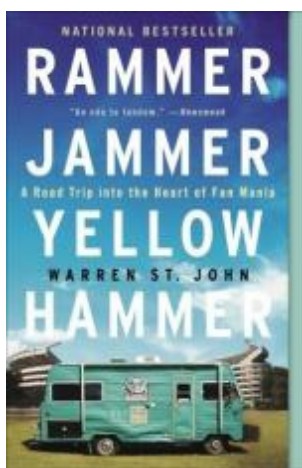
9. Because You Like A Sports Story, Even If You Don't Like Sports: 'Twelve Mighty Orphans' by Jim Dent

I'm not a huge boxing fan, but *Rocky* kicks ass. Same deal with this. It's one of those overcoming adversity tales, a group of orphaned boys with nothing rise through the ranks of Texas high school football, which is about as easy to do as rising through the ranks of holiness in Vatican City.



10. Because You Love A Rebel Journalist: 'Paper Lion' by George Plimpton

George Plimpton takes a shot at playing football as a total amateur in the 60's. This is before football was what it is today. The average salary for an NFL player was something like \$6,000 (which is a tidy \$50,000 in today's dollars. A salary, to be sure, but not something that's getting you to celebrity status). Plimpton is a great writer, and he captured an era of professional sports that is long, long gone and unlikely to ever return. It's a pretty cool act of embedded journalism, and Plimpton's writing is solid.



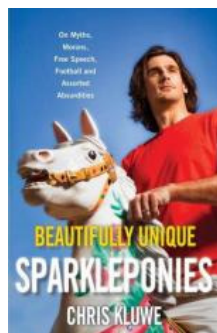
11. Because You Love An Exploration of Subculture: 'Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer' by Warren St. John

This one gets bonus points because A) it's about fan culture more than it's about football, which gives it another angle entirely and B) because it's about college football, which is a whole world of what-the-fuck all on its own. If you're a person who doesn't mind reading about folks that make you shake your head, if you like Nathan Rabin's book about Juggalos and Phish fans, then you'll get into this one. Warren St. John buys an RV and hangs with the hardest of the hardcore fans, tailgates with the grillin'-est of the grillers, and even profiles a minister who watches Alabama football on a small screen while performing weddings. "You may now roll tide."



12. Because You're Always Up for a Screwball Comedy: 'Semi-Tough' by Dan Jenkins

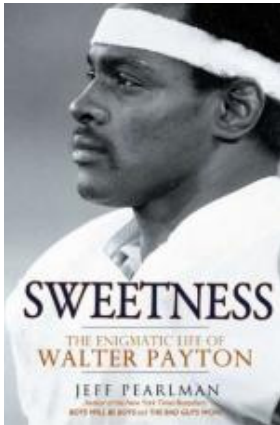
Look...this was written in the 70's, and it's the screwball comedy of football books. What does that mean? Well, like *Animal House* or *Porky's*, there's fun to be had, but there are some racial slurs, and sexual politics are not what I'd call "banner." There's a certain intertwined thing going on with this type of comedy and football. *The Longest Yard*, *North Dallas Forty*, *Necessary Roughness*. If you get down with that type of raunch, then you might get a kick out of this one.



13. Because You're Not Up for a Screwball Comedy: 'Beautifully Unique Sparkleponies' by Chris Kluwe

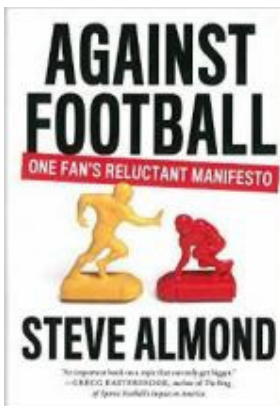
Let's balance out the last one with this. Chris Kluwe was a pro player who was known for his political outspokenness, and especially for being pretty

left-leaning in an arena where those aren't necessarily the prevailing politics. A collection of essays about football amongst other things. A personal suggestion: rather than reading this one straight through, read a section, put it down, and come back for the next section a day or two later.



14. Because You Want To Understand The Greats: 'Sweetness' by Jeff Pearlman

On the field, he was an incredible talent. Off the field, Walter Payton had a difficult life. This is a good one if your only exposure to football is video of Ray Rice and the dog-fighting trials of Michael Vick. Walter Payton wasn't as easy to dismiss as a monster, but he was also someone who was as complicated off the field as he was great on the field, and Sweetness has no problem presenting the real, unvarnished person.



15. If You're Looking To Pick A Fight This Year: 'Against Football' by Steve Almond

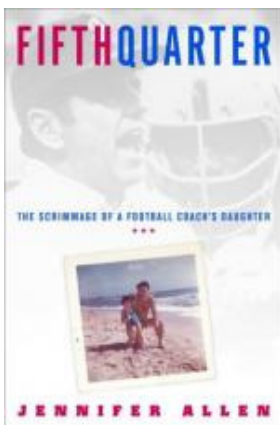
If you took it easy on your relatives at Thanksgiving last year, if the election was just not something you could talk about, and if you're looking to get back into it with your relatives, this is the book to read.

"Welfare moms? What about the NFL being a tax-exempt organization?"

"It's not just the concussive hits. It's sub-concussive hits that are causing a lot of damage to players, especially high school players."

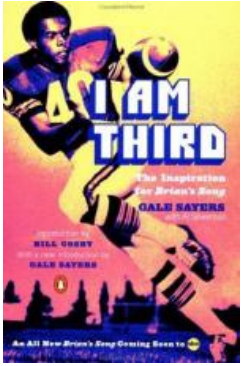
"You don't want to pay for someone else's healthcare, but you were happy to fund that gigantic stadium, and they don't even throw you a couple tickets twice a year?"

Against Football is a tough read, especially if you're a football fan, but that's what makes it good. Steve Almond likes football. And he understands how friends and family connect over the game. This isn't some hippie nerd who's dismissible because he doesn't get it. This is a diehard fan who's had a change of heart.



16. If You're Looking for an Unsung Memoir: 'Fifth Quarter' by Jennifer Allen

A book by and about a high-ranking football coach's daughter. It's pretty easy to identify with Allen's struggle. How do you connect with your dad when it seems all he cares about is football? This one flew under the radar a bit, and I think it's because the audience for it missed out, seeing it as a football book. Trust me, you don't have to love football to get something really good out of this one.



17. If You're Looking to Connect to a Fan's Softer Side: 'I Am Third' by Gale Sayers

The inspiration for the TV movie *Brian's Song*, starring none other than Lando Calrissian himself, Billy Dee Williams, *I Am Third* is a story of football, friendship, loss, and grief. If a football fan you love came of age in the 70's, and if you've never seen them cry, bring up *Brian's Song*.

18. If You're Looking for a New, More Interesting Fight to Pick: 'But What If We're Wrong?' by Chuck Klosterman

It's the saw amongst non-fans of the sport: "This shit's going to be gone in 25 years." And the unspoken part is, "Proving I was right to never like it in the first place."

Klosterman takes a different look at the current, heavily academic argument about the idea that football will completely fade within the next couple of decades. The quick version: What if the violence of football is precisely what saves it? What if football moves from culture to subculture, and the things that set football culture apart are the very things that allow it to continue?

Side bonus: In *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* Klosterman also presented two hypothetical questions that are certain to get football fans talking, one about a super gorilla whose sole desire is to play football, the other being about a glimpse into the future where you are a serious Canadian Football League Fan.

Klosterman
Chuck
But What If
We're
Wrong?

12 "Boring" Books That Are Way Better Than They Should Be



"Boring" is almost always bad. Who wants a boring movie? A boring piece of art on the wall?

But sometimes boring is alright. Better than alright.

I live in Colorado, land of the craft beer. I've seen it all. Beers with every kind of fruit involved. Beers of all shades. Beers with stuff floating in them. Beers meant to embody seasons, holidays, and dead celebrities. Beers garnished with lemon, lime, or half an orange on the edge of a glass.

In some ways it's great. But once in awhile, damn, you just want to drink a regular, boring beer. You don't want to sit at a bar and drink the liquid vision of hell created by some bearded madman craft brewer after he had a dream where a peach had sex with some hops inside of a barrel used to age bourbon.

Sometimes you want something a little boring. Sometimes boring is a nice palate cleanser. Sometimes boring is a great alternative to something that's trying too hard, that's working so hard at being novel or different that it forgets to be good too.

Boring can be good. Boring can be comforting. Boring can be a compliment.

Doing laundry is boring. But it feels good. Yardwork. Raking, mowing. Cleaning out the gutters. All boring. But the good kind of boring.

These books are the good kind of boring.



1. 'Swimming Studies' by Leanne Shapton

I hate to use the word “meditative” to describe a book, but something about this book is meditative. It feels like you’re at the pool. Not swimming, not trying to outdo Phelps or something. Just...a slow cruise through the water. You get a beautiful, surprising, hard-to-capture feeling when you read this book, and I say that as someone who nearly failed Beginning Swimming in college.



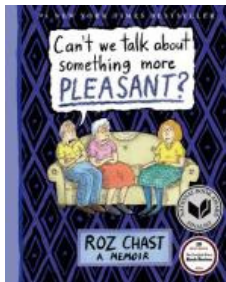
2. 'Invincible Days' by Patrick Atanagán

Using animals to relate childhood experiences, *Invincible Days* is made up of comic strips that are sparse, simply written, and lack a lot of the punching and kicking and shooting laser blasts by opening your eyes found in comics. They're short memories from childhood, and there are some standout incidents, but the real effect of the book doesn't smack you in the face at some point. It comes when you read the whole thing, let each small entry build a world.



3. 'An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments' by Ali Almossawi

Discourse! Illustrated! This is like a college class, but with really good pictures. As you start reading, you’ll recognize people. People in your life, people you see online. While logical fallacies aren’t a big selling point when compared to murderous clowns and bizarre information encoded into American historical monuments, this book is written in a crisp, clear way, and you’ll be happy you read it.



4. 'Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?' by Roz Chast

Roz Chast is best known for her *New Yorker* cartoons. If there's a better example of boring than a *New Yorker* cartoon, I'd love to hear about it. Except I never will, because boring on that level is probably lethal.

Anyway, this memoir is all about Chast dealing with her aging parents. No, there's no outrageous oldsters in here, no rapping grannies or skydiving bucket-listers. It's very, very real, which is what allows for it to have such a sly humor.

It comes from a place that I don't identify with, it's about a situation I'm not in, and I couldn't have loved it more.



5. 'Archie: The Married Life' by Michael E. Uslan, Paul Kupperberg, and Norm Breyfogle

Yeah, Archie. Who cares, right? Kids in letter jackets drinking phosphates or egg creams or banana oil malts or whatever crazy crap some maniac behind a soda counter dreamed up back in the day.

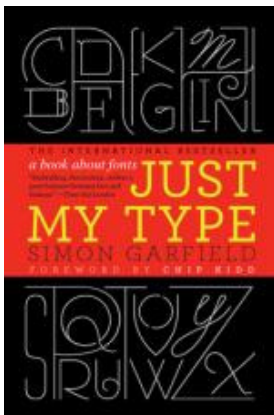
Archie reminds me of the kind of TV I watched when I stayed home sick from school as a kid. Something about the style, the way the characters talk. It's compulsively readable, and it's way better than it has any business being. It's comforting. Just know that shit gets real in volume 6.



6. 'The Book Bindery' by Sarah Royal

Can you write a good book about a boring, menial job? Yep. And you can call it *The Book Bindery*.

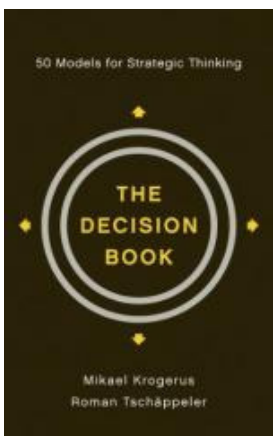
It's simple, the chapters are short, and it tricks you into a flow, a rhythm that lulls you into following the story.



7. 'Just My Type: A Book About Fonts' by Simon Garfield

Did you know there are font conferences? Like more than one? I didn't until someone told me they had come back from one.

Fonts themselves are boring unless you're a really particular type of person. But, reading this book will get you looking around at all the fonts out there in the world. You'll be comparing road signs between different states, wondering why the badges on your car have the fonts they do. While the book itself isn't thrilling, it's a gateway to a much larger world.



8. 'The Decision Book: 50 Models For Strategic Thinking' by Mikael Krogerus

I saw this one in an airport, and I was intrigued. Which means it's boring. See, I'm a boring person, so I'm intrigued by boring things. This is a self-perpetuating cycle that makes me ever more boring as time moves on. It would be sort of fascinating if it wasn't so boring.

This book is exactly what it says it is. 50 ways to make decisions. The sneaky thing here is that it's also a statement about the fact that there are A LOT of ways to make decisions that work better than voting. I know, sacrilegious as an American, but voting is just not the right way to make every decision. If you're feeling bored, next time you have a meeting at work, suggest that voting isn't

the best way to reach decisions, sit back and watch the fireworks.



9. 'Galaga' by Michael Kimball

Maybe a third of the way into this book Kimball admits that it might've been foolish to write a book about a game simple as *Galaga*. And then he continues on and nails it.

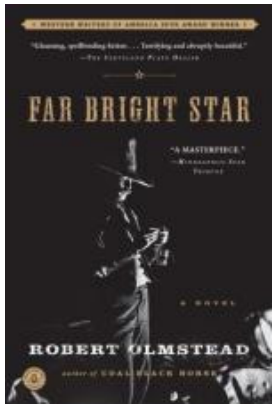
Michael Kimball is one of my favorites, and what he managed with this book is nothing short of a low-key, whispered miracle.



10. 'Drinking at the Movies' by Julia Wertz

I have a limited capacity for reading things where not much big stuff happens and it seems like a writer is working out their life on the pages. Good medicine for the writer, but maybe not for the reader.

Julia Wertz is one of the exceptions. *Drinking at the Movies* doesn't have a lot of thrills, but that's what I love about it. It has to be one of maybe a couple graphic memoirs I've read with NO LOVE STORY. Yes, people, the element jackhammered into every movie, every book, every TV series, you won't find it here. And damn is it a relief.



11. 'Far Bright Star' by Robert Olmstead

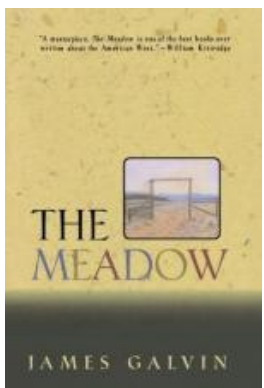
This book breaks a primary rule of storytelling. We've got two big characters. One is a dude who was captured, stripped naked, and left to die in the desert. The other, his brother, is wreaking havoc, spilling blood trying to find his stranded brother. Which of these two brothers do you think the book would follow? Well, you're wrong. It's the naked guy wandering the desert. You'd THINK we'd hear more about the person doing all the stuff, but we hear almost entirely from the dude lost in the desert. It's a book only Robert Olmstead could pull off.

12. 'The Meadow' by James Galvin

A book about a meadow. Damn, at least *Anne of Green Gables* had Anne. *Little House on the Prairie* had a house. It was little, but there was a house.

This memoir is filled with little moments, the small things writers always capture but tend to throw into a bigger story as background. In this story, the small moments ARE the story. They're the only moments you need, the only ones that matter.

I met James Galvin once. He signed a copy of *The Meadow* for me. I'd had



another copy before, one I'd had since college, but I loaned it out and never got it back. So I bought a new one. Galvin signed my crisp copy of *The Meadow* with disgust. Then he took my friend's copy, which was bent to shit, and he said, "Now there's a book somebody actually read!"

Holiday Gifts I Would Give To Famous Authors



Close your eyes and imagine a holiday the way you've always wanted it.

You close your eyes and Christmas morning, which usually starts at 8 AM, is now Christmas early evening. You close your eyes and the cup of coffee in your hands turns into a cup of coffee that looks the same, but you take a drink and realize there's booze in it now. You close your eyes and instead of that one relative you don't like, sitting across from you is David Sedaris. He keeps pulling that notebook out of his shirt pocket to write stuff down, and you're thinking, "Ah, shit." But at least he's polite and interesting. You close your eyes and instead of that annoying guy who's always around at Christmas, you've got George R.R. Martin in one of his trademark old man hats.

Only problem, when you close your eyes, you have to think about the gifts you're going to give your new besties. The good news for you is I've made a list. I've checked it twice. And whether the folks on it are naughty or nice is none of my concern. Like I said, boozy coffee. I'm feeling no pain.

And by the way, if you're on this list, consider yourself formally invited to Christmas with me. Unless you're dead. In that case, let's talk closer to Halloween.

George R.R. Martin: Around the World Tickets

I'm the only person on the planet who enjoys the outrage Martin creates whenever he's not sitting at his desk more than I enjoy the actual product of him sitting at his desk. What's that saying? Some people like to watch the world burn? This is true. And some people might also want to shower the planet in highly flammable confetti.

Chuck Palahniuk: Fancy Headphones

I read this interview with Palahniuk where he said he would do yard work wearing these 3M jobbers

to block out the sound. I can tell you from experience, someone in his life hates these. I used to fly with ear protection worn over earbuds. I did this for years until my partner finally bought me fancy noise-canceling headphones. Partially for me, partially for her so she didn't have to walk through the airport with me when I looked like someone who just got off work demolishing buildings. Like some sort of Demolition Man.



David Sedaris: A Hot Scoop

Simply a 3X5 card with the following information on it: *You can buy raccoon penis bones, by the dozen, on Amazon.*

Charles Bukowski: A Longer Gravestone

Bukowski's grave marker famously reads "Don't Try."

I think this is probably misinterpreted often to mean exactly what it says.

But the story goes like this:

Somebody asked me: 'What do you do? How do you write, create?' You don't, I told them. You don't try. That's very important: not to try, either for Cadillacs, creation or immortality. You wait, and if nothing happens, you wait some more. It's like a bug high on the wall. You wait for it to come to you. When it gets close enough you reach out, slap out and kill it. Or if you like its looks, you make a pet out of it.

Not only is this a little truer to what he said, it would make a hell of a huge grave marker, like 50 feet long, which would be sweet.

Margaret Atwood: URL

Margaretatwood.com takes you to Atwood's Amazon page. If you want the author's actual site, you have to hit up Margaretatwood.ca. Atwood can keep her Canadian pride, but why not redirect Margaretatwood.com to her actual web site? And while I'm cruising around GoDaddy, I'll probably stuff a couple others for Atwood in the shopping cart. AtwoodIsMetal.com is like \$12 dollars.

William Shakespeare: A Scarf

That way he could stop wearing that air filter around his neck all the time. You're not fooling anyone, Bill. That's not a fashion statement. It's an air filter you dumpster-dived from behind Grease Monkey. Luckily for you, scarves came back in for men about 7 years ago, so there are a lot of great options out there, although somewhat limited if the look you're shooting for isn't "Special Forces Wannabe."



Hunter S. Thompson: Sheriff's Badge

Maybe Thompson's campaign to be Pitkin County Sheriff didn't work out for him, possibly because his campaign poster included a peyote button, possibly because the man was a maniac. But he will always be the Sheriff in my eyes, and I wish for a world where that happened for all of us.

Jorge Luis Borges: A Heist Team

Borges was involved in some of the coolest guerrilla writing ever. Borges co-founded the journals *Prisma* and *Proa*, which were large, one-sheet journals pasted to the walls in Buenos Aires. As Borges aged, he was less proud of this work, and he tried to find all the copies he could and destroy them. Now that time has marched on, there are copies under lock and key. What better way to honor Borges than to fulfill his wishes, put an amazing heist team together and recover Borges' stuff. We need a techie, a getaway driver, a demolitions expert, a violent knife enthusiast who is a total loose cannon, someone who can climb an elevator shaft, and a charismatic leader who makes us feel like what these folks did was wrong, but we're also mostly okay with it.

Haruki Murakami: Tattoo Markers

Murakami is famous for his writing, and he's famous for his running. In an interview, he said he tries to run without too much in his head, but once in awhile a writing idea pops up. The best way to get your head empty again is to take whatever's in your head and put it somewhere else. With tattoo markers, Murakami can write the idea on his skin, get them the hell out, and keep the inside of his brain nice and tidy.

Stephen King: Rancid Beard or Pubes Home Game

This is a one-of-a-kind game/conversation piece, homemade being the only way to go when we're talking about someone super rich. We collect a small packet of Rancid frontman Tim Armstrong's beard hairs. Then, a similar packet of Tim Armstrong's pubic hair. We then put them in two small vials, make a nice wooden stand for them, and King can ask people whether they know which is which. I know this is a vile suggestion, but it seems like a very Rancid thing to do, and King is an avowed fan.

Virginia Woolf: A Room. Sort Of.

An Ostrich pillow isn't exactly an entire room, but at least it provides some level of illusion that nobody else is around. And we'll paint a terrifying face on it. That way, if anyone does show up, this'll scare them the hell off so Woolf can get some work done.

J.K. Rowling: Review

A 5-star Goodreads review written by the one person on Earth who has never heard of Harry Potter but read *Casual Vacancy* and thought it was badass.



Toni Morrison: \$2,001 In The Form of a Giant Check

A few years back, Rutgers had a star-studded cast of speakers. One of them was Toni Morrison. The other was Snooki. If you don't remember Snooki, I like you, let's hang out. Unfortunately, Snooki's speaking fee was \$2,000 more than Toni Morrison's. Which meant that they had a writer of unusual talent that they paid less than a Jersey-ite of no discernible talent, if you don't consider being sunburned and belligerent a talent. Holidays are a good time to right the wrongs. Let's do this.

John Steinbeck: Leonardo DiCaprio Oscar Win Commemorative T-Shirt

Steinbeck was nominated for the Nobel four times before he won. And in all honesty, lots of folks felt the win was more of a make-up for his past losses than a legit win. In this way, maybe Steinbeck and DiCaprio are intertwined, and Steinbeck could take a little solace in DiCaprio's Oscar win, which came after five nominations and was seen as a bit of a consolation prize. They are victims of the system, man.



James Joyce: Pez Dispenser

I feel like Joyce was the original hipster. If he was famous for his Pez dispenser, I'd be chomping down on artisanal Pez right now. The silliness of a single piece of \$4.00 Pez emerging from Spider-Man's neck is almost more than I can handle. ALMOST.

Junot Díaz: A Better Wikipedia Picture



What the hell is this? Why is this picture of Díaz, mid-sentence, the one used on the place where he's probably seen the most? Just do an image search, there are HUNDREDS of better choices.

Sue Grafton: Party Popper

I like to get these for people I've done Nanowrimo with. It's nothing huge, but it's good to take a second and say, "Hey, I finished something." With *Z Is For Zero* expected in 2019, she's got something to celebrate.

Edgar Allan Poe: A Roll of I Voted Stickers

If, as is the theory, Poe was a victim of cooping (an early form of election fraud where they'd kidnap you, keep you in a room and feed you booze until you agreed to vote for a candidate. Which, compared to modern voter fraud, doesn't sound so bad. At least they buy you a drink) then he deserves the little white oval as much as anyone ever has. I might even go so far as to say he should get 500 of them. Hell, for \$8 bucks? We owe him that much.



Joyce Carol Oates: Oates: FiestaFive

I feel like Joyce Carol Oates has gotten most of the types of praise that can be given except for possibly a "Nice writing. Up top!" This gift ensures that not only will she get the richly deserved high-five, but it'll shoot out some confetti, making it a high-five to remember.

Charles Dickens: \$100 Donation to The Empowerment Plan

The Empowerment Plan makes awesome coats. They're designed for people experiencing homelessness, and they transform from coat to sleeping bag to easily-carried bandolier thingie. Dickens started a house for "fallen" women during his life, and he managed it for 10 years. Part of the Empowerment Plan is that the coats are made by formerly homeless women. Plus, the story goes that Dickens conceived of *A Christmas Carol* while walking late into the night, so I have to believe he's got a good idea of how cold it gets in the winter.



Or maybe I'll just get him a copy of Scrooged. Because fuck it.

Jhumpa Lahiri: Personalized Dollywood Mug

I recently learned that Jhumpa Lahiri's real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri. She went by the name Jhumpa because, as she says, "I always felt so embarrassed by my name... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are." My brother had an unusual name in the 80's that's more common now, but every time we went somewhere with a personalized license plate, deck of cards in a leather pouch, or whatever, his name was never to be found. I've got to believe Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri doesn't show up on a ton of stuff, and that stinks. But we can fix that in a jiffy.



William Faulkner: Dry erase paint

When Faulkner wrote *A Fable*, he wrote the outline for the book on the walls of his office. Which didn't please his wife too much, and she had the outline painted over. After which he wrote the outline AGAIN and then shellacked over it to make sure it would stay. I feel like there's a compromise to be had here, and it might be dry erase paint.

Jane Austen: A DVD copy of Jane Austen's Mafia!

Because it must be a very rare thing to have your name used as a joke in the title of a parody movie. If it were me, I'd want to know.

Herman Melville: Dwight Bobblehead

Because without *Bartleby the Scrivener* there is no Dwight.

Mark Twain: World's Best Cat Dad Mug

Did you know that Mark Twain was the world's best cat dad? He even played pool with one of them:

One of them likes to be crammed into a corner-pocket of the billiard table—which he fits as snugly as does a finger in a glove, and then he watches the game (& obstructs it) by the hour, & spoils many a shot by putting out his paw & changing the direction of a passing ball.



Why You Should Never Buy A Writer A Notebook



It's a no-brainer. Your friend, your mom, your person, is a writer. You aren't going to buy them a new Macbook. You thought about gifting that vintage typewriter until you tried to lift it, learned it weighs 800 lbs, and priced it at about a dollar for every one of those pounds.

No problem. You go with a notebook. Simple, practical. Supportive. Good choice, right?

Maybe not.

Hear me out.

We Have A Bunch

You know how you have that one aunt who is into...I don't know, anything with a cow on it? And so you buy them cow stuff all the time? A ceramic cream container. Salt and pepper shakers. Everything a cow.

I have a newsflash for you. That aunt probably isn't all that into cow stuff. Someone bought her one cow thing, then another. And then someone else saw her small shelf of cow stuff and got in on the action. Your aunt didn't want to disabuse any gift-givers out of a sense of politeness. And so it spread, and now your aunt has a curio shelf full of cow stuff, a shelf that she can't wait to move so it can "accidentally" get destroyed.

It's like that for writers and notebooks. Yes, we use them. But that doesn't mean we want 100 of them. That doesn't mean we want to see another one every time we turn around. That doesn't mean we need another one.

We Are Obnoxious

I like me a good notebook. But for me, and for a lot of others who use them frequently, there are some pretty specific likes and dislikes.

For example, I don't like notebooks that refuse to lay flat. I need a notebook that lets ink dry quickly because I drag my hand across the pages like a slob.

Do you know if your writer wants something stiff or floppy? In a notebook, I mean.

Is your writer left-handed?

If you're buying someone their first set of tools, it's hard to screw it up. But if you're buying hand tools for a mechanic who's been in the business for a couple decades, they will have opinions, quirks, and downright oddities when it comes to their tools of choice. Unless you know those inside and out, it's tough to get them what they want.

You'll Never Know If You Nailed It

When it comes to notebooks, I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Which is a really apt analogy.

That saying about gift horses. Imagine you're a farmer. Another farmer is giving you a horse, totally free, no strings attached. Normally, if you were buying a horse, you'd inspect its teeth. But if the horse is a gift, the idea is you should take it and worry about the horse's condition later. Take a gift for what it is, take it on faith and resist the urge to check it over, at least until the horse-giver leaves.

When I get a notebook, I can't really inspect it and debate its usefulness. I have to either use it and accept it's not really what I wanted, or I can be a sneak and toss it out somewhere down the line. Either way, I'm not going to honestly tell you that you've thrown money away on me.

There's An Expectation

Some writers feel like an empty notebook is almost a taunt. I don't feel this way, probably because the taunts I've been on the receiving end of are a lot meaner and more direct. It's hard to see an empty notebook as a taunt when your partner regularly calls you "dum-dum" to your face.

That aside, a number of writers do feel a certain amount of pressure when a blank notebook comes into their lives. A positive pressure, maybe, but a pressure nonetheless.

A gift shouldn't be about adding pressure. It shouldn't be like getting someone a day planner or making them a new resume for Christmas.

Giving someone a new notebook is giving them a job.

A gift shouldn't be about adding pressure. It shouldn't be like getting someone a day planner or making them a new resume for Christmas.

Notebooks Fail The Good Gift Test

I have a three-step test to figure out whether something is a good gift. You ask three questions:

Question 1: Do they want it?

Question 2: Would they buy it for themselves?

Question 3: Is it fun?

The first question is a no-duh. The second helps you avoid a gift that really just saves a person a trip to Target. If I'd happily buy myself something, then it's not a bad gift, but it's not a great gift.

The third question, the question of fun factor, is one I instituted after my mom asked for a birthday vacuum. A vacuum passed tests 1 and 2, which is why the process had to be revised to include question 3. I'm not buying my mom a vacuum for her birthday.

A notebook is, for the most part, something that gets stuck after test number 1. The writer needs it. But they'll probably buy it themselves. As for test 3, c'mon. You can do better.

Nothing's Good Enough

Many a writer will be totally paralyzed by the kindness of a new notebook. It's awesome, it's nicer than one they would buy for themselves. And in fact, it's TOO nice. It's too nice for the aimless scribbles that turn into a story or a book. This notebook is good, and so whatever goes in it had better be good too.

I know you don't want your writer to feel that way, but they will. This notebook will become an object that's too meaningful as-is. It will turn into "that one notebook from that one holiday where that one person got that thoughtful gift." Then it's no longer a notebook. It's a shirt you never wear because you don't want to wreck it or a set of earrings you leave at home because you can't stand losing them. It becomes something more than what it is, and it loses its usefulness.

If You Insist...

Part of the fun of a new notebooks is buying a new notebook. There are so many possibilities, and it feels like those possibilities are right in front of you when you're standing in front of a shelf full of new notebooks. When someone buys it for you, that experience is lost.

If you want to buy someone a notebook, do it like this: Take them out for a nice lunch. Buy them a couple drinks. Then go somewhere that has a lot of fancy, fun notebooks, and tell them to pick out one they love. Hand them \$50 and a tiny envelope. Tell them to bring back as much or as little change as they get. Tell them you don't want to know how much it costs, and you don't want them to look at price. You just want them to pick out a notebook they want, for whatever they want, and that's the end of it. Go browse the fancy pens or the wide array of bizarre highlighters while they're looking around.

Take the envelope back, slip it in your pocket, and walk away happy. You got them something they wanted, something they weren't planning to buy for themselves, and you made it fun.

Why Microsoft Word's New Grammar and Style Corrections Suck



Microsoft Word has always been that know-it-all prick that's correcting your spelling and grammar. It HAS to interrupt you while you're talking, and you get the distinct feeling that it's not really listening to what you're saying. It's like telling your friend, "And that's when my dad done died." and your friend says, "You really shouldn't say he 'done' died."

The newest iteration of Word corrects more than ever. Wordiness? No more, says Microsoft. Cliche? Not here! Jargon? Excised. Er, replaced.

Are these new, beefed-up options bad? Do I just hate being told what to do? Do they signal the death of human intelligence? Am I threatened by that? Are these the same questions I ask when a sandwich joint makes menu changes?

I pulled Microsoft's descriptions for some of their newer features, what they do and how they function. Let's take a look.

Complex words:

Targets complex and abstract words, and suggests using a simpler word to present a clear message and a more approachable tone. Example: The magnitude of the problem is far beyond the scope of humanitarian aid. Magnitude would be corrected to size.

I don't have faith in Word's ability to do this well. Take, for example, a situation where the word "magnitude" is better than "size." The "magnitude" of a surgical procedure to save a hedgehog makes more sense than the "size" of the procedure, unless you want to hear jokes about it. Which you don't. Hedgehog surgery is serious shit.

I'm harping on one example, but if it's the selected example, you'd think it'd be rock solid, right?

Jargon:

Targets jargon, technical terminology, or abbreviations which may confuse readers. Consider using more common language that is likely to be understood by everyone. Example: The company hired a well-known headhunting firm. Headhunting is corrected to recruiting.

Jargon exists because there is the need for specificity. A "headhunting" firm (terminology I understand is leaving the common lexicon, but we're working with the example we were given) is a term that makes a point of what the firm is doing, and also that they're doing it in a shady way. When someone uses a term like "headhunting," they mean headhunting, not recruiting.

If Word is successful in this endeavor, the result is a homogenized, corporate voice.

Nominalizations:

Targets phrases relying on many nouns which need extra words to introduce them. Consider using a single verb instead of nouns, where possible. Example: The trade union is holding negotiations with the employers. Here holding negotiations is corrected to negotiating.

This is a good thing to do in writing. Because I am old-fashioned, I think it's a good thing to do, not a good thing to have done for you.

Here comes the part where I reveal that I'm a grumpy old man.

Writing is like any craft. Pottery, let's say. Pottery is something that could go out of style pretty damn fast. 3D printing is, basically, pottery. But you know what the difference is? The human being isn't satisfied in the same way by the acts of programming a 3D object and throwing a vase on the wheel. These aren't the same thing.

Writing is that way too. We may very well see the rise of AI authors in our lifetimes. More likely in your lifetime than in mine. I eat A LOT of pork. But people will continue to write. Even though it's easier to have this stuff corrected automatically, we're starting to butt up against the lines where writing is a craft, and part of craft is understanding that the most efficient way to do something is not going to be the most satisfying, and therefore might not be the "right" way.

Passive voice with Known Actor:

Targets passive voice sentences with a known actor, i.e. a known subject. Use active voice whenever possible to be more concise and avoid possible confusion. Example: The dog was seen by the man. This will be corrected to The man saw the dog.

The correction of passive voice is good. Except when you work in a place where you have to say

something happened while not assigning blame. Or, as these places are known, every office in the world. Give me Passive Aggressive Correction. THAT I'm interested in.

Wordiness:

Targets redundant and needless words. Eliminating redundant or unnecessary words often improves readability. Example: Her backpack was large in size. Large in size is corrected to large.

In the description of wordiness, I can cut 6 words with no effort:

Wordiness: Targets redundant and needless words. Eliminating redundant or unnecessary words often hinder readability. Example: Her backpack was large in size. Large in size is corrected to large.

I can only assume these descriptions were created in Word while using these new corrective settings. Not giving me a ton of faith here.

Words Expressing Uncertainty:

Targets words that express uncertainty or lessen the impact of a statement. Example: They largely decorated the kitchen with old bottles. The phrase largely decorated is replaced by decorated only.

If I were editing the example sentence, I would tell this writer that the word "old" is the more challenging problem. "Largely" you can cross out, but what are you going to do about "old" in here? What does an "old" bottle look like? What are the shapes? Colors? Smells? What do the labels look like or feel like if you touched one. I would tell this person to have the character pick up one of the bottles, touch it, and give us the information in a way other than "old."

This is good minimalist practice, and it helps the prose to get rid of the word "largely." But this doesn't turn into good writing until you go further.

Words in Split infinitives (more than one)

Targets multiple adverbs between "to" and a verb. Using multiple adverbs between "to" and a verb can create an awkward or unclear sentence. Example: He tried to firmly but politely decline the offer. This is corrected to decline the offer firmly but politely.

This is such a minor matter of taste as to be ridiculous. Also, there are situations where this is not preferable. How about jokes?

I'm going to tell him to fuck off politely, respectfully, and with the utmost respect.

Or

I'm going to tell him politely, respectfully, and with the utmost respect, to fuck off.

Matter of taste, but it's not hard to come up with scenarios where these rules offer critique that's objectively wrong.

Gender-Specific Language:

Targets gendered language which may be perceived as excluding, dismissive, or stereotyping. Consider using gender-inclusive language. Example: We need more policemen to maintain public safety. Policemen is corrected to police officers.

Hmm. I wonder if a rebuke from MS Word might be a good thing. It allows people to think about this and be corrected in a private setting. I've heard multiple people start to say "fireman" and stop and correct halfway through. It's something that we're working to unwind, and this is a way we can be reminded about it without hurting someone else with the learning process.

Clichés:

Targets overused and predictable words or phrases and suggests to replace them with an alternative phrase. Example: Institutions seem caught between a rock and a hard place. The phrase between a rock and a hard place would be corrected to in a difficult situation.

Pass on this. Hard pass. This is how people talk. If you, like me, like writing that sounds the way people talk, then this is not going to work. Now, I WOULD be more interested if Word offered folksy, amusing replacements. "Between the devil and the deep blue sea," for example.

Contractions:

Targets contractions (e.g., let's, we've, can't) which should be avoided in formal writing, such as in legal documents. Example: The animal won't be authorized to be out of the bag during the flight. Won't will be corrected to will not.

I misread this example and thought it said "The animal won't be authorized to be out of the bag during the FIGHT." This was a very confusing mistake. What animal? What bag? Why is this animal present at a fight and confined to a bag?

Now that I get it, I understand that MS Word is coming out as anti-animal. I think the best way for us to handle it is to toss blood all over our computers.

Informal Language:

Targets informal words and phrases which are more appropriate for familiar, conversational settings. Please consider using more formal language. Example: Our atmosphere includes comfy massage chairs. Here comfy is corrected to comfortable.

The problem with technology-minded people is that they see the world as a series of problems to be solved, and all of those problems are solved through technological solutions.

If there's one thing I don't think the world needs, it's more formal language. How much better would you feel if the airline sent you an email that said, "We fucked up. I'm sorry," instead of "We apologize for any inconvenience"?

You can be professional and helpful and still be a person. These things are not mutually exclusive. The sooner we embrace that, the better.

Slang:

Targets regional expressions or slang terms which may not be understood by a general audience, and should therefore be avoided in formal writing. Consider using more standard expressions. Example: My cat barfed all over my homework last night. Barfed is corrected to vomited.

"Vomited" is the word I use at the vet. "Barfed" is the word I use with people who know me, people I'm not afraid will judge me because I didn't use the formal term for describing when the cat hurled on my homework.

The problem with technology-minded people is that they see the world as a series of problems to be solved, and all of those problems are solved through technological solutions. The right software, the right interface will fix anything.

I propose a different solution in this case.

The solution to people using cliches and passive voice isn't technical. Because if you ask me, the solution isn't to stop people from doing this stuff. The solution isn't about preventing the creation of prose with passive voice or slang. The solution is about getting over ourselves.

When we talk the artsy side, there's room for stuff that's wordy, voice-y, and even a little over-written. And there's room for minimalist stuff.

When we talk the professional side, someone sends me an email that has the passive voice, do I need that corrected? Do I understand what they're saying? When someone's a little wordy, so what? I still understand it. I still get what I need from it.

If Word is successful in this endeavor, the result is a homogenized, corporate voice. All we've done is "solve" the "problem" of people sounding like...different fucking people.

'Ready Player One': Fun Ride or Commercialized Nostalgia?



You've seen the trailers, you've seen the book, and you've seen the movie tie-in cover they insist on printing even though NOBODY WANTS IT.

Is *Ready Player One* a reference-heavy, cynical, nostalgia vampire feeding off the good memories we have of other pieces of media?

Or is it a good book?

Or is it both?

What the hell is it?

Ready Peter One

In 2011-ish I got an advanced copy of *Ready Player One* from someone who said, "This sounds like something you'd love."

For the first few chapters, I was pissed. This is what you think of me? That I'm some chump who loves nothing more than references to things I know? That recognition is what makes a joke funny, a line clever, and a book good?

But I calmed down, spackled over the holes I'd punched in the wall, and read some more. And after a few chapters, I was having a good time. I stayed up late to finish *Ready Player One*, which is something I hadn't done for a long time with a book.

Let's lay it out: I am totally the target demographic for this book. I am a white male, somewhere in the author's neck of the woods age-wise, raised in the suburbs more by Nintendo than by a father. I spent many a quarter in an arcade and have an abiding affection for 80's movies.

I also had the benefit of going into this book with no idea what it was or what to expect. It wasn't possible for this book to fail to meet my expectations because I had no expectations to speak of.

Was *Ready Player One* a life-affirming, life-altering book? Absolutely not.

It was fun.

...

You want to hear more? Geez, I don't know if I HAVE a lot more to say about it. But alright, let's give it a shot.

Is It Just a Big Mash-Em-Up?

Totally. 100%. I would never argue against that. But I WOULD argue that a mash-up can be a lot of fun.

Thor: Ragnarok is a mash-up. It draws heavily from *Planet Hulk*, which had nothing to do with Thor. Then you've got Space Jeff Goldblum, a Wonder Woman character, mythology, sci-fi, and gladiator stuff. Mark Mothersbaugh music slammed up against Led Zeppelin. Colors, lights, and a giant wolf that may or may not be Loki's offspring. Karl Urban wielding twin machine guns to mow down Asgardian zombies.

Shrek is a fairy tale mash-up. *Hamilton* is a mash-up of hip-hop, American history, and musical theater. *Stranger Things* is a little John Carpenter, a little Spielberg, a little Gary Gygax, and a little Stephen King. If you've never listened to Girl Talk's *All Day*, you are missing out.

Sometimes you have to steel yourself, dip a hot french fry in a Wendy's frosty and consider the possibilities. It doesn't always work. But the track record for the mash-up, especially when it's self-aware that its appeal is in the mashing, is better than we give it credit.

It's Nothing But References!

I've seen many a review that shows a single page from *Ready Player One* and says, "See!? Look how reference-dense this is!"

Don't trust it. In general. 1 page out of 400 would lead you to believe that Stephen King's *IT* is a book about child sewer orgies. A carefully-selected quarter of a percent of Star Wars Episode I would lead

If you are embarrassed and a little disgusted when a nerd is unabashedly, self-centeredly vomiting their nerdiness onto the streets, and if flecks of that vomit speckling your shoes is something that makes you recoil, skip this one.

a person to believe it was the best Star Wars ever.

If people could make good decisions based on viewing one quarter of one percent of something, the colonoscopy could be replaced by a book of matches and a doctor with 20/20 vision, and I could've saved myself a lot of time.



The Nerd Authenticity Question

One of the discussions surrounding this book has to do with whether Ernest Cline is legit. Is he a card-carrying dweeb, or did he just cram a bunch of nostalgia into a book and sell it to make a few bucks?

I tried to find out. And the best evidence of nerdiness I found was Ernest Cline's fanfic script for a *Buckaroo Banzai* sequel. If you don't know what that means, just understand it's extremely geeky, and you're missing out on a movie that features Jeff Goldblum dressed in the cowboy getup from *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*.

The more I looked for evidence of nerd or not nerd, the more cemented my opinion became: I'm really fucking fed up with the nerd authenticity question.

Questioning a nerd's authenticity has a purpose for kids. It's a safety feature. As a young nerd, one could make a couple veiled references to "Justin Bailey" or a gelatinous cube to find out whether this other kid at school was a fellow nerd, therefore safe. You tested another nerd's authenticity because you didn't want to have someone over to your house only to discover they told EVERYONE that you have Swamp Thing action figures all over your bedroom. In your junior year of high school.

We're not in school anymore. There's no need to run someone through the gauntlet and see if they're a real nerd. Ernest Cline didn't write a book in order to weasel his way into your house, find your true nerd heart, and stab you in it. He's not going to stand in front of a group at ComicCon, whip off a mask like a Scooby-Doo villain, and reveal he's actually Tom Brady. Although I wish that happened. Not only is that world more interesting, it's a world where I know can probably score ONE point during the sports portion of a pub quiz.

Nerdstalgia For Profit

We're all on the lookout for packaged nostalgia that takes advantage of us. But let's face it, that ship has sailed. That Millennium Falcon blasted off from Disneyland, flew through a couple Nissan commercials, and crash-landed on top of BB-8, who was distracted because he was busy hocking Verizon.

Geek culture is mainstream. It's big business. It's blockbuster movies, Target t-shirts, and hell, you can buy diapers with Iron Man on them. Excrement bags we strap to babies, even those are nerd-ed up and stocked for the purchasing.

For now, nerdy stuff and commerce are about as separable as a Blow Pop mashed into shag carpet.

There's a commercial element to *Ready Player One*. No doubt. At the same time, I would say it's right in line with most of nerd pop culture.

I mean, c'mon. How hard can we crap on *Ready Player One's* commercialization when we can literally crap in Iron Man diapers?

Who Should Skip This Book?

If you are not at least a little smitten with pop culture from the 70's and 80's, and if you've got no patience for people who are, don't pick up this book.

If you prefer fiction that says something explicit about politics or the world we live in or the role of technology in society or the environment—this won't scratch the itch.

If you read books for the purpose of discussing them and dissecting them later, I think you could make a better choice.

If you are embarrassed and a little disgusted when a nerd is unabashedly, self-centeredly vomiting their nerdiness onto the streets, and if flecks of that vomit speckling your shoes is something that makes you recoil, skip this one.

If you think you're going to hate it, you are probably right.

Who Should Read This Book?

Tango & Cash, embarrassingly, was off my radar for a long time. I went in with no expectations, no idea what was going on, and not expecting much. And I was rewarded with a nutty buddy cop movie and cinema's greatest battle van.

If you don't like something like *Tango & Cash*, if you hate turning the ol' brain off, you probably won't dig *Ready Player One*.

However.

If you have a spot on your reading list for something that's just plain fun, then I'd give it a whirl. If you like to put your feet up, munch some popcorn, and cough loudly to mask the sound of opening a beer in the theater, and if you can apply that "skill set" to reading, I'd say go for it.

If you can watch a movie without nitpicking some of the profoundly stupid things about it, like the idea that everyone is familiar with two hero cops by name and feverishly follow their exploits in the newspaper—



then you might love *Ready Player One*.

So You Want To Write About The Cold



Take It Easy On The Visuals

It's easy to fall back on visuals when you write. Colors, actions, how tall something is. When you work with cold, it's a great time to try and create balance with some of the other senses. Especially because cold itself can't be seen. Check it out:



Is this soup warm? Cold? Really, super hot? You can't tell from a visual, right? We assume it's hot because, well, it's soup. And we assume it's cold outside when we see someone wearing a heavy coat. And we flip it to "show" the cold in a story, describing someone in a heavy coat, therefore proving it's cold. It works in a pinch, but you're better off spending time describing something invisible by using something other than visual cues.

Think about what you hear when it's cold where you live. What do you smell? Firewood? Diesel engines left running? Think about all the non-visual cues that come with cold.

Go Non-Traditional

I live in Colorado. It can easily be a cloudless, sunny day where the temperature is below freezing.

Cliche snow is pure white powder, but the way a lot of us experience snow is as that hard gray mass in the gutter. Cliche rain always comes with thunder. Cliche wind always, always howls.

Whatever the cliche, go the opposite. Go different. Make your cold something special and unusual to match your story, which is also special and unusual.

Don't Make Me Do Math

If you're in the U.S., does "23 degrees Celsius" mean a lot to you? Do you think it means a lot to a reader?

Look at the weather on the news. They've got the numbers, and they've got colors, light to deep blue. They've got a picture of a thermometer coated in ice. They make some poor newbie stand outside in what looks like polar exploration gear just to SHOW us that there is, in fact, a blizzard. As if we wouldn't believe them otherwise. As if we've never seen snow before.

They do all that because numbers don't mean much. Not when it comes to telling a reader how cold it is and how that cold feels.

It's all relative anyway. 40 degrees Portland feels different than 40 degrees in the night in the deserts of the Southwest. Any Chicagoan will tell you that the 15th day in a row of freezing temperatures has a different flavor than a cold day here and there.

We know that -15 is a miserable temperature, but does "-15" describe the experience? Nope.

Try something else. Does your coffee get cold before you're halfway through the cup? Do you see tossed cigarette butts that haven't been smoked down to anywhere near the filter, abandoned because it's just too damn cold outside? Abandon the number in favor of something else. Challenge yourself to replace those numbers with something better.

Contrast and Transition

You don't want to keep me in the cold the whole time. Contrast helps. It's like dramatic tension. It can't always be high. It can't always build. It's got to be tension, then release. Tension, then release.

Contrast helps, and if you can warm me up between periods of cold, you get that contrast.

Instead of telling me that your character shivers, consider what that looks like to someone standing across from them, and tell me that instead.

And when you have contrast, you can make good use of the transitions.

Find a crowded, warm coffee shop, and park yourself. Watch how people enter a warm room, and watch how people leave a warm spot to go back outside. How do they act when they come inside? What do their faces look like? Do they stomp even though there's no snow on their shoes? How long does it take before they start to feel human again? When they leave, what do they do? Do they steel themselves or just push the door?

Writing someone who enters and exits the cold gives you a lot more to do than writing about someone who is constantly in the cold, and it lets you remind the reader about the conditions without constantly saying, "Oh, by the way, it's still really cold."

Deeper

Don't tell me your teeth chatter. Tell me what that feels like. Instead of telling me that your character shivers, consider what that looks like to someone standing across from them, and show me that instead.

Skip the part where you tell me it's cold. Instead, tell me what the cold feels like. What your eyes feel like. The hairs inside your nose. Your mouth between breaths.

If you can replace a single word with your own description of the physical action or sensation, go for it.

Get Cold

Ice bath. Lay down on a cold sidewalk. Cryotherapy. How is it different when you take a spill in the cold? How is the cold different when you're wet for 8 hours as opposed to standing in a walk-in fridge for 2 minutes in the heat of summer?

If you're writing about guns, you go and you shoot a gun. Likewise, you need to experience the cold.

We think we know the cold, but don't rely on your memory. Have a fresh experience, and have that experience as a writer. You know how you read a book as a writer and how that's different? Same principle. Be cold as a writer.

Hack The MFA



Maybe you applied to a university's creative writing MFA program and didn't get in. Maybe you have a life that would never allow for you to take classes. Maybe you already have an MFA and need something new to kickstart your writing. Maybe you can't afford an MFA. Actually, scratch that one. NOBODY can afford an MFA, even though lots of people DO afford it.

There are lots of reasons you might want to hack an MFA, create your own version of a master's program that will improve your writing, pump up your reading, get you a gig and get you published. And if you follow this program, I will give you the exact guarantee any MFA program will give you on all fronts: diddly.

And you will work your ass off for that diddly.

Quick Warning

This guide is oriented to those that are serious about this. If you want to hack the MFA because you're lazy, too strapped for time, are completely unwilling to spend a dime, or because you think the whole idea of an MFA is bunk, that's totally cool, and this isn't going to be what you're looking for.

What we're doing here isn't about "hacking" the MFA in order to compress it into two weeks. We're finding a self-guided way to get an experience that replicates, as closely as possible, an MFA experience.

This is, in some ways, more work than attending class. Because you not only have to attend the class and do the work, you have to set the schedule and do everything for yourself. You'll need discipline, drive, and dedication.

Build Your Program



Read 'MFA Vs NYC'

Why this to start? Because we all have preconceived notions about what an MFA is, and like most preconceived notions, those make an ass out of you and me.

For every writer that has an MFA, there's a great writer who doesn't. For everyone who loved their MFA experience, there's someone who hated it and found it worthless.

MFA vs. NYC is what I recommend to start . This book gives a range of opinions that will fully explain what a person can expect from an MFA program. It'll give you a good idea of what exactly an MFA offers.

Check Out Requirements

Just about every MFA program will list required credits and have a course catalog. Look through these. Get an idea what would be required of you. How much reading, how much writing, how much critique, what the balance is. List all the course options you see. Keep track of any details you might be interested in.

Make sure to check out a mix of schools. Check out some ivy league stuff, and look at Wyoming. Look at Iowa, and look at University of the Virgin Islands. Look at grad and undergrad programs. Look abroad. Look for your areas of interest, and look for your areas of weakness.

Ask for Syllabi

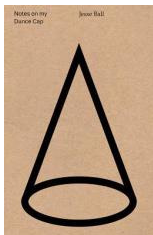
If you were going to teach from a text, what would you want in there? Put it together. Make it real. A lot of writers you love are probably teaching or probably have taught, and a lot of them have shared syllabi, reading lists, guest lectures, at least some morsel of what you might get if you were able to attend class with them.

Start with the Googling. Look for Junot Diaz, you'll find a condensed Junot Diaz syllabus. Lynda Barry famously puts her assignments on Tumblr. Reading lists are easy to find.

If you can't find what you're looking for, find some writers you love and ask them if they've made any teaching materials they're willing to share. When you ask, be courteous, and get to what you want before the end of the second sentence of your email.

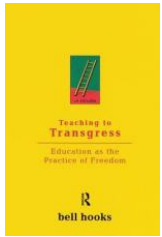
Recommended Texts

Here are a couple resources you could build classes around. I've skipped the well-known stuff, for the most part.



'Notes On My Dunce Cap' by Jesse Ball

Jesse Ball teaches some very experimental classes, including a class on lucid dreaming. This sort-of-syllabus will give you some unusual ideas about what a class can look like.



'Teaching to Transgress' by bell hooks

hooks teaches that education can be a transgressive, powerful act. Bonus points because she admits upfront that when she started, she didn't want to be a teacher. Someone coming at this from an atypical angle is just what we need.



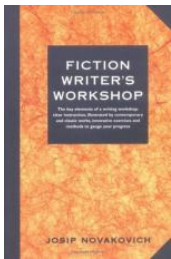
'Draw It with Your Eyes Closed: The Art of the Art Assignment' by Paper Monument

This book will stretch your idea of what an artistic assignment can look like and what its utility can be. You'll find adaptable assignments in here that are unforgettable.



'The One-Hour MFA' by Michael Kimball

If you're starting from scratch, this is the way I'd go. It's a quick read, and it provides a lot of the lessons you'll learn in various writing classes in a condensed format.



'Fiction Writer's Workshop' by Josip Novakovich

Packed with concrete exercises and ideas. This book could make for an entire class, no problem.

Stretch

As you cement things in, make sure to stretch yourself. Study poetry. It won't make you a worse noir writer, trust me. Study comics. They'll teach you about images and sensory detail. Study stand-ups. Study sitcoms. Study something that's different than what you want to do. Parallel, but different.

Create A Program Structure

Now that you've got an idea what some of these programs look like, create a structure that allows you to finish a course of study in 2 years. How many "classes" are you taking at one time? Which ones go where? How much time should you expect to spend working on this stuff every day?

My advice would be to avoid creating a structure that revolves around your current lifestyle. The idea here is to make a change, do something different. If you're doing the same thing, you're not changing anything concrete and physical.

Get up early. Have set times to work on certain things. Go to "class" by going to a certain place the same time(s) every week. I know you're busy, and you can't do all these things, but the closer you get to a traditional structure, the more you're subject to something that feels out of your control, the better off you'll be.

With this step, we're trying to re-create one of the cornerstones of the MFA experience, which is

having a couple years to focus on writing like it's the only thing that matters. For you to do it on your own, it has to become the only thing that matters.

Before You Embark, Have A Talk

Sit your significant other down. Your best friend. Your roommates. Whoever you spend time with, talk to them.

You have to tell them you're doing this, and you need buy-in from them on the level of understanding your plan. Understanding that if you have "class" on Monday evenings, you have class, and you need to commit to that the same way you would if you were meeting in a university somewhere and paying university prices.

This isn't an excuse to shirk your responsibilities. Floors have to be mopped no matter how close you are to a breakthrough in a short story. This is an honest discussion with the people you care about.

Do The Work

N

ow that we've observed how it's done and put some stuff together, it's time to work.

You've seen some suggestions and ideas for courses. I'm sure you're also capable of finding free online courses, reading lists, and other stuff like that. Let me provide a handful of other must-do's that you might find interesting or helpful.

Shameless Plug #1

LitReactor offers online classes. You probably know that.

What you might not know is how to get the most out of those classes. I'm going to give you some advice.

Treat it like a real class. Because it IS a real class. There are real instructors, real feedback, and real fellow students. If you get in there and screw around, you won't get anything out of it. It's like buying a gym membership. Buying the damn thing does squat. Doing squats is where the work gets done. How is it that squats are called "squats" and "squat" also means doing nothing? Whoever decided that has never done squats.

Networking

What a gross word for such a good thing. When we talk about networking, most of us think of slimeball business types who get jobs because of who they know, not what they know, and what they don't know usually becomes problems for you and me when some knob decides to break your favorite software.

But that's not what I'm talking about here. What I'm talking about is meeting people.

You're not done when you finish your coursework. If anything, it's time to start in on the part that lasts the rest of your life.

The writing world is gigantic and spread out all over the place. You're qualified and able to do a lot of things, but how is anyone else going to know that? If nobody knows you exist, then you're never getting anywhere.

In my world, networking isn't about worming your way into something you don't deserve. It's meeting people who help you, meeting people you can help, and finding a place that feels like home for your work.

It's a crucial part of an MFA, maybe even the most important in a lot of ways. And it's the part you least need a program to do.

Make friends in classes, in-person or online. Arrange readings for a group of authors you enjoy. Go to stuff. Leave the house. Find some people you get along with, and they'll help you get along.

Workshopping

A HUGE part of this education is giving and taking feedback. So important, so difficult sometimes.

Join a writing group in your area. If there isn't one, start one, but try to not take a leadership role just yet.

It's going to be difficult. You're going to be critiquing someone's version of the next big dystopic 3-part series, and you're going to hate it. And if you think you're going to hate that, just imagine how much you're going to hate it when that person turns around and starts telling you where you're falling short.

There are things you can learn, even from a bad group. You learn to shut up. You learn to listen. You learn that a broken clock is right a couple times a day.

You need a workshop.

Shameless Plug #2

LitReactor has an online workshop. The good news here is that if you're interested in the kind of things that LitReactor puts out, you'll likely find people who have similar ideas about writing in the workshop. It's worth your time, worth your effort, and you'll find people who give you some excellent feedback. Not to mention that there's more material to read and provide feedback for than you could ever get through in a lifetime.

Readings

Attending readings is a critical part of the MFA experience. If you have a city within an hour or two, check out when they've got people coming. Go to big readings, go to small readings. The idea is to hear from a lot of different writers, as many as possible.

If there's a college or university anywhere nearby, see if you can make friends with any instructors. Ask if you can sit in on some visiting authors.

If you must, set up a queue of writers you can watch online. It's the least effective way to get it done, but it's better than nothing.

Wrap It Up

You're not done when you finish your coursework. If anything, it's time to start in on the part that lasts the rest of your life.

Make a CV

One of the things that MFA hackers miss out on is a way to effectively demonstrate that though their education might be atypical, it's still very valuable. Whenever you take a class online, add it to your CV. Whenever you get something published somewhere, add it to your CV. When you make a contact who would be a great reference for you, add that person to a list of references.

I know some of you are saying that you don't need to do that. You've no intention of doing something as vulgar as writing for money. But I'll encourage you to do it anyway. Something, sometime, will come up. It may not be for money. It may be for something else entirely, something you care about deeply. And when it does, you'll be ready.

Check for Sponsoring Programs

It's in vogue for libraries and other institutions to have writer-in-residence programs open to community members, and these are often open to folks who have little or no formal experience. You'll be in direct competition with people who have experience, but that's the way the mustard is cut. (What a stupid saying. Nobody cuts mustard. You don't need to. It's a sauce, and it's a seed, both things you don't cut.)

These programs can be great career-builders, look great on your CV, give you connections in the world of books, and they'll show your community-mindedness.

Run a Group

Run your own critique group. Not for the sake of getting critique, but for the sake of learning what it means to run a critique group. How do you handle that person in the group who can't let things go? How do you keep the group on track? How do you manage it?

Volunteer

Try an organization like 826 National or Denver Writes. You'll get valuable experience designing curricula, critiquing, and working to help writers be the best THEY can be, not the best writer you envision them being.

Whatever writing organization you have, get involved. Whether it's as a teacher or sweeping up, this is a great way to keep yourself in the local writing scene.

Put together your own short story collection

If you were going to teach from a text, what would you want in there? Put it together. Make it real.

Keep track of what you'd want students to learn, what purpose each piece serves.

Create Your Own 15 Lectures

There's a saying in medicine: See One, Do One, Teach One. You need to teach a class too. If you were going to give 15 lectures, one per week for a semester, what would you teach? How would you teach it? What would your Powerpoint slides look like? Put it together. You'll learn something.

Written, audio, video. Make these real.

Digitize Your Books For No Fun and No Profit



I moved apartments three times in a little less than three years.

There were some tough losses as a result of all these moves. Some losses were tragic accidents:



And some losses were on purpose.

Every move, your definition of a "must-have" item gets tighter and tighter. Your first move, you take everything. Your third, you figure, "Eh, I can get by as long as I have two pairs of underpants. One to wear, one to wash while I wear the other."

Of everything that's been downsized, my book collection has been hit the hardest.

There's another move on the horizon. And this one's a doozy.

As you might imagine, between writing and librarian-ing, I've got a big-ass book collection. And as you might imagine, this is a curse when it's time to move. Why couldn't I take on a hobby that was lighter? Like...I don't know, some kind of styrofoam-based hobby?

I decided it was time to give serious thought to digitizing some of my collection.

The DIY Approach

Being a lone wolf, a rebel, a no-time-for-backup kinda dude, I started to look at book digitizing options I could handle myself.

I looked at a few methods online, and most of them involved some contraption that cradled the book, and then you hooked up a camera and photographed the pages. And then—

Sorry, I nodded off there. Just the thought of that process was SO BORING. Plus, by the time I photographed, cropped the images and stitched them together...couldn't I just READ the book? And I've got a move on my hands here. I don't have time for a process that's only slightly faster than re-copying books by hand.

Then I came across something called destructive scanning.

The method works like this: You know how in *Mortal Kombat*, Sub-Zero will rip out a dude's spine? You do that to your book, throw the pages in a scanner with a feeder tray, and bam, you've got a digital book.

This method has the drawback of destroying your books. BUT, it has two big advantages. One is the speed. The other is you get to use a power tool.

You clamp down your book (vice) and cut the spine off (saw). This separates the pages and allows you to run them through your typical office scanner's feeder tray, which means you don't have to hand scan each page.

There is another drawback to this method. It's mostly in the inadequacy of scanning technology.

Even a decent scanner starts to struggle somewhere in the neighborhood of 200 pages. And most of your books are longer than 200 pages.

What'll happen is something will jam. And then you have to re-order everything, re-scan, and wait and pray and pray to a tech-savvy deity of your choice that the scanner doesn't get to about page 199 and jam again, in which case you start all over.

That's how I ended up scanning batches of 50-100 pages. And getting them mixed up, out of order, and deciding that maybe I didn't even want to read these stupid books anyway.

Paying For It

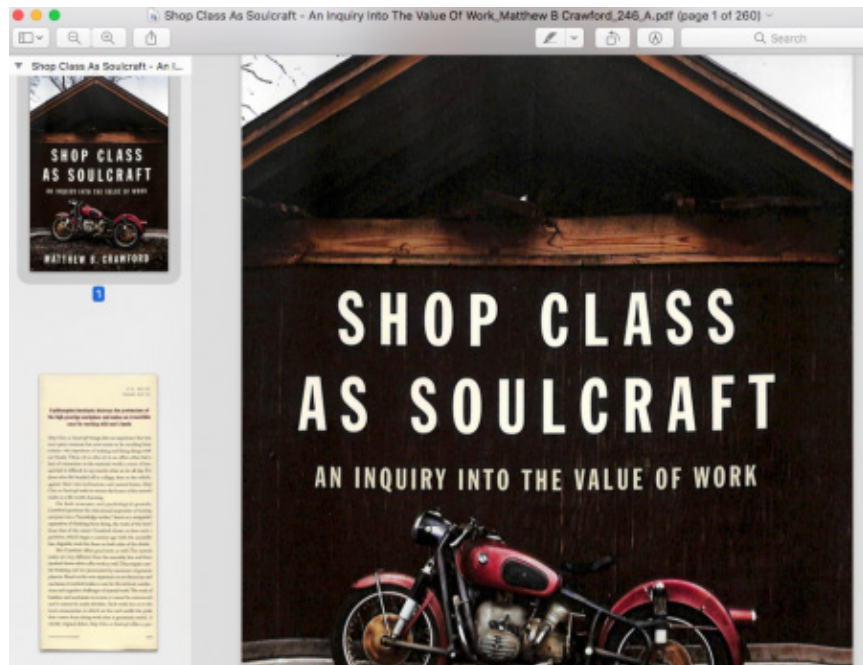
Book scanning is like getting food. If you're mostly short on money, you do it yourself, and you buy stuff like bulk beans that you have to pick the stones out of. If you're more short on time than money, you buy a plate of restaurant food for higher cost but lower time investment.

There are a bunch of companies that offer book scanning services. I'll be quick about my selection process: there was one company that had a price where the scans were reasonable. Most would charge several HUNDRED dollars to scan a box of books. For that price I could buy them electronically or just toss them and buy them again at a lower price.

One company, though, had a price that I'll call not-unreasonable.

The math is tricky, but what you need to know is there's a charge per book, plus a charge per "book unit." A book unit, in this case, is 200 pages. So a book that's 201 pages, that's two book units.

It took a couple weeks, and then I got a Dropbox link with my scans. And they looked really, really good. They scanned the covers, the flaps inside the dust jackets. They scanned and cropped everything. It looked really great on the screen. I was surprised. Turns out that a professional is a lot better at this than I am with my crooked-ass self scans.



The company was also pretty conscientious. I got an email saying I'd miscalculated, and they owed me 78 cents.

More cost than doing it myself, but way less aggravation, way less wasted time, and better scans. It's almost magic. You send your books off, they vanish, and they return to you in a new form.

Books That Make Good Candidates

Regardless of your scanning choice, I don't recommend scanning anything and everything. There's

some stuff that I'd hang onto or skip.

Let me guide you through your scanning decisions.

Pile everything together and go through it by hand. Don't just look up at the shelves. Touch the books. This is like *The Life-Altering Magic of Cleaning Shit* or whatever that book is called. That title always bothered me. It's a bit long for a minimalist, isn't it?

Beloved Books: Your first pulls are books that you love as objects. You got this one autographed, this one has a story behind it. Stuff that you love as much as an object as you do a book. Hang on to that stuff.

Paperback Classics: Don't send these. Do not send *The Old Man and the Sea* because it's been on the shelf and you can't get to it. These sorts of books are so, so cheap and plentiful. You'll find another copy. Don't waste your cash getting something scanned if it's at every bookstore and library ever. If you're looking to get rid of stuff like this, donate or toss it, and then get a new one later.

Format-heavy books: If you like your Chris Ware comics, I wouldn't necessarily suggest scanning. It's not the worst thing in the world, but it's not going to please the same way. *House of Leaves* doesn't make for a great digital read.

Length: If you're looking to scan a pile, I'll recommend that you go through and find books that are as close to the service's page limit without going over as possible. If you do it that way, you maximize the value of your scans. If a book that's 299 pages costs the same amount as a book that's 201, the closer you get to that 299, the better.

To-Reads: If you haven't read them yet, order your books by desire. How badly do you want to read this or that one? Send in the ones you have a less urgent desire to read, and just plop down and read the ones you want to get to right away. Also, anything you can tear through quickly, read them instead of scanning.

Legalities

Well, I'm not an expert here. But I'll say this:

What you're doing here seems less morally problematic than ripping a CD you paid for and listening to it on whatever gizmo you use to play your music. The reason being, when you transfer a book to a digital format, you also sacrifice the original book. When you rip a CD, you've duplicated the work.

It DOES make the sharing of files a lot easier, "sharing" being the friendly term we use for "bootlegging." "Sharing" makes it sound like I'm Jesus and I've figured out a way to multiply loaves, when the truth is I'm more of a Robin Hood, but less heroic, shitty at archery, and instead of screwing that Sheriff dude, I'm screwing an artist I supposedly love. But I DO look good in green.

My advice is that if you choose to digitize your books, do it, hang on to the files locally, and keep your mouth shut about it. Don't bend and send the files to your buddies, your classmates, whoever. Once they know you've got this easily-accessed treasure trove, you'll never rest.

Deal With The Empty Shelves

Most people leave this part out. But it's weird. If you think of yourself as a book person, you scan your stuff, and then you're naked, no longer surrounded by books.

The biggest fear people have in getting rid of books is that this somehow violates who they are. It's an addict mindset, part of what addicts struggle with. "I don't know who I am if I'm at a concert without a beer." "I don't know how to exist at a party without a drink."

You're still a book person. You're just a different kind of book person, and you have to recognize what matters is reading the books. Enjoying the books. Not displaying them on your walls. Not that other people know how much you love books.

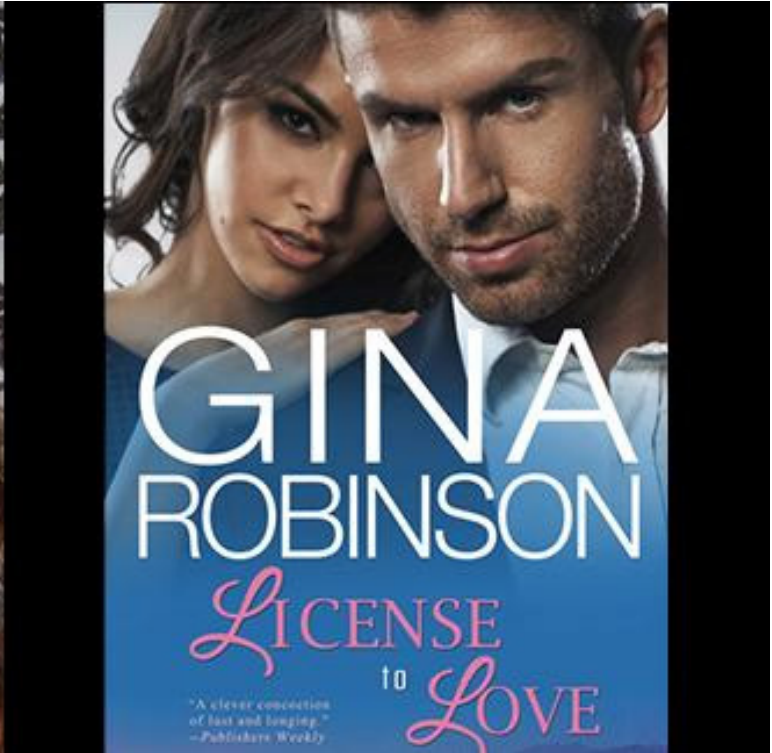
It's like truck nuts. You know, those testicles that hang from the back of a truck? That's a redneck-y way of saying, "I am ballsy."

But the truth is, anyone who possess the qualities usually summed up as "ballsy" has no need to display fake balls on the back of their vehicle.

Anyone "ballsy," you'll know it when you meet them, even if they get out of a champagne colored Beetle with daisy decals on the headlights.

Likewise, if you're a book lover, people will figure it out. You don't have to dangle your reading habits out in the world for every motorist to see.

Rocket Launcher Bayonets, Secret Babies, Rock Powers: This Is 'License To Love'



Allow me to take you on a journey, not only of romance and love, but of Vegas magicians and UFOs. Take my hand and marvel with me at the plot of a book that features the most asinine poker scene of all time. And learn the ideal way to read a romance novel (spoiler: 5 feet from a toilet with a belly full of disgusting wine).

Make the commitment. Earn your *License to Love*.

How I Got The Book

My own stupid life is my own stupid fault.

It's been said to me by more than one person, "I hope you never read anything you like." Because when I read something bad, it's pretty bad. And I say bad things about it. With passion.

Cut to a friend reading *License To Love's* book description in a trade magazine:

Rock Powers is one of the most successful magicians in Vegas for a reason—he creates illusions too spectacular to believe. But his former assistant, gorgeous Lani Silkwater, pulled off the greatest trick of all: disappearing into thin air the day after they were married. Two years later, Rock can't resist a clue to Lani's whereabouts—or the outlandish plan Lani and her mysterious boss propose, if it means a chance to win her back for good...

So this friend went ahead and put in an interlibrary loan request for me. This could be embarrassing

for someone who isn't me and hasn't gotten an official email that reads, "Unfortunately, we weren't able to fulfill your request for the item: *The Baby Jesus Butt Plug.*" So I was fine until the interlibrary loan department mentioned that they wouldn't be able to get *License To Love* on loan and would instead just go ahead and purchase it, adding it to the library's collection. They were also kind enough to put me at the top of the request list.

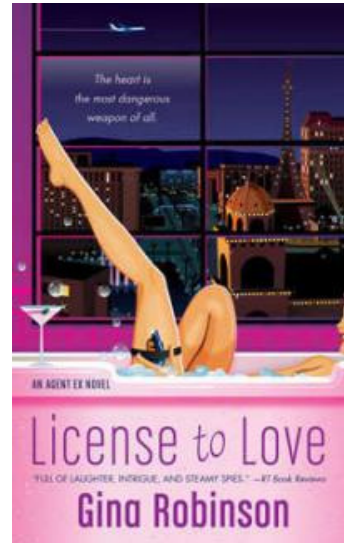
A couple weeks later I was holding a shiny new library copy of *License to Love*, a copy I was responsible for bringing to the community.

A Word On Romance

I'm not, at any point, trying to bash romance as a category here. I have no illusions, and you shouldn't either, that this book is representative of romance fiction. That would be like saying *Demolition Man* is representative of Sandra Bullock movies.

Also, let's recognize that there are some things I didn't love about this book, and that's cool because this book was never for me.

In other words, I'm going to trash this book. BUT, it's like trashing a pair of women's pants that got shipped to me on accident. They were never meant for me, there was zero chance of them being satisfactory, and this does not mean I think all women's pants, or even that particular pair, are bad. They just present to me a world I never imagined, never even dreamed existed.



Crack A Beer

By the way, the following summary can be used as a drinking game. Every time I say the phrase "for some reason" feel free to tip one back. A lot of stuff happens in this book "for some reason."

What's In A Name?

The book opens with Vegas magician Rock Powers.

Stop. Already, we have to stop.

His name is fucking Rock Powers. Was Maximum Cornelius Overdrive already taken? Slade Jackknife?

You know what? Fine. I'm along for the ride here. Fine.

At one of his Vegas magic shows, Rock Powers performs an illusion that causes his wife of about a day, Lani Torres, to disappear. Much to the chapping of his finely-toned magician/bodybuilder/secret agent/doctor ass, she ACTUALLY disappears and he can't find her.

Cut to the chase, turns out she was a secret agent and for some reason (drink!) she picked right then to run off and stop the Hoover Dam from being blown up. We've all been there. I remember my last girlfriend vanished for a few days to save the Empire State Building, not to mention the times she was only gone a few hours rescuing some of our nation's lesser landmarks, The Hancock Building, stuff at

Yellowstone that's not Old Faithful—these sorts of things.

Lani stays disappeared for a couple years before she returns and reveals that she was a secret agent all along. Oh, and her name isn't Lani Torres. It's Lani Silkwater.

Yes, Lani Torres is the name she used for the role of MAGICIAN'S ASSISTANT while Lani Silkwater WAS HER REAL NAME.

Wouldn't you think Lani Silkwater sounds precisely like a magician's assistant, almost too on the nose? And that Lani Torres sounds like...a name? And if your regular-ass name was Lani Silkwater, wouldn't you have to go even bigger and badder when you become a magician's assistant? Lani Magickadispell?

Oh, and while we're on the topic of names, during Lani's vanishing act, she gave birth to Rock's baby. Who she named Stone. Stone Powers. Christ.

Now you might be asking, why would she keep Rock's baby a secret? And why wouldn't she just come back after she finished this Dam Caper (her term, hand to god, CAPER)?

Here's something I've learned about the way to read this book. If you ask a bunch of questions, we'll be here all goddamn night. Just say that for some reason (drink!) she couldn't come back and we'll call it good.

So the new question we shouldn't be asking, Why is Lani back now?

Well, there's an answer. Although it starts with "for some reason."

For some reason (drink!) the CIA or some such government agency needs Rock Powers because...and I'm going to do my best here.

If you haven't been faithfully drinking up to now, the upcoming paragraph will catch you up nicely.

The CIA has uncovered a plot by the evil organization known as RIOT to infiltrate Area 51. For some reason they plan to use a magic trick to spook attendees of a UFO watchers' festival thingy, which will cause them to storm the gates of Area 51 in a panic for some reason, and then for some reason this will allow RIOT access to Area 51.

The magic trick in question is none other than "Outlandish Marauders," a trick conceived by none other than Rock Powers. The CIA's plan is for Rock Powers to beat RIOT to the punch, perform the trick himself, and once he reveals it was only an illusion the panic will subside and everyone will be cool, Area 51 will remain unpenetrated, and life goes on.

In short: A terrorist organization is planning to enter a top secret facility by pulling off a bizarre, complicated magic trick. The CIA is highly concerned about this.

As a side note, I locked myself out of my apartment a few nights ago. My top suggestions for re-entry

In short: A terrorist organization is planning to enter a top secret facility by pulling off a bizarre, complicated magic trick. The CIA is highly concerned about this.

were asking the manager for a key, hard-kicking the door until it fell over, maybe break a window. What I did not concoct was a plan that involves hosting a block party, panicking the guests by way of insane magic trick, and hoping they'll freak out in a very specific way that causes them to break down my door. Of ways to break into something, this would never occur to me, and if it did I would check into a hospital immediately for some sort of brain scan. Because a part is either missing or I have an extra part or somehow a snail got in there and is activating shit with his slime trail. I don't know WHAT is wrong, but I know SOMETHING'S wrong.

At this point, for some reason (!) Lani has to go undercover, sort of, and get in good with the magician hired by RIOT to perform Outlandish Marauders. Who just so happens to be Rock Powers' nemesis, Sol. Rock and Sol were buddies from the magic school days. Sol even saved Rock's life. During an attempt at a trick to escape from a straight jacket while water skiing, Rock fell into the water and was sinking...like a stone, baby! Luckily, Sol saved Rock by catching him with a grappling hook (one of those water skiing grappling hooks we all carry), and dragging him back above water. The grappling hook left a scar on Rock's thigh, and afterward this spot is where Rock got his first of many tattoos, the text "Expect the Unexpected." I don't think it's an ironic tattoo for Rock, even though the most expected word to follow the phrase "Expect the" is "unexpected."

At this point, I knew I'd have to buckle down if I was going to make it through. It was time for the three B's: Booze, Bubbles, and Bon Bons.

Wine Interlude

I'm not a romance reader, but I figured that when in Rome(mance), drink wine and take a bubble bath.

Step one was purchasing wine.

I'm not exactly a wine connoisseur. In fact, most of my wine experience comes from a single evening when some charitable friends agreed to help school me in the finer things. The night ended with me drunkenly calling my sister, who lives on the east coast, to ask her to take us to Taco Bell.

This time I was on my own, and it came down to a decision between a wine called Red Truck or one called Little Black Dress. I was too embarrassed to buy Little Black Dress for purposes of drinking in the bath and reading a romance novel. So good news, I have one small shred of pride.

I'm told that I pour inappropriately large glasses of wine. Which must be true because, by my count, an entire bottle only contains two glasses. This is something I'd put in the category of willful ignorance. I don't know what the right amount is. This is to my benefit.

I also made an attempt to buy bonbons. The problem was that I don't know what bonbons actually are. I checked the freezer section, no dice, so I gave up and went home to set the scene with a lavender candle and lavender bubble bath.

By the way, what's the average fill time on a bathtub? Because mine seems to take about 3 hours. I'm not kidding. I'm pretty sure it would be faster to hire an old-timey innkeeper lady to boil water in a huge pot on the stove and dump it in. I think people might take more baths if the fill time was not measured in phases of the moon.

Several hours later and "one" glass of wine in, I was ready to read.

Read On

The post-glass/bottle of wine section of the book pretty much flew by. I can't really read all that well drunk, but I found this wasn't a big problem in this case.

I don't really want to go through this entire book blow-by-blow because a lot of it was, "Here's the plan" and then a second scene where we saw the plan executed exactly as planned. I can't think of a more effective way to take the fun out of a situation. Plan it out carefully, then have it go according to plan. However, if you've got a novel to write, and someone wants you to double the length, the easy way to do it is to have everything planned out, in detail, and then show the execution of the plan, in detail.

So rather than go through everything in order, I'll just pull out a few snippets that explain things better than the entirety of the text ever could.

Scene: The Poker Game

At one point Rock Powers is watching another secret agent's back while this agent participates in a poker game. Powers is banned because he is the apex of human ability and he wins too much. I'm serious.

Now, I have a problem with poker games in narratives. Because that's boring. I get it inasmuch as you want some physical business for your characters, but Christ, what is less interesting than a fictional version of a game of chance? Watch this: I just invented a story. It's about a man named John. He's thrown dice 999 times, and he's going for his final throw. So far, all 999 have been snake eyes. He throws number 1000. It is also snake eyes. What were the odds? It was 100% likely that the outcome would be what I'd already decided.



So poker stuff irks me to begin with. But somehow we have an EVEN MORE BORING version of poker where Rock Powers can't play, so he writes down the moves he WOULD HAVE made if he were in another player's shoes.

Riveting. Electrifying. We've gone from a card game, which I already abhor, to a hypothetical version of a made-up card game that I don't care about in the first place.

At any rate, the game is interrupted when Rock Powers discovers that an enemy spy snuck in a gun disguised as a stylus. Which would sound bizarre if Rock Powers weren't already sporting a single-shot pistol disguised to look like his thumb. Yes, a fake thumb that slips over his real thumb and is a pistol somehow. I don't know if there are any normal guns in this book, but I do know that Powers is also given a six-shot pistol that is disguised as a magic wand. Whether this is a horrible pistol and passable wand or a passable pistol and horrible wand I don't know. Is a magic wand pistol just a revolver with a long barrel, painted black with a white tip? It's best not to ask too many questions

because the later appearance of a rocket launcher equipped with a bayonet will just blow your mind right through your face.

A thug puts the stylus gun in one player's back. Powers, of course, notices this, but because he can't interrupt the game with his thumb gun, he elects to shoot the thug with a spitball, which causes him to drop the stylus and at that point everything sort of resolves itself. Cue Bond theme.

Skills To Pay The Bills

In addition to being an expert magician, Rock Powers also has the following skills. I promise you that these are all explicitly detailed in the book. Don't read the list and try to pick out the joke one because it's not in there.

- Expert lip reader
- Water skier
- Escape artist
- Can hold breath for 7 minutes
- Face reader
- Expert at sex
- Uncanny powers of observation
- Doctor
- Junior High Rope Climbing Champion
- Spitball shooter

Scene: Limo Sex

Finally we get some sex in this book! I was under the impression that sex happened in romance novels, like, immediately. If there's a pirate ship, they're banging right on the big wooden steering wheel. If there's a millionaire cowboy, horse trough will do. But maybe I'm wrong because this took FOREVER.

**Everything's a
smoke bomb
with this guy.**

Anyway, we finally get to the sex, and it's in the back of a limo where Rock Powers blows off a smoke bomb so that the paparazzi can't get pictures of him and Lani.

Apparently, in the reality of this book, magicians are the hottest celebs in town. EVERYONE knows Rock Powers, they want to know what happened to Lani, and her reappearance on the scene is the biggest tabloid tale since Batboy's death, subsequent rebirth, and sub-subsequent re-death.

You know why actual tabloid readers don't follow magicians? They're not nine years old.

Anyway, they have this limo sex because it is required to make sure Lani has a good flow of endorphins, which is the only way to overcome the potential hangover she might experience from a drug she was dosed with. Sort of like the movie Crank except less stupid. Well, okay, like Crank but the male lead has lesser abs. Well, okay, it's like Crank.

I've heard of some interesting hangover remedies in my times. Grease. Green drinks. About 15 episodes of *My Cat From Hell*. What I haven't come across is a nice bang in the back of a limo full of magic smoke.

As a public service announcement, if someone tries to convince you to head off a hangover by having sex, you should probably push them into a garbage can.

And let me tell you, Rock Powers? Everything's a smoke bomb with this guy. He's lighting off smoke bombs to get out of gunfire. He's lighting smoke bombs to have sex in limos. He lights smoke bombs to facilitate escape into a laundry cart in a hotel hallway. This man lights more smoke bombs than I did in my entire life, and most of my middle school days were focused entirely on the finding, purchasing, and lighting of smoke bombs.

Because of the smoke, this sex has to happen while both participants hold their breath. This leads me to believe that I'm doing sex either terribly right or terribly wrong, because there's no way I could hold my breath. Try this: Get aroused, then sprint. Remain aroused and sprint as far as you can while holding your breath. It will not be far. God help me for knowing this, but I know it will not be far.

Scene: Outlandish Marauders

I'm rarely at a loss when it comes to describing scenes. This one is particularly difficult because near the end I have to honestly say, "Rock Powers defeats his evil nemesis magician, who wields a rocket launcher with a bayonet attached, while both are aboard a hovercraft."

Rock Powers assembles his team of young magicians/CIA agents, of which there are apparently many, to help him perform his big illusion.

He picks a Social Media Magician who can manipulate Facebook. This is considered magic.

He picks a Laser Magician who can manipulate lasers. This is considered magic.

He picks a Video Game Magician who I would also make fun of except I've played Ninja Gaiden.

He also has some other magicians, and then the CIA builds him a UFO.

The trick, from what I can tell, goes like this:

You're partying at the UFO convention in the Nevada desert about 10 miles from Area 51. When a UFO shows up, a for-real UFO. Then a couple aliens show up on the ground and start running away, right towards Area 51. They are bounding and almost seem to teleport and reappear further away. You give chase because...you're at a UFO convention, so I guess you'd go Fox Mulder and try to tackle one of them. At one point a whole shitload of cows are released, which slows you down as you try to catch the aliens. Then, after you've run ten goddamn miles, the "aliens" reveal they are magicians, the UFO is revealed as totally real, and everyone credits Rock Powers with pulling off the greatest illusion of all time. Granted, he didn't do shit. Oh, and as far as illusions go, I guess there was a lie involved in saying the UFO was an alien spacecraft, but the thing goddamn existed! What is magic about this?

But hey, no time for details. Let's cut to the chase:

Rock Powers defeats his evil nemesis magician, who wields a rocket launcher with a bayonet attached, while both are aboard a hovercraft.

Happily Ever After

This book left me speechless. Then type-full. Because I still can't wrap my head around anything that happened here. I sort of wish that someone else had read it because then I could confirm that all this really happened and it wasn't a wine-induced night terror from which I'll never wake.

Was it so bad that it was fun?

No. Well, yes. But no.

I just don't know if it's possible for a book of 300+ pages to be so bad that it's fun. Because the fun of something bad wears off once the bad becomes baseline reality. You have a period of big fun at the beginning as you try to figure out if this is a gag. Then you figure out it's not and things are briefly even more fun. BUT THEN it just becomes white noise. The lines about Rock leaving "no stone unturned, only himself, Rock Powers, upended" just become the beige walls in the beige office of your day-to-day life.

It's like taking a bath. Fun at first. Novel. Then you're just sort of there naked in your own body stew. You wonder about dropping in a bouillon cube and seeing what man broth tastes like, and then you're bored again.

Or it's like wine. Hard to get used to the first couple sips. Then great. Then everything is confusing and you just want to go to bed.

But mostly it was like a book that I didn't enjoy, even though I applaud it for its enthusiasm and ability to maintain a very high level of crazy over an astonishingly long time.

Single And Loving It: A Reading List



When you say "There are some great things about single life," people look at you like you're saying, "There are some great things about having oral surgery." They figure you're a person so deluded you'll try and find the upside of bleeding from the mouth for a few days.

I'm here to reassure you, there are some great things about single life. It beats oral surgery any day. Even on Valentine's Day, the love-est of love days. Don't believe me? Fine. Sign yourself up for a gum graft. STILL don't believe me? Fine. Here's two lists of books. I know it looks like one, but it's two.

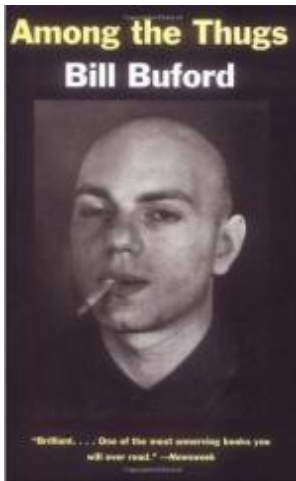
It's a list of reads for people who are single and loving it, and it's a list of reads for people who might not understand what's so great about being single. Who might not believe a person would ever choose to be single, or perhaps find themselves single and grow to like it. And to really drive the point home, each book on this list includes something awesome about flying solo.



1. 'Drinking At The Movies' by Julia Wertz

Too many slice of life comics are about love, focus on love, or revolve around the rituals of love. Not every comedy needs a romantic subplot. Not every superhero movie needs to bend over backwards trying to make us see love between a Hulk and a Black Widow (so unearned, Marvel. So unearned).

One of the pleasures of single life is going to the movies by yourself. Seriously, it's awesome. If you've never tried it, you should. Nobody is talking in your ear during the movie. Nobody "shares" your popcorn. And if the movie sucks, you can get up and leave.



2. 'Among The Thugs' by Bill Buford

This book will make you hate groups of people. It will make you pretty sure that going it alone is a better way, provided you're not interested in being stabbed or crushed against an iron gate at a soccer game. If you are interested in those things, then you might need a buddy or two.

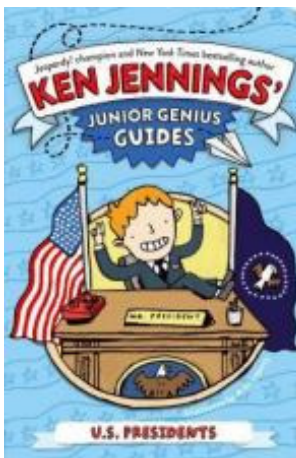
When you're single, there's none of this democracy nonsense, none of the "wisdom" of crowds. You make your own decisions. There's nothing more freeing than deciding, rather than washing each individual cup of a muffin pan, that you'll just throw it out dirty and never eat muffins again.



3. 'Textbook' by Amy Krouse Rosenthal

The most conversational, participatory book I've ever read. It's like a friend, but a friend that only responds when you're interested and waits around until you're ready to chat.

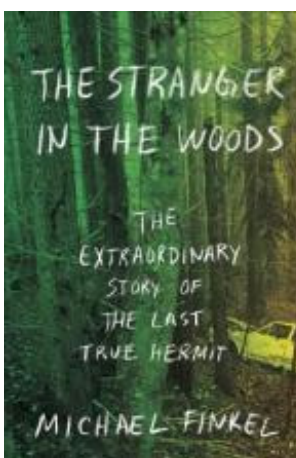
Friendships are one of the best parts of being single. When you're single, you find out who your friends are, have plenty of time to devote to them, and, hell, I don't have to tell you the ways in which friendships are a lot simpler than romantic relationships.



4. 'U.S. Presidents' by Ken Jennings

Jennings has this whole series of Junior Genius Guides, and they're great for the single person. Why? Because your one-person bar trivia team needs to do a little homework if you're going to stand a chance. Read these and you can be a one-person pub quiz champ. Except on the sports. You're screwed on that one.

Going to a bar alone is one of life's great pleasures. I'm not kidding. Bring a book, have a couple. You'll never feel more at peace.

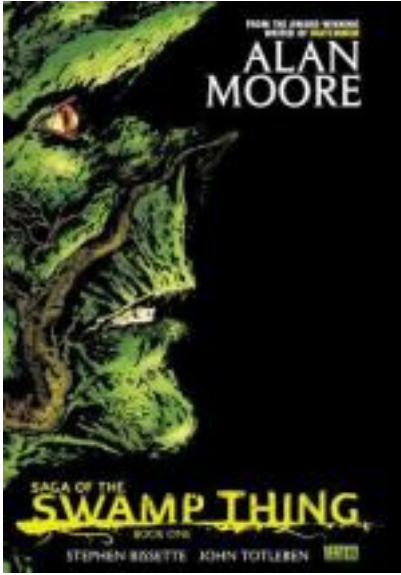


5. 'Stranger In The Woods' by Michael Finkel

This book profiles Christopher Knight, a dude who walked off into the woods one day and didn't speak to another human for 27 years. This book isn't just "look at this weirdo!" It explores the place loneliness has held in different cultures. It asks a lot of questions regarding why someone might want to be alone, and it starts to ask why the rest of us can't handle someone who doesn't want to be around us.

Being single and loving it allows you to really strip away any aspects of your life that are performative. There's an authenticity to single life that people

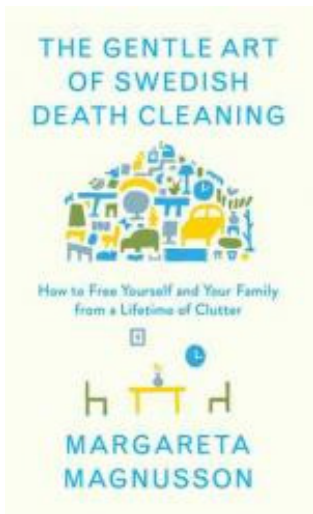
shoot for in their intimate relationships, telling you things like, "We poop with the door open." Yeah, you know who else does that? Single people. All the time. And you don't see us crowing about it.



6. 'Saga Of The Swamp Thing' by Alan Moore

Great example of an extremely non-traditional but loving relationship. It's the classic story of boy meets girl, except the boy is a plant man. And has no genitalia. But grows this fruit and then the girl eats it and... this sounds really bizarre. I promise, it works better in the book. Alan Moore might, might, be a better writer than I am.

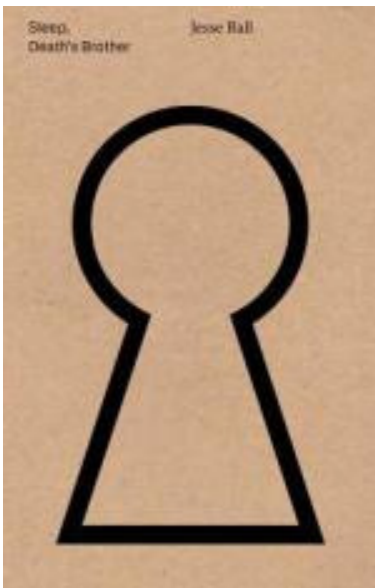
Being single can mean you develop other fulfilling, non-traditional, non-sexual relationships. Friendships, relationships with pets, siblings, motorcycles. Everyone in a relationship thinks they can do it too, but trust me, they can't. They think they're doing an awesome job balancing a new beau and their buddies, but trust me, they aren't.



7. 'The Gentle Art Of Swedish Death Cleaning' by Margareta Magnusson

This sounds a little sick, but I love the idea of leaving no trace after death. Sort of like the camping thing, leaving nothing but footprints, taking nothing but memories. There's a tidiness there, a closing of the loop that's really appealing.

I think this would freak out a lot of people, but when you're single, you don't have to worry about freaking anyone out. Your oddities and proclivities are yours and there's nobody to explain them to. You don't have to talk out your morbid curiosities. Of which there are many.



8. 'Sleep, Death's Brother' by Jesse Ball

This is sold as a manual for lucid dreaming, specifically for children and people who are incarcerated. The idea being that lucid dreaming can provide a level of escape and agency for people who might not have those things in spades. This could provide an interesting, reality-altering experience for anyone. Although dreams aren't interesting to hear about, admit it, they're fascinating when you're the dreamer.

Sleep is one of the best parts about single life. Unless you're lucky enough to sync up with your partner. In which case, get hitched. Seriously. People talk about liking the same bands and having similar outlooks on child-rearing, but I'd put some stock in "You go to bed at 1 AM? Me too!"



9. 'Misfit's Manifesto' by Lidia Yuknavitch

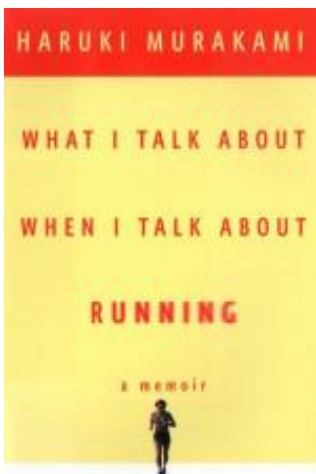
This book is about the idea of being alone together. You're a misfit, you're alone, but you're together with a whole lot of other misfits who are alone as well.

Community is important when you're single. And one of the joys of single life is that it can be a little easier to find your community. It's more imperative. And you come to recognize that nobody is going to do it for you. Your community isn't going to knock on your door and say, "Where have you been all our lives?" You have to leave the house and chase that shit down.



10. 'Behind You: One-Shot Horror Stories' by Brian Coldrick

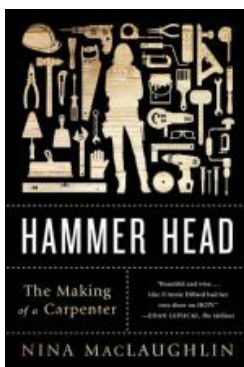
No better experience than a horror story read alone at night. That's a heightened experience if there ever was one. I daresay horror is meant to be read alone, at night. It's an experience you'll never have if you can jump in the bed and someone else is there, bored and sleepy.



11. 'What I Talk About When I Talk About Running' by Haruki Murakami

What's the difference between loneliness and solitude? That question is something you'll find explored in this book.

Being single gives you the opportunity to address this, find out how it's different. Because until you're single for a good stretch, you'll never really know the difference between being alone and being lonely.



12. 'Hammer Head: The Making Of A Carpenter' by Nina MacLaughlin

When we make a switch in life, that can be a very lonely thing. This book reassures readers that the switch can pay off big time.

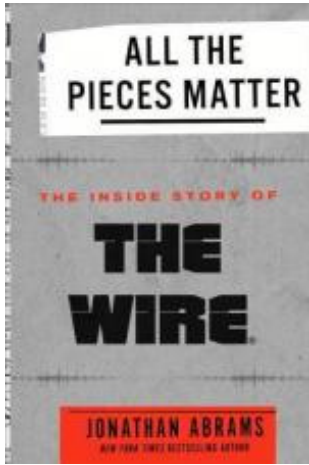
Making a switch can be tough, but one of the joys of being single? Hey, go for it! Nobody to consult. Nobody to hold you back. Of course, this is one the challenging things too. When your pop-up *Demolition Man* memorabilia

store goes belly-up, there's only one person to blame.

13. 'All The Pieces Matter: The Inside Story Of The Wire' by Jonathan Abrams

Oral histories are great if you're feeling like you need more voices in your life, something that's almost like a conversation. Plus, you can't go wrong with this set of voices.

Binging TV is a great single activity. Haven't we all tried to do this with a partner? Only to be red with shame as we watched the same episode of *Black Mirror* a second time, torn on whether it was better to admit it or lie?



14. 'The Best Small Fictions 2017' edited by Amy Hempel

Collections like this are a great way to find your new favorite writer. You can skip around, you can plow straight through. You can do it however you want.

One thing I've loved and hated about single life is that you've got a lot more time. It's hard at first, but you could do worse than filling your time with some great books.



15. 'There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé' by Morgan Parker

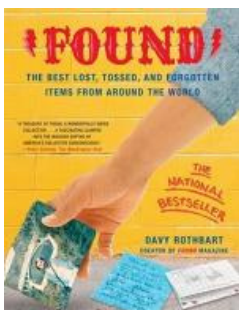
What of loneliness do we own? What of ourselves is really ours? This book of poems asks some big questions inside the tight, lyrical lines.

Don't ask me why, but I feel like poems are really great to read alone. It's during the alone portions of my life that I really connected with a lot of poetry. It's not something that I can explain, but if you've ever wanted to get into poetry and struggled, try it when you're alone.



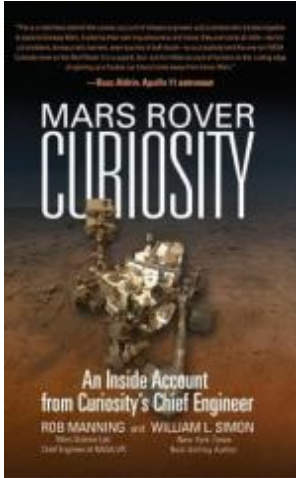
16. 'Found: The Best Lost, Tossed, and Forgotten Items from Around the World' by Davy Rothbart

Keep your eyes open. Humanity's all around. Take a second to lean over and pick up a scrap. You can have these short relationships with total strangers if



you're willing to look through what everyone else sees as junk.

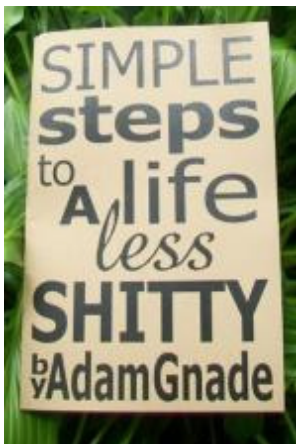
One of the great things about single life, you can collect whatever you want, and nobody's going to bother you about how gross or bulky or expensive or stupid your collection is. Nobody to politely suggest the molds of your teeth they let you take home from the dentist might be better housed in the basement. In the corner. Away from the light.



17. 'Mars Rover Curiosity: An Inside Account from Curiosity's Chief Engineer' by Rob Manning

You think YOU'RE alone? Imagine how far that little rover is from anyone.

Being alone is a landscape you can explore. When people get married, they talk about starting their lives together and starting their adventure. Being alone is an adventure too. It's a different kind of adventure, but it's one that can be very fulfilling, and it's one worth trying.



18. 'Simple Steps To A Life Less Shitty' by Adam Gnade

I'm not saying you have a shitty life. But if you slip into it every here and there, and if you need someone who's a little drill sergeant and a little punk rock, Adam is your guy.

Being alone can help a person toss off the idea that everything is about progression. In a relationship, it can feel like a series of forward steps. Date, move in, engagement, wedding, married life, house, kids, so on. And, in this human's opinion, it's in the dry spots between steps where you find out what your relationship is made of. Being alone can help you get used to the idea that there will be good days and bad days. Every day isn't better than the last. Every day isn't forward motion.



19. 'Chewing the Page: Mourning Goats Interviews' by Phil Jourdan

Like I said earlier, other voices can be a help. Why not make those voices of other authors? You're here on this site, you care about this shit.

When it comes to writing, times I've been alone have been massively productive. It's a combination of a lot of things. Time, energy, money, attention. All of it can go in one direction. You can leave work Friday and spend every waking moment until Monday morning working on something. Whatever your project is, the times when you're alone are far and away the best times to finish it.

What Made 'Roseanne' Great



Next month we're getting a new *Roseanne*. And this Conner-lover couldn't be happier.

I fucking adore *Roseanne*. Start up that saxophone music, show me the family sitting around the table with slices of pizza, and I'm 100% yours for the next 20 minutes.

Here's what I don't get: When we talk about great sitcoms, *Roseanne* isn't an automatic entry on the list. You've got your *Seinfelds*, your *Friends*, your *Woops!* (look it up, it's bonkers). And even though *Roseanne* gets SOME credit, the show doesn't get its due.

What was so great about *Roseanne*? I'll tell you. Cue saxophone.

Roseanne Conner: The Real-Est Domestic Goddess

Roseanne Barr:

I'm just the typical American woman. I don't like to clean. I yell at my kids. I ignore my husband. I think every other woman is exactly like me. I just try to portray how we (women) really are, because none of us really give a care if the husband's collar is clean or not. Nobody really gives a care about that. It's just on TV that they show us these images of women who do, but no one really does.

Roseanne Barr coined the term "Domestic Goddess" to describe her on-screen doppelganger, Roseanne Conner. Today the term "Domestic Goddess" probably conjures images of a woman at home, cleaning, folding blindingly-white linens, and clicking through Pinterest to find the perfect paleo meal to cook for her family. It's a *Stepford Wives* thing.

The "Domestic Goddess" Roseanne put on screen was different. It wasn't about perfection. It wasn't

about being this unflappable home-maker. She screeched at her kids. She wasn't always a ray of sunshine. She had a job. She was the authority in the house. She was responsible for the family, for the bills, and for meeting with teachers when her kids screwed up. She did it all, she deserved your respect, and if you didn't give it to her, goddamn it, she'd take it from you.

For lots of us, home life in the late 80's and early 90's looked like *Roseanne*. Moms were in the workplace and still doing most of the crap at home (division of domestic labor being a subject *Roseanne* tackles in Episode 1!). Divorces peaked in the early 80's in America, and loads of us were being raised by strong-willed single parents. A lot of our parents, moms especially, had to overcome the fear of being perceived as pushy, bitchy, and shrill.

And a lot of these parents were dealing with all of this while feeling isolated. Alone. Like they were the only ones.

What made Roseanne Conner special was that she wasn't special at all. She was real. She was us. And she was on TV.

The Conners Were A Broke White Family On TV

I have my own system for extra money. First you send in the phone bill and we forget to sign the check. Then we send the water bill to the electric company and the electric bill to the water company. And, you know, that charge card bill, it never even showed up!

The Conners didn't live in the heart of a bustling city, they didn't have fun jobs. They didn't have a ton of money.

Wanda Sykes is a writer for the *Roseanne* reboot, and as she puts it:

The thing about the Conners is they were a Midwestern family who have limited means, and you don't see that a lot on TV — except for black people...Black people are allowed to be poor on TV.

When it comes to being poor, there's regular poor, and then there's TV poor. When you're TV poor, you still have a nice apartment. You still have a car. Being TV poor means you get your spouse something cheap for your anniversary, and then we all learn a lesson about the real meaning of love or some crap like that. By the next episode, money is no biggie.

The Conners were not TV poor. They were regular poor, and this tinged everything (okay, there was that final season craziness where they won the lottery. We'll get to that).

Think about it: how might a typical show celebrate episode 100? *Seinfeld* did a two-part retrospective clip show. In *Friends*, Phoebe's baby is born.

Roseanne's 100th episode centers around the Conners' power being shut off because they didn't pay the bill.

What's really odd is that Roseanne broke the mold, and for the most part, the mold went right back into place.

We get a shot of Roseanne looking in the fridge, the set goes dark, and she says the classic line: "Well, middle class was fun." It's not only a good joke, it's a defining moment for the show.

Where most sitcoms painted a portrait of prosperity for people to live up to, *The Conners* provided an alternative lifestyle model for people who didn't have money. The Man might be able to shut off the lights, but he can't stop you from making a joke about it.

Would the Conners be happier with more money? Totally! *Roseanne* isn't selling nonsense about how money has no real value or the nobility of living poor. It simply tells the truth: there isn't any money coming, so you'd better figure out how you're going to deal.

Good narratives give us structure and something to laugh about. Great narratives give us models of how to live.

Roseanne Wasn't Afraid To Look Bad

There's a semi-famous episode from *Roseanne's* 7th season called "White Men Can't Kiss." DJ, Roseanne's son, is in a school play. His part calls for kissing a girl, and he's refusing. It's no big deal until Roseanne discovers that DJ doesn't want to kiss the girl because she's black:

Hey! Black people are just like us. They're every bit as good as us, and any people who don't think so is just a bunch of banjo-picking, cousin-dating, barefoot embarrassments to respectable white trash like us!

Because it's *Roseanne*, things don't end there. DJ doesn't say, "Gee whiz, ma, you're right." Instead, Dan (Roseanne's husband and DJ's father) and Roseanne get into it:

Dan: He grew up in Lanford, it's only 5% black, and kissing's a new thing for DJ. It's only natural that he's not as comfortable kissing a black girl as one of his own—I did not say that!

Roseanne: Well at least now I know where he gets it from.

Dan: I am not a racist.

Roseanne: Yeah and neither's your father, he says he doesn't have any problem with "the coloreds."

Dan: I am not my father.

Roseanne: If I had known you'd be passing your family's crap onto my kids I wouldn't be having another one with you.

In another sitcom, only a heinous character could have a racist view. A character we hate already, someone the show can afford to throw away at the episode's end. Most sitcoms wouldn't have the guts to pit two main characters against each other on an issue of race.

Because *Roseanne* isn't afraid to cast characters in a bad light, the show can talk about serious stuff

in an effective way. Now it's not a simple matter of good versus evil, bigot versus progressive. It's not a straw man. It's Dan Conner!

It's a complicated thing to like a person or a character but really hate something about them. It's almost like...real life.

Roseanne Understood Laughs And Drama As Currencies

After Nana Mary (Roseanne's grandmother) admits to having two abortions in her youth, we get this exchange between Roseanne and her mom, Bev:

Bev: Now what if I'd decided to have an abortion with you, Roseanne? Or your sister? What would've happened then?

Roseanne: Would you like me to tell you, Mom? Maybe you wouldn't have had to marry some guy you didn't love and you would've had a happy and fulfilling life. Wouldn't that be an abomination?

Bev: Yes it would, Roseanne, because I know the difference between right and wrong. And abortion is wrong.

Roseanne: Well thank you for giving us all the truth, mother. I've always wondered what that red phone was doing in your apartment with the word GOD on it.

What you're seeing here is that *Roseanne* had a flexibility.

Too many sitcoms use comedy and tension in one way: They create tension, then use comedy to burst the tension.

Roseanne understood that they didn't always have to break the tension with a laugh, nor did adding a laugh mean the tension was broken. You could forgo the joke and let something be intense. Or you could tell a joke that gets a laugh and still manages to keep the tension rolling.

This meant the show could make jokes around serious topics while not making fun of the topics themselves. *Roseanne* could use humor as a spoonful of sugar to wash down a serious message. It meant they could do a heavy, heavy episode here and there.

Comedy and tension were not at odds on *Roseanne*. They worked together.

The Ending Was Totally Fascinating

If there's one discussion that namechecks *Roseanne* consistently, it's the discussion of terrible TV endings.

In the final season, the Conners win the lottery. The show takes on a weird tone, almost like a variety show. They did comedy, drama, their take on a BBC-style sitcom, their take on *ER*, a *Xena* thing, a *Mary Tyler Moore* thing. They did all the things. And when I say that, I mean ALL the things. Steven Segal makes a cameo.

The series ends with a voiceover in which Roseanne Conner explains that everything we saw over the course of the series was written by her, including this last, bizarre season. In her voiceover, she explains why the last season has a different flavor:

My writing's really what got me through the last year after Dan died. I mean at first I felt so betrayed as if he had left me for another woman. When you're a blue-collar woman and your husband dies it takes away your whole sense of security. So I began writing about having all the money in the world and I imagined myself going to spas and swanky New York parties just like the people on TV, where nobody has any real problems and everything's solved within 30 minutes.

Indulge me for a second.

I think *Roseanne's* final season works as a commentary on the idea of the sitcom. The way in which it's all fantasy and wish-fulfillment, and the ways in which real life isn't like that.

While the last season doesn't fit the rest of the show, *Roseanne's* finale brings things back around. In *Roseanne's* final moments, we have this cultural artifact that lives on beyond its original viewership, and it has something to say, something that we're not spoon fed.

My take: If *Roseanne* had been a typical sitcom, if it had been about escaping reality rather than living in it, the show would have looked like this bullshit all along. You're welcome.

One of a Kind

What's really odd is that *Roseanne* broke the mold, and for the most part, the mold went right back into place. *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, these were the shows that came in at *Roseanne's* end, and they didn't depict the sort of reality we got from the Conners. Nothing could step into *Roseanne's* shoes.

Until now.

There's a lot going on in the new *Roseanne* series. Roseanne is a Trump supporter. She's a grandma to a gender-non-conforming grandchild. The show is already rumored to be tackling topics like immigration and the opioid crisis.

Maybe *Roseanne's* biggest failure was that it didn't spawn other shows like it.

But maybe it's for the best. Maybe, instead of looking for replacements and lousy imposters, we should've just gone straight to the answer: more *Roseanne*.

Of Mice, Men, and Gloves Fulla Vaseline



This is partly about a classic novel, but more than that, it's about a time I decided to wear a glove fulla Vaseline.

In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, there's an antagonist, a real asshole. His name's Curley, and he's introduced wearing a glove on his left hand and high-heeled boots, the type of boots designed for sitting on a horse and telling OTHER people what to do.

Here's a conversation between two characters, George and Candy:

"You seen that glove on [Curley's] left hand?"

"Yeah, I seen it."

"Well, that glove's fulla Vaseline."

"Vaseline? What the hell for?"

"Well, I tell ya what--Curley says he's keepin' that hand soft for his wife."

George studied the cards absorbedly. "That's a dirty thing to tell around," he said.

It WAS a dirty thing to tell around. And it disturbed a young Pete. We're reading this classic novel in English class, complete with its thematic yadda-yadda, it's pastoral blah-diddy-blah. And then we're thrown into this Clive Barker shit.

Granted, I was young the first time I read this book. I only knew the barest rudiments of sexual congress, and none of these were first hand. Er, wait. All of them were first hand. Whatever. You know what I mean. I wasn't exactly experienced at sex, but I was into the stage where you suspect something like a glove stuffed with lube is about sex, even if you're not sure how.

Now that I'm Old Pete, the glove still doesn't make sense. I thought I'd understand when I was older. But like most grown-up things ("films", wine, the enduring popularity of Bob Dylan) I never got it.

After exhaustive internetting didn't get me any answers, I decided there was only one thing for it. I'd have to give it a whirl.

Putting On The Glove Fulla

Filling a glove with Vaseline is not an easy task. It's like trying to fill a party balloon with gel deodorant. Or trying to fill my head with knowledge about figure skating. The openings and materials involved just don't work well together.

Which is why I gave up on filling the glove, coated my hand in Vaseline, and jammed it in.

The sensation of putting on a glove fulla Vaseline is about what you'd expect. If you expected it to be super disgusting and super warm.

Vaseline is weird shit. It's not like lotion where it feels like it'll absorb into your skin. It's more like peanut butter where you feel the grease will follow you around forever. It exists in this strange land somewhere between cosmetic product and mechanical lubricant. The idea of covering yourself in it is like spraying a quick shot of WD40 in your mouth before a date.

Oh, and it's warm. WAY warm. I can't express that enough. My hand was cooking in that glove.

The first time I wore the glove, I was just doing crap around the house. Nothing to shout about. It was a few hours, and afterward, no noticeable difference in softness, plushness, and it didn't cause me to feel any other Curley-esque feelings, like the need to punch a really big guy or accuse people of sleeping with my wife.

Uses For Vaseline

In the continued search for answers regarding Curley's glove, I didn't find anyone using Vaseline like Curley, but I DID find some pretty interesting uses for Vaseline.

It turns out Vaseline is an NFL cold-weather secret. Want to play in a freezing game while still showing off the guns? Slap on some Vaseline. It's a coating that keeps you warm. Ish.

Also, if you're painting, Vaseline makes a good protective layer for crap you don't want to get paint on, like door hardware that's tough to remove. Or your face.

Perhaps most interesting, Robert Chesebrough, the inventor of Vaseline, was the total embodiment of a snake oil salesman. He'd go from town to town, burn himself with fire or acid, and apply Vaseline to the wounds. He also ate a spoonful of the stuff every day. And, once when he was ill, he had a nurse cover him from head to toe in Vaseline. He did not become a supervillain and chase down that accursed Spider-Man. He recovered from his illness and lived to the age of 96.

And because it always comes back to Tyra, Tyra Banks claimed that Vaseline was her biggest beauty secret, and she gave away jars to screaming fans on her talk show. This secret has been explored by

The sensation of putting on a glove fulla Vaseline is about what you'd expect. If you expected it to be super disgusting and super warm.

a large number of internet people with highly mixed results.

Highfalutin Theories

Although there was some interesting stuff out there, including the nightmare fuel of EATING Vaseline, there wasn't a lot of concrete evidence as to the "why" behind Curley's glove. But there are some literary-type theories, stuff related directly to the book. I thought the most useful thing I could do here would be to present some of the more popular theories and then present my findings.

The Concrete Theory

Curley is doing exactly what's stated, keeping his hand soft for his woman, either at the woman's request or because it's Curley's preference. The best evidence in favor of this theory is that the novel makes it clear that Curley's wife is out of his league, and he's doing anything and everything to stay together. Sort of like the older dude who pretends he likes Ed Sheeran to stay with his younger girlfriend. The evidence against, Curley's wife says, "He ain't never home. I got nobody to talk to, I got nobody to be with." Which makes me think he perhaps doesn't care all that much, is kind of a jerk, and why would a jerk care about the softness of his hand in regards to his wife?

The Test

My partner did not find a discernible difference in the softness of my hand. Granted, I'm not a ranch hand, but the book goes out of the way to point out that Curley's not exactly a working stiff either.

If you're interested in repulsing your partner a little, explain to them that you've worn a glove fulla Vaseline and would like them to feel. For research purposes. Or, tell them about this experiment, and tell them you're going to claim, when asked, that the glove is there and filled with Vaseline to "keep it soft. For my woman." If you miss the look of disgust in your partner's eye, this is the way to go.



The Rumor Mill Theory

The glove is not fulla Vaseline, and this is a rumor started by the other workers. Entirely possible, but a very boring option. Really only serves to point out that Curley is a weirdo jerk, which is pretty thoroughly established in the book. Nobody seems to have a problem calling Curley an asshole outright, so it strikes me as a little odd that they'd make up this fairy tale.

The Test

On one hand (HA!) wearing a single glove definitely gets you looks here and there. One glove, it's a source of curiosity. But not always.

I wore the glove to the airport. I should clarify, I didn't wear it through airport security. I didn't think I'd be able to explain this unless there was someone on staff who'd taken freshman English recently. Plus, LitReactor won't give me press credentials. I could really use a hat with a card in it that says

PRESS, if anyone's listening. Might get me out of a jam here and there.

Once I got through security, a lady behind the Frontier counter watched me take out a small jar of Vaseline and coat my entire hand before applying a leather glove over the top. She watched this entire process with definite interest, but she didn't say a word.

However, nobody on the flight seemed to notice my glove. This could be because the person seated next to me took out of her bag the largest pill organizer I've ever seen. It looked like she'd chopped the top part off a tool box, the sectioned part where you can put little screws and washers and crap like that. So my glove, which wasn't immediately, obviously full of Vaseline, was probably nowhere near the weirdest thing going on during that flight.

The Spousal Abuse Theory

I've also read theories that Curley beats his wife, and somehow keeping his hand soft makes sure he doesn't damage her in some way. This theory has the least merit, if you ask me, and its proponents don't seem to know a lot about the non-existent relationship between the pain of being punched and the softness of the puncher's skin. Also, I don't see a lot of support for the theory that Curley is beating his wife. This theory just comes up often enough I felt compelled to mention it.

The Test

I punched a thing. I don't know how soft and thick your skin has to be to provide better cushion for punching, but I imagine hands that luscious could be put into a prayer position under your head and provide a really great pillow.

My Theories

I'm not in love with any of these online, English paper theories. None of them really explain the glove, the Vaseline, or the fulla.

Let me tell you my theories:

The Reality Theory

The glove is based on something in reality. It's such an oddity that I don't know why Steinbeck would just cram it in there if it wasn't something that he encountered and it stuck out in HIS mind. Indeed, a good chunk of the novel is based in true-life shit. In 1937, Steinbeck told a *New York Times* reporter:

Lennie was a real person. He's in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn't kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times I saw him do it. We couldn't stop him until it was too late.

If Lennie was real, stands to reason Curley's glove fulla Vaseline could be real too.

The Test

Well...I can't find a lot of people doing this online. Which WOULD make it pretty eccentric and strange, something that would stick in your head. It's stuck in my head since 8th grade. I guess there's something to it.

The Revulsion Theory

Steinbeck wanted to make Curley repulsive in some visceral way, and this is what he came up with. Points to Steinbeck if this is the case. He manages to make Curley creepy and fucked up in a way that's permissible in middle school classrooms. No mean feat.

The Test

Wearing the glove was absolutely disgusting. I dreaded putting it on every time. The glove got heavy, and it felt almost alive somehow.

Also, I took my glove off when I visited a middle school for work. As difficult as this would be to explain to a TSA agent, I felt a middle school administrator would be, rightly, even more suspicious. It's just revolting as an idea, and it's revolting in practice. While we live in a world that's mostly about avoiding judgment for how people have dressed themselves, it just seems that a glove fulla Vaseline says something about a person. And it's not good.

A+, Steinbeck.

The Biggest Problem

Okay, the biggest problem is that it's a glove fulla Vaseline. Nuff said.

The other problem, book-wise, is that Steinbeck's no Chekov. If you hide a pistol in the first act, that pistol better re-emerge later on. Likewise, you give me a glove full of Vaseline, that glove and its Vaseline better be important later on.

In *Of Mice and Men*, it's totally not. I re-read the book. Curley's hand gets crushed by Lennie, but it's not explicitly stated which hand. Which seems like a huge missed opportunity. What better thing to do with this baby-ed hand than crush it until bones crack through skin?

But that doesn't happen. No description of Lennie squeezing the be-glove-ed hand, Vaseline oozing out at the wrist. No dramatic removal of the Vaseline glove to show the gore underneath. Nothing.

We don't get a scene of Curley touching his wife either. In fact, there are only two people we see touch Curley's wife: Lennie, when he breaks her neck, and Slim, who touches her face after she dies. Curley never actually touches his wife.

We don't get an action movie line when Curley discovers his dead wife: "The glove's off now, you bastard!" and a dramatic flinging away of the soggy glove.

We don't see Curley jerking off with his soft hand. I don't mean to be crass about it, but that'd tie up the mystery, no?

We don't get anything!

I daresay a glove fulla Vaseline is such an engaging, interesting object that it deserved a little more.

You dropped the ball, Steinbeck. Probably because it was coated in petroleum jelly.

In The End

I learned nothing from my glove fulla Vaseline. Other than people find it disgusting and a terrible idea. Universally. Not one person I talked to about this said, "Hmm. Interesting. I think that's a GREAT idea! I wish I had as many good ideas as you, but I'd settle for just your good looks."

We may never know. There might not ever be an answer. Which is a shame.

But the good news is, from now on, whenever someone asks me about having lunch with anyone, living or dead, I know who I'm picking and what I'm going to ask. Steinbeck, you got some splainin' to do.

Flannery O'Connor's Greatest Hits



Flannery O'Connor is one of those names you hear a lot, but folks who aren't interested in writing and short stories don't know a lot about her.

I'd venture a guess that it's a short story problem. Short stories aren't the easiest. Getting into a collection of stories takes a certain level of commitment and flexibility at the same time. It's not the same long-term relationship you get with a novel, and it's not the one night stand of poetry either. It's somewhere in-between. A serial monogamy that doesn't work for everyone.

What I'm here to tell you is that you're missing out if you don't take a couple of O'Connor's stories for a spin. Which is why, in honor of her birthday (March 25th), I've picked out 5 that I think you should read, and without spoiling anything, I'll tell you why.

Plus, we'll get to some other stuff along the way, stuff you might not know about her. To borrow a phrase from everyone's aunt, she was a pretty neat lady.

"The Life You Save May Be Your Own"

This story serves as a master class in unlikable characters, something of a specialty of O'Connor's. She could write a character who you hated, but who felt real, and you still had some sympathy for. Often these characters were damaged or in bad situations themselves, and that helped when they did something awful. Like the main character in "The Geranium," who's a total racist trapped in a situation that's not suited for him, moving from the country to the city. You hate an aspect of his character, and at the same time he's going through something so human and so disorienting.

Unlikable characters are hard to pull off even today. "I didn't feel like I was rooting for anyone" is a critique you see about a lot of really good books with really difficult people in them.

Some of O'Connor's people were so unlikable that her German publisher wanted to drop some of her stories, saying they were too dark for Germanic sensibilities. Her response?

I didn't think I was that vicious.

Unlikable characters are an acquired taste, it seems. Sort of like O'Connor's drink of choice, Coca-Cola mixed with coffee. If you're looking to tip one back to the lady on account of it being her birthday, this is the drink to go with. For a fancier *cough* grown-up version, try a can of coke, a can of cream soda, 2 tablespoons of coffee, and a shot of spiced rum. That's a party in your mouth where everyone is caffeinated up to their eyeballs.

"The Barber"

Not one of her better-known stories, but very "right now." In it, a man getting his hair cut has an ongoing argument with his barber about a political candidate. And as you watch the man in the chair trying to make his case, returning to the barber again and again, it's painful. It's really painful. You feel for the guy. O'Connor builds a ton of sympathy for the character because you, as the reader, already know how this is going to pan out.

Nobody understands being misunderstood better than O'Connor. Paul Engle, a teacher of O'Connor's, says that when he first met her in 1946, her Georgian accent was so thick that he had to ask her to write down what she'd just said. What she'd written:

My name is Flannery O'Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writer's Workshop?

The answer was yes, and it's a good thing. Not only did she turn out great work, but O'Connor was an excellent student. She revised and made significant changes to her work based on workshop feedback. She was always willing to try something another way. She was painfully shy, but this didn't slow her down at all. As Robert Giroux put it:

Flannery was more of a presence than the exuberant talkers who serenade every writing class with their loudness.

"A Good Man Is Hard To Find"

It's no exaggeration to say that without this story, Southern Gothic wouldn't be what it is today. While it's not the first example, I'd put solid money on it being the story that brought Southern/Rural Gothic into the modern era and gave us writers like Cormac McCarthy, William Gay, James Dickey, Harry Crews, Daniel Woodrell, and Jim Thompson.

It leaves you with a beautiful ending line, full of mystery, menace, and that O'Connor twang:

She would of been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.

What I'm here to tell you is that you're missing out if you don't take a couple of O'Connor's stories for a spin.

“Good Country People”

There’s a turn in this story so odd it’ll leave you without a leg to stand on.

O’Connor’s stories tend to have a side-glancing fascination with characters that are disabled in some way, whether it be by birth or incident. “Good Country People” is the story that comes at this fascination most directly, and if you read this one early, you’ll pick up on this stuff in other stories too.

She even wrote an essay about why these elements so often show up in her work:

Whenever I’m asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one ... Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

“Good Country People” takes a minute to get going, a minute of forced focus until you start to see the story developing. But it’s a good story to start with if you want to get a bead on what it is O’Connor’s doing, and the payoff is pretty good.

Oddity was certainly of interest to O’Connor in her real life. When she was young, she had a backwards-walking chicken, which kickstarted her curiosity when it came to fowl:

I began to collect chickens. What had been only a mild interest became a passion, a quest. I had to have more and more chickens. I favored those with one green eye and one orange or with over-long necks and crooked combs. I wanted one with three legs or three wings but nothing in that line turned up. I pondered over the picture in Robert Ripley’s book, Believe It Or Not, of a rooster that had survived for thirty days without his head; but I did not have a scientific temperament. I could sew in a fashion and I began to make clothes for chickens. A gray bantam named Colonel Eggbert wore a white piqué coat with a lace collar and two buttons in the back.

Excuse the pun when I say O’Connor was an odd bird. Oh, and to put a cap on it, oddness bought us what might, MIGHT, be my favorite O’Connor quote:

You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.

“Why Do The Heathen Rage?”

This one had to be brought up, not so much because of the story itself, but because it’s also the name of an unfinished novel O’Connor was working on just before her death in 1964 due to complications from lupus, a disease that doctors estimated would kill her in 5 years. She showed those jerks and lived for 12.

To be honest, the story feels a little unfinished to me. Perhaps it just feels that way because it’s so much shorter than most of her others. If you read *The Complete Stories*, you’ll see that while most of O’Connor’s stories hover somewhere in the 10 to 15 page length, this one clocks in at 5.

The brevity could be an experiment, an early inspiration for folks like Lydia Davis. Or it could be the imperfect expression of something she decided to come back to near the end of her life. Which

makes sense. She'd written more, experienced more, and said that her sickness was "...more instructive than a long trip to Europe."

Cut to present day, and the novel is being finished, or rather, "prepared" by Jessica Hooten Wilson. Dr. Wilson has written about O'Connor before, but this will be her first crack at writing for her.

Sorry, is my unhappiness creeping in just a bit?

It's not Dr. Wilson's fault. She knows her stuff, and if someone is going to finish the book, she's a great choice.

But does it need to be finished? Are we getting another Go Set A Watchman here?

Maybe. Someone certainly stands to make a few bucks.

But maybe not. It's not like O'Connor is as big a name as Harper Lee. And to be honest, she would have written more if she hadn't died so young. A lot more. And she died very close to the time she wrote some of her best stuff. It's entirely possible that the manuscript is very close to finished, and that it contains some of O'Connor's best work.

Time will tell. But no matter what the result, it won't be pure from the mind of that woman with the thick accent, backwards-walking chicken, and a glass of coke and coffee at hand.

10 Literary Holidays We Desperately Need



Take a look at the calendar. Come up with your top three complaints about it.

Here are mine:

1. The week starts on Sunday? That's dumb. Everybody knows the week starts on Monday. Ask anyone. Ask Garfield.
2. Not enough holidays. We work MOST days. 5 out of 7? That's dumb.
3. DEFINITELY not enough literary holidays.

In fact, there might not be any literary holidays to speak of. President's Day? Lame. Spring Break? That's almost as anti-literature as it gets. Boxing Day (Canada)? For all I know, that may be book-based. But I'm fairly sure it's not. Thanksgiving? That's owned by the Three F's: Food, Football, and Family (arguments with). Even Christmas, it may have origins in a book, but it's got way more to do with Bezos Christ than Jesus Christ these days.

March 26th is Make Up Your Own Holiday Day. Which I figure makes for a good excuse to right the calendar's wrongs and come up with some literary holidays. You can thank me later, astrologists, or old monks, or whoever came up with the calendar.

Book-In-A-Day Day

Reading a whole book start to finish in one day makes you feel so accomplished. You have this great, one-day experience of another world. And let's be honest, the best of books are usually consumed pretty quickly. You stay home from work, get some snacks, get some of the beer kind of snacks, and start and finish a read in the same day. The best part, it's only March and you've already finished a book this year. Go you. Keep the momentum rolling.

I'm Totally Giving Up On 'Infinite Jest' Day

You can replace *Infinite Jest* with a title of your choice. That's the one I'm using.

We've all got that book we keep going all *Brokeback Mountain* on, all "I wish I knew how to quit you!" Take this day to say, fuck it. I'll never finish. Take this day to accept you're just not that person. Toss that book off your nightstand, move on with your life.

Official Dress Like Frankenstein Day

In my never-ending quest to argue with my fellow English majors, this day is designed to see who we all see as "Frankenstein." Yeah, in the book, the doctor is Frankenstein. But in real life? Well, I guess we'll just have to see how many people walk around in big green monster costumes and how many are dressed as old-timey doctors. Let's settle it once and for all in the gladiatorial arena of festive dress-up. Bonus: pretty solid way to get double-mileage out of your Halloween getup.

Buy Your Friend's Self-Published Book Day

We all mean to do it. It's not that hard. It's just, you know, "I don't have a Kindle," or "I never downloaded the app," or whatever.

This day is a lot like Valentine's Day. It's really not that hard to buy your girlfriend some flowers every so often. But some of us need a reminder, a date circled on the calendar. As soon as we do it, it's like, "I'm so stupid. That was pretty easy to do."

Just buy your friend's damn book. Even if it sucks. Who cares? You weren't doing anything with that two bucks anyway. Just buy it.

Hunter S. Thompson Cannon Day

If you've never seen it, Thompson's funeral was pretty spectacular. He built a big-ass tower with his signature two-thumbed, red fist at the top. A cannon was hoisted up, and his ashes were blown out of it, scattering all over the valley where he lived.

Let's change gears for a moment. Recently, in my town's police blotter, I read that a local man had to be asked to stop shooting off a cannon in his backyard every time the Broncos scored a touchdown. This told me a couple things: 1) People possess cannons, 2) They are looking for an excuse to fire them off, 3) They seem to be incensed when you tell them that shooting off cannons in the middle of a residential area isn't a cool thing to do.

I'm not above instituting a holiday just to prove a piece of folk wisdom wrong.



I think we might be looking at a great opportunity to bring the literary crowd together with the...let's call them cannon-firers. After all, in Thompson, they were one and the same.

The celebration is simple. Fire 'em if you've got 'em. In honor of a writer.

Touch All Your Books Day

This is the day when you go through your book collection, touch everything, and maybe decide to get rid of some shit. Let's face it, you probably don't need all of that. Whatever you don't want, give away, gift to someone. Or donate (responsibly).

If it truly is better to give, then this will be the best holiday ever.

You should know I have my doubts about the whole "better to give" thing, and I'm not above instituting a holiday just to prove a piece of folk wisdom wrong.

Stay Up Late And Read Day

For the kids. Stay up as late as you want, so long as you're reading. Why not? Why not make reading into this fun, transgressive thing? Why not let reading occupy a space, the late part of the night, that it once ruled?

I've been asked by some parents about getting their kids interested in reading. And my answer is usually a form of reading as rule-breaking. Let them read something you wouldn't let them watch. Let them read in place of doing something they don't want to do. Let them read past their bedtime.

Read-A-Thon Day

Do you remember this shit in school? You come dressed in your pajamas (or, in my case, a reasonable version of what I wore as pajamas that didn't rely on a simple fabric flap to obscure my middle school shame), sit around and read all day.

We should do this shit at work. Why not? One work day to look forward to. Is that so much to ask? One day where I don't have to consider driving a MUCH longer route to work because that MUCH longer route has a bridge, and the advantage of driving over the bridge in a car that's almost 20 years old is you don't even have to make a decision to live or die, you just let go of the wheel? I say it's not a lot to ask. But maybe that's just me.

Day Without A Writer

Okay, less a holiday. But imagine. No books. No text, period. No movies either. Sorry, no TV. No news. No speeches. No Facebook. No memes. Anything written can't happen.

Maybe next time someone's talking smack about an education in the arts, they'll think how boring their lives would be without writers.

Read Edward Lee's 'Header' Day

It's like one of those programs where a city all reads the same book, but instead of being something uplifting or "tough but empowering" it's a book about people drilling holes in humans and...you know what? You'll have to check it out for yourself. This book is so super fucked up. I don't know how you talk about this thing in polite company. But I like the idea of coming out of the house on a Monday, looking around and wondering who else read it.

11 Tips To Keep You Writing While Traveling



Getting into a workshop with Chuck Palahniuk and Lidia Yuknavitch was one of the best pieces of news I'd ever received. Especially because when I got it, my cat had died, I had stitches in my mouth, and I was on prescription meds that meant I couldn't drink a drop at the heavy-drinking party I organize every year. That night, when I got home from said party dead sober, mouth throbbing, I got the email: "You're in."

To make all 12 sessions, I had to travel from northern Colorado to Oregon, every Monday. The way this shook out, I took 22 flights in 3 months.

I'm very lucky that I was able to do that. My work flexed around my schedule quite a bit. And while it wasn't cheap, I compared it to a college class. About the same length, hopefully of greater value, and honestly, cheaper.

22 flights is a lot of flights. I'm seeing that numbers don't really express what that means. But I'm not here to lament how much travel it was. I'm here to tell you what kept me writing while traveling. And to give you some tips should you ever find yourself traveling a lot, a little, or somewhere in between.

Don't Complain About Traveling

If you travel a lot, you know it sucks. But nobody wants to hear you complain about it.

Everyone thinks of traveling as this glamorous thing. You're in an airport bar, wearing a suit, sipping on a cocktail at 8:45 AM. You'll probably meet a beautiful woman and have a 45-minute romance.

You and I know it's not like that. Travel is coming heartstoppingly close to massacring an antelope in your car while driving the back road to the airport on a few hours of sleep. It's using a urinal next to a dude who's flossing. The closest thing you have to a romance with a beautiful stranger is sitting next

to a burly dude whose arm is way over the armrest, and tattooed on that arm is a fully nude woman with her lady parts spread wide open.

People don't know that traveling sucks. And they don't want to hear that it sucks. So don't bother. Take my word for it.

Analog Rules

If you want to keep working while you travel, no matter what the circumstances, you're better off with paper and pen. I know, most of us can type almost as fast as we think.

But let's talk about the time losses with a laptop. You've got your boot up and shutdown. You've got the time you spend hopping on different WiFi networks in the airport, on the plane, when you get where you're going, and so on. On takeoff and landing they'll have you stow your laptop. And to be honest, having the whole world a click away isn't a good thing when you're writing.

It's just not as convenient to bust out a computer when you've got a spare 5 minutes here and there. It's not super practical if you're on a bus. Your notebook never runs out of power. It's never out of WiFi range, and you never turn the page and see someone's already written in "\$10 bucks to connect to the page, bro."

Learn to love the soreness you get from writing by hand. Learn to use the unpredictable little moments that come with travel because sometimes they're the only moments you'll have.

If You're Tech-Reliant

My rule with technology is ABC: Always Be Chargin'. Maybe you'll only use 15% of your battery while you wait in the terminal for a flight to board. Plug in anyway. You might want that 15% later. That 15% might carry you to your next charge.

Get a wall adapter that turns one wall outlet into a few outlets plus a few USB outlets. It's a great way to spend \$15 bucks. Outlets are in demand in a lot of places, but most fellow travelers won't turn you down if you ask to plug in an adapter so you can share the outlet. Same goes for coffee shops, libraries, other places you might end up.

Tasks and Time

If you're a task-oriented writer ("I'll be done when I finish this scene"), try being a time-oriented writer ("Whatever I accomplish in the next hour"). If you're time-oriented, try being task-oriented.

Part of the goal of writing while you travel is to kill time, and breaking up the methods that provide you the most efficiency can be a great way to kill more of that time, and it might give you a new perspective or a new way to solve a problem in your work.

Wash Up

If you kept your eyes on the news in February, they made it sound like airplanes were basically horizontal test tubes brimming with flu.

I didn't get sick. And the only thing I can credit is washing my hands. Every time you use the bathroom, sure. But wash your hands every time before you eat. Every time before you apply something to your face. Don't touch your face unless you've washed your hands. Don't drink a drink, don't brush your teeth, just don't let anything near your face in unwashed hands. If you touch another person, wash up before you touch your face or handle food.

I'm not saying you've got to Purell every time you take a breath. I'm saying that it's good to prompt yourself to wash your hands a little more often and to do it a little more thoroughly.

Stay healthy, stay productive.

What You Can, When You Can

A good rule when you travel is to do what you can when you can. On the flight, I can write, but I can't walk. So walk in the airport, write on the plane.

This works for saving things up too. There are some things that'll be easy for you to work on while you travel and some things that'll be tough. As you start to figure those things out, save the stuff you can do on a plane for the plane. Don't do that stuff at home if you're getting on a plane tomorrow. Save it up.

Be Realistic

Traveling will not turn you into a writing machine. If you're used to putting in a couple hours in a day, don't board the plane with the idea of going for a 7-hour session.

It's cool to watch a movie sometimes. It's cool, on a 5-hour flight, to spend a couple hours working and a couple hours relaxing. Just be smart about it. Work first, then relax. Earn that viewing of *Baby Driver* on a sweet 5-inch screen by putting in a solid work chunk first.

If You're Not Alone

Maybe you're going on vacation with your lovely partner or a friend or a family member. Repeat after me: "If I can work on the plane, I'll be more present with you and can enjoy our vacation together undistracted."

Don't Forget To Research

I'll share one little bit I learned in the workshop.

Chuck has talked about head authority lots over the years. This is a term for information a character can spout off so that the reader trusts them, in a way. Trusts that this character knows what he's

If you kept your eyes on the news in February, they made it sound like airplanes were basically horizontal test tubes brimming with flu.

talking about.

With the rise of the internet, head authority is difficult to come by. You have to get into a specific topic pretty deep in order to really get head authority going.

Airplanes are a great place to do this. Strike up a conversation with a seatmate. You've got two. You're going to be staring at their tattoos of naked, oddly-posed women. You're already pretty damn intimate.

A good way to start this conversation, tell them something a little humiliating. My go-to, I flew Frontier, and they turned me down for their credit card, which they pitch to the entire plane at some point during the flight. I'd say, "Every flight they pitch this thing, but they turned me down. And now I have to listen to the commercial every time." It's just a little detail that I'm...kind of a fuck-up. It makes people think that they've got nothing to lose by sharing with me. And the natural, human reaction is to hit me back with an even better story.

Give It The Finishing Touch When You're Not In Motion

Writing on a plane or a bus or a train or whatever is, at best, like writing with a TV on in the background. There's just a little bit of distraction no matter what you do.

The best use of your travel time is drafting, editing, and getting stuff on paper, and the best use of your quieter time is putting on the finishing touches.

Be A Kind Traveler

I think the most draining part of travel is that you see the worst of a lot of folks. People are not at their most courteous when they travel. To put it lightly. I'd like to tell you that being a kind person when you travel will get you upgraded, net you rewards, or some shit like that. But it won't.

The point is, if everyone tried to be courteous, it'd be a lot easier.

That's a pipe dream, but that doesn't mean you should act like a jerk.

Pay attention. When you're in line, pay attention to what's going on, when it's your turn, and what you're supposed to be doing.

Take a shower, skip the perfume/cologne.

Try to not yell at people who have no control over what's happening to you.

Get there early enough that small delays don't cause a panic. Whatever that means for you, time-wise, do it.

And just remember, you've got a big advantage. No matter how bad it gets, it's always material for later.

Speculation On The Upcoming Marvel Movies



Marvel has announced six open slots for movies, release dates and titles forthcoming.

Through a combination of logic, knowledge, and getting into the mind of a marketing juggernaut (marketing, like THE Juggernaut, is unstoppable, but also thwarted fairly easily by the Fantastic Four), I've picked some likely candidates.

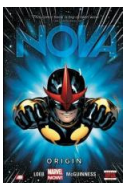
Using my gut, beers that I put inside of my gut, and the works of Chip Zdarsky, I've selected some very unlikely candidates that I want to see anyway.

Obvious Omissions:

It's pretty likely some of these slots will be filled by sequels. The only thing that could stop a *Black Panther 2* would be the American film industry developing a sudden allergy to money. And even then, they'd probably freebase Claritin and make it work.

I also mostly stayed away from anything that is currently or recently on TV (*Inhumans*, *Runaways*, *Jessica Jones*) and most of the stuff that's been a movie and/or show before (*Daredevil*, *Punisher*, *Elektra*, *Blade*).

The problem is, talking about sequels, remakes, and the move from TV to movie just isn't as interesting as talking about possibilities. Plus, it's more fun to talk about the possibilities than it is to be right.



Nova

Nova comics have been an uneven ride, but there's definite potential in the movies. Mostly, the potential to take a character who is basically a space cop and do it right. Clean up after DC's Green Lantern mess.

Likelihood: With one of the Infinity Stones left with Nova Corps at the end of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1*, there's a pretty natural entry for Nova to show up in *Infinity War* and then get his own starring role. I'd give it a 3 gems out of 5 chance.



Moon Knight

This one slim volume of *Moon Knight* by Warren Ellis is the closest thing Marvel's ever had to a kickass Batman book. If you like Batman doing a little detective stuff, a little smashing down doors, and a whole lot of kicking of asses, read this book.

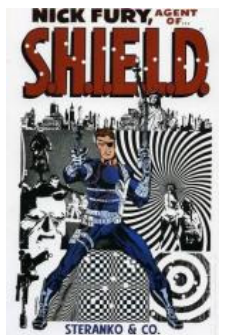
Likelihood: Look, this isn't happening. I only put it on here because I want to tell people to read it. It's one of the most cinematic comics you'll ever pick up.



Ms. Marvel

Marvel movies have a problem where oftentimes the end involves a cosmic threat that is going to annihilate the universe and all life therein, and this usually involves a portal that looks like a weird tornado vagina that leads to space. Ms. Marvel is a bit more of a local hero, a friendly neighborhood shape-changer, if you will. Part of what worked in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* was that a hero was given a task that fit his scope. The world wasn't coming to an end. We just needed this one jerk to stop being a jerk, and that could be accomplished with punching. I think there's room for more of that. Ms. Marvel would fit the bill nicely.

Likelihood: This is happening. It's almost cheating to even put it on here.



Nick Fury

I'd love to see Samuel L. Jackson in a movie that draws from the Jim Steranko, groovy as hell 60's and 70's stuff. Think about it. The coolness of *X-Men First Class*, but add in Samuel L. Jackson, a psychedelic feel, and a sidekick named Dum Dum Dugan.

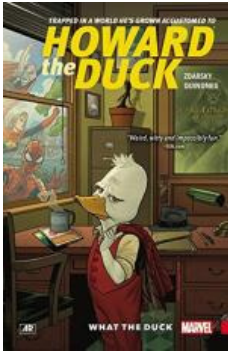
Likelihood: Nick Fury has glued the Marvel U together, and with the Star Wars model of telling smaller side stories, I think this would fit right in.



Black Widow

I'm at a loss here because I think I'm the only person on Earth who despises James Bond bullshit. But everyone else seems to dig it, and I could see this being a pretty good character swap for a James Bond type of story.

Likelihood: The script is being written, but the movie isn't greenlit just yet. The only thing that makes me think this isn't happening is that it hasn't already. But I would say this one is all wrapped up in a silken web. I WOULD say that, but it's corny, and really more of a Spider-Man pun.



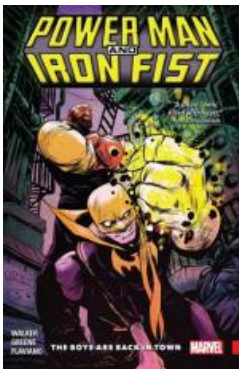
Howard the Duck

My favorite alien, non-human character. I know, we got the movie. And yes, it had a topless duck woman. But the most recent iteration of Howard the Duck is hilarious. For example, he spends a lot of time chasing The Abundant Glove, which has gems in it. They are as follows: Compassion, Laughter, Dance, Respect, and a second Dance gem. He goes undercover in a park by taking his clothes off and waddling around with the other ducks, eating bread.

Likelihood: Here's a pic from *Guardians of the Galaxy* director James Gunn:



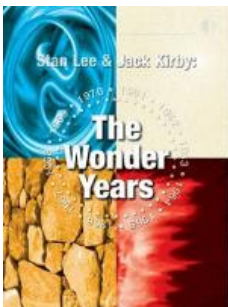
What else is there to say?



Heroes For Hire

C'mon. This is a natural. Luke Cage, Power Man teams up with Iron Fist? It's your classic buddy cop movie with a little bit of superpowered mayhem thrown in for fun. It can't miss. They're one battle van short of a perfect 80's action flick.

Likelihood: The only thing that makes this unlikely is how it would fit in with the already-running shows. But Iron Fist hasn't been killing it, and there's so much two-person team-up potential here that I think it's got to happen.



Stan And Jack

This is a TOTAL departure from the current formula, but I think they could make a great Stan Lee/Jack Kirby biopic. It's been a big story in comics for a long time, and I wouldn't mind seeing something based in the reality side of the Marvel U. Something that handles things in an even-handed but interesting way, and something that reminds the world of the creators behind the beloved characters. Think *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, but adapted for screen and Marvel.

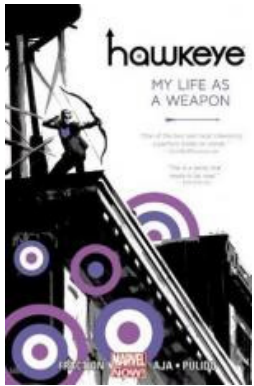
Likelihood: Will it get made? Totally. Will it get made by some indie filmmaker in the next decade as opposed to Marvel? Probably also totally.



War Machine

One of the best Iron Man stories involves Tony being a drunk, and his buddy Jim Rhodes has to take Tony's keys away and pilot the Iron Man suit himself. Or, take the weird sensors away? Whatever you use to start one of those suits, he has to take it while Tony dries out.

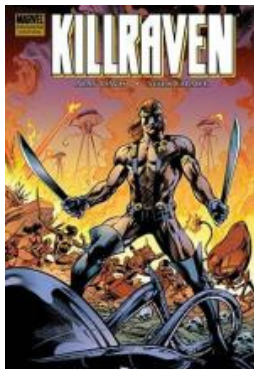
Likelihood: They have set in some seeds regarding Tony's drinking. It's not off the table. And it might be a great direction to take the Iron Man story.



Hawkeye

He got a little more life in Age of Ultron. And he's kind of interesting because he's mostly a regular guy. And Matt Fraction recently did a much-loved run on the book. The material's there, and Renner is a great choice.

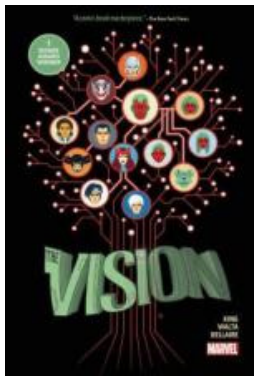
Likelihood: No disrespect to Batroc the Leaper, but I'd give this more cred if there was a single credible villain for Hawkeye to fight. So I guess that comes with total disrespect to Batroc. Sorry, dude.



Killraven

In a post-apocalyptic world, he, uh, does post-apocalyptic stuff. With a sword.

Likelihood: There's almost no way. I think the post-apocalypse narrative has peaked, valley-ed, and then maybe even dug a little more valley for itself by now.



Vision

If you haven't read it, Tom King wrote an awesome miniseries about the Vision and his attempts to live with a created, android family. It's bizarre, sad, and never, ever boring. It could be really creepy at times too, which would add a new dimension to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I can't believe I just capitalized that.

Likelihood: To calculate the likelihood of this, you have to use those scientific notation numbers, and it's like a tiny number to the negative one million. It's dark, it doesn't really fit the overall universe, and I mean this as a compliment: it worked great as a comic, but the material would need an overhaul to be a movie.

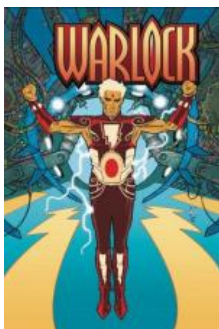


Fantastic Four

After 4 pretty terrible attempts to bring the 4 to the screen, you just know that Marvel is going to want to take a whack at it. Plus, the coming of Galactus? That's a solid story all the way.

As much as FF is an over-beaten, dead horse at this point, one more whack isn't going to do any harm. And damn it, you just want to see someone get it right.

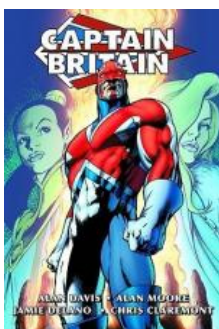
Likelihood: There's a merger going on between Fox and Disney, which means that Fantastic Four could be up for the Marvel treatment. However, the merger may not be complete until 2019, which would be a fairly tight turnaround. That said, this is almost a foregone conclusion. Wait, shit, a FOURgone conclusion.



Adam Warlock

Warlock has always been a very weird character, and if you think Superman flicks have a lot of religious iconography in them, hoo boy!

Likelihood: Warlock was often in possession of the soul gem, so we might see him turn up in *Infinity War*. But in my estimation, Dr. Strange showed us the limits of Marvel's current willingness to go weird, and it wasn't nearly weird enough to bring Warlock on board.



Captain Britain

Why, in a world where I accept Captain America, does Captain Britain seem stupid? And for people in Britain, does Captain America seem stupid? Can some UK readers chime in?

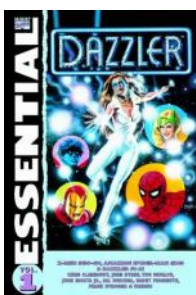
Likelihood: The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. Why NOT have a story that takes place somewhere other than America? It seems like there's a huge concentration of heroes, but very few outside the States (unless those vaguely Eastern European accents on Quicksilver and Scarlet Witch are to be believed).



Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur

After the merciless beating of Moon Boy in the book's first issue (which was super weird because this was otherwise a very kid-friendly book), *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* gave us...pretty much what the title says. A smart, science-y girl and a big red dinosaur.

Likelihood: If you read the book, it's clearly an all-ages title, which usually means it's for kids. Which is why Disney has been in the early stages of developing it as an animated series. Which seems like a good fit for the book.



Dazzler

Dazzler should be a movie. It was ALMOST a movie! It'd be awesome. You could even make it a musical, I would allow that as long as the songs were good. IN FACT, we could get a whole line of Marvel movies that take place in the 70's, and this one could cross over with Nick Fury.

Likelihood: How many small mirrors does it take to cover a disco ball? Imagine you took one of those mirrors, painted a tiny bullseye on it, then gave me a BB gun and told me to nail it, while the ball was spinning and shining in my eyes. I'd put the odds somewhere around there.



She-Hulk

The problem with the Hulk movies is that it's tough for the big green dude to carry a movie on his own. He needs a foil. Plus, if they were going to make a Hulk movie, *Planet Hulk* was the way to go, and they burned most of that material on *Thor: Ragnarok*.

But She-Hulk gives us another dimension. She's not stupid. In fact, she's a lawyer. A tall, green lawyer with super strength.

Likelihood: If there's one thing I know, it's that every writer wants to take a crack at a courtroom scene. Doesn't matter if they're writing *Spongebob*, *Family Matters*, *Orphan Black*—whatever, everyone wants to try their hand at the drama of a courtroom scenario. She-Hulk gives that in spades. 1 in (a Fantastic) Four.



Beta Ray Bill

Did you SEE his brief, inanimate cameo in *Thor: Ragnarok*? Because I did. And it was a moment of pride that came crashing down to reality when I tried to explain to my girlfriend why that was exciting for me. The short version: Because I am a nerd.

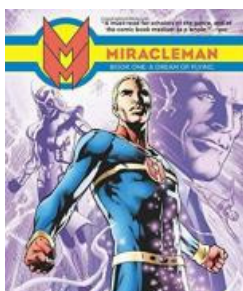
Likelihood: I would've said no, but apparently Bill was supposed to have a small part in *Ragnarok*, and here's what Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige had to say: "He was in it a little bit more and it just didn't do justice. And the feeling is, if you can't do it justice, do it later."



Master of Kung Fu

While Shang-Chi hasn't been a huge player in the comics or movies for a while, I certainly wouldn't mind a martial arts extravaganza.

Likelihood: This could totally work IF they went old school and filmed a non-CG movie with real stunts. *Rumble In The Bronx* made a huge splash, even though the Bronx looked suspiciously like Vancouver. It might be time to see the return of the true-to-life action movie.



Miracleman

If you haven't read this, dig it up. Not a huge title, and I think Marvel was trying to bury it a little for some time, but they did reprint it a few years back, and it's Alan Moore at his Alan Moore-iest.

Likelihood: On one hand, the story is an Alan Moore joint, and a good chunk

of his stuff has gotten the movie treatment (*Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *From Hell*). On the other hand, this one does not fit the humor/action mixture of the current offerings in any way. 6 orange rocks out of the billion that cover Thing's body.



Superior Foes Of Spider-Man

Think *Ocean's 11* except everyone is kinda stupid. And they're the bad guys. I mean, in my humble opinion, the Ocean's guys are totally bad guys. They're charming, but they also steal a bunch of money. Anyway, that's off track. Point being, Foes could make for a great comedy/heist movie.

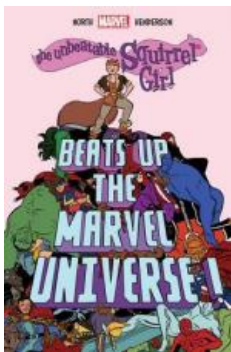
Likelihood: I don't want to talk about the odds of it happening. Just the odds of me being in a seat if this ever hit theaters. Those odds are excellent.



Man-Thing

Here's something I didn't know: Man-Thing came BEFORE Swamp Thing. By only a month or two, but still! It turns out both Marvel and DC were unwilling to sue because they BOTH ripped off a super old character called The Heap. I always thought it was the other way round. Probably because Swamp Thing has some truly classic tales and a movie. A really bad movie that couldn't even be saved for an adolescent me by Adrienne Barbeau.

Likelihood: Unlikelier things have happened. Such as Marvel and DC putting out swamp monster protagonist comics within a couple months of each other.



Unbeatable Squirrel Girl

This is an extremely stupid and funny book. Especially if they went the *Squirrel Girl Beats Up The Marvel Universe* route.

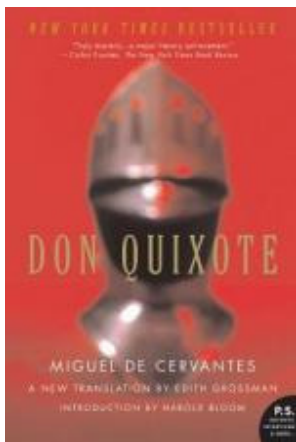
Likelihood: I give it no chance, but I also didn't ever think I'd see, much less enjoy a monthly Squirrel Girl book. So what do I know? See, I saved this one for last because I just blew all my credibility.

If Classic Novels Were More Like Blockbuster Movies



Not too long ago I found out that Bram Stoker's original version of *Dracula* ended in an explosion. Unfortunately, Stoker didn't have the good sense to keep it in the final draft. Instead he went on about some nonsense, probably something about how Arthur was a lord of whatever. Snooze.

It makes a person wonder. What if other books had alternate, more exciting, more explosive sections? What if classic novels worked more like blockbuster movies?



'Don Quixote'

Alonso Quixano finishes dictating his will, and he's left to rest in his room. He breathes, calm, and watches a distant windmill slowly turn.

As he does so, a mysterious figure rides up on horseback. Quixano first mistakes the rider for a child, but as he gets closer Quixano can see the years in the man's face and the cigarette holder in his hand. A curious thing, a cigarette holder that accommodates five cigarettes side by side.

The man dismounts, and he says, "Got a light?" He gestures towards Quixano with the 5 cigarettes.

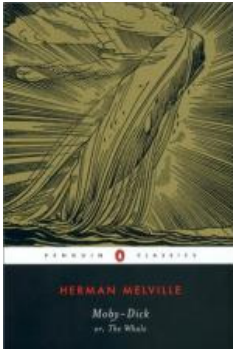
Quixano waves to indicate no.

The man says, "You know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't serious. But...I need you to come back. One more mission, Don Quixote."

Quixano squints. His mind flashes through the many brave deeds and beatings he's suffered over the years.

"Don Quixote," he says. "That's a name I haven't heard for a very, very long time."

'Moby Dick'

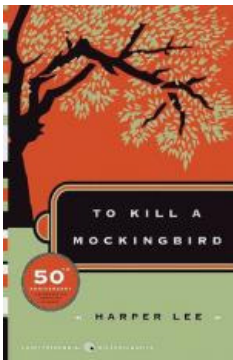


Exhausted and floating on the coffin, Ishmael saw, to his horror, the white whale's great body rise to the surface. He stared at the beast. He stared a long time before he realized it was dead. Dead. But somehow, still moving.

As Ishmael watched the beast's motions, he realized they weren't of the whale, but IN the whale.

A burst of gore rushes from the whale, into the water, and surrounds and warms Ishmael. He could only watch as a smaller whale tore through Moby Dick and swam into the waiting ocean.

Moby Dick wasn't a male whale asserting his dominance. Moby Dick was protecting her young.



'To Kill A Mockingbird'

Boo Radley, once again safe in his home, lifts the head of his Shakespeare bust, revealing a small red button. He presses the button, which turns a bookcase around, revealing an array of crimefighting gear. He replaces a small blade in its spot, a knife sheathed in a leather pouch branded with the outline of a ghost.

"Boo!" he says, as he shuts the bookcase.



'Alice's Adventures In Wonderland'

Alice woke up and realized it was all a dream. But what she didn't realize is that her reckless dreaming forged a connection between their world and ours, a connection the Queen used to bring her armies into the real world, our world. And that's when the beheadings begin.

Alice, now with an eye patch and stubby cigar in her mouth, looks over maps and says, "We're through the looking glass here, people."

Alice WILL return in part two: *Alice Through The Looking Glass: Requiem*.



'The Stranger'

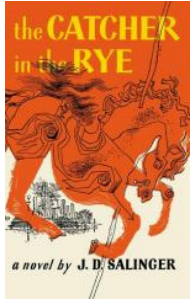
Meursault falls asleep in his cell, but when he wakes he's in a posh hotel room overlooking the square where he's to be executed. He watches out the window as

a man, his perfect double in every way, is led to the guillotine.

We hear the blade slice down and thunk through the man's neck.

Meursault hears the strike of a match, and he turns to see a small, well-appointed man lighting 5 cigarettes, all held in the same cigarette holder.

The man says, "I know that most wouldn't consider your...attitudes to be gifts. But used properly, I think we can find useful sport for your mind without separating it from your body to fill a basket."



'Catcher In The Rye'

As Holden watches Phoebe circle on the carousel, a shot rings out in the distance. Holden looks to find the shooter, and he sees a wild-haired, Nicolas Cage type step out of the grass with a rifle. As Phoebe passes by on the carousel, she's slumped over, red blood leaking onto her white horse.

Cut to Holden in an interrogation room. A man, a John Travolta type, steps in the room.

Holden says, "I already told the other guy everything I know. Some guy folded up a gun into this crummy suitcase and ran off."

The Travolta type, very seriously, sits across from Holden and says, "Do you know why someone wanted to kill your friend?"

Holden, in tears, shakes his head.

Travolta says, "He didn't. He didn't care about your friend. He was gunning for me."

Holden stands and starts pounding his fist on Travolta's chest, calling him a phony. Travolta holds him back, and says, "Listen to me. We can get him. But I'm going to need your face."

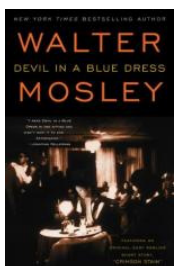


'Lord of the Flies'

Camera pans away from the soldiers and crying children, up to the sky where we find a large airship suspended.

Soldier: "Sir, Project Jaguar Experiment #66592 is complete."

General: "Excellent. Reset the grounds and prepare the next class for splashdown by 0800 tomorrow. And this time do not forget the giant mechanical praying mantis."



'Devil In A Blue Dress'

After the whole Monet thing, I was sitting under the fruit trees in my front yard when a man walked up, sat in the chair across from me. He held a folder. He said, "Are you Ezekiel, 'Easy' Porterhouse Rawlins?"

I nodded.

He said, "War hero? Battle of the Bulge? Then you worked in aviation? Champion Aircraft?"

I leaned forward in my chair.

He said, "I need you to find something for me. I think you might be just the right man for the job."

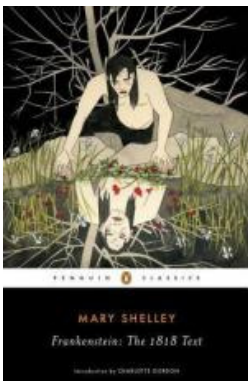
He passed the folder to me, and I opened it to find a picture of the Moon.

I said, "I don't appreciate you wasting my time."

He said, "Please, Mr. Rawlins. I assure you. We are in desperate need of your services."

"Who's 'we?'" I said.

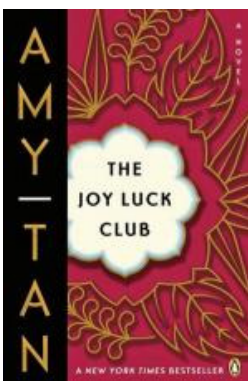
"NASA," the man said.



'Frankenstein'

As the creature drifts away on an ice raft, he's startled by the sudden appearance of a strange, metallic fish in the water nearby. A small door opens at the top of the fish. The creature realizes this is no fish, but in fact, a ship.

A small man, impeccably dressed and smoking 5 cigarettes through one of those multi-cigarette holders, steps on top of the fish and regards the creature. He says, "Seems a waste of your talents to just leave you floating out here, Mr...?"



'The Joy Luck Club'

The mahjong tiles clack against the small table as the mothers draw and discard.

A man enters the room, flanked by two soldiers. The man entering the room has a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. He says, "Ladies, I hate to interrupt, but I have a request from the President of the United States."

The women look up briefly, but their game continues.

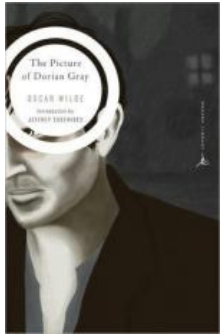
The man holds up his briefcase, snaps his fingers, and one of the soldiers stands to the side and holds the briefcase. The man opens the case using a key on a chain around his neck, and inside is a small screen that begins showing a video.

The man narrates what's happening, saying, "At 1600 hours, the President's daughter was kidnapped by a rogue nation of prisoners from the Staten Island prison colony, which, as you know, was sectioned off from the mainland and made into a land of prisoners, which seemed like a good idea at the time for some

reason and now seems like the worst idea we've ever had. Anyway, their leader, James "Slaughter" Quinn released his demands.

The tape cuts to a shirtless man with a long, flowing royal cape draped over his shoulders. He says, "I will release the child on one condition: You must find a mahjong player who can defeat me. You have 48 hours."

The mothers sit quietly, then resume their game. The man closes his briefcase and licks his lips. He's not looking forward to telling them about the supervirus he'd dosed them with, a virus he will cure for them only if they complete the mission.



'The Picture Of Dorian Gray'

As Gray enters the room with the intention of slashing the portrait, he sees that the image of himself, too, holds a knife. As Gray gets closer, the old man in the portrait reaches out from the painting and steps into our world.

"What say we finish this, once and for all, boy?" The haggard, older Gray says.

"Indeed," Gray says.

They tussle, slashing at each other until both lose their knives. They begin wrestling, crashing each other into antiques stored in the attic. As they fight, the years pass between them. Sometimes the portrait version being old, sometimes the real world version. The years flow back and forth, blow by blow, until they seem to even out, at which point the servants burst into the room with pistols. Both versions of Gray are shouting, "Shoot him!" "No, shoot HIM!"

One servant says to the other, "Do you know what I'm thinking?"

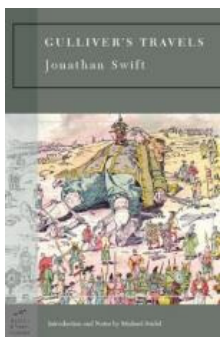
And the second servant says, "Yeah, buddy. Let's do it."

They count to three, and they both fire.

Both Grays fall dead to the floor.

The first servant says, "Huh. I thought for sure this one was the real Dorian," as he nudges the body shot by the second servant.

The second servant says, "Oh, he was. I'm sure of it."



'Gulliver's Travels'

Obsessed with the Houyhnhnm and wanting only to return to a land where the horse is king, Gulliver uses technologies cobbled together from his various travels to construct a gene bomb designed to mutate the horse population, turning them all into hyper-intelligent beings.

As he's about to detonate the bomb, he hears a whipcrack, and a whip wraps around his arm.

Gulliver says, "Who the hell are you?"

"Indiana Jones," the man says.

Gulliver feels this is an odd name, but somehow also knows that it wouldn't be odd a few hundred years in the future.

This "Indiana" pulls Gulliver away from his detonator, and makes short work of tying the much older recluse up and absconding with his device.

Cut to a storehouse. A pair of men hammer the top on a large barrel. Or they hammer the metal hoops on or whatever part you hammer last on a barrel. They count to three and hoist the barrel onto a shelf, next to other barrels. As the camera pulls back, we see the storehouse is vast and filled with barrels.



'Jane Eyre'

"Am I hideous, Jane?", Rochester asks.

"Very, sir: you always were, you know", she answers.

After witnessing the scars inflicted upon Mr. Rochester by Bertha, Jane decides she still loves him. She takes a moment to excuse herself and check herself in the mirror. As she reaches for the towel, she finds a curious knob hidden in the bathroom. She presses the button, and a door slides aside, revealing a laboratory full of large cylinders filled with a green liquid. Jane enters the laboratory and approaches one of the tanks. She sees, inside, a human figure, a face without lips, but that is still unmistakably Bertha.

Tank after tank, she examines and finds a version of Bertha, an imperfect, warped clone in each.

Then she hears the door snap shut, and Rochester is there.

He reaches up and places his palm on the surface of one of the tanks.

"Sadly, their minds are often warped far more than their bodies."

Jane says, "How many have..."

"Many," he says. "There must always be a Mr. Rochester. And always, always, there must be a Mrs. Rochester."

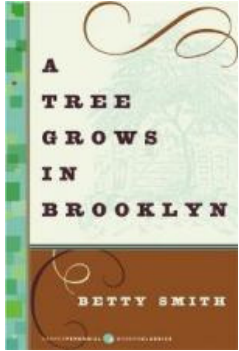


'The Scarlet Letter'

Pearl visits her mother's grave, intent on finally leaving behind the scarlet "A" she wore on her dress for so many years. Pearl fondles the fabric, running her fingertips along the curious metalwork on the underside of the "A" when it hits her. "Of course!"

She clutches the "A" and runs back to her mother's modest home, sprints around to the side of the house and approaches a large stone with an odd etching in it. She places the "A" on the stone, and the ground shakes and moves aside, revealing a set of stairs leading down into the darkness.

"So the stories were true," she says. "Hester's treasure has been here, untouched, all this time!"



'A Tree Grows In Brooklyn'

While Francie looks out her window, probably thinking about pickles or a kid reading a book or some mundane bullshit, she hears the door of her apartment swing open.

A man, a small man, lights a cigarette, then another, and then another until all 5 cigarettes in his holder are lit. He takes a deep drag and says, "Did you really think it would work?"

Francie turns to face the man head-on.

He says, "Did you really think living the most boring, mundane life of all time would keep you safe? That it would undo all the things you did? That the world would just forget who you are, what you can do?"

She begins to speak, telling him a tale of how much a thing used to cost in a store that doesn't exist anymore.

He says, "Don't bother. My ears are completely plugged. Your spells won't lull me to sleep."

Francie looks confused, but then shining silvery claws emerge from the ends of her fingertips, and leathery wings sprout from her back.

The man says, "Most of the world forgot about your atrocities, 'Francie,' but not me. And not my friends."

Out from the shadows creeps an inhuman monster with stitches covering his body. A plain-looking man with a bored look on his face. And a man in full knight's armor, brandishing what appears to be some sort of electric sword.

The small man says, "I can't hear you. So I'm going to assume that you're telling me you want to do this the hard way."

A Very Personal Chuck Palahniuk Retrospective

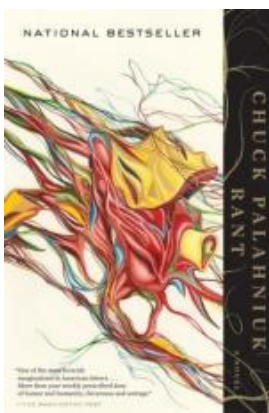


This is a retrospective, a going-through of Chuck Palahniuk's work. Because his new book comes out this week.

I'm not going to talk plots or reviews so much as I'll tell some personal stories.

If you're looking for a plot summary, just buy the damn books and read them already. If you're looking for reviews, there's lots out there for you.

If you're looking to hear how an author has shaped a person's life, read on.



Rant

If you read Chuck Palahniuk's *Rant*, then I don't have to explain where I got the idea to glue a ceramic coffee mug on top of my car, just above the driver's side door. And even if you didn't read the book, I don't have to explain to you what's funny about a car with a coffee mug stuck on the roof.

The only part I have to explain is the part that I can't explain.

I'm at a stoplight, mug glued to the roof, and the guy in the car behind me opens his door and gets out, starts walking towards my car. He's definitely going to grab the mug off the roof, definitely going to find out it's glued on. And the part that I can't explain, the guy walking towards my car, it's 100%, no doubt my elementary school gym teacher. I haven't seen him since fifth grade, but there he is, instantly recognizable, probably closer than he appears in the side mirror.

My gym teacher gets pretty close to my back bumper, and I let off the brake and

coast up into the crosswalk, nose into the intersection.

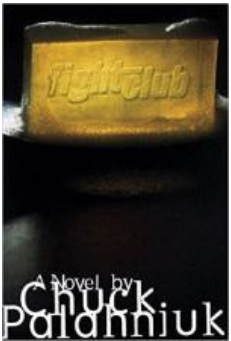
There are two last things in the world I want right now. The last thing I want in the world is to have this guy figure out it's a fake, and the other, also last thing, I don't want to talk to my elementary school gym teacher again.

The light changes, I stand on the gas, and my gym teacher cups his hands around his mouth and yells something.

My drive to work is shorter than a Mars Volta song. Not shorter than the radio edit, but shorter than the ones where they're really jerking off for a while. And in that time, 4 different people try to "rescue" me. Got out of their cars, honked, yelled and made hand motions next to me at lights. I smiled and thumbs-upped them, and I couldn't wait to drive off.

I tore the mug off my car that same night. The mug pulled a ring of paint off with it, which wasn't a big deal because the car was a total shit box.

I wasn't the idiot who read a book and started a fight club or burned my hand with lye (a friend I had did that. It was really stupid). But I did try out a stupid prank from a Chuck book.



Fight Club

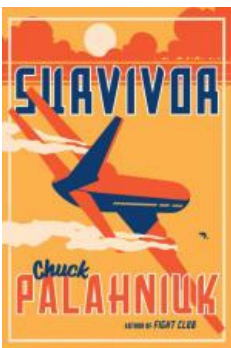
It was my first Chuck experience. Of course.

Me and a buddy snuck into the movie. I wasn't quite old enough to get into it yet, which is the perfect age to see most movies.

I remember two things.

I remember the ending. The very, very last moments. The movie stops, the music kicks, and I'm thinking, "What the fuck just happened?"

The second thing, I remember seeing in the opening credits that it was based on a book. But by the movie's end, all I could remember from the name was "Chuck Pa... gjbraejkr."

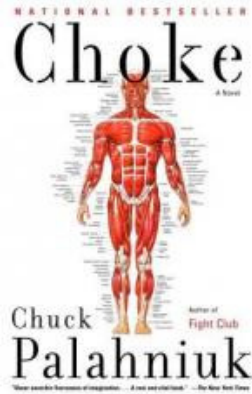


Survivor

I read *Fight Club* and then *Survivor* while I worked at a phone center. Not an evil one. We picked up items to benefit folks with Cerebral Palsy. We sat in front of computers that brought up green text over black screens, and an autodialer that connected us to the people in different local-ish zip codes. 80631, 80620, it didn't matter, the spiel was the same every time. After working there maybe a week, I could say it without reading it off the screen. A month and I could do crosswords while I said, "Hi, this is Peter from Cerebral Palsy, we'll be in the area on..." A year in, I could spit it all out and read books at the same time.

The only thing that tripped me up was every few days someone on the other end of

the phone asked what Cerebral Palsy was. I had no fucking idea.



Choke

In college I injured a hip. If you've ever hurt your hip, you know it's a tough thing to ice. The only way that worked for me was to buy a couple bags of ice on the way home from work, dump them in the tub, fill the tub with cold water, and get in.

The hardest part of an ice bath is the part where you get in. If you can get in, sit down all the way, you can make it. If you can commit to that much, you'll make it.

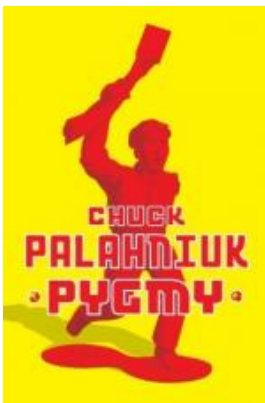
To get me in the ice, I brought home *Choke* on CD audiobook. And the only time I let myself listen was in the ice bath.

Chuck Palahniuk read the book himself. I loved hearing the book how it went in his head. I learned some shit. And I healed.



Tell-All

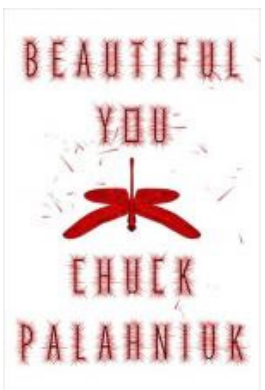
The thing I really loved about this book, it was the one that felt like a book he wanted to write. That he was like, "Fuck it. I know people want another *Fight Club*. But I want a book about old-school Hollywood gossip." I always like work where the creator is doing something they enjoy. I respect that on a deep, deep level.



Pygmy

This is the only book of broken, made-up English that I've ever finished. I could never get into *Trainspotting*. *Everything Is Illuminated?* Gag me.

Everything Is Illuminated was a cheat, this guy who speaks in a broken, odd English, but the English he uses is MORE complex and complicated than the average speaker. He's invented a new English that seems impossible without first understanding the nuanced rules of "proper" English. It only works if you don't think about it much. It's a little bit adorable in a way I don't appreciate.



Beautiful You

Good god with the reception of this book. This is satire on a level of not only plot, but the actual syntax and style is satire too. Argue with me all day. Argue in the comments, I'll respond to you.

I went to a reading when Chuck toured for *Beautiful You*. The reading went down in a big church. We sat in honest-to-God wooden pews, Bibles in the slots and everything.

We all got inflatable beach balls with an insert for a glow stick. And between stories, the lights went out, and the balls were tossed in the air and bounced around. All these people were laughing and shouting.

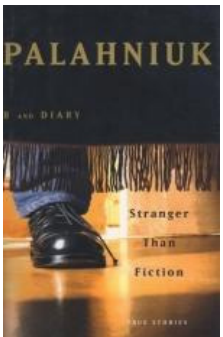
I've been to dozens of readings in my lifetime, and I've never had more fun than at one of Chuck's. Even if you're not a fan, go to one. It's fun. It's an event. It's like a demolition derby. You don't have to be a fan of motorsports to enjoy watching cars smash into each other. Only problem is, you're spoiled for just about any other reading. You'll watch some guy read out loud at a podium and be wondering when all the fun starts.



Haunted

"Guts" came out in *Playboy* before it came out in *Haunted*. I tried to convince my girlfriend to buy it from Borders for me. I was embarrassed. Some because it was a *Playboy*, but way more because the cover models were female wrestlers. It was a weird stage in life where being cool and mature was important and didn't accommodate for nude lady wrestlers.

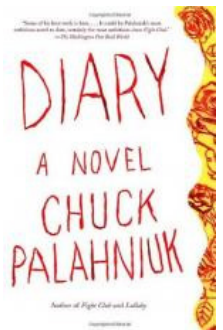
I can thank Chuck for motivating my first pornography purchase. And, honest to god, cliché as it is, I bought that *Playboy* for the articles.



Stranger Than Fiction

Chuck really does a great job with non-fiction. Lots of his fiction applies a non-fiction form, so it shouldn't be a surprise. The surprise, really, is that he doesn't do it more often.

I did find [this article he did in 2010](#), another great dip into non-fiction. This is KonMari, but 5 years earlier and suited to those of us who don't really feel that sweaters spark joy.



Diary

You know how you date someone and a song or an album gets tied to the relationship? And it's not really yours anymore? That's kind of what happened with *Diary*. Except I barely knew the girl and she wasn't my girlfriend.

I had this buddy. And he had this girlfriend. She was...I'll say wacky. That makes it sound fun.

There were things about her that were fun. She liked to go on short trips for no particular reason. She would ring up stuff at her big box hobby store job super cheap for you if you were nice.

She lived in Texas. So my friend, he asked me if I wanted to road trip with him out to Texas to see her.

"When?" I said.

"Tomorrow."

We did. I drove stick for the first time since Driver's Ed, from just south of Denver to Amarillo, through the night. My friend slept the whole time.

I don't remember much of the trip. I remember figuring out, about 10 miles from the house, that my friend didn't tell his girlfriend we were coming. He wanted to surprise her. I remember thinking my friend was an idiot. I remember a pretty good chicken fried steak. I remember it turned out the girlfriend was seeing someone else, a real Texas boy who took us all to some kind of outdoor hoedown.

I remember that *Diary* was this girlfriend's favorite book. And somehow that part sticks in my mind.

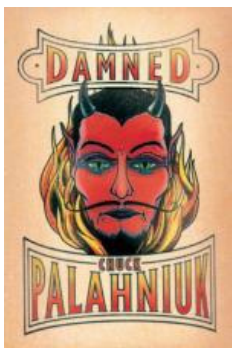
It's hard to explain, but the way a smell becomes the memory trigger of a person, or a certain food, that book always reminds me of her just a little bit.



Invisible Monsters

I'm still freaked the fuck out about riding with the car window part way down. It's all or nothing for me. That's it.

Some books change the way you think, some change the way you live, and some give you a horrific image that you're reminded of every spring.



Damned

Powell's in Portland was everything I wanted from a bookstore. Tons of shit, a whole big section of zines, and a big, honking section of indie presses, bizarro, just generally weird shit.

I was an English major in college. I read all the stuff you're supposed to read and didn't have fun with much of it. At Powell's I picked up *The Menstruating Mall*. I'd never read anything like it before. I didn't know books could be like this. This...fun.

The section is shrunk down in Powell's now. The zines mostly gone, relegated to a spinner rack thingie. It's a sad state of affairs. I won't say that it's because the store is cleaned up now and that they have no room for this stuff. I won't say that because I still love that store.

Damned brought back a lot of those bizarro feelings. It wasn't fully a bizarro book, but it flirted with bizarro. Maybe some over the clothes groping with bizarro.

It made me think the spirit of the bizarre was still on those shelves. That it had infected its way into books that weren't relegated to that one spot. I just had to work harder to find them.



Doomed

I read *Doomed* on vacation in Portland. During that vacation, I may have visited the Portland Memorial Mausoleum, the real-life place that inspired scenes in *Survivor*.

I say “may have” because it’s privately owned now, so you can’t just waltz in. But IF I visited it, I WOULD HAVE done it like this:

I looked up someone who could be related to me using Find a Grave, finding someone who came from my part of the country, someone who could’ve been a relative. I memorized a story, how I was in the area and my mother asked me to visit the grave. All that work was for nothing, though. All the story I needed was a nice pair of slacks and some flowers I picked up a stop early on the bus. Nobody even asked. I signed a paper and the woman buzzed me in, not so much as a question.



It’s pretty incredible. If you like graveyards, or maybe I should say if you think graveyards are worth visiting, this place is graveyard times a billion. The carpets are deep and thick. The colors are wild. Pink and avocado. Each floor has its own feel.

I would never encourage anyone to visit such a place under false pretenses. That would be dishonest. I’ll just remind people that if they were up for a little dishonesty, and if they wanted to make a totally worthwhile literary pilgrimage, they can probably do it, but they should do it in a way that doesn't ruin it for everyone. Treat it like a national park. Be prepared and deeply respectful. Don't even take a dump there unless you plan to pack it out in a bag.



Make Something Up

I read "Phoenix" on my phone in some chain restaurant outside an Ikea.

I was buying a couch. An upgrade from the huge sectional that I got from my old high school principal (long story, lots of coincidence, let's not worry about that).

I picked out the couch with my new girlfriend. The one I’m dating still. It was our first date. It wasn’t a glamorous date, couch shopping at Ikea, but it was the first time we went out in the world together and did a thing.

We looked at couches, and we looked at other things. Including a fake fur, a small rug we joked about getting for my office at work. To make it more “home-y.”

My girlfriend got the little rug for me to take to work. But it backfired. I never took it to work. Instead, I draped it across the back of the couch. We moved in together, and as much as my girlfriend hated the rug, it became her cat’s favorite thing in the world.

Our cat died this year.

The thing about a cat is, when they're gone, they're gone. It feels like they were never there. Like maybe cats don't have such a big impact on the world. We decided to fix that. Just a little.

The cat left litter everywhere. In the couch from Ikea, in her white blanket, everywhere. She couldn't track litter around anymore. But we picked up the slack.

We filled out coat pockets with kitty litter, and we rode the train to Ikea. We looked for my couch, my bed, and the huge yellow cage of white furry rugs. All the things she loved, and we spread a little kitty litter. In the cracks in the couch, under the bed just like the one from home, the one she hid under when our old neighbors played norteño music so loud it vibrated the walls. All the things she loved. In the fake Ikea sinks too. She loved sinks.

The litter was clean. Don't worry. And if you bought something from Ikea in Portland and found a small white pebble in it, I'm not sorry, but that's what it was.

This one doesn't sound like it has much to do with Chuck, but it does. He's been around, one way or another, most of my adult life. Lots of the milestones. Even the ones that you don't know are milestones at the time, picking up an Ikea couch you picked out with your future girlfriend, who would buy a white fur rug, which your future cat would love.

Oh, and our cat's name was Sicily.



Snuff

I started dumpster diving in elementary school. A friend of mine lived in an apartment, and we'd climb the bins, jump inside and look around for treasure. Treasure was usually porno magazines, but sometimes it was a weird gaming console or one of those crystal balls with the purple lightning inside, or a giant stuffed gorilla from a carnival, which I pulled out of the dumpster, and it was only once I got him out that I figured out he was soaked with trash sludge water.

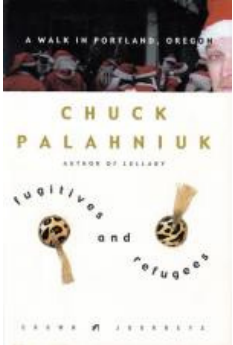
The dumpster habit doesn't break easy. The college near my house, they rolled up big ass dumpsters at the end of the school year. Rich kids dumped a whole dorm room worth of shit in there, bought new the next year. Lamps, a desk, most of my furniture came from there. And probably the worst thing I ever had to admit came from the bottom of a dumpster, a George Foreman grill. I cleaned it, but still.

The bookshelf in my first apartment was a dumpster treasure too. I saw it when I was out jogging, and I came back with a friend who helped me cram it into my Grand Am. We had to roll down the window, lay it diagonally across the inside, and then I had to lay on top of the shelf, squeezed between its metal bars and the inside roof of the car. My friend drove, the seat scooted so far up his foot caught under the brake pedal.

I had that shelf for years, until I classed up my apartment with a shelf that was very

chic, combining organic and industrial aesthetics (bricks and boards, if we're being exact).

One of my favorites on the shelf, *Snuff*, the slim fleshy book with the tour bookmark from a Chuck reading, one with a string of blue anal beads dangling off it. That would look out of place on a lot of bookshelves, but on a 4-tier, multicolor shelf meant to sell different disgusting flavors of Pucker, it fit right in.



Fugitives and Refugees

After I got my wisdom teeth out, a buddy picked me up, drove me to Walgreens to get my pills. While we waited in the car, I looked through the bag of shit they gave me at the oral surgeon's office. Gauze, papers, and a plastic condiment cup with my two wisdom teeth inside.

I held them up to look at them. They were gnarly. Deep, twisty roots, dark yellow. They didn't look like human teeth. I didn't remember asking for them, but I was glad to have them.

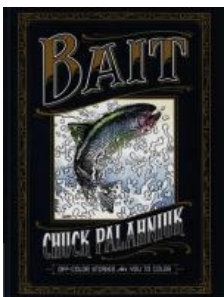
I kept them around for awhile. Didn't really know what to do with them, but also didn't want to get rid of them.

I'd swallowed almost all of my baby teeth. The ones I gave to the tooth fairy, my mom trashed them. If my life went mostly good, these would be the only teeth I grew and held outside my mouth.

In *Fugitives and Refugees*, Chuck Palahniuk takes his tonsils, floating in a jar, and he makes a wish that he'll be a writer, and he throws the jar off his back porch, into the trees. It seems like a very crazy and romantic thing to do, but I can't argue with the results.

I took my teeth out with me in a blizzard, ran to the top of this big hill near my apartment. I made the same wish, and I threw my teeth as far as I could. They were lost in the snow.

As far as the effectiveness of teeth versus tonsils, we'll have to wait and see.

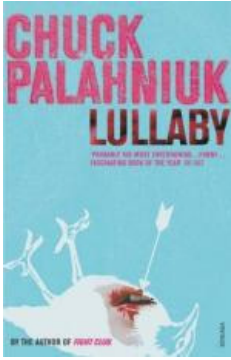


Bait

I heard an interview with Chuck where he talked about adult coloring books saving the publishing industry for a time. Because they are good gifts, and because there's no secondary or electronic market. You'll notice Bait and Legacy aren't on the Kindle store.

He also talked about liking the idea of no two copies ending up the same. That once they were filled in, each copy of the book was totally different.

I wasn't sure if I would ever color mine in. Until I heard that interview and started in, colored a single red crab on the inside cover.



Lullaby

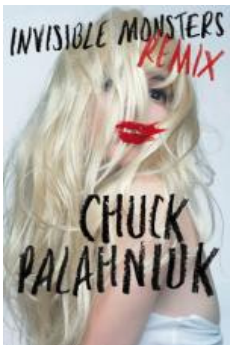
While we walked, I told a friend about a story I was working on. After I went to a comic convention and saw a *Giant-Size X-Men #1*, I thought it would be a great idea to get one, then go around and destroy as many other copies as I could, making mine more valuable. I didn't have the guts to do it for real, but I thought it would make a good short story.

My friend said, "So the story is about this person going on a road trip to destroy copies of a comic book?"

And I said, "Yeah!"

And he said, "So it's *Lullaby*?"

And I said, "...Shit!"



Invisible Monsters Remix

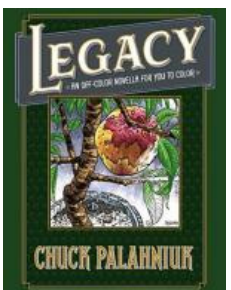
I have some obsessive qualities. Probably not a surprise if you've gotten this far in the article. I used to have problems. Rituals, numbers, all that crap. Not so much anymore.

Now and then something comes up that puts me back in that life.

Invisible Monsters Remix, it's closer to Chuck's original vision for *Invisible Monsters*. Things are out of order. Imagine almost a Choose Your Own Adventure. About a lady with half a face.

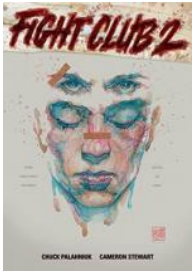
I flipped through it in Barnes and Noble, and I knew the only way I could read this book was to go through, marking off each section as I went. That would be the only way to know I'd read everything, that I'd really completed the book. I might even have to map it out, figuring any branching paths to see where material was left behind.

Plan concocted, I put it back on the shelf. It was the right choice. I'm sure most recovering drunks can step into a bar eventually and be alright. But it wasn't my time just yet.



Legacy

There's something appealing to the nerd superfan of imagining a work like this as a collaboration with the man himself. Yes, I know that it's not like I'm giving him editorial notes. Yes, I know it's not like he'll ever know. Yes, I know it's a little pathetic. But that's what fandom is about. Being a little pathetic in the face of something you enjoy.



Fight Club 2

I can think of 4 times creators wrote themselves into comics that I've read.

John Byrne wrote himself into "The Trial of Galactus." This one didn't work because everyone in the comics is like, "Oh, hey! My good buddy John!" It was a little self-aggrandizing.

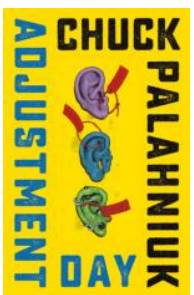
Grant Morrison wrote himself into *Animal Man*. He told a little story about his cat dying. He said he'd been sad, but also excited about the prospect of using the story in *Animal Man* somehow. Which ultimately didn't sit right with Morrison. He writes himself into the comic to sort of explain all this, and it kind of works.

Chip Zdarsky did it in his recent *Howard the Duck* run. But only sort of, and he makes himself a big fool. Plus, this results in two versions of Biggs The Cat (Biggs Prime and Biggs, pictured left to right), so it's a home run as far as I'm concerned.



Chuck Palahniuk did it in *Fight Club 2*. And I think it works.

There are things about the writer writing himself into comics I don't love. But in some ways, it's a great version of stepping up and stepping out, speaking a truth that's a little too real for narrative fiction. People who interview Chuck always ask him questions about *Fight Club*. Which always reveal they haven't read *Fight Club 2*.



Adjustment Day

Adjustment Day comes out tomorrow. I'll buy a copy tomorrow. Because that's what you do. If you love a director or an author or a musician, you buy their stuff the day it comes out.

It's hard to know what I'll say about this book in the future. Right now I'm long-distance-ing it with my girlfriend. I'm about to start my 14th year at the same job. I just finished a 3-month workshop with Chuck and Lidia Yuknavitch, and to do that I flew back and forth from Denver to Portland every week.

I read the first page of *Adjustment Day*. A galley someone got their hands on and brought to class. I couldn't tell you much about it from that one page, but I'm looking forward to it. Are you surprised?

And I'm looking forward to another couple decades of stories. The ones that happen inside the pages and out.

13 Solid Pieces Of Advice From LitReactor's Writers Workshop



One of the great, unsung aspects of any writers' workshop is what you learn from reading the critiques of someone else's story.

You get to see the entire process, from story to critique, and you get to exist outside of that process. You can have an emotional detachment that's hard to come by when it's your own work.

If you start to listen to critique, really listen, you'll always catch things that help you with your own writing. You might even catch more from the critique of someone else's story than you do from critique of your own.

The downside here is that this listening/watching process isn't easy to replicate on your own if you don't have a solid writing group. Which is why I wanted to take a moment and share some advice from LitReactor's Writers Workshop.

What goes down in The Workshop is basically a perpetual, asynchronous writing group. Someone submits a story, others read it and critique. And, more importantly, you see everyone's critiques of every other story. Which means you've got an incredible opportunity to learn. You can follow your favorite reviewers, see what they've said to others. You can find stories that have problems similar to ones you're having in your WIP.

I don't expect my explaining to convince you. Let's take a look at some of the best pieces of criticism from other users like you.

1. Kedzie on “This Is Normal” and Willingness to Change

If you want to keep your start point where it is, that's fine. But find a way to make the prose less confusing. You don't want any potential for confusion in the first paragraph. I realize the paragraph is not confusing to you. I had a line of dialogue in one of my stories that some readers mentioned stumbling over. To me, and to the readers who did not stumble, the line could not have been more clear. Still, I changed it.

One of Flannery O'Connor's strengths as a writer was her strength as a student, which came with a willingness to change. When she got feedback that something needed to change, she took it more often than not.

Like Kedzie says, sometimes a line, an idea, a piece of dialogue works great in your head, seems flawless on the page, and you don't want to get rid of it. But if you're writing for anyone other than yourself, listen for the opportunities to change for the better. It takes a big person to toss out something they like, but writing is an act of humility.

2. NicoBell on “In Camera” and Unsympathetic Characters

I think it's perfectly possible to have an unsympathetic protagonist, but I do think the reader still needs to have some sort of connection to her. She needs to have some sort of arc, even if in the end, she doesn't change to become a better person. It's like that movie Young Adult. She starts off awful, some stuff happens and she learns what life could be like if she changes, and then she doesn't. We, as viewers, don't like her, but we understand her decision.

Yes, yes, and yes. Some characters are unsympathetic, but some characters are just baffling. It's completely okay, and encouraged by me in a big way, to have unlikable, fuck-up characters. And it's okay if they don't go through a big change. But I do need to at least understand why, for them, their choices seem right.

3. mark william mills on "Arnold's First Real Job" and Putting Inner Thoughts on the Page

One point on depicting a character's thoughts: Like you, I also italicize those passages. But the design of your document needs to be clear to the reader, so structurally you should address this. I'd advise keeping all of those moments contained within their own, single paragraphs. You may even want to change the spacing to 1.5. Memories and all else that happens upstairs usually comes as a wash and is rarely as narrative as speech. Go ahead and drop some of the punctuation too. Let the sentences drift into each other. Faulkner is a great resource for learning how to do that well.

Not only a reference pointing someone towards a good example, but suggestions that encompass formatting and style to create different textures between thoughts and actions.

4. Rose Kimura on "The Agents of Mass Distraction" and At-Stakeness

I found myself wondering about Malarkey and Thompson's motives and personalities. I had a great visual of them, but I was not sure why they are doing this job, what they want from it, and how their values are in conflict with those of Brattigan. It seemed that things mostly happened to them and the two guys were trying to survive, but I have a feeling like this may have been meant about being something more—like personal power and growth, or bringing justice and fighting evil...Whatever that drive is, how can we understand it better from the plot?

A critique many of us hear at some point is that the characters lack agency, and it's tricky to give agency to a character who may be in a situation that's out of control. But at-stakeness is one angle to work. What's at stake? Why are these characters doing what they're doing, why now, and what's the plan in their heads? Demonstrating clear stakes is a great way to give the characters agency without ceding control to them.

5. walterstc on "Lena's Ghost" and dialog

I do not think it is bad to reveal exposition through dialogue, sometimes it is the only way, but I think if every piece of information is revealed through dialogue then it takes away a lot of the fun of reading. Readers love to figure out what is happening in a story, to get wrapped up in the characters and situations and interject our own thoughts on just what it is that might be happening... Let the characters talk and let the readers guess a little as to what is going on.

One opinion on dialog, which is different from the typical opinion. This is one huge advantage to workshopping a piece, you get some different perspectives on a single issue. walterstc does a great job explaining the deflating feel of having things laid out just a little too directly.

6. J.L. With a Differing Opinion on Dialogue in "Lena's Ghost"

The dialogue was generally written well. In particular, I liked your use of gesture and facial expression to convey the emotions and unconscious non-verbal reactions of the characters. However, certain lines were highly expository, giving them a sense of being contrived. Some of these details are things that Lena and her mother would not need to say to one another because they are so intimately familiar with these events. Particularly in the beginning, there were several lines that were clearly being used to convey information. Perhaps this information could have been included as expository narration outside of the dialogue or as part of a flashback or memory that Lena has? The writing outside of the dialogue was very clear, clean, and direct.

This is closer to my personal opinion, that exposition shouldn't come through dialog, and it does a great job of unpacking that idea, saying that characters wouldn't talk about certain things with which they're both already intimately familiar. It's not just "Don't do it!" It's an explanation of how it breaks the reality for this reader.

7. Hugh Dufour on "Ghost Story" and the Power of Objects in a Story

I'd also work a bit on the object under the wiper: feels like you would get more out of a weirder object, and something that ties in more evocatively with the rest of the story would definitively create more tension.

Objects can carry a lot of weight in a story. You'll have to read more of this story to find out the specifics, but this piece of advice is a good one to apply to everything you write. What are the objects in your story, what are they doing, and can you wring more life from them? Can the objects stand for more? If you're going to put an object on the paper, why not craft it as one that can pull a little more weight? It's a great, great reminder for all of us, objects can be more than just stuff.

8. Steph Austin on "Stems" and Increasing Tension in a Scene

I think your characters could benefit from some attention. Again, why are these particular people in this particular place? Why is it Janine? How does she add tension? Is she essential? This could play out in dialogue. There's a discussion about how many tables are left, which didn't feel super interesting for the moment, not when we're about to see a guy cut open his hand. How many tables are left is straight forward dialogue. How many tables are left when, say, Janine is his ex-girlfriend and the dishwasher is her new boyfriend is super tense. (Obviously, that's just an example of how to increase conflict. Maybe the dishwasher is an ex-boyfriend. Maybe Janine is a federal agent, haha, just kidding, but so on and so forth.

Each scene should do something. That's broad advice, but what I mean is, and what this critique asks, is whether everything in a scene is essential because it advances the narrative, advances the conflict, or raises the tension. Can something extraneous be filled in or altered so there's nothing extra in your story?

9. Nathan Scalia on "Getting Back To You" and Putting Down Roots

I think the best way to clean this up involves adding a bit of imagery, like you had in the first paragraph. You talk about the hot, steaming bathroom contrasting with the cold porcelain, which is neat. From that point on, you sort of abandon all interesting descriptors, and focus entirely on this stream of consciousness, which is where things get confusing. I think you could grow some roots and keep the reader on the ground by sprinkling a lot more of that imagery throughout. What do these people look like? What about the bathroom (haven't we all spent at least one, terrible extended occasion in the bathroom so vivid that we could describe that bathroom in horrific detail)?

At some point, lots of writers will write something that ends up very image-heavy. It's a constant balance, but sometimes we'll tip into a world of all language, stuff that's lacking a concreteness, a grounding in reality that will make it easier to understand and a more pleasurable experience for the reader. Nathan provides some very specific examples of places where the writer is already grounding the story well. It's just a matter of spreading it out.

10. chris_diplacito on "The Reverend's Exaggerated

Casualness as He Settles in His Chair” and Giving Good Compliments

You have a great use of tone. There is an ominous blanket of fear that hangs over the entire story. There is no gore or outright horror (ok maybe the cat) but I was some paragraphs in when I suddenly realised I had a sense of dread growing within me. It is a talent to be able to evoke this in a reader.

It's not all "you suck!" in the workshop. Not by a long stretch. There are lots of props, and they're often well-earned. Readers in The Workshop really have a knack for picking up on the issues, but they're also great at giving a story its due.

11. curiousgcc on “Ed and Pene” and Finding the Story in the Story

I sense overall this is a pretty fresh draft and have noted several places in the attached LBL where you could zoom in possibly and create a level of depth in the story, either by cutting away some of the more mundane moments and focusing on the more interesting ones (like the couple hiding out in the pickup while the rest of the guests celebrate the wedding. An interesting scene in itself may be worthy of an entire story).

Sometimes you finish a story and it turns out you wrote the wrong story. Sometimes a side piece is a little more interesting, has people engaged and asking questions. Workshops are great for uncovering those moments that you miss in your own work. Maybe you wrote a story about somebody, but maybe the story you should've been writing was happening in a pickup off to the side.

12. Hue M Flex on "Imaginary Friend" and LBL's

There were a few places where I thought things should be deleted or moved around and they are identified in the LBL.

Okay, okay. Not a mind-blowing piece of advice. Just a reminder, one of the great things is you, as a lurker, can also see the LBL (line-by-line) critiques readers make on stories. Some of the reviewers in the workshop do incredible, detailed LBL's. This is the kind of close reading you don't get everywhere.

13. Hugh Dufour on "Bruno" and Touch

The physical scenes are hot and never icky—but they sometimes veer into the abstract and the overly philosophical. I noted some lines that could be cut or rewritten, making it more specific, more tangible.

Anything sexy, sensual, or touch-based can be really tough to write alone. These things can be tough to workshop too. It takes a lot of guts to put out something meant to be sexy, wondering whether it'll work and you'll be Britney Spears dancing with a snake or if it'll flop and you'll be Miley Cyrus twerking on Alan Thicke's son. Reading critiques of the sexy bits other people put into their work is a great way to get some pointers.

Look, it's part of my gig here at LitReactor to talk about The Community, The Workshop, The Classes, The Craft Essays, and all the perks that come from getting a little more involved.

Here's my advice to you: Maybe you aren't ready to submit a story, and maybe you're not ready to give feedback. That's fine. But do yourself a favor and start looking at the submissions and the feedback they're getting. I've been in a number of creative writing classes in college, and this is much, much better. You'll only have to read a couple pieces of feedback to figure that out for yourself.

Take advantage of The Workshop. Use it not just to review and submit, but to see what other people are writing and what readers are saying about it. Apply that stuff to your own work and you'll be way ahead of the game.

Oh, and as a final note, seek out some of the readers quoted above in The Workshop and in The Community, and thanks to them for their great advice. You all truly power things around here.

Make Your Characters More Interesting With Lies



When's the last time one of your characters told a lie? A small one or a big one, doesn't matter.

Lies are an under-used facet of real-life interaction that don't get enough play in fiction. Characters telling too much truth too much of the time makes for some very boring, very rote storytelling.

Simple lies, elaborate lies, systematic lies, Santa Claus lies—all ways to push a story and a character into a new, more interesting, more real place.

These are some of my favorite lie types, but by no means are they all of the types. Just something to get you thinking.

The Character Complication Lie

Who's more interesting, Thor or Loki? Of course it's Loki. Because he's not going to do what you think. He's devious and deceptive. He's a liar.

Consider what might happen if your character told a lie. Especially if your character is just a little too perfect, a little too aspirational, a little too...blah.

A lie adds nuance to your character's perfect status. If your character tells a lie, and if that lie makes it harder to love them, you've just set up something more interesting, more dynamic, and more real.

Think about the most complicated relationships in your life. The people who you love, but damn it, they don't make it easy. Think about adding that sort of imperfection to your characters.

The Story Break Lie

When we're stuck in a story and we reach for our writing tools, plot and dialogue are usually the closest to hand.

But there are other ways to break the story, shake things up and get them moving again. One that I'll suggest is a lie.

If you're stuck, ask yourself, What's the worst, most interesting, most world-shattering lie one of these characters could tell right now? What would that do? Where might that take me?

The Sympathetic Lie

Writers are afraid lies will always make a character unsympathetic. Don't believe the hype. Lies, rather than damaging a character, can make them more sympathetic.

Think of Michael Scott from *The Office*. He lies all the time, but the lies are in service of his desperate need to be loved. He wants to be loved so badly that he's willing to go way too far. Yet, when you think about that character, do you think of him as a liar? Would "liar" be in your top 5 adjectives to describe him? No way. Because he's not lying for the sake of lying or to be malicious. He's lying in pursuit of his goal, and because his goal is sympathetic, the lies don't outweigh his goodness.

A lie, rather than damaging your character and hiding their true intentions, can be a way for a character to roll over and expose their soft belly.

The Starter Lie

In Flannery O'Connor's "The River," a little boy tells a lie that sets the entire story on its course. It's a small, realistic moment, a little kid telling a lie, and it serves to give us a quick insight to the kid's age, demeanor, and intelligence.

Starting off on a lie might be starting off on the wrong foot, but there are times when a story needs to be told from the wrong foot, when the "right" way to do something isn't the most compelling, when what's morally right is not what's most interesting.

Think how your stories might be different if you threw yourself off balance once in a while.

The Prophetic Lie

Seinfeld did this a lot. George tells a lie, that he's a marine biologist, and then something happens that forces him to change the world and fulfill the lie as though it were true (like, say, saving a beached whale with a golf ball in its blowhole).

This is a sitcom staple, from *Seinfeld's* golf balls to *The Simpsons* and

Don't believe the hype. Lies, rather than damaging a character, can make them more sympathetic.



their “steamed hams.” It works in drama too. The lie about someone playing the hard man, someone playing rich, someone playing at being something they aren’t and then scrambling to make the lie true in order to save face.

Characters can do some very interesting things when they're desperate.

The Plan Lie

There’s an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* where Larry doesn’t want to go to a party. So what he does is pretend he thought the party was Wednesday when it was really on Tuesday, going so far as to show up to the party house on Wednesday, acting like he's prepared for a big party. He figures that he'll show up, he's off the hook for not coming to the party, and he'll also be able to take off after only being there a short time. Of course it backfires on him.

This type of lie is really appealing. It’s watching a plan come together, and it’s up to you whether the plan holds together or falls apart. Either way, you’ve got a story on your hands.

The Action Replaces Thoughts Lie

Two characters are on a first date. Dater A has a sack of jellybeans, but she picks out the licorice ones because she hates them. She says, “I always swore the perfect person would be someone who eats the licorice jellybeans so I don't have to throw them away.”

At this point, we could go into Dater B’s head. We could write some stuff about how he’s really falling for Dater A, how he’s thinking wedding bells, blah, blah, blah.

Or, Dater B dives in, eating the licorice jellybeans, struggling to put them down while keeping a straight face.

This way, you get to talk about Dater B’s physical sensation. His body rejecting the vile beans. His gagging, his trying to hide his gagging, his remembering when he tried to put down whiskey for the first time. And through all this, we know that Dater B likes Dater A quite a bit, despite Dater B never saying a word about it.

The 8 Keys To A Good Heist Story



This week *Ocean's 8* brings us the first all-female heist film!

...if we ignore 1996's *Set It Off*, which is a pretty good heist movie. It's maybe less a romp than some others, but if we're talking firsts, let's put all the cards on the table.

Regardless, with the opening of *Ocean's 8*, I got to thinking about what makes for a good heist story. What are the needed elements? Which 8 things should you make sure to have? And how can you use those elements to write something original?

1. The Basics

A good heist has a planning stage, execution stage, and an escape. They can be in different proportions, but if your story is missing one of the three, it won't pass muster.

The escape is probably the one most often neglected because it's the hardest to pull off, but it's what separates the smash and grab from the true heist tale. Give your escape a little more time, just 10% more than you think you need. I spent an entire story with these characters, which means I care about what happens to them after the dust settles.

2. Complications

If your heist goes off exactly as planned, without a hitch, it's not much of a story, is it? Apply this thinking to any other type of story. How interesting is the story of a flawlessly-planned wedding that goes exactly as planned? How interested are you in a horror story where a bunch of kids go to a cabin in the woods and get there and they have a pleasant weekend?

Hiccups are what make the heist story come alive in the moment, rather than having it be a constant acting out of the plan as if the plan were stage directions.

Do yourself a favor, don't concentrate your hiccups all in one phase of the story. They should be spread out during the planning, the execution, and the escape. Mixing it up keeps things lively.

3. Putting The Team Together

They say everyone likes to see a plan come together, but better than a table full of blueprints and elevator schematics is seeing people come together.

One tip: Vary the relationships the different players have with each other. Person A shouldn't relate to Person B, C, and D the same way. You know how you have those two friends, both nice people, but they're just oil and water? Do some of that. Characters become more real when they have different relationships with each other.

4. A Reason Beyond Cash

In *The Hunter*, the Richard Stark classic you HAVE to read if you care a lick about heists, our main character goes after the man who screwed him out of a small amount of money. It's almost a joke throughout the book that Parker goes to such lengths, risks infuriating bigtime players in organized crime, just to get back a relative pittance. But that's the thing, it's not really about the money. It's about what the money represents.

A heist can happen purely for cash, but if it happens for something more than cash, the audience will give a shit, and we'll learn something about the characters. For example, Parker, the main dude in *The Hunter*, can be kind of a blank slate, but because he's doing something irrational on principal, we learn a little bit about him. Or, consider Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (not a heist story exactly, but it features a cash-motivated character). His motive starts with cash, but about halfway through the series we start to see there's more going on there, and it's not about the money or the baby or whatever. It's about Walt.

Please, do me a favor and don't go crazy here. When you make the motive "Little Billy needs this money for a heart transplant," you lose me. That's the easiest path to take, it's been done, and it's boring. But when a heist has the added bonus of hurting someone, that's a little more intriguing. When a heist is also about a point of pride, I want to hear more. When someone pulling a heist has something to prove, I want to see whether or not they're right.

5. Something To Root For

Most heists give us a good reason to be on the side of the crooks. When it works, we almost completely forget that what they're doing is wrong. There are some different methods to make this work. You can make the thieves very likable. You can set up a Robin Hood situation. You can make the mark very unlikable, in which case we don't really care WHAT happens to them. A modern twist on this is to set up the theft as a sort of small revenge for larger societal ills.

When you make the motive "Little Billy needs this money for a heart transplant," you lose me.

One way to switch it up, give us a reason to side against the crooks, and that can raise the tension as we watch the hapless victim struggle to stop something in progress. Imagine an Ocean's movie from the victim's perspective, especially if the victim is presented to us as a decent person.

Any way you work it out, even if it comes down to a small thing, if we don't care about the thieves or the mark, we won't care how things pan out.



6. An Element of the Ridiculous

What separates a heist from a straight-up steal? What elevates something from a crime to a caper?

An element of the ridiculous.

In the first *Mission Impossible* movie, Ethan Hunt is suspended above a floor he can't touch, and he catches that drop of sweat. So ridiculous, so memorable. There's a Richard Stark book, *The Outfit*, where thieves put together a getaway car. They go to great lengths to soup up a Volkswagen Beetle. By the time they finish, the thing is a beast, and it's the most unassuming car, the least likely candidate for a getaway car. It's a sight, a Beetle tearing ass, and by the way it pre-dates the original Italian Job and its Minis by a few years.

Whether it's a fake nose on Matt Damon, a souped-up car that has no business being involved in souping, or something else entirely, something good and ridiculous provides a nice anti-anchor in a story type that can default to being a little too grim and gritty.

7. Plausibility

A heist story shares one huge thing with a sci-fi flick: the need for plausibility.

Let's briefly discuss the difference between believability, plausibility, and probability.

Believability means I believe something could happen. That, in my eyes, is the least of the three, and it's not quite enough, but you have to clear the bar of believability to get to plausibility.

Probability is the highest bar. It means I think it's likely. That's not necessarily what I need. No, I don't think it's likely in reality that a group of 8 folks could pull off a multi-million-dollar heist in 2018.

But plausibility, which I'd advise as your goal, lies somewhere between. I don't have to think that there's a good chance. I have to believe there is A chance. That with the right people and the right set of skills, it could happen.

One method of elevating believability is through authority. I believe the robbers in the story. I believe they know what they're talking about and what they're doing.

One pitfall to avoid is over-reliance on technology in bridging the plausibility gap. This is the problem we see in a movie like Hackers, which seemed very high tech at the time and now seems totally ridiculous.

Build to plausibility, but stop short of probability.

8. Willingness to Break The Rules

You need all this stuff to make a heist story, but it's how you break the rules that makes your story unique and interesting.

Don't take this for cheesy, fluffy advice. It's not. It's my advice that you read up, watch everything you can get your hands on, and once you thoroughly understand what a heist is all about, once you've been completely intimidated by the greats, take a crack at it and make it yours.

31 Ways To Remove Phones From Your Fiction



There's this saying about how there's more than one way to skin a cat. It's a pretty weird saying. Why is there enough cat-skinning going on that people get huffy about the multiple ways of doing it? Who is this person who's like, "Hey, just because that's one of the five PRIMARY ways to remove a cat's skin doesn't mean it's the ONLY way"?

In fiction, especially horror and thrillers, a "cat" that often needs "skinning" is the removal of the smartphone from the story. And like skinning that proverbial cat, there's more than one way to do it. In fact, I've got 31 ways for you to take the phone out of play or at least disable it to an extent.

Sprinkled in here I've got some tips to help you concoct your own methods, too.

Let's start with two I don't particularly like:

1. No Service

It's a go-to, but it's increasingly unlikely and just not believable unless you take things a little further (see below).

2. Battery's Dead

Again, it's a little easy.

3. Set Your Story In The Past

Doesn't have to be the distant past. Don't feel like you have to go crazy and put it in 1974. Just 2002

or so when having a phone meant you were probably a doctor or a drug dealer. You can also go just slightly into the past if you can have phones but not smartphones (the first iPhone was released in '07).

4. Cracked Screen

How about a cracked screen that only allows limited navigation on a touchscreen? You could still have a phone, but maybe it has limited practical application if you can't use some of the touchscreen functionality. If I can't scroll horizontally or vertically, for instance, so I'm stuck with what I've got on the lockscreen.

5. Parents Just Don't Understand

A quote from a parent: "You give your kid a phone because then you have something to take away from them when they need to be punished."

If your character is a kid, it's pretty easy.

6. Update Purgatory

"These goddamn updates are taking an hour!" Updates take forever, and interrupting them is a great way to screw up a phone.

Tip: Use Appropriate Measures

Only disable the phone as much as you need to. If you just need your character to ignore the phone for awhile, it's easy. If you need to prevent calling emergency services, the only way to manage that is to disable the phone completely. My advice here is to use the level of force necessary and not an inch more. This prevents you from causing your own problems down the line.

7. Blowing It

Maybe your character has a burner phone, and now that they've used it to make a call they can't have traced back, they crack it in half and throw it in the river (or lake or whatever. Bodies of water seem to be where it's at, although I haven't seen many dropped in a nice creek). A temporary solution, but a good one.

8. Self-Control

Maybe your character is trying some zen thing of staying away from the phone for stretches during the day, meaning the phone is not at hand. It can be as simple as giving the character a personal reason for not bringing the phone when they leave the house that day. Maybe they leave it at home on date night.

9. Out of Control

I don't buy James Bond dropping his phone in the shitter. I buy Michael Scott doing that.

Maybe your character's taken it even further and has a time lock enabled on their phone, meaning it's unusable to them until a certain amount of time was passed. That could certainly ramp some tension.

10. I Didn't Pay The Bill

Note: The interval between non-payment and actually having the phone shut off can be pretty long if you've got a good payment history, shorter if this isn't your first mess-up, shortest on prepaid. This could also be as simple as a credit card switch, which disconnected the autopay. An unpaid bill is a good one because in order to borrow a friend's phone, you've gotta confess to screwing up.

11. Flooding

If you had constant incoming calls, it would effectively disable your phone. So if some autodialer went haywire (intentionally or not) or your character was someone famous whose phone number was released, their phone would be rendered useless.

12. Butterfingers

Most phones will lock with too many incorrect passcode attempts. If someone wanted to disable your phone, maybe for sinister purposes, maybe just as a gag, they could enter the wrong passcode a bunch of times.

13. We Jammin'

Cell jammers aren't exactly legal, but that doesn't mean they're hard to come by either. A modern-day Michael Myers would be smart to buy one of these things. The people who use them tend to get caught, and there are a couple of great stories of highway vigilantes hooking them up. But it takes time.

14. Slipping My Mind

Have none of you carefully placed your phone somewhere only to completely forget where you set it down? Have none of you texted your phone from your computer in a desperate attempt to find it? And when you texted it, you had to think really hard about what to send, and then ended up with, "Hello? Phone?" And then your girlfriend came home and saw it and thought you were the biggest idiot?

Just me?



Tip: Build Character

Make the loss/disabling of the phone believable to your character. I don't buy James Bond dropping his phone in the shitter. I buy Michael Scott doing that. The bonus here is that the method of disabling the phone can strengthen my sense of your character. If your character is a cat lady, I will 100% buy a cat knocking a glass of water on a phone, and your character's reaction to that will tell me something.

15. Kangaroo Style

Ever been to a show and got your phone locked up in a pouch? Can you imagine a scenario where someone's phone is locked in one of these things (prank, evil motive, whatever)?

16. Out Of Respect

Ever been to a wedding where cell phones were collected before the ceremony began? They're out there, and they could easily create a situation where you've got a large number of people in a remote location without phones

17. The Hypocrite

Maybe your character is at a movie. Maybe your character takes it upon himself to give another phone user a piece of his mind, and everyone else in the theater claps and cheers. Maybe he then feels his phone vibrate in his pocket, and maybe he can't answer it for fear of looking like a hypocrite. A moral stance can be a great way to change things up and make them less technological.

18. The Truth About Location Tracking

Here's a question: Does your phone matter in an emergency if your location can't be accurately tracked? In 2010 a bunch of rules changed such that calls had to provide accurate information at 100 meters 67% of the time and 400 meters 90% of the time. Carriers are allowed exemptions for 15% of their service area, usually because it's heavily forested. So, what does this mean? It means that your caller might get in touch with emergency services, but they've still got a 10% chance of providing no info, and there are pockets where this info is unlikely to exist at all. Even if a call does provide the info, if it's accurate within 400 meters, that's a point with 400 meters radiating out in every direction, which, according to mathamagics, is something like a 500,000 square meter area to search.

19. Hand Your Phone To A Toddler

It'll be disabled.

20. All Hands

If your hands don't function in a typical way, it can be really difficult for you to operate 9 out of 10 phones carried by folks these days. Whether the hands are always that way or somehow disabled by someone else in that moment, taking away the hands can be a way to take away the phone.

21. The Hubris Break

I think we've all seen the hubris break, the one where "This case makes my phone indestructible. I'll prove it."

Tip: Be Spectacular

I dropped my personal iPod and ran it over with my own car. Yep. Point being, if you're going to break the phone, break it in a notable way. Don't just drop it. That's boring. Drop it in a volcano if you can pull it off.

22. Bricked

Some iPhones can be bricked by setting the date to January 1st, 1970. Which makes sense by Y2K standards. There are lots of weird ways to brick phones out there. Figure one out, or make one up. If the pinnacle of mobile technology can be broken by setting the date wrong, it's perfectly believable for your fictional phone to break from something equally bizarre.

23. Overheat

Overheat the phone by using something like GPS and leaving it on the car seat, in the sun. All you can do at that point is wait for it to cool down. This is more interesting than a battery going out because we can figure on the phone coming back at some point, we just don't know when.

24. DIY

In my personal experience, a great way to really screw up a piece of new tech is to try and fix it yourself. Maybe your phone is just a little broken, and maybe your attempt to fix it makes things worse. These things are not designed to be repaired by amateurs. I say this with experience.

25. Quick Break

If someone sticks a pair of headphones in and snaps off the jack inside the phone, the phone will still work for texting, but talking will be difficult. What might it do to your story to only allow texting?

26. Jerks Being Jerks

I hate to be so simplistic about it, but you can simply have an antagonist take the phone away. It doesn't work so well with, say, a Leatherface type, but for any modern day character it'd work just fine.

27. Unfamiliar

Put it in the hands of an inexperienced user. I know that sounds unlikely in 2018, but believe you me, there's many a person out there who has no idea how to use a smartphone, and a huge number of icons only serves to confuse and disorient.

28. Use The Technology

The technology exists to block phone use inside of a vehicle in motion. You'd only have to imagine a society a few years in the future to implement this, and you'd have a sort of new-fangled *Speed* movie on your hands (keep driving over 20 MPH!).

Tip: All Or Nothing

Decide whether your story needs to eliminate ALL phones or just your character's. If we're talking about a romantic subplot, if I can't text my loved one, then you don't need to lose all phones. But if the broken phone situation is solved by "Buddy, there's a robbery going on and I need your phone," then you're going to have to do something more extreme.

29. Townies

There's an American town where the only radio communication allowed is for radios held by emergency services. You'll find no cell service, and that's by choice, providing a little wrinkle to the classic, "Damn, no bars" thing.



30. Getting Away From It All

A number of AirBNBs are promoting the fact that they don't have internet or cell signal. Some people go on vacation to get away from that stuff. It's a thing. A new spin on the cabin in the woods. Bonus points if you do some searching and find a cabin/woods alternative. You could start the new trend: Bungalow in the Desert!

31. Memories

If your character loses their phone, how many numbers do they have memorized? How many numbers do YOU have memorized? You might be able to effectively remove a communication avenue by simply taking away someone's pocket brain.

23 Books that Prove America Ain't So Bad



This has been the hardest column I've ever had to introduce. And I wrote a column about the "child sewer orgy" in Stephen King's *It*.

If I may, a short story.

Pete's not in a great place. I'm calling myself "Pete" for a minute here. Let's just go with it.

Pete's in a long-distance relationship. Really long-distance. And it sucks.

And the only secret I can share, the only advice I have for anyone else, is that you need to find ways to remind yourself what's good about your relationship.

It costs money, it takes time, but do it. It's worth it. The only way a relationship survives distance is by you reminding yourself that what you're doing is worthwhile. However you can.

Okay, this is the part where I bring it back to America. And stop referring to myself as "Pete."

As much as I need to seek out and engage in the reminders about my romantic relationship, I need those sorts of reminders about the place I live, too. America. The U.S. of A.

What was clear, when I went looking for other lists of American books, was that those lists tend to come in two flavors. Flavor 1 is "The Great American Novel." Flavor 2 is "Here's the awful history of America."

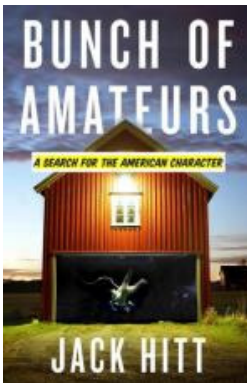
I'm not interested in talking down those flavors or saying they're invalid. I'd like to humbly offer a third flavor. The strawberry of the neopolitan. I know strawberry is the worst of the three flavors, and I picked it on purpose. It's not to everyone's taste, but for people who like it, here it is.



'Population 485' by Michael Perry

Cities can be cosmopolitan and wonderful, but there's something uniquely American about small towns in the midwest. Michael Perry, as a volunteer firefighter, got to know his neighbors in tiny New Auburn, Wisconsin, as he put it "one siren at a time." The emergencies are a great vehicle to drive the stories, but there's also some deep thought about the intersection of blue collar lifestyles and the value of art.

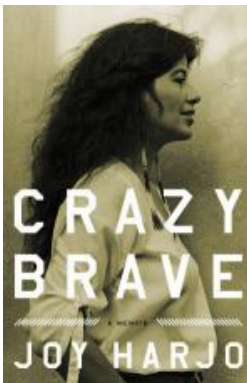
What It Says About America: Small-town Wisconsin is probably not what you think.



'Bunch of Amateurs' by Jack Hitt

This American Life regular contributor Jack Hitt celebrates the tinkering spirit in garages and sheds across the country. You'll walk away from this one curious about what's going on in garages and spare bedrooms wherever you live. I just enjoy the attitude of "This doesn't suit me, so I'm going to roll up my sleeves and do something about it."

What It Says About America: This book spends time talking about how some of the "American spirit" was formed by self-taught tinkerers who didn't see innovation as the exclusive territory of trained, educated professionals.

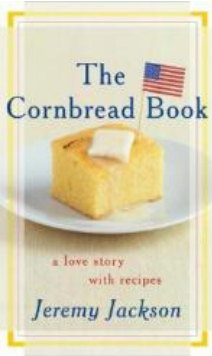


'Crazy Brave' by Joy Harjo

Here's an excerpt from an interview from NPR. This gives you a taste of what the book is like:

Sometimes, I think, in order to get to something that we really want or we really love or something that needs to be realized, that we're tested. I mean, I think if you look at any stories all over the world, they are usually set up as, OK, here's where I start, here is where I want to go, and here are the tests...And they were pretty intense tests ... I failed a lot of them, or you find a way around. And maybe there is no such thing as failure ... that's kind of what I've had to come to. Yes, I mean, there's times ... when we fail. But it's a useful thing...At least I've had to come to that in my life, to realize that this stuff called failure, this stuff, this debris of historical trauma, family trauma, you know, stuff that can kill your spirit, is actually raw material to make things with and to build a bridge. You can use those materials to build a bridge over that which would destroy you.

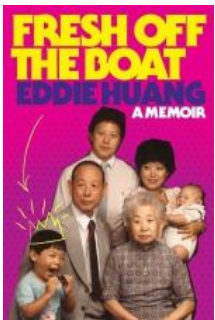
What It Says About America: As a member of the Mvskoke Nation, Joy Harjo is uniquely qualified to talk about the ways we can be transformed by pain and the ways we can transform with it.



'The Cornbread Book: A Love Story With Recipes' by Jeremy Jackson

There's a lot to be said about the most American food that exists. Hot dogs and hamburgers are the traditional contenders, but I'm putting my weight behind cornbread. Cornbread, as you find it on your plate at Thanksgiving, is a combination of Native American and European cooking styles (Native Americans using corn meal for all sorts of good stuff, Europeans using the ingredient to make breads like the ones they made back home). And this book doesn't weigh in on the great sweetened/unsweetened cornbread debate. It gives great options for both, and you can vote with your oven.

What It Says About America: We have better things to offer than tubular meats.



'Fresh Off The Boat' by Eddie Huang

Provocative, boisterous, and a different American way. Eddie Huang was a film and English major. A law student who got a corporate law job. Then he got laid off and took to stand-up and dealing weed. Then he was a clothing designer. Then a chef and restaurateur. And author. He's lived a dozen reinventions of himself.

What It Says About America: Some people see this book as insulting towards America and Americans, but I think that's the whole point here. "Americans" aren't this monolithic, singular group. Eddie's take:

Take the things from America that speak to you, that excite you, that inspire you, and be the Americans we all want to know; then cook it up and sell it back to them for \$28.99.



'Moneyball' by Michael Lewis

What's more American than baseball? How about a rebel who uses math and a laptop to shake the sport to its core? The best thing about this book is that one by no means has to love baseball or sports to have a good time with it.

What It Says About America: It's hard to change things. Even in something like baseball, even when everything you're saying is objectively correct. But it can make for a damn good story.

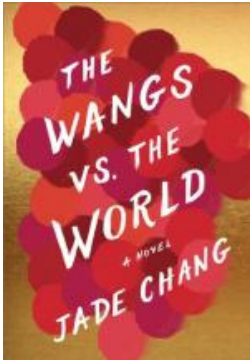


'Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?' by Mindy Kaling

There was this whole thing for a while about whose superpower funny lady memoir was better, Amy Poehler's or Tina Fey's.

I'm here to tell you the answer is neither, because Mindy Kaling's is better. It's funnier, and it doesn't get too exhaustive in the biographical. It's just a better book.

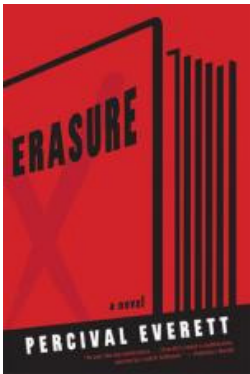
What It Says About America: Mindy Kaling was a big writer on *The Office*, and The U.S. still produces a ridiculous amount of great entertainment. Fact is, there's a lot of entertaining people here.



'The Wangs Vs. The World' by Jade Chang

Nothing like the Great American Road Trip. This one is tinged with a hint of desperation, but it's a great picture of the ways different generations view the same place.

What It Says About America: It's still all about family.

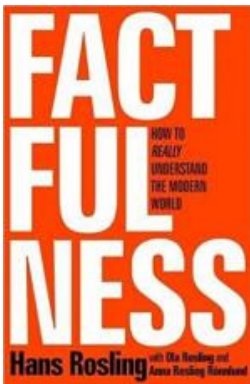


'Erasure' by Percival Everett

Everett is mostly ignored when it comes to literary lists of writers of color. And I think it's probably because he's so sharp and satirical that people don't know what to make of him, and as you read his books, you're thinking, "Should I be laughing at this?"

In *Erasure* a writer who's frustrated that his works won't sell while exploitative novels go like hotcakes, decides to write an exploitative book of his own, a parody. Which, of course, hits it big.

What It Says About America: The Percival Everett's are out there. Just when you think you've scraped the barrel of gutsy, unusual American writers, you can still knock that barrel over, get a shovel and start digging.

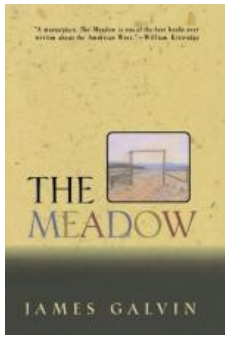


'Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About The World — And Why Things Are Better Than You Think' by Hans Rosling and Hannah Rosling Rönnlund

Bill Gates loves this book. Here's what he had to say:

Hans argues that...instincts make it difficult to put events in perspective. Imagine news coverage about a natural disaster—say, a tornado that kills 10 people in a small town. If you look at only the headlines, you'll view the event as an unbearable tragedy (which it is). But if you put it in the context of history, you'll also know that tornadoes today are a lot less deadly than they used to be, thanks to advanced warning systems. That's no consolation to the loved ones of those who died, but it matters a great deal to everyone who survived the tornado.

What It Says About America: America can be both bad and better than we think.



'The Meadow' by James Galvin

I recommend this book on almost every list. It almost always applies. It's beautiful. James Galvin is a poet who wrote another novel, *Fencing The Sky*, which wore the skin of a western thriller, but really it was an excuse to "talk about the pretty flowers."

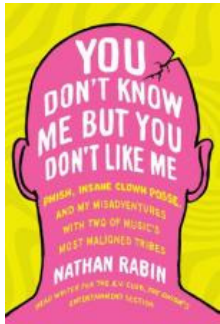
What It Says About America: America, as a place, as a land, is damn pretty at times.



'Brownsville: Stories' by Oscar Casares

There's no book list about America without a Texas book. Brownsville sits at Texas' southern tip, just across the river from Mexico. Writing about a sense of place can be really tough, but this book totally nails it.

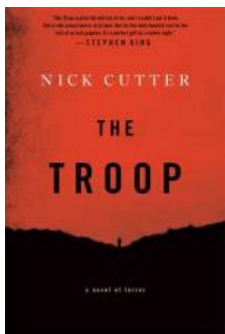
What It Says About America: This book, in its authentic characters, shows the way a sense of place is built by the people who live there.



'You Don't Know Me But You Don't Like Me: Phish, Insane Clown Posse, and My Misadventures With Two of Music's Most Maligned Tribes' by Nathan Rabin

If there are two media-based subcultures we love to hate, they're juggalos and Phish fans. But as Rabin starts to look a little further, you find out they're...actually kind of cool. Don't get me wrong, I'm not about to slap some Phish on any playlists any time soon. It just turns out that most Phish fans and juggalos don't seem half bad.

What It Says About America: Even the groups that seem so far away from us can be pretty cool on a personal level.



'The Troop' by Nick Cutter

I'm not saying you'll absolutely meet a horrific death if you travel to the Canadian woods. But this book might be saying that.

What It Says About America: If the only way to make yourself believe America ain't so bad is to see gore and gruesomeness in Canada, this is your ticket.

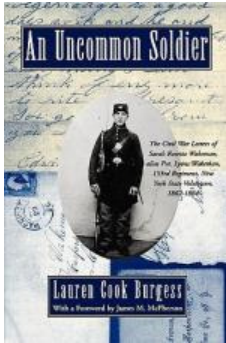


'Love And Terror On The Howling Plains Of Nowhere: A Memoir' by Poe Ballantine

If I told you to read an entire book about a Nebraska town you'd never heard of, it'd probably be a tough sell. But if I told you there's a ramblin' man settling down

with his wife, who is an immigrant from Mexico, and their son, who may or may not be autistic, and, oh, a local college professor is tied naked to a tree and burned to death and nobody can figure out what happened, I feel like that might make things more enticing.

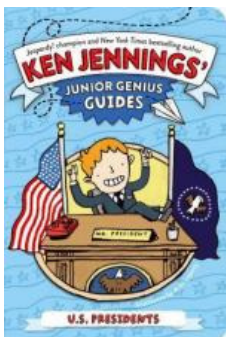
What It Says About America: There's an idea out there about lives in small places being simple and less complicated. Poe Ballantine shows us otherwise.



'An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, Alias Pvt. Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers, 1862-1864' by Lauren Cook Burgess

It's not talked about a great deal, but there was a surprisingly large number of women who dressed and acted as men and fought in the Civil War. I don't know why it's a subject that isn't talked about more, but there you have it. A country born in rebellion continues its rebellion.

What It Says About America: The people fighting the good fight have always been there, even if they've been in disguise.



'U.S. Presidents' by Ken Jennings

The best thing I've ever learned about American history is in this book. Nell Arthur, wife of Chester A., died about a year before Chester became President. When Chester was asked to be a patron for a memorial stained glass window at St. John's church, he agreed to do so and dedicated the window to Nell. He selected a south facing window so that he could see it every night from the White House.

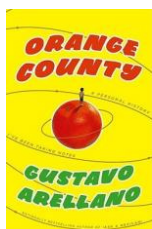
What It Says About America: Even in something as ugly as American politics, there are still moments of heartbreaking beauty.



'Never Can Say Goodbye: Writers On Their Unshakable Love Of New York' edited by Sari Botton

Okay, we can't really have a book list about America without having a book about New York. This one has a solid contributor's list (a term I'd like to replace with "Rogue's Gallery" from now on), and it mostly avoids anything too saccharine.

What It Says About America: For some, New York is America.

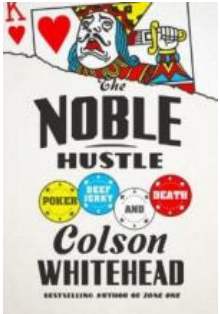


'Orange County: A Personal History' by Gustavo Arellano

Hey, if we're doing an east coast book, we need a west coast-er too. Orange County is a weird place. It's part of the "tech coast," it contains two gigantic theme parks, it's neighbors with L.A., but it's also one of the most conservative places

in the country. This book tells the history of the area and the history of Arellano's family in alternating chapters, mingling the personal and the historical.

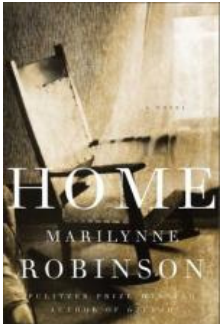
What It Says About America: As Arellano puts it, Orange County is a "petri dish for America's continuing democratic experiment." The book's format does a great service of showing the way our collective and individual histories shape our lives.



'The Noble Hustle' by Colson Whitehead

Poker is an American game, and what's weird is that despite all the so-called entertainments we've developed around poker (mostly I'm thinking of televised poker, which is crazy considering that poker was developed before television as a way to kill time) so few have read this book. If you like poker, you'll like this book. If you like Whitehead's writing, you'll like this book. And the best part is, you only have to like one of those things to enjoy this book.

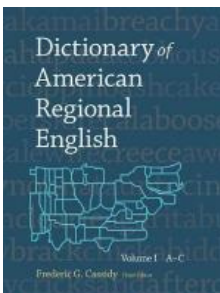
What It Says About America: Colson Whitehead is the perfect embodiment of someone who defies definition. He wrote a zombie book, a historical fiction about the underground railroad, and a book on poker. He's a writer who won't let what he did yesterday determine what he's doing tomorrow. There's a lesson there.



'Home' by Marilynne Robinson

Okay, it's the second in a set. I say "set" instead of "series" because it follows some of the same characters, but each piece stands on its own. More important, it's about the question of what it means to be home. And it's a quiet, slow-burning question.

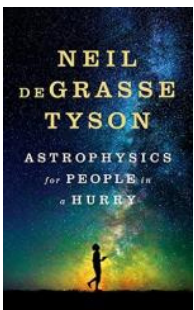
What It Says About America: The where and the who are equally important questions when we talk about home.



'Dictionary of American Regional English' by Frederic G. Cassidy

It'd never occurred to me that people from other places didn't know what a Dagwood was. But then again, I had no idea that in Georgia, someone who's stuck up is called "biggity." This book is a great way to learn some colloquialisms and tell the Queen's English to cram it with walnuts at the same time.

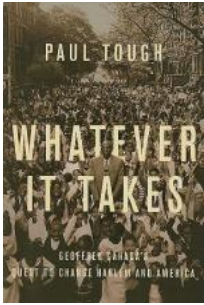
What It Says About America: Lots of us only sort of speak the same language.



'Astrophysics for People In A Hurry' by Neil deGrasse Tyson

Sometimes it's all about perspective. I do have a very specific recommendation that goes along with this book: Read the last chapter first. After I finished, I wished the book had been laid out that way. The last chapter gives all this great context that helps the rest of the book make sense. Trust me on this one.

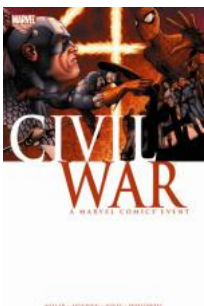
What It Says About America: America is unbelievably small on a cosmic scale. And on a chronological scale. But somehow, this comes off as a really positive thing.



'Whatever It Takes' by Geoffrey Canada

Geoffrey Canada founded the Harlem Children's Zone, a space occupying nearly 100 blocks that provides education for children and their parents with the goal of breaking the poverty cycle. Canada looked at a problem, and he asked himself what it would take to solve it. And then...he got to work.

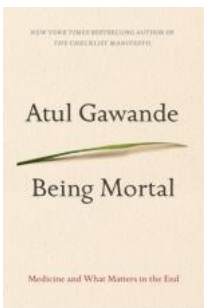
What It Says About America: We're a country of problem solvers.



'Civil War' by Mark Millar

If you've seen the movie, it's a little like that and a little not. In the book, Captain America takes a very surprising, very anti-America-seeming stance against registration of superhumans. But in doing so, he reinforces a different sort of American value, which is that of standing up for what's right.

What It Says About America: Even if you're clad head-to-toe in red, white, and blue spandex, that doesn't mean you have to let someone else's idea of America define you or the place you live.



'Being Mortal: Medicine And What Matters Most In The End' by Atul Gawande

Though Dr. Gawande's father is proudly American, he was born in India and doesn't agree with the way Americans treat their elders. Dr. Gawande is pretty honest about the drawbacks of a system where elders remain at home and are taken care of by their children, a system we romanticize in America.

What It Says About America: America's medical system is messy. But the truth seems to be that nobody's got end-of-life care figured out. Some problems are more human than they are American.



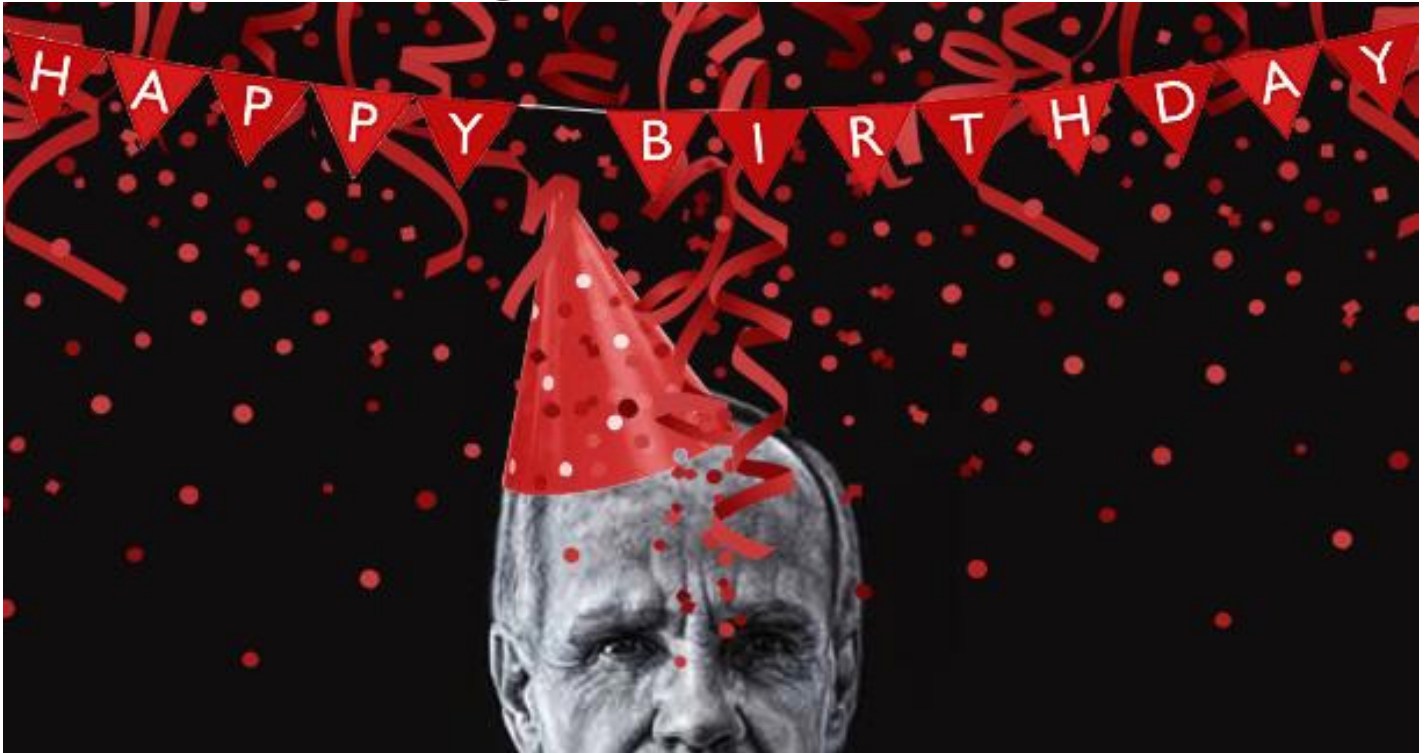
'But What If We're Wrong?' by Chuck Klosterman

This book forces us to ask the titular question: What if we're wrong? And it ponders how this question might be asked in any situation. It also goes to great lengths to demonstrate that humans, as a species, are spectacularly bad at predicting how events occurring in the present will be viewed in the future.

What It Says About America: Each of us is assuredly very wrong about something.

That's my list. No excuses, no blowing off the fact that there's some rotten stuff going on. But I hope this list gives you a chance to remember why America is an idea worth caring about.

The 85 Best Things About Cormac McCarthy



July 20th is Cormac McCarthy's 85th birthday. In honor of the man and his work, we bring you 85 things you might not know, might want to know, and that you might find useful, especially if you like stumbling around drunk in Tennessee. Which, if you haven't done it, is worth your time.

1. One of his only taped interviews is the most awkward interview of all time

It was weird. Not Franzen, combative weird, but you could tell this was a person who didn't do this sort of thing often. McCarthy slumps in his chair, scratches his lapel microphone, and spends more time talking about science than his books.

2. The awkward interview was with Oprah

3. His novel 'The Road' was based almost entirely on a single, real-life image

I just had this image of what [El Paso] might look like in 50 or 100 years...fires up on the hill and everything being laid to waste, and I thought a lot about my little boy.

4. Or, maybe it was a sound

One claim says the writer's gears started turning when he was with his son in El Paso, at 2 AM, and looked out over the town and heard only a train in the distance, a sound he described as "very lonesome."

5. 'The Road' is about goodness

Or at least, that's how McCarthy thinks of his post-apocalyptic novel of a dying man escorting his

son through a world of death, cannibals, and not much else.

6. McCarthy wrote most of his books on an Olivetti Lettera 32 typewriter

By his estimate, more than 5 million words came out of the machine, which he did nothing to maintain other than blowing it out with a shop hose.



7. McCarthy sold his Lettera for \$254,500

McCarthy's Lettera was expected to earn \$20,000 at auction, but it did quite a bit better than that. With the original cost being \$50, he turned a \$254,450 profit, which he donated to the Santa Fe Institute.

8. McCarthy then replaced his typewriter with another of the same model for \$11

9. Glenn Horowitz on the significance of the typewriter:

When I grasped that some of the most complex, almost otherworldly fiction of the postwar era was composed on such a simple, functional, frail-looking machine, it conferred a sort of talismanic quality to Cormac's typewriter. It's as if Mount Rushmore was carved with a Swiss Army knife.

10. McCarthy picked his publisher by chance

When McCarthy sent out the manuscript for *The Orchard Keeper*, he picked the publisher Random House because it was the only one he'd ever heard of.

11. Luck worked out for him

Random House editor Albert Erskine ended up with the manuscript. Erskine had edited William Faulkner's stuff, and he'd edit McCarthy for the next 20 years.

12. McCarthy on writers and drinking:

If there's an occupational hazard to writing, it's drinking.

13. He doesn't care for semicolons

As is the case with most of the greats.

14. McCarthy has copy edited several scientific books

Physics professor Lawrence M. Krauss and physicist Lisa Randall both had books edited by McCarthy. Randall:

I got the manuscript back in the mail, and it was marked up on every page...He read everything. He essentially copy-edited it, getting rid of some of my semicolons, which he really didn't like.

15. McCarthy is more interested in the company of scientists than writers

He spends most of his time hobnobbing and working with scientists at the Santa Fe Institute, which is, "...an independent, nonprofit theoretical research institute located in Santa Fe (New Mexico, United States) and dedicated to the multidisciplinary study of the fundamental principles of complex adaptive systems, including physical, computational, biological, and social systems."

16. This preference is 30 years old

When McCarthy won a MacArthur "Genius" Grant he was flown to Chicago to meet other recipients. He avoided the other writers. As he put it:

The artsy crowd was all dressed and drugged and ready to party...I just started hanging out with scientists because they were more interesting.

17. He won a MacArthur "genius" grant, by the way

McCarthy was in the first class of MacArthur Fellows or "Genius Grant" recipients along with Robert Penn Warren, Leslie Marmon Silko, and others.

18. Anyway, back to science

Science is very rigorous...When you hang out with scientists and see how they think, you can't do so without developing a respect for it. And part of what you respect is their rigor. When you say something, it needs to be right. You can't just speculate idly about things.

19. And the generosity of scientists at the Santa Fe Institute

People drift in from all over the world—Nobel-winning chemists and biologists—and they're sitting next to you at lunch. They're just very generous. You ask them something and they'll just stop what they're doing and sit down and tell you all about it. And that's rather remarkable.

20. One more McCarthy science quote

To me, the most curious thing of all is incuriosity. I just don't get it.

21. McCarthy is known for eschewing classic punctuation

Especially quotation marks. This sounds like an obnoxious affectation, but if you read the books, he makes it work.

22. It turns out that McCarthy replaces punctuation with other things

23. He's a practitioner of what's called polysyndeton

Polysyndeton is the practice of using conjunctions in place of some punctuation in order to create prose that's slower and more "solemn."

24. Papa Roach totally ripped him off

McCarthy, 1992: *Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.*

Papa Roach, 2003: *Our scars remind us / That the past is real*

25. He was luckier than he was rich

I had no money, I mean none. I had run out of toothpaste and I was wondering what to do when I went to the mailbox and there was a free sample.

26. This was consistently true

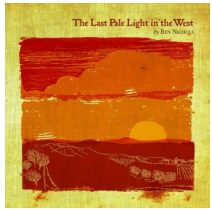
At one point McCarthy had eaten the last bit of food in the house when a courier knocked and handed him an envelope with a check for \$20,000, a gift from a private patron of the arts.

27. But still, the dude was broke

At one point McCarthy was thrown out of a \$40 per month hotel for not paying the rent.

28. However, something always came along for him

McCarthy doesn't find his toothpaste story or the donor check to be unusual. He says his life is filled with hundreds of stories like this one.



29. His book 'Blood Meridian' inspired a great album

The Last Pale Light In The West by Ben Nichols is a must-listen.

30. This haunting quote from 'Blood Meridian'

War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.

31. 'Blood Meridian' has been called unfilmable a number of times

A claim that may be accurate considering the large number of false starts.

32. McCarthy doesn't think 'Blood Meridian' is unfilmable

He says it would be...

...very difficult to do and would require someone with a bountiful imagination and a lot of balls. But the payoff could be extraordinary.

33. He lived in a stone house on Coffin Ave in El Paso

That's so metal.

34. McCarthy's grandfather put all his daughters (and sons)

through college

35. McCarthy found his writing talent after a college professor asked him to redo the punctuation for a collection of eighteenth-century essays

36. 'Suttree' is the book he considers most autobiographical

37. You can take a McCarthy vacation

"Searching For Suttree" is a website devoted to cataloguing the real-life locations depicted in *Suttree*.

38. If you do, don't forget to drink a beer

Suttree's High Gravity Tavern is a brewery named after a character in McCarthy's book.

39. If you have one beer, why not have two?

Nearby Harrogate Lounge is named after *Suttree's* Watermelon-humping character. Appetizing!

40. If you have two beers, why not 15?

The Suttree Stagger is an 8-hour pub crawl through Knoxville which includes stops to do readings from *Suttree* at appropriate locations. 2019 will be the event's 40th anniversary.

41. While in Knoxville, see the sites

In Knoxville's Market Square, you can find this McCarthy passage etched into the stone:

Market Street on Monday morning, Knoxville, Tennessee. In this year 1951. Suttree with his parcel of fish going past the rows of derelict trucks piled with produce and flowers, an atmosphere rank with country commerce, a reek of farmgoods in the air tending off into a light surmise of putrefaction and decay. Pariahs adorned the walk and blind singers and organists and psalmists with mouth harps wandered up and down. Past hardware stores and meatmarkets and little tobacco shops. A strong smell of feed in the hot noon like working mash. Mute and roosting peddlers watching from the wagonbeds and flower ladies in their bonnets like cowed gnomes, driftwood hands composed on their apron laps and their underlip swollen with snuff.

He went among vendors and beggars and wild street preachers haranguing a lost world with a vigor unknown to the sane. Suttree admired them with their hot eyes and dogeared Bibles, God's barkers gone forth into the world like the prophets of old. He'd often stood along the edges of the crowd for some stray scrap of news from beyond the pale.

He crossed the street, stepping gutters clogged with greenstuff. Coming from behind the trucks, a beggarlady's splotched and marcid arm barred his way, a palsied claw that gibbered at his chest.

42. And check out some of McCarthy's other work

At one point, McCarthy helped a friend create a mosaic. Just before it was destroyed, a friend and fellow mosaic-builder pointed out McCarthy's signature. It's now located outside the Blount County Library.



43. Knoxville likes burning down the house

Although Cormac's childhood home in Knoxville burned down, he's in good company. Apparently Knoxville is earning a reputation for torching author houses, including those of James Agee and poet Nikki Giovanni.

44. Maybe he cursed himself

Supposedly McCarthy used bricks from Agee's demolished home to build a fireplace. Or possibly a bathroom. Depends who you ask.

45. McCarthy says there are four great novels

He likes a number of books, but as greats go, his list is short: *Ulysses*, *Brothers Karamazov*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Moby Dick*.

46. Charley, Chaz, C.J., and Cormac are all names Cormac has gone through

47. His work has been put into concordances

John Sepich has put together concordances for McCarthy's books. For those of you who aren't biblically-inclined, a concordance is like an index of all the words used in a book. It tells you where the words were used and how many times.

48. McCarthy tends to recruit unusual fans

Sepich, who made the concordances, also posted meticulous directions for creating a wooden "utility stool," which he crafted after he decided a bucket wasn't the best seat to use when changing shoes.

49. McCarthy on outlining:

I just sit down and write whatever is interesting. If you're writing mystery stories or something, you might want to have an outline, because it all has to have a logic and fall into place and have a beginning, a middle and an end. But if you're writing a novel, the best things just sort of come out of the blue. It's a subconscious process. You don't really know what you're doing most of the time.

50. McCarthy has known a handful of drug dealers in his time, and he has this advice for any upstarts:

If you're in the drug business, you know when you get up that morning that there's some chance somebody's going to get killed...Maybe it'll be you. Maybe by you. People who are not prepared to face that are not going to be in that business. Being a drug

dealer is like operating a machine gun in wartime. You're in a line of work where you're not going to live long.

51. This quote from 'The Road':

Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that

52. Or this one from 'The Sunset Limited':

I got what I needed instead of what I wanted and that's just about the best kind of luck you can have.

53. 'The Road' and 'All The Pretty Horses' are McCarthy's most famous film adaptations, but the adaptation of his play, 'Sunset Limited', might be one of the best

It's a dialog-driven story starring Tommy Lee Jones and Samuel L. Jackson.

54. His least successful move to the big screen was 'The Counselor'

Cormac wrote the screenplay, and Ridley Scott directed. This one was not based on a book.

55. Although the world didn't love 'The Counselor', Guillermo Del Toro did

Here's what I love. Cormac McCarthy's writing is so true to itself. It doesn't want to comply with the screenplay manuals and it doesn't try to conform to the conventional breaks of the three-act structure.

56. It's 2018, so let's get political

McCarthy has never voted, and he's been quoted as saying, "Poets shouldn't vote"

57. McCarthy's take on people from the coasts who've moved to the southwest:

If you don't agree with them politically, you can't just agree to disagree—they think you're crazy,

58. Hold your horses. He seems to be a nice guy:

McCarthy tries to live by a code of civility. He shows up when he says he'll show up. He inquires about sick parents. After a meal at SFI, he's the first to clear a visitor's plate. When a friend refused to see a doctor, McCarthy swore to call every day and bug him until he got the care he needed. After ten days of calls, the friend gave in.

59. 'No Country For Old Men' started life as a screenplay

It eventually took a turn towards being a novel. This might have something to do with why it made for a good film adaptation.

60. Ethan Coen once described the grueling work of adapting 'No Country For Old Men' with his brother:

...one of us types into the computer while the other holds the spine of the book open flat. That's why there needs to be two of us - otherwise he's gotta type one-handed.

61. The best-known adaptation of 'No Country for Old Men' is the movie, but...

...the audiobook narrated by Tom Stechschulte, who also reads *The Road*, is better.

62. Completionists: There isn't a boatload of McCarthy short fiction out there, but Here's a link to a McCarthy story published in 1959: "A Wake for Susan."

63. Another shorty, "A Drowning Incident" from 1960.

64. And "The Dark Waters" from 1965.

65. He wrote a short science piece, too

[The Kekulé Problem](#), which asks the question of where language came from. And if that's not strange and interesting enough, [he wrote a follow-up](#).

66. For \$43 annually you can join The Cormac McCarthy Society

Add \$13 if you want a hard copy of the newsletter.

67. Before you join, you should know they respect McCarthy's privacy

The society focuses on the work rather than the man out of respect for McCarthy's desire to live a private life.

68. McCarthy is somewhat of a recluse

From a *New York Times* article:

McCarthy has lots of friends who know that he likes to be left alone. A few years ago The El Paso Herald-Post held a dinner in his honor. He politely warned them that he wouldn't attend, and didn't. The plaque now hangs in the office of his lawyer.

69. You can still get an idea of what the man is like

For example, you can check out [nearly 40 years of correspondence](#) between McCarthy and a friend.

70. If you're in San Marcos, TX, you can check out his

papers, too

Including an unpublished early novel, screenplays, and correspondence.

71. McCarthy on what makes for bad fiction:

If it doesn't concern life and death...it's not interesting.

72. This little story about the beginnings of 'The Road':

*One day a few years ago, after checking his mail and pouring his coffee, McCarthy gingerly made his way down the hall at the Institute...and into the corner office of his friend Doug Erwin. Then he started asking about the apocalypse. In particular, he wanted to know about extinction—the Cretaceous-Tertiary meteorite that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago...Erwin told McCarthy about the likely aftermath of the deadly meteorite: the magnitude of the desolation, the collapse of ecosystems, the fallout of debris and gases. Then, one day [years later], Erwin sat down to read a galley of *The Road*, which depicts the harrowing, post-apocalyptic journey of a father and son. Erwin smiled—so this is what McCarthy was up to, he figured.*

73. McCarthy's work has distinct eras

His early works focused on Appalachia, and his later works focused on the American Southwest.

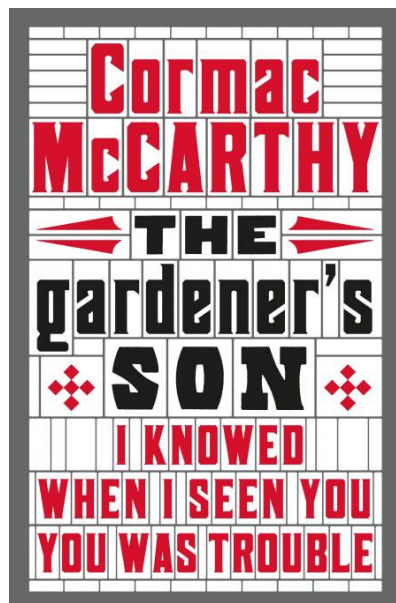
74. He did sit for another interview after Oprah

He appears onscreen in the film *Unbelievers*, a 2013 documentary about the roles of science and reason in the modern world.

75. McCarthy wrote an episode for 'Visions', a PBS sort-of anthology show that aired screenplays by different writers.

McCarthy's episode was called "Gardener's Son" and focuses on a small handful of characters interacting around the backdrop of a cotton mill 1870's South Carolina.

76. "Gardener's Son" was adapted into a book.



77. On being a dad:

When you're young and single, you hang out in bars and don't think about what's going to happen...But in the next fifty years when you have kids, you start thinking of their life and the world they have to live in. And that's a sobering thought these days. I'm not one of those conspiracy guys, but the world is in a very unstable situation. If you were to take thoughtful people on, say, January 1st, 1900, and tell them what the twentieth century was going to look like, they'd say, Are you shitting me?'

78. On why he won't be teaching any classes anytime soon:

...teaching writing is a hustle.

79. He got along with Edward Abbey

The two of them were supposedly hatching a scheme to reintroduce wolves to southern Arizona in the late 80's.

80. He has worked on up to five novels at a time

81. Switching between novels is easy for him

He takes a walk, then sits down and works on a completely different book.

82. His mysterious past spawned lots of speculation

Esquire once published a short article consisting of Cormac McCarthy rumors.

83. Cormac McCarthy appears in the show Mike Tyson Mysteries

Well, sort of. He appears as a centaur.



84. His best writing advice:

You spend a lot of time thinking about how to write a book, you probably shouldn't be talking about it, you probably should be doing it.

85. His best life advice:

There is for a man two things in life that are very important, head and shoulders above everything else...Find work you like, and find someone to live with you like. Very few people get both.

Your Favorite Book Sucks: 'The Yellow Wallpaper'



'Your Favorite Book Sucks' is an ongoing column, written by different people, that takes a classic or popular book and argues why it isn't really all that great. Confrontational, to be sure, but it's all in good fun, so please play nice.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman would be 158 years old this July. Which got me thinking about her classic tale, "The Yellow Wallpaper."

If you were an English major in college, I'd wager you've read this story no less than three times.

Professor types love this thing. It's feminist literature. It's transgressive, but in a way that's safe to discuss in classrooms. Hell, it even fits in with medical stuff. You can find a digitized copy of the story on the National Library of Medicine website.

I was an English major in college. I read this no less than three times. But I'm not so much a professor type, and if you ask me, this story sucks.

If You Have Horses, Please Hold Them A Moment

Bad books can have good effects. Something can be a bad read and still do something positive in the world outside the text. I recognize that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a force for good in the world.

For comparison, let's look at the humble banana. I don't like bananas. They're mushy, they're chalky. I actually almost slipped on a banana peel once in real life, like I'd stepped into a game of Mario Kart. And the peel is a lie. It looks like this great case for bananas, but the slightest pressure opens that baby up in the bottom of your backpack and all of a sudden you've ruined your pricey German textbook, which you were really hoping to return and get SOME cash back for.

To be fair, bananas can do good things for a person. Potassium and whatnot. You might as well choke one down here and there. But that doesn't mean I think bananas are "good," and given the option, I'll pick something else.

I recognize that bananas are a force for good inside my body. But they suck as eating experiences.

Likewise, I recognize that "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a force for good in the world. But it sucks as a reading experience.



The Premise Is Better Than The Story

"The Yellow Wallpaper" has a solid premise. A woman is being treated by her husband/caretaker, an extension of the medical system and patriarchy of the time, and he doesn't listen to her or understand her at all. Rather than being treated in some reasonable way for her undetermined affliction, she's put on bed rest and forbidden from doing anything intellectually stimulating (or, as we call it today, the "Psych Is On Netflix?" Cure). She's locked up in a room, and this speeds up her fairly short drive over the brink of sanity. She becomes fixated on this ugly-ass yellow wallpaper that adorns the room, and she starts seeing visions, including a woman or women creeping around in the wallpaper.

It's a premise that combines a locked room mystery with a Hunter S. Thompson drug trip and maybe a little bit of *The Ring*. It sounds like a win.

But once you get the premise, there's not a whole lot to sink your teeth into. Instead of moving in a direction, the story rotates around its own general idea over and over and leaves you feeling like, "Alright, we get it. Are you going to do something with this idea or are you just going to repeat it over and over again?"

"The Yellow Wallpaper," is like an *SNL* sketch where the premise makes you chuckle, but the sketch itself is mostly repetition of that premise, and it goes on and on about 7,000 years too long.

It's Over-Interpreted

Some of what sucks about this story is the people who love it.

Sorry! But it's true.

The people who love this story love its ambiguity, love its voice, and love, love, love to sit around and interpret the thing.

Here's a short poem by Billy Collins that sums up the situation nicely:

*I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide*

or press an ear against its hive.

*I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,*

*or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.*

*I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.*

*But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.*

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is not a story to enjoy. It's a story built for classroom discussion. Waxing intellectual about symbols and snippets of dialogue that surely mean more than meets the eye.

It's all exhausting, but the really annoying part about all this discussion is that Gilman has explicitly said what the story is about. In fact, she wrote a short article with the title "[Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper](#)."

If you mosey on over to the story's Wikipedia page, there's an interpretation section, and the first of three options is "Gilman's Interpretation." Her interpretation? How are we calling the author telling us exactly what's going on an "interpretation"?

What's frustrating about all the alternative interpretations and the highbrow time and energy put towards them is that their existence is almost antithetical to the story's purpose. Namely, that Gilman wanted to be heard by her doctor, who tried to remove all the intellectual stimulation from her life.

She wrote the story, told us what it meant, told us how desperate she was to be heard, and we all pat her on the head and say, "That's nice, dear. But wouldn't it be more interesting if it meant this..."

The Static

The character is pretty static. To say she descends into madness is like saying I've descended into

ugliness: It's a pretty short and undramatic fall. Less a plummet off a cliff, more a casual stepping down off the curb.

I'm not necessarily a believer that every story, especially every short story, has to demonstrate big changes in character. But if the story is about a descent into madness, if we think of the movement of the character as being a descent down a spiral staircase, this story starts on the second-to-last step and leaves us in the dark as far as the rest of the staircase goes. The version of the character that's depicted at the beginning and the end of the story is very similar, and as a reader this means I don't see the dramatic, awful change that has resulted from being denied the intellectual stimulation she needs.

The Wallpaper Itself Is A Wasted Object

The narrator describes the wallpaper only in flowery, non-specific terms:

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide - plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

I don't know what that looks like. If I told a roomful of people to draw that, I'd have a roomful of different drawings.

Not to keep hammering on the static character, but had the wallpaper descriptions started concrete and gotten more strange and emotional, that would have been a great way for us to see the change in the character's state. And it would have helped the reader "see" what the character saw.

The way the character views the paper, and the way that view changes, could have given us insight into the character. Instead, the character hates the paper from the beginning, and she obsesses on it for a large portion of the story. Though the obsession grows, the way the character feels about the paper never changes. The relationship the character has with the paper is ultimately flat.

The wallpaper could have served as such an interesting object. It's a wasted opportunity.

Too Much Life of the Mind

This story could use a heavy dose of on-the-body description. We're spending most of our time in a locked room. Is it hot? Cold? What does it feel like? What do her fingers feel like as she's attacking the yellow wallpaper? We get one quick shot of on-the-body sensation, and it's when she bites a piece of wooden furniture and says her teeth hurt. It's not super strong, but it's like, FINALLY, finally you give me something that causes a visceral reaction.

Madness is a great opportunity to observe bodily sensations from a distant, unusual perspective, but

If things are described for me and then I'm told how to feel about those things, then what's left for me to do as a reader?

it's wasted here. And the lack of physical sensation leaves the story feeling anchorless.

Medical Context

Bed rest with no intellectual stimulation is a pretty stupid idea, I'll admit, and there's no part of me that thinks we're talking about good medical care here.

But reading this in 2018, I think the story makes the whole thing seem more intentionally harmful and unusual than it would have been in the 1800's. Let's provide a little context regarding medical treatments of the time:

If you came down with syphilis in the 1800's, chances are you'd be treated with mercury, which would save you from dying of syphilis only because the mercury would kill you quicker. If you had any number of medical complaints, chances are you'd end up hooked on laudanum, heroin, or morphine. If you went to a dentist, if you could even find one, you'd probably discover that his equipment consisted of pliers and two stout gentlemen to hold you down.

Robert Liston performed a surgery in the 1800's with a 300% mortality rate. How's that possible? He was performing an amputation, no anesthetic, of course, when he accidentally sliced through an assistant's fingers. And by "assistant" I mean "dude who was holding the other dude down while his leg got hacked off." The patient had an infection and died, the assistant who was cut contracted the same infection and died, and someone who'd been observing thought he'd been cut as well, collapsed, had a heart attack, and died. 1 patient, 3 corpses.

What I'm getting at here is that the "rest cure" is applied badly to Gilman and her avatar in "The Yellow Wallpaper," but when looked at in context of medical treatments of the time, I have to say that bed rest is boring and demeaning, but the body count is relatively low.

The Story Tells The Reader How To Feel

People feel mostly one way about this story: Readers are meant to be sympathetic towards the narrator and feel that the cure is worse than the affliction.

Something I enjoyed about Elle Nash's *Animals Eat Each Other* is that it tells me about a lot of different situations, it tells me how the characters feel when it needs to, and it sets the scene really well, but the book never tells me how to feel about anything. I loved that.

If things are described for me and then I'm told how to feel about those things, then what's left for me to do as a reader?

A really good story gives me choice, leaves me some agency in deciding what the story means and how I might feel about it.

A sucky story doesn't leave me those options.

Why Nobody Gives A Crap About Books In The Summer



Is it just me, or do the rest of you feel like there's a summertime slump when it comes to reading? Just this...dispassionate feeling about books that comes around every May and sticks around into September?

It's not like you have to think that hard to come up with reasons why reading might take a backseat in summer. Summer is the most popular time to:

- Move
- Get Married
- Be Drunk On A Body Of Water*
- Vacation
- Go to a concert
- Vomit In An Alley Behind A Chuck E. Cheese*
- Sell A House
- Have a Yard Sale
- Find an Earwig In Your Toothbrush Bristles*
- Visit a National Park
- Get a Tattoo
- Sing Smashmouth's "All-Star" three times in one night at three different karaoke joints*
- Work On A Home Improvement Project

*Just me? Especially the earwig thing? Because that really happened, and I see it every time I close my eyes.

Basically, summer is the most popular time to do everything but drink cocoa, celebrate Christmas, and ski. And maybe read.

But I have to wonder, is there a real reason reading bores me in the summer?

First and Foremost, I Blame New York

There's a publishing tradition to take it easy in the summer. There's some applicable song about summertime and cotton and taking it easy that probably gave them the idea.

It makes sense that you'd take it easy in summer if you're in 1960's New York and perhaps your building doesn't have A/C and you're wearing a crushed velvet Austin Powers suit. Apparently, despite modern conveniences like climate control and non-velvet fabrics, the tradition of slowing down in NYC summer still exists. Lots of publishing houses work short hours in the summer, especially on Fridays. They'll be quick to tell you that they usually OVERwork the rest of the year. Yeah, yeah. Save it for my rejection letters.

Point being, publishers aren't exactly putting on their best razzle dazzle to hype us up about hot new releases in summer.

On one hand, it's pretty lazy. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure even New York's most famous citizen, the Amazing Spider-Man, would probably take afternoons off in the summer. Otherwise, wouldn't he be scorching his fingers and toes on hot buildings all day?

Besides, I'm not one to give up a holiday or work slowdown. I'm still pissed we got rid of Columbus Day as a day off. Not because I care about that guy, just because we should have replaced it with another holiday by now, maybe a two-day affair to make up for lost time.

Second, I Blame Hollywood

Summertime is movie time.

This summer you've got *Incredibles 2*, *Jurassic World 2: The Parkening*, *Ant-Man And The Wasp*, *Mission Impossible: The Codex Prime Directive Strike* (or something). All within about two weeks of each other.

12 of the 20 biggest box office months of all time are Julys. 16 out of 20 of Hollywood's biggest months are summer months.

Now, how am I supposed to read about the crushing ennui of living in a dying former steel mill town when I can watch Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard search through dinosaur droppings for the remains of Neuman (or whatever happens. I feel compelled to admit I didn't catch *Jurassic World 2* in theaters)? How is a Victorian tale where every stick of furniture is described in painstaking detail supposed to grab my attention when I can watch Tom Cruise grab a missile and fly into a volcano that erupts and Simon Pegg makes a great quip about it (again, missed it myself, but you get the drift)?

Summer movies are a lot of fun, and they're best experienced on the big screen. Those books? They'll still be there once the fun is over and the *Incredibles* have all learned a lesson about family/togetherness/being different/friendship/love/responsibility (close? Missed that flick too!).

Lists of Summer Reads Suck

Summer makes a lousy theme for a book list. I end up dismissing every option because I either chuckle and say, "Feh, mindless" or snort and say, "Who are you trying to impress with that copy of *Infinite Jest* on there? Who do you think you are?"

Don't even get me started on "Beach Reads." Whose idea was that? It's not like anyone makes other lists of habitat-specific books, like "Read These Books In A Swamp" or "15 Books You Have To Read While Experiencing The Singular Horror of Winter's Cruelty In an Alpine Tundra."

Winter lists make sense. "Curl up with these books." Spring makes sense: "Try to ignore the inevitable beginning of the horrible summer with these reads." Fall makes sense: "Celebrate the death of another hellish summer with these reads." But summer? "Just try and read this shit in the hot sun while sand fleas destroy your flesh. Try it. You're so great, hotshot. Just try!"

The School System Conditioned Us

Poet Laureate of Rock Villains Alice Cooper said it best:

*No more pencils no more books
No more teacher's dirty looks
Out for summer
Out till fall
We might not come back at all*

That's what it always felt like at the beginning of summer, anyway. Summer was going to last forever this time. I'd never pick up a book again!

I think my brain is still wired to use summer as a time to avoid scholastic endeavors. "Don't read in summer, dummy. You'll have to read a bunch of boring crap when you go back to school in a few months. You need to build up your desire to read by not touching a book. In fact, if you could forget which way books open, that'd be a sign you had a great summer."

Summer Slide? Sign Me Up!

Libraries do summer reading stuff to prevent what they call "summer slide," which is the effect that comes from students doing nothing school-like for three months. A reading program connects kids with books, and this connection helps them retain what they've learned over the school year.

It's a good mission, but the nomenclature is working against them. Has there ever been a ride that sounds more fun than this "summer slide?" A slide you go shooting down all summer long? A slide so great that it actually allows knowledge to leak out of your head? If there were a rollercoaster called "Summer Slide" that was so awesome and intense that it made me lose knowledge, I'd be pretty tempted to climb aboard,

When is roadwork happening? Summer. When do we light torches and hang neon wasp cones of death just to stem the tide of insects? Summer.

and I'm not someone who can afford to lose a lot of smarts. Like a week ago I turned a doorknob with the same hand that was holding a cup of coffee, and when I turned my wrist I poured the coffee on the floor.

Reading prevents summer slide. And maybe there's a part of me that equates reading in summer with year-long, non-stop learning. And maybe that rebellious, anti-intellectual side just can't cotton to the idea of learning ALL THE TIME.

I say, No thanks. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got coffee to scrub off the floor.

I Hate The Summer And Simply Want To Wallow

Look, summer is not my favorite time of year. Lots of people think I'm nuts, but you all, all you filthy summer lovers, you forget about the many horrors of summer.

When is roadwork happening? Summer.

When do we light torches and hang neon wasp cones of death just to stem the tide of insects? Summer.

When do we get out of the shower and have a hard time knowing what's sweat and what's water? Summer.

And books can provide an escape. But I'm grumpy in the summer. I don't want to be consoled. I want to wallow. Why can't you people just leave me alone (on this very public web site) to wallow?

How Did Comics Become a Social and Political Battleground?



My brother asked me if I liked writing about comics on LitReactor.

“Not really,” I said.

He was surprised because in my day-to-day, I talk about comics a lot. Too much. You know how you have a friend who compares every real-life event to *The Simpsons*? I can be like that, but with comics. Even when it's extremely inappropriate, like the comparison of juggling a cup of coffee and spilling it to Spider-Man kinda, sorta killing Gwen Stacy, who was perhaps the love of his life.

I like comics, and I think about them a lot, but when it comes to writing about them there's something you have to accept: someone will hate you no matter what you say. You say something bad about Ms. Marvel and people flip, or you say something good about Ms. Marvel and a different set of people flip. Or you say something fairly neutral, and both sides hate you for not wanting Ms. Marvel to die screaming/not demanding that Ms. Marvel replace Lincoln on the fiver.

This never happens when I write about traditional books or *Demolition Man* or exercise or Stephen King or hemorrhoids or movies or music or any of the other things I've written about on this site. It's very comics-specific.

The other problem with writing about comics is that it exposes you to a

These are just some opinions and theories. If you disagree, comment below with the way in which you hope I'll die.

terrifying tier of risk/reward. Whatever your opinion, the best you can hope for is that people will just subtly say that the world would be better if you spontaneously combusted. This is the best you can hope for because spontaneous combustion would be quick and painless. The average opinion on a comics column usually involves a stated preference that you die a very slow, very painful death that involves a red hot implement puncturing your scrotum.

Because I'm a slow learner, I'm giving it a last shot. And this time, taking it head-on.

Why is the world of comics fandom like this? How did it become a hotbed of social and political battling, and how did it get so ugly?

Go ahead and read. These are just some opinions and theories. If you disagree, comment below with the way in which you hope I'll die.

We Read ABOUT Comics More Than We Read Comics

Let's start right there. By me discouraging you from reading this column and encouraging you to pick up a comic book instead. Not smart on my part, from a self-preservation standpoint, but who said I was smart? Seriously, who? I'll kick his ass!

Besides, I'm not worried you'll put this down and pick up a comic. I wouldn't. I read a good number of comics, and I still end up reading more ABOUT comics than I read comics themselves. I'll spend an hour skimming reader reviews of a trade paperback, which is more time than it would take to just read the damn thing myself. That's how ridiculous I am.

On a personal level, I'm starting to question the amount of reading I do ABOUT comics compared to the amount of reading I'm doing OF comics, and with good reason. Comic Book Resources, likely the most popular comics website, pulled in 373,000 visitors in July of 2016. The estimated monthly value of their traffic at that time was \$670,000. 1.7 million people follow their Facebook page.

That doesn't sound like a ton, but consider this is ONE comic book website. One of many. And consider that loads of mainstream entertainment and news sites also cover comics. And consider that the best-selling comic of July 2016, *Justice League #1*, sold just a hair over 200,000 copies to retailers that month.

Consider: In the same month, a single comic book news site had almost double the readers of the top selling comic.

It's not difficult to see that, in all likelihood, we're doing more reading ABOUT comics than we are reading OF comics. The question: Is this bad? Is this a problem?

Yes, I'm going to say it's bad.

To be a good writer, you read books. Not "How To Write" books. If you want to be a novelist, read good novels. Sure, we all get suckered by a good how-to once in awhile, but most writers will tell you the answers aren't in the how-to's. They're in finding books you love and figuring out what you love about them.

To be someone who enjoys comics, the answer might be as simple as "read more comics."

There's a balance here, a good amount of time to spend reading comics themselves and reading about comics. I wonder if it's time for us to be more thoughtful about where that balance sits.

Negative, Dramatic Stuff Entices Us All

There was this story/non-story a bit back about a dude ripping up a comic that he thought was trash. It's a long story, but it became this big piece of news that folks were pointing to and writing about and commenting on and so on.

The ripped-up book was written by Kelly Sue DeConnick, and at some point she felt obligated to jump in and say something, just because things were getting out of hand.

Here's Kelly Sue DeConnick's version of the story. It's shortened here, and her complete version is a lot funnier:

So, when the email came in [informing me of the incident], I laughed. Can't please everybody. And hey, we had a hell of a Wednesday.

Then... the internet exploded. I keep not-commenting hoping it'll just go away, but every ten minutes somebody new decides to run the "story," folks are saying I said things I not only never said, I never THOUGHT... it's just... WTF?

Look, I've got a hide like a rhino, I can take it. And I know a lot of folks who are perpetuating this are doing so out of love, wanting to come to our defense. And I love them for it, I do. But every outraged post magically puts words in my mouth I never said and makes that one dude THE story.

THAT IS NOT THE STORY. THAT ONE DUDE IS NOT THE STORY.

THIS is the story: You know what we thought this book would do? 9-12K. A couple of our more experienced friends at Image said that they thought it might do as well as 20K — we guffawed. When I saw the initial orders I was in Brisbane — Fraction will tell you, I got light-headed. My hearing went out. As of right now, we have blown through our print run of 57K and are going to a second printing. Do the math. With the second printing we're going to be at THREE TIMES our DREAM NUMBER. How is that even possible?

That is the story.

DeConnick is right. On a lot of levels. We tend to take the negative shit, blow it up to the point that it obscures the real story, and then we debate it while mostly not discussing a book's contents at all. We talk about this one man's action and its problematic nature, but in the course of doing so, we ignore the book, and we ignore the overwhelming positive fact that the book sold much better than expected.

We've always been like this, right? We crave drama. Is *Moby Dick* about some guy's general curiosity about a whale? Hell, no. He wants to kill that bastard for taking his leg. The negative is exciting. It's dramatic. It's popcorn-worthy.

The positive is boring. A book sold beyond creator expectations? Wow. Not exactly material that makes for a good hour-long drama starring a hip-hop artist from the past (we've had Ice-T and LL Cool J. I think it's Petey Pablo's turn).

I don't know what the answer is here, but I think it's got something to do with recognizing that negative internet drama is a lot more appealing to us in the short term. It has an immediacy that's undeniable, and unfortunately, the act of reading good comics doesn't make for an exciting back and forth, or a shouting match, or a one-hour drama where Petey Pablo is partnered with Mariska Hargitay (seriously, can someone make this happen?).

It's hard to say where we go from here. My opinion, however, is that comics fandom is the long game. The marathon, not the sprint. The negative, combative stuff is very tempting, but in the long run I suspect most of us will be happier having spent our time in the less dramatic but more pleasing act of reading good comics. Just a little something to ponder.

Battling Straw Men

Here's the straw man we've created of the old-school comics fan:

I'm an old white guy who lives in my mom's basement and I hate seeing any superheroes other than those I can fantasize about being or sleeping with. Any discussion of relevant social issues sends me spinning off into a world of anger and confusion. Not only do I have no ability to empathize with others, but I actively choose not to. Anyone who disagrees with me doesn't know what they're talking about, and I'll hurl a slur and death threat their way to make my point. I want everything to stay exactly the same for all time.

And here's the straw man we've created to represent the other side:

I'm a college student with no real understanding of the world outside of the university setting. I spend my time looking for things to be angry about, and today I've chosen to campaign that ALL superheroes be changed in some way, even though I don't particularly care about comics, buy them, or read them. Anyone who disagrees with me is a Nazi and should be fired from their job.

Whew, writing those was cathartic. You should try it.

I'm of the opinion that we've lost our way in spending a ton of energy battling one of these two straw men. It's a bad look, it doesn't get us anywhere, and it's time better spent in other ways.

I'll give you two in-comic examples.

One comes from the book *Princessless*, a comic with a diverse cast of characters and girlpower galore. In reading the first volume, I felt like the book was written more to send a message to the book's detractors than it was for the enjoyment of readers who were looking forward to a book where the princess saves herself. The mocking was pretty gentle, nothing that would set off any reasonably-adjusted person. It just felt like the book wasted an opportunity to do something good, spending way more energy mocking tropes than it did creating new ones, slaying dragons and empowering its

audience.

The other example is Nick Spencer's Sam Wilson *Captain America* #17. In it, Spencer creates a group of villains who throw out social justice taglines and attempt to kill an Ann Coulter stand-in:



Again, this feels written as a jab towards the folks it's mocking. And again, I don't have a problem with the mocking, but the whole thing feels like it's written to anger people who don't like Spencer and his work rather than existing for the enjoyment of people who do.

The reason I bring up examples of this happening in the comics is to say we all do it. Even comics creators themselves fall into the straw man trap, even when they have good intentions. Whether it's on Reddit or in the pages of a comic, we all end up fighting the straw man here and there.

I can't stop anyone from going back at a group or individual they don't like, and I can't stop anyone from doing it in their preferred fashion. But when you do so, I want there to be a voice in your head, asking whether you're missing out on an opportunity to do something good for another group of people.

As a favorite farming analogy of mine goes, it's important to fight the weeds. But if all you do is fight the weeds, if you don't take the time to nurture the plants, you'll starve.

Say It With Me: People Don't Like Everything I Like, And That's Okay

Just a few days ago I went and saw my all-time favorite band. This is a band I love on a deep level. A couple weeks ago I stepped out of the house wearing 3 pieces of their merch at the same time, and this was not intentional. I've seen them 25 times live, maybe more.

When I went to last week's show, there was an opener, a great performer, and after he finished, some people up and left. Yes, before the best band in the world hit the stage, people fucking left!

There are ways people can attack the things we love that are more hurtful than others. Watching people leave the venue wasn't a dagger in the heart for me. It was just baffling. But I wasn't about to stand at the exit and say, "Excuse me, but I think you owe me an explanation as to why you're leaving before the greatest band of all time hits the stage."

Someone disliking Lucero, the pride of Memphis, TN, is not a personal insult. I have to accept that. It feels personal sometimes, it's difficult to comprehend, but someone's dislike of music that means a lot to me is not about them saying I'm stupid or bad or unworthy. It's not about me at all. It's about them disliking something. It's a matter of taste.

I could spend time railing about it. Or I could spend more time listening to the music I love.

We could spend time arguing that the taste of others is wrong. Or we could spend that same time engaging with things we love.

It's hard, it sucks, and it can be devastating to hear someone tear down something you love and identify with on a deep level. We all find ourselves in that position from time to time.

But there's good news.

The first piece of good news is that reading comics you enjoy can provide a great refuge, a comfort to return to when someone badmouths your taste in comics.

The second piece of good news is that your enjoyment of something doesn't require the permission or agreement of anyone else. You do you.

We Should Talk About This More In Person

An office work technique I learned was that if you're having a bad relationship with someone at work, try changing up the communication method. If things aren't working through email, try calling the person instead, or just stopping by to chat for a moment when you need something (if you work with me and are reading this, and if we're having trouble communicating, I've found that someone dropping off a bag of Wendy's is my "preferred communication style"). Sometimes the problem is that the medium doesn't suit the message.

Are your in-person interactions anywhere near as combative as your online chats? When you chat with people in person about comics, do you find it boils your blood the same way?

Probably not. And my guess is because it just doesn't feel the same to dunk on someone in real life. There's no audience, and hurting people in real life feels shitty, even if you've made a really good point. And when you hurt people in real life, they aren't going to want to talk to you anymore. The internet is an endless supply of people you can slam, argue with, be mean to and absorb meanness from.

I know comics and the internet have been bosom buddies forever. But I wonder if the online space devoted to comics is helping us enjoy comics more or if it's just become another outlet for us to be jerks.

You May Have Noticed A Theme

Most of this column encourages you to read more comics.

I can't say definitively what caused the state of comics fandom, but I can say that I think reading

more comics is the way to improve it.

Comics fans have it great right now. There is SO MUCH out there, and so much of it is available in a lot more places and formats than ever before. Publishers are collecting older titles, limited runs, works by great creators, and they're putting out new and different stuff all the time. I defy anyone to hit the comics shop, look at the wall of new books and find nothing of interest.

Perhaps that's the problem. There's no scarcity in comics, no inability to read something, no hunt for a book you could never get your hands on. Perhaps it's the need for something more exciting outside the books, and perhaps all of our arguing is what we've found.

If that's your thing? Cool. Let's check in with each other in five years.

In the meantime, I've got a pile of comics to read.

Summertime Sadness: Do Writers Have To Be Sad?



Summertime sadness. It's not just a clever title. It's not just my favorite Lana Del Rey song, excluding of course the one where she compares the taste of her ladyparts to a soft drink, a claim that strikes this writer as dubious. Because if you could make a part of your body taste like cola, wouldn't you make the inside of your mouth taste like cola, and wouldn't that be a much better use of your powers? You could taste cola all the time! Think it through, Del Rey.

Are you a writer who experiences summertime sadness? Maybe even the variety of summertime sadness that's not exclusive to the summer? A winter summertime sadness?

You're not alone. Plenty of writers are depressed, unhappy, unpleasant, or feeling other things that basically just suck.

But do all writers feel like that? All the good ones? Do writers have to be sad sacks in order to be any good?

It might sound like a stupid question, but I'm betting a good number of us think, on some level, that sad, mopey people with tortured souls write better stuff.

I'm here to say that I don't think it's true. As someone who has spent a lot of time sad, I don't think it's true.

And that would be the end of the column if I thought it would satisfy. I suppose you could pretend it's the end if you're in that tl;dr camp. Just assume it ends here, the rest is footnotes, and discuss below!

But for everyone who wants to hear a little bit more, read on.

The Writerly Mystique

Why do we think of writers as being downers?

A happy writer doesn't really fit in with the whole Writer persona. A Writer is supposed to be a drunk, somewhat anti-social, somewhat reclusive, unhappy person who has a difficult time finding love and probably had a bad time growing up. Bonus points if the writer did something that's romanticized but pretty much sucks, like hitchhiking a long distance through a desert, working on a fishing boat of some kind, or listing "degenerate" in that career field on their tax return.

"Writer" is one of the few job titles that carry a pride in this sort of persona. Stand-up comedian is another. You'll hear a lot of arguments about people who grew up happy having no ability to be funny, successful stand-ups. Maybe artists too. People who do art installations at least. As I understand it, an "installation" is art that goes in a place but probably doesn't hang on the wall, and some part of the art DEFINITELY represents genitals. None of this subtle Georgia O'Keefe nonsense.

Certain artistic careers carry this outsider mystique, but can you imagine something like, I don't know, accounting having this sort of stigma? You can only be a good accountant if your parents split? You'll find plenty of accountants, but the really good ones, they always have a dark past? The best accountants are either drunks or in recovery?

What if we applied it to chefs? What if you went to a fancy restaurant and read about how the head chef had a really, really lousy dad? Would that make you excited, licking your lips in anticipation because you could be totally sure the food was going to be awesome?

The sadness thing, I think it might just be part of this whole mystique. A way to keep things mysterious and interesting, and a way of gatekeeping, something we do to keep other people out of the writing world.

I'm in favor of squashing some of this mystique. I worry it makes happy people feel like they're inadequate or underqualified to write.

Confirmation Bias

I mean, sure, we can all name some writers who've had bad times. It's very easy to come up with the Poes who got tanked in some kind of old-timey voting fraud or maybe had rabies, or the Woolfs who filled their pockets with stones and walked into a river. Or the Nicholas Sparkses who melted their own heads in a freak teeth whitening accident while trying to maintain a happy image (okay, this one is more prediction than fact).

The reason we all talk about those people is because they're great writers, but it's also because their troubles and eventual deaths make for great stories. They're interesting. They're tragic. There's

What if you went to a fancy restaurant and read about how the head chef had a really, really lousy dad? Would that make you excited, licking your lips in anticipation because you could be totally sure the food was going to be awesome?

drama.

How much drama is in "This lady wrote a bunch of books, and they were pretty good, and she lived to be reasonably old and then died of the sort of thing people die of when they're reasonably old"? You're bored already. I had to type it, so you can imagine I'm bored as hell.

Interesting stories are the ones that get repeated and spread, so it starts to seem like interesting stories make up the bulk of author stories. Which makes it seem like every author on Earth has some pretty big demons to battle. We look for more stories that prove that point, and kapowski, it starts to look like all writers are deeply sad.

By the way, "kapowski" is my new, *Saved-By-The-Bell*-themed onomatopoeia. Pretty sweet, eh?

It's A Convenient "Where Does It Come From?" Answer

In interviews, writers will often be asked where they get their ideas. And there are a lot of answers out there, but I think the only real, true answer is "I don't know."

Seriously, where do ideas come from? They come from somewhere inside your head. Perhaps prompted by real life, perhaps drawing heavily from real life, but where do the ideas, in the form they hit the page, come from? Do those words exist in any tangible form before they hit the page, somewhere out in the ether? Nobody can really answer that question.

But if we have some sort of answer, a quick, "Well, I was a lonely kid who wrote a lot" kind of thing, we can peg the source. And if we can do that, we don't have to worry about running out of ideas. You've got this endless well of personal issues from which to draw. Those things happened, they're tangible, they're real, and we can look at them as material and feel a level of comfort.

To me, drawing on sadness seems like an easy answer to an unanswerable question. Why do some people write? Why are some people really good at it? Why are some stand-ups funnier than others? Why do some art installations have way more interesting penises and vaginas made out of scrap metal than others?

To me, the easy answer is that it all comes from past problems. And the easy answer is the one we reach for a lot, but that doesn't make it the right answer.

It's Reverse Engineering Talent

We are a world obsessed with reverse engineering talent. Think of all the web sites and blogs devoted to people asking other successful people about their morning routine or their diet or their exercise regimen or what have you. All of them subtly promoting the idea that by acting the way a successful person acts, we can be successful.

Want proof this is stupid? When Steve Jobs worked at Atari, he didn't shower. He ate fruit instead. I'm not kidding. If I stopped showering and started eating fruit instead, it'd be about 20 minutes before you could smell me through your computer screen. I'd take off one shoe, and you'd swear you just snorted this:



For some reason, we look at talented successful people and think we can replicate their habits and outlook and thereby become successful. Rarely do we consider that the habits and preferences and outlooks of folks may be a product of the success rather than the cause of it, or that their habits and their success may be unrelated. In fact, successful people might be successful in spite of their habits and personalities rather than because of them. Like Hunter S. Thompson. The man was a maniac. Here's his daily lunch:

Heineken, two margaritas, coleslaw, a taco salad, a double order of fried onion rings, carrot cake, ice cream, a bean fritter, Dunhills, another Heineken, cocaine, and for the ride home, a snow cone (a glass of shredded ice over which is poured three or four jiggers of Chivas)

No part of me thinks that replicating this lunch would help me be more like Hunter S. Thompson. Well, I guess it would probably make me dead, which is what he's like now, but that wasn't the part I was looking to replicate.

And I don't think replicating something less concrete, like Thompson's outlook, would make me a better writer. Or, at the very least, I don't think it's a requirement.

In looking to sadness as fuel, we might be looking at a person in a very piecemeal way that doesn't really represent who they are and how they wrote the things they did.

The Moment of Harshness: We Need To Believe Our Suffering Means Something

If we go through difficult times, and if we can emerge on the other side, there's this very human need to make sense of it all. Why did this happen to me? What is the purpose of this?

And to those questions, writers can say, "I went through that because it fueled my writing."

Which is entirely possible, entirely true, and entirely valid from the standpoint of an individual who's gone through something or feels awful for no easily determined reason.

Personally, I subscribe to a philosophy that is a bit nihilistic in that nothing has meaning other than the meaning we assign it. In other words, Why do we go through crappy times? For no reason at all. It just happens. Life is just a series of things that happen with very little meaning or purpose, and

almost certainly no forethought.

That's not how everyone feels, and that's cool. But from my perspective, we all have problems. We all have big problems. By turning our problems into a positive, by giving it that spin, some of us can feel a lot better about those problems. It's why you see people who go on Instagram "fitness journeys" and spiritual journeys, and it's why we like reading tales of people who pulled themselves from the wreckage, and it helps writers feel better about who we are, which is very often troubled people who have (sometimes) found ways to make a good life. It's a way of making sense of the world, and if it helps people, that's a good thing. I just have to ask whether we're working backwards, looking at our method of coping with life's bad shit and labeling it as the reason the bad shit happened in the first place.

It's Okay To Be Sad

Before we wrap this up, you should probably know that it's okay to be sad. I know I sound pretty Sesame Street right now, and I just hope I sound cool *Sesame Street*, like that Pointer Sisters song that counted to 12 inside a pinball machine.



It's okay to be sad, and it's okay to not be sad, too. That's what I REALLY wanted to say here.

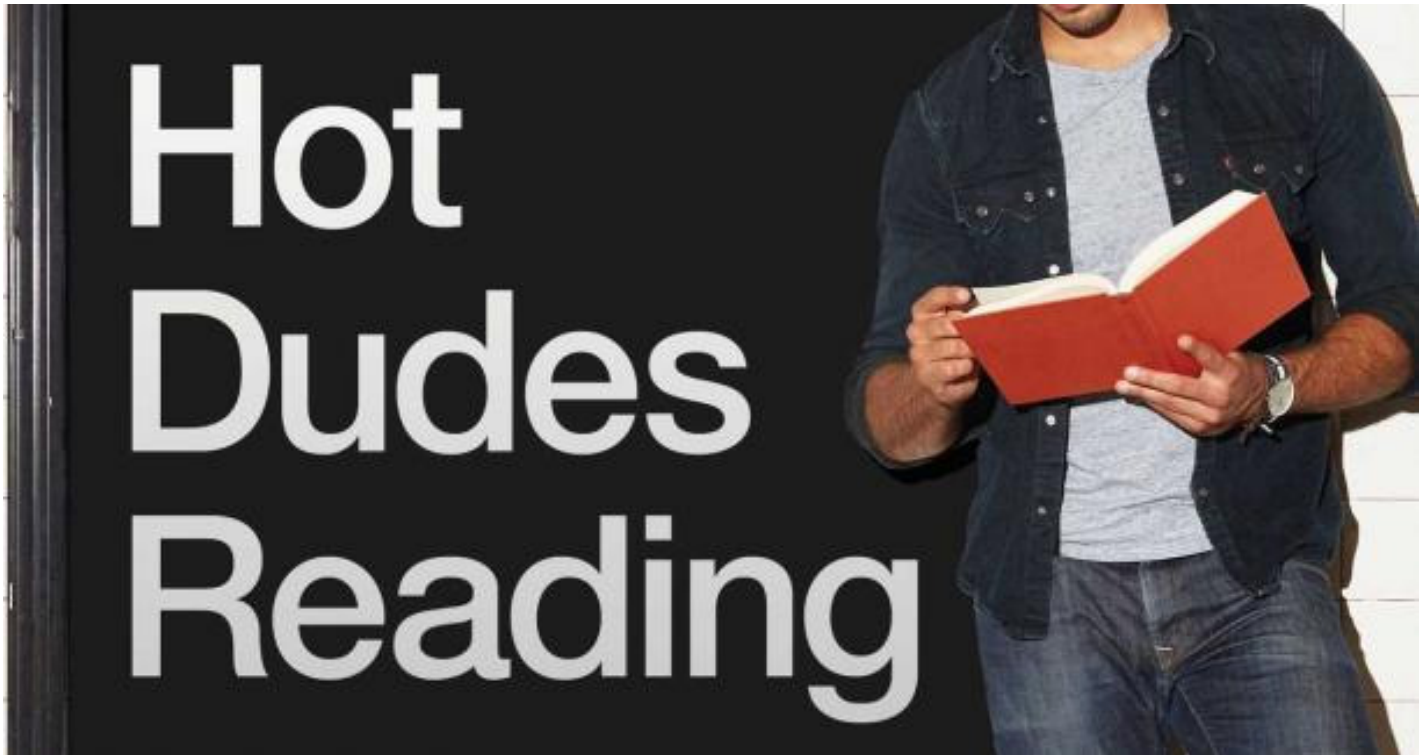
Our sad times can be productive and constructive, and they can provide something that might be hard to find otherwise.

Sad people can write, and they can write great things.

But, if you find yourself happy, if you find your sadness slipping away from you, it's okay to let it go. You can still write.

And if you've never been sad a moment in your life, you can write. I'm confident in you. I believe in you, even though you must already believe in yourself if you've never had a bad moment. Seriously, how does that happen? You've never waited in a line? Had a bad date? Gone to a water park and had an intense water slide shear your swimsuit off your body? Man, you happy people just piss me off...

Hot Dudes Reading: Summer Heat or Total Defeat?



You probably know the Instagram account by now. If you don't, you're behind. Over 1 million people follow Hot Dudes Reading.

The premise is pretty simple. A group of creeps take pictures of attractive men who are reading in public and then add fetishizing captions.

Sorry, am I revealing my take on this too early?

Here's the thing about HDR: Some folks have problems with the sexism of it, and we'll talk a little about that, but I think the idea is a failure in a much worse, much bigger way.

Let's Get This Out Of The Way

Objectifying as hell.

Yes, I recognize that women are subject to this kind of sexism regularly. Yes, I recognize there's a difference between taking a picture of a dude reading on the subway and taking an unauthorized upskirt picture. Yes, I recognize the difference between taking a picture of a woman alone on the subway and a man alone on the subway.

All of those factors might make HDR less sexist in a two-wrongs-make-a-right kind of way, but they don't make the whole thing un-sexist.

And there are three basic points to be made here.

Point the first: The captions take this into gross territory. There's part of me that's like, "This is harmless fun, why make a fuss about it?" But the captions are where things get a little fucked-up.

Snippets? Snippets:

With his hearing and sight already occupied, I have no problem leveraging taste and touch.

Ran into this caffeinated cutie on my way to a friend's #MemorialDay BBQ. I was supposed to pick up some burgers on the way, but all of a sudden, I'm in the mood for a foot-long instead. He looks pretty content but I guarantee my weenie roast will be a lot more eventful than sitting there all afternoon. #INeedAHotDogRealBad #hotdudesreading

Everyone else might be at #Coachella but I'm just on this train trying to figure out where this burley brunette is headed. Lucky for him, he doesn't have to go all the way to the desert for a show stopping performance. And I promise mine will be much more intimate. #LoveOnTop #LoveOnBottom #LoveInTheMiddle #LiterallyAnywhereYouWantIt

I'd even cram myself into a middle seat so I could teach him all about my own special love languages: Words of Insertion, Acts of Sexuality, Receiving Tongues, Spooning Time, and Really Really Physical Touch. But the language I like speaking the most is #bodylanguage #hotdudesreading

This shit is creepy. If I found a notebook with this kind of stuff scrawled in it, I would be concerned. This kind of text should be slathered on a wall in blood and lead investigators to a murderer who presents them with a head in a box.



But the important tie-in here is point the second, which is that consent is non-existent in the world of Hot Dudes Reading. That's right, these dudes, for the most part, have no idea they are being photographed. At one point, HDR tried to reverse-engineer consent by posting on their Facebook that if someone saw himself on there and wanted to be taken down, all they had to do was contact HDR. Which is, to use the name and spelling of a hip-hop artist, Ludacris. How would someone know they were on HDR if they didn't follow already? And how is offering to take something down equivalent to not doing the thing in the first place? We live in an age where consent is everything, but HDR can't be bothered?

Point the third is that this account commoditizes objectification. They sell a book, they sell calendars, they sell t-shirts. And do the models get paid? Do they even know they're in the book? The calendar? Do they get any kickback from their images and sexualization being used to sell t-shirts?

There's a link for "business inquiries" in HDR's Instagram bio, but no link to request your picture be removed. There are SOME posed shots to be found, and they're posed for the purpose of selling Pizza Hut.

Hot Dudes Reading is making a buck off of objectification without consent. Overall, not super cool.

More to the Point

You can read everywhere about the problematic nature of this, you can read arguments for and against it. The objectification isn't the thing I really want to talk about, though. It's that Hot Dudes Reading has failed. They've failed to make reading sexy.

Where My Books At?

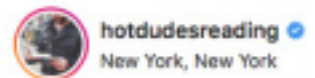
Scroll through HDR's feed, and you'll see plenty of eye candy. But just how book-centric is this whole endeavor?

I did some of my own very un-scientific research using the most recent 100 images (in August 2018). In 13 out of the most recent 100 images, I could discern the book's title (okay, it was really 15, but two of those posts were sponsored for *The Alienist*, so I'm not counting them). 13% of the time, someone could reasonably look at these pics and figure out what the hot dude was reading.

In those same 100 photos, 8 of the captions mention book titles, and many of those are in a sideways fashion where a casual reader wouldn't be able to look up the book and read it themselves.

What I'm getting at here, for being such a book-based thing, HDR doesn't really seem to give a hot damn about what these hot dudes are reading. For all we know, this account might as well be called Hot Dudes Reading *Mein Kampf*.

But let's not go that way. Let's go the other way.



hotdudesreading Sure, no o Gaston, but this coiffed cutie the Disney hunk a run for his love for books will be sure to attention. But since this is my not Belle's, I say we skip the dancing and go find a little tc village. Soon enough he'll ha #Bonjour #Bonjour #IWantMi #hotdudesreading

Load more comments

kircarmel @kristinefahn cryli

jrossn @meghmakes 🤔🤔

In this image, the hot dude is reading *Hyperion* by Dan Simmons. This is a Hugo winner from 1989 that has a multiple timeline sci-fi story presented in a *Canterbury Tales* structure. It's some nerd shit. It's good shit, but it's definitely nerd shit.

Would it be such a bad thing to show us the title, or to list it, so that we could see an attractive guy with genuine interest in some uber-nerd stuff? Doesn't the presence of that particular book say something about that guy, something that we might think of as being in contrast to his appearance? Is this title something that should have to be called out by a commenter?

The books don't matter over at HDR. Not one bit. Okay, maybe a bit. Being generous, they matter 10%. That's not good enough.

When you get down to it, the thing that supposedly makes this idea unique is that the guys are reading. But the reading is more present in the name of the business venture than it is in any of the images.

Books are the hook for HDR. They're the thing that grabs your attention and differentiates this from Hot Dudes...Just Generally Being Hot Dudes.

Books could serve a real purpose here, but once they hook you in, the books are conspicuously absent.

It's Pseudo-Intellectualism

That's right, I used a big-ass word. And hyphenated. And there's a silent "P." I'm on a roll here.

Hot Dudes Reading hits me as the kind of pornography that a person feels better about because they're pretending that there's this intellectual element. Which to me is like when a porn star throws on a pair of nerd glasses. "Oh, she's relatable! She wouldn't have those glasses if she weren't smart! What I'm attracted to is her brain, which elevates me above those other animals who only care about the nakedness!"

Please.

That bespectacled porn star may very well be smart, and these hot dudes may very well be smart, but you don't know that. You're just creating a justification for looking at man meat.

Looking at man meat is fine. It's a wholesome activity. Can we just stop pretending that we're so much better? That looking at HDR is any different from looking at tasteful nudes, distasteful nudes, feet pictures, or whatever floats your boat? If you're looking at this for a form of sexual gratification, you're doing the exact same thing as someone looking at a Victoria's Secret catalog he fished out of the garbage when I was 14 and lived at home and I had to debate whether to tear off the cover, which was wet and stained with coffee grinds, or to try and dry it out and hope for the best. Don't turn your nose up at me. You with your Hot Dudes Reading and I with my brown, stained catalog of models in beige bras, we're the same.

They're Oddly Anti-Kindle

The account refuses to post pictures of dudes reading on Kindles or other eReaders. Jesus, format-bias much?

Don't get me wrong, I read both ways, and I do prefer an honest-to-goodness book. I just think it's sort of weird that amidst pictures of guys, taken while they're unaware, we're suddenly taking a moral stance. It's like some guy says, "I catcall people all the time, but I only listen to vinyl because anything

**You with your
Hot Dudes
Reading and
I with my
brown, stained
catalog of
models in
beige bras,
we're the
same.**

else is for fools." And then I high-five that dude and later think, "Waitaminute. What was that first part again?"

Or maybe it's not a moral stance, maybe it's an aesthetic thing. Which would make a lot more sense if books had anything to do with the aesthetics of this whole shebang. If they represented something of value or if you could see a title more than one out of every ten times.

Do Hot People Have To Own EVERYTHING!?

I'm so tired of sexiness being the benchmark for value. It's like, if a hot person does something, suddenly it's a valid use of your time. When did we decide that? How?

And, okay, fine. Hot people own some stuff. I say we let them have it. Hot people own smoking. Cool, keep it. Hot people own wearing stupid clothes. Great. Hot people own the selfie game. Hot people own modeling. Hot people own being from Asgard in Marvel movies. Hot people own all the stuff where being hot is the primary qualification for doing the thing.

But, damn, do hot people have to take reading too? Do hot guys need to take that as well? Do hot guys need the added validation of being caught reading?

Some of us, the trolls, the C.H.U.D.S., the scumbags, the lords of the sewers, the people who eat chocolate donuts on the toilet—I could go on, but let's just say SOME OF US don't have the hot option. We need something. Leave us something, something we can achieve that lets us compete with chiseled faces and bodies. You've already got so much. Can't you leave us reading? Can't you leave us this one thing?

Books Are Better Than This

The biggest thing, for me, is the penises.

Okay, just kidding. Just trying to get into the Hot Dudes Reading spirit.

The biggest thing, for me, is that books are better than this.

Books mean a lot to a lot of people, and I think it's pretty lame, limp even, that you're using books as a prop to sell sex. Newsflash: Sex sells itself! You don't need to slap something on top of sex to sell sex.

Watching this pairing of books and hot dudes, it's like when your friend brings a new partner out to dinner, and everyone is thinking, "Oh, friend. You can do much better!"

Books, you can do better than this. Those photographers, they're using you. They don't care about you. If hot dudes were always eating apples on the subway, it'd be Hot Dudes Eating Apples. If hot dudes were always carrying grocery sacks, it'd be Hot Dudes Carrying Grocery Sacks. It just happens to be Hot Dudes Reading because it's convenient.

Books, don't be with Hot Dudes Reading because it's convenient. You deserve to be with someone who really cares about you. You're better than an Instagram account that OCCASIONALLY lists your titles and authors. You're better than serving as a tertiary prop to sell pizza (pizza, like sex, also sells

itself, by the way).

You deserve so much more than what Hot Dudes Reading is giving you.



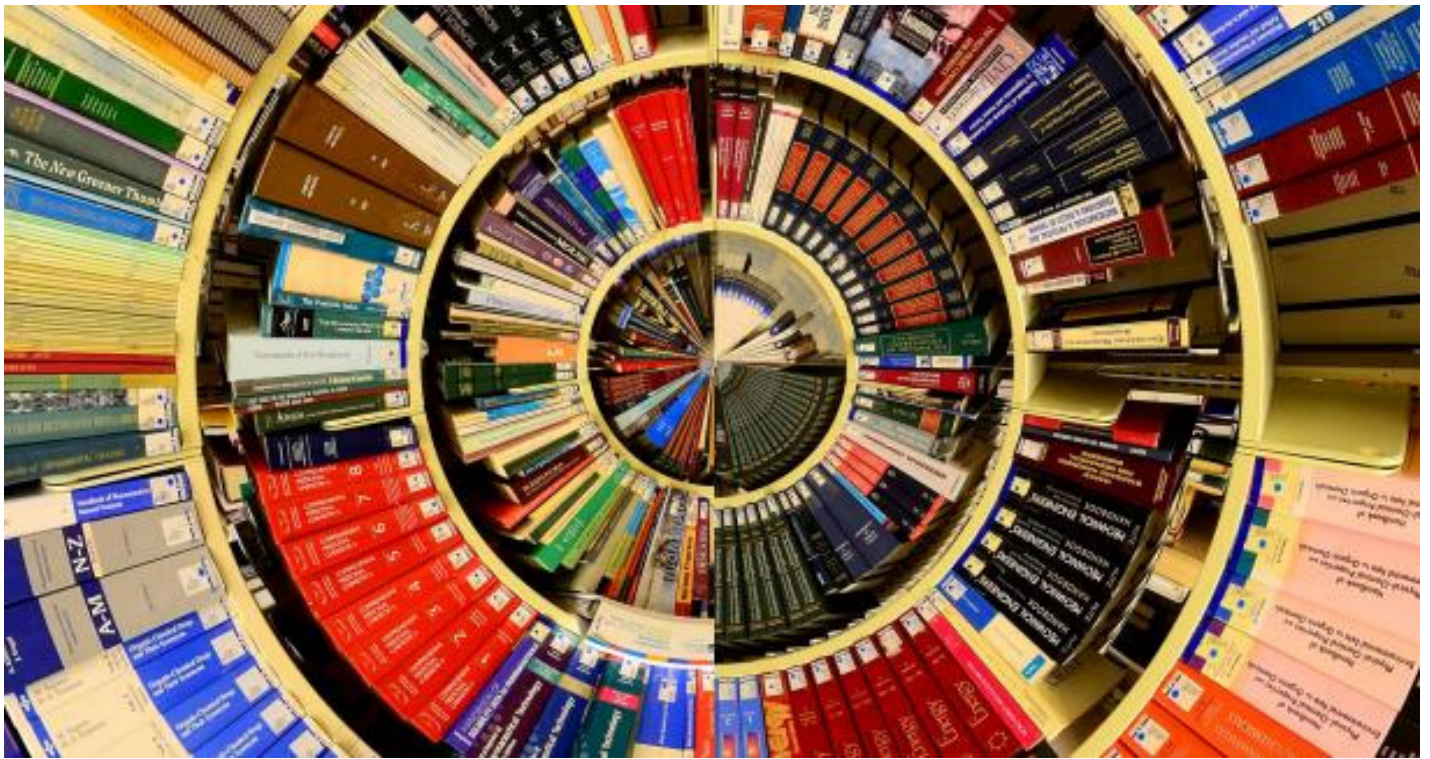
The Dick Jokes Ain't That Good

Most of them are about a 4, at best. And when it comes to dicks, 4 is below average.

Why is this so difficult? You've got plenty of material to work with. Lots to roll around in your mind. Plenty to chew on. There's a rich, thick vein to be mined here.

What HDR does are not dick jokes. They're dick puns. And puns will always be the limp phalluses of the joke world. They're fine, they can be molded into something passable, and they happen to all of us here and there. But given the option, most would take a rock solid joke over a pun any day of the week.

Changing The Book Format Game



There are two types of books in this world:

...uh, finish that with what you will.

There are two types of books in this world: electronic and print.

There are two types of books in this world: read and unread.

There are two types of books in this world: *Ghost Dick*, which I wrote, and all others (all others not being shameless plugs).

However you finish that statement, you're wrong. There are way more than two types of books. In fact, there's been a surge of new publication methods changing the format game.

Let's take a look.

Serial Box

Serial Box is very "everything old is new again." The idea of serializing was big back in the Gatsby days. But let's dismiss the cynical side for a second. Cynical side, you're dismissed. Why don't you go outside and look at some flowers and think how pointless their lives are for a while? You like that kind of thing, right?

Serial Box is releasing books in episodic format. Once a week, you get an "episode" of a story sent to you electronically, copying the way TV has traditionally been released.

Each episode has an estimated reading time of about 42 minutes, which is just a hair shorter than the average episode of your favorite 1-hour drama once commercials are tossed in for cars you can't afford and companies that will insure the car you can't afford, should you someday be able to afford it because you spent the night in a spooky mansion in order to collect an inheritance (I always thought that plot was stupid. Wouldn't you rather inherit the cool, spooky mansion?).



Timed-out reading in show-length increments isn't something most people think about. I first heard about it from bizarro lit luminary Carlton Mellick III, who said he wanted to write books that you could sit and read all in one shot, consuming them in a single experience the way you would a movie.

Serial Box's stuff is written by teams. Most of us in the book world hiss and back away into a dark corner when we see an ampersand next to an author's name, but maybe it's time to be more open-minded about the idea. TV is certainly created by more than one writer, and it'll be interesting to see where a writer's room might take books.

You can choose to subscribe or get your entire "season" at once for binge-reading, too. It seems to me that binge-reading is basically normal reading, which defeats the point here, but to each his own.

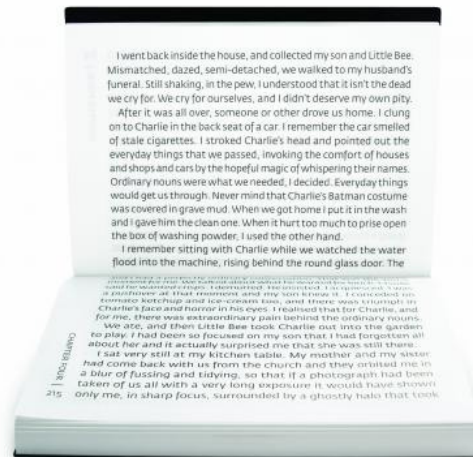
For \$1.59 access to weekly episodes in both text and audio formats, it's pretty inexpensive and could be a lot of fun. There's some utility here worth exploring if you're running a book club or the more loose kind of book club where you and a friend read the same thing and then drink booze and talk about it (this is the only kind of book club worth its salt. Plus, you can use said salt in a tequila drinking ritual, the order of which I never get right).

Novelty or Next Big Thing?

I'm not totally sure that the weekly episode thing is working great for TV these days. On the other hand, one of the barriers to entry with books is the time commitment, and knowing the time commitment in advance might work in Serial Box's favor.

This one is all going to depend on the content. Hey, if you can get Vince Gilligan to run a writer's room and make one of these, you're set. But if the content doesn't become a hit with an audience, it'll fizzle out. The format is a good idea, but it's not enough to draw in big crowds on its own.

Dwarsliggers



These are relatively new to Americans, but they might be familiar if you're overseas (and the above image is a Stephen King book from a few years back, but let's stay with the thread here). A Dutch printer is credited with starting the whole thing, making smartphone-sized books printed with special paper normally used for bibles, thin paper that's still opaque. He kicked his press into gear in 2009, and since then he's published some big names like Dan Brown and John le Carre.

The American side of the story is that teen bookthrob John Green saw some books printed in this style while overseas, and he was impressed with the quality of the bookmaking and surprised how readable they were despite being pretty small. Penguin worked with Green, and in the fall we'll see some new editions of John Green's hits in palm-sized, high-quality minis.

They're small, they're compact, but they're still high quality and useful. They have a hinged spine, which lets the books lay open despite being so small, and Penguin worked hard to make *An Abundance of Katherines*, which has notes and charts and stuff, work in the small, landscape format. It's not just a tiny book, it's a very thoughtful, well-constructed book.

Novelty or Next Big Thing?

I guess I should have said "Next Small Thing." But I'll save that joke for your dad to use sometime.

The application here is obvious: A book that easily fits in a pocket, even a crappy pocket like the pocket on this one pair of jeans I bought from Amazon that definitely has pockets from girl pants. And I mean girl pants, not a woman's pants. These pockets are too small to hold a damn pencil. If only we'd known, we could've rolled that 19th Amendment momentum into some pocket equality too.

Anyway, the thinking behind smartphone-sized books is pretty clear, but will it catch on with the audience?

It's entirely possible. We've been seeing that younger generations really aren't all that into electronic reading. John Green might be the perfect author to get an idea like this off the ground. He appeals to that print-hungry youngish generation, and his books make for pretty good reads in transit, on breaks, stuff like that.

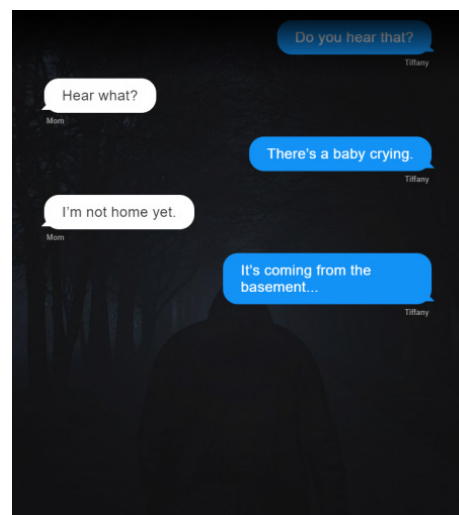
And to be honest, I was totally suckered by a Moleskine-sized copy of Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*. I don't get suckered often, but when I do, it's by an adorable little book about a bunch of people who use way too many drugs.

Hooked: Stories Through Texts

With Hooked, you install an app and then read a story presented as a series of texts. The app's layout mimics the look of an iPhone's messaging app, and each time you tap the screen, a new text is displayed.

Hooked was downloaded over 20 million times. So there's certainly interest in the idea,

Books have been written in the format of texts, of course, like Lauren Myracle's *TTYL*, but Hooked seems to be a first as far as sending the narrative in text format based on a reader's taps as



opposed to printing texts into a book. It's a big deal to be able to read a text-message-based book on the device you'd use to read text messages.

Of course, it's also the perfect thing for a short attention span.

Novelty or Next Big Thing?

Here's the opportunity being missed by Hooked: texts that build the narrative should come to your phone as texts, and they should come on a schedule, not when you enter the app and tap the screen. It's sort of fascinating to consider the possibility of a text stream narrative, fictional messages popping in next to messages from your friends. "Friends" being Amazon shipment notifications, in my case.

There's just something very appealing about crossing those streams, the real and the narrative, through a method of storytelling (text messaging) used almost exclusively for real-life application up to now.

Hooked isn't quite there yet, and I think that's going to hurt it. The stories are contained in a tidy app, waiting for you to pick them up, rather than barging into your life and demanding a little attention.

It's also going to be a big challenge to create solid writing through texts only. It's such a limited format, and creating a narrative where it feels like you're peeking in, keeping up the illusion that this isn't a created narrative, is going to be very difficult when dialog is your only tool. In this case, the format will heavily dictate the sort of content that's workable.

Augmented Reality

Think of this like *Pokemon Go!*, where you see objects existing in your world through a screen, but these objects are attached to a book. So you're reading *Harry Potter* on a tablet, and then you hold it up and see a Voldemort in the sky Quidditching all over a Horcrux (I don't totally remember how that series goes, you guys).

At my job, we did some of this with a NASA app that allowed folks to explore various space probes, the Mars Rover, things like that. You'd hit a button, and then if you held up an iPad, it looked as though the Rover was in the room with you. It gave you a sense of scale, and you could walk around the Rover and really check it out. It was very cool to "see" these objects in a real world context, and it was a great way to learn.

Novelty or Next Big Thing

I don't know if I buy this one.

Okay, pretty solid application when it comes to education. If you could actually see the layout at Antietam (see, I don't know about Harry Potter, but I know about The Civil War's bloodiest battle), that would probably help a lot of students. But that's because the book, as an object, may not be the best vehicle for some types of information or for some types of learners. When it comes to reading, however, using books for reading as opposed to information delivery, I'm not convinced that AR is the future.

I heavily question the utility of having something presented to a reader versus the author's work of describing the thing and the reader meeting the author halfway, creating their own image of it in the

mind. I think this exchange and compromise between reader and text is really what makes reading an interesting and different pastime. Part of the “fun” of reading is imagining things. Using your brain to make a picture instead of letting a gizmo do it for you. Do I sound like enough of an old man yet? Should I talk more about Civil War battles?

The other thing is, at what point is the object no longer a book? If I’m looking at 3D models of sharks, am I reading or looking at 3D sharks? Don’t get me wrong, I’m down with looking at 3D sharks. But I’d be hard-pressed to do that for an afternoon and say I was “reading.” AR might be a thing we look to in the future, but I don't know if it's the future of reading.

Choosing Your Own Adventure

I wrote quite a bit about the shortcomings of these “children's” books where you’ll most likely meet a grisly end by being decapitated by a giant ant or decapitated in a rollover car accident or doing drugs. But the Choose Your Own Adventure approach has expanded into some new territories.

Neil Patrick Harris wrote his memoir in a CYOA style, even mimicking the cover art of the well-known series.

Ryan North wrote *Romeo And/Or Juliet*, which has branching paths and unlockable characters and storylines.

Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters Remix* had some of these elements too, being non-linear and not necessarily including the entirety of the text in a straight readthrough.

Novelty or Next Big Thing

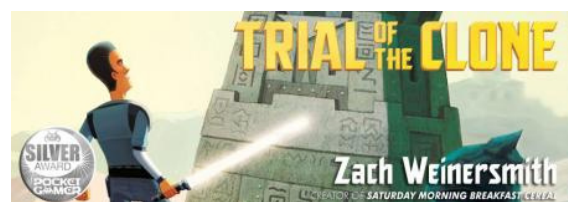
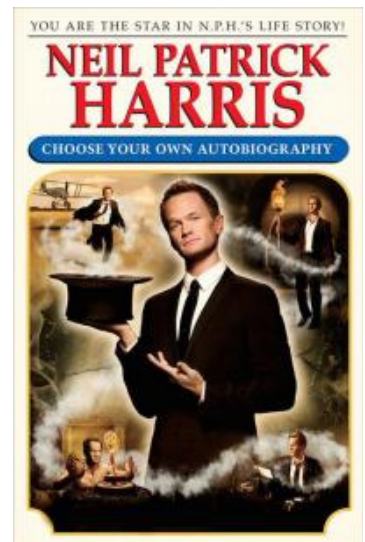
The Choose Your Own Adventure idea isn't anything new, but applying it to nostalgia-hungry adult books and non-fiction seem like different ways of looking at books.

These books have a big downfall, which is that they’re SUPER ANNOYING for those of us who are completionists. Maybe I go through *Romeo And/Or Juliet* and end up experiencing 10% of the pages. In order to get a more complete read, I have to do multiple readthroughs and retread a lot of territory I’ve already trod, and I’m already unhappy about that because I don’t like the word “trod.” It sounds like slang that mixes “turd” and “trot,” like you’re someone who takes dumps while walking upright without even slowing down.

I’d predict that the Choose Your Own Adventure format will mostly die in print, and while a few folks will carry the torch, it won’t be a big thing overall. But I also think this could be the emerging of an electronic selection of game-ified reads that would showcase some real benefits to the electronic format that haven't yet been fully explored.

OR HAVE THEY!?

Gameified Books



Zack Weinersmith, famous for his webcomic *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal* among other publications, or possibly famous for having a hilarious name (sorry, dude. You're really great, but you've gotta admit, hilarious), put together *Trial of the Clone*, which is a book that functions through choices and contains RPG-like elements, even a system that includes random page turning as a substitute for dice rolls.

The book was fun on its own, but a company called Gamebook Adventures made the whole thing run on an iPad, automated the battle systems, and added voiceover by Wil Wheaton. There are additional achievements and art to unlock as well.

That's not the only book Gamebook Adventures have put out. They have a huge selection of titles and genres, all of which blur the lines between games and books in a way that a middle school Pete could only dream of. Alas, to finish stupid required reading through a video game that had a lot of jokes about clones murdering people. If only.

Novelty or Next Big Thing?

The electronic format might be a great thing for these types of reads. If an electronic format could create buttons to take me back to the place where I went wrong, an electronic finger between the pages of my last decision, that'd be pretty nice. They could even include some other features like interactive action sequences! And they could be about commandos! BIONIC commandos that you control! Wait, no. That's a video game. They already have those. Roll that back a few steps.

That's the whole thing here, right? If Wil Wheaton is reading the book to me, and if I'm not keeping track of the battle systems...what do I get to do? I wanna do some stuff! That might just be me, Ol' Antietam Pete (I hope that one doesn't stick), but when I read a book, I like to do some of the work sometimes. When I play D&D, I don't like automation all that much. It just takes some of the fun out of it.

This type of interactive storytelling does more for me than the augmented reality type, but I'm wondering if increased accessibility and ease of use in video game creation software will put this sort of thing in the grave before long.

8 Reasons We Should Listen To Book Banners



It's September, which means it's Banned Books Month. Lots of us, especially in the book selling/lending worlds, get pretty excited about this. We wear our Read Banned Books t-shirts and fasten I Read Banned Books pins to our cool jackets (or cardigans). We create massive displays and really stick it to the man.

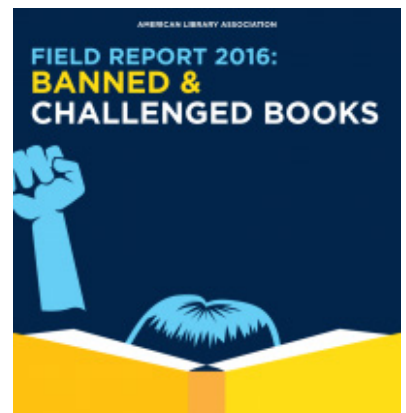
I've done it too. I've been there. Big display and "Fuck you, book banners!" attitude.

Time has passed, and as with most things (my bones, my stools) I've softened a bit. I've softened on banned books. Well, maybe not on the books being banned, but on the book banners. Time and experience have taught me that when someone comes into the library or bookstore wanting a book banned, bold slogans printed across a punk t-shirt might not be the best way to deal with them. In fact, there are some good reasons to listen to book banners.

Please douse your torches and holster your pitchforks (holster? Is that a method of putting away a pitchfork?). I'm not in favor of banning books. I'm in favor of talking about why listening to book banners is worth your time.

Different Flavors of Bans

Sometime this month you'll hear an alarming stat about how many books were banned this year. But let's take a moment to talk about what that means, exactly, because you're probably picturing a pile of books, some gasoline, and a smiling, evil religious figure with a match. We think about a book ban being like the dancing ban in Footloose. Nobody could hold a dance, nobody could dance anywhere in the community. If you wanted to dance, you had to find an abandoned barn and be prepared to face the consequences (which mostly consisted of



being the butt of jokes in columns like this, as I find choreographed 80's dance a silly medium for the expression of genuine emotion).

So when you hear a stat about "banned books," you likely picture flames and sermonizing and a group of zombified followers cheering the destruction.

This image is...not entirely accurate.

The book ban stats you're most likely to hear come from the American Library Association. Often, these stats are called "bans" by media outlets, but the ALA counts "challenges." What's the difference?

A challenge can include something like a library user wanting a book moved from a children's collection to an adult collection. It can include a request that a school remove a book from the curriculum or from a particular grade's required reading. A challenge also does not need to be successful to be counted.

It doesn't mean that challenges have no impact. A challenged book is less likely to make the curriculum in the future. A challenge might make a bookstore hesitant to stock something. But, if we go back to the *Footloose* situation, we should all keep in mind that if *Footloose* were the story of a challenge to the act of dancing, it might be venue-specific, might be age-specific, and might not be successful. It would be a pretty boring movie, however, we could still play chicken on tractors and have that sweet soundtrack.

I just want everyone to understand the context of this discussion. The book banners we're listening to might not want a book removed from the world. They might not want a book burned out of existence. They might have requests that are a little more reasonable.

Banners Are Often Engaged With The World Of Books

When you look through the ALA's highlighted challenges from various years, there are some ridiculous stories. Challenging Lauren Myracle's *TTYL* because it encourages teenagers to rebel against their parents? Please. Like teens wouldn't come up with that idea on their own. *Footloose* was in '84, WAY before *TTYL*, and those teens rebelled like...you know what? Enough with the *Footloose*.

Other challenges, however, show a deeper involvement with the world of books.

When someone challenged Ian McEwan's *Atonement* at Toronto Public Library, it wasn't on the basis of crude material or sexiness or anything remotely exciting. It was because the book contained "poor grammar and sentence structure." A Dave Eggers book was also challenged for the same reasons, also at Toronto Public Library. Possibly by the same person? Either way, take that, literary darling Dave Eggers!

I don't want to get into the debate about whether "poor grammar and sentence structure" are legitimate reasons to ban a book. I don't want to get into that debate because they totally aren't: End debate.

What interests me about this challenge is that it would seem there's an individual at Toronto Public

Library who is engaging with a number of books and the library. This is probably someone doing a good bit of reading, and someone who is reading critically.

I like that, personally. I like when people actually give a shit. I think the shits they're giving are sometimes directed poorly, and I think maybe this person would find a better outlet in a book club or in writing extremely angry Amazon reviews, but I think it's easier to redirect that energy than it is to get someone who doesn't care about books to start caring.

Lots of people don't care about books. Banners don't care the way I want them to, but at least they have SOME passion regarding books. They genuinely believe in a book's ability to shape a life. They've had at least ONE passionate conversation, as an adult, regarding a book.

It's a low bar, but it's reality. And I'd rather listen to someone who has a hot take on Dave Eggers than someone who hasn't read a book since high school.

Their Concerns Can Prompt Us To Reevaluate Canon

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is an oft-challenged book, as are lots of titles commonly assigned in schools. Huckleberry's troubles often originate with one word. Well, one word that's used hundreds of times.

It's a book that I don't think should be banned or censored, but it's one that prompts a good question: Is there something specific you want to get out of this book, and can that need be fulfilled by a book that has, I don't know, something less than a couple hundred N-bombs?

It's a question I've phrased badly here, but it's a valid question. Are some canonical works replaceable by other works that are more relevant and cover the same ground? Are there alternatives that still speak to the spirit of a work without carrying with them the specific issues?

Hey, sometimes the answer is No. I accept that. *Huckleberry Finn* probably isn't replaceable in a college course regarding classic American novels of the 19th century. Some books just don't have an equivalent. Some books are used specifically because they challenge readers in specific ways.

However, it's crucial that we ask the question, even if the answer is No. It's a good exercise to seek alternatives. Seeking alternatives can result in finding alternatives, or we might end up crystallizing what was unique about the work we were trying to replace, both of which are good things.

Book banners don't necessarily phrase their complaints that way, with a look to alternatives, but sometimes it takes an extreme viewpoint ("All copies of this book should be destroyed!") to get us asking the right questions ("Does this book need to be read by every American 10th grader?").

The Response Can Mean A Widening Of Options For Readers

What started as an attempt at narrowing options ends in a widening. Feels like a win to me, and a win we might not have seen had the challengers kept quiet.

In a Michigan high school, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was challenged because it depicts a sexual assault. The compromise reached in that case was that students could pick one of three books (one of those options being *The Bluest Eye*) that covered the themes of oppression and poverty.

This is a fairly common compromise type that comes out of these types of challenges.

Again (for the hundredth time) I don't necessarily agree with the challenge, but I like the result. Not so much the steering away from Toni Morrison, but I like that students, especially students in later high school, are given a modicum of agency in their education. I like that they're learning to look at options and select something for themselves. Y'know, maybe think for themselves just a little bit. I like that *The Bluest Eye* remains one of the options.

What started as an attempt at narrowing options ends in a widening. Feels like a win to me, and a win we might not have seen had the challengers kept quiet.

Oh, The Hypocrisy!

Let's look in the mirror for a second. You can dim the lights a little first, if you'd like. Sometimes I'm not good about trimming the nose hairs and it gets—I digress.

It's pretty hypocritical to advocate for the freedom for books to say what they want, but in doing so to shout down folks who have opinions on those same books.

This doesn't mean we have to agree with a book banner, and it doesn't mean we have to like what they say. We don't have to like anything about them at all! And we most certainly don't have to ban a book because someone requests it.

However, we do have to give them the chance to say their piece.

1984 is a book. The person trying to ban it is a person. The decent thing to do is to afford the same courtesy to a living person (even if they're totally wrong) that we do an inanimate book.

They Force Us To Ask What Art Is

When someone wants to talk about Toni Morrison, it's pretty easy to bust out some evidence that Toni Morrison's works are very reasonable to have in a library.

When someone talks about *The Baby Jesus Butt Plug*, it's tougher.

You know and I know that *The Baby Jesus Butt Plug* has every right to exist. I know, anyway. I OWN this novel. I GET it. It gets ME.

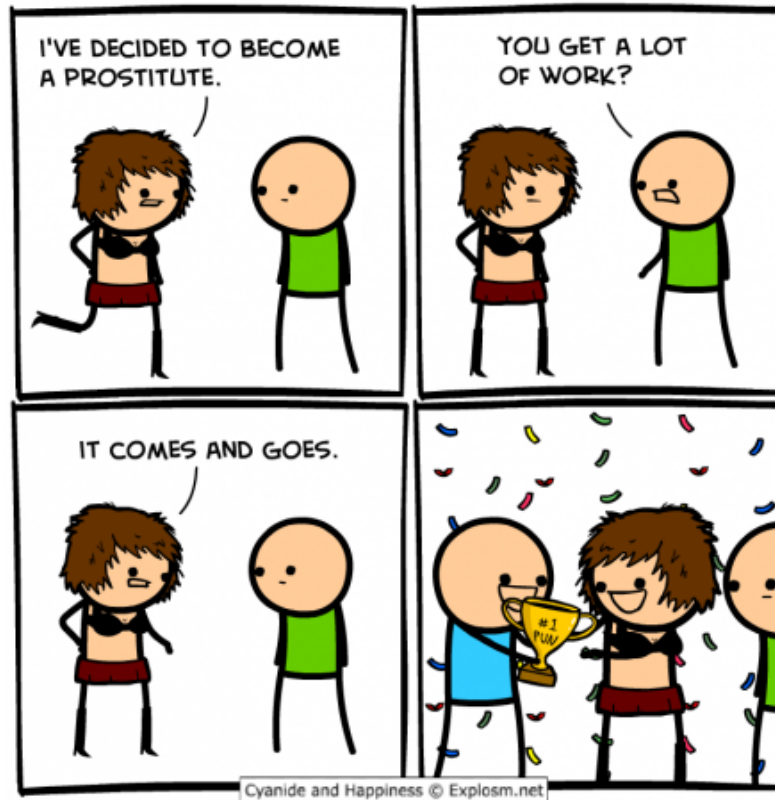
But when I imagine having to explain to an angry person why my library or bookstore carries this item, I don't think "This book GETS me, man!" is going to cut it.

The shadow of the book banner forces us to think. Forces us to come up with our own answers as to what is and isn't of value, what is and isn't important, and why.

It's good practice to think about books that way. It's a good mental exercise.

Sometimes Challengers Are Totally Right

Are you familiar with the comic *Cyanide and Happiness*? This is *Cyanide and Happiness*. A fairly tame *Cyanide and Happiness*:



A *Cyanide and Happiness* book was challenged because it was located in the children's section of a library. I don't think I sound too prudish when I say that a comic with jokes about prostitutes, jerking off, and jamming a marker into someone's rectum should have been shelved there in the first place. This IS listed as a challenge in ALA's documentation, but this is, in my opinion, a good call, and the "book banners" behind this one were correct.

And that's the thing. Once in a while...these folks are right. Once in a while, someone picks up a book of comics where a proctologist is inserting a giant foam "We're #1!" finger into someone's ass, and that book probably doesn't need to be next to *Goodnight Moon*.

Bookstore owners, librarians, and teachers can't read everything. Sometimes we miss something. Sometimes we miss a giant sex toy in the middle of an otherwise perfectly suitable graphic novel. It happens, and when it does, we've got to be grown-up enough to admit we were wrong.

If we crap all over book banners right off, if we don't listen to what they have to say, then we have to be prepared to sit down to a pretty big meal of crow now and again.

Because Oftentimes, Hearing Them Out and Treating Them Seriously Fulfills Their Need

Ignoring someone or treating their concerns as petty and stupid is a quick way to cause yourself a problem.

The flipside, listening to someone as a person and treating their ideas as valid is a great way to solve a problem. Most folks really underestimate the power of making someone feel heard. This is something that has saved my relationship. Take note:

When my partner, Poonmaster Flexxx (her self-chosen nickname, by the way) has a bad day, and when she's telling me about it, I'll ask her, "Do you want Boyfriend/Listening Peter, or do you want Solutions Peter?"

Most times, Solutions Peter can take a hike. Because what she wants is for me to listen. To hear what she's saying and understand it. Not to give my take on it, not to tell her what she should do next time. She's in a bad mood, and moods aren't problems to be solved.



Figure A: Solutions Peter. No. Bad.



Figure B: Listening Peter. Yes. Good. Note the active covering of the mouth part of the face, leaving the ear parts wide open.

Likewise, when someone has a negative experience with a book, it's often feelings-based. "This book is obscene!" is really a way to say "This book made me feel scandalized!" "This book is inappropriate for children!" is language that usually means "I am unhappy that my children read this book."

It's not nearly as fun, but often, hearing someone out relieves most of their concerns and fears. If you can suck it up and listen to someone complain, and if you can squeeze out a little empathy, you can probably have the best possible outcome, which is the one where the book stays available to everyone and the individual feels heard. No meeting with management, no articles in the paper. Just

an exchange of words.

There was a time when I was always low-key spoiling to fight for a book's right to exist. I craved nothing more than to talk about freedom of speech and American values and yadda yadda. I still believe in those things, however I recognize that what matters with a book banner is the outcome: the banner is satisfied on some level and the book stays on the shelf. That's it. It's not about creating a scene, it's not about my ego, it's not about a performative act that demonstrates my feelings on intellectual freedom. It's about treating this human person like a person, and it's about keeping the book on the shelf. Sometimes, oftentimes, MOST times, listening to a book banner is the easiest way to make that happen.

Is Crosstalk Killing Your Feedback?



We've all been in a workshop where that one wretched member had us conspiring to "dissolve" the workshop and then re-form without telling them. We've all done the thing where we allow and disallow booze. We've all had the rules about length and continuing stories, all of which are violated in a fashion usually reserved for exploitation horror movies.

There are lots of great ways to ruin a workshop.

But there's something that wrecks your workshop in a sneakier way. Something I didn't know about until I was lucky enough to workshop with Chuck Palahniuk and Lidia Yuknavitch (and 20-some super talented writers) earlier this year.

I'm talking about crosstalk.

Now that I know about crosstalk, I can't stand it. It's like that high-pitched noise you didn't notice at first, but as soon as you did, you couldn't stop hearing it.

If there's something killing your workshop, something you can't quite identify, I'd put money on it being crosstalk.

What Is Crosstalk?

Crosstalk sounds like some kind of electronic board game from the early 90's, which would probably have a very cool commercial that takes place in some kind of laser volcano.

Sadly, crosstalk is not nearly that cool, and it has nothing to do with volcanoes. Or lasers.

Crosstalk works like this:

Person A reads a piece in workshop.

Person B gives feedback on the piece.

Person J (for jerk) gives feedback, but that feedback is more about Person B's feedback than it is about Person A's story.

In other words, Person B uses their turn to say, "The father character was really well fleshed-out." Person J uses their turn to say, "I disagree with Person B. The father should be more fleshed out. I also think Person B's statement about..."

The short version, crosstalk is feedback that's focused on other feedback more than it is on the original piece.



How Is This A Problem?

I know a lot of you are probably disagreeing with me right now. Probably saying something like, "But sometimes someone gets a bad piece of feedback!" or "That's helpful information you're talking about!"

If you're saying that, I'd encourage you to take a deep breath, stop being defensive, and read. Just read on and see if things make more sense.

It's Disrespectful To Your Fellow Writers

When someone brings a piece to workshop, their piece should be workshopped. It should be the primary topic of discussion during the time devoted to it. When we're talking about each others' feedback, we're not talking about the original piece. This is intensely disrespectful to the person who brought in their work and shared it with everyone.

This is not the time to school your fellow workshopers by giving the best, most insightful feedback.

Give your fellow workshop members the time and attention they deserve.

Crosstalk Causes Us To Focus On Pointless Details

I once listened to a podcast where two movie critics talked about E.T. They spent a ridiculous amount of time arguing over whether it makes sense for Elliott's mom to have Coors in the fridge:

Critic A: It doesn't make sense. Why would she have Coors?

Critic B: I don't know. Maybe she bought it for someone else or had a barbecue or something.

Critic A: It just doesn't seem like a type of beer a single mom in the 80's would drink.

This went on WAY too long.

If you engage in crosstalk, you'll spend an hour going back and forth over the brand of beer that would make most sense for a character to have in the fridge. And pretty much ignore an entire movie about a space alien that befriends a boy and goes through a traumatic medical horror.

Crosstalk can easily turn to spending time on shit that doesn't matter. It's how you end up having those ridiculous discussions about the color of a character's nail polish or the Midwestern state they hail from, but the real issue is that the story is a structural nightmare with no ending.

What If The Reader Takes A Piece Of Bad Feedback Seriously?

It's entirely possible that you see crosstalk, when YOU do it, as a positive thing. That you're rescuing another writer, preventing them from taking bad advice to heart.

I'm going to say this is an unlikely outcome and not something to worry about.

When you're getting feedback on a piece, don't you mostly just absorb whatever's thrown your way, and don't you, later on, decide that some of it is on the money and some of it is bullshit? And don't you think that the others you work with can do the same thing? Isn't that why you're working with them?

There are the occasional inexperienced writers who come about, and yes, they might need a little help. But to be honest, if you've got someone in your group who is constantly offering bad advice, you should consider how you might help THAT person give better advice as opposed to stopping others from taking their advice. If you've got a leaky roof, you don't protect your floor by buying a bunch of buckets. You fix the damn roof.

**Create your
feedback, give
it to the writer,
then shut up.**

Why Is This Better?

First, feedback without crosstalk is better because you'll provide fresh takes on stories. You'll talk about how they hit you and what stuck out as important.

Second, you'll avoid confusing the writer. If Person A says "I want more description of the room" and Person B says the opposite, these two pieces of feedback create discussion in the group, but later that night the writer will get home and figure out they didn't learn much about their piece.

Third, a good writer brings something to workshop because they want to know how readers will react. Average readers will not sit around and discuss the piece with other readers. They don't read with that in mind. They will pick it up, and if you're damn lucky and damn good, they'll finish it. Your feedback should be oriented that way as much as possible, towards discussing the piece as it would likely be experienced by a casual reader, not towards creating discussion and debate in the workshop.

How You Can Avoid Crosstalk

If you think you might be engaging in crosstalk, it's easy to eliminate it from your feedback.

Listen to or read the story, come up with your feedback, and then give it. That's it.

Don't jump in on what someone else says. Don't change what you were going to say after you hear everyone else. Create your feedback, give it to the writer, then shut up.

How You Can Banish It From Workshop Entirely

To make this work, you kind of have to be in charge, or you have to be with a group that's open to the idea of eliminating crosstalk. But if you get there, it's simple.

The rules:

1. The writer shares their piece
2. The workshopers consider and form their feedback
3. Each workshoper provides the feedback they've created
4. Each workshoper talks once
5. If the writer is confused or wants second opinions, they can ask for them specifically. Crosstalk is allowed at the writer's direction, once all the feedback has been gathered
6. It's a practice, and it takes some getting used to. But if you're in a workshop, I recommend giving this a shot. Go one round (however many weeks that takes) trying this out. Be strict about it at first. See if you leave with better feedback.

Oh, one other thing, someone has to be willing to enforce the rules.

I suggest you buy a name placard, something like this:



Then you designate one person to kill crosstalk at every meeting. The placard reminds everyone it's nothing personal if you have to be reminded to avoid crosstalk. It's not that Steve from workshop hates you. It's just his turn to be the asshole.

Nitpicking 17 Great Horror Comedies



Horror and comedy go together like Leatherface and chainsaws. Like Candyman and mirrors. Like candy corn and the garbage can.

But even the best horror comedies have lousy moments, tiny little things that change the tone or take a person out of the story. It's these things that keep me up at night. Not the Kruegers or the Vorheeses. It's these tiny, nitpicky things.

Sure, I could've used this space to write an appreciation of these excellent horror comedies, but let's be serious. I'm a lonely man in an apartment who has not had success in life. That has not set me up to be good at heaping praise on genuinely good things.

What it has done is set me up to be a class A (hole) nitpicker.



1. 'Shaun of the Dead'

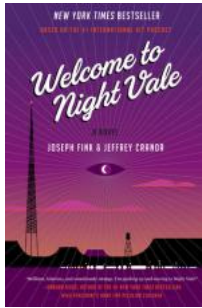
This is the one most of us think of when it comes to horror comedy, right? Classic sequences, Edgar Wright's signature, energetic style. We get to see what happens when a couple shitheads have to deal with the zombie apocalypse.

The first 80% or so of the movie is gold. Cinematic gold. Horror comedy gold. So much gold that there should be latenight infomercials offering cash for your Shaun of the Dead DVDs.

But the last 20% is a little rough.

The corpse of this movie starts to decay rapidly towards the end, right after the "Don't Stop Me Now" sequence. There's really nothing funny about the last stand against the zombies. By the end, there are no laughs for the characters or the viewers.

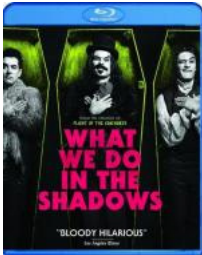
And despite being so creative throughout, the resolution to the zombie apocalypse (people running in with guns) is pretty unsatisfying. That's being nice. If I'm being honest, it stinks worse than a half-rotted Nick Frost (un)living in the shed.



2. 'Welcome to Night Vale' by Joseph Fink And Jeffrey Cranor

This very funny book, based on the popular podcast, features updates from a small desert town with more than its fair share of creepy goings-on.

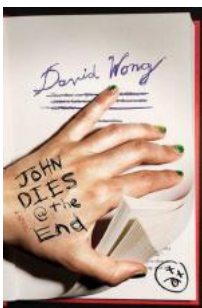
Part of the podcast's strength is its willingness to play and experiment with format (doing an episode that's mostly in the form of a phone tree, doing a "Best Of" clip episode from shows that never existed). I think the idea of a radio station in Creepsville, U.S.A. is a great concept for a podcast, but the translation to print felt like it abandoned a lot of what makes the audio so good. It didn't play with the format in the same ways, and it was kinda...just a book.



3. 'What We Do In The Shadows'

A funny, documentary-style vampire movie, the strength of this one definitely comes from its stars and its commitment to the premise: what happens when a pack of vampires from different eras are forced to live in a house together, stop being polite, and start getting real (vampire-y)?

The problem comes with the introduction of the werewolves. They steal the show. The werewolves are a lot funnier than the vampires, and I think it's because our time with them is brief. We get just enough. The vampires are like your parents where the werewolves are the beloved, party animal uncles who show up in Hawaiian shirts, have fun, and then take off, leaving us buzzed on candy and sips of beer and uninterested in our boring old parents. When the werewolves leave a scene, it's a little bit of a letdown.



4. 'John Dies at the End' by David Wong

If you ask me, there are two novellas here. A great first one where doofuses fight a shit monster and a doorknob turns into a penis, and we even get a lovely horror/action/comedy sequence complete with They-Live-caliber one-liners. But then there's a second novel in here, which might get great deeper in, but I wouldn't know because I never finished it.

Everything is set up in the first book, we have an awesome climax, and then we push the reset button and start again. Halfway through we hit a low point of action and comedy, and I just couldn't carry on.

There's a great book here, I just don't know why there's a second, not-so-great book tacked onto it.



5. 'Child's Play 2'

It's not the original, but the action picks up in the second *Child's Play* movie. It's a certain kind of humor, but watching a doll somehow kill a full-grown adult with a yardstick is good fun, and the final sequence in the doll factory is gruesome, gross, and by the end of the film we see Chucky fly through a windshield, mutilated by a doll-making machine, and covered in molten plastic.

What's missing?

Chucky always needed a signature weapon, if you ask me. Something weird and fitting. In *Child's Play 2* he walks around with a knife. What is he, Pony Boy from *The Outsiders*? Freddy's got a glove, Jason has a machete. Can we give Chucky something? He gets so close at the end here, but the ol' knife hand didn't stick.

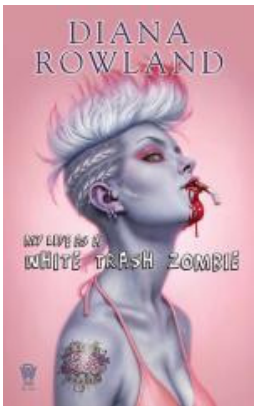
By the way, while we're on the topic of Jason's machete, the Friday the 13th Wiki has a pretty exhaustive entry regarding deaths via machete in the series. My favorite entry:

Friday the 13th Part VI: Jason Lives (1986)

Katie: Jason does a triple decapitation and kills three people at once.

Larry: See above.

Stan: See above.



6. 'My Life As A White Trash Zombie' by Diana Rowland

A woman who's somewhat unpleasant to be around, but pretty fun to read about, becomes a zombie. And, you know, life ensues. Afterlife ensues, I guess.

A huge advantage this one has over others, the character does grow and change. It doesn't always feel like there's space for characters to grow in most horror, unless what they're growing into is a giant flesh balloon full of space worms.

The issue I have with this one, if I'm nitpicking, which I totally am, is that I'm a little over the directionless dropout characters who aren't living up to their potential. Even if that character is outside a Judd Apatow movie AND is a lady AND a zombie. Even then, with all those extra layers, I have a hard time really getting into that character. How about a character who gets a superpower or paranormal thing or has a baby and is like, "Oh, shit! This is going to make finishing grad school while working full time and volunteering at the food bank very challenging!?"



7. 'Ghostbusters' (1989)

I don't know why there's a ghost blowjob in this movie. I've come to love it at this point, but only because it represents an oddity that never should have made the final cut, yet still manages to be included in subsequent releases.



8. 'Ghostbusters' (2016)

I don't know why there isn't a ghost blowjob in this movie. I mean, c'mon. If there's something ripe for poking fun at here, how is it not this? If *Rogue One* can explain a hole in the Death Star, I'm confident that a revamped *Ghostbusters* can explain ghost oral. Although maybe a better comparison would be the new Star Wars movies explaining why sometimes a brother and sister just make out a little bit...



9. 'My Best Friend's Exorcism' by Grady Hendrix

This book succeeds in the way good buddy comedies succeed, and it paints a great picture of a female friendship. It's a fun book overall, and if you liked horror from the 70's and 80's that seemed designed to scandalize your mother, you'll dig this one.

But the problem is that I think *My Best Friend's Exorcism* got painted with the "horror-comedy" brush the way we're told certain things are funny, but we were only told that because marketers don't know how to sell them. This is what happens with movies like *The Lobster* or *Her*, movies that some reviewers call "funny" because they don't really know what to call them.

It's not a failure of the humor. I just don't think *My Best Friend's Exorcism* is meant to be hilarious. Or, rather, I think Grady Hendrix was having fun writing it and warping some of the trashy, schlock-y horror paperbacks of the past, but I think it's a book that's fun without being funny.



10. 'Zombieland'

The movie has some great moments, and there's not much better than a bunch of zombies being clobbered by operating amusement park rides, killers reveling in kills, and the cameo in the middle is excellent.

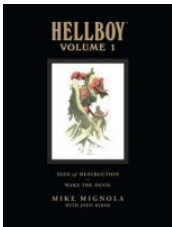
Only problem, there were some great practical effects up top, but the later CG sequences rendered some of the gore weightless. A piano being dropped on a zombie by a kindly lady is funny, straight out of *Looney Tunes*, but I just didn't feel the impact enough. A few more practical effects would've gone a long way in this one.



11. 'Soulless' by Gail Carriger

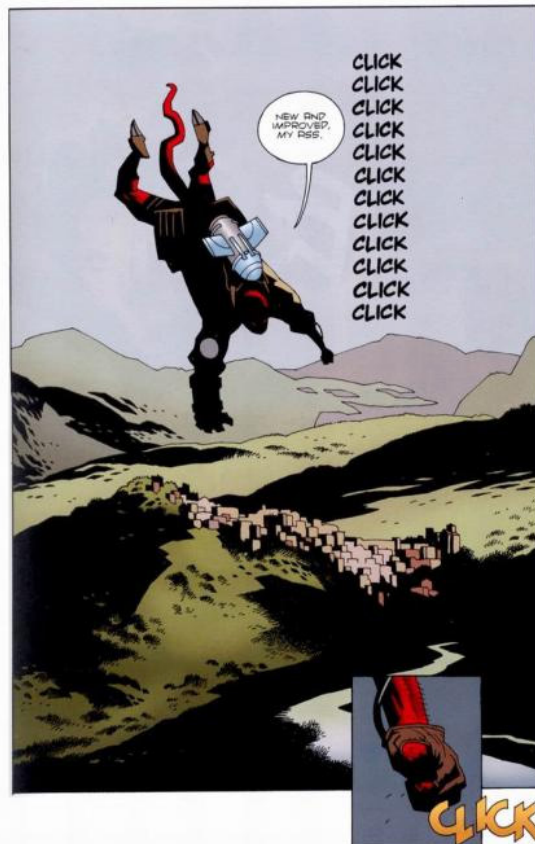
Featuring horror characters in a steampunk-y setting, this is for people who like their comedy with a bit of manners. I'm pretty well established at this point for liking doorknobs that turn into penises, but I know there are folks out there who get a good laugh out of the preposterous notion of dunking a biscuit into the wrong kind of tea(?) Using the wrong fork(?) Crumpeting before pip pip, cheerio?

It's different, and it's not my cup of tea (see what I did there? Because tea?), and I think at times it's because it's too much of a mash-em-up. It's a sci-fi steampunk Victorian paranormal urban fantasy vampire werewolf historical comedy horror romance. The stew is tasty, but I wonder if there are a few extraneous ingredients here.



12. 'Hellboy'

I know we don't all consider this comedy, but in the early iteration, I think Hellboy creator Mike Mignola was picturing something a little funnier. Something that didn't take itself too seriously:





There's a slapstick-y element to *Hellboy* that faded over time, but is very much alive in the earlier books.



My complaint? The world caught up with *Hellboy*. At the time of its release, a put-upon superhero who's dealing with paranormal nonsense was pretty novel. But the character's been around so long that he had to grow up and abandon his sense of humor, die, go to hell, and he's gotten a little mope-y. At the risk of being "that guy," I miss the exploding jetpacks.



13. 'Beetlejuice'

This is a perfect film. This is the *Demolition Man* of horror comedies. I understand that some people will say that something is the *Citizen Kane* of its genre to denote that it's perfect, but I don't care what those people think. Most of them haven't even seen

Demolition Man. A sled? How about a cryo-prison? THAT'S a film!

Winona Ryder is decades ahead of her time with her over-the-top goth teen performance, Michael Keaton is at his best, and it's easily Tim Burton's best-looking movie.

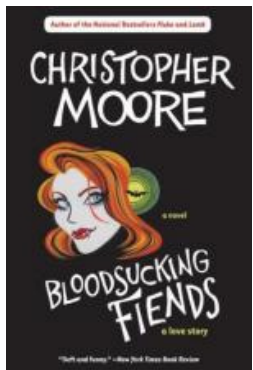
If I had to nitpick...where's the *Beetlejuice Goes Hawaiian* sequel?



14. 'Tucker And Dale Versus Evil'

A solid horror comedy that turns the evil hillbilly stereotype on its head, this one has kills so over-the-top that you can't help but laugh.

What's missing from this one? Well, the movie goes a long way to show us that country folk are not what we think. But it hits the fratboy/sorority girl stereotypes so hard in doing so. It makes sense, but a viewer can't help but wonder what could have been.



15. 'Bloodsucking Fiends' by Christopher Moore

If you don't know Christopher Moore by now, you should get on that. He's written books that parody the Bible, Moby Dick, and here he takes a crack at the vampire tale.

Moore's a type, and some people don't find him funny, which is cool. But my nitpick for *Bloodsucking Fiends* is that there's a reading group guide for this book. Seriously?

Jody has obviously had a tough time with the men in her life; do you think this affects how she reacts to becoming a vampire? Was the way Jody thought about herself shaped by how men reacted to her? How did you feel when Jody started to come into her own as a vampire and enjoy her powers?

This is nuts. This is like writing a serious-minded study guide for *Basket Case*. "Do you think Duane was wrong to keep Belial, his mutated twin, in a picnic basket, or do you think he was making the best of a bad situation?"

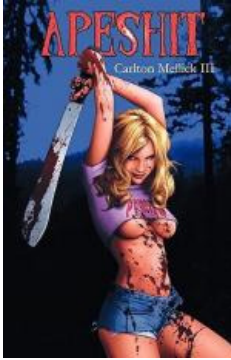


16. 'Cabin In The Woods'

A fun, clever ride with some good twisty parts and an ending that's bananas, this movie tells us the sorts of movies we'd have gotten if Joss Whedon had gone horror instead of Marvel.

The nitpick isn't with this movie so much as it is with the viewers. SO many people watched this and felt like they were smart and sophisticated because they "got it." This somehow became a horror movie that was "acceptable" for smart people to watch. "Not like that torture porn that you see all the time."

Anyone who says this is their favorite horror movie all the time probably uses the word "authentic" ALL THE TIME.



17. 'Apeshit' by Carlton Mellick III

While it's not Mellick III's weirdest, most Bizarro-est book, it might be his bloodiest and one of the more fun. Strangers to Bizarro can enter here as long as they've got some horror background. If you thought *Cabin in the Woods* was shocking, take out your pipe, pack this book in lightly, and smoke it.

What itches me about this is what itches me about all of Carlton Mellick III's books: I can't tell if this guy is

- A) A genius who pretty much invented a genre
- B) A genius marketer who seized on something and the books are ancillary
- C) Completely unhinged

This book absolutely did not aid me in my quest for an answer.

Put A Vampire In It!



By now we've injected vampires into just about everything. Jane Eyre got the re-VAMP experience in Jane Slayre. We crammed vampirism into Emma (Emma and the Vampires). We've even mashed up Abraham Lincoln and vampires in Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter. I guess being our greatest President wasn't enough for some folks. "That's great and all, but what if he, like, also killed vampires!?"

We could all be upset about this trend, but I figure, why fight progress? This is the way of the world now, so why rail against it?

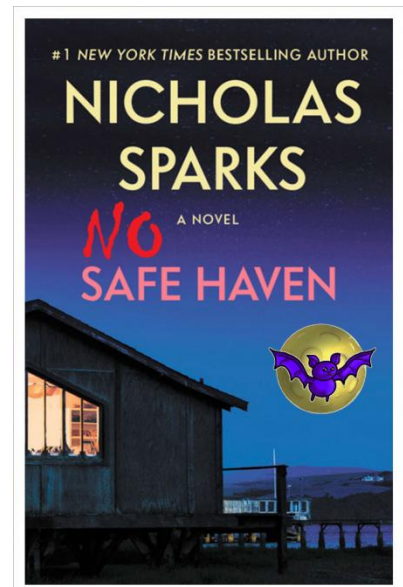
In fact, let's get ahead of the curve, shove a vampire into some other as-of-yet un-vampire-ed books, movies, and TV shows.

What say we put a vampire in it?

Nicholas Sparks' Next Book

I've always desperately hoped that Nicholas Sparks' entire career is an elaborate prank. Like he'll release his 50th book, it's a romance between an old war veteran and the girl he left behind or something, and they're on a park bench, and then BAM, halfway through the book, a horde of vampires descends on everyone.

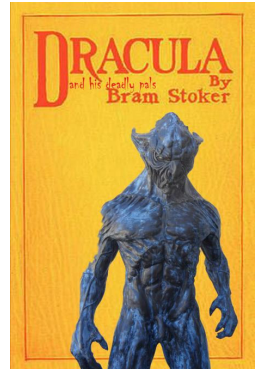
Wouldn't it be a more interesting world if that kinda shit happened? You've got the power, Mr. Sparks. You could single handedly make this an interesting world. Or you could sell a bajillion more books, which probably makes the world pretty interesting for you because cocaine is a thing.



'Dracula' by Bram Stoker

Yeah, I know this already has a vampire in it. What this needs is *another* vampire. A gorehound vampire. Couldn't we sub in an undead monster tearing people in half for some of this nonsense about Arthur becoming a lord or whatever?

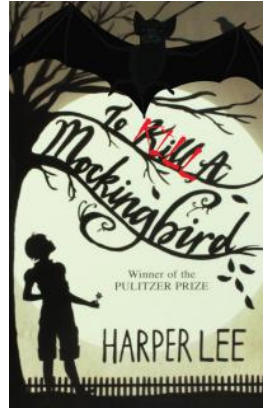
Besides, wouldn't it do the least damage to add a vampire to a book that already has one? What's the harm? What're you, afraid the book will actually have some thrills now?



'To Kill A Mockingbird' by Harper Lee

Hey, the book already has a climax right around a Halloween pageant. It's a natural!

Boo Radley is the obvious choice for vampirism here. Based on his name and his reclusiveness, there's a strong candidate. But it's not as much of a twist, and if R.L. Stine taught me anything in 3rd grade, it's that the story needs a twist. So we'll make the vampire...Dill. He sweeps in, drinks the blood of a bunch of mockingbirds, but it's not enough. Then he infects Bob Ewell, Ewell is slain by Boo Radley: Vampire Hunter, and Dill sneaks off with nobody suspecting a thing. That takes us straight into *Go Set A Watchmen*, which has a great horror novel title already.



'The Golden Girls'



I'm picturing two options here.

The first is a flashback Halloween episode. The girls play themselves, of course, mostly looking the same but with ridiculous wigs and getups. Now, in *Golden Girls* continuity, they didn't all know each other until about a year before the series began, but that's cool, we'll make them guests at the same creepy vampire-run B&B who don't remember each other because of a vampire's spell.

The second option, since we ALL know Dorothy marries Leslie Nielsen at the end of the series, there's an easy crossover with the beloved *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* universe. And what a rich, untapped universe of stories THAT is.

Either way, we'll just ask Disney to let us borrow their Grand Moff Tarkin machine and make us a new episode with CG *Golden Girls*. We'll call the episode "F\$#! The Uncanny Valley!"

'The Host' by Stephenie Meyer

Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* follow-up wasn't as well-received, and I think I know what was missing: vampire action. Follow with me for a second. *The Host* is about aliens or something, right? And a pro wrestler who finds magic glasses that let him see the aliens? Or, wait, am I talking about *They Live* again? Damn it! I always confuse Stephenie Meyer's novel *The Host* with John Carpenter's *They Live*. Who can keep track of these young upstarts when their ideas are so similar?

'Stranger Things'



Well, we'd basically get *Monster Squad*, right? Something like *Monster Squad* but probably a bit more focused, with less werewolf nards?

My plan is to throw a vampire into *Stranger Things* season 2, replacing that episode where Eleven goes to the city and joins up with the Teen X-Men and they go to Warped Tour together (or whatever the hell that was). A vampire makes no sense in the show, but neither does the existence of that episode. What's a sillier waste of time? You be the judge.

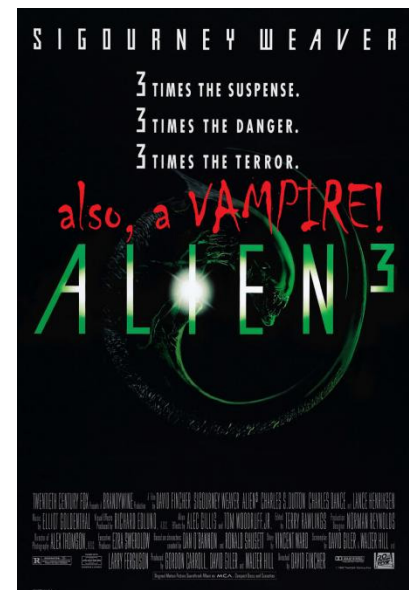
'Alien 3'

There wasn't a lot going on here anyway, so why not? We've had Jason and The Leprechaun in space, so maybe it's a vampire's turn. Wouldn't it be a great moment, a vampire drinking an Alien's blood and then the blood melts the vampire's face off? Not exactly highbrow cinema, but at least *Alien 3* would have that one shining moment.

Golf

This is an excuse to pitch my new character: Count Golfula.

Once a secret sequence of clubs is used on a cursed golf course, a gate



to another realm is opened, releasing Count Golfula! Who is a vampire who's pretty decent at golf. Also, he plays in a cape.



He should probably do something more exciting than just being good at golf, but c'mon, this is televised barely-sports. What do you expect?

'The Merchant of Venice' by Willam Shakespeare

All of a sudden, this bizarre fascination with receiving a pound of flesh would make sense. Plus, you could edit the whole thing so Jewish stereotypes are replaced with vampire stereotypes. PLUS, in this version, you could have a double-twist and Shylock can be victorious, taking flesh without spilling blood!

*Portia: But in the cutting it if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are by the laws of Venice confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.*

Shylock: Don't worry, babe, my knife won't spill a morsel [puts on cool sunglasses, uses fangs to drain Antonio's blood before cutting him].

'Firefly'

I never got the whole *Firefly* thing. I'd like to throw in a vampire just to fuck with everyone.

And then I'd destroy any copies of the original, non-vampire series so that the show would only exist with vampires in it. And then my pointless revenge against a group of people who did nothing wrong other than liking

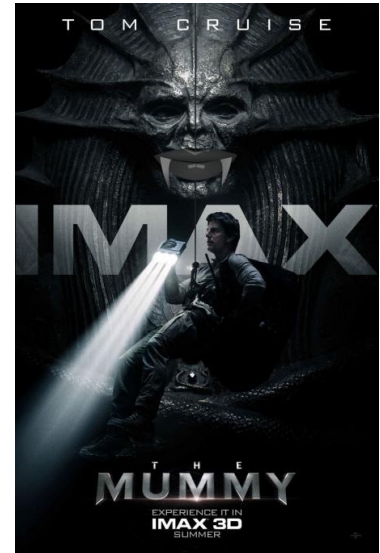


something I didn't would be complete.

Take that!

'The Mummy' (2017)

We had a couple mummies, we had Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Why not throw a vampire in there too? When one considers we're never getting this whole Universal Dark Universe thing now, I feel like we should shoot some additional footage, go apeshit and throw in as much monster into *The Mummy* as possible. Have Tom Cruise bump into what's clearly an invisible man, do a quick bar scene at a bar called Black Lagoon, and give me a vampire suggestively eating a jelly donut with red jelly dripping down his face. Is it going too far to splice in *Brendan Fraser and Co.* walking down a hallway opposite Tom Cruise, perhaps suggesting that there's ANOTHER mummy movie going on at the same time, and then perhaps we get a new post-credits sequence that suggests we, the viewers, were watching the incorrect mummy movie, and perhaps this whole Dark Universe thing can still happen?

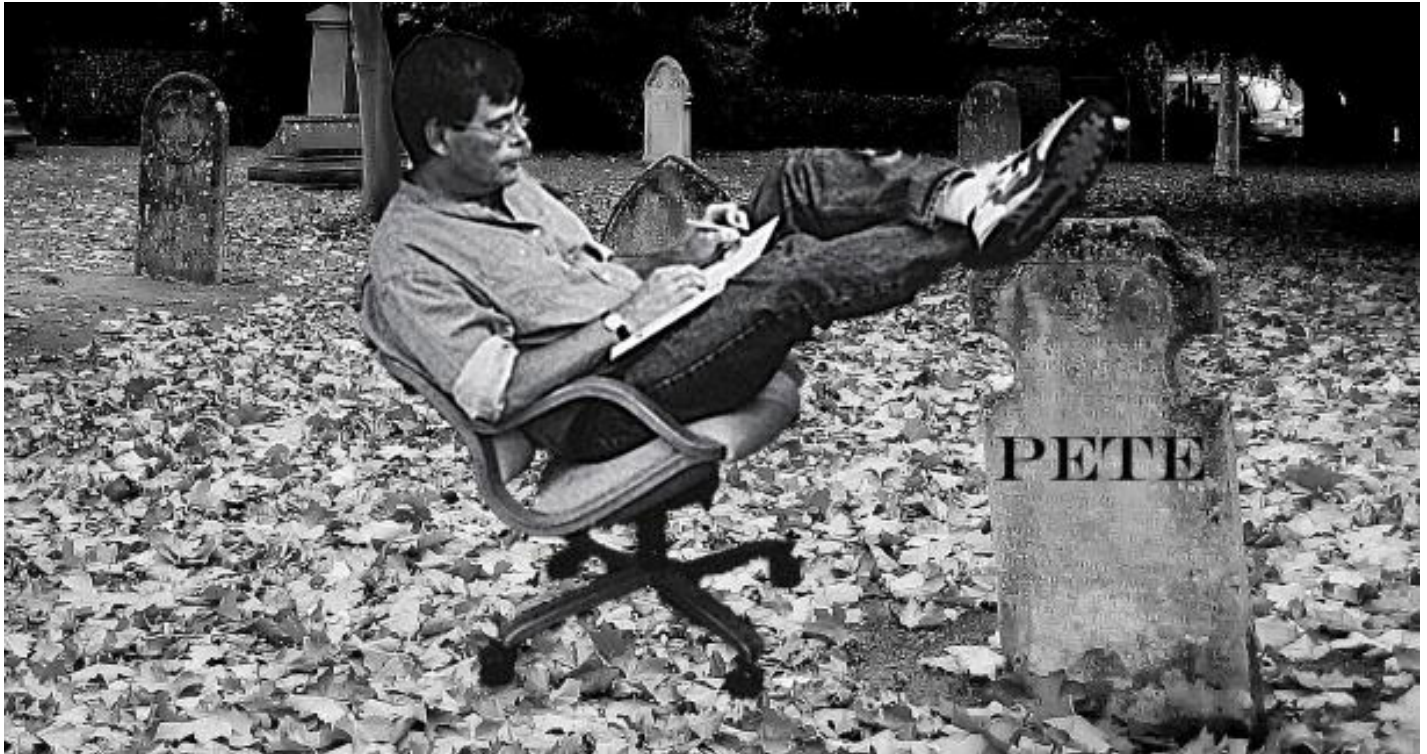


'Saw'

Might as well. By the end this series was so convoluted nobody would bat an eye at the idea of a *Saw* movie where victims of Jigsaw's crimes were mysteriously disappearing, and it turned out a vampire was to blame. By the end, those movies were immune to complaints about not making sense. Complaining about a lack of sense in a *Saw* movie is like complaining about a lack of graphic sex in *Sesame Street* in that it's you, viewer, who came in with the wrong expectations.



How I Would've Died In 20 Stephen King Novels



Plague strikes. Pets and children return from the dead. A bunch of kids get fried at the prom.

Stephen King has a talent for killing folks in his books. I'm pretty sure we're meant to read one of his horror novels and think how we'd handle the situation, and I'm pretty sure that I would handle most Stephen King situations by dying immediately. I'm no survivor set on rebuilding society. I'm no brave kid venturing into the sewers to battle evil. I'm one of the many bodies that litter the pages.

How exactly would I die in some of King's books? I'm glad you asked.



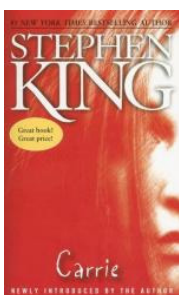
1. "The Shining"

Jack asked, "I don't suppose there's one of those fancy theaters built in here?"

Ullman replied, "For a brief time the Overlook prided itself on its movie viewing options. However, one of our previous caretakers, a man I knew only as Pete, took his own life after being driven insane by repeated viewings of the only film reel left behind for the winter. We've since done away with it."

Jack pondered aloud, "I wonder what movie it was..."

"*Casino Royale*," Ullman said. "That wretched *Casino Royale* film. Nearly buried a franchise, you know!"



2. "Carrie"

I die in a "50 years later" epilogue, shortly after my 50 year high school reunion. Which wouldn't be a very happy affair. Because, you know. The deaths and the burnings alive

and so on.

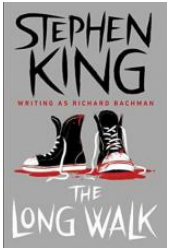
I was mostly safe as I spent the evening of my high school prom at home, hot gluing aluminum cans together to make "robots," all the while muttering "Seriously? Carrie goes and not me? What the hell, man?"

For quite some time I was relieved to miss the prom, although as the years passed I started thinking what a sad life I'd lived. I wasn't even popular enough to be hated and elaborately pranked. But I still have my robots. Always my robots...



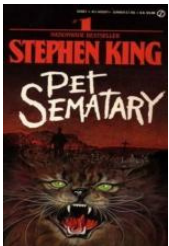
3. "IT"

Pennywise seemed to appear to the kids of Derry as the monster they most feared in their late childhood and early teens. I seemed to have some sort of fear of basic hygiene at that time, so I reckon I'd be killed by a giant toiletry kit. Garrotted by dental floss, my fingernails pulled out by tweezers. Stuff like that.



4. "The Long Walk"

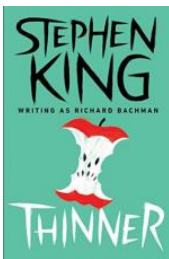
Eventually I'd stop enough times to fiddle with my secret weapon, a prototype for Reebok Pumps, that I'd meet my end.



5. "Pet Sematary"

Absolutely massacred by a string of deceased, cheap pets, including two birds, a gerbil, a crawdad, a swarm of lightning bugs, countless fish and a lizard that I managed to kill within a single day.

Sometimes dead's better, but geez, you'd think a lizard would last the better part of a week.

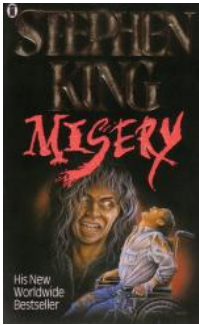


6. "Thinner"

When I minorly insulted an old man, he pointed at me and said, "Immortal!" I didn't know what he meant, but oddly, the longer I had my iPhone 4, the longer the battery seemed to last and the more durable it was. Sure, I couldn't update anything or download any new apps, which meant no Uber or Lyft for Peter, but it was cool. Until the year 2055 when I was still using an iPhone 4 and couldn't bring myself to spend the massive future bucks to buy a new phone. I end up dying of complications after selling a handful of internal organs in order to purchase a charger cord for my phone, which had been discontinued for decades. They buried me with a fully functioning iPhone 4.

Legend says, if you go near my grave around 7:30 AM, you'll hear my alarm from under the soil. Which is Katrina and the Waves' "Walkin' on Sunshine," which kinda takes the

spookiness out of it.



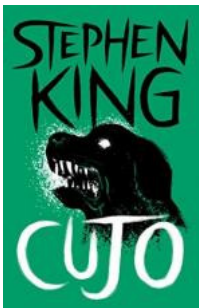
7. "Misery"

Not killed by a fan of my work so much as someone who's a fan of the lore of Konami's *Contra* series and didn't take kindly to some handjob erotica I wrote using *Contra's* characters. Which, I have to say, is understandable.



8. "Christine"

Killed by my wife who eventually grows so fed up with the car that's been sitting in our garage for 5 years that I'm "Totally getting around to restoring."



9. "Cujo"

Holding a stump where there used to be a hand, my last words: "St...Bernard...rolled over so I could rub its *guh* belly. I...regret...nothingggggg..."



10. "Salem's Lot"

After being turned into a vampire, I die a second death as I'm unable to feed due to jacked up teeth. Most people think all vampires have perfect teeth, but that's a lie perpetrated on us by Big Vampire. And good luck finding an orthodontist who has office hours after dark. Those people buzz in about 11 AM and they're home by 3.



11. "Under the Dome"

Pete, never one to be involved in local politics, is mostly unaware of the power struggles going on in his hometown of Chester's Mill after the dome comes down.

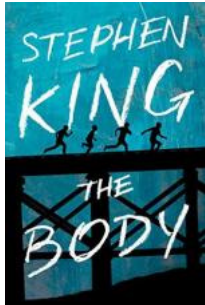
However, ALWAYS one to be involved in wacky schemes, Pete sets up a dome clarifying business (kind of a scam, like those headlight restoring kits) so residents can ask him to improve the view through parts of the dome near their homes. He is killed when he falls off a ladder, which he tried leaning against the dome.



12. "The Mist"

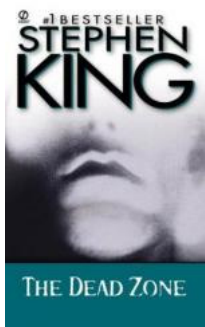
Pete is shoved out of the supermarket after non-stop singing "Into the Mystic" and saying, "No, get it? Like into the MIST-ic? Because the mist outside?"

No one ever mentions that it was done, but all agree it had to be done.



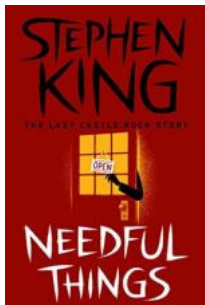
13. "The Body"

I'd puke from the leech, I'd puke from the pie story, I'd puke when I saw the body. "Dehydration" would be the official cause of death, but it's just from all the puking.



14. "The Dead Zone"

When a patient wakes up after a 4-year coma and seems to have psychic powers, he touches me and says, "Maybe get new tires more than once every decade." I scoff and ignore him. He tries to show me the trick where you stick a quarter in the treads to test their depth, but I shake him off and say, "Peasant! Show me a trick that's useful, one that utilizes a \$100 dollar bill! That's something I'm likely to have." Then I strut out of the room, impressing no one. I die weeks later on a perfectly dry road when my bald tires fail to create purchase on a mildly steep hill.



15. "Needful Things"

I walk into the Needful Things shop, walk past a piece of Noah's Ark and find a 4th gen iPod nano at a very reasonable price. The owner of course tells me I have to play a prank on someone, so I shortsheet my brother's bed. To get back at me, he hits me in the stomach with a medieval battle axe while I'm asleep. I know that sounds excessive, but that's sort of how this book works.



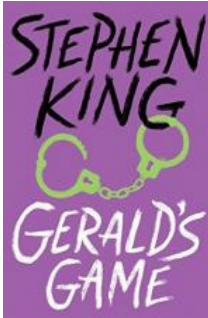
16. "The Stand"

There was that one dude who died in the lab, face down in some soup. That'd be me, but replace "soup" with "pulled pork." Also, it's important to note that I died face down in the pulled pork not because I was sick and lost consciousness and my face hit the bowl, but because I'd already smothered myself while eating swine-style.



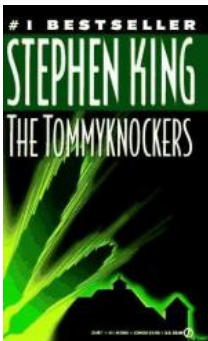
17. "The Running Man"

In a world where many people turn to sex work as a means of survival, I would certainly starve.



18. "Gerald's Game"

Years and years later in a passionless marriage. What? I'm just not kinky that way.



19. "The Tommyknockers"

Gaining just enough genius to make a workable-ish jetpack is pretty much a guarantee of my demise.



20. "Dreamcatcher"

The much-mocked idea of dying on the toilet is the odds-on favorite in my real-life death pool, and it hits a little too close to home to really get joke-y here. Other favorites include "Changing a lightbulb while standing on a rolling office chair" and "salt."

Ranking 20 Literary Monsters



Here, I present to you, a ranking of literary monsters.

They're ranked from worst to best. So if you want to find the best monsters, skip to the end. If you want to start with the worst, you're in the right spot, and you'll get to hear all about why the Jabberwock sucks.

You'll notice some are specific monsters, some are a type. That's because I figured nobody wants to read about 15 different vampires. Or dozens of zombies ("Zombie who is partially decayed, zombie missing one arm and part of a face, zombie on fire...").

As with any ranking of this type, it's important to be as objective as possible. That's why I took into account scariness, killing aptitude, coolness, legacy, and several other factors which I balanced, calculated, and then threw out the goddamn window in favor of just deciding as I went. Perhaps the haphazard creation of this list makes ME one of literature's greatest monsters? Only time will tell, but I'm still convinced that I'm a better monster than the Jabberwock. I really hate that guy.

20. The Jabberwock

Shit's for nerds. No, really. The only reason I put this "monster" on the list is to stick it to the type of literary nerd who would want to hear about this thing. I can picture him now. Crying poverty while sleeving his arms in tattoos. The kind of person for whom the word "affectation" was created. Supposedly the poem "Jabberwocky" was written as satire meant for pretentious poems and critics. And, as is usually the case, the people being satirized didn't recognize themselves in the lines.

Hard pass, worst literary monster.



19. Old-Timey, Literary Ghosts

I'm not a fan. I don't know...it just seems like it's always some Victorian-era thing, never a dude who worked at Best Buy and is now ghosting around. I don't get why I'm supposed to believe that only people who traveled in carriages and used cocaine as medicine became ghosts. Also, how scary is a ghost in an era when you'd probably die before you were 30 anyway? I'd be more scared of tonsillitis. Or being buried alive. That seemed to happen WAY more often than it should have. *Turn Of The Screw* types. These ghosts slam doors, open drawers, and mostly just hang out, looking sinister. They're really more annoying than deadly.

18. Giants

Giants should be terrifying, but they always blow it when the pressure's on. Goliath is the prime example, and his legend created the entire "David versus Goliath" concept, a way of saying that the person who should clearly win in a conflict will be defeated by the underdog. See also: *Jack And The Beanstalk*. See also: Polyphemus from *The Odyssey*.

17. Giant Squid

Guys, I don't mean to be insulting to your dope *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* tattoos and your Lovecraft-themed cocktail menus, but a giant squid ain't that scary. Sure, if I was in the ocean and up against one, by all means, I'm crapping myself. But when a fella lives in Colorado and has found the solution to be as simple as "Don't live near the water," it's a pretty easy monster to ignore. I'm more afraid of a squid showing up on my plate than I am of a squid showing up as a villain.



16. Dementors

They're super gross, like rotted corpses, and they force you to re-live your worst memory. I already lived through the mistake of getting gasoline on my hands and touching my scrotum ONCE. That's more than enough.

However, they sure seem to be bested by a bunch of schoolkids pretty often. How many times do you have to be outwitted by children before you're de-mentor-moted?

15. Haunted/Evil Objects

Mirrors, shoes, rocking chairs, Stephen King's laundry folding machine, whatever. The haunted object is mostly ineffective, although it depends a little on the object. Horror movies sure have gotten a lot of mileage out of the haunted garbage disposal.

The problem with haunted objects is they don't have enough agency to do you in. They're easily thwarted. If you find yourself pursued by a haunted object, simply take 3 big steps in a direction away from the object.

14. Haunted Dolls

I'll also throw in ventriloquist dummies, puppets, *Demonic Toys*, what have you. For some reason, it seems like haunted dolls appear in books for kids more than for adults. *Goosebumps*, *Coraline*. But there is a lesser-known *Annabelle* horror novel from the late 80's, which is book schlock horror at its best.

Yes, it's bizarre to sleep in a room with a weird doll sitting up in a rocking chair, staring you down. But that creepiness goes out the window when you're reading about someone else doing it.

Imagine your best friend saying they stayed at an AirBNB with a creepy doll in a chair. Your friend didn't sleep all night. They could swear they heard the doll walking around. Does this story send a chill down your spine, or are you laughing your ass off? I may just be a terrible friend, but I would find this story hilarious.



13. Grendel

Beowulf's Grendel seemed pretty badass, but when you get down to it, he killed a bunch of drunken dudes in the dark. Plus, it turns out his mom is way more badass. Sort of like a *Friday the 13th* situation.

12. Demons

For every story where some dude sells his soul for a Ferrari, how many are we NOT seeing where some guy is like, "Waitaminute. If you're a demon, and you can give me a sports car...that means heaven and hell are real! No way, dude! I'm not only keeping my soul, I'm going to start hitting up church, big time! Thanks for helping me avoid the biggest mistake of my life!" I suspect there are a lot of these stories floating around. Demons just have good PR people (Gideons).

On one hand, some demons are super spooky. Like The Judge in *Blood Meridian*.

On the other hand, they sometimes wear lil' shorts and boots and talk in rhyme.



11. Scary Clowns

Pennywise is the creepy clown most of us think of, but there are others, including the fellas in Ray

Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

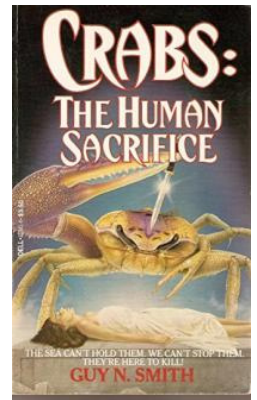
The issue I have with the scary literary clown is that he's never as scary as the real-life scary clown, John Wayne Gacy, aka Pogo. He looks horrific. His paintings are terrifying. And he's real. The minds working in fiction are aces, but sometimes you have to admit you've been bested by reality.

10. Witches

Witch narratives can be pretty cool. As monsters go, they've got a great, underutilized power set. Flight, curses, potions, feline familiars. They also seem like they'd be able to identify eye of newt as being the genuine article, whereas I'd never know the difference between a quality newt eye and a cheap, toad eye knockoff. The downside, I'm a lot more scared of the dunking and being burned and pressed with stones, the things that were used to torture a confession out of a supposed witch, than I am of the witches themselves.

9. Animals Gone Berserk

This depends quite a bit on the animal in question. A dog that's killing people? Sure. A shark? Absolutely. But when we start having swarms of crabs and slugs, things go downhill pretty quickly. A crab holding a knife? C'mon.



8. Aliens

Somewhere along the line it seems like we lost our fear of aliens. We forgot *Starship Troopers*, *Ender's Game*, *Day Of The Triffids* (those of us who paid attention to Triffids in the first place). I blame *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* makes it seem like aliens are rational, humanoid-ish creatures who have culture different from our own, but are mostly like us. What happened to buzzing by Earth and turning some cows inside-out? What happened to the aliens that kidnapped people, strapped them to a table and got down to probin' for absolutely no discernible purpose?

I can't say I LOVE the idea of being beamed into a ship and having a probe crammed in my butt. But once you've had a colonoscopy, it's really not a big deal. At least the aliens don't make you drink that gallon of laxative. And they don't generally bill you after.

I guess aliens have learned all there is to know about the human butt.

7. Medusa

Going old school here, but Perseus needed A LOT of help to defeat Medusa. He was equipped with a shield, sword, golden sandals, and a helm, all of which were previously owned by gods. Even after she's decapitated, Medusa's head is a powerful weapon. Plus, any *Castlevania* player knows the terror of those damn Medusa heads sine-waving their way across the screen.

6. Evil Kids

The evil kid is a classic. Gage from *Pet Sematary*, Holland and Niles from *The Other*, Children who are of the Corn persuasion. Something about kids is just creepy. Even parents seem to agree, nothing

worse than a little kid with a bowl cut, a deliberate way of speaking, and a big-ass knife. It's hard to say whether it's creepier when it's your kid or just "some kid," but I'll come down on a side and say that when it's some kid you don't know, it's way worse. You can't take away his phone until he decides to stop being a creep.

5. Vampires

This includes your Draculas, your Lestats, your Carmillas. Your Edwards from *Twilight*. Your Blades. It's a big umbrella with a lot of different vampires underneath it. They're probably under that umbrella because they're staying out of the sun.

I don't know why vampires are awesome, but they totally are. Face it, if they weren't awesome, we'd have been done with them long ago. They've been done to death, then un-death, then death again, and they keep coming back.

The one drawback of the modern vampire, they always have to come up with some reason that you wouldn't want to be a vampire. "Oh, it's terrible. You have superpowers and live forever. That's something I would NEVER want you to be cursed with!"

Although vampires are often a metaphor for something else (virginity, leukemia, etc.) I haven't heard anyone say that vampires are a metaphor for human inability to get our shit together. Seriously, you have ALL DAY to kill a vampire. Try waking up before 1 PM and I think you've got a pretty good shot.

**Seriously,
you have ALL
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4. Local Legends

My favorite is the Headless Horseman from *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

What I like about the headless horseman is that he knows what he does well, and he stays in his lane. He's not trying to take over the world or some such nonsense. He's got Sleepy Hollow, and he's good with that. He's an unambitious, workman-like monster, and I respect that.

Also, he's got that animal-like quality in that he can't be reasoned with. Reason happens in the head area, where he's pretty deficient.

Of course, a hallmark of the local legend is that they're often just that: legends. Even Headless himself is probably just a ruse to scare off a professor type so the cool jock, who even has the cool jock name "Bones," can secure his place in a lady's heart.

Local legends are the mom and pop version of sell-out, big box monsters.



3. Mr. Hyde

Without Mr. Hyde we'd have no *Fight Club*, no Incredible Hulk. The fear of the monster inside feeds on our biggest insecurities, and *The Strange Case Of Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde* is all about whether or not Hyde can be stopped once his leash is loosened the tiniest bit.

2. Zombies

Zombies make great utility monsters, which is why they've been done so much. They have flexible rules like whether or not they eat flesh, transmit disease, run or shuffle. They're fun to drop into any number of scenarios.

The other thing that makes zombies great is that they're equal-opportunity killers who are weirdly neither good nor evil. They're more like a force, like gravity. Gravity will kill your ass if you jump out of a plane, just like a zombie will kill you if you go into that building, ignoring the paint on the doors that specifically advised you not to. A zombie doesn't kill you because it's bad. It just...is.

The zombie would be a near-perfect horror monster, but there are three strikes against it.

One, the zombies that can think (*your iZombie* types). A zombie that can think isn't a zombie. It's a cannibal.

Two, zombies from Italian horror films have made their mark. Sorry, friends, but those movies, though usually containing some great visuals, NEVER make sense.

Three, I think we've heard the story about the real terror coming from...OURSELVES! enough times, eh?

That said, solid monster.

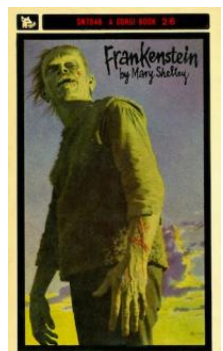
1. Frankenstein

This is the monster, of course, not the doctor. That's what I'm calling him. What can I say? I'm an instigator.

Let's start with the fact that he's big and scary looking, and for good reason. Dr. Frankenstein gathered parts from larger folks for the simple reason that he figured it would be easier to work on a larger body. It'd be less delicate. This was great thinking until it turned out that the doctor was building a monster he'd have to try and kill down the road. I've always liked that there's a reason for him to be big and strong beyond that making him scarier. Why is Michael Myers so big and strong? I dunno. Jason? I dunno. But Frankenstein, his size exists for a reason.

The other oft-discounted factor is that by the end of the book, Frankenstein was not only big and strong, he was pretty cunning as well. And MEGA pissed off.

Frankenstein, as a monster, touches on taboos and things we're still scared of today. Medicine, grave robbing, and the creation of life. Pretty badass for a book that's 200 years old.



Upon My Death: What Happens To An Author's Unfinished Work?



I have a birthday coming up, so of course that's got me thinking about my death.

For me, and for a lot of writers, what I'll leave behind mostly amounts to a pile of papers and manuscripts and journals and stuff jotted on a Jimmy Johns wrapper that seemed very important at the time.

Which is why I decided to look into my options. What can be done with my work after I die? What have some of my betters done?

A Note

Lots of folks will tell you they don't care what happens to their bodies or their junk or their collection of *Demolition Man* memorabilia after they die (note that I separated *Demolition Man* memorabilia from "junk"). I understand this belief, but let me present the full picture of what it means to leave the mess of your life laying around without directions.

If you don't make those decisions before you die, your loved ones will have to. They'll be forced to go through all your stuff and figure out what to do with it. The more you can help them out with specific directions, the better. Unless they suck. If your family totally sucks, then by all means, accumulate a bunch of lousy furniture from the thrift store that your family will have to deal with. Lousy, heavy furniture and haunted porcelain dolls.

The Steamroll

Terry Pratchett not only asked that his unfinished works be destroyed, he asked that his computer hard drive be destroyed by a steamroller.

And Pratchett picked good friends, because Rob Wilkins, executor of his estate, followed through. He even found a steamroller with a name, Lord Jericho, which is a pretty solid name for a piece of construction equipment.

I'm jealous that Pratchett came up with this first. As destroying things goes, a steamroller is excessive and kinda fun. I don't know if my level of fame warrants the spectacle of steamrolling, but a specific type of destruction is a good way to go. Industrial shredder, hydraulic press, just about any piece of overly strong equipment will do. Plus, it makes a fun little task for whoever is left behind. A quest. A way for them to have agency in an otherwise out-of-control time.

About to fulfill my obligation to Terry
[@SalisburyMuseum](#) [@Wiltshire_flo](#)



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The Torch Pass

Robert Jordan published the first book in his *Wheel of Time* series in 1990, and in early 2006 he told the world he'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness. With quite a bit of business left to wrap up in *Wheel of Time*, Jordan made extensive notes, and his widow and editor, Harriet McDougal, selected Brandon Sanderson to finish up the series.

Jordan knew he didn't have much time, and he wanted to see that his series ended the right way. If you don't get enough time to write it yourself, that's a pretty nice thing to do for fans of your work.

This probably won't be my bag. I only have one series in mind, and I don't think books about a dystopic future where everything is powered by semen will be popular enough that fans demand to know how it ends. But if you're looking at a series, it might be good to think about how you could pass the torch.

The Cease And Desist

Sue Grafton left us last year, just after she released the penultimate, 25th book in her Kinsey Millhone series, *Y Is For Yesterday*. Grafton was a big loss, and being so close to the end of the series added an extra sour note to the whole thing.

However, Grafton's daughter has been adamant in saying that they won't have a ghostwriter finish the series:

...as far as we in the family are concerned, the alphabet now ends at Y.

Grafton was also pretty clear about the fact that she never wanted to see Kinsey Millhone on screen, during her life or after:

"I will never sell [Kinsey] to Hollywood. And, I have made my children promise not to

sell her. We've taken a blood oath, and if they do so I will come back from the grave: which they know I can do." Grafton is adamant, "They're going to have to pass the word on to my grandchildren: we do not sell out our grandma. I just will not let them touch her."

Good on Grafton, and good on her family for sticking to Grafton's guns. Maybe when the person ends, the work should end too.

The Unplanned Torch Pass

Dacre Stoker is the great-grand-nephew of Bram Stoker, which is part of the selling point behind his novel, *Dracula: The Un-Dead*.

Dacre isn't the only person to take over the work of a relative. For example, my father left our family for the comforts of prison, leaving a lot of drinking to be done. But certain jobs just don't seem to go down the genetic line. For example, writing vampire novels. And sometimes the directness of the line seems a little indirect. A great grandnephew? C'mon. It's not like Dacre was at Bram's knee, hearing him tell story after story.

This is something I'd absolutely like to avoid. If you're one of my relatives in the future, whether you're a direct product of my gametes or not, put down the space pen (or whatever you're writing with) and get a job.

The Time Capsule

Mark Twain famously asked that his biography not come out for 100 years after his death. Presumably this would ensure that nobody was hurt by the contents and he could speak freely. I'd be down for this happening with my own work if only I wasn't a vindictive bastard who specifically wanted to hurt people's feelings so I can enjoy their pain while I'm still alive.

In Twain's case, things worked out. In Eugene O'Neil's, the plan didn't go as smoothly.

Eugene O'Neil wanted *Long Day's Journey Into Night* published 25 years after his death. He sealed a copy and left it in a Random-House-controlled vault. However, shortly after his death, his widow demanded publication. It turned out she was in the legal right, and the play was published only three years after his death.

So, you can ask that your stuff come out after a certain interval, but it's a risk. Do you have a widow who doesn't particularly care about your final wishes? I don't. Not yet, anyway. But I think I've still got enough good years in me to be in a loving relationship that nosedives into vindictiveness. I'm an optimist that way.

The Dead Man's Switch

If only I wasn't a vindictive bastard who specifically wanted to hurt people's feelings so I can enjoy their pain while I'm still alive.

The Dead Man's Switch works like this: Every year or so, I get online and set a publication date for all of my works for a time in the future. Let's say a year. Then, as the deadline approaches, I get online and move that date ahead another year. When I'm dead, nobody moves the date ahead, and my stuff goes out into the world.

This is a cool option, but I don't have my shit together. I know it doesn't sound like a big task to click a few buttons once a year, but I guarantee I'd wake up on switch day, have a lousy breakfast, take a sip of coffee, and then spit it out on my computer screen when I realize I've forgotten to advance my date another year and the entire world is being subjected to my 6th grade diary.

The Burn Unit

Nabokov requested that his novel-in-progress, *Laura*, be burned after his death. It was written on notecards, which his son did not burn, although he held out for 30 years before publishing.

Kafka wanted to feel the burn too, leaving behind a note that said:

My last request: Everything I leave behind me . . . in the way of diaries, manuscripts, letters (my own and others'), sketches and so on, to be burned unread.

This didn't happen. In fact, two months after Kafka's death, his buddy signed a publishing contract. Which gave us a lot more Kafka, including *The Trial*.

Burning is a popular request, and it's romantic, but it seems the follow-through isn't quite there. Maybe because it feels like book burning, or maybe because burning a bunch of stuff isn't as easy as it looks. Every movie I've ever seen, there are burning barrels EVERYWHERE (it should be noted at this point that I've only seen *Escape From New York* and *Escape From L.A.*). In real life, finding a burning barrel is next to impossible, and when you get one going at the park during youth soccer, people get very uptight.

The Key: One Good Friend



The stories of authors who got what they wanted all have one thing in common: One really good friend. Planning-wise, a minimum of one trustworthy person to carry out your wishes is the most important thing.

I'd advise selecting this person carefully. The person who loves you the most might not be able to burn your pages. The person you're married to might be in a troubling financial position after your

death that forces them to make a decision they might not want to make. Your best friend may think your left-behind papers are pretty good, and they may want to make sure they see the light of day.

When it comes to your papers, find that friend. You know the one. The one who's a pretty solid person and gets things done, but if they told you that one time they strangled a crow just to see what it feels like to watch the lights go out in its eyes, you wouldn't be totally surprised.

Good Oral: Telling Stories Out Loud



Early this fall I did one of those live storytelling things. You know the type. You get up on a stage, you get ten minutes or so, you tell a story from memory, and if you're lucky, people clap at the end. In my case, you tell a story about your cat, mostly avoid crying, and wind up feeling pretty good about the whole endeavor.

If you're reading this, chances are you're a writer. And if you're a writer, chances are someone will ask you to do an event like this at some point.

I'd encourage you to try it. It's a great writing exercise, and it's good to try out some material in front of a live, attentive audience.

It's nerve-wracking, it's harder than it looks, but don't worry. We'll get through this thing together.

Beginnings

The beginning of your story needs to grab the listener's attention. I know writers say that ALL THE TIME, but seriously, you've got a couple minutes to capture your audience or lose them. And keep in mind, these events often take place where alcohol is served.

Don't go for pure shock value, don't worry about starting with a death or an orgasm or something. Just use your first couple of lines to answer the question, "Why should I sit here and listen to this asshole?"

Less Is More

Most of these things have a time limit, maybe 10 minutes. Believe me, 10 minutes of storytelling is not like 10 minutes in a work meeting. Time goes fast when you're up there. Nobody will give you a hard

time for telling an 8-minute story, but some of these events are pretty harsh about the cutoff.

Less is more also means telling a simple story with one or two themes. Long, complex stories are great and fun and useful, but these events aren't the right venue for them.

Chunk It

If you can divide your story into chunks, almost like chapters that can exist on their own, this will help in the event of a catastrophe of forgetting. If you're totally lost, you'll have these touchstones to get you back on track.

You shouldn't have a forgetfulness problem. You'll practice more than you've ever practiced before (see below). But chunking will help with the nerves.

Practice Makes Perfect-ish

It's impossible to over-practice. Some people worry about losing spontaneity or about sounding wooden if they practice too much, but I think that's like sitting down to the first blank page of your novel and wondering whether the prose will work for the European market. You're not there yet. Cross that bridge when you get to it, IF you get to it. In the meantime, practice, and trust that the shock of being in front of a crowd will add a charge to your story, even if you've practiced it to death.

You'll hear and see tons of people who didn't practice enough. Chances are you won't see a single person who overdid it on the training.

Good and Bad Practice

Good practice is running through your entire story, out loud, from beginning to end.

Good practice is speaking aloud in the tone and at the volume you plan to use on stage.

Good practice is telling your story out loud in different situations. While you're driving, in the shower, while you take a walk. Get your story so nailed down you could tell it drunk, stoned, and hanging upside-down in a hot dog costume.

Good practice is not running through the beginning a hundred times, the middle 50 times, and the ending twice.

Good practice is not whispering it to yourself under your breath.

Good practice is not comfortable.

Leave Room For Laughs

If you do it right, people will laugh. Let them. If you plow through the laughs and keep telling the

**You'll hear
and see tons
of people who
didn't practice
enough.**

story, and if your audience misses important information because they're laughing, they won't want to laugh anymore for fear of missing something important.

It's the most uncomfortable feeling in the world. The clock is ticking, you're on a roll. But remember, people are there to enjoy your story. Let them.

Do Not End With A Moral Of The Story

There's a strong temptation to end most oral stories with some version of "And the lesson I learned is..." or "The moral of the story is...". Don't.

If your story has a lesson to be learned, craft your story so that the lesson doesn't have to be spelled out at the end.

In making the lesson overly clear, you kill the story in two ways:

One, when you move outside the story to tell everyone the moral, you axe any momentum you've built. Don't leave the story when things are good or intense or emotional or physical, which is what your story should be by the end. Stay inside. Stay close to the feelings and the intensity.

Two, a "lesson learned" tells the audience how to feel about your story. That's not your job. It's their job to figure out how they feel, and an audience won't necessarily reward you for doing their job for them.

End on a gesture, end on a physical action, end with a joke, end with a sense (smell, taste, etc.), end with something you used near the beginning of the story—end with anything but that tidy, forgettable ribbon that says, "And here's what I learned."

Be Respectful

There are a lot of ways people can spend an evening out, and the people in your audience have chosen to take a risk and spend the evening listening to you, an unknown storyteller. Practicing, crafting, all these things are about paying respect to the audience that has put aside any number of things to come out and hear you tell a story.

When you're on your 15th run-through of a story, and when you start to think maybe it's good enough, remember that every person in the room, every person who listens to you, will have something better they could be doing.

Show up on time. Stay sober. Follow directions. When the show is over, help the organizers pack stuff out to their cars.

A roomful of people listening to you is an honor. Earn it.

If your story has a lesson to be learned, craft your story so that the lesson doesn't have to be spelled out at the end.

Dear Mr. Gaiman: Why I Can't Re-Read Sandman



First of all, Mr. Gaiman, happy late birthday. And thanks for all the stuff. All the great stuff. Your work was there for me when I was growing up, and there's even more still coming, stuff that's here for me now as a grown-up. A grown-up who ate mini Snickers for breakfast. And a second lunch.

Now that we've got the warm fuzzies out of the way, I'm sorry, Mr. Gaiman, but I don't think I can ever re-read *Sandman*.

In the 90's, I was a teenager. I was sullen and unhappy, and I loved comics. Which made me the perfect audience for DC's Vertigo line of dark, grown-up stories that paired nicely with *The Crow* soundtrack on cassette. *Preacher*, *Transmetropolitan*, *Doom Patrol*, *100 Bullets*. And, of course, *Sandman*.

Sandman was already a well-established, highly-praised comic by the time I got to it. See, I grew up in a cow town. A literal cow town. We're home to one of the largest beef producers in the world. Which didn't lend itself to a bustling metropolis with comic shops that carried stuff like *Sandman*.

I picked up the first *Sandman* trade on a trip to Mile High Comics in Denver. A couple times a year, I'd save money from whatever terrible job I was working (McDonald's, mowing lawns, washing dishes) and pick up a stack of trade paperbacks. And when it came to *Sandman*, I was hooked.

Sandman was packed with memorable moments. There's the moment when Lucifer quits hell like I quit working at Wal-Mart. Just "Enough of this bullshit," and a walkout.



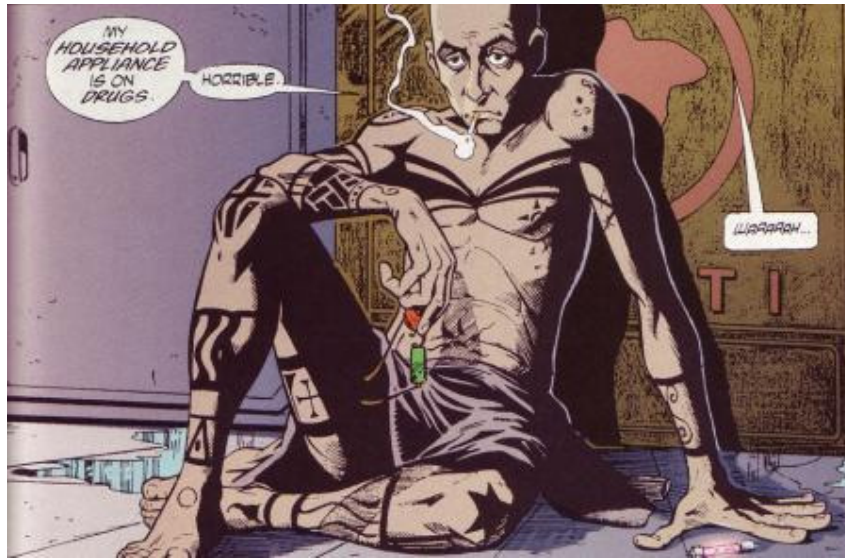
There's the moment this scary dude took off his glasses to reveal an image that would haunt me for... well, I'll let you know when it stops.



Then there's a whole slew of stories that were smaller, quieter, and by my estimation, better. Like the story of a man offered immortality. Just this regular dude who Morpheus, King of Dream, meets with every 100 years.

Sandman has it all, in my memory. And that's the way I'd like it to stay.

My brother had a deep love of Warren Ellis' *Transmetropolitan* when we were younger, comics about an outlaw journalist, sort of a Hunter S. Thompson of the future, whose most recognizable feature was his RIDICULOUS number of tattoos. Take note, kids, this was an outrageous amount of tattoos in the late 90's, before every person pushing a stroller had both arms sleeved.



My brother re-read *Transmetropolitan* a few years ago. He called me, totally deflated. It wasn't everything he remembered. It wasn't even very good. This thing he loved as a kid, this madcap romp through the future where journalists fight The Man by injecting drugs into the corners of their eyes and then type like mad while sitting on a toilet, it just didn't work anymore.

When my brother re-read, he replaced this memory of beloved comics with something else that wasn't as good: Knowledge. Details. A revisionist, adult's view on a formative piece of art.

I have this story about trying to recapture magic. Because sometimes it works. Sometimes you re-read something from childhood, and it gives you the ability to appreciate something in a different way.

But there are also times you try and re-create an experience and it doesn't work.

There was this time my girlfriend Cassie and I had a date at a gas station. Well, okay, it wasn't planned that way. We were headed to a coffee shop, and we didn't make it inside because I was just that slothful. We sat in the car, facing the gas station, and we watched. The gas station was busy, and we started to get involved with the characters. Someone who spent 20 minutes filling a tank. A woman who pulled in, put no more than 50-cents of gas in her giant SUV and pulled out. "What are they doing?" "What do you think this guy's house looks like?" "Where is that lady going on 50-cents of gas?"

This became a classic date for us. One we laughed about because it was ridiculous, but it was fun.

[Cassie, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that our classic dates are not at a fancy restaurant where I call ahead and learn how to say the stuff on the menu so I don't embarrass you. Also, I'm sorry that this letter is mostly an apology to a writer of comics books who I'll probably never meet as opposed to being a letter to you.]

We tried to replicate our gas station date. We brought food this time, and we sat and watched. And it wasn't the same. Maybe it was a slower day at the gas station. Maybe there just isn't that much magic in sitting and watching a gas station. I know, it sounds unlikely, but maybe the gas station isn't a super magical date locale.

Whatever it was, we couldn't recapture it. And whatever it was, it was better when we had the memory of the time it worked. The mystery of it. The memory of discovery and random chance.

Let me be clear, I think *Sandman* is great. I think it's probably BETTER than I remember. It's probably better than sitting at a gas station. I think if I re-read it, I would enjoy it more than I did the first time around. Let me also be clear, I don't think memory is always more important than knowledge.

But when it comes to *Sandman*, I don't know if I'm willing to take a risk. Because those memories mean a lot.

My memories of *Sandman* are less issue-by-issue specific, more how it felt overall. How grown-up I felt when I read them. How many little, different, magical stories the series opened up for me. How I made the trip from Cow Town to Denver, bought the books, and then stayed up late reading them. Then woke up early the next morning, skipped breakfast to read them again.

I'm not willing to risk those memories. It's cowardly, and I accept that. If anything's up to the task, it's *Sandman*, but that doesn't matter.

The memories I have, the way I felt...

I loved those *Sandman* books, but I love my memories of those books more.

Clarity vs. Experimentation: A Letter To Myself



A guy cracked his head on a bathtub and couldn't keep his memories straight. He remembered everything, but not in order.

That's the basic premise of a story I wrote in college. The first drafts of this story, all the scenes were told out of order. At the time, I would have said the goal was to replicate the experience of the character in the reader. Now, I would say I was being fancy and artsy. Fartsy, if you will.

A writing teacher took me aside and said it seemed like there was some solid writing in the story, and what would I think of putting the scenes in order? I hesitated, but he told me to try it, see what happened, and if I didn't like it, I could always revert.

His suggestion was 100% right. In order, the story worked better. It was less confusing, and because it was less confusing, I could better get across what I wanted to get across.

It's been 15 years since I wrote that bathtub story, and I just came across it again the other day. When I looked at the out-of-order version, I chuckled at myself. I wanted to be experimental and edgy. I wanted to break new ground so badly that I was willing to lose a reader completely.

I'm getting older. I've been hacking away for a bit. The experimental, wild stuff is mostly in the rearview mirror for me. As a writer, but also as a reader.

If I could speak to my past self, if I could talk to that kid about the balance of clarity and experimentation, here's what I'd say.

Feel Free To Experiment

You can do whatever the hell you want on your pages. You can tell a story that makes no sense to

anyone but you. You can write poetry that is a splatter of words with no concrete imagery or threads whatsoever. You are free to do what you want. And in fact, you SHOULD experiment. It'll help you grow, and college is a great place for that sort of thing.

However, let me also say that you're going to piss people off when you bring that stuff to a workshop. And nobody is going to want to publish it. And when nobody "gets it," it might not be their fault.

Let me sum this one up by saying that experimenting is good, important, even crucial for you, the writer, but not always so good for readers.

Work Your Fundamentals

Between you and me, younger Pete, sometimes the experimentation you do is really a bunch of clever tricks meant to hide the fact that you don't know how to do certain critical things. Move characters around a room. End scenes. Write dialogue that's more than just two heads talking to each other.

You haven't lived through this yet, but pretty soon you'll start seeing a lot of action movies filmed with shaky cam. Shaky cam is a handheld camera technique that is designed to make the viewer feel they're in the movie. Used sparingly and purposefully, it can work. But more often, you'll see it used to hide the fact that there's nothing interesting happening in the scene. The fight sequence isn't all that good, so we'll move the camera around a lot to disguise that fact and make everything feel exciting. This is kind of what you're doing. Disguising your weaknesses under the guise of experimentation.

Experimentation can be a good tool. Just don't let it be the tool you reach for whenever your attempts at clarity fail.

Earning Experimentation

Does your work have a worthwhile story underneath the experiment? In other words, are you going to pay off the work a reader does to understand what's going on?

Take *Pulp Fiction*. That movie was experimental, out of order, but if you watched it chronologically, it'd still be a Tarantino movie. It's still worth watching without the gimmick.

Quentin Tarantino can experiment because it's worth your time to watch *Pulp Fiction* regardless of the order. Lydia Davis can write experimental stuff because her prose is so tight that it's worth reading anything she does. Cormac McCarthy can make up words because he's fucking Cormac McCarthy, and the stories are worth it.

If I can make an analogy, these writers put a steak on the plate. Something solid and good. Then, their experimentation is seasoning that adds just a little something extra.

Literary experimentation is like Tony Chachere's Original Creole Seasoning. It's great to add a dash to most things, but a spoonful of it alone is a terrible experience that's hard to work through.

Experimentation can add a lot of flavor to your work. Just make sure you have a steak in the pan before you break out the Tony Chachere's.

Recognize Who's Having Fun



Some writers say that if they aren't having fun writing, the reader won't have fun reading. This seems somewhat true, but for you, young Pete, for someone prone to go off the deep end, it's terrible advice.

It's fun to write something wild and experimental. You can be your weird, wacky self.

Clarity is not as fun. It's hard work. Hard work that pays off for your readers.

Padgett Powell wrote this book I love to shit on, *The Interrogative Case*, where every sentence is a question. Young Pete, you'll try to read it a couple times in the near future. I hope I can dissuade you, but probably not. You're stubborn that way. And honestly, it was a good object lesson for you.

I can't say for sure that Powell had more fun writing it than I did reading it, but I'd sure as hell hope he did. Because for me, it was ZERO fun. Negative fun. Minus 10 points fun.

Experimentation can make your readers feel left out instead of feeling like they're part of the exchange between reader and writer. It can make a reader feel stupid. Nobody picks up a book because they want to feel stupid.

Just because you're having fun writing it doesn't mean anyone will want to read it.

If you do the hard work of clarity, your readers will have more fun.

With Clarity You Can Do Anything

If you can write with clarity, you can write experimentally. But the converse isn't true.

The REM song "Nightswimming" is an excellent example of clarity:

*The photograph on the dashboard, taken years ago
Turned around backwards so the windshield shows
Every streetlight reveals the picture in reverse*

This is a very complicated thing being described, but you can understand it. It makes sense. The image is vivid, the placement and nature of the thing. It's a weird, artsy setup, and the song gets away with it because it's laid out so clearly. In three brief lines, you understand this very specific, artistic, thoughtful image. I'd challenge anyone to come up with three lines that so simply express such a complex image.

Clarity does not mean simple. It doesn't have to be minimalist. It doesn't mean your work is emotionless. Clarity means only that I know exactly what you're talking about.

Let me be clear, young Pete, that I think clarity and experimentation are at odds, but clarity and beauty are not. If you have a beautiful image, express it clearly and others will be able to see the beauty as well.

17 Books You MUST Own To Enjoy



If you're looking for a book gift this year, I have a few suggestions.

See, a lot of books, you don't actually need to own them. You can check them out at a library and save some bucks. Not to mention some space. Not to mention your back if you end up moving. Or, you can buy them digitally, save yourself the trouble of the physical item.

But there are still some books out there, special books, that you have to own in hard copy to really enjoy.

The book isn't dead. Here are some of the titles keeping the book alive.



1. "Ship of Theseus" by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst

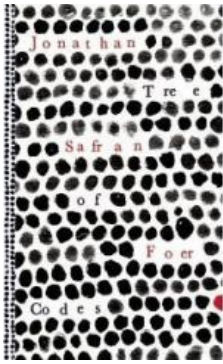
Let me tell you, this thing presents a nightmare for libraries.

It's a book within a book. There's the book *Ship Of Theseus*, but then there's a narrative told through margin notes, slips of paper stuck in the book, envelopes, all kinds of ephemera.

Why is this a nightmare?

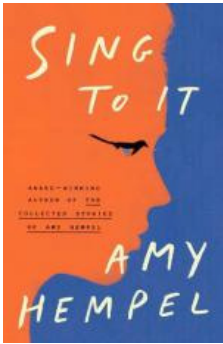
Because how the hell am I supposed to keep track of everything inside the book? How do I know, when it's checked in, that the dozens of slips of things are not only back in the book, but in the places they're meant to be discovered?

If you want the real experience with this one, buy it. Sealed.



2. "Tree of Codes" by Jonathan Safran Foer

As much a piece of art as a book, this delicate work is not only an interesting read, but it makes for a great oddity in any home library. Pages feature cut-outs and small windows that reveal different texts depending on page turns. There's really nothing else like it.



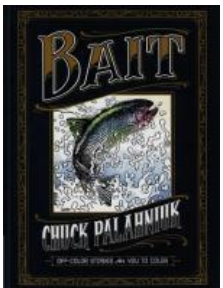
3. "Sing To It: New Stories" by Amy Hempel

This is Hempel's first new book in ten years. If you're a smart consumer, you'll pick this one up, but you'll ration out the stories over time. It might be a long-ass wait for her next book. And if you have the physical book, you'll be reminded to keep revisiting it.



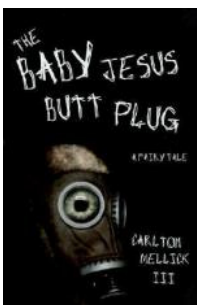
4. "Trial of the Clone" by Zach Weinersmith

This RPG-like reading experience takes some time. But it's thoughtful. For example, random page turns act as dice rolls. This is a much better experience if you can write in the book, and it's one you'll want to go through way more than once.



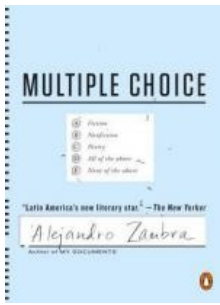
5. "Bait" by Chuck Palahniuk

An entry into the somewhat-faded coloring book craze, *Bait* offers a little something extra. The coloring serves a purpose. The act of coloring makes you more complicit and participatory in the events of the stories. Bonus: There's a REALLY great story in here, "Ghostwriter," that I put up there with Palahniuk's best.



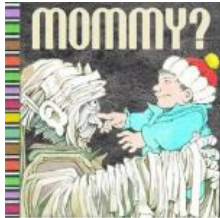
6. "The Baby Jesus Butt Plug" by Carlton Mellick III

You miss half the fun of this book if it's not on the shelf for guests to see.



7. "Multiple Choice" by Alejandro Zambra

This is like a Choose Your Own Adventure except more fun, better written, and you won't die out in space like a chump. It's a little more artsy, sure to please lovers of experimental fiction. You need to be able to mark in this one. Don't forget to fill in the bubbles completely to ensure your answers are counted.



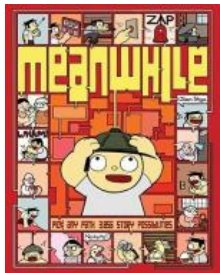
8. "Mommy?" by Maurice Sendak

If you find this at a library or used bookstore, I guarantee it's fucking broken. The pop-ups in here are super elaborate and wonderful, and the feel of the paper unfolding and tucking itself back in as you turn the pages is a once-in-a-reading-lifetime experience.



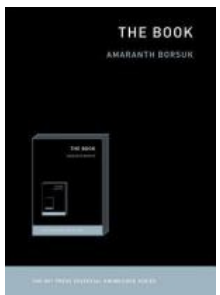
9. "Silver Surfer: Parable" by Stan Lee and Moebius

You can read these digitally, I'm sure, but the bizarre art and the bombastic prose, they just need the feel of a floppy comic book. It's an experience from two unlikely collaborators that should be absorbed as originally intended, and the fact that it ever hit stores is a...Marvel? Eh?!



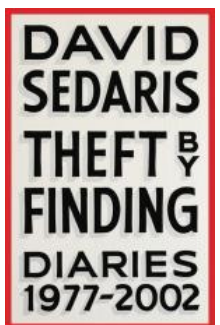
10. "Meanwhile" by Jason Shiga

With its fascinating format and clean art style, you'll want to flip through this one, oh, 3,856 times. After all, there are 3,856 possible endings!



11. "The Book" by Amaranth Borsuk

When you're reading a book about the forms books have taken throughout history, you're missing out on a more connected experience if you read digitally. Hold history in your hands. Embrace the analog.



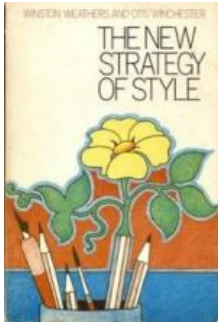
12. "Theft By Finding" by David Sedaris

You're not going to want to read this straight through. But it's great on the shitter. I'm sorry, Mr. Sedaris. I'm so sorry.



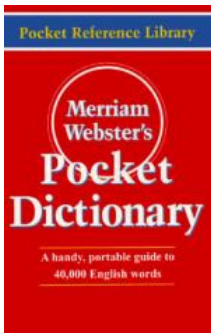
13. "Building Stories" by Chris Ware

With 14 different pamphlets, booklets, and pieces, you want to get this one, clear some space on the floor, spread it out and dive in.



14. "The New Strategy Of Style" by Winston Weathers

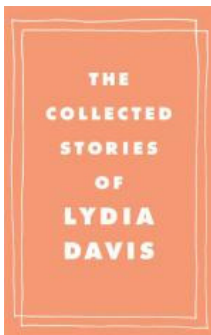
We've made a big deal out of *Copy And Compose* on this site. And unless you've got about \$100 dollars to blow, it's out of reach. But it seems the secret's still a secret, *The New Strategy Of Style* is cheap and has the same material.



15. "Merriam Webster's Pocket Dictionary"

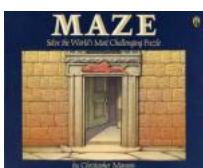
My poetry teacher:

Toss out your thesaurus. Real poets carry a dictionary.



16. "The Collected Stories Of Lydia Davis" by Lydia Davis

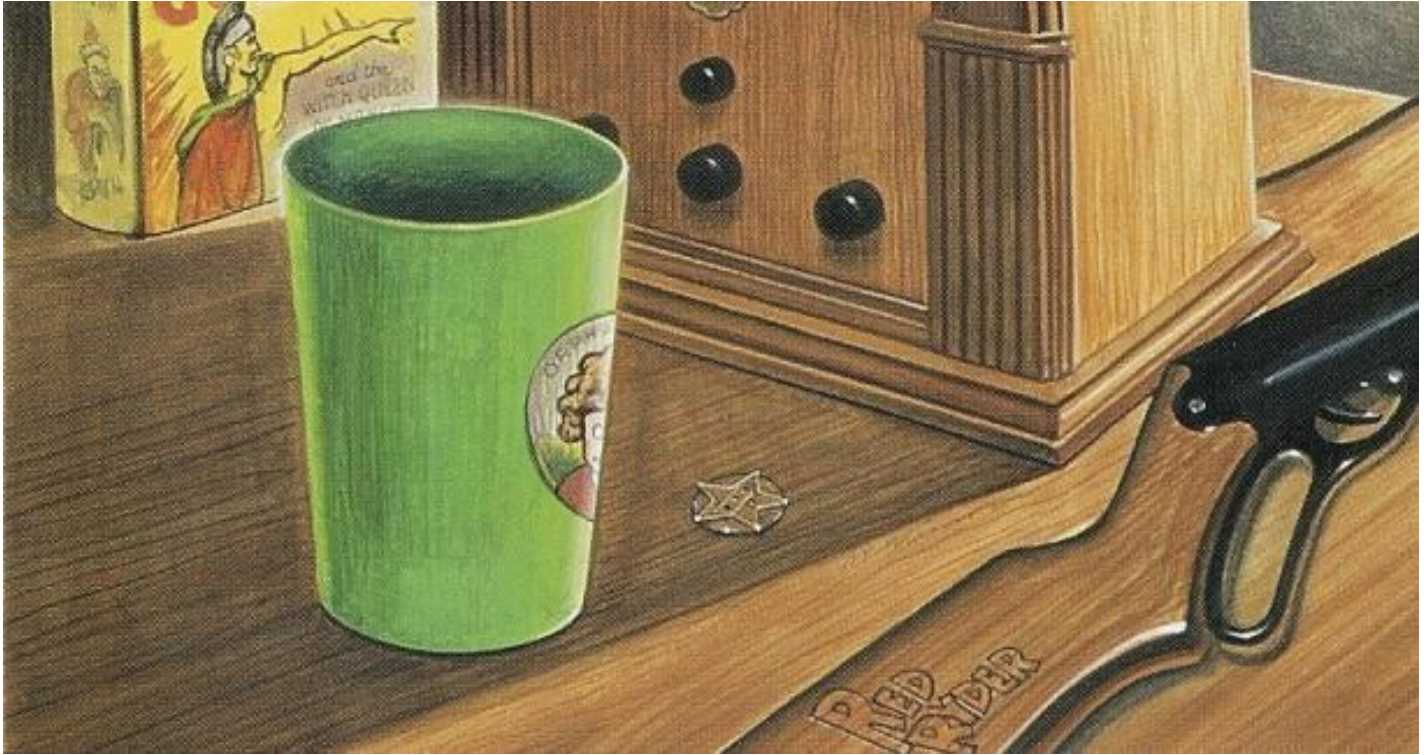
If you go straight through 700+ pages of Lydia Davis, you'll be lulled into not paying enough attention. You have to read a few, put the book away. Read a few more, put the book away. These stories are meant to have space between them, and if you buy it, you can space it out however you like.



17. "Maze" by Christopher Manson

Want to do an escape room but without all the hassle of putting on pants or a facial expression that's acceptable in public? Maze is your answer. You'll want to keep this one because it's going to take you longer than you think.

Wait, 'A Christmas Story' Was A Book?



Whatever you read this year, don't believe the headlines. There aren't 10 Things You Don't Know About *A Christmas Story*. There are no Things To Watch For In *A Christmas Story* that you haven't already seen.

This movie is so damn ubiquitous that the only thing I'm interested in is when they're going to change the name from *A Christmas Story* to *THE Christmas Story*. I suppose that puts Ralphie in direct competition with Jesus, but I don't see anyone running *The Passion of the Christ* on a 24-hour marathon.

There's not a lot left to mine in the movie. But don't fret, leg lamp lovers. There's more *A Christmas Story* to be had if you're willing to dive back into the books.

Christmas Past

Everything starts with Jean Shepherd.

Shepherd was a radio personality in the 50s and 60s. He told stories. Maybe like an old-timey David Sedaris or something, or a precursor to Garrison Keillor, but with a little bit of mischief mixed in.

One of his more famous stunts: Shepherd initiated a prank where he asked his listeners to go to their local bookstores and ask for a non-existent book called *I, Libertine*. Shepherd's devoted listeners even collaborated to create a fake author, Frederick R. Ewing. Then they created a fake backstory for Ewing, saying he was well-known for his BBC Radio talks on 18th century erotica.

Shepherd's listeners came through, and they requested the book en masse. Some accounts say the hoax book did in fact make the NYT Bestseller list. But that's only half the weirdness.

In what has to be one of the most backward-ass publishing ventures ever, because there was demand for the book, publisher Ian Ballantine met with Shepherd to discuss creating *I, Libertine*. Ballantine then hired Theodore Sturgeon to ghostwrite. *I, Libertine* hit the shelves. You can still buy it today, and reviewers will tell you it's not so bad, considering that its entire creation was a joke.

But *I, Libertine* wasn't the only book of Shepherd's that had a difficult birth.

Shepherd's other books started as semi-outlined stories Shepherd told on his radio show. Shel Silverstein, who you may know from *The Giving Tree* and other books that seem harmless as a child and are devastating as an adult, encouraged Shepherd to write his stories down and sell them in book form. Shepherd wasn't into it. He wasn't a writer.

The legend goes that Silverstein transcribed some of Shepherd's radio shows, and the two edited the texts together. Some of the stories appeared in *Playboy* and were eventually collected in *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash* (1966), which provided most of the basis for *A Christmas Story*, along with Shepherd's later title, *Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories: And Other Disasters* (1971).

Which Is Better?

The movie's better.

Well, okay. That's not fair.

It's hard to say at this point. When I'm reading the book and Ralphie is opening Christmas presents, there's not a whole lot of surprise that his Red Ryder BB Gun is hidden behind the curtains. When Ralphie is decoding a secret message with his hard-won decoder ring, I already know it's going to be a big letdown.

It's hard to say definitively because the movie was not only first (for me), it was WAY first. Like 25 years first. And because so many of the details are so strange, because so much of the greatness is the surprise of watching Ralphie's dad open that leg lamp, it's hard to say whether I might prefer the book if I hadn't seen the movie first.

That said, the movie has undeniable merits.

The movie trims a lot of the fat. There's a framing story in the book. A grown-up Ralphie is home for Christmas, sitting in a bar, remembering stuff with a grown-up Flick. The movie used the narration to fill in the adult side of things, and it sped things along.

Things are inflated in the movie, in a good way. In the book, Ralphie gets pink bunny slippers from his aunt. In the movie, he gets that whole pink bunny getup, and we get to see him try it on and be super unenthusiastic. In the book, the visit with Santa is similar, but it's missing Santa's boot to Ralphie's face.

If you're into humorous recollections of a 1950's Midwestern childhood that occasionally veer into "walked to school uphill both ways in the snow" territory, you'll dig it.

A lot of what's great in the book is pumped up just a tad for the movie, and inflation was the right move.

The stories started on the radio, were committed to print, and maybe the third time really was the charm. If you ask me, the movie is the best version of the material.

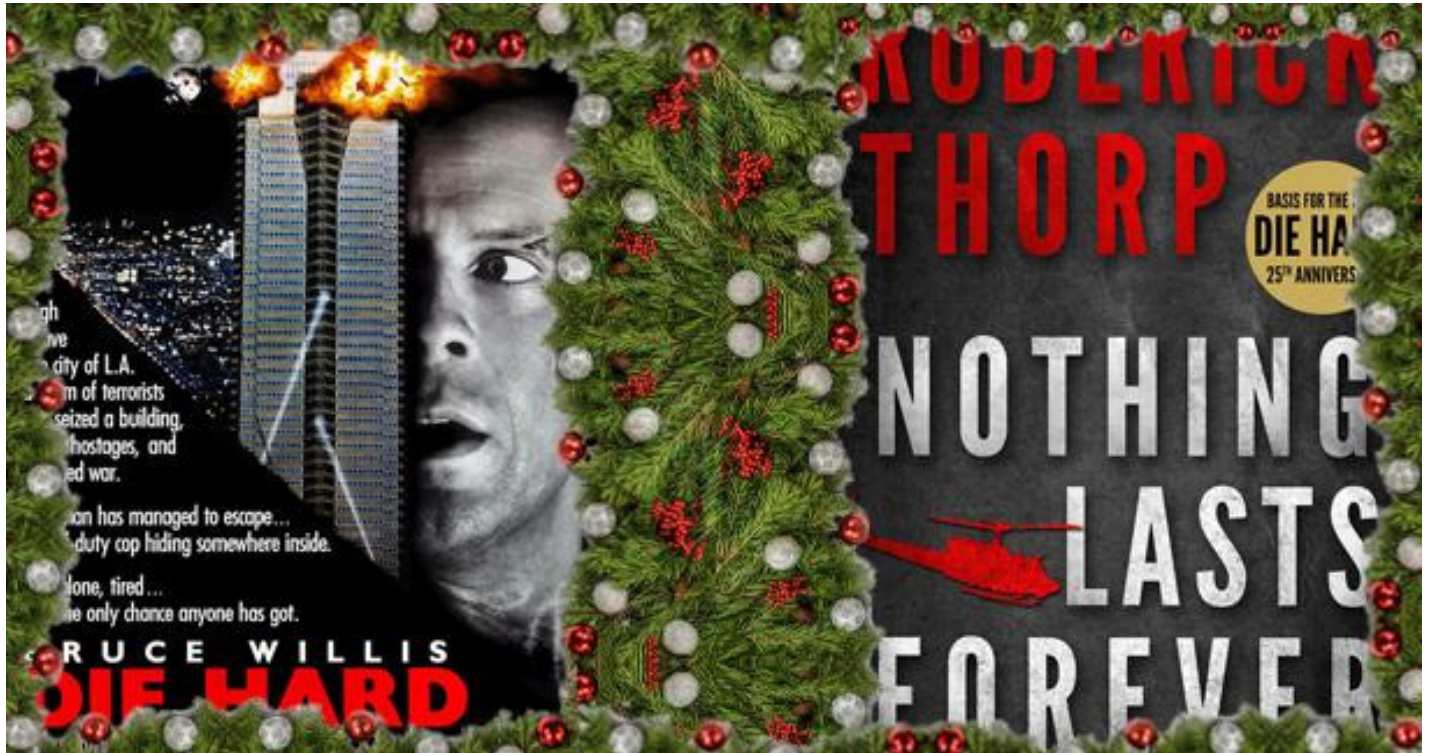
Who Should Read It?

It's still worth your time to read *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash*, provided you really like *A Christmas Story*. I know it sounds weird, but I'd skip the *A Christmas Story* material and read everything else. There's some funny stuff in there, like the tale where Ralphie thinks he's doing his buddy a favor by double-dating, but then realizes HE'S the dud, and it's everyone else on the date doing HIM a favor.

If you love the movie to death, I think you'll find a lot to enjoy in *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash*. If you're into humorous recollections of a 1950's Midwestern childhood that occasionally veer into "walked to school uphill both ways in the snow" territory, you'll dig it.

Oh, and I'd definitely recommend reading the books over seeing the semi-sequel, *My Summer Story* aka *It Runs In The Family*. Even an appearance by the great Glen Shadix (Otho from *Beetlejuice*, people!) couldn't save that one.

Book vs. Film: 'Die Hard'. Plus An End To The Christmas Movie Debate



Merry Christmas and Yippee-Ki-Yay!

To enhance my enjoyment of *Die Hard*, I went ahead and read the book it was based on, *Nothing Lasts Forever*. After all, the book is ALWAYS better than the movie, right? Which meant *Nothing Lasts Forever* was liable to blow my mind all the way down my throat, through my digestive tract, and violently out through—well, you get the idea.

Let me tell you all about it. Plus, stay tuned for definitive proof that *Die Hard* is, in fact, a Christmas movie.

"Nothing Lasts Forever"

In 1966, author Roderick Thorp released *The Detective*, a novel about a detective. Well-titled, that one. It was made into a movie by the same name in 1968, starred Frank Sinatra as the titular detective, and did well at the box office.

In 1975, Thorp saw *The Towering Inferno*, dreamed of a man being chased through a burning building, and wrote *Nothing Lasts Forever* as a sequel to *The Detective*. *Nothing Lasts Forever* is the book that would eventually become *Die Hard*.

I say "eventually" because there were some serious changes between *Nothing Lasts Forever* and *Die Hard*.

What changes? Spoilers Ahead.

Details, Details

For the most part, *Die Hard* follows the story set out in *Nothing Lasts Forever*. A cursory read of the book will even lead you to believe that *Die Hard* is a faithful adaptation. The basic setup is the same: people trying to steal money from a safe in a big-ass building, a New York cop doing the fish out of water thing in L.A., the jump off the roof with the fire hose, taping a gun to the hero's back, Al Powell assisting on the ground—the pieces are all there.

But when you read the book carefully, you can see why we all owe the filmmakers something extra in their stockings.

For starters, the book has a bunch of extra crap we don't need. A semi-romance takes place between a flight attendant and Joe Leland (the McClane character) during Leland's flight to L.A. The flight attendant and Leland know each other for all of a couple hours, but Leland is desperate to talk to her over the radio during various points of the siege. Sorry, that doesn't work. I don't really care about a romance that started like two hours ago WHEN YOU'RE BEING HUNTED INSIDE A SKYSCRAPER BY TERRORISTS WITH MACHINE GUNS.

But the biggest problem with *Nothing Lasts Forever* isn't extra nonsense. It's that Joe Leland is a dud. He's not charming whatsoever. He's not interesting. He's just Action Guy Doing Action Stuff.

John McClane is goddamn charming. It's part of why you root for him. Where Leland is cold, calculating, and in his element, you get the feeling that McClane is WAY out of his depth and surviving one moment just to get to the next one. You root for McClane because he's the underdog. Leland is like Mr. Counter Terrorism. He's a WWII veteran and pilot. He knows all about who the terrorists are, which countermeasures the police will take, and so on. He even credits himself with coming up with the idea of selling small items, like pens, attached to cardboard to reduce shoplifting.

I mean, c'mon. Can you imagine John McClane bragging that he added plastic bubbles and cardboard to pens to stop kids from ripping off a Bic at the Walgreen's?

Oh, and the ending of *Nothing Lasts Forever*? Bummer city.

You probably remember *Die Hard*, where Hans Gruber is going out the window, and he grabs Holly's arm, almost pulling her out. He snags her watchband, but McClane manages to release the clasp, sending Gruber out the window solo in that beautiful slow-mo shot.

In the book we have a similar situation with the bad guy falling out the window and grabbing the leading lady (notable difference being that Holly Gennero is replaced by Stephanie Gennero, who is Leland's adult daughter as opposed to estranged wife). The setup is almost identical, but in the book, Stephanie plunges out the window with the baddie and crunches into the ground, dead. Which sparks Leland to kill all the remaining terrorists, including a baby-faced female terrorist. It's cold-blooded and dark, and it's straight-up revenge, which doesn't leave a great taste in the mouth.

Where Leland is cold, calculating, and in his element, you get the feeling that McClane is WAY out of his depth and surviving one moment just to get to the next one.

In the book's original ending, Leland was also killed, but this was softened to him being wounded. And, you know, completely alone in the world and having just witnessed/being partially responsible for his daughter's gruesome, terrifying death.

Overall, there are two very damning things I can say about the book.

The first is that it was criticized as being "tasteless" and "exploitative" BY A 1980'S HOLLYWOOD SCRIPT ANALYST. The people who brought you such film classics as *Low Blow*, *Killpoint*, and *My Mom's A Werewolf* lifted their faces out of huge piles of cocaine just long enough to express that they felt this book was a bit too rough around the edges to be made into a motion picture. "We can't put THAT on screen. Now hand me that script for *Death Wish 4*!"

The second damning thing is simple: The book's no fun. John McTiernan said this about the earlier scripts, which had a strong basis in the book:

There's no fun in this. No one feels good about it. There's no way you can convince someone to get a babysitter for the kids, go to this movie, and come out of it saying, 'Wow, this is a lot of fun. I got to tell everybody else to come and see this.'

Nothing Lasts Forever's best attribute is its title, which blares out at you from the cover, a constant reminder that this book will eventually end.

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Enough about that book. Let's get back to *Die Hard*.

There's this newish, on-going debate online: Is *Die Hard* a Christmas movie?

I was hoping to settle this by reading *Nothing Lasts Forever*, and I did gain one little piece of evidence for the pro-Christmas camp. I also read *Die Hard: An Oral History* by Brian Abrams, which is a great one for true fans.

Armed with all the information I can tape to my back, I think it's time we settle this.

Does *Die Hard* take place during or around Christmas?

Yes.

Yes. It might look like it's just a little extra flavor, but it's really more diabolical. This is made a much bigger deal in the book, but the reason Hans and the boys decided to take over the building on Christmas Eve is because law enforcement and security would be operating on skeleton crews. It would take a lot longer to get everyone on-scene, leaving the baddies plenty of breathing room. Additionally, it's a convenient time when an office building is mostly empty, save for the hostages they want, and all of them are gathered in one area.

This is less explicit in the movie than it is in the book, but the source material provides context that makes the Christmas element more central to the plot.

Is there Christmas music?

Yes. At least five Christmas songs appear on the soundtrack. Fun fact: "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow" playing over the ending was a last minute, joking addition made by a production assistant. And when the movie was screened for a test audience, they loved it.

Does it have a happy ending?

Yes. Especially compared to the book.

How about cold weather?

No. You've got me there. Although the entire southern hemisphere experiences Christmas in summer. So maybe the problem isn't the weather. Maybe the problem is that your perspective just isn't global enough.

Is Christmas referenced multiple times?

Yes. "Now I have a machine gun Ho-Ho-Ho." The tape on McClane's back is clearly Christmas-themed. John is visiting Holly and their children because it's Christmas. There's a Christmas party. There's a whole lotta Christmas going on. The word "Christmas" appears 20 times in the script, and the word is said aloud 12 times.



But *Die Hard* came out in July!

Miracle on 34th Street came out in May. May! Is there any more Christmas-y movie, and is there any less Christmas-y time of year? Plus, nobody knew what to do with this thing. Is it a dumb action movie? A smart thriller? An action comedy? What is this? It's hard to imagine now, after decades of movie pitches that go "It's like *Die Hard*, but on a military boat/bus/cruise ship/mountainside/airplane/Alcatraz/Air Force One!" but *Die Hard* was a new kind of thing, and it baffled a lot of executive types. They put it during summer blockbuster time. Go figure.

Does it have a lesson about the true meaning of Christmas?

Absolutely. At the end, our heroes completely ignore what is essentially money falling from the sky, eschewing material things for togetherness.

Bruce Willis said it's not a Christmas movie!

Well, Steven de Souza, *Die Hard* screenwriter, says it is. Also, it should be noted that Willis' quote came at the end of his roast. So is it possible that he made the decree for the sake of trolling? Entirely.

It's more of an action movie than it is a Christmas movie!

Then I suppose *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is more claymation than it is Christmas movie? That *A Christmas Story* is more comedy than it is Christmas movie? That *Jingle All The Way* is more total bullshit than it is a Christmas movie?

Maybe it's just me...

I'm not going to get overly interpretive, but for some of us, Christmas is a huge pain in the ass. We identify with John McClane flying all the way across the country to try and mend a very complicated relationship (and mostly screwing it up) as a Christmas tale more than we do some stupid story about unwrapping presents and being super happy. I'm a child of the early 80's. Broken homes were a thing. Problematic parental figures were a thing. Lousy Christmases were a definite thing.

If Rankin/Bass make you feel warm fuzzies, that's awesome. We had different childhoods.

Ultimately, It's A Dumb Debate

Alright, I've bludgeoned you with all the reasons *Die Hard* is totally a Christmas movie. But it doesn't really matter.

What makes a regular-ass tree into a Christmas Tree? Bringing that tree inside and dressing it up. What makes a movie a Christmas movie? Bringing it into your home, deliberately, around Christmas, and dressing it up. Watching *Die Hard* with eggnog, a fireplace, bourbon until you can't get up. Whatever your traditions are. That's what makes it a Christmas movie.

Oh, one last quick point. If we're really going to argue about what is and isn't a Christmas movie:

Rocky IV and *Batman Returns* are Christmas movies.

The 'Narrow Your Horizons' Reading Challenge



It's January, so there's a decent chance you're reading this in the gym. Because this is THE NEW YOU, and the new you reads articles on an elliptical machine, perhaps while a kale smoothie sloshes around in your stomach.

It's crowded in that gym because most of us take up some kind of ambitious New Year's Resolution, but for 80% of us that ambition runs dry by the second week in February.

Every year we try to get better for six weeks. We jump on the treadmill. For 6 weeks. We eat right. For 6 weeks. We meditate. For 6 weeks. We do Rosetta Stone. For 6 weeks. And we take up new reading challenges which, statistically, none of us complete (more on this later).

Yes, we are worse at reading than we are at getting in shape. It's a sad state of affairs.

What Can We Do Differently?

Whenever I have a question, like "How can we get people to read more?" I start searching. And I get frustrated when I see the same answers over and over.

SO MANY reading challenges contain some language about "broadening your horizons."

Book Riot:

Hopefully you'll find tasks that excite you and tasks that push your reading boundaries.

Popsugar:

This year, there are 40 book prompts to broaden your reading scope...

And SO MANY of the challenges involve reading dozens, if not hundreds, of books in a year.

Bigger, more, broader, deeper, faster—this is the language of reading challenges.

Whatever the common theme is, I want something else. Especially if the common theme isn't working (I promise, this part is coming. Just a little more patience).

Which is why I'm proposing a new reading challenge: Narrow Your Horizons.

The Narrow Your Horizons Reading Challenge

The Narrow Your Horizons Reading Challenge consists of 6 things. I'll list them up top for those of us who like to keep life simple:

1. Narrow your challenge to 5 books
2. Cut the extra nonsense
3. Pick things YOU want to read
4. Don't like it? Stop reading it.
5. Tend to your horizons
6. Get anti-social

Now, I respect your intelligence, so if you want to know the why behind each step, read on.

Step 1: Narrow Your Challenge To Only 5 Books

Goodreads allows users to participate in a yearly challenge. It's simple. How many books do you pledge to read this year? You can go as low as 1 and as high as 5,000. In 2018, over 4 million of us challenged ourselves. Less than 1% of us finished our self-set challenges. (Please note, this data is from late December, so it doesn't account for all of you who stayed in on December 31st, reading your asses off, who rocketed that number up to a whopping .8%.)

There's a sneaky side benefit to a lower number.

More numbers? The average person reads 12 books in a year, but that average is hugely inflated by people who read a shitload. The median number, which is probably closer to the real number most people will read in 2019, is 4. Meanwhile, the average Goodreads challenge was 60 books in 2018.

What do all these numbers mean? They mean that we over-plan and under-work. By a wide margin. Surprise.

Which is why 5 books is the Narrow Your Horizons number. It's attainable, and it means you'll probably read more than most people.

There's a sneaky side benefit to a lower number. A low number encourages you to take your time. Enjoy what you're reading. Reading voraciously can mean reading huge quantities, but it can also

mean reading with enthusiasm. A small number of paced, savored experiences might serve you better than a large quantity of experiences at maximum efficiency.

Try it. Narrow down to 5.

Step 2: Cut The Extra Nonsense

Most reading challenges are super fun at the beginning. You know, the part where you're putting your list together, searching for titles, plugging them in. That's fast-paced and engaging as hell. It's aspirational. You can imagine where you'll be at the end of the year. How much smarter. How literate.

Where do most reading challenges fail? That second week in February. You're at home, alone, slogging through a book that you don't want to read so much as you want to have read it so you can tick the box on your reading challenge.

The Narrow Your Horizons Challenge doesn't have that problem because there's very little to do outside of the actual reading. No spreadsheets, no research. It's a reading challenge that narrows the scope of activities down to focus on READING. It's a simple, honest challenge that doesn't deceive you with a bunch of fun tasks up front, meanwhile the actual work of reading is waiting for you on down the line.



The entire thing fits on a post-it.

Step 3: What Do You Want To Read?

Other reading challenges are all too happy to tell you what you should read. Which types of books and what sorts of authors you should read. Sometimes this is great. I have an abiding love for *Like Water For Chocolate*, which I read for class. It's a book I never would have picked up if I hadn't been forced.

But I'm not your professor. And you're a grown-up. And we've seen time and again that prescriptive diets, prescriptive fitness activities, and prescriptive lifestyles don't give us good results. Which is why I'm going to ask you the questions nobody else asks: What do you want to read? What do you like?

Imagine a diet that asks what you want to eat. A personal trainer who asks you what sorts of things you like to do. That's what this is. A reading challenge that asks you what you want AND ACTUALLY LISTENS.

Wander the bookstore. Wander the library. Pick up books and hold them in your hands. Look through your bookshelves at home. Look at the eBooks you've bought without ever reading. Just look around until something jumps out at you. Something that you simply want to read.

If you're still having trouble, I have a thought experiment for you: In 2019 you can read 5 books. No more. After 2019, you will not be able to read another book. You'll still remember all the books you've read throughout your lifetime, and you'll still be literate. But some cosmic force will prevent you from

ever reading another book. This means you can add 5 reading (or re-reading) experiences to your life, and that's it.

Which 5 would you choose? List them. Read them.

Step 4: Put The Book Down

If you're living life the right way, you're quitting more books than you finish.

If you force yourself to march through a book you don't like for this challenge, it doesn't count. Simple as that. In fact, if you're not loving a book enough that you carry it around with you, if you don't look forward to reading it on your lunch break, on the toilet, whenever you get a spare minute, it's probably not good enough, and I don't want you to count it. Put it down, try something else.

This challenge removes any incentive for plowing through something you're not enjoying.

Step 5: Tend To Your Horizons

Let me be clear: engaging in this challenge is no excuse to be lazy about self-improvement, and I'm not suggesting that expanding your horizons is a bad thing. What I'm suggesting is that a lot of us have two goals: being a better person and reading more, and a lot of us try to kill those two very different birds with one stone. And most of us miss both birds.

What would happen if you expanded your horizons through something other than books for a while? Watch movies that are intellectually stimulating or challenge you in some way. Try a TV show you don't think you'll like. Listen to classical music if that's something you have never really tried. Follow new and different people on Twitter. Go see a stand-up comedian who may show you something different.

You could even take a horizon-expanding reading challenge and apply it to another format. For example, the most famous of these reading challenges is probably Book Riot's Read Harder Challenge. You can easily adapt their categories to another medium. The challenge to read "A book by or about someone that identifies as neurodiverse" becomes the challenge to watch a movie by or about someone that identifies as neurodiverse. The challenge to read a self-published book becomes the challenge to play a truly indie board game. "A book by a woman and/ or AOC (Author of Color) that won a literary award in 2018" becomes a challenge to listen to a podcast by a woman of color who won an award (for podcasting or in another field).

Continue to broaden your horizons. But for the duration of this challenge, consider broadening the range of methods and tools you use to broaden your horizons. Maybe you'll find that your horizons are better broadened when you open yourself to a greater variety of formats. Maybe the voices you really need to hear are working in a medium other than print. Maybe you'll come to find that reading is the best way for you to broaden your horizons, you'll miss it, and you'll go back to it.

Read 5 books because you want to read them, not as a means to an end. If it turns you into an inhuman monster, I take full responsibility.

Read 5 books because you want to read them, not as a means to an end. See what happens. If it turns you into an inhuman monster, I take full responsibility.

Step 6: Get Anti-Social

If there's one thing nobody needs, it's another gym selfie. And I'm proposing that #AmReading posts are the book world's equivalent of the gym selfie.

Bro, we don't care about your #HugeGains, whether they're bicep- or page-based.

What if, instead of taking that gym selfie, you picked up something heavy? What if, instead of taking a picture of the book on your desk, you read the damn book?

Narrowing your horizons, in this challenge, means narrowing what you want to get out of the act of reading. If what you want to get is validation via social media, this will be difficult for you. There are no hashtags for this. No online reading groups.

Read a book, finish a book, and if it's great, tell people about it online. No need to hide a good book's light under a rock. But I don't want to hear what you're planning to read, currently reading, and I definitely don't want to see a picture of a closed book on a your table. How are you #Reading a closed book you're photographing, posting, and hashtagging?

Remember, it's about the reading. Not the moments before. Not wasting time taking a picture when you could be turning pages.

Instead of getting all over Instagram, [print off this sheet](#). Cut it into quarters. Keep one for yourself and hand out the other three to people you like. Explain it to them. Talk to real people, flesh people. Because they are your friends. Those folks making these other challenges online? They're not your friends. Hell, I'm not your friend.

Narrow down your social horizon. Be better friends with the people who are actually your friends. Do stuff with them. Talk books with them.

That's it. Simple, clear, and do-able. I think you can do it, and I think it'll help you out. But honestly, it doesn't matter what I think. All that matters is that you're reading.

5 Reasons We Love To Hate Jonathan Franzen



It's never a good thing when Jonathan Franzen is a trending topic on Twitter.

The last time this happened, Franzen had put out his "10 Rules for Novelists." People seemed pissed. Really pissed. So royally pissed that I fully expected the pieces of advice to be:

1. Consume as many human souls as possible a la *Mortal Kombat's* Shang Tsung
2. Know that New York pizza is bullshit
3. Have as much money as me
4. Millennials: stop ruining TGI Fridays
5. Driving in the left lane at low speed gives you lots of time to work out plot issues
6. Officially challenge Oprah to an MMA bout
7. #BirdLivesMatter
8. [contains a racial slur]
9. Writing a pro-Trump novel will put you on the right side of history
10. Haha, you dope. I can't believe you actually read this!

Turns out his advice was pretty tame. Fistfighting Oprah was not even mentioned in an oblique way. Maybe a bit *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, but pretty harmless stuff. .

Still, we couldn't leave it alone. We had to dissect it, give each line an uncharitable read, and talk about what a pretentious jerkoff Jonathan Franzen is. Everyone got in on it. Celebrities, amateur writers. Everybody gave their take.

And I had to wonder: How did we get here? Why do we love to hate Franzen so much?

The Oprah Baggage

The rich history of hating Franzen can be traced back to his early dealings with Oprah.

In 2001 Oprah picked Franzen's *The Corrections* for her book club. Franzen was somewhat concerned:

She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one-dimensional ones that I cringe, myself, even though I think she's really smart and she's really fighting the good fight.

And he was especially unhappy about the Oprah Book Club sticker on his book's cover:

I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience and I've heard more than one reader in signing lines now at bookstores say 'If I hadn't heard you, I would have been put off by the fact that it is an Oprah pick. I figure those books are for women. I would never touch it.' Those are male readers speaking.

He did end up backtracking:

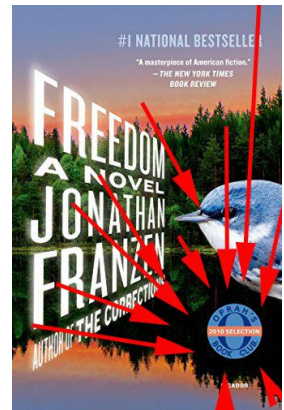
I said things that ended up hurting Oprah Winfrey's feelings and far too late it was pointed out to me that this was happening...I feel bad for a number of reasons, because I really don't like to hurt people, and I feel bad because the person being hurt is actually a really good person for American writing and reading.

But Oprah had already rescinded her invite for Franzen to appear on her show, and the hate train had already left the station.

It's been almost 20 years. Let's take a moment to reexamine.

The whole situation felt a little like pro wrestling. You've got a hero and a heel. We've got Franzen as this snobby upper-crust douche and Oprah as salt-of-the-earth woman bringing books to the people.

Folks, Oprah is worth an estimated \$2.8 billion. She may be a lot of things, but she is not like you or me. She's worked her ass off, she's smart, and she knows how to do business. She may genuinely care about people. But she also had a gardener who spent 5 years breeding a new kind of rose for her estate's garden. To have Oprah in the proletariat seat is a bit hard to swallow. At best, it's like siding with the "of the people" side in an argument over monocle quality.



Franzen:

I also blame Oprah...Because, from our very first conversation, it was clear we were not speaking the same language. I didn't scream when she called me. I said, 'Oh, hey.' And was trying to talk like a media professional to a media professional. And she didn't know what to do with that...And I was, like, well, I don't think you'd be doing this if it weren't good for you, too. So let's work together. And the answer was no. So I blame her, too.

I think we were led to believe that Franzen was being a jerk to this kindly, humble TV host we all

know and love. But what if the reality is that the way his book was used to boost Oprah's signal should have warranted some compromises on her part?

Here's where I go out on a limb.

Often, artists are called jerks and assholes for advocating for what they think their work is worth. We love to hate artists who do this. Especially if they're wealthy and/or powerful. Metallica took a boatload of shit for their ASININE stance that people should pay for music instead of stealing it.

We hate when artists bring up economics because we feel like it somehow diminishes the "purity" of art. As though the desire to be compensated for art signals that an artist is cynical.

We especially love to hate artists who know what they're worth and demand what they're worth. We need to stop doing that.

Not to mention that Oprah and Franzen buried the hatchet in 2010. The original feud is almost old enough to drive. It's time to let it go.

The War Orphan Adoption Thing

Franzen said that at one point he considered adopting an Iraqi war orphan because he felt out of touch and that raising a kid would help him understand the youth better. Now, in the same article where he admitted this, he also said:

Oh, it was insane, the idea that Kathy [his partner] and I were going to adopt an Iraqi war orphan. The whole idea lasted maybe six weeks.

Most of us ignored the first part of his quote, the part where he said the idea was insane, and instead we explained how insane it was. Again. We scolded Franzen for something he didn't do. We couldn't jump in fast enough with our hot takes "But if he HAD done it, here's why it would've been bad" or, "He decided not to do it, but he decided not to do it for the wrong reasons, therefore we should still scold him as if he did the bad thing."

This one I find a little baffling. Not because the adoption idea is remotely a good, unselfish, reasonable, fair, thoughtful, kind, wise, intelligent, loving, parental, decent one, but because Franzen is talking about a bad idea he had, admitting it was a bad idea, and most importantly, he made no actual moves towards making his bad idea a reality.

I'm not prepared to hate on someone for their self-labeled bad ideas. If I did, I'd have to start with myself and work through a checklist longer than the entire text of *The Corrections*.

Franzenfreude

Franzenfreude is a term coined by Jennifer Weiner, author of a bunch of books categorized as chick lit. When Franzen's novel *Freedom* was coming out, Weiner wrote about the ways in which the book was over-praised, and she wrote that female writers (especially in genre fiction) don't get the same props or review space as white male writers. She encouraged tweeting with the hashtag #Franzenfreude to highlight non-Franzen books about Franzen-y topics.

Franzen became the lightning rod for this literary movement of sorts, and a central figure in the debate regarding equitable coverage for writers. Which was sort of strange because, honestly, while the system was set up to favor him, it was certainly not created by him. And Franzen himself seems to dislike it:

To a considerable extent, I agree. When a male writer simply writes adequately about family, his book gets reviewed seriously, because: 'Wow, a man has actually taken some interest in the emotional texture of daily life', whereas with a woman it's liable to be labeled chick-lit. There is a long-standing gender imbalance in what goes into the canon, however you want to define the canon.

Franzen didn't help himself in that he dismissed Weiner specifically, even accusing her of hijacking an important issue to boost her own signal. Weiner then struck back at Franzen, and they've been at it for years now, doing everything short of picking up folding chairs and going to town on each other.

Speaking personally, the whole Franzen/Weiner situation feels like rap beefs. For those unfamiliar, one way to try and raise your name in the rap game is to start a beef with a rapper. Kind of operating under the "No press is bad press" idea, if I wanted to start rapping under the name "Easy P" (which sounds like a pill for prostate issues, but whatever), I might write a diss track about another rapper or create a fake feud to boost sales. Beefed oftentimes benefit both parties financially, and usually one artist becomes better known while the other has the opportunity to reestablish their authenticity/credibility/skill.

I think we love to hate Franzen partially because he's the embodiment of the thing. The straight white male writer who is lavished with attention. Even though he's the target of the spotlight as opposed to the person operating it, he makes a good stand-in for what's wrong with publishing. He's instantly recognizable, and he's got that twee, upper-class thing going. He's the perfect villain.



Plus, who doesn't love a good beef?

He Hates Technology

He hates Twitter, he hates Facebook, and he advocates for writing without an internet connection.

This is a tough one. Buckle up.

I think he's right. We think we're doing actual important work when we tweet and increase the brand and so on, but maybe that stuff doesn't matter. It seems all over the map. There are big time authors who do and don't tweet. There are indie authors who don't tweet and indie authors who do.

Franzen strikes at technology with a big hammer, and sometimes he might be smashing more than he needs to, but I think he's more right than he is wrong. I think there are more of us writers who waste time online than those of us who would greatly benefit from a stronger online presence.

Hating Franzen for his technology stance is the same thing as hating the alarm clock. We all hate the alarm clock for telling us the truth: it's time to wake up.

He Can Back Up His Talk

And finally, we hate him because we have to admit, he writes damn good books. He's the shit-talker who has the moves to back up his big mouth. There's nothing worse.

The Best of Stan Lee's Soapbox



I was reading *Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-Man #310* on a train in Portland, Oregon. I'd been carrying the issue around, folded in half in my coat pocket for a few days, and the blue line to Beaverton was my chance to read it.

It's a really good issue, written and drawn by Chip Zdarsky. Get it.

When we got off the train, I heard one of my friends say, "Don't tell him. He'll just be depressed." But I made them tell me. Stan Lee was dead.

I carried *Spectacular Spider-Man #310* around with me for the next few days. It came with me into the city, out to Cannon Beach. It just felt right. I know it wasn't something Stan wrote, but it was the closest thing at hand. Even though it wasn't Stan's work, Zdarsky gets it, and if there are comics shops in the afterlife, which there goddamn better be, I think Stan would be pleased.

I wanted to write something that celebrated Stan. Those early issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man* are just so much fun. It would be impossible for me to overstate what The X-Men meant to me as a kid. Fantastic Four, Daredevil, Thor, Hulk, Iron Man, Doctor Strange, the revival of Captain America—movies, books, and the whole world would be a less interesting place without all of Stan's work.

What do you say about a writer who inspired the entire world? How do you speak about his impact?

The answer is you don't. You let him do the talking.

I've collected some of the best quotes from Stan's Soapbox, a column that ran at the end of Marvel comics from 1967 to 1980, totaling 144 columns. Because while Stan was at his funniest, cleverest, and his best in the pages of Marvel comics, he brought readers into the world of Marvel through his

soapbox. He was an ambassador for comics. He spoke directly to readers as if they were his friends. And that's how he should be remembered.

May 1967

May 1967 was the first Soapbox column, and over 60 years ago Stan managed to summarize what exactly Marvel was up to:

That purpose is, plain and simple — to entertain you! We think we've found the best formula of all — we merely create the type of fanciful yarns we ourselves like to enjoy — and if we like 'em, you oughtta like 'em too; after all, you're our kinda people! Now then, in the process of providing off-beat entertainment, if we can also do our bit to advance the cause of intellectualism, humanitarianism, and mutual understanding... and to toss a little swingin' satire at you in the process... that won't break our collective heart one tiny bit!

November 1967

Early in the Marvel/DC rivalry, Stan weighs in. He's clever and cutting, and anyone in marketing should read this as a master class in spin:

The mail hasn't stopped pouring in, asking for our comments about the ever-continuing Marvel-Brand Echh rivalry! It seems that some of our less-than-redoubtable rivals are still taking pot-shots at us on the pages of their mags, and our loyal legion of letter-writers has been demanding to know what action we're gonna take. Well, we're sorry to disappoint the hawks among you, but we really don't feel any action is warranted. Actually, they're not competition! You see, they obviously aim for a totally different type of reader than we do. We don't cater to any special age group, but we do cater to a special intellectual level. Our rollickin' readers, no matter what their ages, have proven to be bright, imaginative, informal, and sophisticated! So we don't mind when some of our roguish rivals claim to outsell us. (Although they never bother to mention that they PUBLISH more mags than we!) After all, everyone knows there's less of our type of people than theirs! So, let them continue catering to the bubblegum brigade — and more power to 'em. The public needs SOME sort of pabulum till it's grown up to Marvel! 'Nuff said?



September 1968

The 60's were turbulent times, and although many of Marvel's stories dealt directly with social issues, Stan got frequent requests for an outlining of Marvel's opinions on issues of the day. Here he tells the truth, and he does it with class:

Over the years we've received a zillion letters asking for the Bullpen's opinion about such diverse subjects as Viet Nam, civil rights, the war on poverty, and the upcoming election. We're fantasmagorically flattered that our opinion would matter to you, but here's the hang-up: there isn't any unanimous Bullpen opinion about anything, except possibly mother love and apple pie! Take the election, for example. Some of us are staunch Democrats, and others dyed-in-the-wool Republicans. As for Yours Truly and a few others, we prefer to judge the person, rather than the party line. That's why we seek to avoid editorializing about controversial issues — not because we haven't got opinions, but rather because we share the same diversity of opinions as Americans everywhere. But we'd like to go on record about one vital issue — we believe that man has a divine destiny, and an awesome responsibility — the responsibility of treating those who share this wondrous world of ours with respect — judging each fellow human on his own merit, regardless of race, creed, or color. That we agree on — and we'll never rest until it becomes a fact, rather than just a cherished dream!

December 1968

Stan was a constant advocate for comics' place in the arts. It's hard to imagine now, but there was a time when comics were not considered a legitimate form of art or communication. When he attended parties, Stan himself would often lie about what he did for a living!

Comic books are a medium of communication — just as television and motion pictures are. All three employ words and pictures, and all must be judged on their individual merits. A story is a story, whether presented between the two covers, or on a screen. If the words have dramatic impact, if the pictures are visually appealing, if the theme is emotionally relevant, then certainly it is worthy of a reader's attention. However, if the quality is lacking, then it rates little consideration. Isn't this equally true of a TV program, a Broadway show, a motion picture, or any other form of Entertainment? All we at Marvel ask is that our product be judged on the basis of quality — a quality which we sincerely believe is equal to that found in any other comparable media.

March 1969

Stan understood something about character creation and applied it early and often: characters that are all good or all evil aren't just boring, they're unrealistic:

One of the things we try to demonstrate in our yarns is that nobody is all good, or all bad. Even a shoddy super-villain can have a redeeming trait, just as any howlin' hero might have his nutty hang-ups. One of the greatest barriers to real peace and justice in this troubled world is the feeling that everyone on the other side of the ideological fence is a "bad guy". We don't know if you're a far-out radical, or Mr. Establishment himself — if you're a black militant or a white liberal — if you're a pantin' protest marcher or a jolly John Bircher — but, whatever you are, don't get bogged down by kindergarten labels! It's time we learned how fruitless it is to think in terms of us and

them — of black and white. Maybe, just maybe, the other side isn't all bad. Maybe your own point of view isn't the only one that's divinely inspired. Maybe we'll never find true understanding until we listen to the other guy; and until we realize that we can never march across the Rainbow Bridge to true Nirvana — unless we do it side-by-side!

August 1969

A great, sensible letter to the comic book fans who just can't let this go, even today:

Every time one of our sagacious superheroes guest-stars in another mag we get bombarded with the same type of complaints from Marvelon Assembled! "How can Thor be fighting litterbugs with Nick Fury when he's in outer space with Winken, Blinken, and Nod in his own mag?" Or "How can Captain America be trapped by Aunt May in Spidey's mag when he's running a school for teen-age dropouts in his own swingin' stanza?" So, we have two choices. Either we stop crossover guest-starring, or we ask you to permit us a little literary license. If the doings of one of our repertory players in his own mag doesn't seem to jibe with his cameo appearance in some other mag during the same month, let's just say that one story took place a few days before, or after, the other, huh?

February 1970

In the weeks following Stan's passing, I was a little horrified by how many people used Stan's death as an opportunity to debate his relationship to Jack Kirby and true legacy (my take: read up on what really happened. Do your research into that specific relationship and the way that comics professionals were treated across the board in the 60's and 70's. If you've still got a hot take worth giving, spout it from somewhere other than atop Stan Lee's casket, fanboy). In this Soapbox from 1970, Stan completely outlines the "controversial" Marvel method of production:

First, the artist and the writer have a story conference, because unlike other comic-mag publishers, Marvel believes the artist contributes as much to the story as the writer does. Then, once the plot details have been worked out, the artist goes off by his lonesome and draws the strip in pencil, drawing it any way he pleases, since the script hasn't been written. (So far as we know, Marvel is the only company to use this free-and-easy, highly creative method. —Free plug!) Next, the penciled drawings are given to the writer, who creates the dialogue balloons, captions, and any other copy needed. After that, a letterer prints all the copy in the correct places (we hope), using a lettering pen dipped in jet black India ink. Finally, the pages go to the inker (embellisher) (or delineator — depending upon how fancy you are), who draws over the penciled sketches with a brush and/or pen, also using permanent black ink. Now that the pages are drawn and lettered, we make copies of them and one of our swingin' staff of colorists paints these copies so that they can be used as color guides by the engraver when he receives the mag. After the engraver makes the engravings, they're sent to the printer and another Marvel masterwork is lovingly brought to life.

Steve Ditko also passed in 2018. I'd just seen some of his original *Amazing Fantasy 15* artwork at a museum in Seattle, and it was incredible. We might've had Spider-Man without Steve Ditko, but he wouldn't have been nearly as Sensational, Spectacular, or Amazing.



March 1970

Should comics have a message or be pure escapism? Stan weighs in:

It seems to me that a story without a message, however subliminal, is like a man without a soul...None of us lives in a vacuum — none of us is untouched by the everyday events about us — events which shape our stories just as they shape our lives. Sure our tales can be called escapist — but just because something's for fun doesn't mean we have to blanket our brains while we read it!

April 1971

...As time went by...we began to touch upon real issues, real problems that confront this woebegone world of ours. Now, here's the hairy part. The more relevant the stories became, the more flak we took from every spectrum of opinion. The radicals claim we're too archaic! The conservatives claim we're too liberal! The doves call us hawks, and the hard-hats call us peaceniks! The Pollyannas say we're harbingers of doom, while the drop-outs and cop-outs say tell us we're living in a fool's paradise. No matter what we write or draw, half of you disagree — and just between us, that's the way it oughtta be!...If we can make you think — if we can anger you, arouse you, stimulate or provoke you, then we've served our purpose.

The short version, every comic should be provocative to someone. If it's not, what is it really saying?

October 1978

It took him a couple years to get around to it, but Stan finally answers a question he often received: What is a bigot?

From where I sit, bigotry is one of the many stains upon the human escutcheon which must be eradicated before we can truthfully call ourselves civilized. It comes in many

forms and shapes, but it's most easily recognized in the forms of cruel and mindless generalizations: such as when you hear some yo-yo say "All Italians are like this"; or "All Germans are like that"; or "All women are so-and-so"; or "All blacks, or Catholics, or Jews, or redheads, or whatever are like this"! Well, they may not be aware of it, but the turkeys that talk that way — and it's always done in a disparaging, put-down manner, of course — are bigots. Plain and simple! Anyone with an I.Q. slightly above a cretin's has to know that all of any type of humans are never always the same. There are good people and bad people, and all categories in between — and you'll find 'em amongst all races, all religions, all sizes, shapes, and sexes. You wanna dislike someone? Be my guest. It's a free country. But do it because he or she has personally given you a reason to feel that way, not because of skin color, or religion, or foreign ancestry, or any other moronic, mixed-up mindless motive! Because, if you justify your hatred by smearing everyone in any given group with the same brush, you're a bigot, Charlie!

January 1979

Stan grew. He changed. So much that he even told Mighty Marvel Marchers that it was alright to take it easy on DC:

I guess what I'm trying to say is, sure we want Marvel to be your favorite comicbooks, and sure we'll knock ourselves out to produce the best stories and artwork in the field. But we don't wanna succeed at anyone else's expense. We don't want you to feel you have to knock the other guy in order to be loyal to us. The better our competition is, the more it'll keep us on our toes — and the more you'll profit by it!

As Stan himself would put it, 'Nuff said.

How to Submit Writing Like A Relentless Force of Nature



Legendary sci-fi author Connie Willis told me a story about her early submitting days.

Willis' method was simple: Always have something out for submission. That way, when place A rejected your work, no biggie, you still had something out at Place B, Place C, and in her case, Places D-Z. You waited to hear back, and in the meantime you took the rejected work, repackaged it, and sent it somewhere else.

This meant Willis made a lot of post office trips and bought a lot of stamps.

So one day she gets everything back in the mail, and I mean everything. Every story she had out for submission came back the same day, all rejected.

To say it was deflating would be putting it pretty lightly. "Gutted" is probably closer. To see that volume of quality work come back, none of it finding a home, it was tough. She considered quitting the writing game. Who wouldn't? If a boxer was knocked out 10 times in a row, they'd probably consider retirement. If they were knocked out 10 times simultaneously (I don't know how that works exactly, just go with it) I'm pretty sure they'd quit as soon as they were conscious and able.

What convinced Willis to keep going? It was simple. She had a bunch more stamps. If you've got the stamps, might as well use 'em.

She sent out her work again, used up her stamps, and this time she got some stuff picked up.

Submitting your work can be a slog. No, it's not that it CAN be a slog. It's that it absolutely IS a slog. Send it out, get rejected. Send it out somewhere else, it's not a good fit. Send it out, get some good

feedback, but no placement.

That's the cycle I'm in right now, and I'm psyching myself up to keep going. Keep submitting. Keep trying to find a home for my work.

How do you keep submitting? How do you feed yourself to the machine over and over again, get beaten down and keep returning for more? I've got a few methods.

Keep Looking for New Spots

Don't send something out and sit around, waiting to hear back. You should constantly be looking for places to send your work.

Entropy Mag has a great list of spots, but there's another method I like.

Basically, look up some stuff that has a similar flavor to your book, find out who published it, and look into that. Sometimes you'll find only the big publishers. Read a little more, find the niches where books like yours live. Hit up their web pages. Damn near every press has submission guidelines and windows.

Just as a note, some places don't allow simultaneous submissions (a simultaneous submission being a piece you send to more than one potential publisher at once), but most do. Just make sure you keep track of all the places you've sent a given piece. That way, if someone accepts it, you can notify the other outlets who missed their chance.

How do you feed yourself to the machine over and over again, get beaten down and keep returning for more?

Get Organized

Spreadsheets. I hate 'em. But they have their uses.

Here's a system I use. Modify it so it fits you.

Sheet 1: Places to submit

Include requirements, dates, type (contest, rolling submissions, etc.), and for your own use, a priority between 1 and 3 of how pumped you'd be to see your work come out of that house.

Sheet 2: Places you've completed the submission process

Same as the first sheet, but add a column regarding whether or not they will get back to you and in what window of time. If you're shopping multiple pieces around, add which piece has been sent where.

Sheet 3: Future submission spots

These are spots that don't currently have open windows, but they will, and they look promising. Keep these organized by date.

Sheet 4: Rejections

No need for gory details here, just make sure you're not hitting up the same venue twice. Also, if a rejection comes through with a desire to see work from you in the future, transfer to your Future

Submissions Spots sheet. Make a note that you've already sent them something, and make a note of the person who you emailed with (this is potentially useful information to include in a letter later on).

It's a huge pain in the ass, but getting organized saves you tons of time in the long run. And a career in writing is definitely a long run.

Keep Your Cool

You can't control whether or not you get rejected. But you can control your reaction.

When you get a rejection letter, pop back an email with a "Thanks for your time, and thanks for letting me know." Do it right away, then file that rejection email in a folder you use to track such things. Get it out of your inbox, don't dwell on it.

The benefits of a kind response can be immediate. I was once referred to another publisher I hadn't heard of as a result of striking up a quick, friendly conversation this way. If you thank the person, you might be able to ask for some constructive critique, if there's any to be had.

Besides the concrete benefits, remember that there's a real person on the other side of that rejection, even though it doesn't feel like it sometimes. Nobody wants to go to work and turn down a bunch of hopeful writers. Nobody was rubbing their hands together on Sunday night, pumped for Monday morning when they got to fire off rejection emails. Hell, for all you know, the person turning you down may have really enjoyed and advocated for your work.

When it comes to rejections, be the person you aspire to be: The person who can accept rejection and move on.

Always Be Closing

This is a tough one for some of us, especially first-timers. If you grew up humble, if humility is a trait you admire and aspire to, you need to drop that in the submission process. Because nobody is going to knock on your door and ask for your manuscript. Nobody knows who you are.

You just have to get used to selling yourself. Talking about how great you and your work are. It's like a job interview. You gotta go in with the attitude that whoever publishes you is lucky to have you. It's a tough mindset switch, and it's going to feel uncomfortable. This might be a good time to talk to your biggest fans, friends or family. People who will unabashedly compliment you and tell you what you're doing right. Write your introductory letters as if you're those people.

Of course, this doesn't apply to raging egomaniacs. You lot are just fine on this front.

Where Skill Meets Luck

Did the person reading your manuscript have a fight with their spouse? Did they get 8 hours of sleep? Did they just read something in a similar vein that just happens to be slightly better than yours?

There's an element of luck to submissions, especially slush pile submissions. And by "element" I

mean in the way there's an "element" of bacon in a BLT—a HUGE element.

When you get rejected a couple dozen times, you start looking for patterns, conspiracies. But the truth of submissions is that your acceptance percentage is going to be low, especially at first. It's not that you're unlucky when your stuff gets rejected. It's that you're extremely lucky when it's accepted.

You can't control luck. You can't fight it. All you can do is write the best possible manuscript and create as many opportunities as possible for luck to strike.

Don't Get Sloppy

Keep yourself to a high standard. Keep reading those guidelines. Keep familiarizing yourself with the other work from a publisher before you submit. Keep doing a good job.

Three quality submissions will serve you much better than a dozen haphazard ones. Sloppy submissions are a waste of your time and of a publisher's as well. It feels like you're accomplishing something, but the terse, quick rejections you get by sending your stuff to the wrong places will only serve to frustrate you further.

Recognize Your Own Milestones

Like I said, you can't control the acceptance of your work. But there are lots of things you CAN control, and those are things you should celebrate.

Did you put in your 10th submission? Get a pizza. Get your first real rejection? Have a drink. A CELEBRATORY drink. Before you even get started submitting, decide what you're going to do to celebrate along the way. Keep things fun, keep things positive, and keep celebrating the things you have control over. Submitting is work that nobody else will reward you for, so take care of yourself.

Platonic Love Between Men In Fiction



One time I brought a story to a workshop and came across a problem. The platonic male friendship in the story read, to almost every single person, as a romance. Maybe a lopsided, obscured romance, but a romance nonetheless.

The overwhelming response meant the misinterpretation was my fault. I'll own that.

I wanted to tell a story about a platonic male friendship, but no matter how I revised, the story didn't turn out the way I wanted. It was hard to carve out even a couple thousand words about a platonic male friendship.

Why? Why was I struggling to tell a story I had lived? What was keeping the story from taking the shape I intended?

Why is it so hard to tell stories of platonic love between men?

Pre-Apology and Definition

It's not like I was furious about people interpreting my characters as being in a romantic relationship. It's that I was trying to write characters who were in a different, specific type of relationship, and romance kept finding its way in. And I want to explore why.

I don't want anything I say to come off as anti-gay. Because that's not how I feel. This is not me prefacing with a huge "I don't mean to sound homophobic, but..." This is me saying that if you feel like I'm saying something anti-gay, I'm sorry. I'm trying to express something, and I might not get it just right.

Also, I do want to be clear, there's nothing about the phrase "platonic male relationship" that excludes

gay men. Gay men can have platonic male relationships. If you think that's not true, you are probably one of those people who also thinks a straight man and straight woman can't be platonic friends, and you're a dope.

And because we'll be throwing around the term "platonic" I want to be clear that "platonic" means "(of love or friendship) intimate and affectionate but not sexual." So, a platonic relationship can be loving, physical, and affectionate. It's simply nonsexual.

Blame It On Literary History

For a long-ass time you couldn't just write a book about being gay. I think we all understand that. Hell, Oscar Wilde was locked up for two years for the "crime" of being gay. It was an actual dangerous, suspicion-arousing act to write fiction about gay characters.

How does one express something that's illegal yet essential to the self in a way that's cathartic, emotionally honest, and provides maximum deniability? Subtext! Beautiful subtext.

Gay relationships in fiction were relegated to the world of subtext for a time. And that's fucked up. We probably missed out on a lot of goodness as a result, and the authors writing fiction about gay men had to be super talented, not only writing the stuff, but obscuring it while still keeping it interesting, emotionally honest, and real. If you want a challenge, write something that works, encode it, and make it so it still works. It's almost impossible.

I think part of the legacy of this is that readers, many of whom have plowed through classics, are very attuned to any subtext in male relationships. I think we've become accustomed to seeing literary affection and intimacy between men as indicative of something more in most instances because, for a long time, that's as far as an author could go. You almost HAD to ask that question about male relationships whenever you read.

This comes from a good place. Authors want to be understood, and readers want to understand them and connect with them. These are good things. And I think there's still some residual feeling (and perhaps still some need) of this.

It does, however, make telling a story of a platonic male relationship more challenging.

Fancy Book Learnin'

I was an English major in college, and there I was taught something that I've started to unteach myself. I was taught to view things with a critical lens, but not a lens of "here's where the story succeeded and failed" or "here's what I genuinely think the author was trying to say." I was taught that every text is saying something other than what's on the surface. I was taught to look for angles. What's my "hot take"? What can I do to write a 5-page paper about this book that has been written about endlessly? Can I sell the idea that George and Lennie from *Of Mice and Men* are in a sexual

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relationship? Does the pig slaughter scene in Lord of the Flies actually represent a rape? Is all that horse-land stuff in Gulliver's Travels really about...well, I don't even know. I feel like you could go just about anywhere with that. But if you want to ace that class, take my advice, something is a penis, something represents a birth, something represents a race/class/political situation at the time of the book's writing, and if you can throw in a Jacques Derrida quote, you're golden.

I was taught to never accept the surface appearance of anything in fiction, especially a relationship. Which is good, but I may have learned to overstep too, asserting more than questioning, thinking that just because a theory CAN be justified, it is worth developing, and that authors are ever obscuring their true message. I don't think my schooling was unusual in this aspect.

Reading into texts isn't a bad thing, but I do think it's a contributing factor that makes platonic man love difficult in the world of fiction. Two male characters having feelings for each other without explicitly acting on them in a sexual manner is exactly the kind of thing that launches a thousand theses. And once you start reading this way, it's hard to slow down and let the text guide you into a reading that's less about interpretation and more about listening.

Touch: So Important In Fiction, So Taboo In Life

Touch is huge in fiction. A necessity. Physical touch between people is something most of us crave and don't get enough of in our real lives. Touch is huge in signaling, cementing, and maintaining a relationship between humans, and when a story is not going the way it should, writers often reach for the tools of plot and dialogue, but they should be reaching for touch.

Touch between platonic males is still taboo. We like to think we are all progressive and cool with it, but we're not.

Think about the bro hug, that hybrid hug where you low five, grip each other's hands, and then hug with one arm, usually while staring off into the distance. The hug is really more of a slap combined with a shoulder bump. The bro hug is a symptom of where we are now. We're learning to be more accepting of physical male affection, but we're not there yet.

Google "Tom Brady kissing" and most of what you'll see is stuff about Brady kissing his son and father on the mouth. The kiss between Tom Brady and his son, depicted in the documentary Tom Vs Time, is probably the most overanalyzed kiss since me preparing to kiss someone else for the first time in 6th grade.

I know, I know. You're thinking, "Not me! I'm totally okay with men in a platonic relationship being physically affectionate with each other." And that's fine. It's my opinion that any individual's take is up against a feeling men have, whether it's internal or external in origin: Touch between platonic male friends is observed and scrutinized in the real world. Lingering touch between men, whether in reality or in fiction, will be analyzed.

The message received by men is, "Bro hug is the limit."

We Don't Understand Male Friendships

I'm sure, at this point, many of you are saying, "But what about Watson and Sherlock?" "What about Batman and Robin?" "What about Peter Dinklage and Chip Zdarsky?" Okay, nobody is asking about that

last one. But I'm trying to make it happen.

One way that men have found to be with each other in fiction is through structured relationships. If two men are working within a structure that has defined rules and roles, they can find a form of intimacy that's not sexual, not explicit, and not questioned.

Watson and Sherlock are a good example. These two men are solving crimes. They have a useful task to perform, and they aren't just hanging out for the pleasure of each other's company.

Batman and Robin have a classic master/apprentice relationship. Both have their reasons for spending all night, every night, with each other.

The guys in *Sons of Anarchy* were free to be very affectionate with each other, but look at the situation. Very structured, very hierarchical.



Bro comedies are almost always about friends whose friendships will dissolve as they mature out of one structure (usually high school) and into another. *Stand By Me*, *Superbad*, *American Pie*—all of them work this way. All of the friendships are based on something that goes away, and when it does, so does the friendship.

Chuck Palahniuk has talked at length about fight clubs in his novel being a structured way for men, who don't know how to be together, to interact with each other.

Highly structured, codified, rule-oriented, hierarchical setups open the door to platonic male relationships because the individuals don't have to set the rules for how to behave. They don't have to call each other for no real reason, just to talk. They don't wonder how their time spent together will be interpreted.

We understand platonic male relationships as goal-oriented. Solutions-based. Means to an end. Working relationships. Combative relationships. Roommate relationships. But I've found very few instances where these friendships are nothing more than friendships. Where there's no external factor driving two men together.

And yet, that's how most of my platonic male friendships function. I'm guessing that's also the case for many a fella.

Why are we so weirded out by men interacting in fiction without cause?

Is This A Real Problem?

I mean, who cares? Don't we have enough masculinity in fiction already? Don't male authors win more awards, make more money, and so on? If men want to be depicted a certain way, shouldn't they ACT a certain way? Aren't there other voices that need amplification more than those of dudes?

Yes, there's truth to all of those ideas. The presence of platonic male relationships in fiction is not a problem that should keep you up at night. It's not at the top of anyone's list. I won't require anyone to pay attention to the idea after the end of this column, which is coming up quickly.

Let's just say you're curious about exploring it further on your own. What then?

I've got mixed opinions on whether fiction shapes reality or reality shapes fiction. I think it's very difficult for a book to change the world today. There's so much competing for everyone's time and attention, so much good stuff out there. Which might make novels the perfect venue for playing with this idea.

If we can make the world as we want it in fiction, why not make the platonic male relationships we'd LIKE to see? Why not build something up in the world of fiction and see what happens in the real world as a result?

I'd encourage all of you to try it. Write a platonic male friendship. Play around with the concept. See what happens. See where the lines are drawn. See if it's difficult to render and how.

Writing about it gives you some time to think about it. It forces you to ask, "If I COULD wave a magic wand and make platonic male relationships the way I wanted, what would they be like?"

Consider the real-life models you're using for platonic male relationships in your fiction. Do you have good models for them? Do you know men who are affectionate with each other? Do you have to make it up from whole cloth?

Consider whether your fictional platonic male friendships exist only within a structure and whether you can abandon that. Can your platonic male friendships look more like Sex And The City and less like a mentor and a student, partners in a task, or individuals acting out a system of rules?

Ask men you're close with what they think about platonic male love. Not to argue, but to hear what it's really about. Ask old men. Ask manly men. Ask dads. Ask teammates. Don't be surprised if your questions arouse suspicion. Most of us are never asked anything like this.

50 Provocative Questions About Romantic



This article was born when I sat down to watch a movie with a bad romantic subplot.

It got me asking questions about romantic subplots. Their utility, their effectiveness. Their very right to exist.

I came up with a list of questions. Let's think about this. Apply this to your work. Annoy your friends next time you see a movie together.

Ready to take the romance out of romance? Let's go.

1. Would the story be any different if the romance were excised?

2. If so, would "different" mean "better"?

3. When one character is sizing another one up, can they do it in a way that both tells me about the person being described and the describer?

4. How much do I worry/care about the romantic future of two super-good-looking, driven, talented young people?

5. Does requiting love effectively end the love story?

Think about *The Office*. When Jim and Pam got together, did anyone give a shit anymore?

6. In other words, once the love is fulfilled, how will you make us continue to care?

7. Is a love story between equals compelling?

It's probably a good thing to shoot for in real life, but what about in fiction?

8. Should romantic subplots reflect reality, aspirational reality, or unreality?

9. Is a failed romance or a successful romance more read-able?

10. Why do readers eat up the romance of *Twilight*, *50 Shades*, and others of that type?

11. What can you learn from their mass appeal?

12. Do you believe more in the power of a romantic subplot to shape the reality of romance, or do you believe that reality shapes romantic subplots?

13. Does every story need a romantic element?

14. Do most stories need one?

Asking this question would eliminate a lot of needless nonsense. I don't want to see a *Transformers* romantic subplot unless it's between two robots, damn it!

15. Is sexless romance interesting?

16. Does your romantic subplot justify its space in the story?

In other words, while we're hearing about the romance, are readers wishing we were getting back to the main thrust?

17. Does your romantic subplot do something for your story that couldn't be done through the lens of a different, potentially more interesting kind of relationship?

18. Do we always need to see the characters first meeting?

The origin is the most tedious part of most superhero movies, after all.

19. Is it just me, or do romantic subplots seem a lot simpler and tidier than real romances?

20. Do you actually know someone who has experienced the kind of romance you're depicting?

21. Do I need to love your characters, as a lot of folks would say?

22. Is it possible that I don't need to love them, I just need to understand what they love about each other?

23. How will you manage a character who's difficult/unpleasant/unlovable in a romantic relationship?

24. Is it possible to capture true intimacy between two characters if they're always being observed by a reader?

To clarify, is there anything authentic about a relationship on display, created for consumption by others outside of the relationship?

25. Is a relationship that “feels” real the same as a relationship that “is” real?

26. Can adding the fictional elements to a relationship make it feel more real than the “real thing”?

27. Is it your intention that a reader imagines themselves in the romantic role, or do you mean for them to be observers of the romance?

28. Do your characters always tend to express love the same ways?

29. Do the characters involved in the romance reflect each other's love, ping-pong-ing the same mode of expression back and forth, whether it be words, deeds, etc.?

30. Have you read *The 5 Love Languages*?

Corny as it is, you should really skim that shit.

31. As society becomes more accepting of things like romances between various genders, romances between people of different races, romances between people of different religious backgrounds, romances between numbers of people other than 2, (you know, all the stuff that you don't mention around that one grandparent), what sort of new narratives might emerge regarding societal norms keeping people apart?

32. Do you think everyone deserves love?

Stop and think about this one. Think about the individuals you hate most in the universe.

33. Do you ever grant fulfilling love to despicable characters?

34. Is your romantic subplot meant to provide something that's familiar to readers, a way of seeing themselves, or is it meant to be something that shows readers something unfamiliar?

35. Is sex better depicted in a more universally-understandable way, or are you better off finding something universal in the specific?

36. How do you decide whether the romantic subplot is interesting to someone other than you, the writer?

37. Does the romantic subplot make the plot more complicated in a good way or a bad way?

More stuff always makes something more complicated. Double-check that it's a good thing.

38. Is the romantic subplot enhancing the tension of the story without explicitly explaining the sources of that tension?

Your romantic subplot can ratchet things up without giving us a ton of backstory.

39. Does your romance feel like something that will go on after the story is over?

40. Do you think people generally act the same in romantic situations as they do in other situations?

41. Do you research your romantic relationships online?

If so, you should probably account for online depictions of relationships being a lot less realistic than real ones. Remember, an online depiction of a person, couple, or group of people is curated, filtered, and disseminated with a purpose.

42. How does technology affect your romance?

43. Do you think, to sound emo for a second, that relationships are mostly situations where people find that their broken pieces match up?

44. Are you letting people make the same sorts of potentially bad decisions in romance subplots that you do in other types of subplots?

45. What are the challenges of depicting a long-distance relationship?

46. Do the reasons people cite for their romantic failures usually line up with reality?

This is a very leading question. No, obviously, they don't.

47. Do you feel in touch with what people who aren't you might be looking for in a relationship?

48. If you're the lower self-esteem type (my hand is raised), do you fully understand what it is people like about you, romantically?

49. Do you think all life stresses end up expressed in interpersonal relationships?

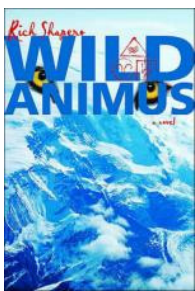
50. Does it matter one lick what you believe, or is it all about what your character believes?

If Books Were Assorted Chocolates



A good box of chocolates has a personality. An overall feeling that comes from the act of discovery, the flavors, and the trust implied by diving into a piece of candy that's unidentifiable at first glance. That's probably why it's such a popular Valentine's gift. You can show someone you know them, treat them to something nice, and they can show you, just a little, that they trust you.

But what if, instead of a variety of chocolates, you gave a variety of books? What's the literary equivalent of fudge? What's the candy equivalent of Ulysses? What's the science behind shrinking books down to fit into a box that size, and would the books retain their original weight? Wait, forget that last question. Nobody gives a damn about that.



1. Coconut = 'Wild Animus'

Ah, yes, the dreaded coconut. Pretty much a chocolate shell filled with clipped-off hangnails. If this thing represents flavor country, it's a flavor country that does in fact deserve to be walled off from its neighbors.

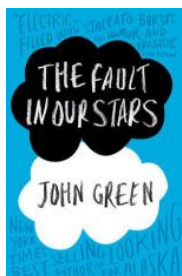
Wild Animus is the coconut of books. *Wild Animus* shows up everywhere, in every thrift store, yard sale, little free library, and NOBODY wants it. And yet, time and again, there it is.



2. Chocolate Covered Peanuts = 'The Metamorphosis'

This is where we all have to admit that a Peanut M&M is superior to most versions of chocolate and peanut. Honestly, I just wish a little Peanut M&M was nestled in every box of chocolates instead of whatever Whitman's comes up with. And maybe a cheese ball. And some chips. I need to make my own assortment of things. That's what I'm discovering.

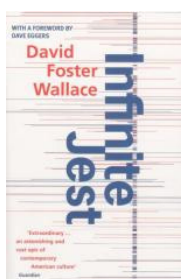
The chocolate-covered peanut is Kafka. It's sort of like Vonnegut (the Peanut M&M), but not quite as good. Because Vonnegut knows that sometimes cheap and trashy carries the day.



3. Caramel = 'The Fault In Our Stars'

Caramel is the one that's hard to really hate, but let's be honest, it can be a little overly sweet sometimes. It's satisfying, but I don't know if I'd call it mind-blowing.

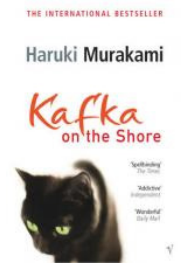
I'm calling *The Fault In Our Stars* the caramel of the bunch here. It's tasty, simple, and it's a crowd-pleaser. The risk reward ratio is pretty flat. Low risk, but you're pretty much guaranteed a certain level of reward.



4. Chocolate Covered Almonds = 'Infinite Jest'

This is the one you pretend to like because you're too good for peanuts. Peanuts are for peasants. "I'm a person of refined tastes, therefore I require a more sophisticated nut, perhaps an almond." Make sure to pronounce every single bit of the word when you say this. All-uh-mun-d.

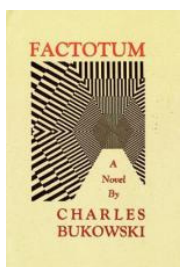
David Foster Wallace, for sure. DFW FTW. A regular novel won't do. Give me a cinder block of a book WITH FOOTNOTES.



5. Chocolate Fudge = 'Kafka On The Shore'

Fudge seems like a good idea, but halfway through you realize you've made a mistake. It's a good thing, and WAY too much of it. The proper amount of fudge is the IDEA of eating a little fudge. Once you've thought it, you've had enough.

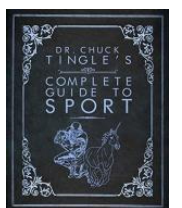
This is totally a Murakami book. *Kafka On The Shore*. Tasty and fun, but you've gotta be in the right mood. Otherwise you get most of the way through, and damn, it just keeps going.



6. Molasses Chew = 'Factotum'

Your Molasses chew people, they seem normal, but there's something disturbing about them. They'll invite you over for a dinner party, everything's cool, but then they show you their amateur taxidermy in the garage. At which point you can't wait to get out of there, and it takes forever (this part is ESPECIALLY analogous to eating the molasses chew).

This the *Factotum* of the literary chocolate box. Because I like it, sort of, but I'm also wary of people who jump to Bukowski as an immediate favorite, especially if they go Factotum.



7. Nougat = 'Dr. Chuck Tingle's Complete Guide To Sport'

Light, fluffy, sometimes tasty, yet nobody really knows what the hell it is.

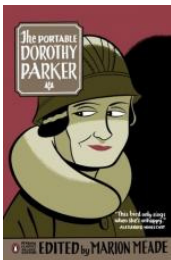
Chuck Tingle, 100%. It's sometimes pretty good, although I don't know that I want a TON of it (looking at you, 3 Musketeers). And I'd be lying if I said I had even the slightest idea what a Chuck Tingle book is, really.



8. Toffee = 'Voices'

Crunchy, sweet, and if you want to really mess up some bridgework, toffee is the way to go. Toffee is great, but you've got to come to toffee on toffee's terms. Toffee will not be pushed around.

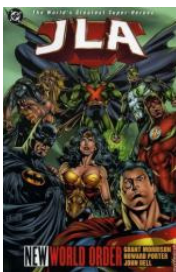
Voices by Lucille Clifton is the toffee. It's complicated, but in a good way. Poetry can be a little tough when we come to it with our fiction reading habits, but if you give these poems a little time on the tongue, you'll be glad you did.



9. Cherry Cordial = 'The Portable Dorothy Parker'

Obviously this is one for the drunks. See, the beauty of a cherry cordial is that you can eat one at work. It's a socially-acceptable way to hit the bottle, just a little. Sort of like secretly chugging Listerine. The cherry cordial is also the one grandma can get wasted from and nobody bats an eye. She's just an old woman eating candy! No issues there! This was, in fact, a candy of choice for MY grandma, bless her heart.

Dorothy Parker is the ticket. If there's a person that I hope my grandma is sitting with somewhere, sharing some cherry cordials that eventually turn into Manhattans (Grandma's drink of choice), it's Dorothy Parker.

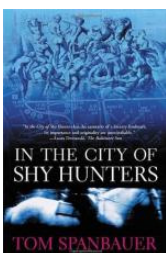


10. Maple = 'JLA: New World Order'

Maple is great when it's great, but when you get a shitty one, watch out. Maple is the author who is great when they're great, and when they blow it, hot damn, they REALLY blow it.

This is Grant Morrison for me. When he's kicking ass, nobody kicks ass harder. When he's UP his own ass, get ready to read a couple hundred pages and think, "Now just what in the hell was that?"

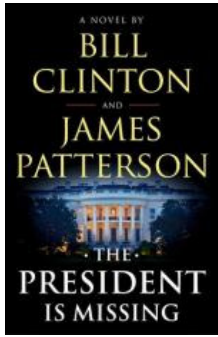
I still think *JLA: New World Order* might be Morrison's best book, which comics fans will probably tell you means I'm not a real Morrison fan. Sorry?



11. Dark Chocolate = 'In The City of Shy Hunters'

It wasn't for Young Pete, but older Pete is pretty into the dark chocolate. Every time I come back to it, it's better than I remember.

As books go, that's easily *In The City of Shy Hunters*. I don't know if I was ready for it when I was really young, but the older I get, and the more I re-explore it, the more I remember how great it is.



12. Chocolate-Covered Raisin = 'The President Is Missing'

Just why? Why does this even exist? Who ever thought it was a good idea to put a gross, squishy raisin inside a chocolate coating? Even if you like the two things, chocolate and raisins, there's no excuse. I like steak and whipped cream. They don't need to be together.

Same deal with this James Patterson/Bill Clinton collaboration. Who needed that? And the combination of two things that I like (sometimes, let's not even go there) didn't need each other or make each other better.

Baby Come Back...To Your Library



Here's the bittersweet relationship between the public and libraries: People like their libraries (sweet). They just don't use them all that often (bitter).

Libraries and the general public are in a failing relationship. We still love each other, but damn, we aren't making enough time for each other. We live in the same house, but the passion is gone. We barely feel like friends, let alone lovers.

How do we repair our flaccid relationship?

I've got ideas, some for libraries, some for library users. Because, hey, to make a relationship work, everyone needs to give a little.

Library Users: Turn Away From Book Porn

What if, instead of having hundreds of brief, review-related flings with books, you went back to a deeper intimacy with books by actually reading them? What if you decided to abstain from this or that list of the best 100 books in whatever category and just picked up a damn book?

Instead of looking at titles and covers and building up that giant to-read list, what if you just went to your library and looked around? Let serendipity be your guide?

Bring some of the excitement you have for books back into your library relationship instead of expelling that energy in a series of shallow encounters. Build something deep, intimate, and lasting.

Libraries: Cleanliness Counts

Clean the floors. Clean the carpets. Clean any fabric furniture you have, I'm begging you. Clean the

bathrooms. I don't care how often you do it now, it's probably not enough.

I know a lot of us have lofty concerns about collections, digital resources, and so on, but come down to Earth for a minute and do a serious evaluation of your library's cleanliness. Would you sit on any furniture in the building? Would you take any chair from the library, randomly selected, and have it in your home? If the answer is no, then don't expect anyone to be pumped about using it.

You can fulfill the greater needs of your users, but you need to take care of the basics. Take pride in yourself by getting cleaned up for your beloved users.

Library Users: Date Night With the Library

I always thought designated date nights were stupid. Probably because my dad, in a last ditch effort to save his second marriage, went the date night route. It didn't work. It spectacularly didn't work.

Now I get it.

First thing, date night probably isn't a great tool to use in the final months of a failing marriage. It's a tool you should be using as soon as you realize you're not spending much time together.

Second, date night doesn't have to be a fancy restaurant. It just has to be committed time to spend together. Time away from other distractions, other people, away from the stack of Amazing Spider-Man comics on the nightstand. That one is sorta me-specific. Your partner might be more excited to read about The Lizard fighting Stegron (Amazing Spider-Man #166, true believer!).

Set a date night with your library. How often? Well, the standard checkout period at your local library is a pretty good interval. Browse around. Sit and do some work at a library. Maybe go to a nice branch a little out of the way. Make the devoted date/time a priority and stick to it. Give yourselves the chance to remember what it is you like about each other.



Libraries: Radical Honesty

Put up a chart, tweets, whatever, outlining your quieter times, your busier times, the times people are most likely to be able to jump on a computer. Be honest. Hey, at 4 PM on a Monday, quiet isn't going to happen. But at 10 AM on a Saturday?

All parties in a relationship are busy. Talk to your partner about the times that you're better able to devote the attention they deserve.

Library Users: Dismantle Your Monument To Failure

My brother and his wife call shelves of unread books "monuments to failure." Your unread books' only real purpose is to remind you of what you haven't gotten around to.

Look through what you've got on your shelves at home. How many of the titles are available at your library? Great. Get rid of them. Let your library take on the burden of hoarding books. Trust me, they're way better at it than you are.

Relationships are about sharing burdens. Lean on your library a little. Their shelves are sturdy. They can take it.

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Libraries: Embrace The Unexciting

Sometimes I feel like modern libraries are trying a little too hard to be radical, X-treme, and tubular. When I see library marketing materials, it reminds me of a 90's Coke ad where, I don't know, a grandpa takes his surfboard up a volcano so he can surf down the lava flow.

The message seems to be "This isn't your grandpa's library!" "Here's how you library in a different way!" "If your grandma was as hip as the library, she probably wouldn't have broken hers that one time!"

I'm going to give you a thought, and you should really think on it: Do people like the library because it's cool and cutting edge, or is it something else?

Keeping up with the times is important. My message is that there's room for growth, and there's also room for some of the same beloved library. It's not an all-or-nothing situation. Just consider...is it possible that the thing people love about libraries has nothing to do with being the cat's pajamas, cat's meow, or any other cat thing that denotes coolness?

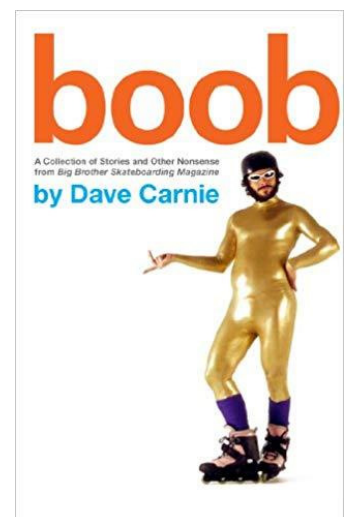
Library Users: Let's Get Goofy Together

One of the hallmarks of a great couple is that they're okay being goofy together. Great partnerships bring out the unguarded, goofy side of people.

It's alright to be goofy with your library. Request that bizarro book, ask them to buy anthropomorphic books, and if they don't have any Chuck Tingle for you, by god, you tell them they're blowing it, big time.

We're cool. We won't mock your weird request. I once requested an interlibrary loan for a book entitled "boob." On the cover was a man in a gold spandex suit. Do you think the library gave me a hard time? Hell no. I requested a comic about a male sex robot. Did the library come through for me? You bet it did. It came hard and fast.

Take that ultimate leap with your library. Get silly together.



Captain Marvel: Primer Plus Predictions



Perhaps, like me, a lot of you were pretty excited by the *Captain Marvel* trailer. She punches out an old lady on the bus! Finally, a hero who represents my interests!

But perhaps, unlike me, you didn't squander your youth with comics. Maybe you wasted your time, I dunno, building relationships, skills, or connecting with family. I'm not going to judge your terrible decision-making. Instead, I'm going to give you popcorn-munchers a quick primer on Captain Marvel.

The Many Faces of Marvel

The Captain Marvel you see on the screen isn't the first to wear the mantle. She's not even the first woman (she clocks in at #3!).

A quick rundown of the character's history:

Captain Marvel (Fawcett)

This is a character we know as Shazam, but his actual name was and is Captain Marvel.

Shazam (we'll call him that for the sake of clarity) was originally published by Fawcett Comics under the name Captain Marvel. Fawcett was sued by DC, who claimed Shazam was a Superman ripoff. The two publishing titans eventually settled out of court, and as part of the settlement, Fawcett was no longer allowed to use the name Captain Marvel or the Captain Marvel family of characters. But this agreement applied to Fawcett and DC, so when Marvel used the name Captain Marvel, there was really nobody to



stop them. By the time the Silver Age of comics came around a decade later, DC had purchased the Shazam characters (comics is a pretty incestuous world), and Shazam was back.

He was/is still technically called Captain Marvel, but his books were published under the title *Shazam* to avoid further legal troubles. So, yes, Marvel and DC both have a Captain Marvel in print, both are releasing Captain Marvel movies this year, yet nobody has an Admiral DC. Go figure.



Mar-Vell

The first Marvel Comics Captain Marvel was a Kree (alien race, hate the Skrulls, that's all you need to know) guy named Mar-Vell. Which was pretty convenient when it came to giving him a superhero name that sounded good on Earth.

This iteration started in the late 60's, and Mar-Vell died in the 80's in what has since become a fairly classic story. Mar-Vell contracts inoperable cancer due to a gas (Compound 13) he'd been exposed to previously. Friends and foes alike come to his bedside, including ambassadors from the Skrull empire who honor him as their greatest foe (this is 80's comics nonsense at its best!).



Mar-Vell experiences what may or may not be a vision, a final battle with his nemesis, Thanos, who forces Mar-Vell to "earn" his death before shepherding Mar-Vell to the other side.

The story was groundbreaking in that it showed a powerful hero felled not by Gauntlets (Infinity or otherwise), not by death rays, not by Spider Slayers, not by gigantic adamantium stilts, not by—well, you get the picture.

Monica Rambeau

Rambeau was launched in the early 80's. She was working harbor patrol when she was exposed to some kind of weird energy, and she manifested energy powers. The media called her "Captain Marvel," and the name stuck for awhile.

Rambeau is still active, now superhero-ing under the name Spectrum. Most interesting, the original artist was planning to model Rambeau on Pam Grier, but he was stopped and told to use a fashion model's face instead because some muckety-muck thought Pam Grier wasn't good looking enough. The real world is a crazy-ass place.



Genis-Vell

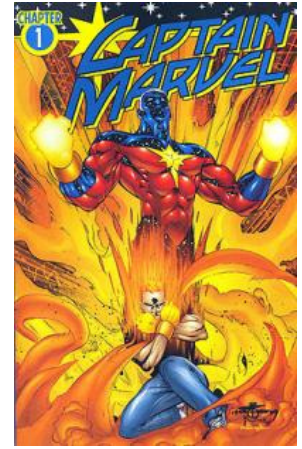
Here's where we get into some REAL wacky stuff.

Elysium, the former lover of the deceased Mar-Vell, decides to have a son. Elysium impregnates herself with some of Mar-Vell's genetic material. I guess if your lover is a superhero, it might be a good idea

to have some of their genetic material. You know, in case they get blown up or you want to have an adventure when someone steals their genes to make a mindless killing machine.

Elysium doesn't want her son hunted down by Mar-Vell's enemies, so she takes him to a far-off world and raises him as her son along with a man named... Starfox. No, not the one who flies around in jets with a toad and a falcon and a bunny. This Starfox is Thanos' brother and pretty much looks like a regular dude.

Anyway, Genis-Vell goes crazy because of his "cosmic awareness" and is poised to destroy all of existence, but then Baron Zemo (evil jerk), of all people, defeats him and separates the pieces of him in another dimension.



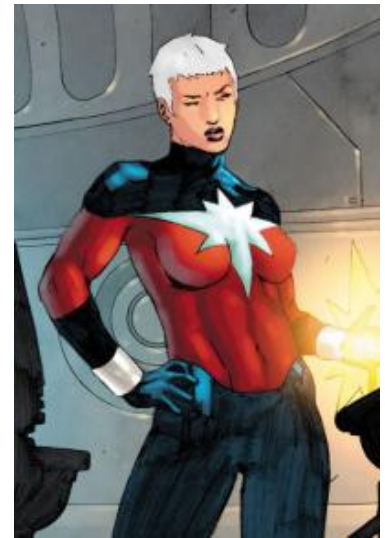
Phyla-Vell

We had to talk about Genis-Vell to talk about Phyla-Vell.

Phyla is Genis' sister. Genis altered reality at some point, and zippity-do, Phyla was created.

By the way, "zippity-do" is what I'm using in place of an overly-complicated, unnecessary explanation.

Phyla is significant as she is the second female Captain Marvel, although she holds the title only briefly after taking it by force from her brother. Her costume also clearly inspired the current Captain Marvel's. Additionally, she has a relationship with another woman, Moondragon.



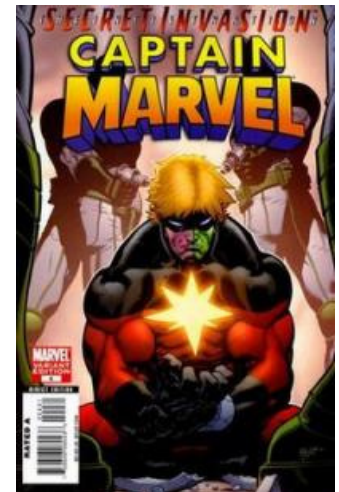
She's currently dead-ish in the way that most comics characters are dead for a while, sort of.

Khn'nr

If you thought the other names were hard to say, take a crack at this one.

Khn'nr is secretly a Skrull who takes the place of the original Mar-Vell. The Skrulls cook up some cockamamie story about Mar-Vell being resurrected by finding a wrinkle in spacetime at the time of his death, a tale that would seem pretty far-fetched if we weren't in comic book world where there's a superpowered trucker named "U.S. 1."

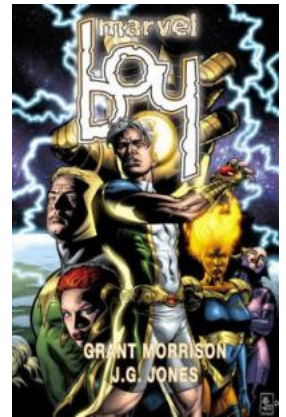
Khn'nr was implanted with fake memories so he'd operate as a sleeper agent on Earth, but "zippity-do", it all goes sideways, and he ends up fighting the good fight until he's killed.



Noh-Varr

Noh-Varr is Kree, the only survivor of a spaceship crash. He takes on several superhero roles, and according to Wikipedia his favorite song is "Be My Baby" by the Ronettes. If you can't tell, I don't have a lot to say about this dude.

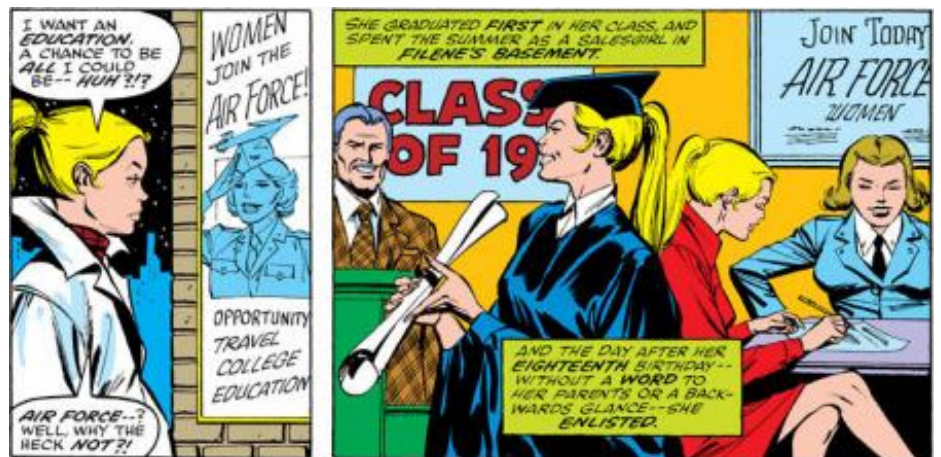
Noh-Varr comes across Khn'nr as he's dying. Khn'nr tells Noh-Varr to continue his legacy of kicking Skrull ass, which Noh-Varr does for awhile under the name Captain Marvel.



And Finally, Carol Danvers

Danvers first appeared in the 60's (*Marvel Super-Heroes #13*, if you're interested in looking for an item that's about to shoot up in value). Early on she wasn't a big player, but she was a USAF Security Chief, and she was romantically linked with Mar-Vell.

Danvers gets caught in the explosion of a Kree (the same alien race as Mar-Vell) device, which gives her superpowers. See, this is how it works in comics. You know that saying about what doesn't kill you makes you stronger? That's never been truer than in comics. That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger than anyone who's ever lived.



After a short time, Danvers begins operating under the moniker Ms. Marvel. A brief note on that, I suppose the gendering of the character is not very with the current times, but in the 70's the "Ms." was a powerful thing. It let the world know that she was unattached and independent.

At some point, Rogue from the X-Men absorbs Danvers' powers, which is what makes Rogue so super strong and whatnot. Danvers gets her powers back, but she's pretty pissed off at Rogue for a good while.

Carol was then...this is very complicated. Some asshole from another dimension falls in love with Carol, impregnates her with a fast-growing version of himself that she gives birth to. The baby ages into an adult, who Carol then "falls in love" with.

It turns out this dude used a machine to brainwash Carol into loving him, basically a technological version of a date rape drug.

This storyline is, *cough* controversial, and I think it's worth mentioning that many in the comics world, including Ms. Marvel writer Chris Claremont, had BIG issues with the inclusion of the story.

Claremont, when he got the chance, wrote a pretty heated in-comics confrontation between Danvers and her Avengers pals where Carol calls them out:



After this she derived new, bigger powers from a connection to a "white hole" and took on the persona of Binary.

In the 90's, Danvers wasn't doing so hot. While working under yet another persona, Warbird, she started hitting the bottle, and during a crossover event called "Live Kree or Die" she made a couple of (really, seriously) bad calls that involved her pursuing enemies rather than saving innocent lives. This all resulted in her being stripped of her Avengers status. She fought her way back on the team, however, and has held multiple leadership roles since.

After a few decades of superhero-ing, a handful of monikers and powersets, Danvers ditches the Ms. Marvel title (which is picked up by Kamala Khan, the current Ms. Marvel) along with her thigh-high boots, and she becomes Captain Marvel.



2012's Captain Marvel is the character that we'll see on the screen. She's powerful, confident, and capable. This iteration of Captain Marvel was a principal character in Civil War II, wherein two factions of superheroes were battling it out over whether or not it was right to use a character with the power of precognition to pre-arrest criminals. For the record, Carol was pro-precog as she felt that it was reasonable to keep people safe at any cost.

In a nutshell, Carol's been around for a long time, as has Captain Marvel. They've merged, resulting in some damn good storylines. Danvers has become Marvel's premiere female character.

What Can Danvers Do?

She's strong, she's durable, she can fly really super fast. She can absorb energy and then re-project it. She does not require any kind of armor or suit to fly at high speeds or to survive in space.

Don't hate me, but think basically Superman minus the goofy shit like freeze breath.

As Binary she had a connection to a "white hole" which fueled her powers, and she's still able to access that energy at certain times, i.e. when the story needs her to.

She's also well-suited to relate to the "normies" like me and you. In the updated version of her backstory, Carol's father sent her brother to college instead of her. She enlisted in the USAF, and while on a mission over Afghanistan she was shot down, captured, and tortured. She killed most of her captors and escaped, and subsequently started training as a spy. So she's no stranger to the "hero" part of "superhero."

She also wrote a bestselling tell-all book about her time as a head of security with NASA. So list "writing chops" in there too.

What to Read

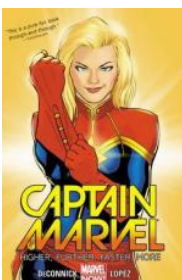
A few key touchstones:



The History: Marvel Masterworks Ms. Marvel Vol. 1

Here's where you get the history, plus some pretty good Chris Claremont stuff. If you're a fan of 70's and 80's comics, this is for you. Of note, Carol is the editor-in-chief of a women's magazine, and her boss is none other than J. Jonah Jameson.

I'd proffer this one to fans of older comics. I know a lot of readers are completionists and want to start at the beginning, but if you don't have a special place in your heart for the cheese factor of old books, this one is skippable. In other words, read it if you like old books, but if what you want is Captain Marvel, take a pass.



The Current State: Captain Marvel: Higher, Further, Faster, More

Readers will note that this isn't the first set of Carol Danvers Captain Marvel books. But it's a sort of soft relaunch that came about a year after the initial issues. This is probably close to the Captain Marvel we'll see on screen. And these are just better than the run from the previous year.



The Adapted: The Life of Captain Marvel

I'm guessing this is the primary basis for the movie as it generally cleaned up and modernized Carol's continuity. It's also a more Carol-centric book than a lot of the others, going back to her roots. If you want to read what I'm suspecting will most likely be *Captain Marvel: The Movie: The Comic*, this is a good bet.

Predictions

Based on Danvers socking an old lady on the bus in the trailer, definitely seems like we're getting Skrulls in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I mean, c'mon, did any of us really think they were just going to have a movie about Captain Marvel cracking old ladies in the face? Old ladies who ride the bus? If you're looking for that type of movie, I'd recommend *Super*, which mostly involved Rainn Wilson cracking people in the face with a wrench.

I'm going to theorize that the rivalry between Mar-Vell and Thanos will be transferred to Carol Danvers and Thanos in some way.

I suspect we're going to mostly eliminate the past Captain(s) Marvel in the world of the movies because, frankly, those are some muddied waters. Sorry to make you read about all those other folks, but hey, I can only take credit for writing it. The bad decision to read it was YOURS.

Are predictions and wishes that different?



I hope Carol's cat, Chewie, will be in the movie. Chewie isn't really a cat, by the way. Just a murderous alien that looks a lot like a cat. It's hard to tell the difference between a murderous alien and a cat. At least until it lays eggs...

I think there will be some flavors of Green Lantern and Nova Corps. Space-cops, basically. It's a

Marvel Cinematic Universe, after all. We could use a little more of the universe outside of Earth.

I'm hopeful that the movie will be light on origin. I think superhero movies are starting to get it, and we don't need 50 minutes of origin. Explosion, awakened dormant powers, got it. This might be accomplished in *Deadpool* style with the character starting fully-formed and then learning backstory in bits and pieces.

I do think we'll get a CGI slugfest at the end, unfortunately. Superhero movies are still falling into that trap, having our hero fight a horde of faceless baddies that aren't really real, so it's cool to punch them into dust. It makes for good visuals, but it's kinda done at this point.

Monica Rambeau will appear (she's in the trailer), but as a fighter pilot friend of Carol's as opposed to a superhero. I DO also predict that we'll have a moment for Rambeau where fighter jets fight alongside superheroes, which will show us we can ALL be super. Read that last sentence with as much or as little exasperation as you feel fits.

Because the movie is set in the 90's, I'm predicting this is a frontrunner in the 90's Nostalgia craze that will exhaust all of us within the next 18 months.

One Last Thing

The movie IS going to have a lot of pressure on it as the first Marvel release with a female lead.



Okay, well it's the first one connected to the world of the movies with a female lead.



Alright, fine. The first Marvel feature film with a female lead.



Alright, geez. Point made. But forget all that for a second. *Captain Marvel* is going to be under heavy scrutiny.

A small subset of the world will hate it for existing, and they will make a lot of noise. I don't know how people manage to raise a lot of hate for something they haven't seen when there are PLENTY of things that legitimately deserve disdain, like the fact that we've had microwaves for decades and they still don't work as well as they should.

Another small subset will make noise because the movie does not represent their precise flavor of feminism. Like the folks who were supposedly having a "raging debate" over Wonder Woman's armpit hair.

The last thing I want to say, I'm giving you express permission to completely ignore both of these subsets of people. There's just no need to pay attention to hot takes. Instead, if you're interested, go see it, and talk about it with people you know and like. If you're not interested, that's cool. You're allowed to be indifferent about a big-budget movie. Either way, I encourage all of you to spend time engaging with the 99% of people who are not on extreme ends when it comes to this one.

22 Unorthodox Methods For Tidying Your Book Collection



I picked up a book that's been sitting on my shelf for a bit. Most times when this happens, I don't actually know how long the book's been on the shelf. But this time, a few pages in, I found the original receipt stuffed inside.

Guys, I have a couple months to read it before I've owned it, unread, for a decade.

This means that my current methods of tidying up my book collection are not working. Because I shouldn't have something unread for 10 years. I don't even know if I'll like it, and I'm carting it around for a decade? No less than 5 moves? Up and down stairs? Just so it can sit there and, what, mock me?

It's time for a change. A rash, extreme, unwise change. Konmari is great and all. I think she's on the right track, looking to emotion rather than logic or concrete methods to get rid of stuff. But I need something a little more...stupid.

Here are some unorthodox methods for tidying your book collection.

1. U-Pay-It

Self-storage is one of the biggest scams in human history. And yes, human history has some pretty big scams, such as Yankee Candle and AirPods.

Start charging yourself for your book storage. Count up your books, and pay a buck a book to "store" them every month. Put the money towards something that sucks like student loans or car payments.

Point being you can't use it for pizza or booze or booze-scented Yankee Candles. Every book you get rid of gives you a little cash back. If it helps, feel free to take on the persona of a self-storage manager, which involves sitting at a card table in your garage next to a space heater while you smoke a cigar.

2. Brutal Ranking

I had this great idea for arranging public library books that nobody gets on board with: Shelve the books from best to worst. That way, whenever someone comes in, they don't have to go far to find something good. Or they can choose to work their way up, reading better books each time they stop in.

Unimaginative people always criticize this idea by asking who will decide which books are "best" based on which criteria. Stop living so rooted in harsh reality! Dream a little!

The good news is you can do this at home to help you with your book problem. Arrange your books from best to worst. Eliminate the worse half, third, whatever. Just make sure you decide how much to eliminate BEFORE you rank, otherwise you'll be too kind.

3. Thunderdome

It's March Madness!

Set up a bracket of all your books that matches them up in battles. Two books enter, one book leaves. Eliminate all except the Final [whatever number you choose, preferably beginning with an "F"].



4. Turn Around, Bright Eyes

There's this method for cutting down your closet that involves turning all of your hangers backwards (so the hook faces you instead of the wall). When you wear something, you turn the hanger back the right way. After a preset time interval, you get rid of anything still on a backwards hanger as it's obvious you never wear that stuff.

Turn your books around on your shelf. Give yourself a set amount of time to be looking for them. When you go looking for a title and find it, turn it around. Everything that's not turned around, you probably didn't miss, and it can go.

5. Call My Mom

My mom would secretly throw out handfuls of my toys when I was a kid. She figured I wouldn't notice. Of course, she was totally wrong, and she had a kid who collected Spider-Man action figures all through junior high, but she meant well.

Call my mom to come over when you're out and just chuck a couple books. Or tell whoever is the equivalent in your life to do that. If you don't even know they're gone, you didn't need 'em.

6. Catalog

Force yourself to catalog your entire collection. Use a spreadsheet, Goodreads, doesn't matter. The point is, you'll pick up some books that you won't want to do the work of cataloguing. Which is a pretty good sign that you don't want them all that much.

7. One In, One Out

A new book comes home? An old one's got to go. It's a system as simple as eating and pooping, which works. Mostly.

8. Write 'Em Down

Go away from home. To a coffee shop or something. Write down as many titles in your book collection as you can remember. These are your "Save" list. Hey, if they're important, you'll remember. You remember your kids' names, right? Anything you couldn't remember gets tossed.

9. Quiz Time

Have a loved one pick a book off the shelf, open to a random page and read aloud for 90 seconds. If you can't identify the title or author, you don't love it all that much. Pitch it. Go through your whole collection like this.

10. Hall Pass

Make a set of hall passes for your books. Pick a quantity. Make them nice. Get actual business cards printed. Slip a pass inside each and every book you intend to keep. Run out of passes? Any book without a hall pass gets to go.

Six months from now, make a new set of hall passes, remove the old ones and place the new ones inside every book you still intend to keep.

11. Books On Trial

Put on a suit. Set up a stand for your books. Start with one and put it on trial. Talk about why you're keeping it. If the reason is "I intend to read it," then you'd better be able to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you're actually going to read it.

12. Books or...?

Count up your books. Let's say you have an even 100. You must then eliminate 100 items from your home. The items you eliminate can be books or something else. So, if you eliminate 50 books, you have to eliminate 50 other items from your home. If you eliminate 90 books, then you only have to rid yourself of 10 items. If you can't part with any of your books, you must get rid of 100 other items to make room.

13. Kitty Help

Look up your books on Worldcat. If 10 or more libraries have it in your country, it's abundant, accessible, and you probably don't need to hang onto it.

14. The Stripper Rule

If a book on your shelf can be had by simply stuffing a buck in Amazon's "Available From These Sellers" G-string, lose it.

15. Ball And Chain

Pick up a book. It stays with you all day. Carry it everywhere. If you decide it's not worth it, it's a goner. Tomorrow, pick up the next book.



16. Apocalypse

Pretend you're in an apocalyptic situation. You can use one vessel (box, bin, backpack, whatever) to save as many books as you can cram in. Which do you save and why? Actually pack this bag. Keep the titles that make the cut, chuck the rest.

17. Hernia City, U.S.A., Population: You

What's the maximum amount of weight you can lift? It can be a one-rep max or an amount spread out over reps, but whatever that weight limit is, that's your weight limit for books as well. Look up the weights on Amazon and either get shredded or get rid of some books.

18. Let God Sort Them Out

God's probably got nothing better to do than help you sort out your overflowing book collection, a situation you caused for yourself.

Take a random handful of books, put them out on the porch. If they get rained on, wrecked, or stolen, God has spoken. If, in the morning, they're untouched, welcome them back into the fold.

19. Calling All Total Nerds

Create a D&D-style campaign wherein the quest is to save your books. Do your best, save as many as you can, and deal with the real-life consequences.

20. G-G-G-G-Ghosts!

I won't rest until one dictionary officially lists an alternate pronunciation of the word "ghost" as "g-g-

g-g-g-gōst."

Get a Ouija board. Whatever letter it navigates to first, get rid of a book with that letter starting out the title.

21. Cashnado

You know those booths where cash blows around and you try to collect it? Rent one of those bad boys, write the names of your books on slips of paper, and keep as many as you can collect in one minute.

22. Rogues' Gallery

Line up your books, get one of these rad decision-making-coins and make like Two-Face.



Blew Your Resolution? Get Back In The Saddle



Welcome, fellow losers!

By now we've all failed in our New Year's writing resolutions. If science knows anything about anything, 80% of us didn't even make it TO March, let alone this deep into the month.

That said, it's not too late. That burning desire to get something done this year has died down, but there are still some embers glowing. I can see them. You can feel them.

Let's get back on track together.

Re-Frame Failure

There's a reason the phrase "get back in the saddle" exists. It's because riding horses means you will eventually fall. A lifetime of riding horses without messing up is not realistic, not even worth discussing. The difference between someone who can ride and someone who can't isn't whether they get thrown or not. It's what they do after.

The year is still young. You can start digging now and by the end of December you'll move a lot of dirt. You know what doesn't move dirt? Lamenting that you've missed the first few months of work.

People will tell you writing is a "long game." What does that mean? It means that 3 months of failure is a forgettable blip. So let's stop worrying about lost time and start getting some work done.

I'm giving you 30 more seconds, right now, to beat up on yourself for not finishing your goal. After that, we move on.

I'm giving you 30 more seconds, right now, to beat up on yourself for not finishing your goal. After that, we move on.

Need some help?

Damn, you're a loser who got nothing done. You couldn't even maintain a resolution for the first quarter of 2019! This year was supposed to be different! You're not even that good-looking, and your laugh is goofy.

Cool? Failure is behind us, let's move on.

Ask How

When we build a resolution, most of us get as far as the "What?"

The part we neglect is the "How?" How am I going to get this done?

We THINK we're providing a "How." What I'm thinking is that I want to get ripped. The resolution that comes out of my mouth is that I'm going to hit the gym every day, which sounds like "How" to me.

But whatever your resolution, there's always another layer of "How." If you want to get ripped, and you say you're hitting the gym every day, I would ask you: How? How are you going to make that happen? How are you fitting that into your life?

If your resolution was to write every day, I would ask you: How?

Think about it this time. What do I need to give up for writing time? How am I going to make sure it gets done? What are my options if I get towards the end of the day and the work's not finished?

Whatever your resolution, ask yourself: How?

Increase The Flexibility

I had a Duolingo battle with my girlfriend. Duolingo uses a streak-building system, making it a challenge to spend just a little time learning every day. It's fun to watch your streak build, but there's a downside.

My girlfriend had a multi-week streak going. Multi-month even. And then she missed a day, broke her streak, went back to zero, and she's hardly used Duolingo since.

The system was so inflexible that a single day missed meant disaster.

If your resolution is set up so that a single misstep equals complete failure, you need to build in some flexibility. If you went with "Write every day," and you screwed up once, you blew it, so at this point, why bother?

An inflexible system yields inflexible results. You're either a 100% success or a 100% failure. Which is not a good way to look at writing. Nobody is a 100% success. And the only person who 100% fails at writing is the person who never tries it.

What can you do to throw in some flexibility?

If you tried a daily word count goal, try switching the timeline from daily to every two days.

If you decided to write every single day, try switching to writing 7 times a week, allowing yourself multiple bouts in a single day if need be.

Duolingo DOES allow you to earn rewards, including a 1-day protection for your streak. Maybe design your resolution so you could earn a day pass for every 5-day streak.

Rules and structure are helpful when you're looking to get something done. Just make sure they're rules that help you succeed rather than bench you for failure.

Prompting Versus Reward

If I have some hardcore spreadsheet nonsense to do at work, what I'll do is make myself a second cup of coffee. I bring it into work with me, unsipped, and then drink it while I spread my sheets. I don't know if that's the proper verbiage, but screw it, I hate spreadsheets.

The coffee is a prompt to get the work done. Not a reward that I get afterward. When I'm making the coffee, I'm resigning myself to doing the spreadsheet. When I'm not touching it on the way to work, I'm saving it for what I know is going to be a lousy time. By the time I sit down, open my spreadsheet and start drinking, I've already gone through the whole dread process, and I can get down to work.

I'm a fan of doing something that prompts you to START work rather than rewarding you for finishing.

Replace your rewards for finishing with prompts for getting started.

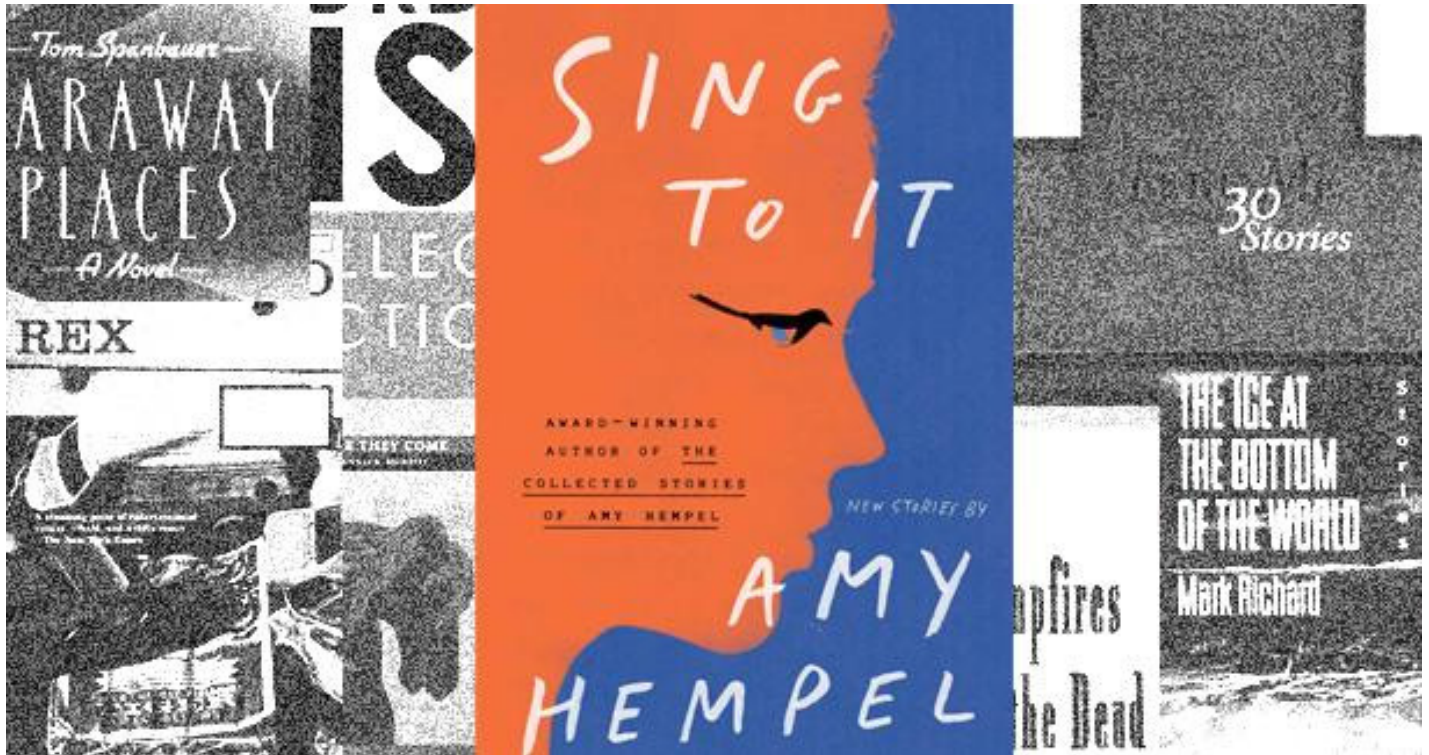
Honesty Time

I'm not here to pump you up with something like, "I know you can do it!" Although I might use that as a pull quote. Hell, nobody reads an entire column these days. Nobody will know the context.

You might not be able to finish your resolution. That's the honest truth. You might've gotten thrown too hard to stand up let alone get back on a horse. It happens.

But, if you can try something out, get another two months out of your resolution, that's better. Because that's more writing.

Amy Hempel, 'Sing To It,' and The Death Of Minimalism



Amy Hempel has a new book out.

This news raises one of two reactions from people.

The one I'm looking for is eyes open wide. Breath held. The kind of physical reaction that comes about when the internal feeling is that we're lucky to be alive now, in this moment, when there's another Amy Hempel book.

The reaction I get, always, is non-physical. It's summed up in a single word: Who?

Amy Hempel Is Great

Let's go here first. My purpose here isn't to say that Amy Hempel isn't important. To me, and to a shitload of other readers and writers, Amy Hempel's first new book in a decade, *Sing To It*, is a big, big deal.

If you've never read Amy Hempel, I have a few suggestions:

1. Get your head out of your ass
2. Read "In The Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried"
3. Read "In A Tub"
4. Read "The Harvest"

Everything I have to say about the death of minimalism, I say with sadness. I'm upset that the writers

I love never get the attention they deserve. I work at a library, and I'm never happy when I run stats and see how my favorite minimalist authors are faring.

As for Amy Hempel, nothing would please me more than to see her book become a huge hit. In fact, let me do my part. I'll give you a link to grab her book on Amazon. And I'll throw it in a few more times throughout this column, just to make sure everyone gets a chance.

Nutshell: Let the record show I love Amy Hempel's work on a deep and sincere level. Wait, no. Don't "let" it show. Carve that shit into the record with the nastiest switchblade you can get your hands on.

Is This The End Of Minimalism?

Recognizing the end of an era is hard in the moment. Sure, decades later, it's easy to put a pin in something. If we'd been asked at the time, we probably would've cited Load as the end of metal Metallica. But, in hindsight, it's probably *The Black Album*.

I HOPE that time makes an idiot of me, but here's what I THINK: Amy Hempel's book might be the last gasp of great minimalist writing.

Perhaps I'll be wrong. Perhaps minimalism is already dead. Or, perhaps it will die many years from now. Perhaps I'm fooled into thinking this way because Hempel's book would make a fitting, gorgeous end to an era. Maybe it's the beauty of ending with *Sing To It* that makes me so tempted to call minimalism's end here and now.

But I don't think so. I think the ending has been coming for some time.

A Very Subjective, Harebrained, Quick History of Minimalist Writing

If you want to know way too much about this and be confused, read Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*. If you want to know just enough to be dangerous, try Chad Harbach's essay "MFA vs. NYC." If you want to know even less than that and very likely have the knowledge delivered with a fart joke, read on.

Creative Writing MFA programs have been around for a bit, but it's only recently that they've grown into something common. In 1975 there were 79 places you could go to get a creative writing MFA. There are now 854. That's a ten-fold increase.

The MFA presents an interesting problem.

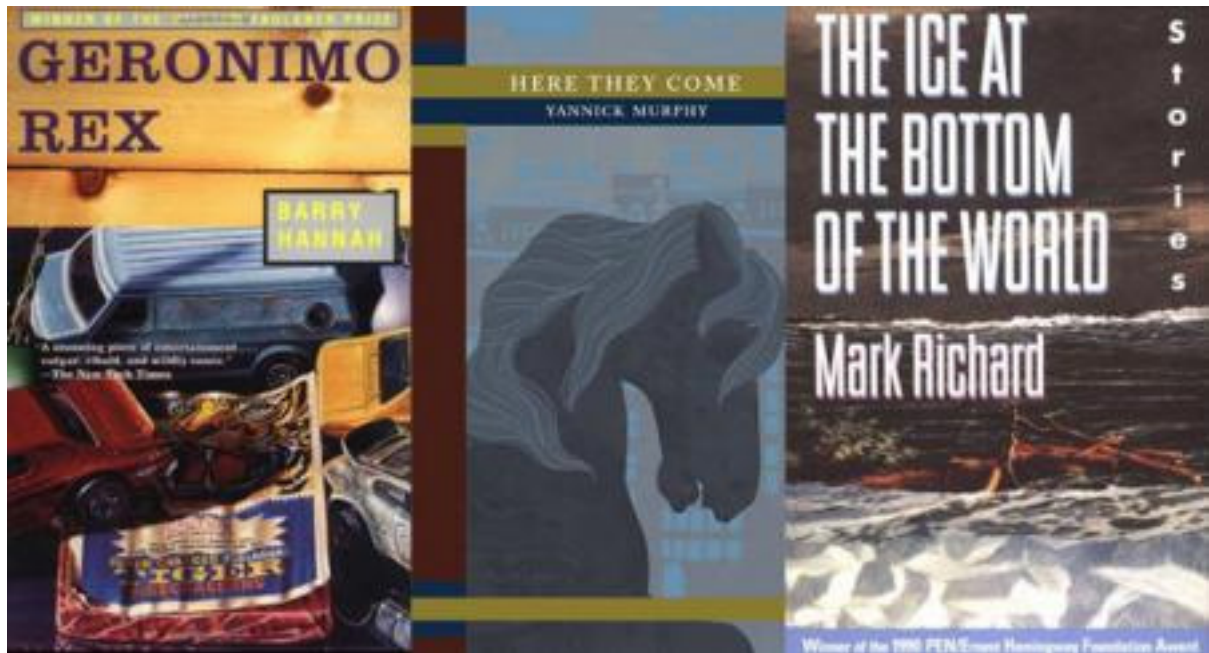
If I get a degree in mathematics, there are certain things that are expected of me. If I can't find the area of a circle, I probably shouldn't get a diploma. And hey, it's reasonable. Structural engineers need to have certain areas of knowledge so they can...engineer structures. Because a bridge either works or it doesn't.

But how do you manage something as subjective as creative writing? How do you decide whether or not an individual is good enough to get that sheepskin? (Just a note: "sheepskin" is slang for "diploma." You're thinking of "lambskin," which is a condom. You weirdo.) There's no straightforward

test, no evaluation.

How do you, as McGurl put it, create an environment of “systematic creativity?”

Enter: Minimalism.



Minimalism is a style, and it's a set of rules. Both of which come in handy when you're sitting in front of a stack of short stories that need grading. Rather than delineate minimalism's rules, which will just turn into an argument, I'll put it like this: If you read enough short stories, you get a Spidey sense for short story collections that sound MFA-y. If they sound MFA-y, there's a damn good chance you're hearing shades of minimalism. If the author bio says they graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, you're reading something with at least a whiff of minimalism. If someone calls the writing "Carver-esque," you're well inside the ballpark.

A ton of this came from the lab/classroom of Gordon Lish, Captain Fiction himself. You might know Lish for his most famous work, editing Raymond Carver's stories down to the bones. But whether or not you know Lish's name, you know him. Here's a quick list of people Lish taught, edited, or published: Amy Hempel, Raymond Carver, Tom Spanbauer, Barry Hannah, Peter Christopher, Yannick Murphy, Christine Schutt, Diane Williams, Sam Lipsyte, Michael Kimball, Mark Richard, Will Eno, Dawn Raffel. Seriously, the names don't stop.

These authors were recognized as "literary." They were writers' writers. They set the tone for MFA-centric literary fiction. For decades, when someone wrote literary fiction, these were the folks being imitated. If you took a creative writing class or a modern fiction class, these were the sorts of people you read. These were people who were published in places that mattered. Esquire, Playboy, The New Yorker, and respected literary journals.

Lish's students also taught many writers themselves. Amy Hempel has made a long career of teaching, and Tom Spanbauer spent decades passing on Lish's lessons in weekly workshops held in his home. Hempel continued the tradition in the east, Tom in the west. And most of us flocked to one of the two from somewhere in between, or we dreamed of doing so.

While it's not the only school of thought that found its niche in higher ed and structured workshops, minimalism presents a set of guidelines for beginning writers, and those same guidelines can carry them through to mastery. This helped minimalism thrive in circles of beginning writers and legendary artists alike. It's teachable, and it provides concrete criteria. It's no wonder this was such a big thing for writers.

What about readers, though? What do they get out of it?

You could read a bunch more, or just

The Other Side

For readers, minimalism presents an active reading experience (more on this in a second). Without long, flowery metaphors, without adverbs, without abstraction, without descriptions of what things felt "like" and instead descriptions of how things actually felt. Minimalism has an urgency to it, a feeling of being in the place and in the moment where the story is happening. It feels very alive on the page. It feels intimate.

To paraphrase Tom Spanbauer, when you read a great story of this type, it feels like you're picking up an old friend at the airport. You haven't seen each other for years. You pick up your friend, go out for drinks, and two cocktails in, your friend says, "Okay, I have to tell you this story." That's the energy.

This is high-level, artistic storytelling that is accessible to the average reader. Gordon Lish instructed his students to "seduce the whole world" with their writing. And they did. They totally did.

To me, minimalism is like a great magic trick. When you watch a magician, it doesn't look like he's sweating. It's not his goal to make the audience know how hard he worked on this trick. How much effort it took to develop, practice, and perform. When the trick is done for the audience, it looks effortless, beautiful, and simple.

A great minimalist story reads as effortless. The true minimalist writer isn't trying to convince the reader that they worked hard. In fact, the hard work goes into obscuring the hard work. If a story sounds like a herculean effort, if a line "sounds written," it's no good. The reader shouldn't even be thinking about the beauty of each line. They feel the story on their body.

People read to connect with other people. They want to feel like part of something, like they're hearing a great story from a dear friend. They want experiences crafted with care, stories that make good use of their time. Minimalism provided that to a lot of people for a very long time.

Why do I think the movement is dying?

If you thought the last section was out there and subjective, buckle up.

It's An Aging School

The 2000's have been tough on a lot of the heroes of the minimalist movement:

Larry Brown 1951-2004

Grace Paley 1922-2007

Barry Hannah 1942-2010
Robert Stone 1937-2015
Katherine Dunn 1945-2016
Thom Jones 1945-2016
Denis Johnson 1949-2017

In addition, let's look at the ages of some of its great practitioners:

Gordon Lish: 85
Mary Robison: 70
Mark Richard: 64
Robert Olmstead: 65
Lydia Davis: 71
Cormac McCarthy: 85
Tobias Wolff: 73
Ann Beattie: 71
Richard Ford: 75
Tom Spanbauer: 73



Sandra Cisneros, who did some minimalist work, is among the young in the group at "only" 64. Flannery O'Connor and Raymond Carver are long gone, rest their souls. Ernest Hemingway, the classic example, has been gone almost 60 years.

Minimalism is an aging movement. Which isn't to say anything about its quality or the work that's coming from the great artists still working in the minimalist tradition. And while there's a newer, second crop of minimalist writers, many of them worked in minimalism and moved onto other forms.

In looking at the field, we have to be honest. There's not a lot of young blood.

Matters Of Fashion

Even Wikipedia is hip to one of minimalism's key facets:

Readers are expected to take an active role in creating the story, to "choose sides" based on oblique hints and innuendo, rather than react to directions from the writer.

In other words, minimalist writing doesn't tell a reader how to feel. It flat out refuses to do so.

I think this is out of style at the moment. I think we're in an era where many people want to consume media (books, movies, etc.) that they fully understand, and they want to feel that they fully understand that media's creator as well. Many consumers want a clear message, and they want a clear moral stance. Ambiguity is not in style. Truly flawed characters are not well-received by wide audiences.

Homogeneity

The writers tended to be a little demographically homogeneous in some ways. I think they often came off as MFA-toting snooty types, and there's a lot of white folks.

Any movement that's same-y ends up eating itself. People who are involved in minimalism start writing books that are mostly read by other people who are involved in it. Minimalist books, instead of being food for readers, become food for other minimalist writers. The circle closes, then shrinks.

Class Clash

Minimalists are an unfortunate casualty of the classic snobs versus slobs battle of books. They started as the slobs, often writing from a middle class or blue collar background, but as often is the case, those still working saw themselves become the snobs.

This isn't entirely the fault of those writers. I genuinely think they're hardworking, and I'm sure most of them are not wealthy. And let's face it, when it comes to publishing, it's a snobs versus snobs situation. But when it comes to snobbery, it's not about reality. It's about perception.

Being a writer of literary fiction, especially one who teaches at a college, comes with some hefty snob baggage. You and I know writing is hard work, but we also have to admit that it's not like busting concrete or washing dishes. We think of it as tiring, but only until we sit and watch pros pack and move a 3rd floor apartment.

The minimalist movement might be tied so closely to its working-class roots that the perceived severance of those roots causes the trunk to die.

Bending Genre

The last few decades have seen a change in the significance of genre.

Look at Kurt Vonnegut. For a time, he was a sci-fi guy. If you went to a bookstore, that's where you'd find him. Now? Now you'll find him shelved with the literary folks.

The literary folks are bending too. We've seen a move away from looking at a book, seeing there's a dragon in it, and dismissing it as total bullshit. A book can be literary AND have a werewolf. A book can be literary AND be a comic. We've seen the rise of writers like Aimee Bender, who wrote an entire literary novel on the premise that a woman could read the emotions of a cook by tasting their food.

It might be the case that minimalism as I recognize it is dead, but there's a new mode of minimalism. For decades minimalism was used to tell mostly (forgive me) plain stories. Maybe the tools of minimalism are being applied to different types of stories. Maybe it has died, been resurrected, and I don't recognize its new form yet.

Form And Function

I'm of the opinion that the sign of a great comic book is that it works best as a comic book. Watchmen is a great example. Watchmen is a classic comic because it uses the comics form to its full extent. It does things that movies and TV can't.

Minimalism creates stories that could be made into movies and TV, but it doesn't usually work. We could paw through the sack full of reasons for this, but the easy way to sum it up is that great

minimalist stories are in their best form when they're on the page. Adaptation is rarely additive. It rarely improves the work.

This is the greatest compliment I can pay to something like an Amy Hempel short story. A story like "In A Tub" is perfect as it is, and attempts to change it only diminish its power.

While it's a great compliment, it comes with a problem. This is why you won't see big-budget adaptations of minimalist classics. Which is why you won't see minimalist books on bestseller lists the way you will more adaptable works. Which is why you won't see them front-facing in bookstores. Which is why you won't see them in the airport bookstore.

There are exceptions. *Fight Club*, *Short Cuts*, *Jesus' Son*—all adapted into critically acclaimed movies. While they found their niche, the praise usually came after an initial hard belly flop. Not the sort of thing moneyed people want to put in theaters.

The Feeling

They say that you can feel the dying breath leave someone. That they're at peace, finally.

Alternatively, you could hook someone up to monitoring equipment and find the exact moment that brain function ceases. But what does that really tell us? Does that adequately mark what it means to die?

The feeling I have that minimalism is dying didn't start with numbers or facts, so it's the hardest for me to talk about. That feeling is the reason I wrote this column, though.

As a fan of minimalist fiction, I spend a lot of time seeking it out. I find more and more that I'm looking into the past. The books I order are more yellowed. The Vintage Contemporaries I love look more and more dated. Some fetch outrageous prices because they've gone out of print, and it seems unlikely they'll be back.

I can talk about objective reasons like I did above, and I can make some educated guesses. But none of it compares to the creeping feeling that minimalism is preparing to meet its maker.

Let's Sing To It

The title of Hempel's new book comes from an Arabic saying: When danger approaches, sing to it.

As she puts it:

It's a stance for how to deal with life," she says. "When there's danger coming your way, you disarm it. It has a better result than meeting threat with threat.

It...is just a little too perfect, isn't it?

We see what's coming, and what can we do?

**This is why
you won't see
big-budget
adaptations
of minimalist
classics.**

Let's sing to it.

Get the book. Read the book. Read it out loud.

Review the book. Tell people about it. Buy it for your friends. Buy it for your parents. If you can't, buy it for my mom. She loves Amy Hempel.

If the approaching danger is the death of minimalism, Hempel will do what she does best. She'll make her stand. Disarm the threat. And sing to it.

April Showers Bring May Manuscripts



The shower is one of humanity's greatest inventions. Okay, it's not really an invention. We just ripped off nature's idea—rain—but the shower is generally warmer, and it's easier (legally) to be naked in the shower than it is to stand at the end of the driveway naked while it rains. Take my word on this one.

The shower is pretty good for cleaning the body, but it's got a magical, second function. It's the place where a lot of us get good ideas.

NASA engineer Jim Crocker solved a big-ass problem with the Hubble Telescope while in the shower. Archimedes figured out how to tell if a king's crown was pure gold or partially silver while getting in the bath. This, by the by, was a defining moment for both science and first-world problems.

We've all done it. You're thinking something over, you get in the shower, and BAM!—you've got a solution.

We could talk about why all day, but the real question is: How can you connect with the shower thinking part of your brain outside the shower? Because nobody carries a mini shower around. And who has time to take multiple showers in a day? Who has the money for those water bills? Whose hair can tolerate that much volumizing shampoo?

Get Comfy

You're pretty comfortable in the shower. Is there anywhere else you're as relaxed while being totally nude? Is there anywhere else you can alter the temperature with a turn of your wrist?

The noise is soothing, the smells are refreshing (once you're at least partially through, anyway).

When the body is comfortable, the mind is free. All the physical needs are being met, and the brain can ignore the basic survival stuff for a minute.

Let's say you want to replicate that feeling outside the shower. Tend to your comfort via:

Temperature: If you could reach in front of you and change your body temperature with a dial, would you go warmer or colder? Adjust your clothing accordingly. Layer up, then layer down.

Space: The shower is both confined and free. It's a limited space, but it's not like a coffin. One whole side is just a flimsy plastic curtain, possibly with a Super Mario design if you're at my house. Can you find a space that's small and controllable without being claustrophobic?

Simple Pleasant Sensation: Do something that mildly pleases your tactile senses. Take off your shoes and make balls on the carpet with your feet. Just remember, if terrorists take over the building while you're doing so, you're gonna need them shoes.

Unfiltered

Your brain is like theater lighting: there's one basic light with limitless filters.

When you get to work, you're thinking about things in a supervisor-approved, HR-approved, task-oriented way. When you go out with friends, your mind works differently. When you're texting your mom, yet another filter applies.

You're a little less inhibited in the shower. I could bring up the nudity again, but I've been hammering that one, so let's drop it. Your thinking is a little looser. You aren't as filtered because, hey, something you think to yourself in the shower doesn't have a lot of meaning.

How can you find more unfiltered time in the day?

Try this:

Writer Chuck Klosterman is an advocate of unstructured thinking time. Every day, get in a comfortable, dark place, sit or lay down, and just think about stuff. Set a timer for 20 minutes, and then...well, don't do anything else.

Note that this is different from meditation. In meditation, you're meant to avoid holding onto ideas. Let them pass you by, and don't tinker with them.

In the form of freethinking suggested here, the goal isn't to clear your mind, it's to reframe the way you're thinking about a problem or idea. It's unstructured, uninhibited, and totally open to bad ideas. Let the ideas flow, and worry about filtering out the garbage later.

Mindless Physicality

Your brain is like theater lighting: there's one basic light with limitless filters.

Many a writer will talk about a mindless physical task they engage in, which provides lots of time to think. But it's not just the time that counts, it's the manner.

The kind of thinking you do 5 miles into an 8 mile run is different than the kind you do in a chair in front of the computer. The places your mind goes while doing thoughtless labor are different.

Sometimes, the way to escape your body/brain connection is to busy your body. That's why the shower is so great. You're doing stuff, but it's not stuff you have to think about. Your body is stimulated in a bunch of ways, but it's more of an external stimulation than something you're burning calories doing.

There are a lot of pricey ways that evil companies have attempted to give office workers a sense of physicality in their non-physical work. This is always disguised as being more employee-friendly, but rather than treadmill desks, weird topographic standing pads and all sorts of other stuff, wouldn't it be easier to let your workers go for a walk?

I digress.

I'm going to make three suggestions on this front, and they're all cheap.

1. Get some exercise. It doesn't have to be anything major. In fact, x-treme, hardcore stuff is not what we're looking for here. But your body should probably move around at some point during the day. It doesn't count if you're looking at a screen or listening to something while you do it.
2. Find a way to make your writing just a little more physical. Stand if you can. Write by hand or, if you're really committed, with a typewriter. See if you can make your body a bit busier while you write.
3. If you're thinking, stop staring at a blank screen, pick up a deck of cards and start shuffling. Stack cards. Deal them into two piles, no counting. Keep your hands moving in mindless ways while you think. Engage the physical and wait for the ideas to show up on their own.

Be Alone

The shower might be one of the few significant stretches of time we spend alone during a normal day. Maybe some of you get sexy in the shower, and if that's your thing, rock on. But for the rest of us nerds, just being alone for a brief period makes a lot of difference.

Carve out some extra time to be alone during the day. Walks are really good for this. Parking your car somewhere and just sitting is another good one, although people think you're either weird or work somewhere so horrible that lunch in your car is better than spending one more second in your hellhole office.

Make a little time to be truly alone. Out of contact with other people, out of sight of other people, without your phone.

One Thing At A Time

Time spent without multiple tasks vying for attention is what makes a shower such a powerful thinking tool.

The biggest advantage of the shower is that nobody is expected to do productive work in there. You've got one mindless task: Clean your body. Nobody expects you to stop mid-shower and do something "real quick." Nobody is emailing from the shower, nobody's managing spreadsheets.

Time spent without multiple tasks vying for attention is what makes a shower such a powerful thinking tool.

To get a similar effect without the shower, try what I call a Dump Notebook. Hang on, don't get scatological here.

When you sit down to write, have your Dump Notebook open next to you. Then, when you're in the middle of working and think, "Oh, balls. I need to get 9 volt batteries for the stupid smoke detector," immediately write it down in your Dump Notebook, then let it go.

By taking the extra nonsense swirling in your head and transferring it somewhere else, you can unload it, stop using your brainpower remembering it, and focus on the task at hand.

Required Reading: Hellboy And The Mignolaverse



One of the burdens of comic book nerdism is that whenever a new comic book movie comes out, you get the same question: "Which comics should I read? Number 1, right?"

Gross Generalization: No, it's not #1.

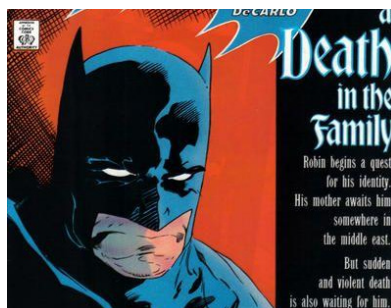
With a new Hellboy movie out, I'm sure many of you are wondering which Hellboy books are worth reading.

I'll let you know, but I also need you to learn about the wider Mignolaverse. Because there are too few other geeks who care about this stuff, and damn it, I'm looking to swell the ranks.

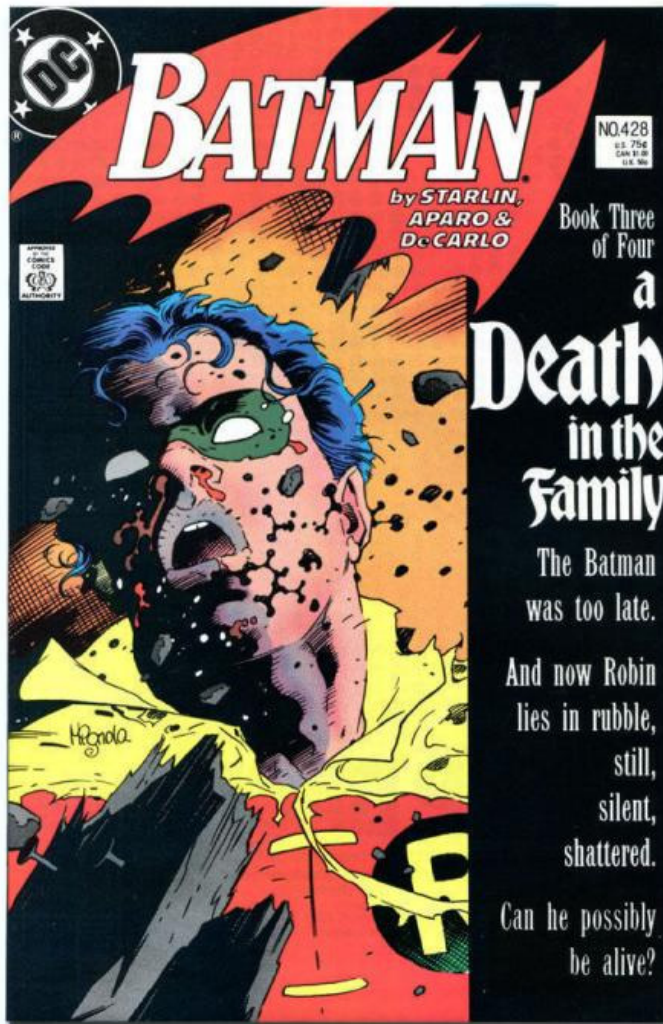
Mike Mignola

Mignola's career in comics started as an artist. Most readers first saw his work on the covers for *Batman: A Death In The Family*, the story in which The Joker beat Robin (Jason Todd) with a crowbar, and based on calls to one of two 900-numbers, readers voted whether Robin would live or die.

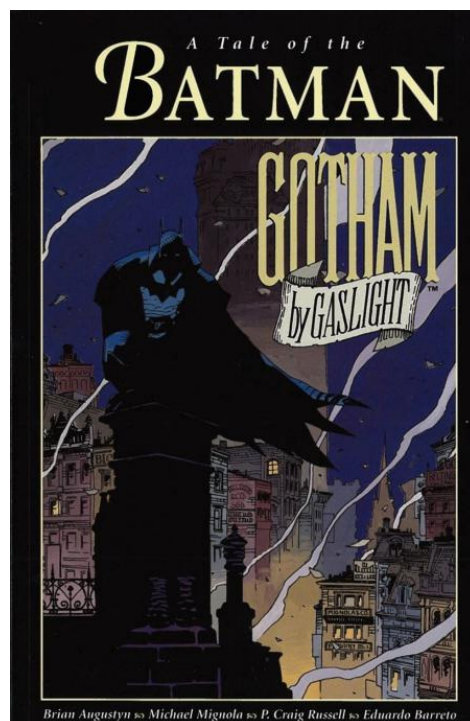
Mignola's Batman has grown on me, but I have to admit, he looks like he's holding back an urgent, hot loaf.



You could see Mignola bloom more in in this bloody action shot:



But I think it's the one-shot *Gotham By Gaslight*, where Mignola really hit his stride:



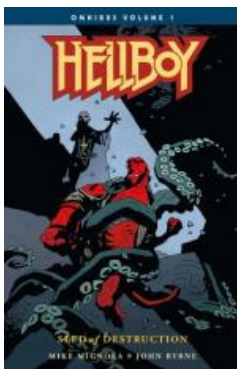
He did some great covers for Marvel and DC throughout the 90s, and he kept working on his own projects as well, such as this very early, very first illustration of Hellboy:



It was in 1994 that *Hellboy: Seed of Destruction* hit the racks. This first release was written and illustrated by Mignola, but comics legend John Byrne wrote the actual script. After that, for the next 25 years, every Hellboy tale (with one exception) was written by Mignola alone.

Since then, Hellboy's world has expanded, and the Mignolaverse has a volume and depth rivaled only by the big two comics publishers and their armies of creatives.

Let's take a look at the Mignolaverse Must-Reads



"Hellboy Omnibus Vol. 1: Seed of Destruction"

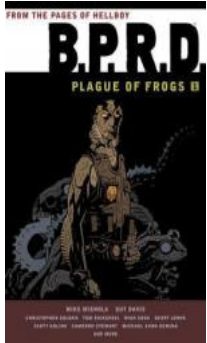
If you want the origin of Hellboy, this is your first stop.

Hellboy has always been a little hapless. He's capable, yet always out of his depth. In my enduring favorite moment from these early issues, Hellboy complains about being outfitted with a jetpack. "These things never work," he says. He's reassured that this model is new and improved. Hellboy jumps out of a plane, attempts to get the jetpack going, and it explodes without providing even a single moment of flight.

Let's discuss the book itself. This honker is 368 pages, priced at \$17 bucks. That's

like 5 cents per page. If a regular comic was priced that low, you'd be talking a buck a book. You can hardly find lousy old Youngblood comics for that price.

My recommendation: if you want to be entertained, stay in for the movie's premiere, settle in with your pal Orville Redenbacher, and read this sucker. Then, hit the movies on a Tuesday evening when all the productive members of society think they're too good to be drunk in a theater.



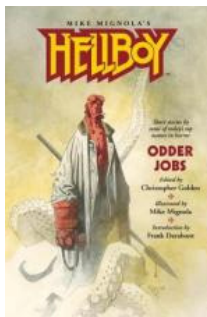
"B.P.R.D.: Plague of Frogs Vol. 1"

At one point, Hellboy up and quit punching and shooting things. The other members of the B.P.R.D. (Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense) had to carry on without him.

There are a few B.P.R.D. volumes that come before this one, but *Plague of Frogs* is where it gets real. This is a bleak book about a small group of people fighting against an extinction-level evil force. There are damn few bright moments, and it's a "war is hell" situation in a very literal sense. The Earth is transforming into hell, people!

B.P.R.D. widens the "Mignolaverse" and explores a lot of the Hellboy side characters, including Abe Sapien (fish man), Johann Kraus (ghost man), Liz Sherman (fire woman), and Roger The Homunculus (homunculus). While there's not a lot of Hellboy in these books, they have a Hellboy-esque feel, and...I think I even prefer them to the O.G.

Special Commendation: There's a significant character death at one point that is perhaps more touching than any other character death in comics. I won't spoil it for you. Just read it and weep.



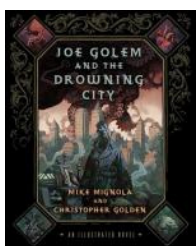
"Hellboy: Odder Jobs"

Don't Like Comics?

Normally I'd shame you, but in this case, I've got you covered.

A threesome of short story collections came out under the Hellboy banner. I'm recommending this second volume. Why? Because they don't have to be read in any order, and this one includes stories from Frank Darabont, Guillermo del Toro, and a boatload of others.

They're fun, they're weird, and they stand alone.

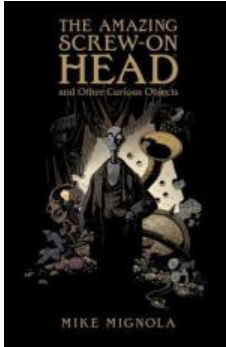


"Joe Golem And The Drowning City"

Mignola has done a few damn good print-only books, and I have to include this one because it's also an audiobook with solid narration by Robert Fass.

Mignola's books often have a sneaky, dream-like, surreal quality to them. You start out and everything's nice and normal, then BAM, you're boating down the now-

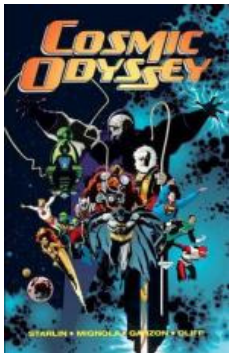
flooded streets of Manhattan with a golem who was created to hunt witches.



"The Amazing Screw-On Head And Other Curious Objects"

When someone tells you that a book might be Mignola's weirdest, you listen. It's sort of like someone telling you that Usain Bolt ran particularly quickly today. ALL Usain Bolt races are fast, but this one is fast even for him. Likewise, Mignola's stuff is all weird, and this is weird even for him.

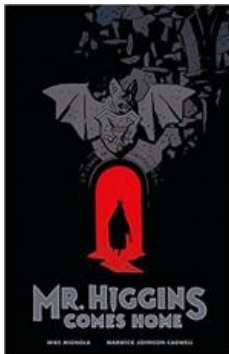
It's also a showcase for the quirky dark humor that runs throughout Mignola's work, an underrated and oft-forgotten element.



"Cosmic Odyssey"

Mignola did quite a bit of DC work, and this is my pick. It's fun to see his take on classic DC characters, especially Darkseid, and this book has just enough weird monsters and bizarre machinery to keep things interesting.

If you need a weird yet relatable monster or a bizarre machine, Mignola's the guy to call.



"Mr. Higgins Comes Home"

A quick, one-shot story with vampires, werewolves, and explosions. What more do you want?

What I like about this one is that so many stories can become part of a larger universe, and things start getting tangled. It's hard to read ONE part of something without the larger context. For this one, you can go in totally ignorant and come out the other side just fine.



"Bram Stoker's Dracula"

If there's ever been a better pairing of visual flair and classic storytelling—you know what? I started that sentence wrong. There hasn't ever been a better pairing of visual flair and classic storytelling.



"Hellboy In Hell Vol. 1: The Descent"

Hellboy dies. Then he goes to hell. Which is nowhere near the end of Hellboy's story.

This book has a slower pace, and that's a good thing. It's almost like a set of fables with Hellboy as the character that leads us through. For taking place in hell, it's

pretty subdued, and it might just be Mignola's most contemplative, best writing.

A Few Bonus Pieces

There are just a few pieces of Mignola art that need to be highlighted before I can feel like we've made good today.

"Classic X-Men"



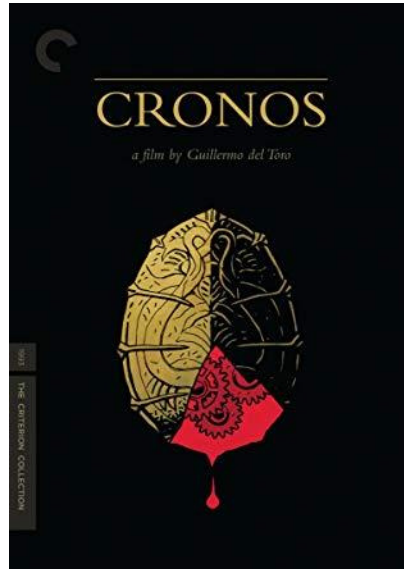
Mignola did a series of great covers for *Classic X-Men*. They're all great. It's hard to pick a favorite, but I'm going with this one. So moody for an X-Men cover.

"Punisher #6"



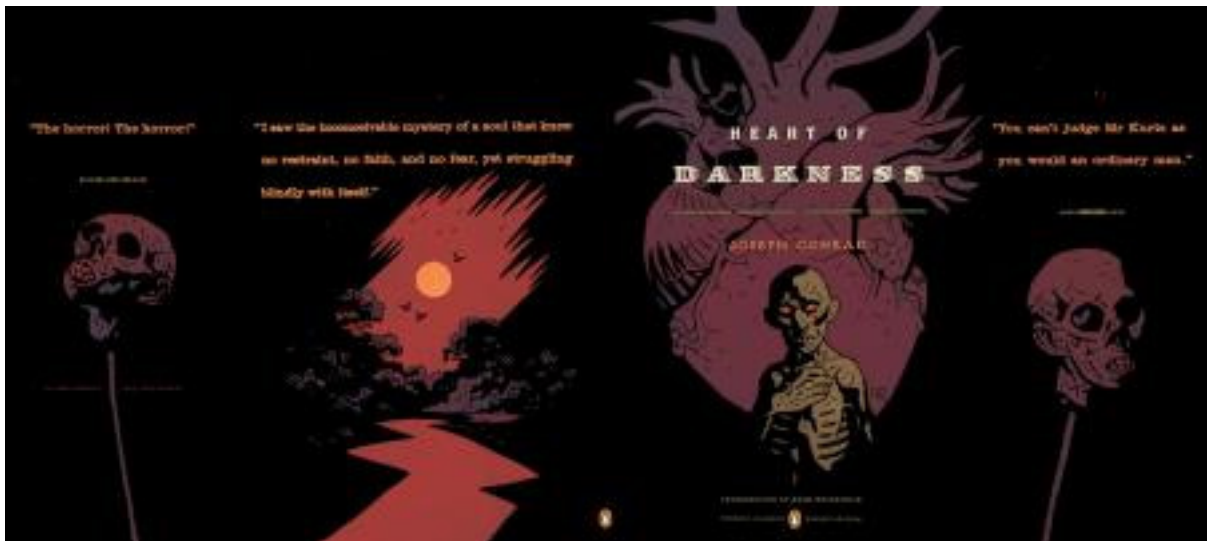
Sometimes Mignola gets a bad rap. His stuff is so stylized that the occasional fool doesn't think Mignola has the chops to draw in a more standard style. I point at this, one of the best Punisher images of all time. If you don't know much about art and composition, look at this while blurring your eyes. You'll see how the whole setup highlights Ol' Frank.

"Cronos"



Mignola's art can be striking and simple, like this DVD cover he did for his buddy Guillermo del Toro.

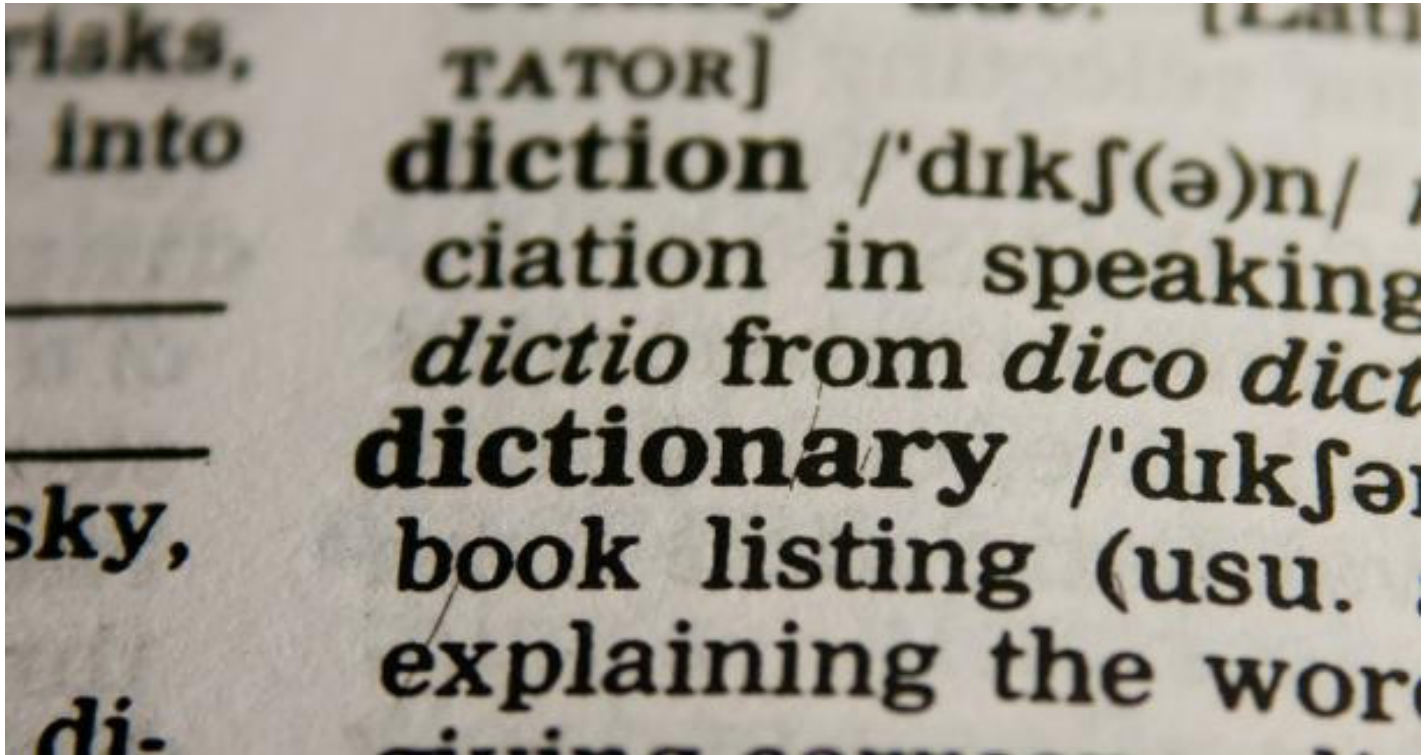
"Heart Of Darkness"



I mean, c'mon. Tell me this doesn't entice you from across the bookstore. Plus, if you were bored as hell by this book, having this edition would've at least given you something of interest.

That's where I'd start. START. Once you enter the Mignolaverse, there's no going back, stopping, slowing down, and you're pretty much ruined for regular books.

30 of Webster's Worst Words



Neologism is a fancy term for "new word."

While Urban Dictionary has provided the general populace the ability to trace neologisms as they develop, it's still Merriam-Webster that really counts. It counts in Scrabble, spelling bees, and if you're ever having a barroom argument over whether or not "embiggen" is a "cromulent" word, Merriam-Webster is the place to go.

By the way, "embiggen" is totally a cromulent word. "Cromulent" isn't a cromulent word, but it's on Merriam-Webster's list of "Words We're Watching."

On April 14th, 1828 Noah Webster published/registered his first dictionary. It had 70,000 words spread over two volumes. Today, The Merriam-Webster dictionary contains over 470,000 entries. Some of them great, like the use of "pregame" as a verb that means drinking before an event. Some of them...not as great, very sober, and pretty uninspired.

Let's take a look at some of the subpar Merriam-Webster entries from the last few decades.

guac/bougie/marg/avo/rando/zuke/adorbs

All added in 2018.

Shakespeare is rumored to have invented over a thousand words. That's almost total nonsense, however I think it's fair to say Shakespeare probably invented, I dunno, 20?

That one dude invented 20 new words and what are we doing? How are we using our connected brainpower and the massive amounts of time we've bought back by not washing our clothes in a

river or emptying chamber pots or dying of consumption? Shortening our orders at restaurants. Fab.

hophead

: a beer enthusiast

A hophead is supposedly different from a drunk because although both a drunk and a hophead consume a lot of beer, a hophead is more obnoxious about it and will probably scoff at the idea of cracking a Genesee after a hard day's work.



hangry

: irritable or angry because of hunger

This is a bad word to use, and here's why:

You're walking around and you say, "I'm getting hangry." Everyone thinks about how cute the term is, maybe laughs, but you know what they're not thinking about? Getting you a goddamn waffle.

If what you're feeling is hunger, and if what you want is to resolve your hunger, simply modify the phrase "I'm hungry" with a word like "fucking." This conveys both the hunger and the anger, and your friends will be very invested in getting you a waffle if you'll stop swearing so often at such high volume.

tl;dr

: too long; didn't read — used to say that something would require too much time to read

My hate for this "word" comes from its meaning, use, and appearance. Y'know, everything about it.

Its meaning is that someone decided not to read something because it was too long. How do you know something is too long if you didn't read it? I didn't know the *Rampage* movie was too long until I watched it. Then, yes, I could definitively say it was the finest action movie of last year with an added 45 minutes from another sub-mediocre action movie.

How about that semicolon? How many words have a semicolon in the middle? Bad enough that we're legitimizing the semicolon, but good lord, in the middle of a buncha letters?

You were too uninspired to finish reading something, and you won't even do the courtesy of spelling out your own laziness? Piss off.

wanderwort

: a word borrowed from one language to another across a broad geographical area often as a result of trade or adoption of newly introduced items or cultural practices

Although it's a German word that translates to "wandering words" and refers to words that make their way from one language to another, this 100% sounds like an STD.



wordie

: a lover of words

I always found the word "foodie" a little precious. And stupid. You're differentiating yourself from other people because you like food? Might need to try a little harder. Isn't it like saying, "I'm an air-y. I just like air inside my body." No shit?

Likewise, don't most of us use words? Don't we all have our preferences? Being a wordie might not make you all that special. Sorry?

That said, "wordie" is probably better than the previous version, "logophile." That whole "-phile" thing is...no thanks.

glamping

: outdoor camping with amenities and comforts (such as beds, electricity, and access to indoor plumbing) not usually used when camping

If only camping could involve escaping the world in a \$60K renovated Airstream with a gas generator that wrecks the peace and quiet of the wilderness. If only camping could be more like not camping.

I feel like this word legitimizes the question "What if camping could be glamorous?" If you want glamour, stay in a hotel that has a shower door that operates on hinges. If you want to camp, camp.

front

: to assume a fake or false personality to conceal one's true identity and character

The word itself isn't embarrassing. It's embarrassing that Merriam-Webster added the verb form in 2017. If I worked there, I'd add it on the sly. This is like 40 years after EVERYONE else knew what "fronting" meant. Merriam-Webster had to go and call themselves out for being tragically behind the times.

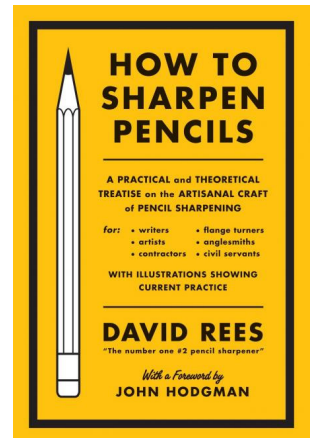
artisanal

: creating a product in limited quantities by traditional methods

The official entry for this word expanded in 2019 to accommodate Williamsburg. If Merriam-Webster knows about it, that means it's huge. When I saw this one, I wondered whether EVERYTHING is artisanal now. I looked around, and the answer is yes.

You can have an "artisanal" pencil sharpening. Just send in your pencil to David Rees, and for ONE-HUNDRED DOLLARS he'll sharpen it for you. Note that the price is so high because the guy is basically retired. Pre-retirement you could have a pencil sharpened for a reasonable \$40 bucks.

Artisanal pickles? Not only do these exist, there are multiple to choose from, including pickles made with an IPA. So your hophead artisanal pickle fan can really live the sweet life. Kill me.



weak sauce

: something inferior, ineffective, or unimpressive : something weak

The irony here is that the word is the perfect word to describe itself.

What the hell happened to "strong sauce?" If there's a word that's weak sauce, shouldn't there also be a strong sauce?

aquafaba

: the liquid that results when beans are cooked in water

Not that bottled water. Not that lady from *Ocean's 8* who everyone pretended to know about from before *Ocean's 8* but, suspiciously, had never spoken about before *Ocean's 8*. Bean water.

Good thing we came up with a whole new word for water that had beans in it. Is there a name for my bath water? Aquafabalous?

I'm upset that, in a limited life, with limited brainpower, some of mine has gone towards a word for bean water.

hot take

: a quickly produced, strongly worded, and often deliberately provocative or sensational opinion or reaction (as in response to current news)

We already had a word for this: bullshit.

listicle

: an article consisting of a series of items presented as a list

I hope whoever came up with this one is still laughing about how much it sounds like testicle. Because I am.

on-brand

: appropriate to, typical of, consistent with, or supportive of a particular brand or public image or identity:

When this moved out of the marketing sphere and into the realm of individual use, an angel lost its wings. To an electric turkey carving knife.

defriend

: to remove (someone) from a list of designated friends on a social networking website

Because at this point, we not only had to jettison friends, we had to make up a word so we could let everyone know we did it. "Oh, I've got so many friends that I'm actively pushing them away." Get over yourself.

big rip

: a hypothetical cosmological event in which all matter in the universe loses cohesion and which is posited to be a possible fate of the universe if the outward acceleration of matter continues

You can't just take the word for a huge fart and then pretend it's a fancy science thing. I call foul.

dead-cat bounce

: a brief and insignificant recovery (as of stock prices) after a steep decline...from the facetious notion that even a dead cat would bounce slightly if dropped from a sufficient height

Why are we so obsessed with visiting violence upon cats for the sake of metaphor? You can't swing a dead cat without hitting on new ways to skin a cat. Plus, this cat could be replaced with ANYTHING. A dead gremlin. A dead gnome. A dead evil dictator. A dead hophead. Anything would probably bounce if you dropped it from high enough, right?

Doesn't this just cause a discussion to derail every time it's used? Am I the only one who would stop some science meeting to say, "Wait, what?"



outercourse

: sexual activity between individuals that does not involve vaginal or anal intercourse

I'm not trying to get too picky, but I guess the mouth does not count? I mean, technically, medically speaking, I suppose the alimentary canal is considered outside the body.

Call me old-fashioned, but I think Merriam-Webster has an obligation, and that obligation is informing people of the myriad ways they can get sexy. This exclusionary word flies in the face of Merriam-Webster's erotic nature.

speed dating

: an event at which each participant converses individually with all the prospective partners for a few minutes in order to select those with whom dates are desired

C'mon. Can't I put this together? I know the two words, I think I can figure out the meaning of them slapped together. It's like "candle holder." What does it do? It holds a candle. Use your brain for five seconds.

vape

: to inhale vapor through the mouth from a usually battery-operated electronic device (such as an electronic cigarette) that heats up and vaporizes a liquid or solid



The disturbing thing is that Merriam-Webster traced this back to 1999. Which means this is Gen X's fault, not Millennials'! We had 20 years to put a stop to this nonsense, and we blew it hard.

flexitarian

: one whose normally meatless diet occasionally includes meat or fish

I don't eat meat. Unless I feel like eating meat. In those cases, I eat meat. But when I don't feel like it, I don't. It's almost like I have a non-specific diet. Which is very important to create a label for.

swole

: extremely muscular : having a physique enhanced by bodybuilding exercises

This is my vote for worst Instagram hashtag, possibly second-worst. Second-worst because "#swollemate" is a thing.

yoctosecond

: one septillionth of a second

You know what's really annoying about this one? It uses "septillionth" in the definition. Like we all know what that means. It's .000000000000000000000001 seconds, by the way.

This must've been a slow year. Here's how you say it when you want to tell everyone about a very short amount of time: "In like a second." No need to modify. A second is quick.

chemo brain

: impaired cognition (such as memory loss or lack of concentration) that has been observed in patients who have received chemotherapy

That is possibly the most depressing shit I've ever heard. What a place to end a column.

The 10 Worst Things About Shakespeare



If Shakespeare were alive, we'd be celebrating his 455th birthday on April 23rd.

Weirdly enough, Shakespeare's death day was the same as his birthday: April 23rd. Different year, unfortunately. Even in being born and dying, Shakespeare managed to be idiosyncratic and annoying. Like something out of a Wes Anderson movie. Just, you know, several hundred years before Wes Anderson.

I'm not a fan. Can you tell?

I was an English major in college, I'm a librarian now, and I've spent way too much of my life being bothered by Shakespeare. For VERY good reasons, which are as follows:

Shut Up And Play The Hits?

I'm starting to suspect that Shakespeare was a quantity over quality guy.

Here are the good plays:

The Merchant of Venice
Midsummer Night's Dream
The Tempest
Macbeth
Othello
Hamlet
Romeo and Juliet

Here's an exhaustive list of the super awesome, memorable sonnets that you must read:

[taking a note from IRS documents, I'm letting you know this space is intentionally left blank. Other than, you know, this text. So really it's not blank, but blank in terms of meaning. This is all a big, joking way of saying that I don't care for ANY sonnets. I can feel the joke tanking]

There are some good lines in some of the sonnets, pretty metal stuff now and then, but I don't think a single one is super awesome as a whole. Hey, the *Rampage* movie had some sweet moments. The Rock fought an enormous alligator alongside a giant albino gorilla. But I don't know if I'd call it successful as a whole.

Does my referencing *Rampage* clue you in regarding my feelings about Shakespeare?

154 sonnets, 37 plays. 8-ish golden nuggets. Which means a success rate of 4%.

The Amazing Spider-Man *has been running for over 800 issues by now*, and while there is some total crap in there (looking at you, ghost of Hammerhead created by a nuclear blast subplot), it's still batting better than Shakespeare.

And still, you go into a school, and what do they hand you? The Shakespeare book. The fattest book printed on Bible paper you've ever seen. Like all of it is amazing and should be located in one giant book. Because you'll want to read ALL OF IT!

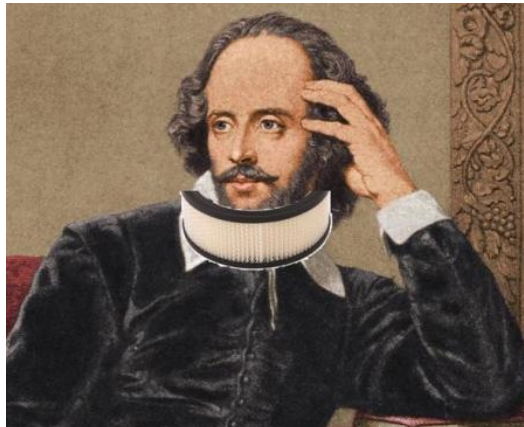
Listen, can we just do the hits? I know some of you love the B-sides, and I know that pain. I have Quiet Riot's *Metal Health* on vinyl. Believe me, you get an album with "Cum On Feel The Noize" on the front side, you know what it's like to love the unloved B-sides. But let's just accept that they're not for everybody, yeah? If the Beatles can release a #1's album, Shakespeare ain't too good to do the same. We can cut that book WAY down, save everyone some time.

**154 sonnets,
37 plays.
8-ish golden
nuggets.
Which means a
success rate of
4%.**

Shakespeare Squandered His Abilities As A Time Traveler

How do I know he traveled in time?

Evidence the First: How else do you explain that air filter he was always wearing around his neck?



Where'd he even get it? Why would the automotive air filter be invented hundreds of years before the automobile itself?

Evidence the Second: He was married to Anne Hathaway? I didn't click on the link in Wikipedia and confirm it's the same Anne "Catwoman" Hathaway. Because I don't need to. The information confirms my belief of Shakespeare being a time traveler, so I'll call it good.

And yet, with access to a time machine, he didn't kill Hitler, didn't push Stalin off a bridge, and we didn't even get one play with hoverboards, self-tying sneakers, and the charm of a young Michael J. Fox. Time travel was wasted on Shakespeare.

The Pitch Is Terrible

Did you have that teacher in school? The one who is all, "Our next required read has sex. Violence. Decapitations. Ghosts." And you're like, "Hell yeah! Finally! What is it? One of those Camp Crystal Lake novels? Goosebumps? Is it Goosebumps? A new one where R.L. Stine stopped beating around the bush and opened up the tap on some sexy time?"

Nope. It's Shakespeare. Groan.

Sure, there's sex in there. But it's like hearing about sex when you're 5. Adults are using words you don't understand. You have a vague concept that they're talking about adult sex stuff, but the exactitudes are lost on your young, dopey mind.

And the violence? Pretty much "[they fight]." Wow. Can you imagine if that's how an action movie went? The *Demolition Man* script would be like one page. "They go to the future. [they fight] They throw a guy in a fire. [they fight] Rat Burger. [they fight]"

I suggest teachers stop with this kind of pitch. It's nothing more than the setup for a letdown. Just say, "Look, we have to get through this crap. If we can do it with a minimum of complaints, we'll watch the *Romeo and Juliet* DVD where Juliet is topless, and I'll just fast-forward the DVD so you can still catch the nudity for about one-millionth of a second. Deal?"

Pretty Sure He's A Cop

How else do you explain that mustache? The only non-cops who have mustaches are villains who tie ladies to train tracks. See, you tie a lady to a train track, but then it might be days before a train even shows up. You gotta have something to fiddle with, so why not grow something to fiddle with on your face? That way, it's always there when you need it.

I don't think Shakespeare was tying ladies to tracks, mostly because there were no tracks to tie anyone to in his neck of the (chronological) woods. Which means he was definitely a cop.



We Still Read His Stuff Out Loud In Class

While Shakespeare is better aloud, it's not improved by assigning parts to disinterested 8th graders who can't even keep up with which page they're on, even when they get to be Falstaff and have all the damn jokes!

This assigning of parts in class has to be the absolute worst way to grind through Shakespeare. At least when I read it at home alone I can munch on some Doritos, and when I space out wondering if there will ever be a third Dorito flavor after Nacho Cheese and Cool Ranch (oh, young Pete, if only you knew), I'm not holding up the entire class.

He Named His Son "Hamnet"

Geez. There are a lot of lousy names you can curse a kid with (some I've legitimately seen include Tequila and Harold Dick). But Hamnet? That sounds like my beard when I'm eating a really good sandwich.

Beers?

People say, "Shakespeare is meant to be heard."

Wrong. So wrong.

I'm pretty sure Shakespeare's plays are meant to be watched while you're loaded and standing around with a bunch of people who have never bathed. Ever. And these aren't people who work in a bright, air-y office. These are people who spent the afternoon mucking stalls, maybe washed their hands, MAYBE, and now they're drunk and screaming in your ear.

Basically, imagine the drunkest, rowdiest concert you ever attended. Add in the strong odor of manure and you're there.

When was the last time you saw a Shakespeare production and a fistfight broke out in the audience? When was the last time you saw someone shitfaced at a production of Hamlet? Why is there no crowdsurfing? No beach balls flying around? Nobody in JNCOs?

And we wonder why only the highbrow types are into this crap. Duh, guys. Duh. Maybe try bringing back the beers and, you know, the fun if you want normal people to get into Shakespeare.

Old Man Earring

If I don't let Harrison Ford get away with that shit, you can be damn sure I'm not letting Shakespeare slide on it either.

Look at him. He knows he done wrong with that earring.

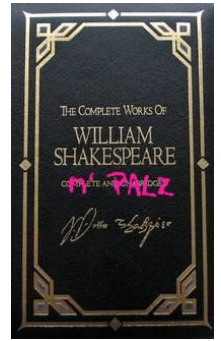
The Question of Authorship

Scholars love to debate what Shakespeare actually did. How much Shakespeare was Shakespeare?



This question heated up, oh, a couple hundred years after Shakespeare died. Great. So at the time when it would be basically impossible to find any answers, let's just wildly speculate on whether or not Shakespeare actually wrote this junk.

If there's one thing scholars love, it's a question that absolutely cannot be definitively answered and is ultimately of little consequence. So maybe there was a group of people who wrote this stuff? Great. Just change the cover to "Shakespeare n' Palz" and call it a day.



His Burial

Why is Shakespeare buried next to his wife (allegedly. I'm not sure Anne Hathaway's body is in that grave, but I'm not 100% sure of the ins and outs of time travel) and...Thomas Nash? Shakespeare's granddaughter's first husband? Who gives a crap about that guy?

It seems that this is either due to some sort of weird head of the family nonsense that I couldn't possibly understand, or because Nash was bros with the church where Shakespeare is buried, so they threw him a bone. Either way, who wants to be buried next to someone super famous that you're vaguely related to? So your grave is constantly lounged on and has never, EVER been visited on purpose? Why would anyone do this? The last way you want to spend eternity is next to someone of a slightly better station than yours. So you can sit, as a ghost, and watch how sad everyone is about Shakespeare's death, meanwhile they look at your grave and are like, "Huh. That's weird. Wonder if he ever wrote any plays with ghosts in 'em."

Plus, Shakespeare was so full of himself that he felt the need to warn people about moving his bones:

*Good friend for Jesus sake forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he that moves my bones.*

Geez! Someone thinks highly of himself. Like we'd all be after his old, stupid bones.

In fairness, the common thought these days is that someone stole his skull. Some curse.

BONUS: Romeo and Juliet Is Assigned at the Wrong Time

We read it in middle school because there are kids in it! We'll relate!

Except that the story is kind of about how kids are dumb because they're kids, and a little age and experience is a good thing.

You know who is not ready to receive that message? Kids. I wasn't. I'm JUST NOW figuring out that I'm not immortal. Decades after reading *Romeo And Juliet*.

While we're at it, ALL of Shakespeare is assigned at the wrong time. High school is not the time to appreciate this stuff. Sorry, sophisticated 10% of high school students who love Shakespeare and probably, I don't know, actually understand David Sedaris and the S&P 500.

You don't drink fine bourbon when you're 21. Because you wouldn't appreciate it yet. You have to drink crappy stuff first. The usual pattern is something sweet and soda-like, then really light beer, then slightly heavier beer with shots mixed in, then bourbon with cola, then bourbon straight, and then, and ONLY then, fine bourbon.

You can't go straight from Mike's Hard Lemonade to Shakespeare. You just can't.

20 Comics To Cure Your 'Avengers: Endgame' Hangover



You saw the movie. It's over. It's all over.

Doesn't it feel a little like the day after Halloween? All this build-up and excitement, then it's just... over? The awesome Demolition Man costume you made is trash. That great party left you with nothing but cleaning tasks, sweeping, bathroom duty, rinsing out the skull/spine beer bong.

That feeling, that "it's all over" thing, it's a form of hangover. How do you cure a hangover? How do you drag your sorry carcass through this, the toughest hours?

I'm so glad you asked.



1. *Astonishing X-Men: The Hair of the Dog*

Hair of the dog is "more of the same." You wake up, feel like crap, and slam a beer. It works, sort of, although you probably just don't notice you're hungover because you're a little drunk again, so the hangover is delayed more than beaten.

If you want to get through your Avengers hangover with more of the same, Joss Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men* might be the way to go. If you liked what Whedon did with the Avengers, you'll like what he did with the X-Men.



2. *East Of West: Stoned*

This goes out to my fellow Coloradans, Oregoners, Washingtonites, Mainerds, Nevadonians, Alaskites, and so on. One oft-cited "cure" for a hangover is getting stoned.

Hey, you gotta pass the time somehow.

East of West is what I'll pitch for this one. It's trippy, distracting, and the world looks like ours but...not. It'll keep you off-balance and busy just long enough.



3. My Favorite Thing Is Monsters: Sweat It Out

Throw on your sweats and move around. I swear by it, provided you're not so hung over that standing upright is enough activity that you hurl.

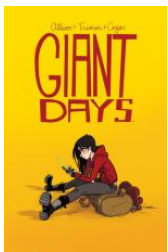
Sweat through your hangover with *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*. It's not the easiest book to read, text-heavy and dense, but once you get over the hump, you'll feel loads better.



4. Invincible: Greasy Food

You can look up the many worldwide versions of greasy, heavy food. Breakfast burritos, sausages, Wendy's, menudo, pickled fish.

I'm calling *Invincible* the greasy food of comics. Don't get me wrong, I love it. It's Robert Kirkman's underrated success. It's candy-colored superhero action, especially if you like your candy blood red. It's tasty, and there's A LOT of it to go around.



5. Giant Days: TV Binge

Sometimes all you can do with a hangover is wait it out. And you might as well have some company. Something familiar, something that doesn't require you to keep track of deep plot details and so on.

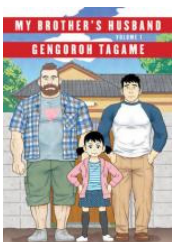
Giant Days is the *Gilmore Girls* of comics. I mean that as a compliment. Am I using this as my coming out as a Gilmore Girlfriend? #TeamDean



6. My Hero Academia: Youth Cure

One of the best ways to cure a hangover? Be young. If you're under 25 and reading this, don't even talk to me about a hangover. You don't know what it is yet. You're arguing with me right now, but trust me, being hungover at 35 and 25 are different things. As an old man, if I have 7 or more boozes, I prefer to walk home. Because I'm hoping I get hit by a truck before I have to deal with the consequences.

My Hero Academia is what the kids are reading. Don't ask me why, don't ask me how this helps, just know that youth is wasted on the (wasted) young.

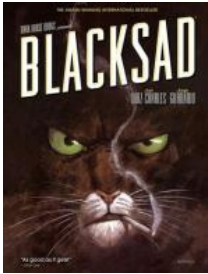


7. My Brother's Husband: Love Cure

Sometimes you just want someone to take care of you. Like that Beatles song about will you still need me, will you still feed me.

Will you still need me / Will you still feed me / If I / Vomit / On the / Floor

My Brother's Husband is a lovely story about men taking care of each other. It's got some things to say about gay rights and the acceptance of gay people in Japan. And if you've ever felt like you wanted to see a male gaze applied to dad bods in comics, this was tailor made for you.

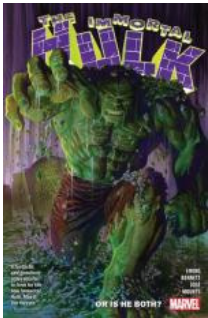


8. **Blacksad: Kitty Time**

Because this time you're so messed up that there's only one thing you can do: pet a kitty.

A kitty really does help a hangover. The cat gives you a reason to live another day, a reason to get out of bed, even just for a minute, and an excuse to lay around. Hey, she's laying around all day, why can't I?

Beautiful art, hardboiled detectives, and cats. I'm not sure what else you want, but you probably ain't gettin' it.



9. **Immortal Hulk: Daytime Movie Cure**

Hit the couch, turn on the TV, and just watch whatever the hell some asshole at TNT thinks you should watch. Which, back in the time when I watched TNT, was often a terrible monster movie.

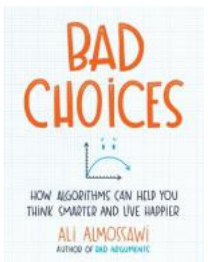
Try *Immortal Hulk*. Imagine the Hulk, but done as a monster movie. Pick this one and you'll love it, assuming you can get past that sweet Alex Ross cover.



10. **March: Slamming Water**

Just keep pounding that water until something gives. Your headache or your bladder, it's a race to see what breaks first.

Flush that Avengers stuff out of your head with John Lewis. John Lewis' *March* is what we all know we should probably be reading, and pounding it down is a good detox.



11. **Bad Choices: Today Will Be Different!**

I've known a person or two who deals with a hangover by promising "I'll never drink again." While they're at it, they usually make a promise about going to church, taking care of yard work, calling mom, or just generally being a shithead no more.

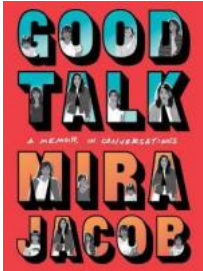
Bad Choices. Okay, okay. Not strictly a comic book. But if you're looking to improve your brain, this is the way to go. It's an illustrated guide to algorithmic thinking. Ali Almosawi made this a tough sell because math is for nerds, but if you're swearing off blockbuster movies forever, I can't think of a better plate of cold turkey.



12. Smashed: Just puke

Sometimes the best way to fight is to stop fighting. Just let it happen.

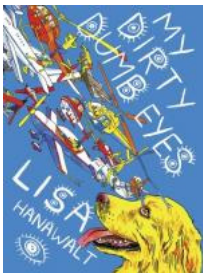
If you're looking to puke, Junji Ito has written some great horror stories with the most disturbing images ever committed to paper. You're 90% there, and trust me, Ito will fill in that missing 10%.



13. Good Talk: Re-Enter The World

Take a shower, have a coffee, and watch the news. You had your night off, now it's back to business.

Re-enter the real world with *Good Talk*. *Avengers* was fun and all, but it turns out there's still some serious stuff happening in the world. Who knew?

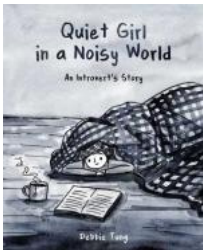


14. My Dirty Dumb Eyes: Laugh Through The Pain

One method of feeling different is to force yourself to feel another way.

Possibly the stupidest sentence I've ever written.

My Dirty Dumb Eyes is by the *BoJack Horseman* lady. If you want to laugh through your hangover, if you're one of those maniacs who can handle laughing at a time when it feels like your teeth are all rattling in their sockets and your skull shrank overnight, here you go.



15. Quiet Girl In A Noisy World: Hibernate

Some of you sweethearts are overwhelmed just by going out to a packed theater and being around people.

Detox with *Quiet Girl in a Noisy World*. Sweet, introverted. Just like you.



16. Darth Vader Imperial Machine: Transference

Need a great way to quit drinking? Try drugs!

Need to quit Marvel? Try Star Wars!

Darth Vader Imperial Machine is a standout entry in the Star Wars comics universe. Which, fine, is part of Marvel now. But let's not get caught up in everything The Mouse owns. We'll be here all day.



17. Mister Miracle: Fake It Til You Make It

Just act as if you're fine. Sort of a self-inflicted placebo.

Tom King wrote an incredible Vision series, and he found some of that same magic when writing about escape artist Mister Miracle. A masterclass in storytelling and a damn good read. You'll only have to feign interest for a few pages before actual

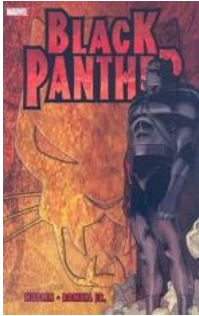
interest takes over.



18. **Someone Please Have Sex With Me: The Sex Cure**

Sort of combining the exercise cure with the release of some other brain chemicals, hey, it's an option. I'm a little shy on this one because it relates to one of my most shameful moments (which I'll share in the comments if...let's say 10 people ask).

Someone Please Have Sex With Me is the sexy cure to your *Endgame* Hangover.



19. **Black Panther: NEVER STOP**

One way to avoid the hangover is to never stop drinking.

Much was made of Ta-Nehisi Coates' Black Panther...but I think I preferred Reginald Hudlin's take. Sure, Coates wrote critically-acclaimed essays and Hudlin wrote House Party. But damn it, these comics work. Superhero comics at its finest. And John Romita Jr. art never, ever hurts.

Keep going with the characters you love.

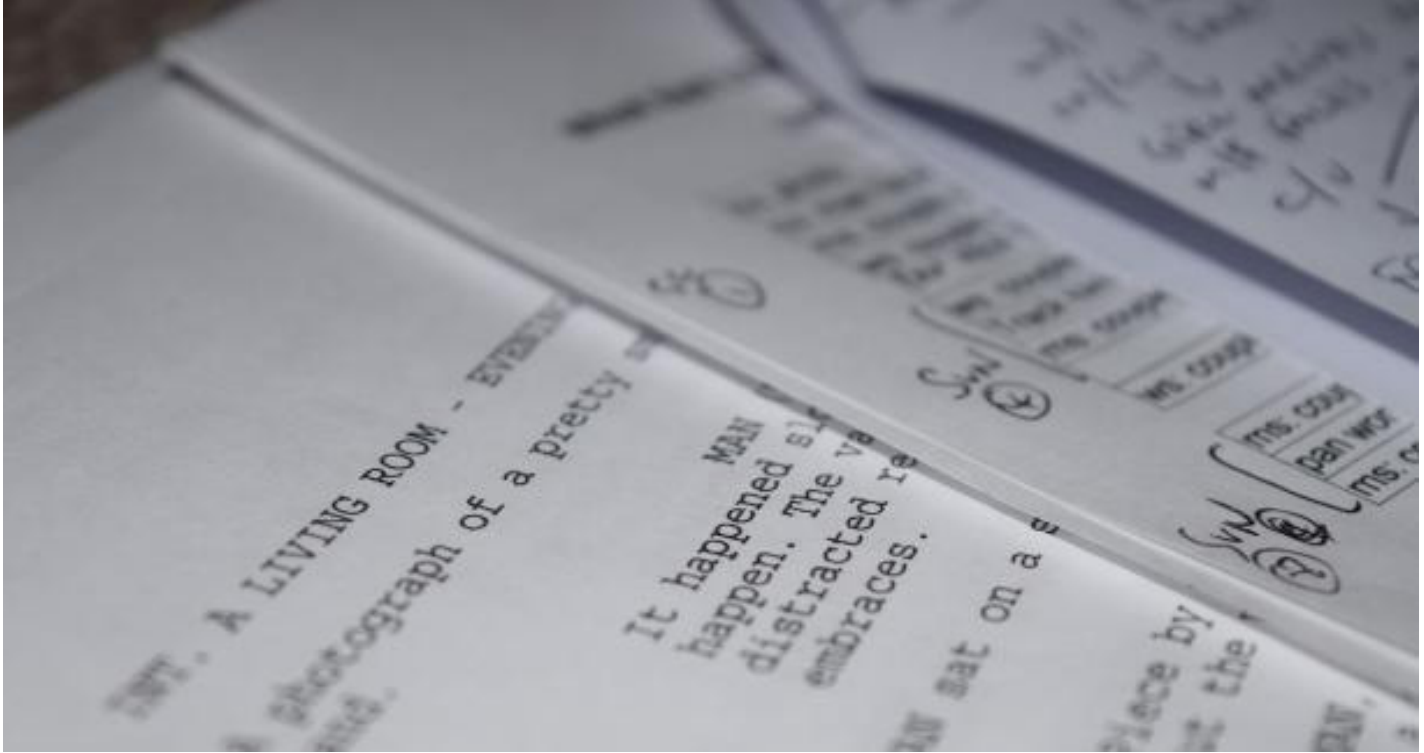


20. **Spider-Man Life Story: ZDARSKY It Up**

Chip Zdarsky always makes me feel better. Whether it's *Spectacular Spider-Man*, *Howard the Duck*, *Daredevil*, *Sex Criminals*, *Jughead*, whatever. Zdarsky is my warm blanket soaked in chicken soup and covered in my exercise sweat. This doesn't sound good, and I'm okay with it. The relationship I have with Chip isn't really for you to understand anyway.

He's got this Spider-Man series going right now, *Spider-Man: Life Story*. It's great. Get to your comics shop and pick it up.

Writers In Movies: What Do They Get Right?



Ever tried to watch an action movie with a gun nut? It's impossible. It's non-stop "11 shots from what's CLEARLY a revolver? Please."

Listen, buddy. We're about to see Stallone kick Wesley Snipes' flash-frozen head clean off his body, and then it bounces and shatters on the ground, shards of frozen gore everywhere. I'm fine with the reality breaking a little bit.

But then, whenever there's a writer in a movie, I become the dude I hate. I start itching a little. Or I'll laugh at something and then have to say, "Oh, nothing." Because I don't want to be that guy, the one who knows SO MUCH about everything and has to ruin a great practical effects shot of a slow-mo head shatter.

Where do movies get the writing game wrong? And where do they get it right?

'Sinister' And Obsession



In *Sinister*, Ethan Hawke plays a true crime writer who's on a little bit of a bad run, but you wouldn't know it because he's wearing a \$200 cardigan with suede elbow patches. I didn't even know that was a thing! Do these come from some kind of catalog that only college professors have access to? Do you have to prove you teach a class on literary theory before they send you the order form?

Hawke moves his family into a house where the former inhabitants were found murdered so he can mine the place for material. He keeps the whole murder thing a secret from his family because he's an obsessive writer. He MUST tell the tale, he MUST write the book. He MUST bear witness.

Sinister's biggest stretch is the money. How is Hawke dressing like a J. Crew model AND buying houses like it's no big thing? It should've gone down like this:

Ethan Hawke sees a murder house go up for sale. He makes his way downstairs to tell his wife about the house, and he runs into her coming up the stairs (first jump scare!). She's running up to tell him they should definitely buy this murder house that came on the market, which she ALSO found, because although she loves him and believes in him, they will NEVER afford a place this nice on his writer's earnings unless someone is killed inside.

'Stranger Than Fiction' and Boringness

I'm going to spoil part of a movie that's 13 years old. I don't know when spoilers become alright, but I feel like it's somewhere around the time a movie would be old enough to start backtalking and coming home with an unsanctioned piercing.

Emma Thompson plays a writer who, it turns out, is writing Will Ferrell's real life. Whatever she types up happens to him.

This movie gets one thing extremely right: The character is more interesting than the writer. Watching Will Ferrell on the screen is pretty fun, even though he's not being wacky. Emma Thompson is weird, she's got her quirks, her gross habit of spitting into a napkin and putting her cigarettes out in her own fluids. But she's just not the character you find yourself wanting to be with. And let's be honest, the affectation of using an IBM Selectric typewriter in a minimalist room with her shoes kicked off...gag.



If you've ever met a writer, they're almost always less interesting than their characters.

'Chasing Amy' and False Choices

Holden McNeil (Ben Affleck) writes Bluntman and Chronic comics with his buddy, Banky.

The most remarkable thing about the whole movie is that we actually see various writers and artists working!

It's not a significant portion of the movie, but there are moments where characters sit at drafting tables,



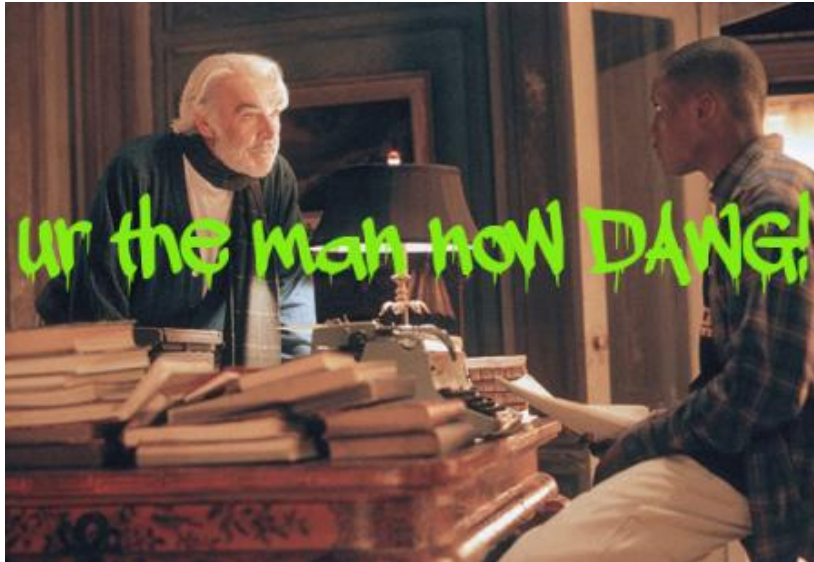
making comics. And it looks pretty super boring, which that part of writing is. Okay, they're in the super cool, 90's loft that is so shabby chic it makes you shabby sick, but, eh, it's a product of the time.

The ending sees the creative team go different ways. Banky continues work on *Bluntman and Chronic*, which has become a mainstream, financial success. Holden goes the opposite way, doing his indie, meaningful book about his failed relationship with Alyssa.

This movie presents a type of false choice that shows up in lots of movies about creatives, which is that you can either do work that feeds the wallet or work that feeds the soul. That there isn't room for both. Although, credit where credit is due, the movie doesn't seem to present one or the other as the "right" choice. Just different paths.

There's another part of the movie that gets the writing life even more wrong-er, and I'm calling this like it is: A young, handsome Ben Affleck meeting a young and charming Joey Lauren Adams at a 1990's comic con? Least plausible moment in ANY Kevin Smith movie, and yes, I'm aware he made a movie where Salma Hayek is a stripper who fights a monster made out of shit.

'Finding Forrester' and Mentorship



This one kinda annoys me and makes a good point at the same time.

You've probably only seen the moment where Sean Connery exclaims that a young black man, tapping feverishly at a typewriter, is the man now. Dog.

The plot: This kid is dared to break into the apartment of Forrester, who is a reclusive writer. The kid accidentally leaves his backpack behind, and some stuff happens, and ultimately Forrester becomes the kid's writing mentor.

The weirdest part? Would you mentor someone who broke into your house? It's a little like, when I complain about loud upstairs neighbors, people will tell me to go over there with some beers and have a chat. Like the right thing for me to do about neighbors who are stomping up and down the stairs, wrestling (adults!), and throwing bottles in the street all night long—I should really try and see things from their side and BUY THEM BEERS!?

That said, the movie does highlight something overlooked in writing: mentorship. If you can find a mentor, you're so much better off. Even if that mentor is an old, reclusive Scottish author who will yell words of encouragement at you while you work at a typewriter.

'In The Mouth of Madness' and Brainwashing

In this totally underrated Carpenter flick, Sam Neill goes nuts in a fictional town created by writer Sutter Cane (this was before Sam Neill went nuts in space for *Event Horizon* and before he played a maniacal business vampire in *Daybreakers*. Sam Neill likes going nuts in weird scenarios).



One reading of the movies seems to promote the idea that a writer, given enough time, fandom, and power can bring a fictional setting into reality. Which is true. Harry Potter Wizarding World Theme Park Land anyone?

A different reading makes it feel like a 50's marijuana propaganda film, or an 80's propaganda film about the evils of heavy metal. It's like a warning that reading/writing too many horror novels will cause actual evil in the world. Ridiculous!

'Man of Steel' and Editing

Amy Adams plays Lois Lane, and she's looking to do a story on aliens. Which is shot down by her editor, Perry White.

In the sequel, *Batman V. Superman Dawn of Justice*... Sorry, ran out of steam on that title.

In the sequel, Perry gives Clark Kent the business for not turning in his sports copy and instead working on his story about "the bat man of Gotham."

I think the movie wants us to see Perry White as a dope, sort of like the Ninja Turtle movie wants us to think Whoopi Goldberg is a fool for telling Megan Fox not to run a story about monster turtle men.

Let's look at the situation from another perspective.

You're the editor of *The New York Times*. A journalist, who you respect, brings you a piece about a super alien man. Or a man dressed as a bat who beats the shit out of criminals. Or a story about a turtle man smashing bad guys with shipping containers.

I gotta believe that your role, in that editorial job, is gatekeeper.

This movie gets it right in that editors are totally the killers of dreams. But it gets things wrong, too. Editors may be the killers of dreams, but they are totally right to kill dreams. Because most dreams are stupid.

'Authors Anonymous' and Blocks

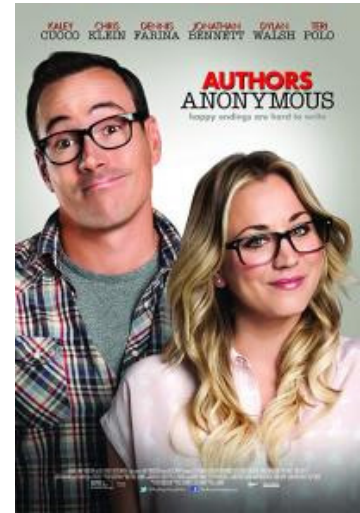
This is easily the worst movie here, but hold the phone.

The premise: A young, inexperienced writer joins a workshop/support group for people with writer's block. And almost immediately lands a publishing deal and gets paid for the movie rights. The other members of the group? Pissed and jealous.

Not a bad premise, right?

There's also a scene where Dennis Farina, as a self-published author, pimps his books at a card table in a hardware store. Anyone who has done any sort of reading or book tour can relate to that HARD.

It's a mixed bag and not the worst depiction of struggling writers. But you shouldn't watch it. Just know that it exists and serves as proof that accuracy doesn't always make something good.



"Birdman" and Tragedy

This one is all too real. A guy known for playing a superhero tries to show he's got a real side to him, adapting Raymond Carver to the stage.

I think, secretly, all writers of dramatic fiction want to be comedians, and all comedians want to be dramatists. *Birdman* nails it. It's a pleasure to watch, and it's the kind of story that succeeds in making a sympathetic character out of a super successful actor.

12 of the Weirdest Star Wars Novels in the Galaxy



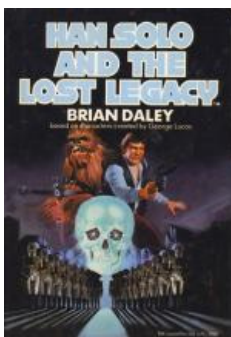
Sometime in 2014 the Star Wars universe got retconned. Hard.

Yes, The Mouse got a hold of the property, and when it was decided to make three more movies, I can only imagine some dork stood up and said, "Well, with the expanded universe of novels, we're pretty hemmed in, story-wise."

I don't know whether that guy ever recovered from the Wedg(i)e Antilles they gave him. But I know the death of the expanded universe gave most nerds a feeling as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced.

Anyway, they slapped a "Legends" label on a boatload of old books, making them non-canonical but still available for purchase. As the newest Star Wars trailer reminded us, "No one's ever really gone." I assume there's an implied "if we can make a few bucks off 'em" tagged onto the end of that statement.

Some of the Star Wars storylines that show up in these books are, frankly, bonkers. Which ones? I'm so glad you asked.



1. "Han Solo And The Lost Legacy" by Brian Daley

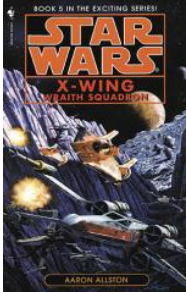
First of all, awesome cover.

In this book, Han Solo is after a legendary treasure. Which sounds suspiciously like another character I know of...who also appeared alongside the image of a crystal skull...and is played by Harrison Ford.

Someone wrote a Han Solo book that is, essentially, Space Indiana Jones.

Want to really blow your mind? *Han Solo and the Lost Legacy* predates *Raiders of the Lost Ark* by almost a full year.

Who ripped off who, here?



2. "Wraith Squadron" by Aaron Allston

Wedge Antilles, famous for being in a ship and having the name Wedge, puts together a new squad. Rogue Squadron was the best of the best, and Wedge decides to build his new team from a bunch of misfits. Does the book's description refer to the team as "ragtag"? You bet your ass.

Who do we get?

- Admiral Ackbar's niece, Jesmin
- "Runt," a pilot with multiple personalities
- "Face," who is an "imperial child recruitment actor" (?)
- Kell Tainor, demolitions expert
- Ton Phanon, part man, part machine, all doctor
- Falyn Sandskimmer, who suffers from "chronic insolence"

The book doesn't do a great job of explaining why Wedge is building this squad from the reject pile. There's some nonsense about how these "dregs" from other units see combat differently or something, but c'mon. Do they see things differently because they're misunderstood geniuses, or is it more likely they washed out of other squads because they see things differently, and in this case "differently" means "completely incorrectly"? It's like staffing a Starbucks entirely with workers who were fired from other Starbucks locations. Maybe they'd be amazing, but more likely you'd discover they show up late, steal \$20's from the register, and give me the shits when they mix the regular milk and the soy.



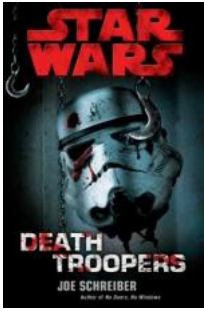
3. "Maul: Lockdown" by Joe Schreiber

Darth Maul is in space jail, where, of course, there is a tournament fighting element. It's all very *Running Man*, which is fun. It's also pretty damn violent for Star Wars.

In the first pages Darth Maul gets a tooth knocked out, which his opponent takes and crams into a tooth hole in his own mouth. There's a rod-like weapon that turns out to be a space snake that blinds people, the snake gets his head popped off, Darth Maul jams his head horns into his opponent's eyes, and some dude gets elbowed so hard his spine is broken. This all happens within the sample pages on Amazon.

If there's something that we don't get enough of in Star Wars, it's eye gouging using head horns.

Fun fact: Did you know Darth Maul's brother is named "Savage Opress"? I mean, damn.

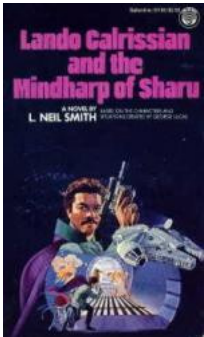


4. "Death Troopers" by Joe Schreiber

Death Troopers is a zombie horror novel set in the Star Wars universe. The author, Joe Schreiber, said he was inspired by *The Shining* and *Alien*.

It's pretty cheesy, but c'mon, are we really complaining? Is that not what we came for?

Schreiber also wrote a prequel book, *Red Harvest*, in which a Sith lord has some cockamamie plan to combine the force with some weird flower or something to make an army of the undead. It's very crazy, which is what I love about it, and it's got a pretty high gore factor as Star Wars goes.



5. "Lando Calrissian And The Mindharp Of Sharu" by L. Neil Smith

I have nothing to say about the book and lots to say about the bio of its author, L. Neil Smith:

Writing in the libertarian tradition of Robert A. Heinlein, L. Neil Smith may be the most widely-published and prolific living libertarian author in the world, with over 20 books to his credit, two of them winners of the Prometheus Award for Best Libertarian Fiction: The Probability Broach and Pallas.

I'd never heard of this Prometheus award. It turns out L. Neil Smith CREATED the award and won it three times.

He has also published numerous short stories and articles, has contributed gags to such comic strips as "Ziggy" and "Frank and Ernest", and has lectured annually in the Colorado State University Physics Department on the physics of alternative realities.

Have there ever been two weirder types of credits so close to each other? Ziggy and lecturing in a university physics department?

He attended the same university 1964-69, majoring in philosophy and psychology. He has served as a reserve police officer for the city of Fort Collins, Colorado, is a skilled competitive shooter, and is a Life Member of the National Rifle Association.

At this juncture I'd like to say that I regret anything negative I just said, and my editor forced me to do it.

Smith was born in Denver, Colorado on May 12, 1946 to an Air Force family, which led to his growing up all over North America. A highly prophetic author, his writings have predicted, among other things, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the Internet as we now know it, and the digital watch.

When he says "predicted," what does that mean, exactly? Can I take credit for "predicting" the bio-wearable music player if I say it's a thing that could exist? Is it

really the predicting part that's hard, or is it more the making part?

STAR WARS OMNIBUS



6. "Star Wars Omnibus: Wild Space" by Alan Moore, et al.

Alan Moore wrote Star Wars comics? Alan Moore of *Watchmen* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *From Hell* and some other stuff with mediocre movie adaptations?

In Alan Moore's Star Wars tales, Han Solo and Princess Leia go through a "hellhoop" and end up facing a weird religious cult obsessed with pain. Chewie releases a demon (that goofball!). A ghost turns Princess Leia's heart into a diamond, which kills her. Vader burns a dude to death. We get a 5-mile-deep droid graveyard.

What the hell were they thinking? You can't give Alan Moore Star Wars. I mean, it's obviously great for me, but it's sort of hard to imagine BB-8 bumbling his way into a "hellhoop."



7. "The Star Wars" by J.W. Rinzler

This is a graphic novel based off George Lucas' original ideas for *A New Hope*. And holy balls does it read like it.

If you thought the prequels had a ridiculous amount of politicking, get a load of this one.

The best part of this book? It makes you appreciate how far the movies took the story. If *A New Hope* had gone down like this, there's no way in hell I'd be writing this column right now. Star Wars would be as much a franchise as *Robot Jox*.

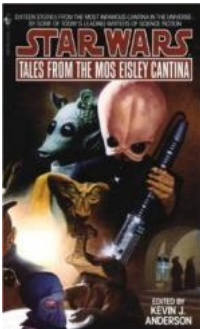


8. "The Ruins of Dantooine" by Voronica Whitney-Robinson

I have to dock this book points on two fronts.

Its main character is named Dusque Mistflier. Sounds like a Yankee candle. Even in a universe with some stupid-ass names, Dusque Mistflier is pretty heinous.

But that transgression pales in comparison to the cover. Good god. What was even remotely the point? This looks like a self-pub book, and not a good one. I know the book is based on a video game universe, but that's no excuse. They didn't have the resources to give it a decent-er cover? Was this a project to test whether the Nintendo 64 could be used to generate book covers?



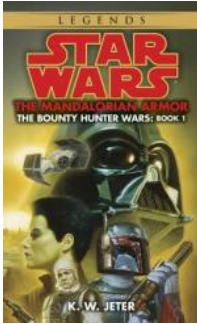
9. "Tales From The Mos Eisley Cantina" edited by Kevin J. Anderson

Yeah, because there's nothing I want to know more than what that ballsack-head guy was doing before he learned to play the space oboe.

This is the problem with Star Wars. There's nothing small enough that it can't be turned into an entire goddamn book. And why does everyone think we want to know

every backstory of everything? Wasn't it better when Han Solo just sort of shot Greedo and we didn't need to know who Greedo's parents were, which albums were his favorite, and whether he was a side sleeper or a back sleeper?

Star Wars falls flattest when it's filling in backstory instead of going in new directions. There's supposedly a whole universe out there. Can we see some of it?



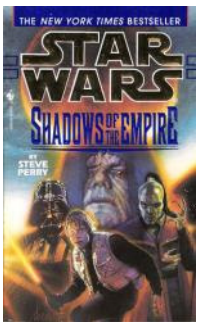
10. "The Mandalorian Armor" by K. W. Jeter

Star Wars books have come from some unlikely sources, like Jeffrey Brown, who was mostly writing super-personal graphic novels about his relationships and his battle with IBS until he came up with Darth Vader and Son.

But no Star Wars authors are more unusual than K.W. Jeter.

Before he got into Star Wars and Star Trek novelizations, K.W. Jeter was one of the forefathers of cyberpunk. Maybe THE forefather. *Dr. Adder*, his first finished novel, had its publication delayed by over a decade, supposedly because it was so horrific.

I wonder if any of Jeter's Boba Fett novels include any of the Dr. Adder hallmarks, such as the titular surgeon who modifies penises to make them ridiculously enormous? Let's hope!



11. "Shadows Of The Empire" by Steve Perry

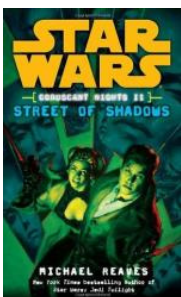
This one also has a terrible character name, even for Star Wars: Dash Rendar.

Shadows is weird in that it was one of the more commercial Star Wars products ever conceived. And let's just remind everyone, we're talking about STAR WARS, the most commercial endeavor of all time. Just about anything you want, you can get a Star Wars version of it. Not to mention some things NOBODY wants.

The idea with *Shadows of the Empire* was to create a "multimedia project" to A) see if a Star Wars property could be created without a movie, and B) to rouse interest in the (at that time) upcoming prequels.

When all was said and done, we had a novel, a video game, a full score, trading cards, toys. All the things that make Star Wars. Except, you know, the basis of the entire endeavor, a movie.

Did I play the game? Yes. Did I read the book? Also yes. Will I regret the time spent in this corner of the Star Wars universe while on my deathbed? Almost certainly.



12. "Coruscant Nights II: Street Of Shadows" by Michael Reaves

This book answers the burning question: What if we had a hard-boiled detective story in the Star Wars universe?

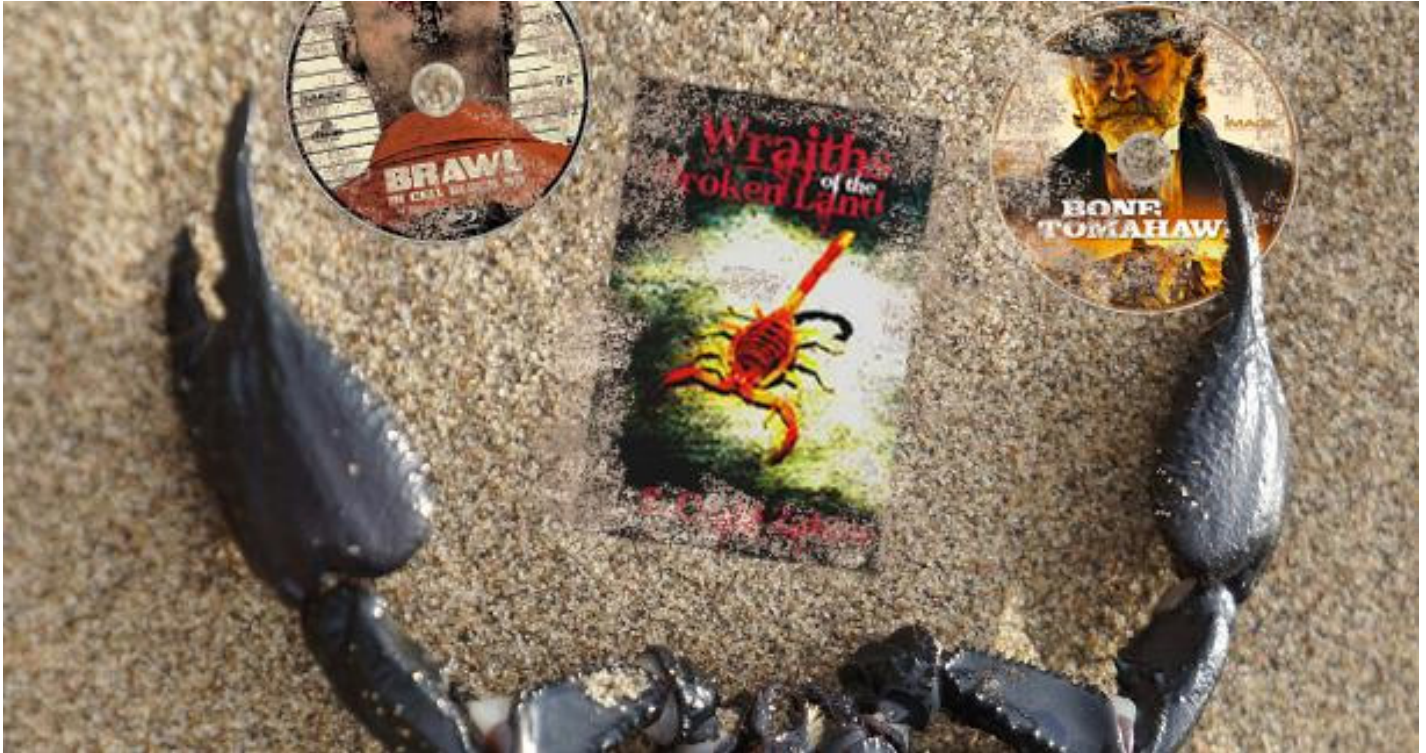
It is pretty fun to imagine, though:

The dame walked into my space office. Her legs went all the way up. Past her face even because, you know, she's an alien. I have a soft spot for hard luck cases, and her luck looked harder than the skin of the Zillo Beast of planet Malastare.

Why do people do this? Didn't we learn anything from *Baywatch Nights*? Adding "Nights" to something doesn't improve it.

If I want to read a hard-boiled detective story, I can read any number of them, lots of which are great. I've also got plenty of Star Wars, more than I could ever get through. Who is the audience for this combo?

Reading and Watching S. Craig Zahler



Here's how I can tell I'm really involved in a book: I read when it's inconvenient.

I read in the 3 minutes it takes to brush my teeth. I read while I take a dump. I get places early and spend the extra time reading. I'm annoyed when friends show up on time because I have to put the book down.

That's what it was like with S. Craig Zahler's *Wraiths of The Broken Land*. Everything else about life dropped away, and all I cared about was seeing the story through to the end.

This book is the real deal.

Bone and Brawl

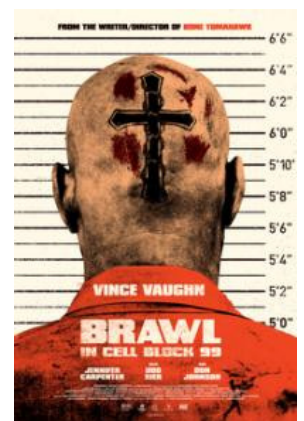
The road to *Wraiths* started with the 2015 movie *Bone Tomahawk*. Halfway through its gritty, dialogue-driven story I was thinking, "This is like *The Hateful Eight*, but better. In every way."

Another 30 minutes and I was repulsed. In every way. But I had to see it through.

That's the chorus in this story, and it's a tagline to S. Craig Zahler's work. It's so awful, and it's so good. You have to see it through.

Zahler's next movie, *Brawl In Cell Block 99*, is even better. It's the kind of wildly violent, compelling, grindhouse-y stuff that so many filmmakers shoot for and so few achieve.

I have some problems. ADD-type problems. Not the cute kind of ADD where I



make a joke about a squirrel running by and distracting me. I mean the kind where I wake up every hour or so in the night, and I'm in mid-thought every time. I mean the kind where I can't listen to Outkast before bed if I want to sleep at all without a chorus keeping me awake. I mean the kind where, when I'm watching a movie, it's very rare for me to get swept up and forget the other things going on around me.

Brawl In Cell Block 99, from start to end, had me swept.

Then I found out that the writer/director of both films wrote some books. So I jumped online, found the one with the highest rating, and started reading.

Complicated Politics

I think discussions of politics are dumb. Because you know how you feel, I know how I feel, and me telling you how I feel probably won't change you in the slightest. So, I'm going to devote just a small space to Zahler's politics, and I'll let him do most of the talking:

If you come into a movie and you're very focused on one thing—like you're very interested in how people of this ethnicity or people with this belief system or women or children or people from Canada are treated in this movie ... that's your viewpoint... And you're entitled to it. If the most important thing for you to get out of the movie experience is to see a reflection of your personal beliefs, you probably won't get that with any of my movies because they don't even consistently line up with themselves.

Zahler has been under some heat after his latest, *Dragged Across Concrete*. Mostly because the movie cast Mel Gibson as a bigoted cop. There's also some "depends how you look at it" to *Bone Tomahawk* and *Wraiths of The Broken Land*.

Here's my opinion: Zahler does not do morality tales, and he does not show a world we want to live in. His pieces are not concerned with being woke, and if that's your thing, his stuff might not be. If the primary way you read a book is by evaluating its politics, Zahler might not be your guy.

If, however, you're someone who feels like a character or a story expressing something problematic is a fine thing to happen in a novel, then I'd advise you to give it a shot. If you lean towards aesthetics and are willing to forgive problematic material, if you're a person who is up for reading something and saying, "It's got these problems, BUT..." then you might really dig Zahler's stuff.

I don't think S. Craig Zahler is a secret right wing propagandist. I think he makes things that he thinks are challenging, interesting, and creative. And I think he takes extra heat because he spends very little time defending himself:

I hope people enjoy [my books and movies], but I'm not going to make different creative choices so that more of them do.

We live in an age where *Game of Thrones* fans feel they are owed a certain outcome, where they petition to get the final episodes rewritten in a way that's more pleasing to them. We live in a time where many a viewer feels their opinion on a piece of art is as important, if not more so, than the art itself. I like that Zahler is doing something different, individualistic, and uncoupled from morality.

Zahler makes things his way, and they're expressly not for everybody:

Of the people who want to see a movie called Bone Tomahawk, 60% will like it, 20% will think it's disgusting and offensive, and 20% will think it's boring, and those stats hold with all of my movies. I take my time, there's stuff that will trigger certain people and that's fine, these are the pieces I want to make.

Wraiths

Wraiths is a western. Sort of. It's a Tarantino western, an ultraviolent, grindhouse-y western that pulls no punches (or kicks, bites, fish-hooks, headbutts, decapitations, mutilations, gunshots—you get it).

The only book I can compare it to is Cormac McCarthy's blood-drenched masterpiece, *Blood Meridian*.

Now, I say this knowing that it's not quite right. McCarthy's book is wordy and artsy, meandering where Zahler's book wastes no time going from one thing to the next. Where McCarthy's book is mystical and lyrical, Zahler's is uncomplicated and gory.

Blood Meridian is one of the best books ever written. *Wraiths*, however, knows when it's time to be a little trashy. A little pulp-y. Where *Blood Meridian* goes high, *Wraiths* crawls on its belly, through the dirt, blood, and greased-up scorpions.

I never thought I'd read a book that made me consider *Blood Meridian* gentle on any level. But *Wraiths* did it. *Blood Meridian* puts the reader under a spell. You're in McCarthy's world, and he carries you through it in the palm of his hand. It never feels quite safe, but it's safer than Zahler's world, a world where you're less under a spell than you're poisoned, gutshot, and terribly, terribly sad.

Why It's Better As A Book Than A Movie

Wraiths would make a great movie, don't get me wrong. But part of the beauty of it, as a book, is that you, the reader, are complicit in what's happening. You, like some of *Wraiths'* characters, are dragged into a bad situation, and you, like some of *Wraiths'* characters, don't like it. But you, like those characters, have no choice but to see it through.

Movies are passive entertainment. We might watch and try to get one step ahead, figure out where the movie is going or how it'll try and surprise us, but regardless of whether you're right or wrong, it all happens without any real work on your part.

The book makes you get your hands dirty.

In the aforementioned *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden (who is basically the devil) says:

Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.

When you read *Wraiths*, every page turn is another act of creation, and another act of consent. Another admittance that you want more. Another utterance: Yes, I'm going to see this one through.

The Most Nonsensical Terms Used in Book



In a big first for me, this column was inspired by something positive. I was browsing books, and I saw this blurb on the back of Dathan Auerbach's *Bad Man*:

Cleanup on aisle 9: Bad Man will make a mess of your daily life, will haunt your next trip to the grocery store. And then you'll want to reread it, just to see how Dathan Auerbach did that. And you'll be scared all over again.

-Stephen Graham Jones

Now THAT'S a blurb.

After a brief high, things turned negative, back to my comfort zone. After you read some good book blurbs, you start to hate the bad ones, the lazy ones, the ones where it seems likely the blurb-er never read the damn book.

I made a list of my least favorite terms, words and phrases that seem to pop up in a lot of bad blurbs. If you see these in a blurb, it's probably a bad blurb. If you're writing a blurb, and if you're using these terms, just stop what you're doing. Stop it right now. If someone writes these things in a blurb for your book...grudges have been built from less.

Wry!

Nothing would depress me more than someone calling my book "wry." In the hierarchy of humor, "funny" is at the top, and "wry" is the rock bottom.

"Wry" is so annoying because it's almost always followed by a sort-of explanation of what it means. Something like, "Wry. A dry, witty book that..." Yeah, you just used a word that means "dry and witty"

so you don't need to follow it up with "dry and witty" again. That's like saying "ATM Machine."

Witty!

While we're on the topic of words in the realm of "funny," "witty" is pretty bad too. A "witty" book doesn't contain a scene where someone forgets to wash their hands after wiping away a heinous dump. See, that would be "funny." You enjoy a book that's funny. You read a "witty" book because you want to impress someone. And if you're playing the game of trying to impress people by reading certain things and you are past the age of 20, I feel bad for you, son.

Clever!

Unless the book is about a child sleuth solving mysteries only appropriate for adults, you can just cut this one right out.

By the way, those Boxcar Children? They lived in a boxcar for like a couple weeks, and they're still known as The Boxcar Children? That's like me being known as "The Epididymidis-Haver."

It's Like X Crossed With Y!

"It's like *Gone Girl* crossed with *The Fault In Our Stars*."

Wait, what?

You just named two things that people like, but they don't really go together. "It's like a a pizza with bourbon poured all over it."

A little tip: if your book isn't as good as *Gone Girl*, don't reference *Gone Girl* on the cover. Readers will just think, "Man, I wish I was reading *Gone Girl* instead of this right now."

Laugh-out-loud Funny!

No, it's not.

I've read maybe 2 books that made me laugh aloud for real. It's not normal in the reading experience. Perhaps you're a maniac who laughs heartily at half the books you read, in which case asking your opinion on what's funny is like asking my opinion on what's new in the world of high fashion.

Evocative!

Of what? It's like saying, "This book made people feel things." Okay, what things? That's sort of what I'm interested in.

A Winner!

We already know. If a book is in print and in a bookstore, if it's gone through the publication grinder

**A little tip:
if your book
isn't as good
as 'Gone Girl',
don't reference
'Gone Girl' on
the cover.**

and come out the other side in something that at least resembles a book, it's already a winner. Not insightful, not helpful.

Gripping!

Criminally overused. How come nobody ever says "A heavy-petter of a book." I'm repulsed by that phrase, which means I would HAVE TO pick up that book and look inside.

Visionary!

I think the bar for "visionary" has gotten a little low. Not to mention that having a vision and having a vision that isn't stupid are two very different things.

Fast-Paced!

This is the "Ice Cold Beer" of the book world. Prepare to hear a complaint about ice cold beer.

When liquor stores advertise "Ice Cold Beer" it's like, "First of all, big deal, welcome to 1755 when William Cullen designed the first small refrigerator that provided the basis for modern refrigeration." Second, I buy a case of beer, walk it out the door, and from there all temperature bets are off. I can't return a beer because it's no longer ice cold. Believe me, I know from experience.

Point being, it's really up to the user how cold the beer is when it goes in their mouth. Likewise, it's up to a reader how fast a book goes in their face.

The pace of a book, sure, the author does some of that, but if I read slow as shit, or if I'm bored, it ain't fast-paced.

Unique!

"Unique" doesn't necessarily mean "good." It means "different and unusual." That's not always a good thing. Peeing all over my pants on New Year's was a unique experience for me. What else needs to be said?

Electrifying!

It's 2019. Electricity ain't that cool. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad I have it. But shouldn't we have moved onto "Geothermal!" or something by now? Is electricity the hot new shit?

Razor Sharp!

I will assume that razors are sharp. You can tell me that a book is sharp or that it shares qualities with a razor, but you don't need to tell me both. It's like "Boiling hot" or "Peter Derk Stupid."

A Page-Turner!

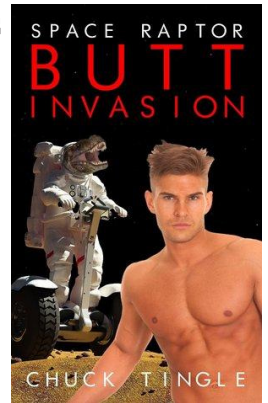
As is literally every book ever committed to print. This HAS to be a blurb people use when they're like, "Shit. I don't know what to say about this. I guess I'll say something about the mechanics of it as a physical object"

Smartly Plotted!

Ehhhh. Look, I think a good book is a little like sexy time. Do we really want to describe sexy time as "Smartly plotted"? Or is it better if it's sort of just like a bunch of stuff happened and everyone left satisfied?

The Best 16th Century Historical Crime Thriller of 2019!

This is the classic micro-description, which is useful if you're blurbing a book you hated for a friend. You can do it with any book. "IT is far and away the best horror novel with a child sewer orgy." "*Space Raptor Butt Invasion* is easily the best and most richly detailed novel that questions whether an encounter between a man and a male space dinosaur would be quantified as 'gay.'"



Timely!

If something is timely now, it ain't timely tomorrow. It's probably not even timely by the time it comes out. You know what's timely? Breakfast. When it's eaten in the morning.

One For The Ages!

What does that even mean? One what? What are the ages? And again, isn't everything "one for the ages" in some sense? It's a thing that exists in time? Anything that can be applied to, say, the motion picture Rampage might not be the best endorsement.

13 Books That Wouldn't Be Published Today



In his new book of non-fiction, *White*, Bret Easton Ellis questions whether Cormac McCarthy's dark western *Blood Meridian* would be published today. To paraphrase Ellis, *Blood Meridian* is an aesthetic masterpiece, but it's also an ideological nightmare. It lives in the spot where aesthetics intersect with ideology. Or, not so much intersect as barrel towards each other like two trucks with burned-out brakes. After those trucks collide, would *Blood Meridian* come out of the wreckage whole?

I started thinking Ellis might be right, and I started wondering which other books might not make it in 2019.



1. "Fight Club" by Chuck Palahniuk

We really can't do transgressive fiction since 9/11. It's more difficult to get away with any kind of character doing really amoral things.

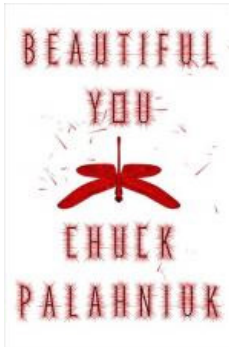
-Chuck Palahniuk

Chuck's take has been consistent: Transgressive fiction ended when the towers fell.

Some would probably say that we don't have the stomach anymore, or that the idea of the rebel remaking the world through violence isn't appealing. If we're being honest, now that we've seen the results of a 9/11-type event, we'd have to say that it wasn't the rebirth of a better America. It wasn't the end of corporations. Wasn't the end of capitalism. Didn't result in Americans living in a brand new way. Wasn't the end of you being your khakis.

People who read *Fight Club* as a manifesto, as a set of literal directions, missed the

point entirely. But I think those types of misreads are seen as more dangerous and omnipresent today than they were in 1996. People make careers out of misreading things, or out of discussing the ways others might misread them, writing thinkpieces, and leaving in their wake the husks of some really good art. Even if *Fight Club* managed to squeak through the publishing crucible, there's no way it'd survive the mob mentality of modern art criticism intact.



2. "Beautiful You" by Chuck Palahniuk

I figured we might as well do two Palahniuk books up top. I know my audience.

Beautiful You isn't even that old, but based on reviews I've read, it's not exactly appreciated in today's world.

The problem is one of audiences.

Non-Palahniuk readers didn't understand that *Beautiful You* doesn't read like a typical Palahniuk book and that something unusual was going on here. Meanwhile, readers of Chuck Palahniuk didn't necessarily read the works *Beautiful You* makes fun of (*Twilight*, *50 Shades of Grey*, *Clan of the Cave Bear*, *The Devil Wears Prada*). And so, the tropes being mocked (the stereotypical roommate characters, the depictions of sex, the use of rape) didn't connect with their origins.

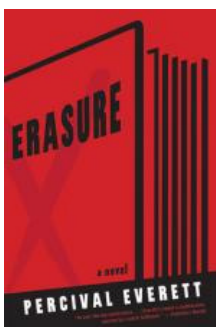
I feel an author can only do parody like this today if they make it overly clear that their intent is to poke fun. Without a long-ass introduction in which Palahniuk would have to basically come out and say he was having a goof both stylistically and thematically (which wrecks the book), this book wouldn't hit the shelves.



3. "Lolita" by Vladimir Nabokov

Although this one is perceived very differently by people who've actually read it, many are under the impression this book is simply the salacious tale of an older man with a much younger girl. And even those who read it can't write a review without stating that, yes, what happens in the book is criminal and creepy and wrong. Thanks for the insight, you fine, upstanding citizens! Without the guidance of your moral light, golly, the rest of us would be totally lost!

I doubt that one could write this book today, let alone publish it, let alone see it become a classic. It's always been taboo, but I think it's too tough a sell these days. And although the opinions of people who haven't read a book shouldn't matter, mass opinion on a topic is more important today, regardless of expertise, and it has a huge platform. The mass perception of *Lolita* as pervy nonsense has bigger pull than the informed opinion of readers.



4. "Erasure" by Percival Everett

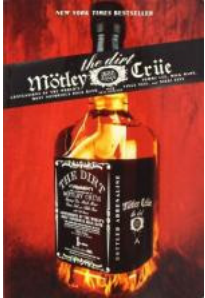
It took some guts to write and publish *Erasure*.

Erasure is the story of a literary-minded man whose agent says his books aren't "black enough." He watches his work go nowhere while another fictional book, *We's*

Lives In Da Ghetto, skyrockets. So, this dude writes a super-exploitative novel called *My Pafology* (later changed to the simple *Fuck*), which takes off.

It's an indictment of the world of black literature, from a fictional black man, but also from Everett, who doesn't shy away from smack talking *Push* by Sapphire and *Native Son* by Richard Wright.

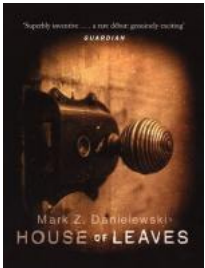
I feel like this book never got its due, but I think today it might never hit the shelves. While it's an authentic, brutally funny book, it's not pulling in the same direction as most of today's social movements. Which I think is an important thing to do today, head in the same direction as everyone else.



5. "The Dirt" by Neil Strauss

While it was totally rad at the time, the joy of watching these dudes behave badly isn't such a good look today. The Netflix version was a hit, but it was sanitized, and as stunning a book as *The Dirt* was on publication, dare I say that we're all a bit more puritanical today?

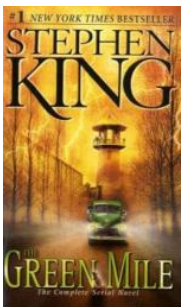
80's metal was all about decadence, over-the-top behavior, and seeking self-destruction through the destruction of others. The bar for "bad" celebrity behavior is a lot lower today. We're ready to jump all over Beyonce for photoshopping a couple pics. Miley Cyrus got lambasted for twerking badly. We're all warming up a seat in hell for Aunt Becky for bribing an institute of higher learning. Bad stuff, sure, but it's got a very different flavor from rubbing egg burritos on your crotch to hide how often you're cheating on your wife.



6. "House of Leaves" by Mark Z. Danielewski

Simply because of the cost and the necessity of it being in print. Taking a chance on a book this weird and costly to produce doesn't seem like something many publishers are dying to do at this point. Every few years we'll get an object book (*Tree of Codes*, *S*), but I only see those becoming rarer and rarer as time goes on.

Unless you're J.J. Abrams, I don't know that you get a book that works exclusively in print anymore.



7. "The Green Mile" by Stephen King

Ah, the King book that spawned the famed "Magical Negro" comment from director Spike Lee (who, to be fair, was referencing the movie along with several others). There's a definite momentum towards narratives that come from the cultural place they depict, and *The Green Mile* is off by a (Green) mile on that count.

I have my own opinions on King and what he's been up to, and I also feel that the problem is rarely the individual pieces of art that present a problematic idea. It's about the preponderance of things that commit the same crime.

That said, another way of looking at it is that you can get away with whatever, just

make sure you're first. Do the thing before everyone else copies it and before anyone notices, and you can get away with it. Publish *The Green Mile* in 2019? You've missed the wave.



8. "Frisk" by Dennis Cooper

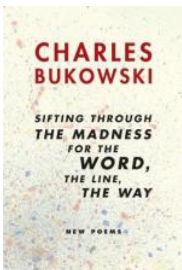
I present the actual act of evil so it's visible and give it a bunch of facets so that you can actually look at it and experience it. You're seduced into dealing with it. ... So with Frisk, whatever pleasure you got out of making a picture in your mind based on ... those people being murdered, you take responsibility for it.

-Dennis Cooper

I like my shit fucked up, and Dennis Cooper definitely writes some fucked-up shit. I've read some reviews that think he plays with taboo just for the sake of doing so, but I totally disagree. He wrote a very underrated, very "normal" novella, *God Jr.*, and his short story "Ugly Man" is a great showcase of the way he uses revulsion to get to something bigger and hard to reach.

A few years ago, Dennis Cooper was essentially canceled when his blog, which represents the bulk of his creative work for the last several years, was shuttered after Google received complaints about it hosting child pornography. The claims were baseless, and fortunately Cooper had the means to get all his content back. It's his opinion that the Google folks probably do this sort of thing all the time to people who don't really have any ability or reason to fight back.

I just find it highly unlikely that a big publisher like Grove Atlantic would pick up something that flaunts taboo the way Cooper does today. If he's getting shut down by Google for something he didn't do, I can only imagine a modern publisher looking at his transgressive, violent, sexualized fiction and taking a hard pass.



9. "Sifting Through The Madness For The Word, The Line, The Way" by Charles Bukowski

I love the guy, but conversations about good taste go out the window when it comes to Bukowski.

I think Bukowski remains popular because people know what they're getting into with him. Super-talented? Yep. Rough around the edges? Absolutely. That's the point with Bukowski: beauty from an ugly place.

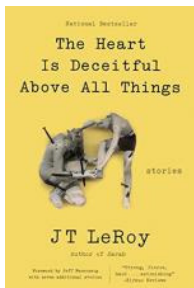
The question for today's readers: Would we spend enough time on our knees in the garbage to see the beauty show through? Is there as much room for works that are "really great, but.."?



10. "Geek Love" by Katherine Dunn

We certainly could make some assertions about people who are "freaks" also being Machiavellian and evil. But we don't need to. The reason I couldn't see this published today? The branding.

Chip Kidd's intentionally ugly cover? And the alteration of the Knopf dog to give it a 5th leg? People are so brand-centric and brand-aware in 2019. We treat ourselves as brands. Being off-brand is a great sin in 2019, and creating something so repellent? Perish the thought.

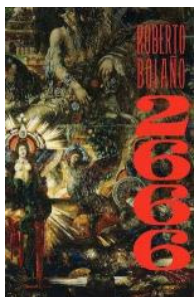


11. "The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things" by J.T. Leroy

J.T. Leroy sold primarily on personality, not style or content, and I'm of the opinion that a J.T. Leroy type of hoax would be tough to pull off today. Laura Albert didn't manage to hold it together too terribly long and she was working the system 20 years ago. I think the threads would come apart quickly in an age when people are infinitely more searchable.

I also have to believe that publishers are a little more wary of what might seem like outrageous claims of circumstance, and I'm betting that after the whole James Frey debacle, most publishers aren't jumping into publishing a totally outrageous story without doing a little checkin' first.

It's a plus/minus situation. It's for the best that people aren't being published under false pretenses, but damn did it make for some juicy stories.



12. "2666" by Roberto Bolaño

Mostly because of its infamous 4th section, "The Part About The Crimes," which is a painfully long set of descriptions of the murders of women.

Again, I see why this exists, and I think most fans of Bolaño understand the section's purpose and can get behind its execution. But, I have to wonder if alternative reads are stronger today and if readers would see Bolaño as reaching for something by standing on the corpses of dozens of women, who are mostly without personality and are introduced to us as victims. Fictional women, but dead, victimized women nonetheless. Would we accept a book that uses the gruesome deaths of so many women as props?



13. "Battle Royale" by Kousun Takami

Is a book depicting the violent, grindhouse-y kid-on-kid murder something anyone would have a taste for in this moment?

The Hunger Games gets away with it because it's ultimately a story of redemption and the disenfranchised seizing power. *Battle Royale* is a lot less empowering and a lot bloodier. If you're not having fun watching these kids kill each other, you're not getting the point of this one.

I can't blame anyone for disliking the general idea, young people going after each other with weapons, poisons, and their bare hands. I just wonder whether *Battle Royale* would be able to maintain its position as a thrilling lark as opposed to feeling exploitative and icky.

The 3 Worst Duties I Performed As A Librarian



This week is my last week as a librarian. After fifteen years working in the same building, I'm moving onto pastures.

The usual phrase is "greener" pastures, but I'm not sure yet. Different pastures, for sure. But there's some parts of my job that I'll miss. For all the good that comes with change, I liked writing "librarian" in the Occupation field of my tax return every year. When someone cut my hair and asked, "So, what do you do?" I liked my answer.

I'm not sure I made the right decision in leaving the librarian life behind. So, what I decided to do was write little somethings about the librarian stuff I'll miss LEAST.

There were some serious contenders. I won't miss working with printers. I won't miss walking folks through the terrible process of recovering a Google password (seriously, Google, what are you thinking?). But my writing mentor told me never to write about general, on-going stuff. He said it's better to pick a few moments and to let those moments stand in for the whole.

Here are my moments.

The Wish Ape

In libraries you work with what you've got. Which sometimes feels a little like that part in *Apollo 13* where the one dude with a buzzcut goes up to a bunch of other dudes with buzzcuts, dumps a box full of stuff on the table, and says, "Okay, make this junk into a thing that's actually useful."

My then-boss dumped a concrete form tube on my desk. One of those cardboard cylinders you get at Home Depot and pour concrete into. I don't know why she had it, I don't know why we didn't just

throw it out, but she told me to do something with it, and I did. A little yellow paper, a stuffed gorilla in the top, and the result: Wish Ape.

Wish Ape was basically a wishing well. Tube, covered in yellow paper, ape sitting at the top. I cut a slot in the tube, and people could write their wishes on little pieces of paper, stuff them in the tube, and...here's the problem. I didn't think about the next part.

I have some advice for anyone applying for my job: If you're going to make a wishing well, have people throw in money. Because A) Then you have money, and B) You don't get your heart broken when you empty the Wish Ape tube and read the wishes.

**Blood, shit,
vomit. That's
my hierarchy.**

Two folded pieces of paper still stand out in my mind.

One was a kid, or at least a kid's handwriting, wishing her dad would come back.

The other wish looked like an adult's. Who was wishing to find a stable man to love instead of people who made her feel terrible.

There were others, but I can't remember them anymore. It's been at least a decade. People have shared so many outrageous stories, sad stories, and outright bizarre stories that they all jumble in my brain. But those two still haunt me.

The Sink

Blood, shit, vomit. That's my hierarchy.

Everyone who's been responsible for a public bathroom has their own hierarchy of things they most hate cleaning, and I daresay those are the three items on everyone's list.

You'll notice urine didn't make the cut. This isn't because urine was never around (ha. HA!), it's because urine is so far beneath the top three that it barely ranks. When I got a call to clean a bathroom, and when I opened the door in fear and found a simple puddle (spray, trail, etc.)? I was liable to bust out a party hat along with the mop.

My hierarchy, from least horrible to most:

Blood: Probably the worst in terms of contagion, but I'm not all that repulsed by blood. It stinks the least. It's fairly easy to clean from hard surfaces. And usually it's pretty contained (notable exception: a colleague once cleaned after a blood incident where it appeared someone with a bloody nose stood in the center of the bathroom, spun, and managed to sling blood on every surface). Plus, the volume is usually manageable.

Shit: Shit is pretty bad, and there's a wide array of possible messes that fall under this banner. However, shit, 9 times out of 10, is in or near a toilet, which helps. It tends to give people a little more warning than blood and vomit. Lots of times we're talking about a toilet stew, and I was lucky enough to work somewhere that had industrial, well-piped toilets that could choke down just about anything. Worse than blood, but still do-able.

Vomit: The stink. The real thing is the stink. When I smell blood, I'm not likely to bleed. When I smell shit, I'm not going to suddenly need to shit. But with vomit, there's a sympathetic effect. My stomach is strong, but even I have my limits. Vomit tends to strike when people least expect it, which means it'll end up anywhere. In the doorway, in the lobby, on the carpet. Just wherever.

My second worst duty was cleaning a sink full of vomit.

I got the call that there was a bathroom issue, and when I opened the door the stink hit me first. The stink that could only come from a sink brimming with pink vomit.

Vomit is quite often pink or orange. I might suggest people stay away from pink and orange foods because those seem to get people sick. I don't have evidence of cause versus correlation, but we can all play it safe here.

The vomit was chunky enough that the sink was completely stopped up. The only thing to do was glove up, reach in and scoop out enough that the liquid could drain.

My gloved hand disappeared into the pool of opaque pink. I reached down with my fingertips and started scooping, careful to make sure my hand didn't get deep enough that the vomit reached up and over the wrist end of my glove.



Something nobody warns you about when it comes to gloves, you can still sense temperature. When you reach into a pool of vomit, you feel the warm.

It took a bit of scooping before the sink started to slurp down what it could.

If you're applying for my job, get some Vick's Vaporub or similar substance. Trust me. A little under the nose does wonders.

The Culling

This last spring the library got an incubator and a dozen chicken eggs.

Staff named the unhatched eggs. Things like Omelette, Colonel Sanders. I named one Egg Shen. After *Big Trouble In Little China*. Which almost no one else knew. I'm right in that awkward age where I'm a bit older than some of the staff, a bit younger than the rest.

The eggs were candled, and almost all of them had chicks growing inside, including Egg Shen.

They started hatching about a week later. It's pretty cool, if you've never seen it. The eggs wobble around. Then flashes of beak poke through. Then the egg cracks enough, the chick sort of tumbles out, all wet and disgusting, and they almost immediately stand up and start walking around.

Egg Shen was the last to hatch. Way behind the rest. And he didn't look so hot. He mostly sat with his face on the ground. He had an open wound on his stomach. While the rest of the chicks turned into poof balls of fluff, Egg Shen stayed sort of scrawny and sad.

He spent a couple days with the others. But his last day, he was too weak to lift his head or move around much. We moved him to his own habitat, just in case he had an infection.

I talked to my boss.

I'd say I was raised practical. And when it comes to animals, pets or livestock, it's our responsibility to take care of them. On every level. And seeing an animal suffer like that, an animal who's obviously not going to make it...the right thing to do was help little Egg Shen along.

On my lunch break I took a Tupperware from my desk. I cut some soft pink fabric and laid it out on the bottom. Then I put a smaller container inside, and I got some baking soda and vinegar. I took Egg Shen outside and laid him in the container. He didn't struggle, fight, or open his eyes when I carried him through the back hallways in the library.

Supposedly sticking a chick in a container like this along with baking soda and vinegar, like your science project volcano, is a fairly quick, humane way to cull a chick. This is not something I learned in library school. Nobody even hinted that this MIGHT be something I'd do. They told me about information storage, about management, about collection development. Nobody told me I'd put down a baby chick just a couple days after it was born. Nobody debated methods.

It's the nature of the library. Stuff just happens sometimes.

I combined the ingredients and snapped down the lid.

Egg Shen kicked hard once. Then his beak opened and closed. Slow.

I sat with him on the cement, out back in the sun.

I waited a few minutes, opened the container, and did a second dose. Just to make sure.

My boss came out and we talked about pets for awhile. Watching Egg Shen go reminded me of letting my cat go last year. Which I didn't expect. My boss told me about a family dog who's getting on in years, and how she likes having him around on holidays. She told me to take a nice long lunch break and come back when I was ready.

The next week when I came into work, my boss replaced my Tupperware container and gave me a gift card as a thanks. It came with a note: For service above and beyond the call of duty.

I'm typing this last part a few minutes after the end of my last shift. Ever.

For those bad three moments, there are so many great ones. The toilet we moved into someone's office. The pranks that came standard when someone was on vacation (until glitter took things too far).

He spent a couple days with the others. But his last day, he was too weak to lift his head or move around much.

I wish I could time travel and tell myself that even though I'd lock up the library way over 500 times, I wouldn't ever lock someone inside for the night. That might sound like a weird use of time travel, but someone else will tend to Baby Hitler, right?

To everybody I've worked with, worked for, and had a relationship with at the library: Thanks. If I had to take another round of those three worst moments in exchange for another 15 years? In a heartbeat.

3 Times I Pirated Books And How I Feel About It



Let's you and me have a real discussion about book piracy. Let me just turn my chair around backwards, turn my hat backwards, and depending how many Kriss Kross albums I've been listening to, turn my pants backwards.

Book piracy is real, and it's a problem. Hardcore piracy enthusiasts are already loading their chambers with arguments about the benefits of piracy, but hold up a second. Because I'm not here to talk about how awful you are. I'm here to talk about how awful I am, which we can all get behind.

I'm going to admit to some instances of piracy from my personal life. Because I'm not a hypocrite. Well, okay, I am a hypocrite, but at least I'm not a SECRET hypocrite.

Yes, I've done it. Unless you're some kind of attorney reading this, in which case this is all a fictional device I'm using to convince readers of something important. Thanks for safeguarding everyone, you legal eagles!

Pirating books doesn't make me uniquely qualified to talk about it. That's just it: So many people do it that nobody is uniquely qualified.

I want to talk about it because I have mixed feelings. Because, like most people, I'm in the middle. Us middle-of-the-road people are the majority, but we're not always heard above the anger on the ends of the spectrum.

So, let's chat.

Avast, Ye Lish-y Landlubber!

Gordon Lish, most famous for editing Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and others, wrote a book of

grammar exercises some years back. It's not a popular item. I only found out about it because I was reading a book of interviews with Lish. Let's call this reading the first layer of nerd.

The next layer of nerd was scouring the internet to find a copy. A legitimate, purchase-able copy. It's not on Amazon. Not on Abe Books. No eBay. It's not even listed as a thing that ever existed in most places.

This book is not rare in the sense of "hard to get ahold of." It's rare in the sense of "Nope."

I finally found a last holdout: university libraries.

So, I got one. And I scanned the pages.

I thought I was doing it because there was no way in hell I'd get through hundreds of pages of grammar exercises in the three weeks I got from the library (short rant: how come libraries think that 3 weeks is a reasonable time frame for the average person to get through a book? Do people who set these policies know we're not all total nerds?). I thought I was doing it because I can foresee even university libraries getting rid of this book. It's far from being a notable entry into any sort of canon, and all it takes is one unknowing librarian to see yet another ho-hum textbook and toss it out.

But. Since copying it and putting it together, how many grammar exercises have I done? Absolutely none.

I'd feel better about it if I actually did the workbook. If the excuses I made were legit. But they're not. I wanted to possess something, and once I did, I didn't care about it anymore.

**I wanted
to possess
something,
and once I
did, I didn't
care about it
anymore.**

The Arguments For Piracy pt. 1

I wanted to put in some common arguments I've overheard that might justify the above piracy, just to get this stuff out in the open.

I'm not benefiting financially, so it's legal.

Common misconception. This whole thing where it's all about financial gain is like that apocryphal law where a cop HAS to tell you if they're a cop. Just no. Anybody who tells you this doesn't know what they're talking about.

The publisher isn't making it available, so it's fine.

This one's more philosophical, but even if I'm going to say the publisher doesn't have the right (philosophically) to withhold the material, that's still a different argument from the one that says I have the right to TAKE the material. There's no argument more classic (and grammatically suspect) than "two wrongs don't make a right."

Sometimes small, more indie things benefit from piracy.

Hey, if you think this is true, email a bunch of indie authors and ask. If they see the benefits of piracy, they will give you the go-ahead, right? If your argument is based on doing a good thing, just go ahead and double-check that you're the saint you think you are.

People should make things out of love, and payment is gross to want or ask for.

That's a pretty high-horse stance about art that's naive and kinda stupid. I don't even want to spend time arguing that people who make things should get paid for those things. So I won't!

Comics Ahoy!

I've walked the dark path to the (un)holy land of digital comics piracy.

The reason it's so popular: It's easy. Shockingly easy. You don't even have to use some weird browser or download software to get involved in "file sharing." A couple questions to Google, and you've got multiple options. It's not only cheaper than buying, it's easier.



And the amount of stuff? It's completely intoxicating. You can find long runs of books. Books you thought everyone forgot about. Books that the creators WISH everyone forgot about. You can find the entire comics rack for the current month!

I did it. I got a run of comics that I couldn't find in trade, couldn't find anywhere I looked. Other than, you know, a comics shop that was charging an unreasonable price. "Unreasonable" being a very float-y term that means "something more than free" in this case.

I read a handful of issues. And then dropped off.

Again, it was almost like once I had them, once I knew I had access, the urgency was gone. The burning desire to read them vanished.

I had to admit to myself, it was more about acquisition than consumption. Which is the exact opposite of my normal M.O. when it comes to comics. I'm not a collector. I roll comics, put them in my pocket. I would never buy a comic that I didn't intend to read.

It took me back to the Napster days. The iMesh days. The Kazaa days. Everyone I knew would download songs they would never buy in a billion lifetimes. Complete discographies for bands that I would actively switch off if they came on the radio. Why? Because a large music collection was cool. We didn't know it yet, but a large music collection would mean nothing in just a couple years. HAVING music is meaningless. Listening is where it's at.

Likewise, unread comics? Worthless.

The Arguments For Piracy Pt. 2

It's not like the creators/publishers get this money anyway.

All I can say about this is: Support your local comics shop. Do it. Maybe a creator doesn't see a dime of a back issue sale, but maybe a back issue sale helps support a comics shop, which allows that shop to buy more new stuff, which definitely supports a creator.

I want to read them digitally anyway. It's nice to be able to tote around a large collection on a tablet.

Don't be silly. Comics are pretty easy to buy nowadays. And if you're reading them on a tablet anyway, you've got everything you need. I know, the piracy is MORE convenient, but buying comics has never been easier.

Some people can't afford comics

This is almost certainly true, but I think it's also an argument used by people who can afford comics. At the very least, get to a library. If you can't afford books and can't access them any other way, then I can't be mad. You're like the person who badly wants to see a painting and sneaks into the art museum. But if you're just making excuses, recognize that what supports the art museum, keeps the doors open and gives someone a place to sneak into, is the money that comes from people like you. Without any payment coming in, those pieces of art would be hanging in some rich person's living room.

Plundering The Future

I have a book. I bought it off the shelf at a used bookstore, maybe \$7 or \$8 bucks. It's a really nice collection of minimalist short stories. Which, it turns out, is pretty hard to find at a reasonable price. It's no mystery. The author is dead. Short story collections, while once a cash cow, aren't worth a whole lot of money unless the author is already well-known. It's possible that someone will uncover this book someday, but I doubt it. It's a good book, but it's not an incredible book. It's not necessarily a masterpiece. I know, I'm really selling it here, and I don't mean to soil anyone's name. Just being honest.

I went as far to get a wild hair, mail the publisher and see about reprinting rights. I couldn't make money from the endeavor. I just thought it would be cool to reprint something that I thought more people should read and that I didn't think they should pay a bunch on the secondary market to get. I really have no idea how I would do it. This is a "jump out of the plane, make the parachute on the way down" kind of idea.

I haven't heard anything yet.

This is a piracy that hasn't been committed. A future piracy. I'm sorely tempted. I haven't given up the idea. It seems so harmless. It seems like a *Pirates of the Caribbean* sort of piracy, fun and bright, as opposed to actual piracy, which probably sucked and got a bunch of people killed.

So why don't I feel good about it? Why does the idea seem sort of repulsive to me?

This is a "jump out of the plane, make the parachute on the way down" kind of idea.

The Arguments for Piracy pt. 3

It's not hurting anyone but a big company

I think it's time to re-frame this: Does a company being big mean it's evil? Is a publisher evil? What is a big publisher taking from us unfairly? What opportunities are they denying us? I don't know if I'm convinced of the evil of big publishers. Do I wish they were different? Sure. But there's a wide berth between Evilville and CouldUseImprovementBerg.

You should be able to buy art, then pay for it afterward, which piracy allows.

If I actually thought anyone would do this, I'd be on board.

I don't believe in this capitalistic system, man.

Sure. Okay. Unfortunately, the folks creating the books you pirate live in a system where money matters. The more they get from making stuff, the more time they can spend making more stuff you like. If you don't pay for it, they have to spend more time engaging in your hated capitalistic system, which almost certainly means 9-5'ing it. Short version: A capitalist system doesn't require your belief to still subject everyone to its rules.

What about that Radiohead album?

Yes, the one people paid what they wanted. That's not piracy, first of all. If I tell someone they can pay nothing or more than nothing, then whatever they pay is good with me. I set the rules, and they played by the rules. The thing is, me and you, we're not Radiohead. Radiohead plays by different rules than the rest of us.

What Does It Mean?

I have pirated things. And I think piracy is bad.

It means that I've done a bad thing.

Some people might think it's hypocritical of me, and they'd be right. It's hypocritical to do something and then say it's not right.

It's also possible that I've changed my mind.

Now that I'm on the other side and see how hard it is to make a buck, I'm not so concerned with advocating for the rights of consumers to pirate materials. Now that I've seen how much work goes into something as simple as a book, I don't really see an issue with asking people to pay for one.

To the people who've done it (so, everybody): It's okay to do it, not be proud of it, and then stop. It's like boozing. Boozing in the past and giving it up isn't a shameful thing. It's not hypocritical of you to say booze is bad even though you used to chug it all the time. You're allowed to change your mind.

To the people who never have, never will (probably nobody): That's cool, but I'd like it if you could also take it easy. Just a little. Things get complicated when moral issues and financial issues are intertwined. See if you can find ways to politely talk about it without moralizing. If we don't all need to scream at each other online, let's not. I don't see a technological solution to piracy coming any time

soon, so I'm thinking we need to convince people not to pirate books. Which is easier when you're not shouting about them being assholes.

To the people who are currently doing it: I'm not here to reprimand you or stop you. I'd just like to ask that you stop justifying it. You're taking a thing that doesn't belong to you and adding it to your possessions. Please stop pretending like this helps the world in some way.

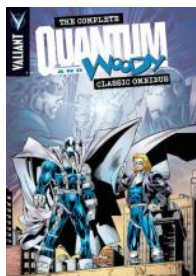
29 Binge-able Comics For Your Weekend



What makes a great binge? Sometimes it's a thing that's super episodic, like *The Twilight Zone*. Sometimes it's a show that pays off damn near every little thing, like *Breaking Bad*. Sometimes it's something that you can watch 50 times and not get tired of, like *The Office*.

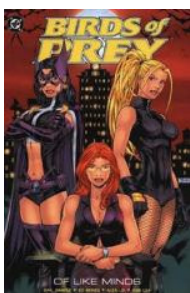
Why not try a comics binge? You can read a ton over a weekend, you don't have to wear clothes while you do it, and there's more than you could ever get through in a lifetime.

Which comics make for good binges? Here are some ideas. Some are complete series, some are portions of on-going series, and regardless, I'll link you to a good starting place.



1. "Quantum And Woody"

The best of the buddy cop trope you'll ever find. Plus superheroes. Plus, the stories and dialogue Christopher Priest put together are hilarious. If you recognize the greatness of *Tango and Cash*, you'll dig this one right away.



2. "Birds of Prey"

Gail Simone put together over 50 issues of *Birds of Prey*. Cop drama. Also with superheroes. The lineup is interesting, the characters are worth following, and the setups are all solid. Gail Simone has written a boatload of books, and she said leaving *Birds of Prey* was physically painful. Read it and see why.



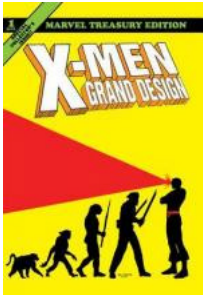
3. "The Omega Men" and the World of Tom King

Tom King has earned a reputation for taking mediocre characters and doing great things with them. In Vision he created an android who was trying to live a human life. That...didn't work out so well for our android friend. In Mister Miracle, the titular character balances family life and interplanetary war. That went better somehow. Although King's three big superhero books aren't technically connected, they make up what I'm calling the Tommyverse. Or King Comics. Whatever. They make a great set of back-to-back reads.



4. "The Superior Foes of Spider-Man"

Doofy, fun, and just what you need if you want a crime caper mixed with comedy. Think of it as Ocean's 11 except all the players involved are sort of inept. Watching characters piss themselves with the arrival of the Punisher is a HUGE laugh.



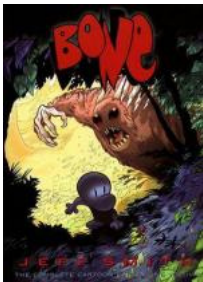
5. "X-Men: Grand Design"

Wanna read through a few decades of X-Men history in no time flat? This is your answer. The first volume takes some stories that might not be all that fun to read but have great story ideas and turns them into something more digestible, more fun, and with stylized art.



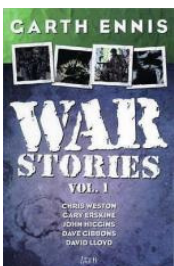
6. "The Snagglepuss Chronicles" and Hanna Barbera Comics

In the last few years DC comics decided to remake some Hanna Barbera properties. *The Flintstones*? Goofy sitcom turned into non-obnoxious political commentary. *Snagglepuss*? Pink cat man turned into a gay McCarthy-era playwright. *Scooby-Doo*? Kind of the same, except more gritty. Read back-to-back, these books build a wider universe of stories, just like their Saturday morning inspirations.



7. "Bone"

I always feel like this one needs a push with adults. It looks like a book for kids, and it works for kids, but damn if you won't have a great time with it. Heroic grandmas, a great trio of main characters. This one even sees me go against one of my primary rules: Nothing with dragons. You can even buy the entire saga in one volume, which will strengthen your forearms while you read.



8. "War Stories"

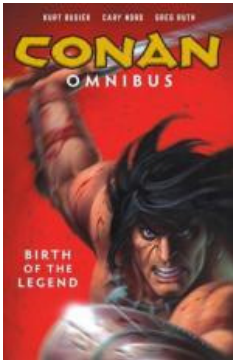
Garth Ennis could make this list for so many different reasons. *Preacher*, *The Boys*, *Punisher*. But if you've read Ennis, you know that war stories creep into just about everything he does. At some point, someone had the brilliant idea of just letting him

go for it.



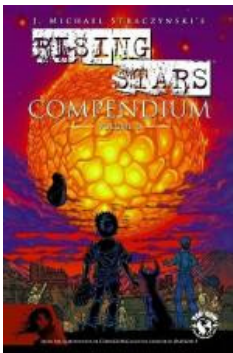
9. "Elseworlds: Batman"

Elseworlds is a DC thing where they take heroes and put them in different settings, different time periods, give them different powers, and then tell stories that are non-canonical, sometimes weird, and always make you think. These Batman collections in particular are sort of like *Black Mirror* except Batman stars in each one. Or, maybe I should say A Batman. Because sometimes he's a vampire or something. Because why the hell not?



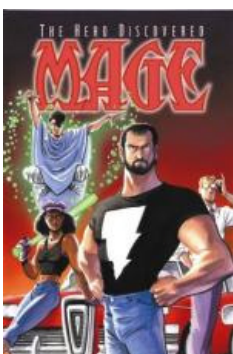
10. "Conan" by Kurt Busiek

It took a long time for me to find a Conan series I liked. Which is weird, right? What's to mess up? Barbarian guy swinging a sword? Seems like a home run. Kurt Busiek pulled it off. Way more fun than that Kevin Sorbo Hercules stuff. Man versus wolf. Man versus frost giant. There's not much else to ask for.



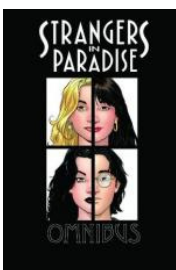
11. "Rising Stars"

J. Michael Straczynski put together a series with a great premise, good pacing, and totally-worth-it payoff. If you were ever even mildly intrigued by *Heroes*, this is the comic that show ripped off.



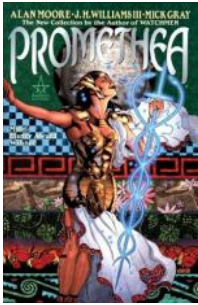
12. "Mage"

This is some wonderfully nerdy stuff right here. A sort of reincarnation of King Arthur, except Excalibur is now a magic baseball bat. I don't want to say too much about what else happens. It's a cool indie comic that's been running for decades. Added bonus: You get to watch the main character go bald. This might be amusing only for me.



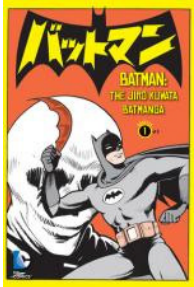
13. "Strangers in Paradise"

If you like your comics a little more soap opera-y, little less super-powered, this might be the ticket. A love triangle between two ladies and a dude, which only gets more complicated as some crime drama unfolds, Strangers in Paradise is charming, fun to read, and combines some of the feel of your favorite sitcoms with the joy of a cheesy crime show.



14. "Promethea"

Alan Moore is a huge name in comics. Any number of series could work here, but...I think this is the one to go with for a binge. For one, you probably haven't read it. For another, it ran its course and is complete. It's weird, different, and an underappreciated masterpiece.



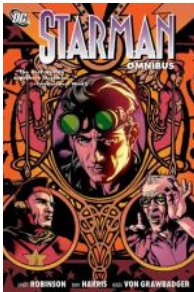
15. "Batman: The Jiro Kuwata Batmanga"

This is like watching a Japanese version of the 60's *Batman* show. In volume one Batman battles: a crazed guy who decides to destroy anything that looks like a face, a rubber ball man, a weather magician, and a psychic gorilla who wears a superhero costume. It's absolutely bonkers in the best possible way, and the villain of the week formula has never been stronger.



16. "Invincible"

The writer, Robert Kirkman, is most famous for *Walking Dead*, of course. But that series is a little slow for a good binge (#HotTake). *Invincible*, in my opinion, is not only better, but it has a tighter arc that wasn't elongated for a TV schedule (#HotTakeAgain). The art is gorgeous, and the story ups the ante just often enough to keep you rolling along.



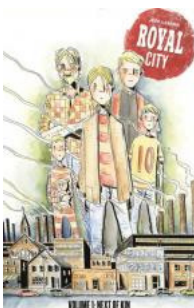
17. "Starman"

Smart, under-read comics by James Robinson. This series does a great job wrapping up all of its loose ends, paying off anything that's set up, and yet it's somehow not well known outside hardcore comics fans. The art is also very classic. If you miss the 90's, this'll give you a nice booster.



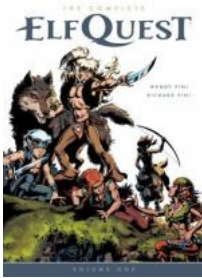
18. "X-Statix"

If the pop art style of Mike Allred isn't enough for you from the beginning, Peter Milligan's take on mutants and reality TV will push you through. The team had a great run, and it's more than worth your time to revisit.



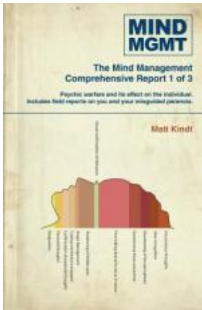
19. "Royal City"

Before he got big doing mainstream stuff, Jeff Lemire was doing small-scale comics about growing up Canadian. Lemire made a return with *Royal City*, creating an indie masterpiece you can read from start to finish in a few short hours.



20. "Elfquest"

This stuff is nerdy as all hell, but it makes for a great extended read. *Elfquest* is a long-running series with multiple branches popping off the main trunk, and if you dig fantasy action, this is the way to go. Nerdy, yes. But hey, bingeing in your house over the weekend is the perfect opportunity to experience this bad boy. Don't worry. We won't tell.



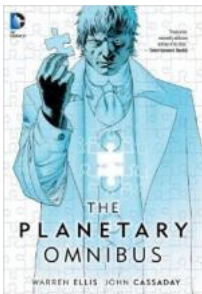
21. "Mind MGMT"

Matt Kindt put together an unusual story that'll be great for fans of things like *The Raw Shark Texts* by Steven Hall. Sometimes indie books lack intensity, but *Mind MGMT* ranks up there with the great, high-tension thrillers you find on TV.



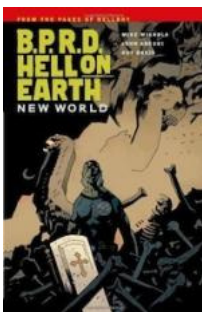
22. "Luther Strode"

If you're someone who does a lot of martial arts movies, *Luther Strode* is the way to go. Hyper violent, beautifully rendered, and with a wink and a nod here and there for comics fans, this one is destined to please.



23. "Planetary"

Warren Ellis is another creator who HAS to make the list. The hard part is choosing just one thing. I choose *Planetary*. Because there's a huge benefit to reading this one straight through. Get a drink, pop some popcorn, and settle in for a hell of a ride. It's sci-fi/superhero action at its best.



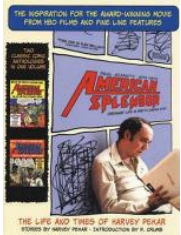
24. "B.P.R.D.: Hell On Earth"

Do you like your downers? Binges that leave you feeling hollowed out? This one's for you. The world starts ending in this book, and it only gets worse as it goes. Weird creatures (on both sides), hard choices, and a good dose of the supernatural bring this one home.



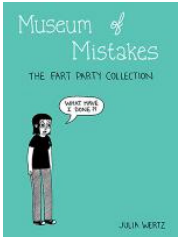
25. "Ultimate Spider-Man"

This is probably my favorite Spider-Man run, and that's saying something. You can read it from start to finish, it gives you a great sense of the character's history (updated to keep things fresh), and the highs and lows would make Smilin' Stan proud. It leads straight into the Miles Morales stories too, which extends your binge well beyond a weekend.



26. "American Splendor"

Harvey Pekar's comics tell the story of a quiet, simple person living a quiet, simple life. They're short, and most of the stories are unspectacular. It's in bingeing them that you really see their greatness. Each story acts as a layer that builds on the previous. Maybe you've read some *American Splendor* and didn't see the appeal. I suggest you give it a good, long read and see what you think.



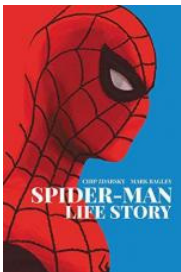
27. "Fart Party"

How much *Fart Party* is too much *Fart Party*? I don't know because I haven't reached my limit yet. Julia Wertz is one of the funniest creators in comics, and c'mon. Who doesn't want to repeat the name *Fart Party* over and over?



28. "Love & Rockets"

Starting right off with my personal favorite character, Maggie Chascarillo, the decades-spanning run of *Love & Rockets* is among the masterpieces of comics. Weird, fun, heartbreaking, this epic series has something for everybody.



29. Chip Zdarsky's Spider-Man

For this binge, you've gotta get Chip Zdarsky's *Spectacular Spider-Man* vols 1 and 2, and pre-order *Spider-Man: Life Story*. I'll never make a comics list without a Zdarsky book or two on it, and although these two books aren't directly connected, you'll laugh, cry, and have a whole new view of our favorite webslinger.

Fountain Pens: Useful Tools or Hipster Affectation?



I'm a curious person, which leads to trouble when it comes to the simple parts of life, like picking out a pen.

You really can't get into trouble with a simple Bic. Sure, they're unromantic, and they come in packs of like a billion, and the ink smells weird. But the mascot is adorable, considering his head is a ballpoint soaked in ink and he's dressed like Angus Young. You lose a Bic, eh, who gives a damn? If you go by any office in America, any bank, anyplace where they've figured out it's cheaper to lose pens than it is to chain them down, you can find a replacement.

But like I said, I'm curious. So I bought some fountain pens.

Fountain pens sort of seem like hipster bullshit, to be honest. But if we're being complete in our honesty, hipster bullshit is to thank for the fact that just about every American city has a fantastic burger. Hipster bullshit means I can get a cup of coffee that wasn't made 7 hours ago in most American cities. Okay, I don't need them to precisely measure the temperature of the water and pour it through a porcelain cone, but if that's the price to pay for something that doesn't taste like it was warmed up in a dead dog's anus and strained through a cigarette filter, so be it.

Point being, sometimes hipster bullshit thrives for a reason.

My curiosity led me to get 4 fountain pens, test them out, and keep a little journal of the experience. Which I present to you here.

Day One, Pen One: Going Metro



The Pilot Metropolitan is your basic bitch of fountain pens. As features and uses go, it's sort of the standard, but maybe in the way that Domino's is the standard for pizza: It's not the best, but it certainly looks and feels like what you'd get if you took everyone's concept of pizza-ness and created a pizza out of it.

The Metropolitan doesn't start off well. It doesn't really fit in the fancy plastic coffin they shipped it in. Seriously, the damn thing looks like something they'd use for a space burial in Star Trek.

I manage to toss out the coffin before anyone sees it, which is good because I have a reputation to maintain. And that reputation does not involve having individual cases for pens.

Of course, I threw out the coffin before I checked for instructions, which is why I have to watch an instructional video just to figure out how to make the pen write. This is also not a win.

To make this pen work, you can't just take off the lid. You take the pen apart, remove this weird rubber thing, which feels like what's probably inside a squid. It's apparently a converter that allows you to put your own ink in. If, you know, you want to fool around with a glass bottle of ink? Which maybe has a feather resting in it? I know that I shouldn't be throwing stones from my vantage on this one, but c'mon. How much of your life do you want to spend doing this crap?

I load in the provided ink cartridge, which is a plastic straw full of ink, and almost definitely going to murder a sea turtle at some point. I feel bad about that, but then again I guess your typical ballpoint

is a plastic straw with another plastic straw inside, so maybe I'm doing the world a favor here. Let's say that's what's happening.

Then? Nothing. I can't get the pen to write. I shake it. Then squeeze the ink cartridge gingerly, hoping the ink doesn't explode on me.

After some fooling around and trying a bunch of different shakes and squeezes, something works, and the pen writes. I have to say I felt like I'd won a small battle. Maybe this is the appeal of these things. Maybe that's why we have artisanal pickle shops and other bullshit, because while eating pickles is good, it's a little easy anymore to just buy 'em from that Vlasic stork man. Maybe it's time to return to the days when a pickle meant something!

I like the way this one writes. It's smooth, it's simple. It's weighty in my hand. I already feel like a twee weakling because I take the cap off the back of the pen to lighten it up a little while I write. I'm not kidding.

Maybe this is the beauty of a fountain pen: you have to work for it. Put in an effort. Maybe that's the charm.

Day Two, Pen Two: On Safari

The Lamy Safari is apparently a good all-rounder, a good pen to start out with. Armed with my knowledge of the Pilot Metropolitan, the Safari was pretty easy to get loaded and writing. It had an empty space instead of a gizmo to remove. Plus, I was wearing my thick-rimmed glasses at the time. Which was weird because I swear the frames were less square and thick the night before...

The writing was okay, although a little scratchy. Maybe if you have some tactile thing where you love to feel the paper grain under the tip of your pen, this is your thing.

The Safari looks a little plastic-y. For such a classy writing instrument, it just looks cheap to me somehow. Like a prop from an 80's movie where they wanted to have a futuristic-looking pen. A movie made in a time before we knew that pens themselves would signal we weren't in the future.

I have a sudden desire to write "aesthetically displeasing" instead of "a little plastic-y" while I'm holding the Safari. It's like the hipster part of my brain is waking up. But it passes after I take a handful of Roloids. I'm sure I'm fine.

I try to change the nib on the Safari. The only nibs I knew of before this were those Twizzlers nibs, the ones where it's like a tiny Twizzler, and also it tastes different. Somewhere between a standard and a Pull 'n Peel?



A nib, it turns out, is a pen tip.

The Fine nib slid off the Safari, and I slid a Medium nib on. I thought maybe the medium would be less scratchy, more fluid.



It leaked. I'm sure I fucked up this procedure, but still, the pen leaked all over my hand, and after I cleaned it out, used a new ink cartridge, and started again, it still leaked all over the damn place. It's a good thing this happened at home. Because nobody had to watch me re-enact the pen scene from *Ernest Goes to Jail*. Or be subject to my reference to *Ernest Goes to Jail*.

A pen can basically be useless in two ways. One, it doesn't work. Two, it actively ruins other shit. The Safari is threatening to ruin other things. Including the tweed jacket and suspenders I'd apparently put on this morning. Weird...I don't remember dressing like someone from Panic! At the Disco. Nor do I remember being someone who was willing to put the exclamation point in the middle of that band's name. But somehow, these clothes just feel right today.

Day 3, Pen 3: Mount Muji

There's a store I like called Muji. Home goods, basically. And clothes. A location recently opened up in downtown Portland, which is nice because your average Joe can go out for an all-organic cocktail, eat a \$45 dollar hamburger, and then grab a few things. Including a fountain pen.

The Muji pen is all metal, which gives it a leg up over the others. It's cool to the touch, literally. It's a comforting feeling. The nib (look at me learn!) is also intricately designed. Which is pretty awesome if you're ever in super boring meetings with only what's in your pocket for entertainment.

However, the part you hold is a little rough.

I found hand balm in my medicine cabinet today. I don't know when this happened, but I must have subscribed to one of those services that send you boxes of hip men's grooming products every month. I have lots of options for oiling my beard now, if I'm ever able to grow a beard that necessitates oiling, and I have a straight razor because I guess this is how old-timey men used to do it. I'm starting to understand why so many old photographs had soft focus. All the razor scars, everyone must've looked like Sam Neil from the end of Event Horizon.



The Muji pen, its rough barrel feels like it's undoing the balm's hard work. Other than that, it's pretty nice. This pen is all the things I'm not: Aesthetically pleasing, a pleasure to hold. Aluminum.

Day Four, Pen Four: Kaweco Sport



Just as a note, it's good to have a go-to test phrase when you're testing out a pen. I use "4. Itchy. Tasty." It's a *Resident Evil* thing that stuck with me for the last couple decades. It's got the bonus goodness of being about the weirdest thing to see on a test pad in a stationary store.

The Kaweco Sport is an outlier. It's tiny. It screws together when you put it away, which is nice because I'm terrified of ruining a pair of pants with these goddamn fountain pens.

It's also got blue ink, which came standard. Seriously? In whose mind is blue the standard, or even preferred, ink color? I'm not a child, Kaweco.

The Kaweco is the scratchiest pen, and it doesn't write too well when I drag my hand across the page and leave my human greases on the paper. That's what I call my body's oils. They're natural, and they're nothing to be ashamed of. The AMOUNT of them is shameful, but the FACT of them is none of anyone's concern.

I couldn't finish this entry with the Kaweco. Instead, I switched back to my manual typewriter. Which I carry around with me even though it's a solid 20 lbs. It's no biggie. The ride to the coffee shop, the shop I like because they purposely don't have wifi, is only about 10 minutes on my bike, down from 12 after I took the brakes off (this really DOES speed things up!).

Itchy. Tasty. This is a great name for my new band where we play plastic instruments from the dollar store.

Verdict



Of the four, if you want to try one, get the Pilot Metropolitan. It's annoying to start off, you HAVE TO throw that coffin in the nearest garbage you can find, but it's the one that worked the best. It writes nicely, it didn't leak on me, and while I liked the Muji, eh, I'll stick to buying ballpoints and airplane slippers from that store.

Are fountain pens worth your time?

Fountain pens are good for sustained writing. If you have a problem while you're drafting, if you stop and start a lot, a fountain pen might be a good idea. The ink dries up, just a little, if you wait too long between strokes. It could help you develop a little urgency, a need to keep the pen moving even if it's not doing much of value.

They're more expensive than a Bic, but if the fountain pen thing works for you, it's a hell of a lot cheaper than a computer, it's easier to carry around, and as a bonus, nobody will steal it from you the way they will a nice gel pen. Because they don't want to fool around with it, and they will probably think it was a gift from your dead father.

There's something to it for the person who likes to customize their life. If you're the sort of person who likes to spend time fooling around with the operation of your phone as opposed to fooling around ON your phone, this might be for you. I'm told that, with time, fountain pen nibs change shape

to conform to your writing style. So, the more you use it, the more it becomes a part of you.

Is a fountain pen hipster bullshit? Sure. Did it turn me into hipster bullshit? For the purposes of this column, sure, but in real life? Naw.

Just be warned: Other writers will probably think you're sort of like a person who goes on vacation and does the super-touristy shit. They'll say, "He thinks he's having fun, but he's not." They'll think you're a dilettante who does more fooling with pens than actual writing. They'll be convinced you're not as hardcore as them.

Non-writers will think you're a pompous asshole. If they notice your pen at all.

But, hey, you should give it a shot and do what you want. If nothing else, it's an object lesson that writing isn't about being liked, whether we're talking the how or the what: Don't pick a pen because you want to be liked, and while you're at it, go ahead and forget about writing to be liked, too.

Comic Conventions Versus Pop Culture Conventions



My first comic convention was not amazing, spectacular, or any of the words that have come before "Spider-Man" in a comic title.

There were no big celebrity guests. There were no medium-sized celebrity guests. You know what? Instead of naming all the kinds of guests that were not in attendance, I'll just tell you there were no guests whatsoever other than Holiday Inn hotel guests who wandered into the basement convention space by mistake.

All the people I would come to know as Denver-area convention regulars were in attendance. There was the guy in the homemade Spawn costume. On the plus, the costume looked pretty damn good. On the minus, it was extremely hot, so he spent 99% of his time at cons sitting in a folding chair, breathing hard, sweating with the mask off, his skulllet dripping with sweat. There was the mustachioed guy who sold comics from a stand and always brought his two kids. The kids were ALWAYS screwing around, he was ALWAYS yelling at them, and he once sold a buddy of mine a *Hulk* reprint for a bad price, a crime for which he'll never be forgiven.

The only con activities were browsing and buying comics. If you were lucky, you might get a signed book from someone who made a comic in their basement, ran off some copies at Kinko's, and showed up to the con.

Cut to a decade later. Denver gets a comic con. Like a real one. A big one. Fewer comics, but more celebrities, more stuff to do, more merch!

Cut to another decade later, to now. In 2019 Denver Comic Con officially changed its name to Denver Pop Culture Con. And although the name change sparked some discussion, the truth of the matter is

that the con has been leaning pop culture for a while now. At least the new name is honest.

What happened to comic conventions that were about comics? How did things get this way? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Why?

How Did Things Change?

Money.

More of an answer? Fine.

Until the early 2000's when we got X-Men and Spider-Man movies that were pretty good (hyphens in the title are key. Make a note!), there wasn't a whole lot of celebrity to be found at a con. You might see the dude who did the voice for Space Ghost, or perhaps J.D. Salinger's son (who played Captain America in the 90's!), or a nice but exhausted Lou Ferrigno selling signed pictures of him as the Hulk or flexing through a posedown in a banana hammock. Maybe you'd have some *Star Trek* crossover and see Marina Sirtis or Jonathan Frakes, but for the most part, you were lucky to get one big celebrity guest. Stan Lee, for example.

In 2002 the only people who gave a rip about Stan Lee were comics nerds.

It's hard to say when the change started, exactly, but I'd say it was around the time comic book movies started getting good/popular. Around the time it wouldn't be weird to take your girlfriend out to see a comic book movie because you were seeing something that wasn't goddamn embarrassing, *Thor* instead of *Elektra* (I'm sure a lot of you are harrumphing about that, but if you saw 2005's *Elektra*...you'd agree with me).

Walking Dead became a mainstream hit. Marvel movies got big. For the love of God, normal-ish people ACTUALLY LIKED *Doctor Who*!

The mainstreaming of nerd culture hit comics hard, but it hit comic cons even harder. And with the widening appeal of nerd culture, con organizers figured out they could make a ton of money by bringing in celebrities, even if their connection to the world of comics was tenuous. A small part of the world wants to meet John Romita Jr. (for the record, these are the people who are objectively correct and the people worth having a beer with). Everyone and their mother wants to meet Daryl from *The Walking Dead*. Seriously, check out the Facebook pictures during con season. You'll see Daryl, you'll see everyone, and you'll see everyone's mothers.

Do You Even Read Comics, Bro?

This year's Denver Pop Culture Con website featured a short explanation of why they were bringing in prose authors as a group of guests:

"I read books — not comics," you say?

How about scores of authors, participating in almost 200 hundred hours of panels and presentations, about everything from the craft of writing to how they think up all those amazing stories!

Let me just engage in some nerd rage for a second.

I spent a career fighting against the idea that comics aren't books. Comics ARE books. What do books have that comics don't? Comics have characters, they have plots. They have Chip Zdarsky writing them! Comics have pictures! Doesn't that mean comics are Extra Books? Books+?

I don't support the person who is coming to the con and looking down their nose at comics. And why would a con specifically cater to anyone who feels this way? Isn't it unreasonable to show up to a comic con, as someone who doesn't like comics, and say, "Where's the stuff FOR ME!?" Isn't this the person who complains about the hamburger at a sushi restaurant? Isn't this the person who's like, "I want to go to the pool, but I don't want to touch the water or be close to it"? Why would we try to bring people who have no interest in comics...to a comic convention?

Don't be fooled by the nerd stereotypes. The idea of bringing more people into the comics fold is definitely appealing to me. I'm not trying to wall off comics fandom. I want to see more people reading comics. That said, I wouldn't mind seeing comics fandom be about...comics. It was nice to have cons where one could sort of assume that anyone else there was not too good for comics.

I don't think most of the cons around today exist to make comics nerds feel less alone. I don't think they exist for comics nerds at all.

Cons, like most other pieces of nerd culture, have been grabbed up by nerd culture bandwagoneers. And it's not even the fact that people are showing up late to the party. I've got no problem with that. Hell, I was late to my own high school graduation. The problem comes when people show up late to a costume party, make fun of the people who chose to wear costumes, and try to convince everyone else to go back to their regular clothes.

It's not a problem that fans are just now becoming comics fans. It's about not being comics fans at all.

Some nerd rage is about things that can exist in harmony. At the risk of invoking the name, *Ghostbusters* 2016 didn't destroy *Ghostbusters* 1984, and being mad about it is a waste of time. But in this case, comic cons have been overrun and erased by the financial and cultural juggernaut that is pop culture cons. You want to go to an honest-to-goodness comic con? Good luck finding one.

Crisis At Infinite Cons

I hope that the pop culture con will die, leaving behind the kernel that was the comic convention. I hope this not because I want the pop culture elements to die or because I wish those fans any harm, but because I have an affinity for comic conventions. I have an affinity for fellow comics nerds. I want to meet the writers and artists who make comics, not so much the actors who put on a goofy suit, a fake accent, and 35 lbs. of muscle. I can think of better uses of my cash than spending it to take a picture with someone who most definitely looks like the person who would call me a dork in high school because I was super involved with Grant Morrison's *JLA* run.

Isn't this the person who complains about the hamburger at a sushi restaurant?

I like comics. Not comic book movies. Not sci-fi television. Comics. And I'd love to go to another convention that caters to that interest someday. I'd like to meet other people who share that interest. Okay, some of them smell REALLY bad, but most of them are cool, and at least we have something in common.

I have reason to think it might happen. The first set of Marvel movies has come and gone, and it wouldn't surprise me if the superhero movie has peaked. The Walking Dead comic is over, and the show can't last forever.

There are some convention organizers who recognize the need. One of the organizers of Spring Con in Minneapolis said:

We are a comic con. We don't do media guests...We are kind of purebred in that way. We are here to provide the comics industry opportunities to interface with the public. There is kind of a fight going on for the heart and soul of the whole thing. A lot of conventions have forgotten the girl who brought them to the dance, so to speak, which is the comic geek.

Naming your hopes is a dangerous thing.

The same year this guy was quoted, their con attendance was up 25% even though a larger-scale con happened in the same city two weeks prior.

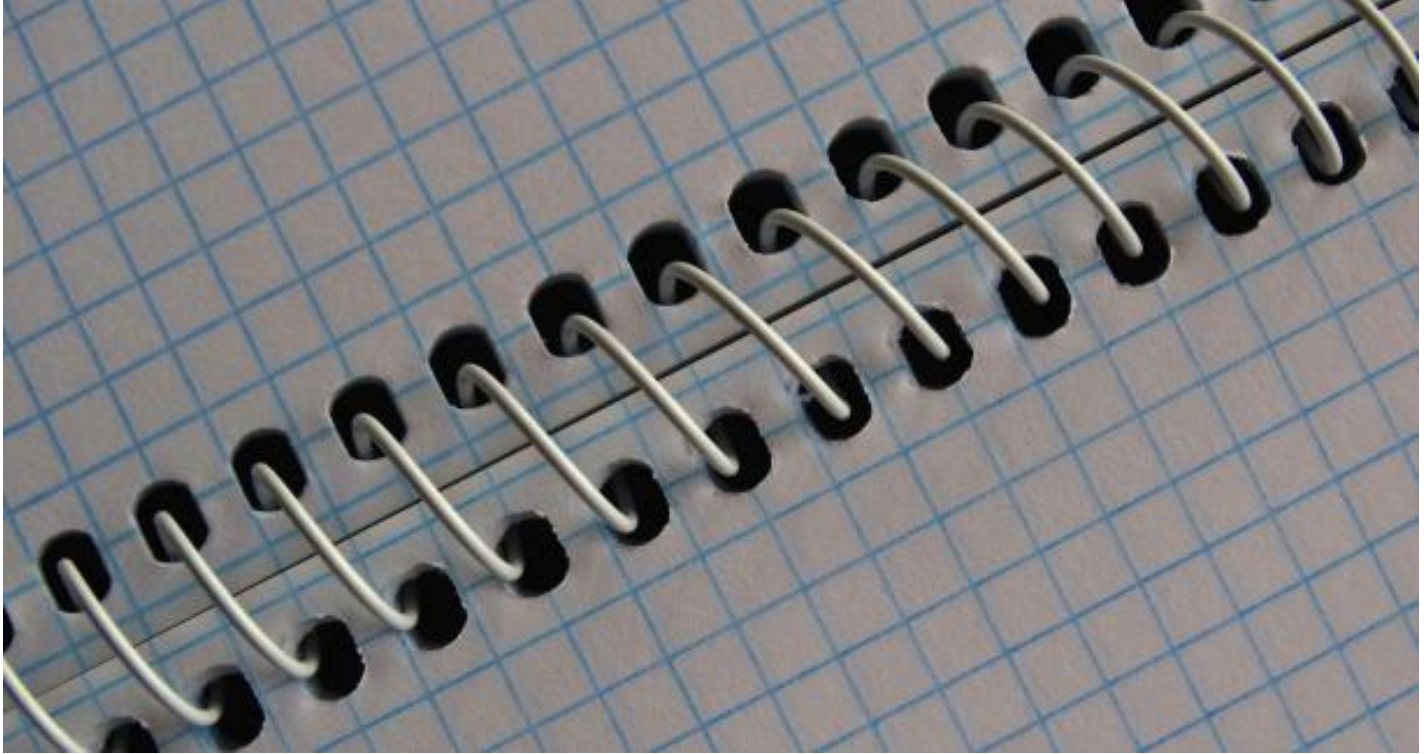
With the glut of large-scale cons meant to please everyone, the next logical step is to see the emergence of smaller, more specific cons. In order to survive, cons will have to get more niche, more specific, more specialized.

Naming your hopes is a dangerous thing. Because when you give your hopes a real shape, it's really clear when they aren't met.

But I say fuck it. I hope that comic cons come back. I hope they get really niche, weird, and fun again.

I hope that I'll see you at Howard The Duck Con 2025.

Building The Custom Notebook



When it comes to matters of personal taste, notebook preferences are more particular than preferences regarding pizza (NYC v. Chicago, Pineapple V. People Who Are Objectively Correct), masturbatory habits, and which Quiet Riot song is the baddest-ass.

I've experimented with a lot of notebooks. Moleskines, of course, which are pretty nice but come with their own problems (we'll get into it). Five Stars, Composition Books. I've been gifted notebooks with paper made out of elephant shit. The paper isn't great, but when you remember you're writing on a heap of elephant turd, you have to give it some credit.

Nothing quite fits. Everything has its flaws. So I figured, fuck it, I'd just make my own damn notebook.

This sort of "I'll make my own X" declaration is responsible for our stupidest and best inventions. Someone was dissatisfied with the pencil, so they invented the pen (probably how it happened). That worked. Someone was unhappy with the Alex Murphy Robocop, so they invented a new Robocop in Robocop 2 (this went poorly, and a drug kingpin child with a machine gun paid the ultimate price, as is usually the case).

I'm hoping this works out somewhere between the greatness of the pen and the bitter defeat of a child's death.

The Issues

Notebooks all have their peccadilloes, but some cross over into dealbreakers. Let's start with an approach that serves no one well in online dating profiles: listing flaws that you don't want to deal with.

Won't Lay Flat: Notebooks laying flat with almost zero pressure is a must. The notebook should

almost open by itself, inviting use.

Paper Sucks: Crap paper is real. Look, maybe you're one of the greats who doesn't get sweaty, greasy hands for no reason when it's not even hot outside. Good for you, your highness. A good paper has to accept ink readily, even if it's a little greased up by my naturally-produced lubes, and the ink has to dry fast so it doesn't smear.

Too Much: I'm of the opinion that most notebooks have too many pages. They should be slimmer. Plus, losing a notebook with hundreds of pages is a tragedy. A few dozen? No biggie.

Too Little: The standard Moleskine is a little small for me. One line fits like 5 words.

Too Looks-Based: My goal here is simple: I want something that no one will mistake for a wallet or phone case or something that's worth taking from me. I want something I could leave sitting on a coffee shop table while I take a mondo duke, worry-free.

Too Flaccid: The cover has to have some firmness. Otherwise, you're always looking for a writing surface.

The Creative Process

I started with size. Because that matters most. Penis joke.

After some careful analysis, I figured that I wanted something that was large, but that could still be crammed into a back pocket. It didn't have to fit entirely, just barely in terms of width, and height-wise, sky's the limit.

I measured my back pocket and figured I had MAYBE an extra inch back there. BUT, I'm working hard on my squats, so some of that real estate would be filled with bodaciousness by the end of the year. If that happens, I won't even need a notebook because, pfft, forget writing, I'll be butt famous. Butt famous is MUCH better than writer famous. My grandmother taught me that.

Then I hit on a brainstorm. Which somebody else hit on decades ago.

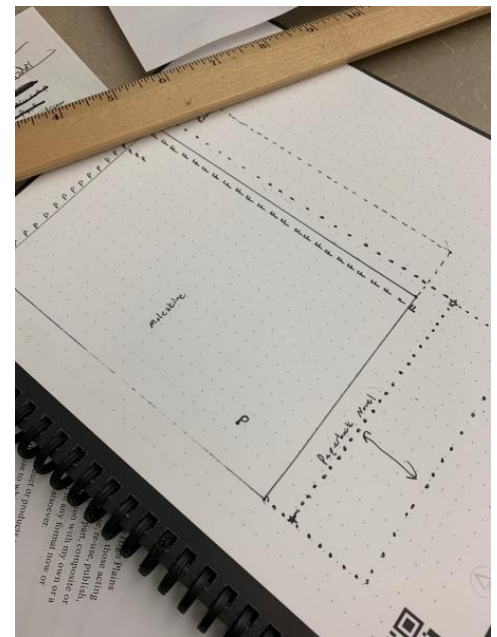
Paperback novels were meant to be portable. To fit in a pocket, just barely. I measured it out, and a paperback novel, taller than a Moleskine, wider than Field Notes, was just about right.

Bookbinding

"The art of bookbinding is dead," you say? Well, sure. But so is the novel. So is the artist. Everything is dead. We're walking through the mausoleum that is life. Don't act like you're original for seeing that.

Without getting into way too much description, a few things:

1. Here's the book press/sewing device I made. It's two slabs of oak, carriage bolts in four corners, and screws near the front for holding binding ribbon. This stuff is for true nerds, so if you have



questions, ask in the comments below.



2. [Here's a resource](#) I used for my first binding projects. Yes, my first project was binding comics. No, this did not cause potential sexual partners to throw themselves at me the way the aforementioned squats totally will.

3. [Here's another resource](#). This person's videos show everything step-by-step.

Seriously, if you have questions, ask me below. Otherwise, I'll assume nobody really cares and everyone is just politely nodding at this point.

Finished Product

Of course, no project is really finished without the "Quality Seal."

Perfection? Well, no. I made it. So that seems like a pretty obvious "No" from the start.

That said, it's a project worth your time. You can craft the story, so why not craft the thing you write the story in? Why not make your own rules, make your own notebook, and write sentences that end in prepositions inside that notebook (like my previous sentence)?

Whatever your gripes about notebooks, exorcise them by making your own. If nothing else, you'll gain new respect for the notebooks you don't have to make yourself.

Granted, the time I spent making a notebook would have probably been better spent writing inside an inferior notebook. But one could say the same about the time you just spent reading this column. Let's both just walk away.



Requests, Not Demands: How to Get Your Books into Libraries



A few months back there was this author who, in trying to get his book stocked in libraries, acted like kind of a dunderhead and pissed off a lot of library people.

He wrote a bit in *Publishers Weekly* about it, which opened like this:

In 2014, as the author of a new nonfiction book—which, even before publication, was more or less doomed to obscurity, at least outside of academic circles—I was looking for ways to shill a few copies. Hey, royalties are royalties, after all. Then it hit me: libraries.

So, basically he admits that nobody wants to read his book, and he's looking to make a quick buck. Maybe librarians are suckers!

Not a sympathetic opening gambit.

He went on to describe how upset he was that the library, at first, didn't beg him to take a crate of books off his hands. Then, after one library system bought one, he was disappointed that they bought ONLY one. Not only did he feel his book was owed a place in the library, his demands ESCALATED as they were met.

Okay, I'm being overly harsh. Assuming best intent, he was probably being cheeky about his book being totally undesirable. And as for his demands, library folks like myself sometimes lose sight of the fact that people who don't spend their lives embedded in Libraryland don't always understand how things work.

I'm not here to shame, but to use this story as a framework for advice to authors looking to get their books into libraries.

Do I Want My Books In Libraries?

Yes, you do.

I know what you're thinking: "If I keep my books OUT of libraries... everyone will have to BUY them! I'll be rich beyond wildest imaginings!"

Before you start buying old-timey bathing suits so you can take a dip in your money bin, here's a small dose of reality: The choice between borrowing and buying is a false one.

Tons of studies have been done on how libraries affect book buying behavior, and every single time we re-affirm that borrowers and buyers are the same people. The latest one even says that library borrowers buy MORE books than book buyers who don't use their library. Weird, huh?

I know, it seems ass-backwards. But if this data seems baffling, blame yourself.

Let me add something else: When libraries promote books, they promote books they have in their collections (mostly). Getting your book in a library opens you up to promo opportunities that you'll miss out on otherwise.

We're On Your Side

Approach the conversation with a librarian knowing that we want to buy books, and approach assuming that we are potentially interested in yours (because we are!).

The big caveat here is that we have to buy books people actually want to read. Notice I didn't say we "prefer" to buy books people will read. I said we "have to."

People spend their tax money on libraries, and it's our responsibility to make sure that money is spent with a likely return on investment. So, yes, we're not going to buy 5 copies of your indie non-fiction about D.B. Cooper. That seems like an unreasonable expectation on your part, and it would be an irresponsible use of money on ours. I might love your book, personally, and if it were up to me, I might stock an entire wing with your stuff. I know many a librarian is tired of watching the same damn books go out the door over and over. But this library isn't my personal collection, it's one I'm curating for everyone else. It's not a matter of my taste, it's a matter of my best guesses as to the tastes of my community.

Go into your library interaction without hostility, assuming good intent, and assuming we're on your side. That said, be prepared to sell us a little.

Personal Pitches

We get a ton of generic author sales emails, the indie author equivalent of the guy who tries the same cheesy line in a bar time and again, figuring it only has to work 1 out of every 100 times to be

**If this data
seems
baffling, blame
yourself.**

worthwhile.

Give yourself 10 minutes to explore a library's web site. Make sure you're requesting via their preferred method. Think up a couple popular books that yours would fit with, and check if the library has those. If they do, include it in your pitch: "I notice you carry Authors X and Y, and my fans have a lot of crossover with theirs."

It takes work to do a personal pitch, but if you're not willing to hand-sell your own book to individual libraries, how willing do you suppose I'll be to buy it?

Respect My Time

I don't want to read a novel ABOUT your novel. Give me the quick, three-line email pitch. People who work in libraries are inundated with emails, small and large tasks, and weird ebbs and flows of busyness. Taking up more of my time than is necessary does not work in your favor. Pick up a *Publishers Weekly* (or look at their reviews on Amazon). No longer than that, please.

Angles

WORK YOUR ANGLES!

It can feel gross and unnatural for authors, but you have to sell. Are you local? That helps. Is your book connected to the geographic area or local history, even just the tiniest bit? That helps. Did you check if this library has a local author collection your book might fit into? Also good.

Did your book get a review in a major publication? That helps.

Libraries struggle to court male readers. Does your book appeal to men?

Libraries are often staffed by women. Does your book appeal to women?

Does your book speak to a very current movement or issue? The wheels at big publishing turn slowly, and if you can beat them to the punch, that's an angle.

I don't think I'm blowing the lid off anything here when I say that libraries are trying to promote more diversity in their collections. If your book fits into that wheelhouse, don't be afraid to say so.

I know, it can feel scummy to sell your book sometimes. You have genuine feelings, and you committed them to paper. It might feel like selling a piece of your soul to think about marketing angles. But the more people who see your words, the better.

Selling copies isn't the same as selling your soul.

Be Yourself

Many an author has requested a book be purchased under the guise of being someone other than its author. These disguises are usually horrible, the online equivalent of the plastic glasses, nose, and fake mustache.

To put it another way, don't you have a Spidey Sense when you're looking at a book on Amazon, it has a couple 5-star reviews, and one sounds suspiciously like the author? You recognize those, right? So do we.

If you're requesting your own book for purchase, that's cool, but don't pretend you're anyone other than the author. Reason being, if you're discovered (which you will be), there's about zero chance your book will end up on library shelves.

Bonus Advice: Don't use the phrase "as a patron of this library" when selling your book. You might be a library patron, but when you're selling a book, you need to set that identity aside and own who you are in this context: a bookseller. Tell them you're local, but don't make it sound like the library owes you something.

Budget

This is some hardcore business shit that we're shooting past, so get ready:

Libraries deal with fiscal quarters and years like any business. So, their buying power is greater or lesser depending on where they're at, who does the buying, and how they manage their budget. Their budgets may also change with the economy and depending on what else is going on within the city. They may be planning their budgets years in advance, so they might be more conservative or spend-y depending on A TON of internal and external factors.

I'll suggest December and June as your best times to pitch for a variety of reasons too yawn-inducing to go into. But, if you're dead set getting into your local library, there's no harm in asking when they do most of their ordering and saving your pitch for that time.

Don't Be An Ass

Asking for a library to carry your book is like asking a social acquaintance out on a date: make sure you're clear in what you're asking, make sure you're ASKING, and if the answer is no, accept it and move on. Don't look for justification, don't make it weird. Don't play the game where Mom said "No" so you go and ask Dad (probably should have ended the "asking out an acquaintance" analogy before bringing in Mom and Dad).

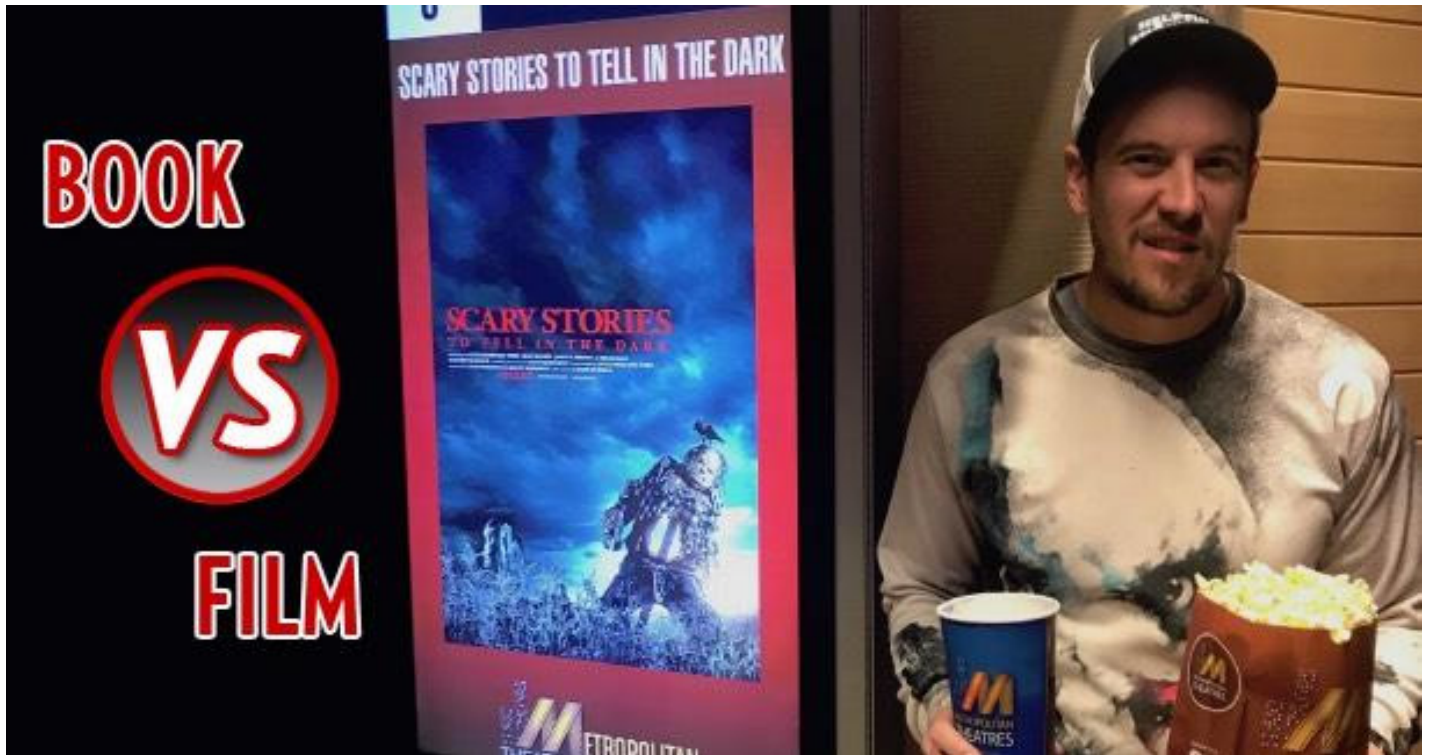
Approaching a library like they owe it to you to carry your book? You might get your book on the shelf, win in the short term, but you won't be happy. The guy from the story at the beginning of this column? He wasn't happy in the end. Even though his book sits on the shelf, he's obviously dissatisfied.

When it comes to placing your book in libraries, the name of the game is respect. Be respectful.

And accept. Although you can do some things to help your chances, it's ultimately out of your hands. The only thing you control, start to finish, is how you behave. And if you're an ass, you'll be disappointed in the results. And in yourself.



Book vs. Film: Very Bore-y Scary Stories to Tell in The Dark



The *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* books were the highlight of the Scholastic Book Fair. Bless you, Scholastic, for sneaking in a book that depicted a woman with spiders exploding out of her face. Bless you for tricking my mom into thinking these stories of people eating sausage made from humans were remotely appropriate. Scholastic, you once sold me a book I can only describe as a sub-Go-Bots-quality Transformers knockoff, but I forgive you.

The *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* movie adaptation, which has been rumored for something like a decade now, finally came out this weekend. How was it?

The Theater-Going Experience

Before you read the rest of this review, a brief disclaimer: I was mildly intoxicated at the movie. I had a couple beers. And some bourbon. This is significantly more than I could drink when I read these books as a kid under the covers with a flashlight. Also, I never read under the covers with a flashlight. My breath was repulsive and suffocating. And I never did the flashlight thing because my parents didn't get all pissy about READING, even if it was at 8:30 PM. Seriously, some parents would stop their kid from creating cold fusion if it happened after 9 PM.

Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark played in a "Luxe" theater. This means that you can have Buncha Crunch that was refrigerated, booze, and assigned seating in reclining chairs. To be fair, booze was available in theaters since the invention of the pocket. So I guess "Luxe" means you can get drunk while wearing bicycle shorts.

Luxe also means you get assigned seats, which is good and bad. Good because you can pick where you sit ahead of time, bad because when someone is occupying your seat, you have to decide

whether or not to ask them to move. I wouldn't bother, except that if I sit in the wrong seat, then someone comes along who bought my new seat, then I have to move and ask someone else to move anyway. It turns seeing a movie into an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. But eventually, after politely-as-possible telling someone that E and F are different letters, I sat down in a body-warmed chair, which is gross. Electronic seat-warmers in the car? Luxury. A stranger warming up a chair (to an alarming degree) with her body? Not as luxurious.



The Movie

The movie stinks. It's bad. It's...

Everything good about it is lifted straight from the books, and everything that's not from the books is a waste of time. I closed my eyes for portions, imagining that every human's eye has a limited number of usage hours, and I didn't want to waste mine on this nonsense.

From the books, we got a scarycrow (combo of "scarecrow" and "scary" that I just invented), a gross version of "The Toe," a lackluster story of spiders hatching from a woman's face (kinda gross, but it wasn't juicy at all. Where's the pus? Where's the blood?), a weird woman, filmed terribly, and a man who may have been scary if he wasn't entirely made out of computer.

What's from outside the book?

A group of kids goes trick-or-treating and tricks the asshole jock with a flaming bag of shit. Mildly charming, but the kids in this movie are really outdone by the casts from *Stranger Things* and the *IT* reboot. The last few years have been an embarrassment of riches when it comes to fun groups of kids in horror, and the *Scary Stories* group feels a little watery, a little bland. We've got the standard kids: funny kid, straight man set to die immediately, girl who has no real traits other than being a girl, and a Latino boy, Ramon.

Which, let's get to that. Ramon is rolling through town, and we're introduced to him as he's hassled by the Sheriff, who all but runs him out of town, Rambo-style for no reason. I think the only reason this kid's Latino is so that we can show that the bad guys in the movie (jock asshole, sheriff) are bad. We already know they're bad, but just in case you didn't get the message from their stock bad guy behavior, they throw a little racism in there. The movie includes a racial element but has absolutely nothing to say about it.

But that's not all. The movie dabbles in about a dozen different "issues," trying them on and discarding them like a female protagonist tries on outfits in a romcom "going out" montage. We've got:

1. The war in Vietnam
2. The draft
3. The election of Richard Nixon
4. Kids blaming themselves for their parents leaving
5. Corporate greed
6. Bullying
7. Being ashamed of a family member because they're "different" (one of the kids says the line "They just did this to her because she was different!" aloud)

Sometimes a movie adds in an element of reality, and it enhances the story to have it going on in the backdrop and/or interrupting the foreground action. It didn't work in *Scary Stories* because we never stuck with any issue long enough to make an impact, and they don't make any parallels with the main story.

This movie's attempts at including relevant issues make *The Purge* look like savvy political commentary. They make *Tucker and Dale Versus Evil* look like *Hillbilly Elegy*.

The irony is rich in that the characters go to a drive-in, and the movie on the screen? *Night of the Living Dead!* A horror movie that in 1968 featured a black protagonist and had the guts to actually talk about race in a horror context. The race issues made that movie better. George Romero had courage in 1968, and it's no coincidence that the results were better for it.

Scary Stories wants to do social issues so badly, and it tries to do them tapas-style. A little of this, a little of that, but never enough of anything. No commitment.

Outside the social issues, the story couldn't be more color-by-numbers if it was a felt poster of animals and rainbows you bought from Hobby Lobby.

There's a half-assed romance between our main character (Girl) and Ramon, which is the least important and least necessary part of the entire movie.

There's a scene where we watch kids go through microfiche at the library. Because that's ALWAYS a thrilling scene. You know, I've never once had a group of teens come into the library where I work and try to find the backstory of some haunted shit. Not once!

There's the "Oh my god, this woman we thought of as a monster was just misunderstood!"

There's that whole "This ghost wants us to do something, but can't tell us directly in a way that we understand, so we'll just try a bunch of shit to appease her and fix this situation."

The overall problem with the movie is, well, the movie. There are about 5 scary stories lifted straight from the books. Those are the good parts of the movie, and they're held together by 90 minutes of unnecessary nonsense. It takes a good half hour before anything remotely scary happens. Then we take a break. Then another story comes in. Then we take a break. It's a mediocre horror movie that is briefly interrupted by a much better movie here and there.

The Visuals

With *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* getting the movie treatment, the big question was always this: Would the ghosts, ghouls, and spook-em-ups be as creepy on the screen as they were in the books?

If we look at the images in the books, they're abstract in a lot of ways. They almost live in a world

The story couldn't be more color-by-numbers if it was a felt poster of animals and rainbows you bought from Hobby Lobby.

LIKE ours, but not quite ours. They're creepy as hell, and a totally underrated achievement in horror.



So, what happens when they enter our world?

The filmmakers do a pretty good job replicating some of the images created by Stephen Gammell. But outside those lifted elements, the movie doesn't have any sort of overall aesthetic. It doesn't have a visual style, and there's a stark difference between the *Scary Stories* portions and the rest of the movie. When the movie is being an adaptation of the books, it looks great. When it tries to be its own thing, it's almost entirely without visual identity.

There's something else. I'm an adult. Chronologically, at least give me that. And there's something, as an adult, creepy about imagining Stephen Gammell creating these images on his own. It's probably nothing like what I picture, but I picture him in a haunted house with a brush, overtaken by a demon, drinking goat's blood to stay hydrated and close to satan. Weird, atmospheric music would be playing in the background. Imagine Tool but with more sounds of adulterers screaming in pain. He's splashing black watercolor paint all over the place, creating in a fugue.

When I think about this as an adult, there's something disturbing about all of the books' illustrations coming from one person, one mind. When I watch a movie where likely dozens of animators worked on the project, where everything was well-lit and child actors were excused from work at the correctly-appointed time, it kills some of the magic. It feels less taboo, less a singular vision than a commercial product.

The Verdict

Skip it. Seriously. If you feel compelled, get it when it's on streaming, watch the parts with the scary stuff. You can use the other 90 minutes to comment on this column, thanking me for saving you the time.

The scary stuff is mostly well-realized, but the stuff in between is boring, and there's A LOT OF IT.

I was thinking during the movie, wondering what I would say about it. For the last 45 minutes,

someone in the theater was snoring. Loudly. This is an unspoken downside of comfortable, "Luxe" seating that I hadn't considered, and also what I would call accurate commentary: Wake me when something cool happens.

Tweak Those Boring, Stereotypical White Dude Characters



Before you label me as some white power weirdo, give me a couple lines.

Or, if you think I'm using "white dudes" as a slur, give me a couple lines.

I see a lot of people who look like me in books, on TV, and in movies.

They look like me, but as soon as they open their mouths or take any sort of action, I see bundles of cliches packaged in white dude bodies. Characters that are tired and boring.

I'm not offended by these characters. I'm not claiming that they've harmed me. I don't think my life is worse when these characters are brought into existence. I'm also not claiming that their real-life inspirations don't exist.

To be honest, this is as much a column about twisting some boring, cliched characters of any race as it is a column about white dudes. It's just that I see a lot of these characters in white dude bods, and I think it's probably because so many writers have seen a white dude as a default, blank-slate human to which a wide range of traits can be applied. There's a mistaken idea that a straight, white, male character can almost serve as a blank canvas for any number of human qualities without any pesky heritage, experience, family issues, or general humanity getting in the way. There's no baggage in making a white dude into just about anything. And yet there seems to be a narrow field of white dudes who emerge over and over.

I want you to know that if you've written one of these dudes, are writing one, or will, I'm not mad at you. That's not why I'm here today. I want to question the overwhelming presence of these characters in fiction, and if you're writing one of them, give you some options to make the character more

interesting, new, or real. You can choose to take or leave those options.

You might notice the options I give for twisting a character in this column aren't along the lines of "Make them NOT white dudes." This isn't because I think you should just write more white dudes. It's A) Because I think you can come up with that on your own, and B) Because I don't think that answer is going to serve you well. Why? Most of the reasons are outlined quite well in a Litreactor column by Andrea J. Johnson (points 1, 2, 7, and 12, especially).

Oh, and I'm not talking to any particular groups of writers here. People who identify as white dudes write stereotypical white dudes all the time. Meanwhile, S.E. Hinton wrote some of the best white dudes ever. Go figure.

There are spots where I'll use TV and movie examples because those are more universal. Books are very specific to readers, but you'll recognize some of these big screen dudes from the books you've read.

Professor Ho-Hum

I think we're good on novels featuring a midlife crisis white dude English professor at an upper-crust-y school.

I'm sure this is an appealing character to a lot of writers as a lot of writers are living this life (or live adjacent to it). And sure, this character appeals to the readers of "literary" fiction because most of them have gone through an English class or two at a university, and the world of this character is familiar to them.

There's a lot of us white dudes out there. Very few of us become college professors, mathematically speaking, even fewer of us work at Harvard, and although most of us do go through some type of midlife crisis, for most of us that crisis isn't made manifest when we're "seduced" by a 20 year-old woman who smokes American Spirits and teaches us life lessons. Most of us don't really understand tenure tracks and don't give a fuck.

I'm yawning just thinking about this character.

The Twist:

You bring a plumber into a room, and they're going to see the room differently than someone who isn't a plumber. You bring in a carpenter, and that carpenter sees the same room differently than the plumber. A painter sees it differently than a carpenter.

An English professor will look at the world like an English professor. Which means an English professor is a boring person to have in the world of your book, books and literature being the normal realm of English professors. An English professor's perspective doesn't add another dimension to a narrative, regardless of whether that perspective is from within the book or outside of it. Set up an English professor to pull his own faucet handles, now we're talking. Put him at the center of a meandering, true-to-life book, and you've given me nothing.

If your professor is a professor of ANYTHING else, math, finance, science, nursing, whatever, then they become multi-dimensional. They see the world differently, and especially see the world of

constructed narrative differently.

Captain Dumb Dad

A term coined by Jesse Thorn to describe Phil Dunphy from *Modern Family*. This is an upper-middle-class white guy with a hot wife, idealized family, and who seems to have bumbled his way to middle-age without enough brains to pour piss out of a boot with directions written on the bottom. This character almost always comes in service of comedy.

I'll also add into this category The Single Dad Who Has No Idea How To Raise A Daughter.

Captain Dumb Dad is a snooze. If the character progresses, we don't really care. If he regresses, it just feels like sliding naturally to where he should be, like water settling at the lowest point. Really stupid water.

We, the reader, all become Frank Grimes, who correctly pointed out that Homer Simpson has no business having the life he does.



The Twist:

Add ANY consistent secondary trait other than "his heart's in the right place." A dumb dad who is malicious is interesting. A dumb dad who is aware he's not all that smart is heartbreaking. Really, adding any secondary emotional dimension to this guy and seeing it through to a logical conclusion takes the character somewhere new.

CEO With A Pistol

Too many crime-y, heist-y plots end with a CEO who, as his plan collapses, grabs a gun, a briefcase full of cash, and climbs a rope ladder onto a helicopter.

People, how many times have you heard of this happening in real life? Which real-life CEO has grabbed up a gun and started spraying as dollar bills flew around him in the helicopter-whipped air?

Is Mark Zuckerberg going to grab a gun at some point? Or is it more likely that he'll just continue to ruin our lives legally via technology? Look at the Fyre Festival guy. He seems like a prime candidate to run off with a briefcase full of money. What did he do when he got busted? He posted bail and started scamming people with fake Taylor Swift meet-and-greet tickets.

I get it, we're not in love with the billionaire CEO right now. But you can make him more interesting.

The Twist:

In *The Office*, Michael Scott is the worst person in his improv class because his characters are always reaching for a gun. Likewise, it's tempting for authors to reach for guns via their characters. RESIST! This is a bad instinct.

Twist this cliché by having your evil billionaire reach for something besides a weapon when the chips are down. Learn the lesson of Rosebud, give your character an object to reach for that tells us

something about him.

The Southern Racist Dummy

Giving a character a southern background is a bad shortcut to making that character A) Racist and/or B) Stupid. It's a bad shortcut we see over and over.

I'm doing some Googling right now, and while I'm not going to name a bunch of racist people here for any of a thousand reasons, in places of birth for some decidedly racist folks I see New York, Boston, Minnesota, England, and even Canada. My home of Colorado has a neighborhood named after a former mayor of Denver, who was a big wheel in the KKK. In the 2013 book *Dataclysm*, the writer claims that Google search inquiries for the N-word were in equal measure in rural areas and big cities.

Point being, let's not pretend like racism is anywhere near the exclusive territory of southern white dudes.

If a character being from the south doesn't lend them anything other than their racism, if racism is the primary character trait of your southerner, then we've seen it. Same goes for stupidity.

The Twist:

Ask yourself: Am I trying to depict a southerner, or am I writing a hillbilly/redneck/person of rural upbringing? Because those aren't the same thing. People from eastern Oregon grew up rural, but they don't have southern accents. People from Kansas City are midwesterners. People from Nebraska ain't southern. People from Mobile and people from Memphis might seem the same to you, but to people who actually live in those places, it's totally different. If your character is meant to be from Arkansas, it's a safe bet he doesn't care for people thinking he's a Louisiana boy, and he would be more than happy to educate you on the differences.

If you're going to write a racist, write a racist. If you're going to write a dunderhead, write a dunderhead. But ask yourself, do they need to be southern? And if so, why? What does being from the south mean for your character other than idiocy and/or racism? What about him is distinctly southern, specific to where he's from? I'm a lot more accepting of a half-assed depiction of a southerner in fiction if you at least tell me he's got strong opinions on whether or not sugar has any business being in cornbread.

The Captain of the Football Team Asshole Jock

Classic Flash Thompson. Kicking sand in a nerd's face. Stuffing a nerd in a locker. Good-looking, the right clothes, with his best girl on his arm. He's got it all! Until the inevitable fall. Because this is fiction, and in fiction people get what they deserve.

This has to be one of the white guy tropes that has most outlasted its time. It's still happening! They pulled this shit in the new *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* movie. It's maddening.

What does being from the south mean for your character other than idiocy and/or racism?

My personal theory is that those of us who are artsy and end up writing fiction are a little bitter about high school. Which is fine, but for the most part, the popular kids didn't hate you (or me). They just didn't notice you (or me).

If you re-watch the first season of *Stranger Things*, you feel differently about Steve Harrington. He seems like kind of a dick when he confronts Jonathan, but look at it from his perspective: Jonathan was taking pictures of Steve and his girlfriend, when they're about to have sex, from the bushes outside the house. Steve doesn't physically attack Jonathan. He calls him out, mocks him, and breaks his camera. I don't know if I feel like this is bullying so much as it's fitting, maybe even taking it pretty easy on Jonathan.

The Steve's of the world don't want to waste their time picking on the Jonathan's of the world. They'll stand up for themselves, but they'd just as soon never bother with the Jonathan's at all. They don't wake up excited to ruin a Jonathan's day. They mostly don't think about a Jonathan ever.

The Twist:

Who makes a better school-age antagonist for your character than the most popular kid in school? Or, can the most popular kid in school become an antagonist for an unexpected reason? Is he a total brainiac and constantly hounding our hero to get something done for a group project? Is he our hero's boss at Pizza Hut? Does the antagonist have to be the person with bigger social clout? Does he have to be physically intimidating?

Even a small high school has hundreds of kids in it. We've seen plenty of captains of plenty of football teams. Give someone else a chance to be a jerk.

The Gamer Who Needs to Grow Up



Putting an Xbox controller into the hands of a white dude in his 30's is narrative shortcut for, "This guy needs to stop being a slacker and start being a grownup." Usually, this means being a better person in his romantic relationship, and oftentimes it means being a father as well. Put down the controller, pick up a baby!

Folks, the days of the controller denoting a slacker are over. MOST white dudes in their 30's and 40's play video games, regardless of whether they're successful business leaders, great fathers, or stoner losers. The people who say they never touch video games are just trying to make a moral point. They're like the English teacher I had who always proudly told classes that he kept his TV in the

closet so he had to haul it out and plug it in every time he wanted to watch it. Dude, give it a rest.

I think we've thoroughly explored the slacker white guy who has some growing up to do. This form of bildungsroman has been done to death, and even though you get a couple laughs out of it, we're all set, thanks.

The Twist:

The real issue with this character is that he tends to reinforce the idea that productive members of society get 9-5 jobs, marry, and...well, produce. It's certainly one way to live, but c'mon, we're fiction writers. We can show people other models of living. That's one of the best things we do!

How can this character be an example for a different model of living?

What if our hero, rather than having a lack of momentum, is purposefully going back and doing things that made him happy as a young person?

What if our hero appears to be a gamer slacker, but in reality is among the hundreds (thousands?) of people making a living from gaming, a living that his parents and people around him can't identify with, respect, or really understand?

What if our hero found out he's distantly related to Hitler, in which case not procreating and not having much impact on society would be, in its own way, heroic?

Okay, once you start bringing in Hitler, you've gone off the rails. Scratch that one.

My point is, we are in no need of another narrative that once again confirms the typical path of an adult by applying a course correction to a slacker. We are in desperate need of other paths.

The Guy Who Just Needs to Learn How to be Smooth

Prime example: *Hitch* starring Will Smith.

Could Will Smith teach me something about happiness? Sorry, happiness? Probably. But c'mon, this character, this average white guy who supposedly needs to learn to be less like himself and more like Will Smith when he's middle-aged? That shit's tired.

By the time a character is in his 40s, he's accepted that he's not smooth, if that's the case. I know that I'm not smooth, and any attempt to deny that fact is just pathetic. Sure, some guys in the 40s think they're smooth. And either they're correct or they're so out of it that they would never think to hire Will Smith because, as far as they're concerned, they're smoother than the Skippy peanut butter that comes in the light blue jar.

The other red flag on this one, if you're writing this white guy, there's a pretty good chance you're writing one of Spike Lee's "Magical Negroes" too. Which, you know, we can also do without.

The Twist:

This character is ALWAYS used to send us the same tired message: Be yourself!

You have your entire, real life to be yourself. Don't be yourself in your fiction, too.

And what are the stakes for this character, really? So he takes some advice, applies it badly, and embarrasses himself in front of a woman. So what? That's what dating is, humiliation until it's not.

Raise the stakes, and stop this character from being himself. What would be the weirdest thing you could imagine your dad doing right now? Becoming very serious about putting out a hip-hop record and selling it HARD on Facebook? Taking a shitload of selfies and trying to become an Instagram influencer? Think about the person in your life who could be smoother, and think about what they could do that you would find shocking, maybe even a little repellent. Go there.

The Swooping-In Rapist

It happens all the time in fiction. If a woman is detained in any way, it's just about a guarantee someone will attempt to molest her. Some guard, someone set to watch her, SOMEONE will throw a leer her way at the very least. Meanwhile, we're all squirming in the theater, watching some shitty action movie and thinking, "No, movie, you didn't earn a rape subplot. Not THIS movie! Just stop!"

A guy in your typical fictional narrative could be a volunteer at a cat shelter, stopping by to check on preemie kittens, and the second he walks in and discovers a woman tied up in the kitten adoption room, he's tearing his belt off and slobbering, driven mad. If everything I knew about the world came from thriller/action plots, I would have to assume that 90% of henchmen are rapists, and the other 10% just haven't gotten the opportunity yet.

The Twist:

If you want to make a bad guy out of a guard or henchman or whatever, that's do-able, and maybe you should think of a different way to go about it. How can this captor be threatening without rape? Can the tension exist without the immediate threat of having someone's pants torn off? It's a little bit like the idea of reaching for the gun we talked about earlier. Don't reach for rape as a tension-heightening tool. Come up with something else.

Indie Comics Review: 'Serious Creatures'



"Would you review my indie comic," might be the scariest request a book reviewer gets. Comics are tough. Before you even think about matters of taste, there are the very basic questions about whether the book is read-able, whether the art is comprehensible, and whether the two can not only co-exist, but enhance each other. It's like reviewing an art installation that boasts some visual art, some soundtrack, and a book of poems you're meant to read in conjunction with certain pieces. You've got the individual parts to look at, plus the way the pieces function alongside each other, plus the way it all comes together as a whole. AND THEN, throw on top of that the fact that when it comes to comics you're reading issue 1 of something with parts to come, so it's like you get to wander through part of the art installation one day, and then you have to assume what's coming next.

I'm trying to help you understand why I was a little hesitant when it came to the first issue of *Serious Creatures* by Tony McMillen, and why I was so delighted to find what I did.

The Super Quick Version

Serious Creatures' first issue is about a young guy who travels to Martha's Vineyard to check out the filming of a little movie called *Jaws*. Now, this was before Spielberg was Spielberg, and it was a little easier for randos to walk around and check out the action. Our hero makes his way to the special effects studio where he meets his hero, special effects wiz Jack Barber. The two nerd out about monsters and monster art.

That's a very fast version, just to give you an idea of what we're talking about. All the emotion and fun have been stripped out in this description, so keep that in mind.

The Writing

I'm enjoying the writing. I'm using that tense, "enjoying" because this is an on-going thing, right?

The writing has a realistic sound to it, and though it goes between the abstract, "life of the mind" portions and the concrete, in-moment stuff, the balance is good. The relationship between the siblings feels real. You sort of bicker with your siblings all the time, probably because you can. It's not like making friends at school where you have to be nice enough to stop repelling people. You're stuck with each other! That's how this feels.



The writing makes nice use of the comics form, too. Comics can do something that other forms struggle with, which is swapping between inner and outer dialog in a seamless, simple way.



There's never been a simpler way to switch from outer to inner than putting a box or cloud around one set of words, dialog balloons around another. It lets the reader switch seamlessly from a third-person to a first-person-ish (or, in some cases, a "close third") perspective, something that comics are underrated for doing and that happens really nicely in this book. Comics that make good use of the options available to comics always get a little credit in my book.

Serious Creatures also plays with time. Some of the narration comes from a later-on version of our narrator, who we don't really see. The adult Kevin Arnold being the closest equivalent. It almost never works in TV or movies, but it can really work in comics to bring out more story. The "I didn't know it then, but now I know..." works better in comics than it does in a novel or on a screen.

The Art

The art might overshadow the writing a little, and that's not because the writing is bad. The art is excellent. It's a watercolor look, moody but also colorful. I'm not a total expert, but I think it's the mixture of bright colors and thick, black lines that really bring the art to life and make it something unique.



Sometimes indie comics struggle in finding a balance. They either look like beautiful art pieces that could go up on the wall, OR you can easily tell what the hell is going on. Sometimes, indie comics manage both, and that's the job, in my opinion, a job Tony McMillen manages and then some.

There's also a great mix of layouts and word placement that give the reader some incentive to slow down and really appreciate what's going on. You can zip through the book, but if you don't, you're rewarded by catching some of the little things, like glasses in place of comics panels.



Nostalgia Done Right

We've seen a lot of nostalgia pieces lately, especially focusing on the 1980's.

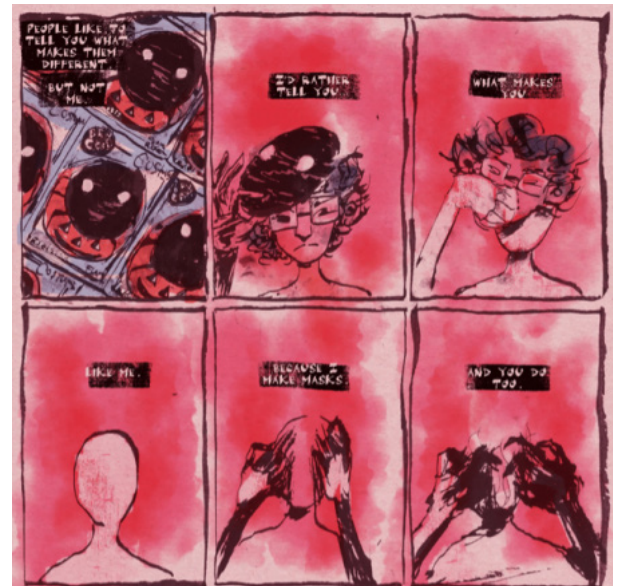
It's getting a little old. Which I guess is the whole point of nostalgia, that it's old, but let's not get caught up in semantics. There are some storytelling reasons that the 80's work really nicely (no internet, no cell phones), and there are some marketing reasons (the folks who are nostalgic for the 80's are in their prime spending years). The result, however, is that there's a bunch of shit set in the past for no real reason. The story could take place in any time, which makes it feel like the setting is just a marketing move.

With *Serious Creatures*, the setting being the mid-70's gave me pause at first. When I'm seeing Pink Floyd and Jaws, I'm thinking, "Here we go."

But what sets *Serious Creatures* apart is that it doesn't stop with namedropping the most famous products of the era. The nostalgia is for creature effects from movies of the time, which is more

niche, more interesting. By making the main source of the nostalgia less universal, it becomes more personal, which (weirdly) makes it feel more universal. Because while not everyone was a student of practical film effects and monster makeup the way our hero, Bobby, in *Serious Creatures* is, lots of us felt strongly about something in that teenage way. And that's why you'll identify with the nostalgia in *Serious Creatures*. It's not about the objects of nostalgia themselves ("Isn't it cool that *Back to the Future* was new at one time?"), but the emotions we felt as young people.

Serious Creatures connects those dots. It digs past "Remember that thing?" and into the place we really want to be: "Remember how that thing made you feel?"



Indie Comics Need to Happen

The biggest thing in comics right now is not comics, it's movies. A huge swath of the best characters are owned by Disney. The comics scene is looking a little..."by committee."

However, that's not necessarily a bad thing. If people aren't concerning themselves with what's happening in funnybooks, that gives funnybooks the freedom to do whatever they want. It means that indies can rise. They can be weird and niche. They don't have to look, sound, or feel at all like their on-screen counterparts. If fewer people care about something, it's wide open for just about anybody to tell just about any kind of story they want.

Which is exactly how *Serious Creatures* operates.

Indie comics can have a moment right now, and I hope they do.

Books like *Serious Creatures* deserve a spot on your to-read list. Whether it's because you were intrigued half-way through this column or because you want to support indie art, *Serious Creatures* fits the bill. Pick it up now.

Sell Books, Get Noticed: Google Analytics for Authors



This is some seriously unsexy stuff. Buckle up.

We all know that Google, Facebook, what have you, all of them are doing some weird, creepy data tracking. And it's probably no coincidence that the outlets doing the most data tracking are also tremendously successful. Data is power. Data is currency.

They own your ass, is what I'm saying.

This leaves you, the average Joe, with two options:

Rage against the machine

-or-

Use the machine

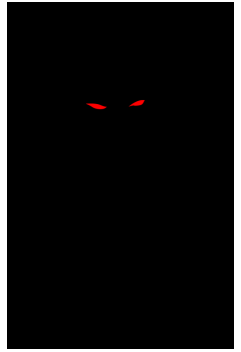
Google Analytics is a pretty astonishing tool, especially because it's free! You don't even have to pay for it, and you can get all kinds of data about your website's users, people you might go ahead and call "fans."

With a little bit of learnin', you can start collecting and using data from your author website to push your newsletter to new heights, figure out where people are falling off in the book-buying process, and see just how much your social media time is paying off.

Not convinced? Let me tell you how Google Analytics can help.

Why This Isn't Evil

Learning how people are finding and using your website assists them. Think about it. If you discover that 80% of users who end up on your main page are immediately going to your "Books" page, you can save them time by changing your site so the "Books" page serves as your landing page. If you spend A LITTLE time learning how to use Google Analytics, you can save each of your fans a little time and energy, which adds up to A TON of time and energy. Time and energy they can use to read your stuff.



You aren't tricking people into buying your books, reading your work, or doing anything they don't want to do. I don't have any advice for flashing subliminal They Live! messages on your site. It's nothing that sinister. You're interpreting user behavior and tailoring your site to make it easier for them to accomplish the things they're looking to do anyway. If that just happens to help your bottom line? Seems like a win-win proposition.

The last pitch I'll make on this front, before you decide whether or not it's evil, learn more about it. Don't just say, "Big data? That's evil." Find out what it is first.

Setting Up Google Analytics

It's simple: sign up, get a code, and start tracking.

Even if you're not interested in the other steps listed below or interested in the data right now, take 10 minutes and set this up today. Why? Because Google Analytics starts tracking data when you put the code on your site, but it can't reach into the past. So, you can always go back and poke around in previously-collected data, but you can't create data from a time before you started collecting.

Think about it like this: Say I run a small bookstore, Pete's Print Hole. I want to see whether my new commercial, a HILARIOUS send-up of Demolition Man, is bringing more foot traffic into my store, so I set up a digital counter that tallies everyone that walks in. In order to know how effective my commercial is, however, I would need to set up that door counter months before the ad runs, right? In order to give me some baseline data? The more baseline data I have, the easier it'll be to figure out how good an investment a screen-worn Glen Shadix costume really was.

You might not have the time or inclination to do any online campaigning, to create a commercial, to open a bookstore with "Hole" in the name, but you DO have the time to set up Google Analytics now, which will really help you out if you decide to do any of these things in the future.

I'll even give you links to some of the most common quick guides to getting set up on different platforms:

- Wordpress
- Weebly
- Squarespace
- Tumblr

Learning

Most of the specific things I'm talking about are linked to lessons from Google's Analytics Academy, which is free, takes a couple hours, and will get you going. Here is the link to the overall site. If you're totally lost, start from scratch, spend a little time, and you'll be a pro lickety-split. If you already know a little bit, feel free to follow the specific links and do it buffet-style.

Technology

Figuring out your users' preferred technology is important. Why? If your audience is viewing your web site on a mobile device, then you need to retool your site to look good on a phone. We all build these things on a full-size screen, but we should probably be paying attention to how they look on a phone, if that's where people are coming from. Take a look at your technology stats, see where people are coming from, and adjust accordingly.

You might also look at your bounce rate under the technology tab and find out whether you're bouncing a disproportionate number of users on mobile devices versus desktop users, which might tell you that your mobile site leaves something to be desired. Don't know much about Bounce Rate? Fine, read on.

Bounce Rate

This is the percent of people who hit your web site and immediately, well, bounce.

But what does this mean? It CAN mean that someone showed up and didn't find what they were looking for. It CAN mean that people are being funneled to your site by something that your site isn't intended for, something that's not helping you out.

You'll always have some bounce because people go to your site mistakenly, drunkenly, or while making a sober mistake (I GUESS that's possible). And, if your site is a one-stop, one page affair, then a higher bounce rate is less concerning.

If you have an exceptionally high bounce rate, consider looking into the things that bring people to your site, and dig deeper to figure out why they aren't hooked by what you have to offer.

Interests

The interests of your site's users shouldn't determine the books you're writing. But those interests could DEFINITELY inform some of the content that goes up on your site. If people are coming to your site and are interested in movies, then it's a decent bet that a little movie-related content might convince them to hang around a little longer. Maybe this informs what you put in your newsletter. Maybe what you talk about on Twitter.

Point being, I wouldn't advise writing entire books to your existing audience based on their interests, but what you do online isn't writing books, it's marketing. Why not figure out what gives you the reach you're looking for?

Conversions

In sales, a conversion is basically turning someone from a browser into a buyer.

On your site, you can drill pretty deep into conversions. You could set up tracking for just about any action. Clicks on a button, watching a video, filling out a form. Whatever weird crap you might want them to do, you can set up code that tracks whether or not they're doing it. Once you set up the goal in Analytics, you can watch how various actions affect the number of conversions. You can see where in the process people are getting hung up. You can even see which things are assisting in conversions, what those middle steps are, the John Stocktons of your sales process (anyone?).

It's not just about sales. You can track who signs up for your newsletter. You can track who clicks the little button at the bottom of your page that says "DO NOT CLICK!" Do people still have those? Is that a late 90's thing?

Measure Campaigns

Let's say you're putting out a book about, oh, I dunno, a terrible paranormal detective. So you decide it's time to put a little money into campaigning.

One of the really useful things you can do with Google Analytics is track your campaigns with data that's much better than, "Well, I guess I had slightly better sales..." You can see where people came from before they hit your web site, what they were doing, how they behaved once they arrived. You can compare campaigns and easily see how successful they are.

Basically, you can see whether you're getting a good return on that campaign investment. Which makes it easy to put some campaign energy into different outlets, different methods, and compare where you're getting the best for your money, your time, or both.

Google Analytics can answer the hard question: Am I spending my time well?

Be Smart on Social Media

Are you on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram? Of course you are. I know some of you are too cool for Facebook and would never admit it, but everyone's there. Let's be adults about this.

Analytics will help you figure out which social media platform is driving the most traffic your way. You can use this data in a variety of ways. Maybe your Twitter game is strong, so you double down. Maybe your Twitter game is strong, so you start looking to Instagram as an untapped resource.

However you look at it, just make sure you do, in fact, look at it. It's very tempting for most of us to spend a little too much time on social media "working" when what we're really doing is fooling around. Google Analytics can answer the hard question: Am I spending my time well?

You can take this further as well, going beyond raw numbers of visitors to find out which sources bring you the most valuable traffic. Maybe a lot of people visit your blog from Twitter, but when people find your site via Instagram, they are a lot more likely to stick around, to click on other pages,

subscribe to a newsletter, or to buy (and therefore, perhaps, are a more “valuable” audience to court). There are a few different ways to look at the value of a given audience, and you should take advantage of them.

Timing

Analytics can tell you when people are using your site and help you make a timing decision.

Traditional techniques would tell you it’s smart to send out your newsletter just before your web site usage peaks for the day. That way, you’re giving your new content that little kick in the ass at the time when it can just be a LITTLE kick in the ass. When people only need A LITTLE nudge to look at your great site.

You can also use this to schedule posts to make sure they’re ready for those who come to your site, hungry for new content.

When are people inclined to visit your site already? Let the data tell you, and be ready for them.

Remarketing

This is where things start to get a little complicated, but stay with me.

Google Analytics offers some powerful tools to do what’s called Remarketing. Remarketing is about creating ads targeting those people who ALMOST bought something, maybe spent a lot of time poking around, but ultimately didn’t pull the trigger.

This might not be a huge population, however consider that they were ALMOST there. They might only require a small, extra shove to get them to buy. They might be the people who respond to a slight discount, a package deal, or any small incentive. In other words, you might be able to sell a fair number of people with a small effort. At the very least, it’s an alternative to the shotgun approach of advertising.

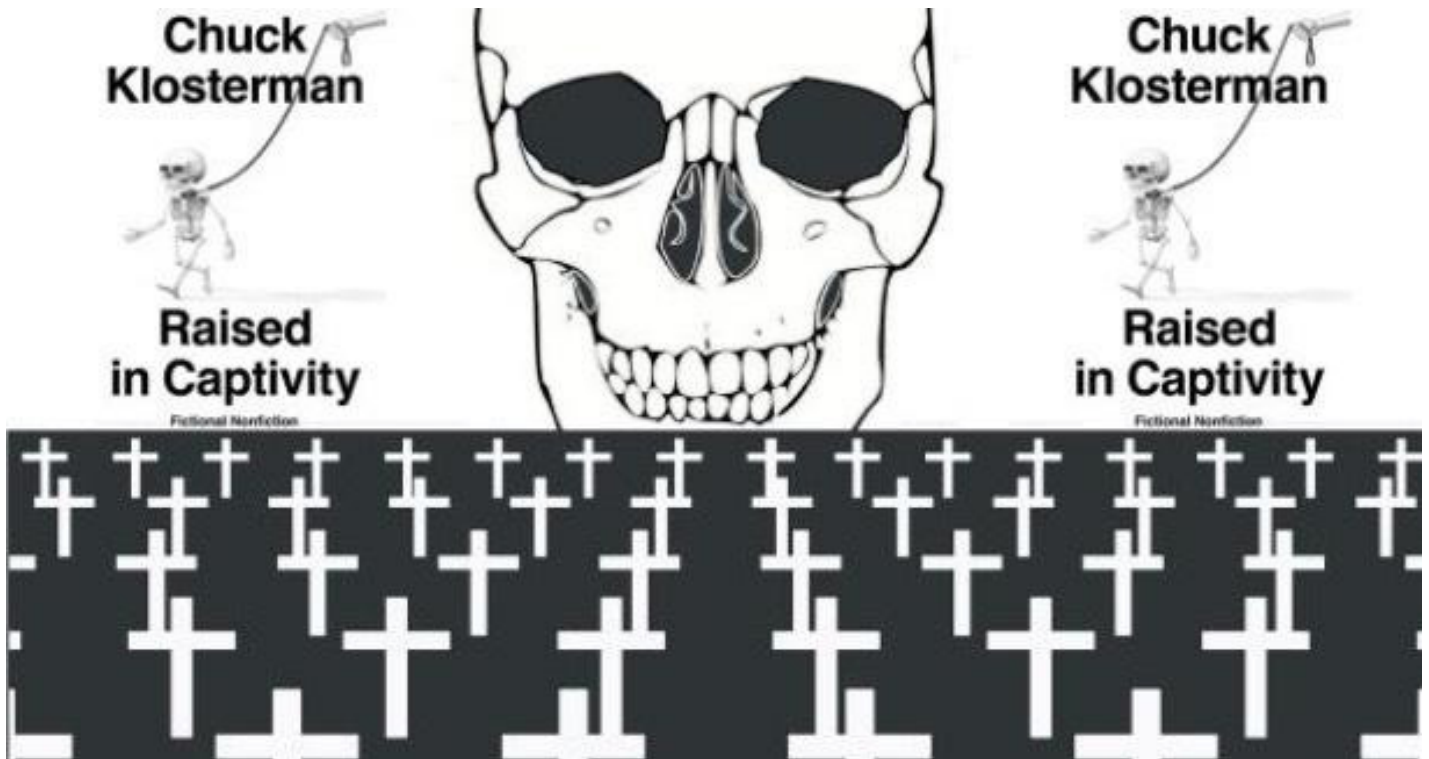
Troubleshooting

If you’re selling directly from your site, good for you, first of all. Second, why not find out where most people are dropping out of the checkout process?

This can be extremely valuable because there may be a technical issue with your site that is throwing a lot of potential buyers. There might be a weird button location or some kind of looping glitch that’s frustrating a good number of folks. If you add shipping costs, you might be able to see that this is what’s changing minds. If nothing else, get peace of mind that people aren’t ignoring your stuff because it stinks. Maybe it’s because of a technical issue.

This is just the tip of the nerdberg, but taking a little time to work with hard data gives you a leg up as an author, and it’s a tool the big boys are using to crush you. Why not do some crushing of your own? I really do recommend Google’s Analytics Academy. You’ll find out that you’ve got options you never thought possible.

Chuck Klosterman's "Raised In Captivity" Kills The Short Story



The best part about Chuck Klosterman writing a new book is that I get to hear him on a bunch of podcasts. Well, no, that's not true. The best part of Chuck Klosterman writing a new book is the new Chuck Klosterman book. But hey, I'm a fan. There can be more than one good thing.

Chuck Klosterman's newest is called *Raised in Captivity: Fictional Nonfiction*, and when it came out Klosterman made the podcast rounds. As you can imagine, that Fictional Nonfiction subtitle was the source of a lot of questioning. Because...what the hell does it mean? Why would someone create that? How does someone create that?

Once I listened to what Klosterman said, and once I read the book for myself, it was clear what he meant to do with it. And it was clear that he did something else, too. Something I can't imagine he intended.

Chuck Klosterman killed the traditional short story.

The Explanation

Fictional nonfiction isn't that complicated once you get it. After you understand, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. I guess that's true of everything. Knitting isn't that complicated once you get it, but when I tried it, it just seemed like magic. You put a string over another string and that makes a sweater? The fuck?

Raised in Captivity started with an experiment. Chuck decided to write 100 stories, each 1,000 words long. He worked on each story for a week, then moved onto the next (in one interview, an interviewer

noted, "This seems like a very Chuck Klosterman idea." Chuck's response: "Well, I'm Chuck Klosterman.").

Of course, once you get into the practicalities of publishing something like this, it doesn't work. You have to get the stories edited, and then the edits have to be incorporated while maintaining exactly the right number of words. At the end of the day, it's a monumentally impractical effort that almost nobody would care about outside a very small circle of fiction wonks who enjoy the experiments of Padgett Powell and Robert Coover. I also wonder if Klosterman realized that what he was doing with fictional nonfiction was far more interesting than a mathematical literary achievement, but even from my stance as obsessive fanboy, that's not been made clear.

Klosterman abandoned the rigid structure, retaining the stories themselves. *Raised in Captivity* was born of those efforts, and the result is a book of crisp, quick stories.

Fictional nonfiction is, as Chuck puts it, different from a collection of short stories by George Saunders or Ann Beattie. If you really like those and are expecting something similar, you're going to be confused when you pick up *Raised in Captivity*.

Each story in the collection takes a premise, sets it into our world, and then sees how it plays out in as realistic a way as possible. One anomalous, interesting event or idea has to be reconciled with the real world and the way real people might react.

One story brings you into a world like our own EXCEPT our main character encounters a puma in an airplane bathroom. This setup isn't out of the question in any number of short story collections, but it's the way the situation plays out that makes this story different. Instead of the puma emerging and attacking (horror story) or being a big metaphor for something else (literary story) or giving advice to a ptarmigan (that one David Sedaris book), the man who finds the puma closes the bathroom door, returns to his seat, and engages in a discussion with his seatmate about what he saw. They talk theories. Is it really there? If we assume yes, what are the most likely explanations?

So, to reiterate, a fictional premise (puma in the bathroom (to the tune of "Mirror in the Bathroom")) is lived out by fictional characters (who don't actually exist but mostly behave in very realistic ways and feel like very real people), who address the situation in a realistic fashion. That's the core of fictional nonfiction.

That's what it is. But why does it kill the traditional short story?

These Stories Kill Interpretation

Each story from *Raised in Captivity* is the antithesis of that story some fool brought into your fiction writing class. The story that probably had a title with a number, a scientific term, something raunchy, and a non-English word ("Synaesthetic Pussy Caesura #248"). The story that had an interesting phrase or two, but after the class discussed it for half an hour, you became more and more sure that the "real meaning" of the story was that this dope forgot it was his turn to workshop until about 2

A fictional premise is lived out by fictional characters who address the situation in a realistic fashion.

hours before class, slapped some crap together, and passed it off as artsy.

I'm harsh on this stuff. Still bitter.

We make two mistakes when it comes to stories that are very abstract. The first, we forget that while this stuff is fun to write, it's crappy to read. And seriously, do you think someone is going to stand around in a bookstore, shelves and shelves full of options, and try and figure out what the hell is going on in your story? Fuck no. Which isn't to say that commercialism is the only reason to write, but to say that this is the sort of thing you should do at home, alone, and not bother other people with. It's like playing scales on the trumpet. Good to do, great practice, but don't jump on stage and waste a roomful of peoples' time.

The second mistake, we confuse impenetrable with interesting. Klosterman is writing in a form that is quick, entertaining, and he makes the point over and over: clarity doesn't make genuinely interesting things less interesting. Because Klosterman has interesting things to say, he doesn't have to be obtuse.

These Stories Get To The Point

Lydia Davis writes stories that are clear. I know what's happening. I understand the physical action. But I ALWAYS feel like I didn't get the point.

Don't get me wrong, there's a part of me that loves this now and again. I like my Lydia Davis stories when I'm in the mood. I like my Harvey Pekar. But sometimes it feels like short stories mess around with obscuring the point because maybe, MAYBE, they don't really have one.

Klosterman's stories don't play that game. They get to the point. You won't find yourself asking that classic short story question: Why does this exist?

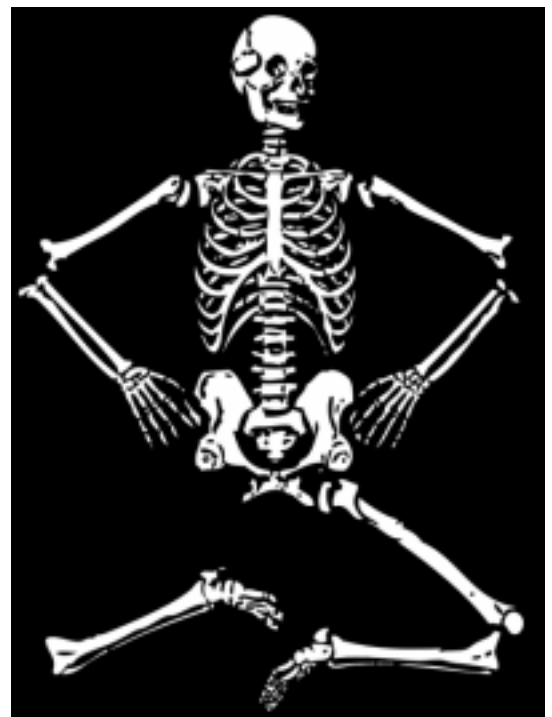
Something to Talk About

If you want to have a TERRIBLE book club meeting, read a book of literary short stories. Short stories, I love you, but you don't make for great discussion.

When you read a book of short stories for a book club, it's hard to know what to talk about. Usually this is made worse by some lady name "Marie" who didn't even read the stories, looked up academic articles ABOUT the stories, makes everyone else feel small by sharing her analysis, and leaves the book club the moment the booze runs dry.

Klosterman's book isn't like that. *Raised in Captivity* would make an incredible book club read. Because most of the stories seem designed specifically to give you something to talk about.

In one story ("Blizzard of Summer"), a rock band writes a song that performs reasonably well for a time, then becomes



EXTREMELY popular with white power groups. The song was 100% not intended for this, does not contain any references to race or politics, and the group is as confused about it as anyone. Why this song became a hit among white power folks is a complete mystery to everyone in the story. So the question in the story is, "Now what do we do?" Do we stop playing the song? Do we give a little speech before performing it in concert? If we stop playing it, does that mean we've sort of turned it over to the movement that we don't want to be associated with? We have to say SOMETHING, obviously, but what do we say?"

That, to me, is interesting to talk about. What would you do? How would you handle it? What are the options? Would the world believe the band?

Klosterman has created short stories that ask the reader questions about themselves, making the reading experience closer to a dialog in a genuine, fun way.

That's the ultimate killing blow for the traditional short story. Instead of making it about him, Klosterman takes up his space on the page, then turns that space over to the reader. The reader doesn't have to finish up the story through interpretation or analysis. The reader can grab a beer with a friend and talk about one of these stories in an almost "would you rather?" kind of way.

Enough Drama

I'm being a bit dramatic when I say Klosterman has "killed" the short story. I'm sure there's many a short story yet to come, many in the forms I talked about in negative terms above.

I think what Klosterman has really done (which doesn't lend itself to a pithy column title) is to offer readers and writers an alternative.

Readers: You don't have to read dense short stories in order to be engaged. You don't have to research an author to find out what a story is really about. An experience of fun and an experience of depth are not at odds.

Writers: You don't have to use metaphor and analogy. Language can do something other than distract from your ideas (or lack thereof). You can write a fictional story in a non-fiction style, and in a lot of cases, this might be the perfect marriage of style and substance.

Everyone: Instead of being at odds, fiction and nonfiction can combine and create something new, engaging, entertaining, and deep. Write your local library and demand they mash up both sections immediately. Cite this article.

Finish Your Manuscript With Project Management



"I'm going to write a novel" is a project that needs breaking down. Breaking it down separates the dreamers from the do-ers.

I'm going to single out some of the project management processes that I think will help you finish a manuscript. Just know a couple things:

1. This is not a substitute for actual project management training. People study this stuff for years. Think of this like me giving you a few cooking tips. Don't run off and open a restaurant, but this'll make your food at home a little better.
2. This is through the lens of me. Filtered through a writer, applied to the specific project of creating a manuscript, and adapted to be useful out of context with the vast system of project management. Don't get all pissy with me if you feel like my version of these steps is simplistic or off. It's meant to be useful to writers, not project managers.

Is A Codified System The Enemy Of Creativity?

Some people look at a business-oriented approach like project management as anti-creative.

Let's talk reality. The idea that you can just write "when the muse strikes" is kinda juvenile. I mean, sure, it works for some people. Chuck Palahniuk is famous for saying he doesn't sit down in front of a blank sheet of paper unless he feels like writing, or, as he puts it, you don't sit on the toilet when you don't have to shit. But the thing is, he's a unique guy. It seems like the urge to write hits him A LOT. Whether or not this means he takes a lot of shits is uncertain, but you need to ask yourself, if you

wrote only when you felt inspired, how often would you write?

Also, think about efficiency. Ask any writer with a full-time job and a side hustle, any writer who has kids. If you codify and structure your creative process a bit, you spend less time remembering where you left off, worrying about peripheral concerns, and you can use what little time you have to get shit done.

Develop Your Charter -or- Mountain

In this case, I want a clear statement about what your project is. "Finish a Manuscript."

This is your mountain, as Neil Gaiman put it. Gaiman said he thinks about his work as The Mountain. You see this Mountain in the distance, and whenever you have a decision to make, you think about The Mountain and ask yourself, "Does this option take me one step closer to the mountain, a step further away, or is this a lateral move?" If the answer is anything but a step closer, then it's a waste of time.

Write your charter/statement on a notecard, a sheet of paper, or a whiteboard. Live with it a few days. See if it fits. Then, declare it your Mountain.

Define Scope

If the charter outlines what your project is, the scope helps you figure out what your project isn't.

Draw a circle around your charter statement. This represents your scope. As you move forward and have weird ideas, decide whether they fit inside or outside the circle.

For example, if your charter statement is "Complete a manuscript," then "Become a famous novelist" doesn't belong within the circle. Write it outside the circle. It can live there in fantasy world, outside this project.

"Write a book that lives up to expectations of my last book," is another one that falls outside the scope of "Write a manuscript." Write this outside the circle, remind yourself what you're really doing.

Becoming famous, being commercially successful, farting FAR less, these are all legit projects, but they're outside the scope of writing a manuscript. Eyes on the prize.

Assets and Environment

If your manuscript is your baby, this is where you consider the world you're bringing this baby into. This is where you ask the tough question: Can this baby thrive in the current environment?

How many hours a day could you potentially devote to the project?

Becoming famous, being commercially successful, farting FAR less, these are all legit projects, but they're outside the scope of writing a manuscript.

What do you have that will help you in terms of hardware, software, STUFF in general? What is your experience/skill level? What is the general level of support within the culture of your organization (your household, your workplace, whatever). Are there laws that might help or hurt the project (can you qualify for a tax break on a home office?)? In the case of writing a book, how many hours are there in a day that are unusable because you're sleeping, working, whatever?

This is a critical stage. Why? Because you need to look at what you've got and honestly decide whether you have what you need. Desire to write a book is great, but it's not enough. Writing a book is a big deal. Don't start your hike towards the mountain without enough water to last you awhile.

Estimating Activity Durations

"How long should my rough draft take?" isn't an easy question to answer, but that doesn't mean you have to make up a bullshit number. Allow me to introduce the 3-Point Estimate or Average MOP, as I like to call it.



Start with your Most Likely. When, based on your historical output, do you think you'll be done? 12 months? Call this M.

Then, give me an Optimistic. If everything went right, if the stars aligned and you cranked out 1,000 words a day, when would you finish? 9 months? Let's call that O.

Pessimistic. If things go wrong, if it took longer than you thought, what would that look like? 24 months? We'll call this P.

Math time. Take your MOP (Most Likely, Optimistic, and Pessimistic), add them up, and average the total. This looks like $(M + O + P) / 3$. And no, this isn't one of those idiotic online quizzes where you argue with people who don't remember their order of operations.

Real world example, my Most Likely (M) is 12 months for a completed manuscript. My Optimistic (O) is 9 months. My Pessimistic (P) is 24 months. Add all three together and you get 45 months for my MOP. Divided by 3 is 15 months. 15 months is my Average Mop.

Hang onto this Average MOP, and hang onto its individual components. That way, you can monitor your progress and make better estimates next time. It's not perfect, but it's a hell of a lot better than taking a total shot in the dark.

Not Meeting Deadlines? A Couple Techniques

Maybe your self-imposed deadline isn't being met, or maybe you have a deadline that is imposed by someone else. Either way, you can speed things up.

Crashing:

Throw resources at the problem. If you throw more time at the project, you might make up for being behind. Maybe you're a slow typist. Can you pay someone to transcribe for you? Throw money at the problem. What resources do you have, and which can you burn to make more time?

Fast-Tracking:

This is where you take things that are normally done one after the other and do them at the same time. Fast-tracking always increases a project's risk. For example, editing chapter 1 while writing chapter 2 is risky because you might waste time making changes to chapter 1 that end up needing to be changed back. But, hey, if you need to get something done, it's an option.

Risk Management

Outline what could go wrong. Not EVERYTHING, not stuff like, "A pilot could be flying and smoking a cigarette, and then the cigarette goes in his eye and he crashes through the ceiling of my apartment and my computer blows up and then my manuscript is lost." Think realistically. Is it likely, in the course of a year, that you'll get derailed by a vacation? Yes. Illness? Yes.

Then, think about how you're going to manage those risks. Think, before you're in the heat of the moment, what you're going to do when you lose momentum because you spent three days hugging a toilet. What's the plan? What's the plan when and if your computer breaks? Can you manage that risk now by putting away some cash for a replacement? Can you buy a bluetooth keyboard and type into your phone?

Give yourself 3-5 very likely risks, then come up with 3-5 good solutions.

Close Project

When your project is "Write a manuscript," you will finish. And when you do, close out that project. Consider getting it published a different project or a different phase, but don't let one bleed into the other.

Take this time to evaluate. How'd it go? What did I learn? What should I do differently next time? Can I cry slightly less? Do I need to shut my cat out of the room because cats love laptops almost to the point that I've started wondering whether humans evolved to create laptops so that cats could sit on them?

And take a little time to celebrate. You did it. You completed the project. Shut the lid on that laptop, open the lid on a beer. Closing the project gives you a definitive party point. Don't let it blow by.

Revisiting The Twilight Phenomenon



When I started looking into the history of the *Twilight* phenomenon, I didn't set out to piss EVERYONE off by saying that *Twilight* ain't so bad. But that's about to happen.

It was easy to hate *Twilight* at its height. Its Twi-height, as I call it. Because I'm clever.

When you go to Target and there are Team Jacob t-shirts all over, it's slightly annoying. When you see some of the other big books that came out in 2005 (*The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *The Glass Castle*, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, *No Country for Old Men*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted*) *Twilight's* top spot seems unearned.

When I was running a middle school book club around 2007, *Twilight* was the shit. And that's what they decided to read, which meant I was supposed to read it. I read about twenty pages before I gave up.

I get it. I was annoyed, too. I didn't want sparkly vampires, and they were EVERYWHERE.

But after fourteen years, the annoyance fades into the background. I'm annoyed by new and different things now. And I can look at the whole *Twilight* thing with a little more clarity.

Let's Get The Weird Shit Out Of The Way

Twilight is bonkers in many respects. Let's look at some of my favorites bonkers-isms.

A 109-year-old vampire falls in love with a high-schooler

I think we made the wrong judgment here. A one hundred and nine year-old vampire dating a seventeen year-old is creepy and weird, but it's also fictional and not something to spend time

thinking about. It's not like teenage girls are suddenly going to have a hankering for centenarians and that would be "normalized" by *Twilight*. I think the weirder, more fucked-up choice would be if Edward was, say, forty eight. A forty eight year-old dating a seventeen year-old is creepier because it could actually happen.

The Birth

In what has to be one of the weirdest love triangles of all time, a werewolf falls in love with a girl who is in love with an old man vampire. But it turns out the werewolf isn't in love with the girl, he's "imprinted on" her unborn baby. Who is named Renesmee, is super strong, and can speak seven days after she's born. She will reach full physical maturity when she's seven, appearing about seventeen, and will stop aging. Whether or not the baby could then bang werewolf boy and have a baby with him is a question that's been asked, but remains unanswered as Meyer says she might want to go there in the future. Weird on so many levels.

Vampire Ultra-Violence

Recently, I caught part of one of the *Twilight* movies. And...it was amazing. A bunch of vampires met in a field, started brawling, and then started decapitating each other, barehanded. They were flying around and tearing each others' heads off. Enormous werewolves jump in. It was like some *Lord of the Rings* shit crossed with *Ash Versus Evil Dead*. I sat with my mouth open, and when the violence was over, I asked my girlfriend, "Hold on. Is this what *Twilight* is!? Has this been it all along and I've been missing it!?" Turns out, no, this is an outlier scene in a series of movies that doesn't really fit with the tone of the rest. Sort of like the end of *Rogue One* where it turns into a Star Wars horror movie for about thirty seconds.



Sparkly Vampires

It's sort of annoying that *Twilight* vampires seem so flawless. However, the Sexy Vampire isn't nearly exclusive to *Twilight*. Nobody seems to complain about Kate Beckinsale as a sexy vampire in *Underworld*, which came out a few years later. Or Wesley Snipes in *Blade* (although he's half-vampire, so maybe the human half was the sexy half?). *True Blood* has more sexy vampires than you can shake a sharpened oak stick at. The Sexy Vampire didn't start or end with *Twilight*.

Everything has silliness. *Ghostbusters* has a ghost blowjob scene that makes no sense in an otherwise perfect movie. Harry Nilsson's "Everybody's Talkin'" has that weird section where he just goes, "Wooh, wah wo wah wah." If we look at everything like Karnak from the *Inhumans*, looking for the flaws only, we'll find them, and we'll never enjoy a damn thing.

I'm not here to say *Twilight* is perfect literature. Just that art isn't defined by its flaws.

Yes, I'm aware I used the word "art."

The Harry Potter Generation Grew Up

Sex was almost entirely absent in the world of Harry Potter.

If you started in on *Harry Potter* when the first book came out, if you were in first or second grade, then you were about fourteen or fifteen when *Twilight* hit shelves. I suspect *Twilight* was the next step for a lot of readers who grew up following a group of ultra-chaste wizards.

While *Twilight* is oddly puritanical in some ways, it's a step in the direction of a more adult world, one where sex is a little bit exciting, a little bit threatening, still a bit taboo, but where it certainly exists.

Even so, *Twilight* is in a no-win situation. If you want hardcore sex, *Twilight* isn't going to cut it. Meyer herself said, "I don't think teens need to read about gratuitous sex." *Twilight* is a throwback, sex as a sort of background noise that fades in and out rather than full-frontal jackhammering. Sex-wise, *Twilight* is almost Victorian. In fact, when it came out, Kirkus criticized Edward's character by saying he was "overly Byronic."

But for the puritanical, *Twilight's* raunchy as hell, inappropriate for kids, and banned time and again for being TOO sexy.

Here's my theory: *Twilight* is for people stepping into the awkward, weird world of teenage sexuality where you hear A THOUSAND different things about how you should act, how you should feel, and how it's "supposed" to work, and it's for people looking to remember life in that space.

Dare I say that Stephanie Meyer is in touch with those feelings in a way that most adults aren't? And that she re-created it better than most of us are able? Dare I say that the folks at Kirkus don't understand novels for teens as well as Stephanie Meyer?

I'm saying that maybe we didn't get it.

The Forgotten Books

Most of what's talked about in terms of *Twilight* comes from the main novels, *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*.

There are, however, some significant spin-offs and oddities.

The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner

A short novel (I guess that was explained in the title) that came out a couple years after the final entry, *Breaking Dawn*, functions to add some backstory from another character's perspective. It didn't quite make the splash of the others, however it was available to read free online for about a month and still managed to hit it big on most bestseller lists and to compete for several sales records. Meyer also donated a buck from each copy to The American Red Cross, and those who read it online were prompted to donate, if they chose, and probably threw a million bucks at relief efforts

in Haiti and Chile. Readers might've been ambivalent, but I'm betting that the recipients of the aid couldn't give a fart in high wind about what *Publishers Weekly* thinks of the book.

Midnight Sun

This novel, *Twilight* as told from Edward's perspective, was partially written when the first dozen chapters were leaked online. At which point Meyer felt she couldn't finish, at least without waiting until everyone forgot about it. She wrote *Life and Death: Twilight Reimagined* in the meantime, and right about the time she felt ready to get back into *Midnight Sun*, she saw that *Grey*, a retelling of *Fifty Shades of Grey* from Christian Grey's perspective, had been released. Meyer was understandably pissed. First E.L. James rips off *Twilight*, then she rips off the idea for the follow-up? Word of *Midnight Sun* has all but dried up since.

Fifty Shades of Grey

Most of us can't forget that *Fifty Shades* started life as *Twilight* fanfiction. We could talk all day about the pluses and minuses of *Fifty Shades*, but we have to acknowledge something here: What series, other than *Twilight*, was a phenomenon itself AND inspired a direct ripoff that was also a phenomenon?

Life and Death: Twilight Reimagined

Basically, we've got a gender-swapped *Twilight*.

It might've been before its time, a little too early to catch the wave of gender-swapped movie and comic book heroes that we saw in the early 2010's. I seriously wonder if people didn't really get it, which is an INSANE thing to say about a Stephanie Mayer book, but there you have it.

Or, it could've been after its time. I think the *Twilight* generation was done with *Twilight* by the time it came out.

It was also hurt by speculation that the whole thing was a cheap find and replace, a cash grab, because other than a couple necessities, the text is almost identical.

It's another no-win situation. If you completely change the narrative, then isn't that saying there's an inherent role to be played by different genders in society? But if you simply swap roles, you're lazy.

This one was in a weird space, publication-wise. Its audience had aged out, its timing wasn't right, and although it might have said some interesting things about gender by nature of its existence, it would never be seen as a serious work, and therefore isn't likely to show up in any gender studies curricula. It's a book without a niche.

Success

I'm not arguing that *Twilight* is important because it was commercially successful. That's like the argument that Kim Kardashian is brilliant because she's rich. Plenty of dopes are rich.

I'm arguing that *Twilight* resonated. It was a BOOK THAT PEOPLE READ.

The "everyone is reading it" phenomenon is becoming lesser and lesser to the point I'm afraid it's dying out. *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Da Vinci Code*. These were books that turned into phenomena. Everyone was talking about them. You'd wait months to get a copy from the library. People lined up to buy them.

Are there other huge books today? Absolutely. But they're huge in the world of books, not in the world, as a whole. You'll have an occasional *Where the Crawdads Sing* that penetrates into the world of regular folk, but just barely.

Twilight wasn't just commercially successful, it was perhaps one of the last novels that can genuinely be called a cultural phenomenon.

Snobbery

Folks who are snobby about books hate *Twilight's* success. Because, okay, sure, the prose isn't highly-structured. It's not the most thoughtfully-written thing on Earth. If a copy was put on the Mars Rover, I would still be unwilling to bet that it was the most thoughtfully-written book on Mars. Hey, there may have been life on Mars at one point, right? That could string together a solid narrative?

Book snobs hate *Twilight* because they feel that it's not a good representation of what they love about books. They cringe at the thought of people thinking of *Twilight* as Literature.

Twilight was never meant for book snobs. And as much as books aren't defined purely by popularity, they aren't defined by book snobs either.

Twilight was huge and important in its time. *Twilight* will have a place in history as a defining text in the rise of teen/YA literature. It's made a huge dent in the universe of books.

Twilight is a thing. Hating it is like hating the weather. You can do it, sometimes it's sorta fun, but it's ultimately stupid and fruitless. You and I are smaller than *Twilight*. Our opinions on *Twilight* will never compare to the juggernaut that is the actual material.

If you hate *Twilight*, I have a suggestion for you: Make your own thing that's better. Piling on with everyone else, your voice gets lost in a sea of voices saying the same things. And probably with crappier jokes. Because my jokes are awesome.

Twilight hate just isn't aging well. Make something that will.

What's With Stephen King and Farts?



Farts. Flatulence. Toots.

Breaking Wind. Blowing Ass. Cropdusting.

I'd just like to point out that writing this column is technically a job for me. And by writing it, I've confirmed the saying is true: "Do something you love and you'll never work a day in your life."

Beef walk, brown belch, cornhole crack, trouser cough, bumsen burner.

I got a late start on Stephen King, but since I got rolling I've been plowing through his books faster than a heinous fart wrecks a nice Sunday morning in bed.

And something bubbled up in in the course of my reading: King isn't shy about farts. His characters fart. They talk about farts. Kind of a lot. I'm sure there's a joke about so much of his stuff taking place in Derry and so many of Derry's residents being lactose-intolerant, hence the gas. I can't quite work the joke out, but you get the drift. Give me partial credit and we can all move on.

Everything else about Stephen King has been written. Everything, that is, except the subject more taboo than kids having a sewer orgy, more contested than the long and short of *The Stand*. More controversial than declarations about his best book. More about shit than piss.

This is a column about farts.

He Who Smelt It, Dealt It

Who's farting their way through King's books? EVERYBODY!

Old guys, women, dogs. Everybody who farts in our world farts in his. There are, however, some patterns, some notable categories.

Old Farts

Many, many King characters refer to themselves and others as “old farts” who are “farting around” or “farting their way through” their golden (brown) years. While this is a common colloquialism in The States, I tried to find out whether it had any specific connection to Maine, and while I was a little disappointed, I did find a Maine-centric saying, a way to describe something as very small: “It’s no bigger than a fart in a mitten.”

There is at least one instance, in *Cujo*, of someone being called a “young fart,” and in *Insomnia* someone uses the phrase “short-time farts” to talk about someone who’s not around all that long.

I’m not sure what’s worse, a fresh fart or an old, stale one. Both sound bad. I think I’d go with the stale fart, if I had to take a deep whiff of one or the other, but I’d be concerned that the staying power of an old fart means its A) VERY powerful and B) perhaps fermented to an extent.

Old farts versus young is a topic that could be its own column, nay, website, wait, no, PhD dissertation. Let’s move on.

Mechanized Farts

Machines fart in King’s world. Exhaust farts from the backs of cars. A lawnmower farts smoke. A calliope farts out its tune. I’d never heard calliope music, but after checking it out, it’s farts. Farts that you control on a keyboard, they’re tuned, but a fart that’s a C# is still a fart.

Little Sayings

A selection of tasty nuggets:

The whole place could fall flat and I wouldn’t fart sideways to a dime.

—*Cujo*

...Jonesy is, as they say, farting through silk.

—*Dreamcatcher*

I don’t give a fart in a high wind...

—*Insomnia*

Allison, still walleyed and only one small step from unglued, looked ready to shoot the moment a squirrel farted.

—*The Tommyknockers*

Just Farts

And then, there are farts. Sparrowfarts (*Carrie*), Swamp-gas farts (*Dreamcatcher*), winofarts (*Insomnia*), farts in a doctor's face (*Insomnia*), dog farts (*Roadwork*), bedfarts (*The Stand*), which are later shaken out of bed sheets (*Rose Madder*).

Dreamcatcher is easily King's fart-iest novel. I counted nearly 50 instances of the word "fart" in various forms.

Sayings, terms of endearment, machine farts—they're all great. But we have to give it up for a good ol' fashioned two-cheek squeak.

I'm assuming this is enough proof for the doubters, if there ever were any, that farts have a place in Stephen King's books. And his heart. And, presumably, butt.

But the question remains: Why?

If You Think Farts Aren't Funny, You're Objectively Incorrect

Disagree? Then I'm betting most people don't think of you as terribly fun, and I'm guessing you're not a go-to judge of hilarity.

I don't know how to convince you that you're wrong. There aren't a lot of scientific studies. I couldn't find anyone who'd thrown someone into a functional MRI and played fart noises to see what parts of the brain light up. But I think you know the truth. If you genuinely don't find farts funny, you're wrong.

We need a laugh now and then in a King book. Badly. And if a fart will do the trick, why set up an elaborate joke? Why make a pop culture reference that'll be outdated in a year? Make with the gas!

Are erudite things funny? Sure, sometimes. But they don't have mass appeal. It's 2019, we have the entirety of the internet and access to damn near every piece of culture ever created, and 14.6 million of us subscribe to FailArmy's YouTube channel because it's funny to watch people fall down.

You might not think farts are funny, but your vote is suffocating in a massive, brown, noxious cloud of ass gas.

Farts Authorize

One of Tom Spanbauer/Chuck Palahniuk's big messages to writers is that a narrator must establish authority. The narrator/main character has to answer the reader question: Why should I believe you?

There are two basic ways to do it: Head and Heart.

Head involves making someone an expert. If I believe someone knows their shit, I'll listen to them

You might not think farts are funny, but your vote is suffocating in a massive, brown, noxious cloud of ass gas.

when they talk about that shit, and that authority will transfer to other things as well.

Heart is about being vulnerable. If I believe I'm seeing someone unguarded, I'm more inclined to believe them.

Sharing a fart with a reader lets them in on a little secret. A little joke, a little biology, between the reader and the writer. When a character blows ass, the reader feels they're seeing a character be real, be vulnerable. If I just watched a character cut loose with a real ripper, I have every reason to believe that this character is unguarded, acting naturally, and whatever comes next, I buy that behavior as authentic.

A fart is a great way to establish authority.

Farts Anthropomorphize (Sort Of)

If a laundry folding machine can be evil in King's world, then all bets are off in terms of malicious inanimate objects. We, as readers, can never be sure where the threats are coming from.

When a car "farts" out its exhaust, it becomes more alive. When a calliope farts out its melody, we have to wonder whether there's something more sinister going on there beyond shitty music. The fart-y quality of King's objects blurs the line between living and not, neutral and evil.

Anthropomorphizing isn't always a good thing. If your elevator door "hisses" shut, some writers will tell you you're being lazy. Because an elevator doesn't hiss. It doesn't have agency, it doesn't create a noise the way a person or an animal does. It's not alive.

But in King's world...it might be.

And maybe farts are a better way to handle this whole imbuing objects with life thing. Farts are sometimes involuntary. They don't feel controlled the way a hiss does. Farts might be a way to live in the (brownish) gray area between making your objects too human and giving them just enough life to keep the world consistently threatening.

Farts Are Human

Because King has so much cosmic, weird, horrific shit going on in his books, we sometimes need to snap back to reality. And there's no quicker way than a fart.

If you were blasting through a weird spacewarp with an old cosmic turtle, wouldn't a fart bring you back down to Earth? If you were traveling cross-country after a plague decimated the population, wouldn't you still fart now and then?

There might be nothing more human than a fart. I'm not proud that I had to be the one to say it. But it's true, farts keep us real, keep us grounded. They're a part of who we are.

Just remember, when you're looking at a glamorous star on the red carpet, she's fired out a fart that'd level a building. When you're watching your favorite dreamy TV doctor, remember, that dude has blown the back out of a pair of pajama pants at least once in his life.

Farts are an equalizer. Much as we all have blood, bones, and teeth that look fucking terrifying when they're removed, we all fart.

Farts aren't what make us human, but they make it hard to forget who we really are.

Cut Loose

Take a page from Stephen King's book. He's got like a billion pages, so you stealing one won't bother him much.

Let your characters fart. Try it.

Got a character who's involved in a boring dialog? Throw in a fart.

Are you looking to ratchet up the tension while a character is hiding? Fart.

Is there a medical situation going on? You'd better believe farts play a part there.

Want us to understand that your characters are intimately acquainted? Fart it up.

Crappy, Ben-Cooper-Style Literary Costumes



Ben Cooper, Colledgeville, Halco — these names meant Halloween for decades.

The costumes they made were crappy. In terms of materials, looks, fit, really any objective measure, these companies made shitty getups. But they were also super fun, and besides, getting a crappy costume had a hidden advantage: If your costume from last year barely held up for one night of trick-or-treating, you HAD to get a new one for next year. Sure, you might want to be He-Man this year, but next year? That's for babies.

And, okay, they had some hallmarks that were pretty weird.



Take this Doctor Strange costume, for example. When exactly did Doctor Strange wear a plastic smock with a picture of himself on it? And his name spelled out? This always infuriated me as a kid. Why couldn't they just make the smock look like what the guy wore?

And why sleeveless? Why the shiny blue pants?



And this one? I OWN this costume. The mask is pretty cool, clearly someone involved saw a Spider-Man comic at some point. But, as someone who has read hundreds of Spider-Man comics, who has seen Spider-Man run through dozens of outfits, I've NEVER seen this getup outside of this Ben Cooper costume. The manufacturers had so many choices for Spidey threads, and they just decided to make their own design? Because one of the most iconic superhero costumes of all time wasn't good enough?

By the way, if you're thinking of buying one like this for Halloween, let me give you a piece of advice: It's not going to fit. It's not common for me to feel too ripped to fit into clothes, and I felt like a bodybuilder trying to get into a child's wet suit when I tried to squeeze into this thing.

Though these companies made some pretty weird costumes, like a Rubik's cube costume, one for the Asteroids video game, and an Alien costume that looked like the result of an unholy union between a xenomorph and a designer committed to MS Paint as his primary artistic tool, they never got into a lot of literary costumes. Stuff for book nerds.

Let's right that wrong. I've got some suggestions.

Tyler/Narrator

Costumes for couples are too cute-sy. "Let's be salt and pepper shakers!" NO! This is Halloween. Nobody kills people with salt and



pepper shakers, although I just saw a \$90 dollar pepper mill, and that sucker'd be capable of caving someone's face in. Nobody's afraid of salt and pepper, except I guess the fact that pepper mills are so damn expensive. Seriously, this pepper mill thing was a revelation for me.

Let's be Tyler and the Narrator. We can get in a literal fistfight. We can take turns being Tyler and being a jerk and being The Narrator and pretending we don't know what's going on. You could also do this one solo, bring both masks, and blame all your party fouls on Tyler. This isn't just a costume, people. It's an entire party survival strategy.

The Yellow Wallpaper



My hatred for "The Yellow Wallpaper" runs deep. So you can bet I'd be terrified if you rolled up wearing a swatch of yellow wallpaper with eyeholes cut in it, ready to talk about literary theory. There is no one I'm avoiding harder at a party than the person wearing this, explaining it to everyone, and pretending to be exasperated when people don't immediately recognize the importance of Gilman's work. Bonus, this mask comes packaged with a bound thesis titled "The Existentialfeministic Horror of The Colonization of Womyn's Bodies as Demonstrated by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' Volumes I and II." If you're tired of Halloween parties due to the constant threat of fun breaking out, this is the costume for you!

Moby Dick



Okay, we just robbed the factory and repurposed a bunch of old *Jaws* costumes. Repainted the box, blunted the snout a little. But hey, are we here to pay reverence and respect to an important time of year, or are we here to make some fuckin' money!?

This is a big step in the right direction for my agenda, which involves getting whales reclassified as sharks. What, exactly, is the difference between a shark and a Killer Whale? Isn't a shark just a "killer whale" when you get right down to it? If you've watched any kind of nature documentary, it seems like Killer Whales basically spend their time killing and/or terrorizing adorable animals. What's the difference between *Jaws* and *Orca*, really? I think Killer Whales just have much better publicists.

Be a part of the movement to raise awareness of just how dangerous these bastard whales are.

Bukowski Grave



Graves are Halloween-y, right? And what grave is better than that of Chucky B.?

Plus, there's nothing that pleases me more than a plastic smock printed with a pattern of natural plants. That shit's hilarious.

The best part is that the whole getup comes in a box, which converts into a mask. Less wasted packaging. And boy, does it give you an excuse to tie one on at the party. A sober Bukowski grave? That doesn't even make sense.

Great Expectations



Gonna be honest, I took A LOT of bathroom breaks in high school when we read *Great Expectations* out loud in English class. My memories of this Dickens classic are mostly about coarse, crappy public school toilet paper. Which, by the way, everyone wants to talk about free college, meanwhile public school kids are wiping their asses with what is essentially thin-sliced, unprocessed tree. How am I supposed to learn enough to succeed in a college environment when I spend half my high school career holding in shits in order to avoid using the bathroom and feeling like I had my butthole

sandblasted?

Stephen King Space Turtle



Stephen King loves him some space turtles. There's *It*, there's *Dark Tower*. If there's one thing that Stephen King likes more than farts, it's turtles cruising the spaceways and getting murdered for their trouble.

The other good news, you know that weird smell that comes when you open up a fresh plastic costume? You can explain it away by saying it's space turtle smell. I've smelled a turtle or two in my time, as have we all, and a timeless, ageless space turtle HAS to smell pretty weird.

Poe's Raven

This is the perfect representation of how it works in English class. Your teacher hypes you up for the scariest gorefest story of all time. Your English teacher maybe even wore a cape if they're that kind of teacher, the one that cares but is also secretly waiting for their "O' Captain" moment that ain't never comin'.

Then, you open it up, it's not scary at all, it's a huge disappointment, and yet you still hear about it all the time.

The rumor is that Poe died from drinking too much when he was sort of tricked into voting or something. If he died any way other than exploding out of boredom, the fate he condemned so many



school kids to, then he got off light.

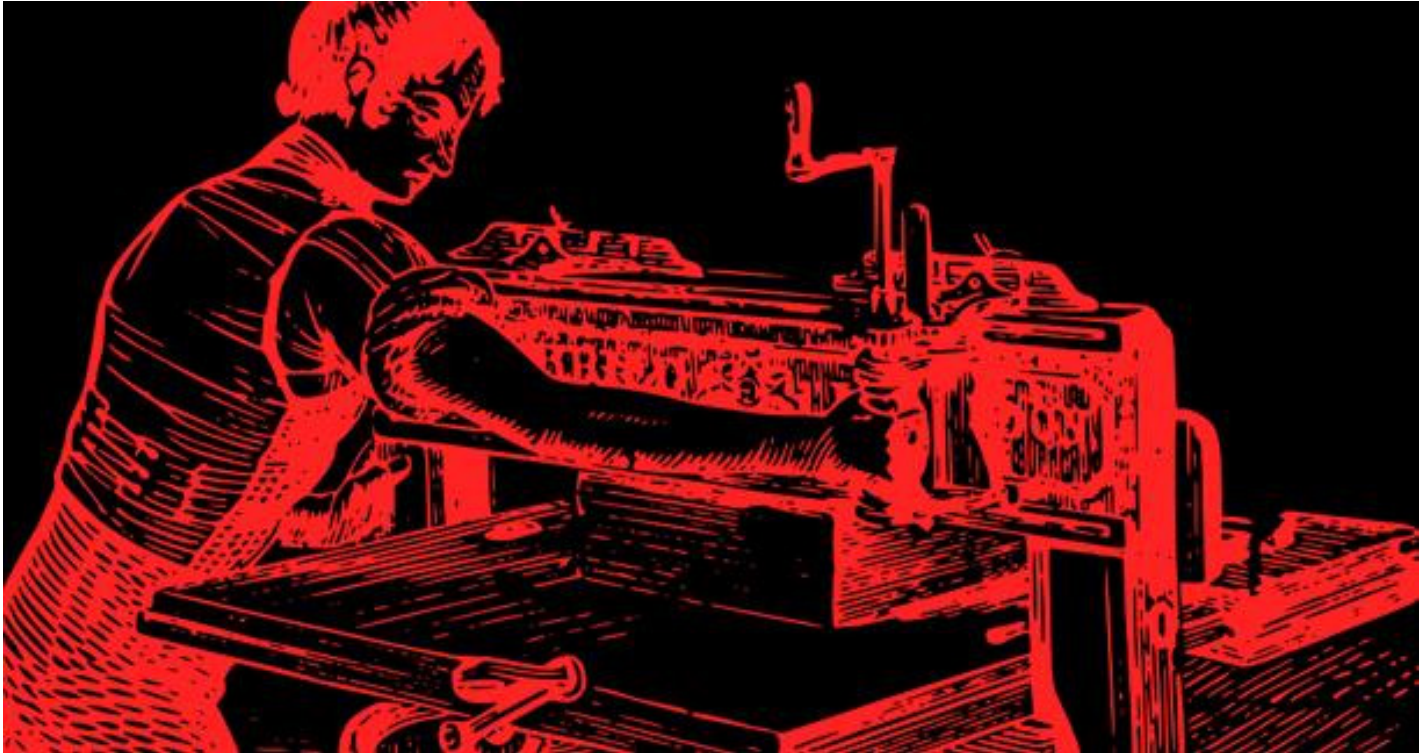
Fecal Bacteria

You put on this mask, you carry a pocketful of Good N Plenty and drop 'em everywhere, you've got a costume AND a party favor in one. Plus, if you ask me, Good N Plenty definitely tastes like ass.

How's fecal bacteria literary? Ha! You think a single used or library book you've ever held isn't shellacked in shit? Hasn't been read on the toilet while someone's nether region committed a complete toilet atrocity? Must be nice to live in your world of pure imagination. Those of us in the real world are gonna go ahead and dress like poo particles, thanks.



10 Horror Books In Desperate Need of a Reprint



I'm a latecomer to the wonders and cheap thrills of a certain brand of horror novels. But now that I'm in, I'm ALL in.

Did I start a book club to get people to read *The Nest*, the first book in Grady Hendrix's Paperbacks From Hell imprint? Yes, yes I did.

Did my own sister attend? Yes. Did she read only to the point in the book where a young girl was eaten vagina-first by a mutated cockroach? Also yes.

Did the book club logo look more penis-y than I'd planned? Again, yes. I thought it would be a little penis-y, but it's VERY penis-y.

After that rousing first success, which also included meeting at a bar that has \$1.50 beers for happy hour, I had to find more books. And I came across a problem. Some of the best options just aren't available. Or they're not convenient. I can't ask people to come to a book club where we read paperback horror for cheap thrills and expect them to pay ridiculous prices for books. They're called "cheap" thrills for a reason. And when you compare books to \$1.50 beers? How can I convince someone to drop \$60 for a vintage book when they could take 10 steps to the bar and buy 40 BEERS for the same price!

If serious, studious, literary-minded groups like mine are to thrive, some stuff needs reprinting. Think of us, publishers. Think of us, sad, a little drunk, hoping our next read will top radioactive cockroaches devouring a group of church children.

Don't you want YOUR books to be the next ones to disgust us?

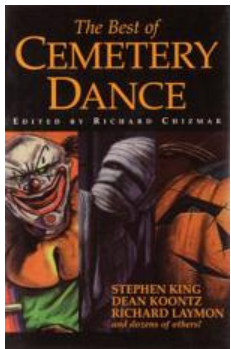


1. "Feast" by Graham Masterton

Soylent Green's Soylent Green, *Demolition Man's* ratburger, *Snowpiercer's* gross-out grub, a surprise from Rob Hart's *The Warehouse*—gross eats are always a high point of disgust, and in *Feast*, vile dining practices hit an all new apex. Or maybe a new low. It's both, really.

This nutty little book, not available in print or digitally, needs a reprint. For fuck's sake, its opening line is, "Well, then, how long do you think this baby has been dead?"

A good number of Masterton's works have digital releases, but where's *Feast*? Your only shot of finding this one at a reasonable price is in waiting for someone with good taste to die and then hitting up their estate sale. Otherwise, don't count on gorging yourself on *Feast* anytime soon.



2. "The Best Of Cemetery Dance Volume 1 & 2 Omnibus Edition"

If you're looking for some of the best short horror fiction of all time, this 800-page phone book's got your number.

You can still find these stories collected in various forms, but damn it, we want the full-on omnibus edition. The 800-page slab, the Tombstone Edition, if you will. What's the saying, Thick Thighs Save Lives? Well, Thick Books... Get You Looks? Lock Up Crooks? I don't know, help me out in the comments. There's gotta be a catchy rhyme here. The Tombstone Edition depends on it!

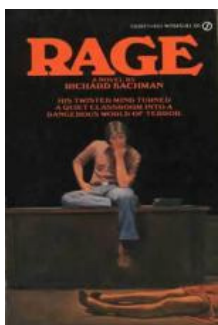


3. "On This, The Day Of The Pig" by Josh Malerman

With this *Bird Box* business, Josh Malerman has a hot iron. My understanding of hot irons is that one has to strike while those irons remain hot. I don't understand the whole of the analogy, I'm not a blacksmith. But blacksmiths and I have something in common: We like money, and when there's a time when money can be made, let's make that money!

I think there's money to be made here. And just look at that cover. Isn't that the kind of throwback we all want to see?

I understand this is a one-time printing, meant to go out of stock and drive some sales, but c'mon, ya'll. Some of us just want to read stuff without getting into the seedy world of book collecting. Because first you're buying Malerman books on eBay, then you're scouring the Goodwill, and soon enough you're hitting up garage sales on no sleep, tearing past all the baby clothes and stupid shit like that to dig through a box of bedbug-infested paperbacks that smell like they were made of recycled cigarette butts marinated in cat piss.



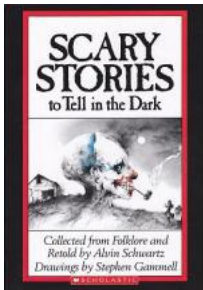
4. "Rage" by Stephen King

This isn't the first time I've asked the question about bringing this back into print.

I get Stephen King's position on the whole thing, and frankly it's not like he needs the money, so why profit from something he's not 100% behind? On the other hand, I think that there's a dearth of good novels regarding school shootings. Whether we like it or not (that's a stupid way to start this sentence. Who "likes" school shootings?) school shootings are a thing that happens. It seems unusual to me that this subject is as taboo as it is in fiction considering how common it is in real life, and I think that horror that goes to the taboo place can often be very effective.

Plus, the sales could go to benefit...whatever the opposite of the NRA is. The NNRA (Not National Rifle Association)?

I respect Mr. King's decision, I really do. And I want to read *Rage*.

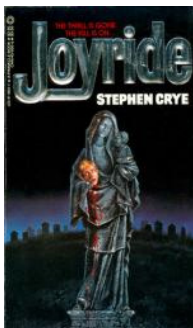


5. "Scary Stories Artifact Edition" by Stephen Gammell

For a few years now, Marvel has started putting out Artifact Editions. These books, rather than showing the finished product, are scans of the original pages. That means you see the white-out, the tape, the word balloons, erasure marks, unused images, all that great stuff.

For too long, *Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark* was only in print with the Bret Helquist art. Supposedly, a restored version was released in 2017, but if you look at Amazon reviews, it's a little unclear whether the art is truly restored to its original glory or not. About half the customers are saying they got Helquist books. It's a mystery whether that's because they bought mis-listed, used copies, or if there's something more sinister going on...

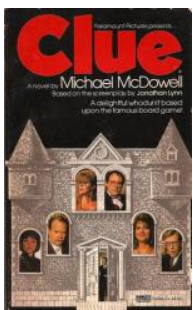
Let's see some of that Stephen Gammell art in the style of an Artifact Edition. Let's see some process. Let's see some images that didn't make the cut. We played along with the art switcheroo, we bought tickets to your stupid movie, so how's about we get a little something we ACTUALLY want?



6. "Joyride" by Stephen Crye

A slasher at its purest, we need more books like this. A reasonable 248 pages, a story that doesn't waste a shitload of time getting the people to the place where the stuff happens. This is what I'm talking about.

There have been some nice entries into the sort of "cerebral" horror, the "indie" horror, and the "worth examining" horror genres lately. *It Follows*, *Creep*, *Hereditary*, all these sorts of things and their book equivalents. What I haven't seen in awhile is a straight-up slasher where we aren't thinking about stuff like "Who are these characters, really?" or "turning the genre on its head" or "tropes." That's good sometimes, and sometimes you just want a good ol' fashioned gravedigger terrorizing asshole teens.



7. "Clue" by Michael McDowell

Michael McDowell wrote the movie *Beetlejuice*, which made him forever my hero.

McDowell also wrote A TON of great horror novels. And, at some point, the novelization of the movie *Clue*.

Clue might be stretching the definition of "horror" novel quite a bit, but it's one of the only McDowell book that hasn't gotten a kindle reprint, and I'm dying to find out if it's any good.

Besides, with that new movie that looks like *Clue* on...well, not steroids. Not acid. It looks just like *Clue*, right? With that thing coming out, I don't think I'm being obnoxious when I say that *Clue* and *Clue*-adjacent products are probably going to be at the highest peak they've seen for quite awhile, and I don't think they'll hit that high again soon. Combined with the fact that *Beetlejuice* is a Broadway hit, the time is right. Let's do this.



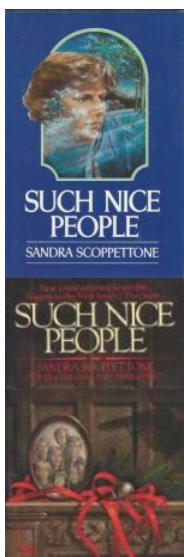
8. "Toy Cemetery" by William Johnstone

By re-release, in this case I mean an Editor's Cut.

This book has some great shit in it. Holds barred? None. Doll people horribly mutilated, a demonic eugenics program, evil fog, incest like you wouldn't believe. A sweaty doll-maker/child molester, a spooky mental institution. By the end, this book feels like Johnstone had about 80 scraps of different horror novels and just decided to clear his docket, do them all at once in one amphetamine-fueled writing binge where it ended and he woke up with his face buried in a typewriter, a manuscript of unknown contents placed in an envelope and sealed.

Toy Cemetery is packed with a lot of nonsense that we really don't need, characters who don't need to be in here, plot lines that don't go anywhere, just a bunch of extra shit. This book has the potential to be one of the best, cheesiest, most exploitatively awesome horror novels of all time. But not at its current length, and not with how essentially confusing it is.

I'm game, publishers. I can cut this book down to a lean, mean, 2-hour read, no problem. Just give me some scissors. Maybe an axe.



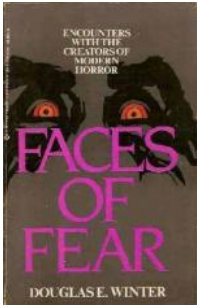
9. "Such Nice People" by Sandra Scoppettone

How badly does this need a new cover? This cover looks like it's going to be a romance with a lot of staring over bluffs into the sea. Don't get me wrong, there's a place for that. And that place is in J. Crew catalogs.

And the other cover?

C'mon. That's not scary. That looks like the cover of a novel where a grandma solves mysteries with the aid of her cat who has a saucy name like Lord Saucington or something.

Let's get some blood and guts in there, please. For inspiration, maybe lessons that could be learned from 80's VHS covers.



10. "Faces of Fear" by Douglas Winter

Stephen King's *Danse Macabre* and *On Writing* are excellent, and we need more books like them. Winter's *Faces of Fear* features interviews with horror masters like King, Michael McDowell, Richard Matheson, William Peter Blatty, James Herbert, and more.

How-to-write books are great, but sometimes author interviews are better. You get some of the same information without as much prescription.

And while there are plenty of great author interview books, far too few are on the subject of horror.



BONUS: Movie Novelizations, Companions, and Spin-Offs

Halloween, *Friday the 13th*, all of these movies had companion novels, some had series that branched off the main movies, and some of them are supposed to be pretty damn good. *Camp Crystal Lake: Mother's Day* combines a bunch of movies, creates a tighter Jason lore, and even has portions from Jason's perspective, which isn't somewhere the movies seem to go. I'd love to give it a shot, but not for \$100 dollars.

Alternatively, if you want to make a donation to the book club, I can assure you that a percentage of your donation will go to purchasing overpriced horror. Another portion will definitely go to beer, but a PORTION will benefit someone besides me and my drinking.

Wild Speculation Regarding The New 'Hunger



When I heard about a new Hunger Games book, I think I felt like most people: depressed.

What? Aren't most of us depressed? Have you BEEN online lately? And do you think a new Hunger Games book coming out in May is going to yank me out of my wallow? Because if you think that, you need to pay more attention to me and my wallows. I put on a clinic, daily. You could learn something.

Anyway, I didn't feel anything, but I gathered that some people did, and their feelings manifested in wild speculation about the book's contents based on some very basic information. Wild speculation is the official sport of the internet, and it's time I got off the bench. If it's mild speculation, forget it. Moderate speculation? Save it for NPR. Wild speculation? Now I'm your Huckleberry.

Timeframe

We know that this book is a prequel, taking place 64 years before the events of *The Hunger Games*. Why 64? I'm assuming Suzanne Collins is a huge fan of a certain underrated Nintendo console. Or a Beatles song. Yes. Will you still need me...will you still FEED me? Get it? *Hunger Games*? Feeding?

Wait, it may be 74 years before. Depends if you believe Wikipedia or Time. Better speculate on both numbers, just to cover the bases.

74 is the atomic number of tungsten, and as we all know, tungsten is brittle and hard to work. Maybe Collins found that this plot was hard to shape. Maybe the plot wasn't as malleable as she'd hoped. Maybe this is a clue! Although the book enlightens us about the period of time before the original trilogy, it was tough going, and it was probably one of those light bulbs that is way up high in your apartment and you didn't even realize how high it was until you're setting a chair on two other chairs to build a crappy ladder and change it.

It was difficult. That's all I'm saying.

Suzanne Collins' Statement

Something we also know for sure is what Collins said:

With this book, I wanted to explore the state of nature, who we are, and what we perceive is required for our survival. The reconstruction period ten years after the war, commonly referred to as the Dark Days—as the country of Panem struggles back to its feet—provides fertile ground for characters to grapple with these questions and thereby define their views of humanity.

Hey, rad. I'm definitely looking forward to finding out how characters I've yet to meet feel about humanity.

In all seriousness, other than the time period, pretty vague stuff, right? Couldn't you say the same thing about every narrative? "The setting provides fertile ground for characters to grapple with who they are and thereby define their views of humanity"? That could be a blurb for *Demolition Man*. The setting of a Taco-Bell-dominated future provides fertile ground for John Spartan to define his views of humanity. And also kick Wesley Snipes' head clean off his body."

Songbirds, Snakes, Hungers, Games

The title of this newest book is *Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. Apparently, nobody got my letters with title suggestions, including:

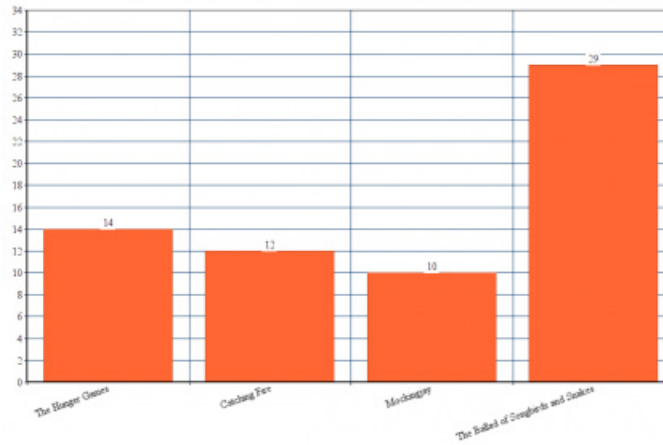
1. The Even Hungrier Games
2. The Hunger This Time It's Not A Games
3. Hard Target 3: No Chance Boudreaux

Or, perhaps they did get those letters and made a good choice to ignore them. Nice move, Collins.

I have a feeling this book won't actually be a ballad in the traditional sense.

I have a feeling this book won't actually be a ballad in the traditional sense, a poem or song with 13 lines with an ABABBCBC form built of couplets of rhymed verse, each of 14 syllables. In fact, I suspect this ballad will be more like the stuff found on *Monster Ballads*, a CD available for like \$90 bucks via infomercial, featuring 80s metal's softest, worst songs. Based on the lovey-dovey-ness of a couple portions of the original Hunger Games trilogy, I have to suspect that this book is going to be less like a traditional written ballad, more like one of these rock songs that's about love. Has it been written, because Suzanne Collins, like the 80s metal bands, is tired of getting on stage and rocking out to a bunch of bros and wouldn't mind finding a way to bring in some babes? Time will tell.

The title is also long AF. Look at all those words! Damn! Let's just look at a graph of title length by character here and you can see the titles got shorter and shorter as the series progressed, and then BAM, total 180 with this new title:

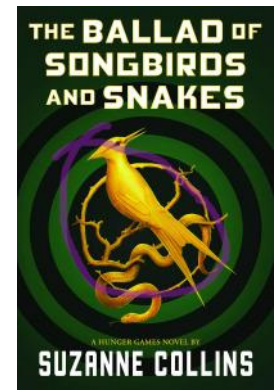


Why would you do this? Well, my theory, the titles got slightly shorter as the original trilogy went on, and the books also became slightly less popular. So, perhaps in a bid to regain control of the popularity of her own series, Collins went balls out to make the title longer, therefore getting better reviews. Likely? No. Shrewd? No. But I'd love to hear a better reason for such a long damn title.

The Significance of the Mockingjay

Well, this thing ain't real. Go ahead and Google it so long as you don't mind being responsible for John James Audubon spinning in his grave. The only meaning it has is whatever meaning it's earned via the other books.

Just to cover my bases, I emailed Jonathan Franzen, famous birdwatcher who is also willing to talk trash about books, but he hasn't gotten back to me yet. So...I have to assume the mockingjay's primary meaning is "Hey, ya'll, this is also a Hunger Games book. Just a reminder."



The Mockingjay's Pose

In *The Hunger Games*' cover, the mockingjay is craning its neck down and to the right. In *Catching Fire*, also down and to the right, but less contorted. In *Mockingjay*'s cover, the bird looks up and to the right and is soaring. In *Ballad*, the Mockingjay has returned to craning up and to the right.

What does this mean?

Perhaps it represents the full circle of the series. We now begin with the bird looking in the same direction that it does in the final entry in the series.

There's also a progression in the orientation of the bird's body. In order, the bird displays its left side (book 1), right side (book 2), and its belly (book 3). This new one shows the bird's back. Because we're going BACK in time. Which we already knew because we were explicitly told, but whatever, you can still talk about stuff. Doesn't make it less clever.

You'll also notice the bird is perched. In the other covers, the bird is in flight. I suppose this means that this book takes place before things really "took off." Is this a subtle hint that the book is boring?

Definitely. It's a definitive hint, a cry for help from Collins. "I have so many ideas, and all you want to hear about is kids with goofy names like Katniss and Peeta and Riboflavin shooting arrows at the government!"

Roots and Adders

The bird is perched on what appear to be roots. There's also a snake.

This probably means that while a bird and a snake are different, they share roots. That's deep. That's really deep. You're welcome.

There are some issues. I don't think birds generally perch on roots. What would be the point of that? Wouldn't a bird be a lot safer perching up in a tree, which birds can totally do? Does this mean the bird is flying low, not reaching its potential? That Collins thinks she can do better?

The snake seems obvious: Bible stuff. I could waste your time and mine explaining, but we all know how that went down, right? Snake bad, apple, and now we have YouTube comments.

Target in the Background

This is an easy one. I predict a Target exclusive version. Boom.

Colors

Green and gold. Obviously, this book is all about the ka-ching. Collins plans to bring in a good amount of green and maybe even a little gold by the time she's through with this series.

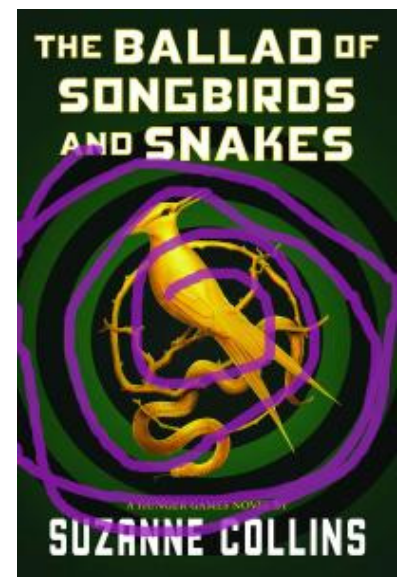
Green and gold are also the national colors of Australia. Hey, Australia, have you ever considered putting your national colors on your flag like every other country? Just a suggestion. I know you're very busy playing host to the worst spiders ever to emerge from some kind of interdimensional hell, but when you get a handle on that, think about the flag thing.

Maybe the green and gold represent Collins' plan to move to Australia and never speak to any of us again with the pile of money she'll make off this book.

Any way you slice it, it's a money thing, no doubt.

Did I shit on the series a little here? Doubt the genuine nature of the storytelling? Sure. Sure I did.

What can I say? Maybe I'm a little fatigued when it comes to prequels, reboots, and remakes. Maybe I still think *Battle Royale* is the better version. Maybe (definitely) I haven't seen the movies yet, and that's part of the problem.



Movies Are Not The Ultimate Form Of Books



Want to have your heart broken? Do you love books? Great. You're in the right place.

A bit back I sat down with a great author. A true legend. Let's just say, for the sake of argument, sci-fi pillar Connie Willis. I got to interview her for a work project, and she couldn't have been a better interview subject. So generous with her time, so smart.

Connie Willis works out of a Starbucks in my hometown. Regulars and townies know who she is, but if you were just a casual visitor, maybe passing through or a student who's new in town, you'd just see some lady writing longhand on a huge stack of paper.

She described the typical conversation she has with people who don't know her:

Person: You're a writer?

Connie: Yes.

Person: Ever written anything I've heard of?

Connie: Blackout? All Clear? To Say Nothing of the Dog? Doomsday Book?

Person: Anything they made into a movie?

And that's it. That's where your heart breaks.

Because this lovely person who has dedicated her life to writing some of the greatest stories ever told, working her hands to the bone writing out thick novels longhand, this legend who edits relentlessly and writes constantly, this person who has put so much into what she does — this person gets asked whether she's successful in a completely different field, and this is a measure of her worth.

It's enough to crack a book lover in two.

I want to stick up for books. Books as books.

Before you get all pissy about it, hey, if you wrote a book that's being made into a movie, that's awesome. I'm not trying to tear you down. I'm trying to build up someone else.

I don't think movies are bad. I don't think they're worse than books. I even love a couple films. Most of them have Demolition Men in them, Beetlejuices, Armies of Darkness. But there are quite a few movies that I think are great.

The thing I don't love, anymore it seems that a book being made into a movie is the ultimate measure of a book's greatness, the pinnacle achievement for books. The novel seems to exist in popular culture as the springboard, the necessary, workmanlike step that leads to a movie.

And I say, "Enough!"

Books Are Work

Yeah, books are work.

My least favorite thing in a book? When a book tells you how to feel. I hate when a novel tells you what happened, then overtly explains how you should feel about what just happened. I hate it in books, yet movies get away with it all the time. Whether it's through manipulative music cues, great actors finding ways to deliver bad dialog, or cuts and angles that explain who's evil, when to be sad, or what's going on — whatever it is, movies manipulate emotions in artificial ways that are glaringly obvious and shallow in books.

It's up to you, the reader.

With a book, you have to "hear" the voices. Picture the characters. You work, and you work over a longer, sustained period of time. Rarely do you pick up a book and expect to read it in a 2-hour sitting. It's usually a couple weeks for an average reader, dipping in and out of that world, living with it in the back of the mind the entire time.

More than anything, when you stop making the effort, the book stops, too. You can't read and fold laundry. You can't read and do paperwork. You CAN read drunk. It's pretty great. I recommend it.

I don't mean to say that movies are for lazy scumbags. I mean to say that some narratives benefit from the mutual effort, and that sometimes the extra work you put in changes your relationship with a story.

Let me put it like this: If you've ever trained for something like a marathon, you know it changes your outlook. I don't mean that in some hippy-dippy way, I mean it changes how you look at things like sitting in a meeting for an hour. If you go for a 15-mile training run in the morning, you're pretty happy to see a chair. Even if the meeting sucks, you're thinking "At least I'm seated." Hard work changes your relationship with something as simple as a chair, and you can bet it changes your relationship with something as complex as a story.

You can't read and fold laundry. You can't read and do paperwork. You CAN read drunk. It's pretty great. I recommend it.

Intimacy

When a book becomes a movie, it loses its intimacy.

Books give you an intimate experience with a character in ways that movies have tried to replicate, mostly resulting in bad voiceover narration that doesn't fit or ends up feeling unnecessary.

Books can get into the first-person in ways that movies have yet to succeed in doing. When we talk about reading encouraging empathy, this is what we're talking about. We're not watching someone else do things. We're in their heads with them, their bodies with them, doing what they're doing.

Credit to *Hardcore Henry* for trying, but I wouldn't say it was totally successful.



Your book experience is a lot closer to being a single person's vision. There are editors and publicists involved, but for the most part, people who are good at those jobs make it possible for an author's voice to sound as much like their voice as possible.

With movies, there's a director. Actors. Cinematographers. A Key Grip (whatever the hell that is). There are a lot of cooks in that kitchen. Again, this can produce a good result. But it's not the same intimate, get-in-the-head experience. It's not a one-on-one conversation.

I'm sure there are filmmaking methods that bring the viewer in closer. But I'm not concerned with that. Because I already have access to that experience through books, and so do you.

Great Books Are Great Books

Great books are exactly what they're meant to be: great books.

People, we don't have to look at great books and imagine what great movies they would make. That's irrelevant. Great books are already great books, and they don't have to be something else, too. We don't need to watch a world class Judo champ and wonder how good he'd be at archery.

Books are not the larval stage of stories that then are completed when they become movies. Great books are exactly what they're supposed to be, formatted the way they're supposed to be, functioning the way they're supposed to be. They are fully-formed stories.

All that to say: Can we cut down on asking authors about movies? That's all I'm really asking here.

It's insulting, it's bizarre, and it implies that the book exists only as a feeder form of a story, the bag of crickets that sustains the apex predator that is the filmmaking industry.

Books exist because they need to. Because we need them to. Because they're the best way to tell some stories. Because anyone can sit down with paper and pen and bring a written story into the world. Because they provide human experiences that we still need, even if it seems like we crave them less and less. Books give us needed alternatives to film.

We need books. And they need us.

Keep reading.

The Worst Fiverr Services for Writers



A bit back I wrote a column about \$5 dollar book covers. The results were...mixed. At best.

What I've discovered is that there are EVEN WORSE author services available on Fiverr. Yes, even worse than terrible graphic design, a sin that damns your indie book to the worst, most indifferent-est circle of hell.

Which terrible services am I talking about?

I Will Craft a Compelling Amazon Bio

Here's a little tip: if you can't come up with your author bio, a couple lines, you probably haven't come up with a good book, either.

I'll be fair, perhaps you exhausted every last bit of your energy on your novel. You're like a wrung-out sponge, just nothing left. But I kinda doubt that. I'm pretty sure Maya Angelou was right, "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have."

By the way, this is a \$125 dollar service. And it's only available to memoir and fiction writers, NO CELEBRITIES. That's an emphatic NO to you, Ke\$ha, if you wanted someone to write a bio for the eBook memoir you're publishing (working title: *Behind the Dollar Sign*).

If you're stuck on an author bio, try these hints. Feel free to send me \$125 if you use them.

- Your work is how you should reveal yourself to people, not your bio.
- If you consider yourself a humor writer, feel free to make me chuckle.
- I'm partial to your friend and mine, Chuck Palahniuk's old bio: *Chuck Palahniuk lives in the Pacific Northwest*. Simple, to the point. And the more mysterious he is, the better. Send people back to

the text, not to your bio (see tip #1).

Could a bio writer be helpful for, say, an investment banker? Sure. But for someone who writes?

I Will Complete Excellent Creative Writing Pieces for You

If you've signed up for a creative writing class, write the shit. If you don't want to write the shit, drop the class.

The only other reasonable application of this comes if you're in high school. Then...I don't know, I'd still just go for it. Most teachers can't really grade fiction in high school anyway. All you've got to go on is perceived effort, so just make things very visual, put in a lot of metaphor that can mean anything, and you'll be in great shape.

Or just make it super erotic. I don't know what a high school English teacher does with hardcore erotica, but I'm pretty sure you'll get a fine grade and they'll never want to talk about it again. If they DO, then you've just uncovered a serious red flag, saved someone some bad times, and you're a hero.

I Will Make You The Star of a Professional Author Magazine

This consists of someone printing up (or making available digitally) a magazine with you as the cover story. This is like a quarter step above that thing where you get your face on the Time Person of the Year cover, which shouldn't even be a service because we all know someone who is at least mildly proficient with Photoshop. Observe:



Not only is this a huge scam, you don't even get a copy of the magazine you paid to have printed! You have to BUY copies "for your friends and family!"

It definitely sucks that authors don't end up on many magazine covers, but this ain't the answer. Believe me, your friends and family don't want to see you sink this low.

I'd go easier on this, but it's a \$555 service.

I Will Create Your Indie Author Book Trailers

Some dude slaps together a bunch of stock footage for your book. You can do that yourself. And even if you can't, it's a waste of money. Just...don't.

Book trailers are overrated as marketing tools. Most of the ones people watch are for books/authors who are well-known already, not for new indie novels or whatever.

And like your bio, if you want to make a book trailer, make it authentic! Don't waste my time with a bunch of stock bullshit. I'd rather see an iPhone video of you talking about your book than stock images and terrible music.

The trailer for Tom Spanbauer's *I Loved You More* is the only one it works, and it's a pretty simple shot of Tom reading his book out loud.

It's to the point, it's Tom's voice, and watching it replicates, in micro, the experience of reading his book.

If you can't do those things, skip it.

And when the advice is, "If you can't do this as well as Tom Spanbauer, skip it" you can just read that in shorter form as: Skip it.

I Will Assign Your Book an ISBN Number From an American Publishing Company

You can buy a single ISBN for about the same price, register yourself as a publisher, and get on with life.

I know there's consternation out there about having your publication look legit, but trust me, NYC who's who types will see this publisher's name, not know it, and assume it's bullshit. Correctly, in this case.

For god's sake, they called it "Absolute Author." Legit publishers don't have the word "Author" in them. Might as well call it "Kindling eInterest" or something.

Just make up your own publisher. There will be no info available for it online, everyone will assume it's tiny and collapsed almost immediately, and if you know anything about publishing, that's the perfect cover story.

I Can Cast A Wiccan Career Success Spell to Help You Find Success On Your Career Path

Most people are probably concerned with the effectiveness, but I'm most concerned with whether or not the person actually did it. How would I have any idea whether someone cast a spell to help

me out or not? If my career was more successful, I'd still want to know it was attributable to the spell. Besides, you don't become successful by paying for spells that never got cast. I've always said that.

I Will Write You a Fanfiction

My favorite part of this is, "Yes, I will also do weird fanfics." Oh, okay. As opposed to those button-down fanfics, like the one I read where Wario filled his own butt with coins. Boring shit like that is a given, but don't be afraid to get weird.

This does open a heretofore-un-thought-of angle for me: release a book, then pollute the internet with fanfic based on your work. Maybe this brings people to your novel? They'll want to see what the fuss is about? Surely someone out there has played *Sonic the Hedgehog* after reading a fanfic about Tails impregnating Sonic, right?

I Will Write A SFW Fanfic For You

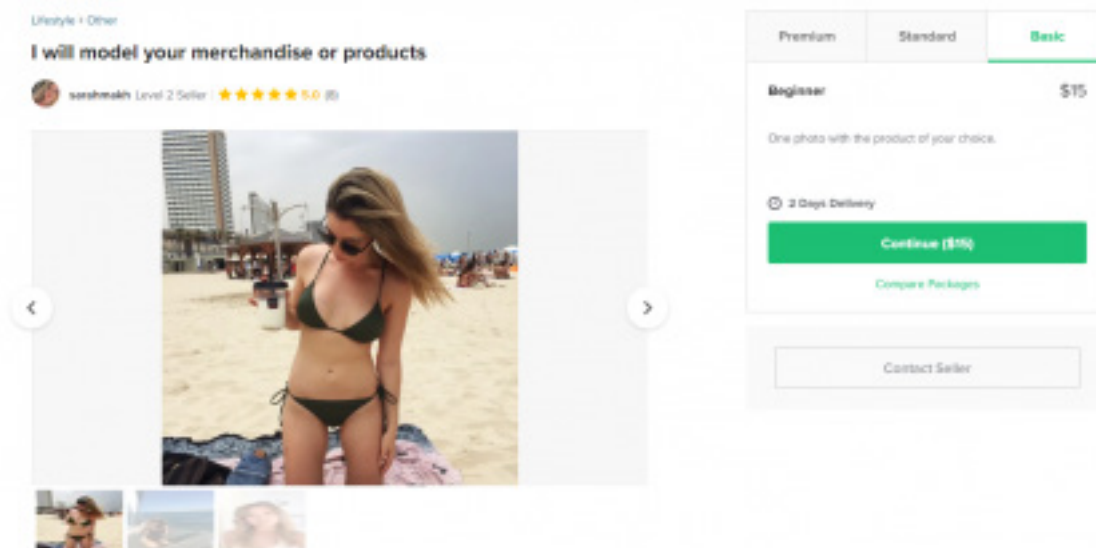
Okay, you know what? I overemphasized the worthlessness of the last fanfic offer. THIS is worthless.

I Will Add Humor to Your Blog, Website, Script, Whatever

Punch-up is a proud tradition that elevated many movies that were godawful, making them borderline tolerable.

The real question: Is it better to contract this person for my humor blog, or to punch up my blog about my journey through life after being burned over 97% of my body?

I Will Model Your Merchandise or Products



The image shows a screenshot of a freelance marketplace listing. On the left, there is a profile for a user named 'sarahmah' with a 'Level 2 Seller' badge and a 5.0 star rating. The listing title is 'I will model your merchandise or products'. Below the title is a large photo of a woman in a black bikini on a beach. To the right of the photo is a pricing table with three columns: Premium, Standard, and Basic. The 'Basic' column is selected and shows a price of \$15 for a 'Beginner' package. The package description includes 'One photo with the product of your choice' and '2 Days Delivery'. There is a green 'Continue (\$15)' button and a 'Compare Packages' link. Below the pricing table is a 'Contact Seller' button.

Premium	Standard	Basic
		Beginner \$15
		One photo with the product of your choice.
		2 Days Delivery
		Continue (\$15)
		Compare Packages
		Contact Seller

Who knows more about books than attractive models? If there's one thing we trust the opinions of hot people on, it's...well, we trust them on everything. They're in all the commercials. Touche, hot people!

Wait a minute...now that I think about it, who runs successful book clubs? Hermione Lady: attractive. Reese Witherspoon: Attractive, despite her big head. Jimmy Fallon: Fuckable (but BARELY, Fallon. Don't get a big head, like Reese).

Maybe there's something here. Maybe this just got elevated from Worst Service to Best Service. Oh, wait, no. Just kidding. Once again, the answer is Photoshop:



Thanks, Obama!

I Will Make A Unique Socks Design

Maybe you should market your book as socks! Why haven't I thought of this before!

Oh, maybe because I really hate people who wear "fun" socks on the regular. And maybe because socks are almost always covered by shoes and pants, making them terrible ad spaces. And maybe because even if you have a sock design, you have to get the socks made. And maybe because I have a strict policy that I only wear ONE type of sock so there's no fucking around with matching in the laundry process (this is possibly my number one life hack, people).

I Will Write Your Erotic Scenes For You

Yes, please! Now if only I could find someone to be in my real-life erotic scenes for me. And drink my beers for me. And live any moments of joy that I might have.

If your erotic scenes aren't fun to write (or, if they're meant to be heartbreaking, if they're not heartbreaking to write), then you're doing it wrong.

There are some simple rules: Just don't call a penis anything other than a penis, dick or cock, and don't call a vagina anything other than a vagina or a pussy. If you call a penis a "fleshy sword" or a vagina a "secret treasure" or anything even remotely like that, you've fucked up. There are no two-

word terms for these things allowed.

If you're struggling, go out with a friend, have a few drinks, and then tell them a sex story. What words do you use? Use those ones.

Quit Your Job, Write Full Time



I'm quitting my job to write.

I'm giddy just typing that phrase, even though it's not true. Maybe it should be in italics. Or maybe I should add "someday" to the end. In italics.

For such a common dream, it's so unattainable. So taboo to even discuss. It's italics-level taboo.

It's laughable, right? If someone said this to you, would you have any reaction other than, "Good fucking luck"?

I'm not going to lie, I'd like to quit my job and write full time. But whenever I think about it, I think about the roadblocks. I'm not a wealthy man, nor was I from the sperm of a wealthy man or the egg of a wealthy woman. That's both the longest and grossest way I could think to say I don't have family money.

I haven't had a ton of luck with publication so far. I'm no Stephen King. I'm no Toni Morrison. I'm no...I'm nobody.

When I have a problem, I find that the solution usually involves plotting it out in linear fashion. Otherwise I get off track. What are the concrete steps I'd have to take to make this happen? What order should I do them in? Can I eat snacks while I think about it? See, off track already.

Take the journey with me.

Step 1: Is It What I Want?

We tend to start with the financial, but there's something to be said for the emotional side here.

Because if you aren't emotionally invested, there's no point in trying to work out the finances.

Question: Am I prepared to spend my time alone?

Some people get weird when they have a couple days with nothing specific to do, nowhere to be, and so on. Some people need a little more human interaction than they'd get as a stay-at-home writer. Ask parents who've stayed home with their newborns. Some people are able to tolerate a lot more of that than others.

Question: Do I want to write, or do I just want a different job?

Hard truth time: Are you quitting because you want to write full time or are you quitting because you hate your job? Being a full-time writer is not the direction to go unless it's very specifically what you want. If you just need a new job, see if you can find one that's more typical.

Question: Can I Try A Working Vacation?

To find out if full-time writing is what you want, take a vacation from your job and try it. Whatever you can arrange. If it's only 2 days on a weekend, then there you go. If you can wrangle a few vacation days and attach to a weekend, try that. Try the 9-5 writing grind, see how it feels.

Question: What's My Emotional Support Network Like?

If you're making this switch, you need your friends, family, and writer colleagues on board. You can't manage this new lifestyle AND be constantly fighting for it or about it. Be real with the people around you, especially the people who need your time and attention.

Step 2: Is It What I Need?

Being honest with myself, there is time outside of the work day that I could be writing, and I'm not. I'd get more done without work, sure. But could I get a lot more done AND continue to work? Yes, probably.

So, quitting would help me level-up, but it's not the only thing that'd help, and maybe it's not even the best thing.

Leaving your 9-5 is a drastic move, so you'd better make sure it's necessary. Make sure there aren't other things that might be just as helpful. Like, in my case, working on my discipline.

Step 3: The Financials

Question: Have I Hit The Pratchett Point?

Terry Pratchett decided to quit working and write full time when it turned out he would earn more money as a writer than he would at his 9-5. He was losing money by working a regular job, so he almost had to quit.

It's not likely that many of us will hit that point, ever. I'm sad to say it, but it's true.

However, if you hit that point, you can bypass all the other questions about finances.

Question: How do I feel about having a lot less money?

I'm a Dave Ramsey fan, especially in terms of financial decisions being emotional. They really are. Taking on debt, paying it off, all that stuff is emotional. Okay, having the money is also pretty damn crucial, but what I mean is, you have to decide what you're emotionally prepared for.

As an example, how do you feel getting out of a car that's 20 years old in front of a group of teens? This is an experience I had recently, and it wasn't my favorite. But, I don't live my life to impress teens. Fortunately. Because if I was, I'd be failing miserably.

How well do you handle financial stress? How do you feel about living in a smaller home than your peers? Are you able to cook for yourself on the cheap, and will eating most of your meals at home make you sad? How do you feel about buying a boring car and driving it for the next 15 years? How do you feel about taking good care of your clothes and wearing the same things 10 years from now?

By the way, I'm not looking down on anyone who wants to drive a sweet whip (is that what kids call them still?) or live in a nice home. That's fine. What I'm saying is, what are you willing to give up? Because the dream of quitting your job will come at a price.

Question: Can I go three months on the New Budget before quitting?

Before you quit your job, see if you can live for three months on the budget you'd have if you quit. This is a double whammy. You'll get to see how realistic the idea is, and you'll get to save a cash cushion since you'll be spending a lot less.

3 months might sound like a long time to put off your dream, but if you start today, you'd be done around Valentine's day.

Question: What's my financial support network like?

There were times in my life when this question would've meant that I absolutely couldn't leave my job. Right now, if everything fell apart, if I made zero progress, I wouldn't be homeless. I wouldn't be penniless. I wouldn't starve. That hasn't always been as true as it is now, and I'm very grateful for that.

If you don't have a partner you share expenses with, parents you can rely on, or whatever situation you've worked out, if you're responsible for your financial present and future, I wouldn't quit that day job.

Step 4: Move Towards the Mountain

In Neil Gaiman's awesome "Make Good Art" speech, he talks about decision-making in relation to his "mountain."

According to Gaiman, the way to make decisions is to look at them and decide whether they're a step

Because the dream of quitting your job will come at a price.

towards the mountain or not. If it's a step towards the mountain, go for it. If not, then leave it be.

In this case, my mountain is working full-time as a writer.

Many a dream dies because it can't be achieved in perfect, ideal form. The best way I've heard it said, perfect is the enemy of progress.

I don't want to miss out on a step towards the mountain just because it's not the giant leap that gets me all the way there.

Truthfully, a lot of us would probably be in good shape if we went part-time and used the additional time to write. Even if we just cut down one day, added an 8-hour writing block to the weekly schedule, that seems like it'd make a huge difference. It's not giving the corporate world the big middle finger, but again, is that really the goal? Or is the goal to write?

Don't sacrifice a step in the right direction because the step isn't big enough.

It's not in the cards for me. Yet. But I've got some concrete steps, things to improve. And working towards that mountain is a hell of a lot better than lamenting how it's not happening right here, right now.

Why Isn't More Poetry Funny?



Can poetry be funny?

Most of you are saying, "Of course it can!"

And most of you are wrong.

Okay, yes, in theory, poetry CAN be funny. The problem I have is that it seems like, for the most part, that's the ONLY time poetry is funny: in theory. In theory, I should be able to put batteries in a flashlight correctly 50% of the time just by guessing at their orientation. In theory, I can bench 400 lbs. I could go on listing things that I can only do in theory, but it's pretty close to getting sad. Let's agree to spare me the embarrassment.

Theory ain't shit.

And while you'll get the occasional funny poetry collection, the stray poem here and there, the proportions are all wrong. There are fewer kneeslappin' poems than there are funny novels, funny essays, funny plays, funny TV shows, funny movies, funny YouTube videos.

WHY!? Why is poetry lacking in the funny?

Funny Is Risky

Humor is probably the hardest thing to get right. It's just so personal. The thing one person finds funny, another probably won't. Something considered "universally funny" is funny to like 10% of the population. You'll never get a consensus on funny the way you do on other things like "important" or "prescient" or "moving." Or "poetic."

Humor also tends to walk a line. It's very difficult to be funny without being offensive to someone, in some way, in some context. Or, to put it another way, it's a lot easier to write a "moving" novel that's inoffensive than it is to write a genuinely funny novel that's inoffensive.

The risk of failing in writing a "prescient" novel is that you don't really do a good job talking about the topics you've covered. The risk of failing with your nonfiction is most likely that you don't craft a compelling narrative. The risk in failing with your jokes is that you piss a lot of people off.

This sets up comedic poetry for a terrible risk/reward ratio. If you "succeed" you make about 10% of the population laugh. If you fail, you are the worst person of all time.

Written and Spoken

Poetry is meant to be spoken. Read aloud at the least, but it's best when it's performed by its creator.

When I asked about funny poems on Twitter, I got an answer of "The Lanyard" by Billy Collins.

When I read the poem to myself, I was devastated. It was funny, and I think the humor existed to make the heartbreak that much more affecting.

When I listened to Billy Collins read the same poem out loud (and when I heard him read other stuff, which you should DEFINITELY do if you get the chance), it was a different thing entirely.

Yes, because you hear his inflection, his tempo. But also because of the environment. You can see Collins there, reading. He's okay. He's not in tears. There's an audience who recognizes what's happening and laughs.

Hearing all writing out loud, from the creator, is a great way to experience it. With poetry, it's more of a need than a preference.

We rarely experience poetry this way. We're used to reading poetry as dour. As readers, when it comes to poetry, we have those dialogs with our game faces on. Serious. Created to display a scar or to mark a tough occasion. Even when it's admittedly pretty funny.

Right Now

Here's a bigger question: Is there room for humor in poetry *right now*?

A recent article told of the rise in poetry sales and the likely reasons. Namely, people are looking for ways to make sense of the world, which many see as a horrific place at the moment.

If you look at the top sellers in poetry, you'll see people asserting their humanity. Poems about the Holocaust. Lost love. All-consuming love. "Darkness...longing and anxiety..." Funerals. Death and death and death.

**If you
"succeed" you
make about
10% of the
population
laugh. If you
fail, you are the
worst person
of all time.**

No offense to anyone working in those modes. I get it. We all like to be taken seriously. But.

Some of us make sense of the world through humor. Some of us get through tough times by joking. By laughing at it. Or by laughing at something else.

Humor has been my coping mechanism for a long time. When you've got some questionable parenting going on at home, humor is a way to cope. Jokes are free even when running the furnace isn't. Being funny is a way to overcome the fact that you don't have nice clothes when you walk into high school.

I don't see humor as being opposed to serious topics. I see it as one way we deal with the serious shit, and it's a method of dealing with serious shit that's underrepresented in verse. Its presence in poetry doesn't make the format less important, less real.

There's not just room for humor. There's a need.

Nobody Puts Poetry In The Corner

Never put a format in a box.

Poetry isn't a genre of writing. It's a format. And a format can try anything. A format can be about anything.

As a format, poetry is incredibly flexible. There are standard forms that can create wonderful, new things, and there are freeform versions that can also create new things. There are completely different ways of looking at the same situation, distilled down into a few lines.

When we sit down to write poetry, let's admit it, there's a leaning towards talking about serious shit in a serious way. But it doesn't always have to be that way.

Next time you work on some poems, try to make people cry. Try to teach them something about how you see the world. And try to make it funny.

'The Handmaid's Tale': Sexy Costumes, Tasteless Photos, and the Limits of Fandom



In the last little bit I've seen some weird *Handmaid's Tale* stories. They got me thinking about fandom, fiction, and...damn, I can't think of another F-word. We'll come back to that.

Let's look at these stories one at a time.

The Wedding Photo Debacle



The first story was about a couple who had *Handmaid's Tale* wedding photos. Have you ever noticed that these stories always say things like, "This couple has *Handmaid's Tale* wedding photos, and the internet is abuzz"? Or "people are outraged," or "the internet is mad"? How come these article writers never have the guts to say how THEY feel about it? It's always putting the feelings on "the internet"

or “people.” And since when did two people tweeting about something constitute “the internet”?

Sorry, we’re WAY off-track, here.

Here’s what happened: A couple got married. They hired a photographer, as one does. They took one picture in front of a wall, which was at the wedding venue and also was used as a setpiece in the *Handmaid’s Tale* TV series. The photographer then photoshopped in the ladies in red. So, this wasn’t a Handmaid’s Tale themed wedding, as some probably heard, and the photoshoot wasn’t themed that way either. It was one photo of many.

Before we get too deep, let’s tackle the other story.

Bringing Sexy Back

The second story I came across was about anger over a sexy *Handmaid’s Tale* costume put out by Yandy. It’s a couple years old, but I suppose Halloween reignited interest.



Yandy, it should be noted, is currently the company that is mostly responsible for the “Sexy [blank]” costumes. A lot of other companies have jumped ship on sexifying Halloween, but Yandy’s holding the line. Sexy Mr. Rogers, Sexy Tin Man. If there’s a costume that doesn’t lend itself to sexy, and if someone is making a sexy version, it’s Yandy.

The sexy *Handmaid’s Tale* costume is, well, par for the course. If you don’t like sexy Halloween costumes, that’s your thing, and I see where you’re coming from. But to single out a *Handmaid’s Tale* costume as being super offensive, as opposed to any other costume, is odd to me.

We’ll come back to it.

The Bigger Question

Now that we’ve got the two stories outlined, let’s get to the big question: What is and is not acceptable when it comes to fictional stories? What can we do in terms of engaging with fiction? What’s over the line? What are the rights of authors and what are the rights of fans?

My Hot Takes

I don’t think much of anything is over the line. Just so you know where I’m coming from, I don’t

think anything that constitutes reinterpretation or an individual angle on a piece of fiction is "unacceptable."

Even if that wedding had been a balls-out *Handmaid's Tale* wedding...so what? Is that disrespectful to...the novel? The TV show? The fictional women who fictionally "died" during fictional executions? Margaret Atwood?

And the costume. Let's look at the classic Sexy Nurse costume. A nurse is a real person. With a real job. A Handmaid from *The Handmaid's Tale* isn't a real person. I know, I know, there are real-life parallels, but by that logic, it would also be intensely disrespectful to dress as, say, Sexy Freddy Krueger.

I would have to say something different about an Anne-Frank-themed wedding, or an Anne Frank costume (which totally exists!), but that's non-fiction.

Fiction opens up the rules, especially in terms of taste.

That's my hot take.

The Artist's Opinion

I recognize that people get upset about *Handmaid's Tale* stuff because they perceive Margaret Atwood having a certain intent, and that intent is being ignored or attacked when it's interpreted in certain ways or parodied. Also, they see the novel as having a certain importance in our current political climate.

But if you're pissed off about the interpretation of *The Handmaid's Tale* that produces a sexy costume because it's against Atwood's wishes, if you're coming to the defense of your literary hero's purpose, you're guilty of not taking a moment to listen to what Margaret Atwood has to say about it. Because Atwood is not mad. As evidenced by her appearance on Seth Meyers:

Seth Meyers: As a writer, that must be frustrating when someone does so badly on the book report that they think that that is an okay costume.

Atwood: I have a sense of humor.

Her choice of words is key. "I have a sense of humor." She gets it. It's funny. Regardless of whether or not the costume was intended as a big joke, Margaret Atwood can look at it as comical, the fact that this book she wrote birthed a sexy costume.

I agree with her. It's funny. It's not, as Seth Meyers speculated, frustrating. It's funny.

If anyone is going to come down on sexy costume makers, shouldn't it be Atwood? And if she's fairly indifferent to the whole thing, if she can shrug it off, shouldn't the rest of us follow her example?

If Atwood gives it a pass, who among us is suited to revoke that?

If you can make a sexy *Handmaid's Tale* costume, and if that concept is something Margaret Atwood doesn't get uptight about, then I have to say, seems like this is an acceptable interpretation of a

fictional tale.

Merchandising!

[say it in your best Mel Brooks voice]

If you love something, then there's some fucker out there willing to sell it to you for a little profit.

On the official MGM store you can buy LOTS of great *Handmaid's Tale* merch. Get a hoodie that says "Don't let the bastards grind you down!" Get a phone case that says, "Blessed be the fruit." How about an "I intend to survive" tank top?

I think we're so used to this stuff that we don't even think about it, but slow down and look at it from another angle. We're cool with a huge corporation commodotizing *The Handmaid's Tale* and selling it back to us, that's tasteful and within the boundaries of what we think it is right, but we're NOT cool with someone who is NOT a giant corporation taking a wedding photo for their own enjoyment? That's poor taste, against the cause, but a \$35 dollar phone case is somehow in the spirit of fighting the patriarchy? Wha?

It's not just MGM either. Lots of folks on sites like etsy are expressing their fandom for profit.

I would strongly suggest we rethink the boundaries of "good taste" here. Because I can't draw them in my mind such that profiting from a cheap plastic phone case is classy and a wedding photo is an abomination.

Fandom

Here's a picture of women wearing costumes at a protest:



Here's some women wearing them at San Diego Comic Con:



Here's another protester pair, these two who are anti-abortion:



The first picture would be people interpreting the book "correctly," by my estimation. Bringing the fictional into the non-fictional world in order to make a point. By correct, however, I mean that they are interpreting the book in the way that it's intended and in the way that the majority see it.

The second would be...not incorrect, but not AS correct. What's the obligation of someone dressed this way? Should they behave as though there's a seriousness to their costuming? Is the costume fun? Is love of a TV show, even a serious one, fun?

The third would probably be seen as the least "correct," of the three, although it's a strange case because the wearers are clearly taking what they're doing seriously. They aren't mocking, from what I can tell. To be honest, I find it confusing, and I'm not 100% sure what it means to the wearers.

What we all need to understand about fandom is that fandoms, and the fans that comprise them, are not one thing. Although these folks all enjoy or identify with *The Handmaid's Tale* in some way, they clearly are not engaged with the material in the same way.

Things get messy when you put them in the hands of people.

If you're a fan of *Fight Club*, you know how this goes. I was a fan of *Fight Club* at the time when other fans of *Fight Club* wanted to start fight clubs. I knew a guy who burned his hand with lye. I thought these people were idiots, and I wished that there were other people out there who were fans of *Fight Club* the same way I was, and there were. It just took a long time to find them.

Star Wars fandom is made up of several different camps. Fans of comics have different eras they love, different things about comics they enjoy. Fans enjoy things differently in private, and when that enjoyment spills into the public sphere through conventions, pieces of art, and so on, we get a quick look into the different ways people love the things they love.

These differences prove the power of fiction. How personal some huge piece of fiction can feel.

If a piece of fiction was enjoyed in the same way by everyone, if all readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* walked away feeling the same, getting the same message, then it would not be a powerful piece of fiction.

Keeping the Narrative Alive

In some ways, all of this, the sexy costumes, the protests, the wedding photo, all of it is great for *The*

Handmaid's Tale.

The Handmaid's Tale was the most-read book on Amazon in 2017, almost 35 years after its publication. In 1985, do you know what the Pulitzer for Fiction went to? *Foreign Affairs* by Alison Lurie. Who's dressing up as characters from that? Would you even know if they were? Does anyone give a shit about *Texas* by James Michener today? Because A LOT of people did in 1985.

Curiously enough, *The Handmaid's Tale* wasn't even the best-selling book at any point during the year it came out. It's survived the test of time, and it's ascending to the next level, exceeding the reach of most fiction. It's becoming ingrained in the culture.

Being ingrained in the culture comes with some rough spots for any book. People will be downright disrespectful. It'll be mocked on SNL. But the way a novel continues to be alive and vibrant is by being part of the larger cultural discussion, and in order to do that, someone's going to have to get pissed off. If there's nothing unresolved, nothing complex and bothersome about *The Handmaid's Tale*, then it won't be long before everyone loses interest.

If people couldn't be offended by the things surrounding the book, it would've died in 1985. If there were no questions about the interpretation of the book, if it was cut and dry, it would have been lost to the last 35 years, to something more modern.

We should all hope the things we love spawn ill-conceived costumes, tasteless wedding photos, and sects of fandom that read it differently. It means they'll be around for a long, long time.

Xmas In Bizarro Land



Christmas is like a great sex worker: it facilitates a wide variety of preferences and experiences.

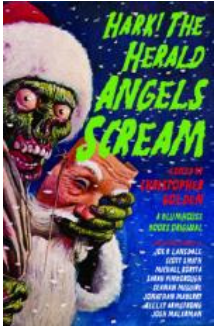
Some people have a very Christ-in-Christmas kind of vibe. They like their Nativity scenes, their crowded late night church services, and settling in on Christmas Eve around a warm fireplace with a mug of boozy egg nog or Christ blood or whatever.

Some people have a very Santa/Polar Bears/Coca-Cola relationship with Christmas. Hey, if you wanted this thing to be all about Christ, maybe it should've been pronounced kh-rice-t-miss instead of sounding more like the celebration of someone named Chris. Marvel movies have given us a whole bevy of Chris's to choose from. Pratt, Hemsworth, Evans, Kristofferson (don't question me on that last one unless you wanna get schooled).

Some people have no relationship with Christmas whatsoever. That's cool. I support you and your belief system, and I would like to help you advocate for your religion's holidays to also be days off of work for me. Whatever I can do to pitch in on that one, I'm extremely willing. I assume that for these folks, Christmas is like most any other day except you can't really go anywhere except the movies, and you can't really do anything but watch the movies that are out around Christmas, which are usually Christmas-y or unbearable. Or Star Wars. Categorize that as you will.

But here's the problem: The relationship most of us have with Christmas is one that was put on us. Not a self-selected thing. Religion, commerce, circumstances of birth, even the weather in the northern hemisphere conspire to set us on one holiday path or another.

I decided that I, like a Twisted Sister jam, wasn't gonna take it. Anymore. It was time for me to make my own Christmas traditions, informed by what I'm interested in. So I got me some bizarro and bizarro-adjacent books and set off on a trip to the Bizarro North Pole. Just to see what else is out there.



1. "Hark! The Herald Angels Scream" edited by Christopher Golden

Although it's only bizarro-adjacent, this one's a good toe in the egg nog (gross). It's the one I picked to try out a touch of bizarro in my book club leading up to the holidays.

See, I started this book club in my home town. It's not a hugely attended book club. Nor is it a highly literary one. Nor is it a sober one. Nor does it meet in classy locations like a living room with a disused treadmill holding laundry in the corner. If only we were at that level.

We meet at a bar called The Key Largo Lounge every couple months (give or take), have 9 beers apiece (give or take), and read something. That last part, the reading something, is also a "give or take" situation.

The Key Largo Lounge is not exactly a slice of a Beach Boys song in northern Colorado. It's mostly just a bar with several half-assed attempts at different entertainments. There's a tiny stage where I think someone was DJ'ing one time, but it was hard to tell. There are some of those electronic dart boards, though I'm not sure if they work. There are a couple pool tables, which seem crammed in like the pool table Kramer and Frank Constanza got on Seinfeld.

It's pretty much the perfect bar.

For December, we read *Hark! The Herald Angels Scream*. Well, parts of it.

Because it's better to give than receive, I decided to gift the book to the book club members. Because it's an expensive book (note: beers are \$2 dollars during happy hour at the Key Largo), I decided that instead of everyone getting an entire copy, I'd get one copy, tear out all the stories, and everyone could have a few.

I'm going to be honest: Most of the stories were just okay. The worst offenders were pretty clearly short stories that didn't work, so the author slapped on a light dusting of holiday cheer so they'd fit in the anthology. Little tip for anyone struggling to place a short story: just have the main character look out a window and remark on the Christmas lights next door. Boom, now it's a holiday story.

That said, "Good Deeds" by Jeff Strand is one of the best Christmas Stories ever. Do you know that song "Christmas Shoes?" If you don't, let Patton Oswalt explain.

I'll say nothing more about the story. Just go get it. The anthology is worth it for this story alone.



2. "Santa Steps Out" by Robert Devereaux

If you ever wanted to read a book where Santa is a completely insane fuck machine, if you've ever wondered where, in all the stories of Santa dropping off presents and bringing cheer, if you're like, "Where's the part where Santa's railing some chick?" then this is probably the book for you.

I say "probably" because...it's a little long. The fifth time Santa is getting down with

the tooth fairy, you've got the premise. By the time we get our first three-way, you're kind of ho-hum. It gets so bad that by the time you get to the part where the Easter Bunny is about to rape a kitten, you're pretty much checked out.

Also, there are points where the prose is more purple than Santa's dick head (I assume. It's gotta be freezing cruising at altitude in the North Pole in December).

And the worst part, you see where the book is going WAY before the characters, and it starts to get frustrating.

But I will say that it has its moments, as do most Christmases. It's a love it or hate it kind of book. People who love it REALLY love it. People who hate it really hate it. It's worth giving a shot to find out which camp you're in. One tip I'll provide, if you have any ideas about Santa being a saintly character, this one's not for you.



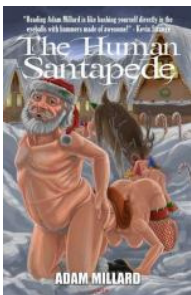
3. "Christmas On Crack" edited by Carlton Mellick III

Apparently Santa and sexy go hand-in-mitten, because damn, it just keeps happening in this one, too.

I've found this to be a divide amongst people in the real world. Do people like to get down on Christmas? Christmas Eve? Was this whole Santa thing concocted so parents could start plowing each other early, drunk on egg nog, pounding out their frustrations at assembling a doll house on each other?

If you're looking for a bizarro Christmas collection, this is a great choice. The stories are just short enough, the setups are fun, and while it gets a little weird for the sake of weird, this is the quintessential set of bizarro stories with enough Christmas to keep things moving.

Also: crabs that shoot lasers. If you feel like me saying that near the end is burying the lead, this is the perfect collection for you.



4. "The Human Santapede" by Adam Millard

My favorite thing about this book was reading in the reviews that someone read it only because that was the penalty for losing a fantasy football bet. I don't know much about fantasy football, but this sounds like the kind of league I could get behind. "If your football men lose, you will be forced to read. A NOVEL!"

This reader, who apparently sucks at fantasizing about football, was the only reviewer who didn't seem to love the book.

Adam Millard is a pretty fun writer. An inside tip: You can get an 800-page epic collection of his for like \$5 bucks right now. See below. If you're the kind of person who's going for *The Human Santapede*, you might as well.

Speaking of body horror and Christmas, there was the year when I was pretty sure my dad died. I'm sitting in the basement, and I hear this crashing coming from the stairs. Then my dad screams, desperate, "Don't come over here! Don't look!"

I thought for sure he was dying. Something happened, his guts were all spilled out at the bottom of the stairs, and he wanted to spare me this vision of his death. I'd seen some Rated R movies that were a little...advanced for me at this point. My imagination was on fire, and not in a good way.

It turned out he'd gotten me and my siblings all Moon Shoes, and he was trying to carry them all down the stairs at once. He missed a step, took a spill, broke something in his foot, and didn't want any of us to see the boxes scattered at the bottom of the stairs. Because that would ruin Christmas.



5. "Sausagey Santa" by Carlton Mellick III

Not only was this amazingly solid, it's a favorite Carlton Mellick III of mine. And that's saying something. I haven't read ALL of his books, but probably a dozen, which is a feat considering the guy seems to write faster than most of us read.

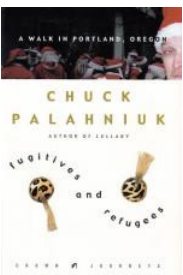
You know this book is a winner from the first line: "I never should have married a woman named Decapitron."

If there's a right foot to start a book on, that's it right there, and that foot is shod in a golden platform shoe with real magic fish living inside the heels, encased and swimming in a semi-transparent sauce made of Velveeta and bourbon.

I accidentally got drunk on Christmas when I was a kid. I don't remember all the particulars, but I got my hands on some cocoa. It didn't taste great. It had a weird peppermint thing going on that I couldn't place. Probably because I hadn't ever heard of Rurple Minze. If I'd ever heard that word, I would have probably assumed Rurple Minze was a mischievous elf or something.

We were watching TV, and I downed this cocoa and started feeling pretty funky. Sort of tired. Sort of weird, like I wanted to cry. And sort of like I was on the floor, and that was a pretty good situation. Like getting up off the floor would be the hardest thing I could ever do.

It was a pretty Merry Christmas, even if maybe the lights on the tree were a little bright the next morning. One of the better Christmas traditions until I read The Sausagey Santa.



6. "Fugitives and Refugees" by Chuck Palahniuk

One of my favorite sections in Chuck's travel book to Portland is about Santa Rampage, a tradition that started decades ago and just sounded like a blast. Okay, I know people have different feelings about these sorts of events anymore, that they've been co-opted by assholes. But damn it, it used to be something different. And I'm not going to let the assholes take a great tradition.

I was so inspired by Chuck's tale that I started my own Rampage in my small town. We've been going strong for about 6 or 7 years now. We've had some different themes, different challenges to keep things interesting, but we're always sure to spread cheer.

Sometimes the cheer has come in the form of hippity-hop balls. Sometimes the cheer came in the form of a contest to put on as many thongs as possible (you can get like a gross of paper-ish thongs meant for tanning pretty cheap). There's been some puking, there's been some messes of glitter, some emotional tears, some people too drunk to be allowed into bars, but nobody has died, nobody has thrown a punch, and many a good time has been had by many a Santa.

There are people I see at our little Rampage that I only see at our little Rampage. Old friends reconnect. Old coworkers catch up. Chuck's book gave me a great Christmas tradition. And the book has some of Chuck's best writing.

You really should try this in your hometown. I have lots of tips. Hit me up.

The Top Most Stupidest 2020 Reading Goals and Challenges



This is the year I figured out how to do reading goals: I'll list the ones I'm NOT doing. Yes, that means the list is longer, but when 2021 rolls around and I haven't accomplished anything on my list, I'll feel good about it.

Plus, there's nothing I like better than making fun of a genuine, thoughtful attempt at reading.

Let's get down to business.

Read Every Carlton Mellick III Book

Don't get me wrong, it'd be a blast. But I don't think I read as fast as he writes. And I do have some fear that this goal would result in a new, much higher baseline for what's weird, and maybe that'd sap some of the fun out of the world. If you read about a literal menstruating mall, what does reality even have to offer anymore?

Read Every Nobel Winner

I'll just use drugs if I want to get really sleepy, thanks. Sleep and warmth. That's all you need. Besides, there are a lot of duds on this list. Do I want to READ Bob Dylan lyrics? Hell, no. Sully Prudhomme? Hard pass.



Read The Dictionary

I thought about this once. Because the dictionary makes a good poop read. But it's also pretty boring, and while I don't really need to read words like "perspire" to know what they mean, I'd HAVE to read them in order to complete my goal. And see, if you set yourself up with a reading goal where half the shit is just for the sake of completion, you're set up for failure. Not to mention they put some weak-ass shit in dictionaries these days.

The Weird Reading Position Challenge

Read in a weird position! Take something that's an offline, relaxing, interesting hobby, like reading, and internet-itize it. Because that's just what reading needs, a way to be competitive and image-based. Good thinking, assholes!

Read A Book From Every Country

Sounds good on the surface, but then you break it down. Is a novel out of Monaco all that different from a novel out of France? Monaco has a literary prize, the Prince Pierre Foundation Literary Prize, and it's never gone to someone who's actually FROM Monaco?! I don't mean to shit on Monaco, it looks lovely. I just mean to say that there's probably a much bigger difference between someone from Moscow and someone from Novosibirsk, than there is between someone from France and someone from Monaco, or someone from northern Michigan and someone from Toronto.

Also, I might be the only one who feels this way, but so-called "armchair travel" is for dweebs. If you think that it's pretty good or even the next best thing to actual travel, I've got a stack of erotica and a chastity belt to sell you.

Classics Reading Challenge

I tried. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*? I wish I was watching that happen in real time. It'd be more exciting than the book. *The Scarlet Letter*? VERY ironic that the chosen letter is an "A," as though this book earned a passing grade. *Moby Dick*? Why bother? NOBODY reads that shit. It's not like I could talk to anyone about it. The last thing I need is a better way to alienate myself.

Read Only Non-Fiction

One time I went to bar trivia with my partner. We showed up late, and we were way behind until the round on serial killers, after which we surged ahead in points. It was exciting to know the answers, but also a little embarrassing to know so much about murderers and so little about baseball. What I'm saying is: I know enough about serial killers, thanks, and I'm sure there's other types of nonfiction out there, but why?

Read Only Fiction

This isn't so much a challenge because fiction is better. It's like signing up for the "Eat Only Delicious Food" challenge. When's the hard part?

Any Challenge Created For The Masses

You know what I'm talking about. All these web sites out there with their "patented" reading challenges.

This is like taking on a powerlifting program that's not designed for you. Some joker over at BookWhatever doesn't know what you need. They don't know your background, your history, where you're starting and where you're deficient. For someone who doesn't know you to prescribe a reading challenge is stupid. For you to accept that prescription is even more stupider.

Any Challenge That Has The Category "Read A Graphic Novel"

First of all, they're called "comics." "Graphic novel" is this fake term NPR adopted so they could talk about comics without being forced to bring in some nerd-o who knows the entire history of Wonder Woman's outfits. It's so you can feel like a grown-up about reading a comic without lowering yourself down into the muck with the rest of us and our webshooters and Fantastic Four's and Leagues, which are often of Justice.

It's 2020 and you haven't read a comic yet? You don't need a challenge. You need an intervention.

"Graphic Novel" is a red flag. Whoever made this challenge is barely even trying.

Goodreads Reading Challenge

Did you know Goodreads will let you set a challenge up to 5,000 books for ONE YEAR? That's like 14 books per day. How do I know this? Because I've been working my way down from 5,000 for the last few years, working from the high to low until I hit a goal I can make. I'm about 4,800 books behind schedule with just a few days left in 2019. Looks like I might have to ratchet down to 4996 for 2020.

Goodreads challenges incentivize you to make it easy on yourself. In order to achieve your goal, you can set it at something that you're likely to match, but then...what's the point?

And if you achieve your goal early, then what? You can keep reading, but it doesn't count for anything. What would be the point of that?

Become an Instagram Book Influencer

Last year I took a trip to NYC, and I was inspired to become an Instagram influencer. I spent hours taking pictures of my butt in front of NYC stuff, surrounded by other people doing the same thing. Sure, most of the other people doing this were young women with lots of makeup and fancy clothes, but there was one other guy who was like me, and he fell in a bush. So I was less of a buffoon than him, and being anything other than the biggest buffoon counts as a win for me. IN ALL SCENARIOS.

I'm fairly convinced that "influencers" are all very attractive. And I don't

**I don't see
someone's
attractiveness
as any
authority on
what's good
readin'.**

see someone's attractiveness as any authority on what's good readin'. Therefore, getting uglier would be the ticket for me. Alas, I don't think it's possible.

A Summer Reading Challenge

What are you, 5? You have a "summer vacation"? Here's a summer reading challenge for you: read some job applications, get a damn job, and maybe then you can stop crying about your student loans. Summer vacation. Gimme a break.

Birth Year Challenge

Pick a book from every year, starting with the year of your birth? How about I'll just read a contemporary book every year until I die? The Death Year Challenge. Almost the same result, but the ending will be more of a surprise.

If you're a big reader, you'll probably come pretty close to doing the birth year thing by accident. A goal you do by accident sucks. "It was my goal to fall on the ice and tear my groin." Wow. Glad you could achieve it.

Clear The Shelves

Read all those books on your shelf, the ones you bought and never read? I'm sure some maniacs out there want to die having read everything they ever bought. Me? I wanna go knowing there's more out there than any person could ever enjoy in a lifetime. Bonus: Your ungrateful, asshole relatives have to figure out what to do with your crap. I see all this stuff about cleaning so that your death isn't a burden on your loved ones. Well, excuse me for thinking that those jerkoffs could use the time to reflect on my life and how great I was. Sorry if that's disruptive to whatever stupid garbage they had planned for the day. Sorry that my death is an inconvenience.

Read Nothing Political

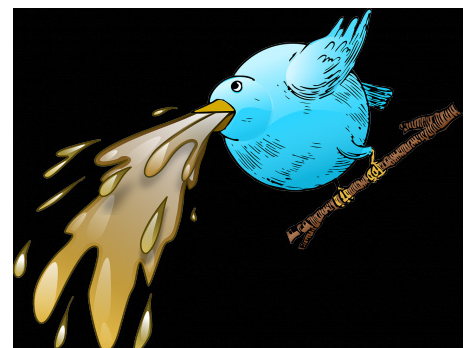
I personally think this is a great challenge, but you're not going to make it. You just aren't. I can do it, but you? Not likely.

Tweet Reviews of Everything I Read

I'm gonna tell you a secret. I'm starting to suspect that nobody on Twitter cares about what I have to say. Seems like people are listening to you, but me? I'm almost suspicious that...nobody gives a shit!

Nothing But Comedian Memoirs

After some research, I've decided that comedian memoirs are the worst. Imagine taking a comedian's act and turning it into a bland text with no act-outs, emphasis, or liveliness. Sound terrible? It is! And there's a ton of it out there.



Free Bin Challenge

There's a "FREE" bin outside a bookstore I really like. One could spend a lot of time perusing the free bin. One has. That "one" being me. And I'm here to tell you, there's a reason that shit's free. You're doing the store a favor by taking this stuff off their hands. The bin must be about halfway between the storefront and wherever they dump trash, and someone must've been like, "Maybe we can trick customers into throwing the trash away for us." Well, not on my watch, buddy! You can throw away your own trash! And also this coffee cup I brought in from outside.

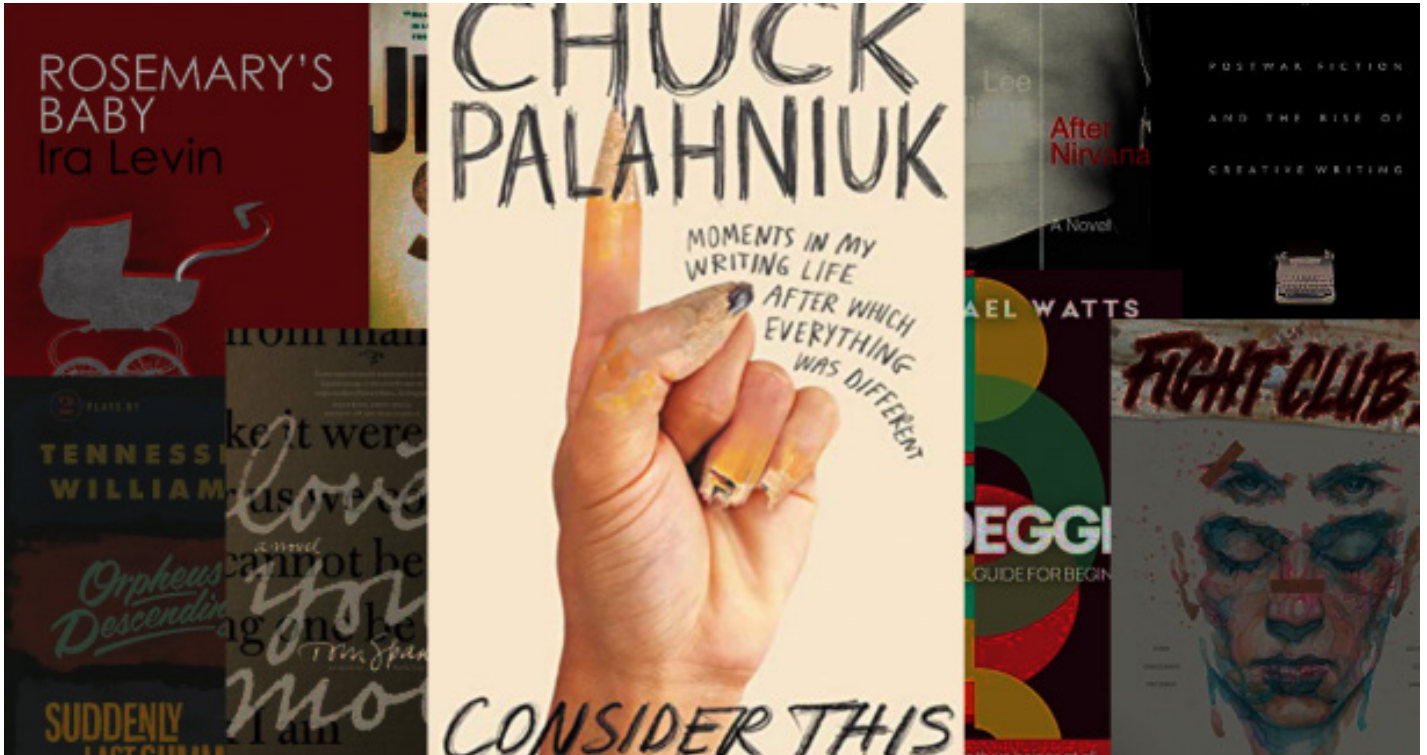
Never Skip a Book Club Book

Maybe this is the year to read EVERY book your book club picks. Or, maybe it's time to admit that you just don't care what your book club thinks anymore. You know it's true. Book clubs are irrelevant now that we can tell the whole world we've read a book by reviewing it just about anywhere. Best part? You don't even have to read it! You can review stuff on Goodreads you've never even heard of. Who's going to stop you? "On my fifth re-read of Infinite Jest, some new items stuck out to me..."

The College Textbook Challenge

I have a better idea. Instead of reading the college textbooks you've got boxed up wherever, feel shame about still having them, throw them in the garbage with as much force and anger as you can, dump the cat's litter box on top of them, officially trash the dream that you're going back to school (and using the same texts for some reason?) and move on with your life. That's the challenge: Put the past in the past. And in the garbage can where it belongs.

Chuck Palahniuk's 'Consider This': A Reading



If you're not excited about Chuck Palahniuk's upcoming how-to book, *Consider This*, you should be.

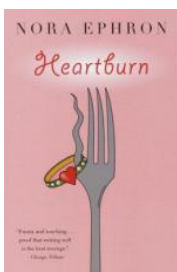
Yes, I know there are lots of how-to-write books out there. This one is going to be different.

For one, his how-to travel guide to Portland is some of his best work. Even if you never go to Portland (and I'd argue you'll never go to the Portland in *Fugitives and Refugees* because it doesn't exist anymore), it's a great read.

Two, Chuck is a really great teacher. When I was lucky enough to be in a workshop with him for a few months, I saw first hand that this guy not only knows how to write, but he can teach others what he knows, provided they're willing to listen.

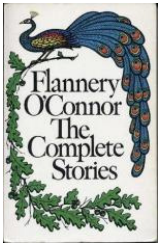
Three, he is like a fiction mechanic. He has this amazing ability to pop the hood on a story, take a look, and figure out how it works (or doesn't). You'll learn a lot about fiction, books, movies, whatever, from *Consider This*.

To get the most out of *Consider This*, I've got a reading list for you. Based on what I learned, fiction referenced by Chuck, and a few other options, hitting up these books will prep you for Chuck's takes. Or, if you want to read them after, will help you with some of the concepts likely to come up in the book.



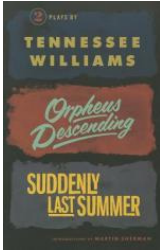
1. "Heartburn" by Nora Ephron

A master class on the use of objects in minimalist fiction. When you see the cover, it doesn't look like something that Chuck would love. But trust me on this one, there's a lot to learn here about using objects to propel a story.



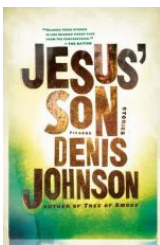
2. "The Complete Stories" by Flannery O'Connor

"What would Flannery O'Connor do?" That is the phrase Chuck wrote on my story, and it's one he asked a lot in workshop. Flannery O'Connor was a great writer, and she was a great student. Take a page from her book. No, wait, take all the pages and go from there. How does she structure a story? How does she end a story? What's interesting about her individual stories?



3. "Suddenly Last Summer" by Tennessee Williams

Authority will almost certainly be a big topic. There are two basic ways to establish your narrator's authority: head and heart. One proven method to gain heart authority is to have a character admit something or be brutally honest in a way that's courageous. One option is finding a way for a character to talk about themselves in the third person, which allows them to be harsh and honest. Suddenly Last Summer provides a great example.



4. "Jesus' Son" by Denis Johnson

A surprise to no one, but there's so much to analyze that most students never even consider. These stories have a depth that warrants reading them over and over. For example, when does Johnson use quotation marks and why? Do the quotation marks make the reader feel more or less a part of the story? Do they bring the reader in closer or push them away? You can get so micro with the stories in this collection.



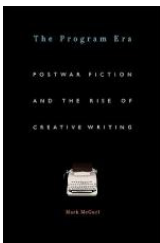
5. "Fight Club 2" by Chuck Palahniuk

With the release of *Fight Clubs 2* and *3* in comics form, I would think it's likely we'll hear some lessons learned from working in comics. *Fight Club 2* has an ending that has a lot to say about fiction and stories as well. It's fascinating.



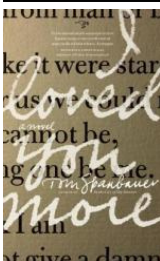
6. "Geek Love" by Katherine Dunn

Liminality and liminal spaces is another likely topic. *Geek Love's* main character manages to manipulate events and orchestrate most of what goes on because she exists in this liminal space due to her growing up in a family that travels the carnival circuit. It's from this space, this "outside," that she is able to do what she does.



7. "The Program Era" by Mark McGurl

An admittedly dry read, but there's a great deal of knowledge here. Especially interesting is the discussion of the value (or lack) of MFA creative writing programs. Likely to be referenced more than a few times.



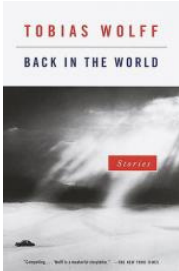
8. "I Loved You More" by Tom Spanbauer

Devotees of Chuck know he studied with Tom. If you read *I Loved You More*, you'll not only get a great story, you'll get a lot of great insight into minimalist techniques like big and little voice. They're naked on the page, and to understand Chuck, you have to go back to Tom.



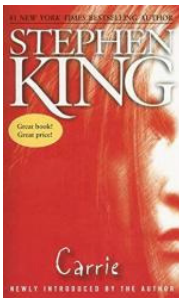
9. "Haunted" by Chuck Palahniuk

Specifically, "Guts." This story is, in my opinion, the purest distillation of Chuck's style and sensibility. It's got the gross-out factor that pumps up the entire heartbreaking conclusion. It was developed the way he likes to develop stories, by talking them over and snowballing other peoples' similar stories into one cohesive unit. If it wasn't about jerking off at the bottom of a pool, this would be in every short story collection used to teach aspiring writers.



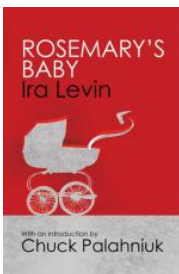
10. "Back In The World" by Tobias Wolff

Specifically "The Rich Brother." This story is all about repetition and how repetition pairs with escalation. Repetition without escalation is exhausting and worthless, but repetition that escalates the tension is a beautiful thing.



11. "Carrie" by Stephen King

Non-fiction devices, techniques, and forms can be very useful in fiction. In *Carrie*, they serve to push out exposition in a way that feels natural. As a bonus, newswriting is not expected to sound as good as fiction, so it gives the reader another texture while providing needed information.



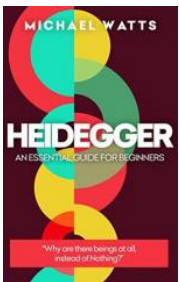
12. "Rosemary's Baby" by Ira Levin

Clocks can be a great thing in a story. They make sure things keep moving. *Rosemary's Baby* was one Chuck mentioned often for a variety of reasons. In it, the baby serves as a clock. We know it's coming, and it adds an inevitability, a momentum to the story.



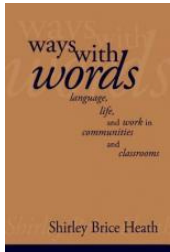
13. "The Essential Kierkegaard" by Howard V. Hong

Sometimes discussions got pretty deep. Fiction's about life. The better you understand life, the better you'll understand fiction.



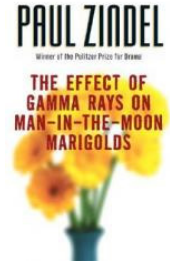
14. "Heidegger: An Essential Guide For Complete Beginners" by Michael Watts

Like I said, things got deep. You can at least cheat this one a little bit via an intro text.



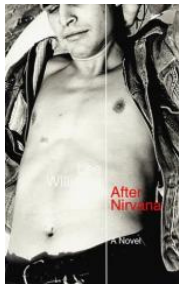
15. "Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms" by Shirley Brice Heath

Heath was a pioneer in the field of studying what makes popular fiction so, well, popular. And lasting and effective. What audiences are looking for and how social models are depicted in fiction.



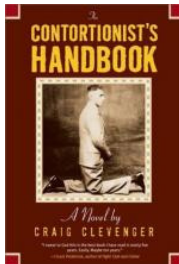
16. "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" by Paul Zindel

This is a big voice / little voice situation. Stepping up and stepping out as well. It also demonstrates the art project as a way to track time and progress in a narrative. It's a quick read, and it demonstrates a lot of techniques without a bunch of extra nonsense.



17. "After Nirvana" by Lee Williams

This book is so unflinching without being exploitative. It's a beautiful, difficult balance, and this book is a master class.



18. "The Contortionist's Handbook" by Craig Clevenger

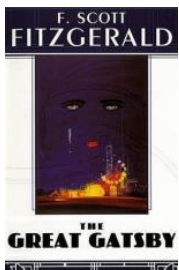
OTB. This is a set of initials you'll become familiar with. Going OTB means going "On The Body," which means moving the narration to the narrator's body, how things feel on the body, rather than reaching for dialog or action when you want to progress a story. How do people understand something they've never experienced? Clevenger does it like this:

You know what it's like when you wake up Monday morning, you're filled with this dread, all is pointless...then you realize it's Sunday? Multiply that by 100. That's what a Vicodin feels like.



19. "Cat's Cradle" by Kurt Vonnegut

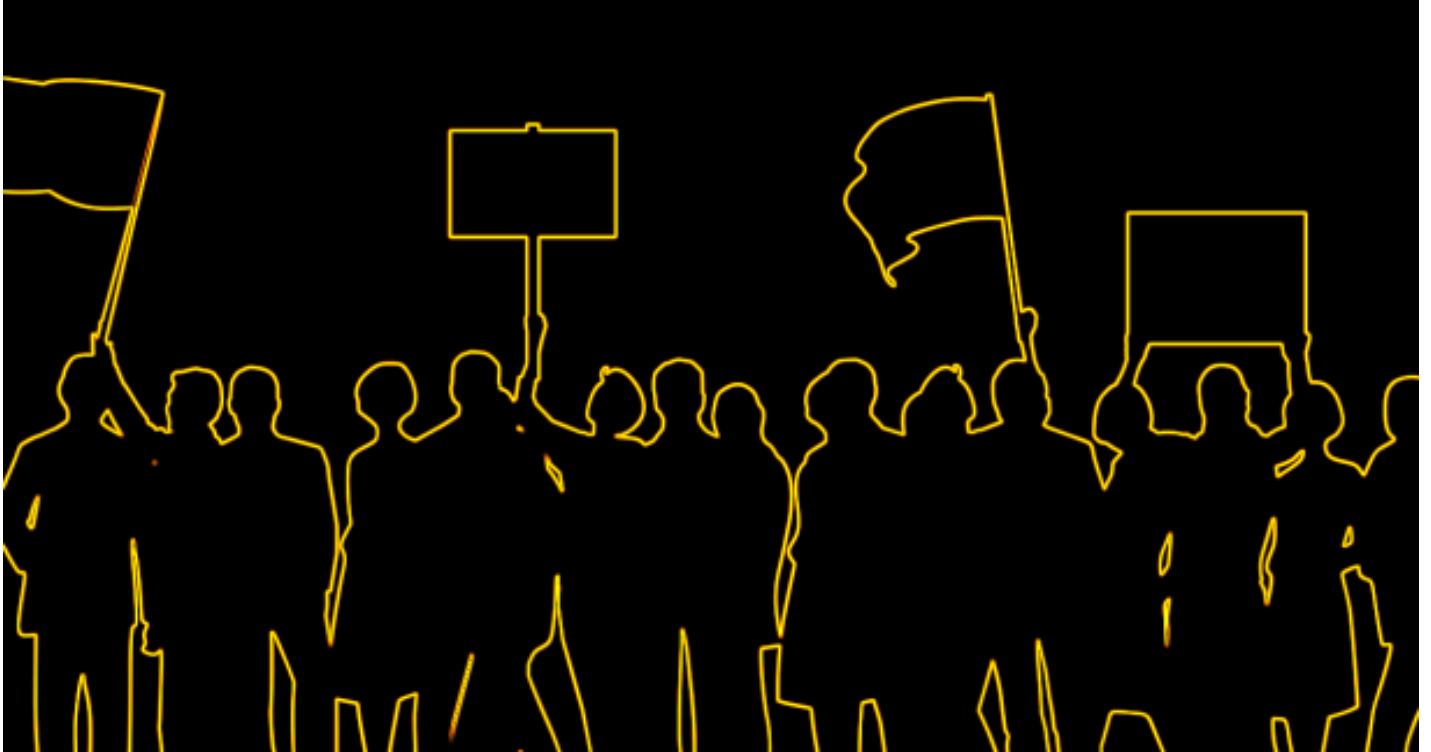
"If you can be Vonnegut, be Vonnegut." Pretty solid advice.



20. "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald

It's just got so many of the essentials. It seems to be the first book that really struck Chuck, the one that laid bare the essentials of fiction and opened up this world of possibilities. If there was one book that I was very sure you'd see referenced, this is it.

Should I Use A Sensitivity Reader?



Maybe you've heard a little bit about sensitivity readers. Maybe you've heard they're the PC Police. Maybe you've heard that they help bring more diversity to books. Maybe you've heard they're expensive. Maybe you've heard they're worth the price. Maybe you've heard horror stories, maybe heroic stories.

The real question for writers isn't whether or not someone else used a sensitivity reader. It's whether YOU should use one.

What Is A Sensitivity Reader?

The answer is more complicated than you might think. It's like asking how much you're supposed to tip a tattoo artist. The only people who answer that question are tattoo artists, who are probably inflating, and people who don't want to tip tattoo artists at all, who are probably deflating. Which makes it difficult for 99% of people who want to tip generously, but who don't want to be taken advantage of.

The best service I can provide is to present two views on sensitivity readers: The Biggest Proponent and Worst Detractor. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle of the altruistic sensitivity reader who just wants to help you write a great novel and the problematizing word gestapo. And it's probably not in the precise middle, just somewhere between.

I assume these will please no one. That's kind of the point. Find your satisfaction in the middle.

The Proponent Version:

A sensitivity reader would probably define what they do as going over a manuscript to check for problematic character traits, language, stereotyping, etc. Especially if you've written a novel from the

perspective of someone who is demographically “other” from yourself. Perhaps you’re a Latino man who has written a main character who is a black woman. And perhaps you feel that you’ve done a good job depicting this character, but you’re thinking that you might not be 100% in touch with the experience of a black woman, and perhaps you’ve unintentionally put in traits, language, behaviors, descriptions, or even scenarios that would read as inauthentic to readers, especially if they are black women. So, you hire a sensitivity reader, who DOES have experience in that area, to check over your work. This can be done for just about any form of “otherness,” including race, gender, ability, what have you.

The Detractor Version:

A detractor would probably define a sensitivity reader as someone who goes through your manuscript in search of anything that people would potentially deem offensive for any number of reasons. The sensitivity reader can highlight those for you, and then you can decide whether or not to remove or alter them. Basically, this detractor would define a sensitivity reader as a pre-internet check: What are the thinkpieces regarding your book going to be about? What should I censor from my work in order to avoid trouble? You’ll then get a pass/fail type of grade on your work, and you’ll probably hear something about how your manuscript doesn’t contain any trans characters, and your erasure of the trans community is an affront to the idea that love is love and a continuation of the heteronormativity of our society that can [clap emoji] not [clap emoji] stand [multiple clap emojis]. Your lack of disabled characters demonstrates that you’re an ableist, and the way you handled race has made you the next Hitler.

When it comes to more diverse books, sensitivity readers play a complicated role.

The Main Arguments In Favor

People who are in favor of using sensitivity readers will say that it’s not so much censorship as it is another form of editing. You hire an editor to check the copy, evaluate the story arc, help make sense of things, and so on. If you wrote a sci-fi book, you might ask one of your science-oriented friends to peruse it. A sensitivity reader is really no different from hiring an editor of any type. They just have a specific area of concern. For example: I had an editor who really discouraged verbs ending in “-ing.” Was I being censored? Not really. I was being challenged to do better. Sensitivity readers can challenge you to do better in other ways.

Sensitivity readers can add depth to your characters. They may steer you away from using things like skin color as a shortcut to personality. We get your character is from Pakistan, but what does that mean? How has that shaped his worldview? How has that shaped the way he’s been treated in his current environment? Where is the intersection of who he is as a character and who he is demographically? If this seems like a bother to you, think about it this way: A common exercise in beginning fiction writing classes might be to have a writer consider what a character has in the fridge. This is meant to help the writer better unpack the idea of who the character is, as a person who exists in their world. Sensitivity reading can help you flesh out characters.

The Main Arguments Against

The straw man argument that’s pinned to the anti-sensitivity reader crowd (sometimes by their own

doing) is that sensitivity reading is censorship. It's debatable, but I think there are more significant, less debatable reasons that one might not elect to use a sensitivity reader.

If I'm not confident in the authenticity of my renderings, then maybe that's a sign I'm writing something I really shouldn't be writing at all. That's the first argument against right there: the necessity of a sensitivity reader might signal you're doing something you should reconsider. I don't think this is just about sensitive topics. I just think that writers should tell the stories only they can tell. That's the thing of greatest value that a writer can offer.

Sensitivity readers do not protect authors. They will read and provide feedback, but they do not want to be used as a "shield" against criticism. This makes sense, but it's a good argument against using a reader as that reader really provides no guarantees with their work. They can only read the manuscript as one person, not as an entire demographic, and therefore don't offer an author much in terms of protection/safeguarding against making a mistake. A single reader from a demographic can't claim to speak for that demographic, and therefore can be a version of a double-check, but there's just no guarantee. If the masses feel like you're book is sexist, saying, "I had a female sensitivity reader go over this thing," is the literary equivalent of, "I have a female friend, so I'm all good."

The idea that sensitivity readings are just like any other editorial readings is disingenuous. If a novelist gets some facts wrong, never closes a plot hole, or writes a fairly boring book, does any number of things that should be caught by good editing, they might not be seen as a great author, but most people won't attack them personally, try to end their career, or write a long Twitter rant about what a horrible human that author is. But, if an author messes up when it comes to depicting a character in a way that's viewed unfavorably, that can be a career-wrecker. What sensitivity readers do comes with more weight, but despite the importance, it doesn't come with any solid guarantees. Which feels...like a fire marshall approving the safety of a building, but not taking responsibility for the building's lack of exits, which results in a couple people getting incinerated.

The Most Contested Part of the Debate

When it comes to more diverse books, sensitivity readers play a complicated role.

A sensitivity reader can probably work through far more manuscripts in a year than they could write themselves. Especially if they receive the manuscripts when most of the editing is done, the copy is in good shape, and the general structure is in place. Meaning a larger quantity of diverse books with good-faith efforts towards authenticity could be pumped into the market.

There's also the argument that it's important for high profile voices to present diverse characters. When Jodi Picoult writes a novel with a black main character, that book is in the hands of a shitload of people. She has huge reach, her books show up in prominent places, and when she does it, the representation needle moves. So, having multiple sensitivity readers (as Picoult did for *Small Great Things*) means there's thoughtful representation in a blockbuster book.

But there's also the "own voices" concept. Let's say I'm Jodi Picoult and I write a book with a black main character. In order to write and publish this book, I employ several sensitivity readers. While I may pull it off, the "own voices" concept would say that rather than having me, a white woman, employ black sensitivity readers, perhaps that story is better written by one of those black women. Perhaps my blockbuster novel takes the place that could be occupied by a novel written by someone

who genuinely comes from a background that resembles the main character.

Some writers coming from the “own voices” perspective will say they’re having a harder time getting published because big publishers are turning to their big names to publish diverse books, going with Jodi Picoult instead of a relative unknown, diversifying their characters while their authors remain the same.



Lightning Round

Let’s do some quick, Yes/No opinions.

Yes: If you’re a Young Adult author. This is a sector of books that, for reasons we aren’t even going to speculate on, seems apt to tear each other apart. You need all the help you can get.

No: If you plan to argue a lot with the sensitivity reader.

Yes: If you’re not paying for it and a legit publisher is making it happen. Why not?

No: If your book is meant to be transgressive in a way that would obviously be flagged by a sensitivity reader.

Yes: If you genuinely are concerned about people being hurt, not because of what effect it might have on your career, just because avoiding hurting people is a primary goal of your fiction and/or career. Note the difference between avoiding hurting people being a primary goal and hurting people being something you’d prefer to avoid, but not being the driving force behind what you write.

No: If you don’t have a reliable way to find and vet a good reader.

Yes: If your book is intended for an audience that would appreciate the fact that you used a sensitivity reader. If they see the good intention behind what you’re doing as meaningful, then you might as well.

No: If your sensitivity reader doesn’t have a significant background in fiction, writing, English (if you’re writing in English), publishing, marketing, etc. They should definitely have demonstrable writing or editing skills, and you should share an understanding of how fiction operates.

Yes: If you’re doing it for the people who are your fans as opposed to the people who are your detractors.

No: If you're doing it out of a sense of compliance as opposed to belief that it's the right thing to do.

Personal Opinion

Here's my decision. Not a recommendation, not a condemnation of sensitivity readers or the people who employ them. Not a statement about diversity in books. Just my personal decision.

I don't feel that sensitivity reading is censorship, but...perhaps it's fair to be concerned that there's a homogenization happening here.

I wrote a book. One section of that book used the word "retarded" to describe developmentally disabled adults. And I wrestled with that. Because I know how that word makes people feel, and at the same time, I thought that because the book was meant to be a very intimate communication with the narrator, using contemporary and correct terminology felt formal to me. It felt like the way someone would talk to their boss at work as opposed to the way they might talk to a friend, in confidence. I felt formal, careful language pushed the reader away.

For the record, I did take out the word "retarded." I don't say that to make you feel a certain way about me, like I'm a big hero here. I say that because I think it was important for me to think about and decide for myself. To decide what would make the story most like the story I want to tell, the way I would tell it.

And it's important for different writers to make a different decision.

A novel is a huge pile of micro decisions. What differentiates one writer from another is how they handle those decisions. The more that these micro decisions are codified and made based on objective(ish) criteria, the more same-y books become.

That's what I fear, not what I know. Nobody really knows. There's no definitive answer here. No plan that's going to work for everyone.

My decision is for me. You have to make your own.

Start As Close To The End As You Can



There's a mandate to keep this one short, what with the premise and all.

Is your piece not working? Your short story doesn't pop? Your novel wallowing?

Start over. And start the story as close to the end as possible.

Newswriting

A great lesson I learned from a newswriting class was to include the entirety of the story as close to the opening of the article as possible. Why? Because giving them the details is one way to let them know whether they want to read on.

You can do this for your readers, too. Pay them up front by starting near the end. Then they don't have to wonder whether the payoff is coming and whether it's adequate.

Thrown Into The Action

When someone says, "I felt thrown right in the middle of the action," it's a compliment. There's the rare story that doesn't have enough background. RARE. I wouldn't worry that your story is one of those. I would worry that you're holding people at the door, giving them a bunch of unneeded stuff when all they want is to rush past you and get inside.

Exposition

Starting close to the end means you'll have to get creative with the ways you package your exposition. Info dumps are hard to manage in the midst of the good stuff. Writers rising to a

allenge equals a better experience for readers. Reveal character and plot using tools that integrate information into the events in a pleasing way.

Don't Show Your Work

I know you did a ton of research. And I don't care. I don't want to see it on the page. There's a difference between doing research to get the details right and being an overachiever. If I want to read a bunch of research, I'll read the shit you read. If you want praise for doing a ton of research, get a job in a lab.

World-Building

"World-Building" is the #1 excuse for too much nonsense. If your world is using standard fantasy tropes, you don't have to tell me that orcs have a rough life.

Excise a ton. Have someone read it. Ask if they understand what's going on. If the answer is yes, then consider the rest of the stuff you wrote back end work that informed the good stuff.

Writers rising to a challenge equals a better experience for readers.

THE End or AN End?

Breaking Bad was tense because it was always teetering on the end. The story begins with the main character having less than a year to live. Close to the end.

Yes, the end gets pushed back. But once that ending gets pushed back, another possible ending takes its place. It's ALWAYS close to an end of one kind or another.

Being close to the end and being short don't mean the same thing. You can have a long-ass book that's never far from ending.

Overstaying Your Welcome

A reader welcomes your story into their life. It's better to leave a little too soon than a little too late. Cutting anything that's not crucial to arriving at the end is a great way to cut things down.

As Possible

Remember, as close as possible. That doesn't mean your story is barren. It's not rushed.

Think about telling someone how to cook a steak. You might start with the grocery store, telling them how to pick out a good one, depending on who you're talking to. You might start with heating the grill. But if you're starting with, "A cow is born," you're starting way too far from the ending.

I'm not suggesting you create a challenge for your readers, forcing them to reckon with some confusing nonsense. I'm suggesting that most writers start with the birth of their steak's grandmother. And that's way, way too far from that forkful of steak readers are looking for.

It Matters

The end matters. A shitload. We all talk big about the journey versus the destination, but everyone's watched a TV series, gotten to the final episode, and said, "What the fuck?"

Starting close to the end obligates you to make your ending a good one.

Death

Everybody is interested in death. Everyone. Because we all die. We all end.

Endings provide us models for death. This is big and woo-woo, and I'll own that: The closer we get to the inevitable end, the more intriguing the very existence of that end becomes.

For the sake of brevity, instead of me arguing why this is true, go back to your work, start it close to the ending, and ask how your ending relates to the ending we all face eventually. If it doesn't work, if this is all too theoretical and academic and whatever, then you've spent some time looking at fiction a different way. Time well spent.



Talking Myself Out of the MFA



My history with the MFA goes like this:

I wanted to do it. This was like, shit, 15 years ago. I'd finished my bachelor's, took a year to work and not be in school. During this time, I was working in a library, a job that was more than tolerable after a few years spread across a phone center, Wal-Mart, making pizzas, etc. So, the plan was to apply to some MFA programs, see if I got in, and if I didn't, I'd apply to the less-choosy world of library schools, get a library science degree, and then get a big boy job.

I'm employed at the library today. You can fill in the rest.

Still, every so often I get the bug. I think about applying to MFA programs again.

And I talk myself out of it.

By now I've gotten pretty good at my yearly, "Fuck that shit" talk, as I've delicately dubbed it. So good that I pitched it as a TED talk. It turns out that TED talks are usually motivational, not de-motivational. But I figure it might benefit some of you who are also trying to talk yourselves out of another round of MFA applications.

Get Together A Packet of Garbage

Colleges want a bunch of extra documents that nobody needs. Letters of recommendation? In a paper envelope? Can't you just give my friends a quick phone call, like any other job? Transcripts? Do you really care that I got a B in biology? Statement of purpose? Do you really need me to cradle your balls for a few pages, telling you how enriched I'll be as a human?

When will these programs get their act together and figure out that nobody cares about this garbage?

GRE

Some programs require a GRE test. That's the Graduate Rectal Exam. Just kidding. I've had more than one rectal exam, and they're a much better time. Plus, no studying.

The GRE is like the SAT, but with different letters. That's the only difference as far as I can tell.

You buy a study book for like a hundred bucks, then you pay to sit in front of a computer in a terrible strip mall and take the test, then you wait about 17 years to get the results, and then you turn in your scores with no real concept of why an MFA in creative writing made you take a math test.



Cost to Apply

You're constantly, CONSTANTLY told not to pay to enter contests for the chance at publication. Constantly. And yet, nobody bats an eye at paying to apply to an MFA program.

Before we talk free college, maybe we should talk about where we can cut some of the costs. Vanderbilt's application fee is \$95! To apply! Wyoming is a "reasonable" \$50. I've paid some contest fees in my day, but nothing even remotely like \$50.

In 2017, the estimated number of MFA applicants was 20,000. Which comes out to an even million bucks in application fees! How have we been so tricked? Broke-ass students, no, broke-ass POTENTIAL students, pumped a million bucks into the MFA system, and 98% of them got nothing in return.

If I could make a request, I'd like to ask that when I get rejected from these programs, I get part of my application fee back. At least toss a fiver in the envelope so I can buy a beer. Ya'll can settle for \$900,000 next year, right?

Debt

The idea behind student loans is that you use them to get an education, then you use that education to get a job and pay off those loans. The problem is, I don't know if anyone told the schools or banks that an MFA program isn't really a career-oriented endeavor.

I did the student debt thing once and payed it off over a long, painful decade. Not looking to jump on that ride again.

Plenty of Heroes Without

When I look at my favorite authors, there's a mix.

Tom Spanbauer has one. Chuck Palahniuk doesn't. Stephen King says you don't need one, and that's certainly true for him.

Let's not belabor this one: You don't NEED an MFA to write, to be a good writer, and/or to be successful. Plenty of people have proven that. We could stack up names on both sides of the fence all day. It's pointless. My takeaway? It's not a necessity.

Time to Write

MFA programs provide writers a lot of time to write, an environment that encourages writing, and some instant feedback jammed into a couple years. Maybe it's like human growth hormone for your writing. But I'm natural, baby, and I tend to think that strength built naturally is longer lasting, more useful in the real world, and more resilient.

I really do think doing the same amount of writing in 5 years instead of 2 brings a different value to it.

You're Not a Kid

I'm sliding into that "nontraditional student" status. Which is the nice way for colleges to deal with students like me who are so out of it we don't realize you can't smoke in class anymore.

I don't think I'd be uncomfortable because of my age, but I do think age has changed my preferences in fiction, taught me some things about writing, and has left me a low amount of patience when it comes to fellow students experimenting. Style over substance isn't going to be interesting to me anymore. Someone not having their pages ready for class would piss me off today in a way it wouldn't when I was younger.

This is a dumb debate, and this is the place to have it out.

This isn't an old man complaining about young whippersnappers. It's an old man recognizing that maybe he shouldn't throw himself into a situation that's designed with younger, less experienced writers in mind. I've had my experiences, and they need a chance to have them, too. I'd just prefer they do it with each other. Not me.

Habits

Getting up at 6 am to put in a solid writing hour for the next 2 years would probably give me a near-equivalent number of writing hours that I'd get in an MFA program. Not to mention I'd learn to build a writing habit on my own. I might learn certain things from an MFA, but by NOT going, I'll learn how to do the long run stuff on my own.

Can Writing Be Taught?

This is a dumb debate, and this is the place to have it out.

Yes, it can. Anyone who says it can't is probably a crappy teacher, a student who refuses to listen, or

a writer who is so precious about what they do that they fear the hard-working writers of the world will expose that anyone with enough time, energy, and drive can do what they do.

I also tend to think that while writing can be taught, it's like sports. Some people are gifted, some people get good with hard work, and most of us are a combo of some kind.

I think I'm somewhere in the middle. Some talent, some really great coaching.

And it's middle-of-the-road-ers who probably benefit least from an MFA.

The talented ones? They benefit from someone holding their nose to the grindstone, not so much from the specific lessons.

The hard workers? They benefit from the lessons learned, which they can apply with their work ethic.

The middlers? We get something out of it, but it's less clear, and it's less measurable.

Learn Something Else

I think it can be tremendously refreshing if a creator of literature has something on his mind other than the history of literature so far. Literature should not disappear up its own asshole, so to speak.

—Kurt Vonnegut

Wouldn't it be a better use of my time and money to learn something else? With that amount of work, I could become...I don't know, an accountant? And work a steady 9-5 with benefits, which would allow me plenty of time to write? Or I could learn to code, and with that I could work from home, probably fewer hours per week, and again, write more?

And wouldn't learning something besides writing give me more things to write about? Might I have more interesting stories that come out of exercise science or vet school?

Is creative writing the worst thing I could study?

Networking

One thing about getting an MFA is that you'll end up with a solid network. We've all seen how this works. One writer publishes a thing, helps another writer out. A writer puts together an anthology that's a mixture of great writers and friends (sometimes these are the same people, sometimes not). A writer gets a book published, and they help put a friend's manuscript in front of publishers.

I hate networking. I suck at it. And while I've made some good friends through workshops, I think the whole networking thing is kinda gross. To put it another way, being a writer is something I want to do precisely because networking doesn't have to be part of the equation. I recognize that it'd help me a lot, but I'm willing to sacrifice some traditional success. Because to me, success looks like not having to network.

Are Functional Relationships Ever Interesting In Fiction?



Dreams, “You’ll never guess who I ran into at the store,” and how much you love your wife: These are the current champions in the Boring Stories Olympics.

I’m happy for you. I’m happy you dreamt that you finally hooked up with Samantha Fox. I’m just tickled that your kindergarten teacher recognized you at the store. I’m delighted that you and your wife are doing so well.

But none of those are interesting stories.

Dreams and non-confrontational run-ins are obviously boring. But why are functional relationships such a snooze? And what can you do to make things better?

Examples Through Hypotheticals

Maybe you’re sitting there right now thinking, “Pete, I don’t know. This seems very cynical!” Or maybe you’re one of those holier-than-thou types who think you’d enjoy a novel about a quaint, loving, reasonable relationship. I’m sure lots of us like to think we don’t feed off the misery, discomfort, or general unhappiness of others.

Fine. Let me offer you some hypotheticals that’ll knock you right off that high horse.

Let’s say you’re given a choice. You can listen to an album by a 37 year-old woman who is in a happy, loving relationship. Or you can listen to an album by a woman of almost identical demographics, but what prompted her to create her album was going through the absolute worst breakup of her life.

Which do you pick?

You're going to have a beer with a friend of a friend of a friend. You can either hear about their highly functional relationship, or you can hear about their nightmarish Tinder date. Which do you pick?

Someone is about to reveal a tattoo to you. Are you more interested in this tattoo if it's based on a good relationship with his mother or a tumultuous one?

If someone were to graph how much they loved their husband from one day to the next, I would love to look at that graph, but if it was a flat line, it'd be boring. If it was a constant upward line, also boring. I want a sawtooth graph. Sharp, sudden changes.

Look, it's not a good thing to want the worst for your friends and family, even for real people. But in a novel? That's guilt-free shit. Put your character through the relationship wringer and kill that darling.

Okay, Some Types Work

Functional relationships in fiction aren't ALL bad. There are some setups where a functional relationship can, well, function.

One is aspirational. Unflawed characters (or characters whose flaws are extremely forgivable), created for the express purpose of being examples, can have a functional relationship. Because that's the whole point. If what people are coming to your book for, specifically, is a positive example of a relationship, feel free to make it a loving, boring relationship. I don't think it's going to be a very interesting story, but if your goal is modeling positive relationships, writing something high-interest isn't your primary purpose.

The second is one where the relationship isn't the source of tension in the story. Let's say your story features a pair of young gay men who are paranormal investigators. The bizarre nature of their work, the sometimes-terrifying events, could contrast well with a solid relationship. If the relationship isn't the spotlight feature of the story, it can be solid.

The third is one where there are very clear rules, and abiding by those rules makes the relationship work. I'm thinking about *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Captain Picard has a good relationship with his crew. However, the relationships are extremely hierarchical and codified. There is a clear expectation of the ways in which crew members will behave towards each other. Functional, healthy relationships can work here.

But...take each of those examples, and think about the options that open up if the relationship goes sideways.

In the aspirational case, when the relationship gets messed up, you may provide a more realistic, if less ideal example, one people can better identify with. In the case where the relationship isn't the

I encourage all of you to have wonderful, boring, functional relationships in real life. And I encourage you to fulfill the excitement of dysfunctional relationships through fiction.

source of tension, think about what happens if a pair of paranormal investigators, who have always relied on their relationship to provide an anchor in a weird world, find themselves without access to that anchor? Think about how some of the best episodes of *Star Trek: TNG* highlight moments when the relationship boundaries are complicated or blurred. What builds better conflict than the violation of a black and white system?

Functional relationships can work, but to be honest, they're more interesting when things go wrong.

How Can You Fuck It Up?

Maybe you're sold, but maybe you don't know how to tweak your fictional relationships.

Lots of writers have the instinct to make things extreme. The wife is a shrew on most sitcoms, and the husband is physically abusive on most dramas. But in a novel, you've got more time. You can be more nuanced. This is one of the great advantages of a book, so think about how your relationships don't have to be augmented by typical, over-the-top types of behavior. You can adjust the functionality of your fictional relationships without throwing a punch.

For example, two people in a relationship have talked repeatedly about whether or not they want pets. They landed on No, but then one person comes home to find their partner got a parrot, which is annoying as hell, plain weird, and will probably outlive both of them.

How does the parrot open up questions about the relationship? Are they communicating? Has something significant changed for one person without the other's knowledge? How does the stress of taking care of this parrot add pressure and urgency to these questions? How does the discovery that a parrot can live to be very old bring up topics of mortality?

Another biggie that many experience but you don't often see written about: an older couple who retire start figuring out that they don't like to be around each other ALL THE TIME. Or maybe one of the two has retired and makes the other crazy, driving them up the wall because the second they walk in the door, the homebody is all over them. Maybe someone stays in the workplace much longer than they have to because they don't want to be around their spouse THAT much.

It's more nuanced than someone slapping someone else. You can love a person deeply and not want to spend all of your time with them. What does this open up in your story? What does the other person start doing to kill time? How do they hide this from their partner?

If you want ideas, watch *House Hunters*. You'll see couples who are just finding out how bizarre their partners are. You'll see couples who seem like they've never talked about what their monthly budget is like or what their interests are. You'll see couples where someone has no understanding of the fact that their partner doesn't want a 90-minute commute each way.

You can mess up a relationship with a pretty simple setup. Every character in your novel should want SOMETHING. When you have two characters (or three, or seventeen, or however many are involved in the relationship), all you have to do is make those characters want different things. Not opposite, not conflicting things. Just different things.

So Wait...Are Functional Relationships Boring In Real Life?

Well...yeah. Functionality is usually boring. And great. I'm sure there are lots of "spice up the marriage" folks out there who would claim that things are as exciting as they were on their first date. "Liars" is the shorter term.

Shared boredom is an intimacy that's not easy. If you really want to test your relationship, do something boring together. Take a long-ass drive with an uninteresting or undesirable destination. Go to your partner's cousin's son's high school graduation. Go to a wedding where neither of you really know anyone and where there's not a whole lot to do. Share chores. Have an ongoing disagreement about purchasing a new vacuum.

I encourage all of you to have wonderful, boring, functional relationships in real life. They are awesome. Really.

And I encourage you to fulfill the excitement of dysfunctional relationships through fiction. You'll never have to duck under a hurled piece of dishware that way.

Why Don't Men Read Romance?



I'm not going to waste time on anyone looking to disagree with the general premise: Men don't read romance.

Yes, SOME men read romance. Because if there's a thing to be done, there's a guy out there doing it, doing it with gusto, and I applaud his efforts.

But if you know anything about books and readers, you know that romance is not popular with the fellas.

Let's skip the discussion of whether or not this is true. The interesting part is the Why.

Why don't men read romance?

Are Men Afraid to Get Caught Reading Romance?

This is one reason you'll see pondered in a lot of articles, and the answer is a fat slab of "Nope." The idea here is that men desperately want to read romance, they just haven't figured out a way to do it on the sly.

You can use an ereader and read whatever the hell you want without anyone being the wiser, which is something lots of romance and erotica readers figured out a decade ago. Even the most dunderheaded of men could do the math on this one. Give us at least that much credit.

Structural Misogyny?

This is another reason I saw thrown out more than once. Basically the world telling us a man doesn't

read romance, and therefore I choose not to read romance. At the risk of attacking a very credible, academic-y sounding idea that launched a thousand theses, I'll present to you a counterpoint: as you age, you really don't give a shit. Structural Misogyny might be why young men don't read romance, but if you're a more seasoned man, one who's given in to a boss at the expense of your pride more than once, one who's been shat upon by a baby that you made on purpose because that seemed like a good idea, one who has abandoned brown liquor for neon alcoholic Slurpees because that's what you like, one who has severely strained a muscle picking an orange up off the floor—I can tell you from experience, the world is very helpful in shattering your ideas of yourself as a manly man. Me reading romance novels would be far from the least manly thing about me.

Besides, look at it this way: if we decide the problem is structural misogyny...then what? Solve that and guys will be snapping up romance?

Not By Us

There aren't a lot of dudes writing romance.

People like to hear from writers that look and sound like them. This is not groundbreaking information, just something that doesn't come up often for men. Men aren't underrepresented in many realms.

In romance, things are different. To the point that even gay, male/male romances are written mostly by straight women (and for consumption by straight women, but we'll get to that).

I can't blame female comics fans for being a bit disinterested when the drawings of women in comics, the images of women in comics, are the exclusive product of male fantasy. Romance is in that same boat. The ideas of men and masculinity in romance are mostly the product of female fantasy.

Not For Us

The covers, the storylines, the titles—they're not for men. These books aren't written with men in mind. They're not edited with men in mind. Cover art is not created with men in mind. At no step in the process is there a "Dude Check" where some bro takes a crack at it and lets us know if the book is appealing.

Reading a romance and not liking it would be like me seeing The Emoji Movie and being unimpressed. At no point in the design process of The Emoji Movie was anyone like, "Do you think this will work for drunken guys in their late 30's who stumbled into the wrong theater and finished half a tub of popcorn before they even noticed?"

Of course I'm not interested. That's by design.

Start writing for old guys. They still sit and talk books with other old guys. They've got leisure time. They're already reading erotica, it's just wearing a cowboy hat.

Romance Takes Itself Pretty Seriously

If you've ever dabbled in Romance Twitter, holy shit. Based on how intense things get, you would think that these writers are a team of offshore oil rig roughnecks attempting to save the planet from a gigantic goddamn asteroid.

The professional associations and conferences, the drama, it's all a little TMZ for my liking. I just don't give a shit what someone said to whoever about so-and-so's book. I can't muster concern over the statements made by RWA regarding the latest scandal about whatever.

I think that whether or not most involved would admit it, the drama outside the books is part of romance, part of its appeal. I've never understood this stuff. I've never read a People magazine. Lots of guys would tell you the same.

We're Told To

It's a very common refrain: "You should read more romance novels. You might learn something."

It's a cute saying, so I can see why it's so popular. But it's...kinda bullshit.

In the handful of romances I've read, what I've "learned" is that it's good to be rich, successful, and regardless of whether you're an emotionally unavailable cowboy, an emotionally unavailable biker, an emotionally unavailable professional athlete, or an emotionally unavailable millionaire playboy, you should definitely have shredded abs.

I didn't learn anything. I never even figured out why someone would attach a bayonet to a rocket launcher. Seems impractical.

People will automatically rebel against anything they're doing because they're told, especially when it comes to something like leisure reading. If you tell guys to read romance, they won't. No matter how snarky you make it. I mean, how's that working for you so far?

Should Men Just Jump In?

Some might feel the answer here is simple: Men just need to get used to reading romance. But that answer addresses the individual reader rather than the overwhelming reality of what's published, who it's intended for, and how it's marketed. It's an industry saying, "Instead of changing what we offer, you should change what you like."

This answer works fine if you don't give a shit about men reading romance. If you're like, "Whatever. They can read about that guy, Derk Hole or whatever, the submarine Indiana Jones guy," then yeah, it doesn't matter. But if you want men to pick up romance, if you think it would be a good thing, the answer isn't going to be about men abandoning their personal tastes.

Overcorrection is Correction

If you want guys to get into it, give them something by a guy, for a guy, and that goes pretty far to reach a male audience.

There's a saying in sports: Sometimes overcorrection provides the correct outcome. So, if someone is bench pressing incorrectly, his coach might encourage him to exaggerate the correct form. Because what feels like exaggeration to him will in fact be the correct form.

The form of romance hasn't been appealing to men for a long, long time. Exaggerate what you think the correct form of a romance for men would be, see what happens.

Look to the Golden Years

Listen up, romance writers. The doorway into the world of men is right in front of your face. Provided you're reading this at 8 am in a Denny's: Old Guys.

Old guys do whatever the fuck they want. They dress like people who've come through a timewarp. They carry their phones in leather pouches outside their pants. They hang out at Panera or McDonald's all morning drinking slightly discounted coffee and talking about how narrow the lanes in town seem lately, which is probably why there are so many scuff marks on the sides of their Buicks(!) These guys don't have fucks to give, and if they were interested in romance, they'd read it. In fact, they do. These are the guys who read those slim paperback westerns, which are DIRTY. You probably didn't know it, but if you bought your grandpa one of those *Longarm* books, you should've bought him some lube and tissues to go along with it. Because damn.

Start writing for these old guys. They still sit and talk about books with other old guys. They've got leisure time. They're already reading erotica, it's just wearing a cowboy hat.

You get the old guys, then you get their sons who are curious what the hell dad is asking for this Christmas. Then you get the hipsters imitating the old guys. Soon enough, dudes are reading romance all over the place. And all because you saw the potential in an broken down elderly man sitting in Wendy's drinking coffee at 6:30 am every weekday.

Feel The Tingle

Take the example of Chuck Tingle. Excuse me, DOCTOR Chuck Tingle.

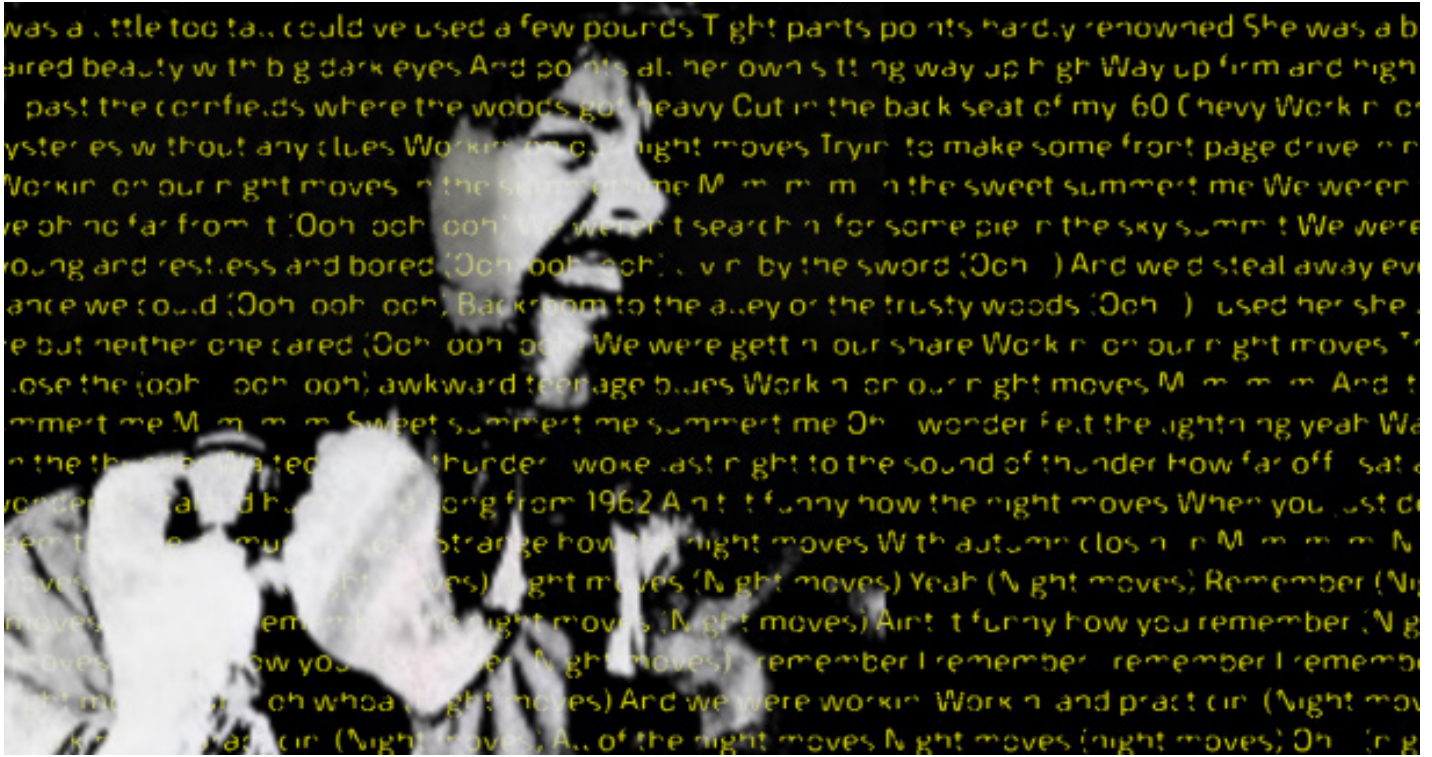
The titles are silly, the characters are silly. They get you in the door with a laugh. The jokiness says, "Welcome, brother. It's okay if you don't take this seriously. And if you laughed, hey, you might've found a place you belong."

You can read a 35-page story, very low commitment.

Don't do what Dr. Tingle does. That's pointless. He's already doing it perfectly.

Pay attention to what's different about what he's doing. Because if there's one romance author that guys know by name, it's Doc Tingle.

Bob Seger's "Night Moves": A Short Lesson on Repetition



If you don't know the song...what am I saying, you know the song.

What you don't know is that it's a great writing lesson that even YOU can understand, you dopey bastard. Allow me to explain.

The Basics

"Night Moves" starts out as an average classic rock song. Describe some Midwest-y characters, a little bit about the decade, that sort of thing. It was the song that moved Bob Seger from "local boy done good" to international rock star.

It's all pretty standard on the surface. You might've heard it a dozen times and have no idea what's really going on underneath the hood.

Burnt

"Night moves" is a ridiculous term for making out in the back of a car. An overly-serious term that a young man might use to describe his sexual prowess, right? The kind of young guy who has really thought about nicknames for his penis.

Sidebar: Most women I know have named their cars. Is this a male/female split? Guys name their junk, women name their vehicles? Also, sidebar is a pretty good penis name.

"Night moves" is a very burnt term. Meaning: it's a term spoken with a burnt tongue. Meaning, it's the kind of phrase that you notice, that sort of thing that makes someone's speech special.

Being "burnt" means the term "night moves" brings two big things to the table: One, it has some life to it. You remember it. And two, it tells you a little about the storyteller. And only a ridiculous kid would use a term like "night moves." Someone in that awkward stage where your loves are so intense that you get a little lost in thinking about them. But see, Seger doesn't have to explain all that shit. He just uses a term that explains it for him.

Twist

The term "night moves" is repeated in the song enough times to get you used to it. A minute in, between the musical qualities and the repetition in the song, you're settled into the words and their meaning. "Night moves" starts to become furniture, something that can be in the room without you really noticing.

Then the song changes. Most of the music drops out. The pace slows. It's just Seger singing with a couple small musical elements at key points. It turns from a loud song to a quiet one. And this is where we get the twist:

*I woke last night to the sound of thunder
How far off I sat and wondered
Started humming a song from 1962
Ain't it funny how the night moves
When you just don't seem to have as much to lose
Strange how the night moves
With autumn closing in*

We got used to "night moves" meaning one thing, basically a noun about making out, and then it becomes a verb phrase about getting old. The transition from youthful love to loneliness, it's utterly heartbreaking.

Silly and Serious

The phrase "night moves" is silly and fun, then it's changed to something serious, something with a lot more depth. Seger instantly goes from using the phrase "night moves" in a fluffy teenage way to using it to describe the passage of time.

Turning something silly into something serious can really punch up the impact. If the listener is thinking, "This is kind of goofy," then they're totally open to the gut punch that comes after. Think about that contrast in your work. That high/low, silly/serious shift can buy you a lot. A shift from serious to...a different kind of serious might not be as effective.

Escalate

The twist with "Night Moves" demonstrates repetition with escalation. If you want to write a repetitive phrase or chorus into your work, you should think about how it can ratchet up the tension as it's used throughout. Simply repeating the same phrase means it becomes furniture, right? But just when it

becomes normal, you ratchet it up just a tiny bit, and now it's something different. Something filled with meaning.

Most songs have a chorus, and that chorus means the same thing. A repeated message the band bangs into your head. But Seger found a way to escalate the tension.

Keep It The Same

"Night Moves" follows the rule of keeping the repeated thing (object, phrase, etc.) the same. The words are the same. Seger doesn't flip the words or do something clever like that. The meaning changes, but the words themselves stay the same. This is really important. If you're using repetition, say an object that shows up over and over, it's important that the object stay the same. If it changes, it's not really repetition, and instead of having momentum, instead of building up meaning, it starts from scratch every time your reader sees it. Don't change it, change what it means or change what it signifies.

You've got a much better chance with Seger than you do with Hemingway.

Clarity

The song and the words are easy to understand, which lets the listener see immediately what's happening in the song. Which means the listener is along for the ride rather than puzzling around with what's going on. If the listener is trying to figure out what's going on, they're not listening anymore. Seger is saying something very simple, and he's using simple words and phrases to do it. He's not trying to dazzle you with big words or high-concept ideas. He's talking to you like a real person.

Your Advantage

You're writing a book. Or a story. Either way, you've got a couple thousand words where Bob Seger had about five minutes. If he can squeeze this into five minutes, you can damn well do it in an entire book.

Last Pitch

YouTube comments are poison. BUT, if you read comments on Bob Seger songs, there are tons about people remembering their fathers singing Seger's songs. Crying in the car.

Maybe he's not your favorite musician, but before you dismiss Seger, remember that he connected to the hardass dads of the 70's. These were not dudes you often caught with a tear in their eyes.

I'm not saying that you will write something that connects if you pay attention to Seger. But I'm saying you've got a much better chance with Seger than you do with Hemingway.

How Late Nights Are Killing You and Your Writing



Writers love the romance of an all-nighter. Oh, we're so into our coffee and our quiet and our manic hammering away deep into the night.

Like most romantic things (showering together in a one-person tub shower, making out in a vehicle, dance in general), the all-nighter is a lot better in concept than it is in reality. It might be hurting you more than you think.

Not Me!

Let's knock this out right away: Most folks will say some version of, "I only need about six hours to function."

This is, scientifically speaking, complete bullshit.

There's a statistically insignificant percentage of the population who won the genetic lottery, and these unicorns function perfectly on less than 8 hours of sleep. You are not one of these people. You're more likely to be a pro basketball player, which you are not. You're more likely to process Wendy's into pure muscle, which you can't. These people are rare enough that you've probably never met one.

So why does everyone think they're good on six?

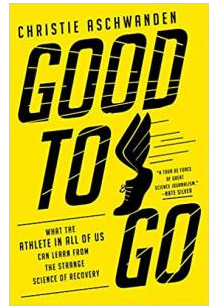
In simple terms, when you're tired, you don't know how much you suck. Because you're too tired to sense it. Think about the drunk guy who's so drunk that he thinks he's fine to drive. He just thinks he's good to go because he's so impaired that he can't evaluate himself.

And, if you're sleeping less than eight hours regularly, you're in sleep debt, even if you slept in today,

and that shit's harder to shake than student loan debt. So you've got not basis of comparison, no "rested self" to compare to.

Rest Is Best

I read this whole damn book, *Good to Go*, about sports recovery. Drinks, foods, ice, all of it was explored. I'll burst your bubble: There are two things that actually work: sleep and mental health. That's it. All the ice, all the sports drinks and special diets, all the gizmos and rollers and massages in the world, all those big ass jars of stuff from GNC, all of it is studied over and over with almost no evidence that it works. I know you swear by your kale and your fish oil and your cryotherapy, and that's cool. Keep doing what works for you.



Just know that sleep works. Whether we're talking about brain function, memory, physical recovery, whatever, sleep contributes to everything good about your body and mind in ways that only sleep can.

Quantity

Let's look at this another way: A huge difference between a shitty athlete and an elite athlete is that the elite athlete is able to string together long periods of health, both in terms of avoiding injury and avoiding illness. This means they can put in a lot more effective training days than someone who's fighting a cold on and off for a few weeks, then gets a nagging injury here and there. By competition time, the shitty athlete missed weeks of training that their opponent nailed.

A consistent writer strings together more writing days every year, and a rested writer is a consistent writer.

Quality

Most of what you write at the end of your wick is pretty terrible. You'll end up spending a lot of time revising that shit. Much like authors on drugs, authors on lack of sleep aren't at their peak.

Sleep improves your quality.

I Can Just Coffee Up

Sure, that works if you're going to sweep the garage and you're feeling pretty tired. But while caffeine will make you feel less tired and might improve your mood, it's not going to improve those higher brain functions. You know, things like communication and putting words together. Writing, for short.

The caffeine in a couple cups of coffee helps you push the pen across the page, but it's not going to replace sleep in terms of making those words worthwhile.

You can drink coffee to mask the misery of being tired. But coffee isn't a sleep substitute.

But I'm So Busy

I feel you. It's hard to fit in eight hours.

We look at sleeping eight hours every night as a luxury as opposed to a NEED. And we have a cultural idea that sleep is for the weak. People wear their lack of sleep like a badge of honor, which is ridiculous. Not sleeping in order to get more done is like knocking out your teeth so you don't have to waste time brushing.

You might work three jobs and just not be able to make eight hours. You might have kids. If you've got a kid with special needs, you've probably redefined "busy" a hundred times over. You might have a number of jobs that warrants you constantly telling people how many jobs you have.

I don't mean to say you're shitty if you don't sleep. I mean to encourage people who can sleep to do so. I mean to encourage people who have the option to prioritize sleep to do so, to consider what's possible if they make sleep important. Sit down, look at your schedule, and see if there's anything you can cut out for sleep. Based on most of ya'll's Twitter streams, the continued presence of BuzzFeed, and the fact that someone spoiled the new season of *Better Caul Saul* within 24 hours of it hitting the air, a good number of us have an hour a day to play with.

And keep in mind, I'm not talking about adding a task to your schedule here. I'm not talking about taking an online coding class instead of doing a leisure activity. Just go to bed early.

**I'm not here to
make your life
comfortable,
I'm here to help
you write.**

A Brief History of Invisible Men in Literature



No, not your absent father. No, not your spouse when you're looking for someone to sweep out the garage with you. I'm talking men who are not visible because of some accident, experiment, magic, or science. Although I guess your father could be absent because of an accident...

You know what? Let's leave the topic of runaway fathers alone. Let's focus on a different set of jerks: invisible men in literature.

H.G. Wells' Invisible Man

For most, this guy is the O.G. invisible man. Griffin, as he's known, claims he was studying medicine and chemicals and figured out how to make himself invisible. Supposedly he tried his formula out on a cat, which should clue readers in that this guy is a real a-hole. What's with science and cats? Schrödinger's, the dead cat bounce. Do scientists know there are crap animals out there, like mosquitos? Or maybe just turn an earthworm invisible. They don't even have faces. And would an earthworm's life be all that different if it was invisible?

Griffin has to get naked to be invisible, and he can't make objects invisible, so if he's carrying a Wendy's Double Stack while nude, which I can only assume many of us do, you'd see a floating Double Stack.

In a book titled *Physics Can Be Fun*, author Yakov I. Perelman came up with one of the primary scientific problems with invisibility as presented in Wells' book. In short, the way the human eye works requires some opaqueness, so if parts of your eye were invisible, you wouldn't be able to see anything. Don't ask me to explain this. I'm not a physicist, I've never worn a white coat, and I think worms are a reasonable substitute for cats in the lab. Perelman goes down in my book as one of the first scientists to make a fun thing less fun with science. I'm not sure he knew how ironic his book title was.

Rings and Cloaks and Caps

Sometimes characters have temporary invisibility granted by an object.

An inspiration for Wells, the Ring of Gyges from Plato's Republic made the wearer invisible. A relative of Gyges discovered a cave, and in this cave there was a bronze horse, and in the bronze horse was a dead body. Don't overthink these things. Bronze horses were everywhere in the Plato days, and most of them had dead-o's in them. On that body was a ring. If you put the ring on and adjusted it, you'd become invisible. Plato made the point that someone who was invisible would likely do rotten shit, which seems to be a theme that has continued. Whenever someone gets invisible in fiction they seem to turn into a jerk, criminal is the next step, and then usually an insane criminal who is often at least a little rape-y.

The Ring of Gyges bears a striking similarity to the ring in Lord of the Rings, which also makes Frodo into a jerkass and kind of kills him when he's wearing it. High price to pay for invisibility if you ask me. If that twerp just learned how to swordfight he wouldn't need to vanish all the time.

Cloaks of invisibility are a big thing, going way back to folklore and fairy tales and working their way up to Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter as well.

Caps of invisibility are a thing, too. One cap was given to Hades and got passed around to a bunch of gods. I don't know why exactly gods would need an invisibility cap, but whatever. Zeus turned himself into a swan in order to sexually assault a human woman, a move that's both bizarre and impractical. The choices of gods are very questionable.

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

This is the invisible man who is more a concept than a guy who runs around being an asshole because you can't see him. He didn't fall into chemicals or whatever. You can't see him because he's black. It's about society, man.

Sorry, this is a good book and super ahead of its time. I'm just bitter because I picked this up off the bookshelf at my mom's house when I was a kid, and I kept wondering when a lab accident or whatever was going to turn this dude invisible. I read an embarrassing amount of this waiting for lightning to hit a wall of chemicals or for our main character to cross a vindictive witch before I figured out what was going on, at which point I reshelfed it and picked up *The Bell Jar*, which was also a disappointment. Not as many insect-murder scenes or enough how-to for my grade-school liking.

My mom had good taste, which can be defined as A) having great works of literature on her shelves and B) those works being disliked by me in grade school. That's the two-step authentication process for taste right there.

The Invisible Girl/Woman

What a great idea for a comics artist. Hey, when I've got the time, I'll draw Sue Storm. When I'm crunched, she's invisible!

Okay, she's not an invisible MAN, per se, but this is 2020. Let go of your traditional definitions of

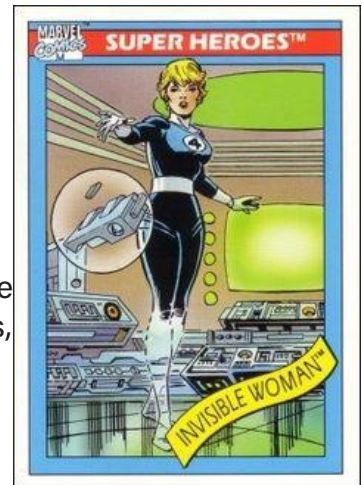
gender already.

Sue Storm gained invisibility powers when she was bombarded with cosmic rays, the same rays that turned Reed Richards stretchy, Johnny Storm into a flame man, and Ben Grimm, Aunt Petunia's Favorite Nephew, into Aunt Petunia's Favorite Geologic Landmark.

Sue Storm doesn't have to be naked because she can turn other objects, like clothes, invisible. She can also create forms that are invisible, stuff like stairs, walls, and a bubble that could go around your head and suffocate you. Fun!

Nerd Note: The Invisible Woman can bend not only the visible part of the spectrum, but also things like infrared and ultraviolet, meaning she's REALLY invisible.

Nerd Note 2: As a big "suck it!" to the aforementioned Yakov I. Perelman, Storm can direct light with enough precision to maintain her vision. Where's your stupid fun physics now, Perelman?



Chuck Klosterman's Visible Man

In *The Visible Man* we see some tech-based invisibility. An invisibility suit.

Now, if I remember correctly, the suit also has some kind of psychological side effects, which is another problem with invisibility: it makes people insane. I might be thinking of another book. It's hard to remember everything, ya'll. There's a lot of invisible dudes out there, and they blend together. But it's fair to say that nobody in fiction goes invisible and then becomes a good person.

The most interesting thing about this man, he uses his invisibility to peep on people, and...they don't really do anything interesting. It might hurt the book a little, but it feels VERY real. If someone could watch people, it'd probably be mundane. It's not all supermodels getting in the shower, accidentally witnessing murders, or robbing banks. The guy spends a lot of time watching people watch TV.

Probably the most realistic portrayal of an invisible man, which takes some of the fun out of it. Also, if I was the kind of person prone to make deep-sounding remarks, and if I made any money from Klosterman book sales, I'd pose the theory that his book was really an allegory for big tech spying on us. But I'm not and I don't, and also I don't think that's the case.

Spring Cleaning For Writers



Ah, spring. Nothing like sweating under your coat one day and freezing your junk off the next. Pollen in your nostrils, flu in your eyes. It's really the perfect preparation for the worst time of year: summer, the suckiest season of all the sucky seasons. Don't fight me on this.

Most of us tidy in spring. It's a ritual thing. For whatever reason, this second-worst season is the time we roll up our sleeves and throw out a bunch of crap that we never needed, sell that treadmill/drying rack on Craigslist, and spend about 2 days feeling good before the whole system topples and we're wallowing in our own filth again.

Spring cleaning doesn't have to be confined to the garage. It can apply to your writing as well. All the scraps you meant to get to, that unfinished short story, that manuscript that needs a little polish. Admit it, all that crap is piled somewhere, whether it's digital files or papers on the Junk Mail Plank, a surface some people insist on calling a "dining room table" even though nobody dines on them, ever.

Instead of sweeping the porch (is that necessary? Are you going to eat off it? Because your dining table is covered in crap?), spend this spring cleaning up your work.

Digital and Paper

All of this applies to both digital and paper.

Some of you are probably like, "Pete, my stuff is digital, so no need to clean!" And while I probably respect something about you, maybe you have good taste in boots, you're dead wrong about spring cleaning. Digital needs spring cleaning, too.

The limitless space of digital comes with its own problems. Files that have names like, "Draft 002(real

draft) (for print) (02-02-2019) - copy:" The mess so tangled that you've never bothered to back it up because you're totally going to organize it first (uh-huh...).

Do yourself a favor, follow one of these methods whether you're a pen and paper person or a digital devotee.

The Freedom-Through-Destruction Method

The easiest way to clean up anything is to straight-up destroy it. Set it aflame and walk away.

If you're a paper and pen person, any notebook you haven't cracked in the last year goes in a barrel. Then used kitty litter goes in the barrel. Then fire. Or just shred it or recycle it if you're not into the drama and don't own a cat. Also, get a cat.

If you're digital, it's less thrilling, but you sort your documents by date, and anything you haven't modified in the last year is dragged into that recycle bin. You can play some dramatic music while you do this, set the mood.

This method is simple, and it saves you a lot of time you'll waste shuffling old shit around, tired nonsense you'll never get to anyway. And it's a great way to confront the idea that you've got a limited quantity of ideas or that your old ideas are the best.

One tip for this method, don't read through all the old stuff before you destroy it. You won't be able to go through with it if you get all nostalgic. It's like smashing a puppy with a hammer. If you look into its eyes first, you'll never be able to swing.

That was needlessly dark. Oh, well. You read it, not me.

Kondo That Shit

The key to the Kondo Method that most people either hate or ignore is the part where she tells you that organizing isn't decluttering. It's not the same. You have to get rid of stuff, not just put it into nice boxes.

Take whatever you've got, read a couple lines, and see if it sparks joy.

Maybe joy is the wrong emotion. Does it spark interest on your part? Does it make you want to drop your work in progress and start in on it?

If the answer is No or Kinda or even Maybe Someday, get rid of it. If you're like, "I wanna start in on this now!" you keep it.

The Idea Dump Method

All your ideas just go in one long document or one paper notebook. Don't worry about organization or categories. Just put everything in one place where you can go through it all later if you want. Which you probably won't. Which is why we won't blow time organizing.

The advantage here is that your ideas are still available to you, but they're not at your fingertips. You'd have to look through this trash pile to find any good nuggets. Some people sleep better knowing those ideas are tucked away somewhere, and keeping them a hot mess will stop you from dipping back in unless it's absolutely necessary. Ever onward, chums.

Organized Mofo

If organization is your thing, I'd propose a pretty simple system:

Gather your stuff and start making buckets. Not literal buckets, figurative. Categories.

Maybe you go by type. Fiction bucket, non-fiction bucket, poetry bucket.

Maybe you go by amount of work it'll take to finish: Idea on a napkin, rough drafts, semi-passable drafts.

Put everything in buckets. Everything. No floating stuff, no exceptions. Make a lot of buckets if you have to.

If you've got paper, use large folders or envelopes or the classic 3-ring binder. If you're digital, you can figure it out.

The advantage here is you put in the work now and create a system for future sortation. If you create a system of buckets, it's easier to move things around in the future, putting everything in the correct bucket before you get a huge pile of nonsense going.

The other option moving forward— have one "bucket" where all the scraps and ideas go for later sorting. Then you can do a massive sort on a regular basis, moving everything from your scrap bucket into the proper buckets.

The other good thing is you can always do this sorting in front of the TV. It's mindless work. Netflix has a great variety of trashy dating shows right now.

The Top 10%

Take all your ideas, look through them, and put them in order by most to least exciting for you. Then toss everything that's not in the top 10%.

You're going to have so many ideas and things you want to write it'll be a miracle if you get to 10% of them. Do yourself a favor and toss anything that doesn't blow your balls off.

Yard Sale

I've never seen this one tried. Which is why you should be first.

Sell all your scraps and ideas. Just sell it as a bunch of unfinished scraps on eBay, all in one lot. Maybe you didn't form them into novels, but that doesn't mean you can't make a couple bucks. And getting a couple bucks takes some of the sting out of it all. Sure, it's hard to part with your items, but when you're buying a sixer that same night with the profits, you'll see the genius here.

Is The Novel Dead?



Lately I've been keeping these columns short. Buuuut I figured you all might be in the mood to think about something other than death. Human death, anyway. And I figured you might have some time to kill, whether that's because you're sitting at home and getting paid or sitting at home because you're laid off. Let's think about something else for a bit.

I heard this diet tip about pizza: when you have a frozen pizza in the freezer, stack a bunch of healthy stuff on top. Leftovers or frozen vegetables, stuff you can blend together for a smoothie.

The idea here, you have to touch and move all the healthy stuff to get what you want. You have to pause and make an effort to eat that pizza.

Now, imagine a reversed setup, pizza on top of veggies. You go to eat dinner, and if you go to eat something even moderately healthy, you first have to move aside a frozen pizza. Or better yet, knock down a pizza boy who's taken up residence in your kitchen. Every time you go for the fridge he stands in your way with a hot, greasy pie. Every time you go in the kitchen for a glass of water, every time you step towards that part of the house, thinking, "Damn, how long has it been since I ate an apple?" Every time, bam, pizza boy is pulling a hot slice out of the oven with that long wooden pizza peel.

That's the situation I find myself in. With the novel.

I work for a library. And our collections department purchased something called a Pop-Up Library. This is basically a tiny box that broadcasts a signal, a signal that reaches something like 50 feet. Your phone sees it as a wifi network, you connect your phone to it, blammo, you can download or stream books with your library card.

Ideally these end up in places where people are spending a lot of time. The DMV, on a cross-town

bus. Places where people are bored, we give them access to books.

Here's the rub: to access these books, you need a device. Most times this device will be a phone. Meaning you'd have to bypass everything else on your phone to get to a novel. So, we have to convince people to ignore Instagram, stop Crushing Candy, drop email, and instead pick up a novel.

This whole thing has given me some insight into the daily choice most people make. Most people choose whether to read or do something else. And most times, the "something else" is simpler, less taxing, and easier to pick up and put down.

It's my personal and professional opinion that novels can't compete with other modern forms of entertainment. I'm sorry. But we're in a place where someone has to walk right past a great game to get to a book. It's like turning down that hot slice of pizza for a pouch of steamed broccoli. We'd all love to think we'd do it, at least from time to time. But any pizza-boy-in-residence will tell you it ain't happening.

Why Write This?

I love broccoli. And novels. I really do. I've read a lot of them. Though I have to admit, not as fast and as often as I used to.

I've seen many an article on this topic, Is the Novel Dead? And most of them say one of these things:

Yes, the novel is dead, and I'm writing this to be seen as a prescient cultural critic.

No, the novel is not dead, and I'm writing this as a takedown of the arguments of another critic, proving that I am truly the prescient critic.

These options both smack of a desire for personal glory. That's not what I'm here for. If I want personal glory, it's definitely coming from a pizza challenge, one of those situations where you eat several pounds of pizza and get a polaroid up on the wall.

I'm here to tell you why I think the novel is dead. Because although I wish it weren't true, I think it probably is. I'm a lover of books, and at the same time pride myself on being pragmatic, realistic. I feel well-suited for this. Which is something I've only said a few times, like at the Pizza Hut buffet in high school when I changed the game by showing my classmates how to use the paper mat that comes on the buffet trays to wrap up slices and leave with an afternoon snack, unmolested.

While I'm here to say the novel is dead, I'm also here to say that the novel being dead is a good thing. Any way you slice it.

What Does "Dead" Mean?

Let's define cultural death. Because I anticipate a lot of "The novel isn't dead, look around, fool! You have novels in your living room!" I anticipate this from my partner. Yes, she calls me "fool" from time

When I tell you my grandmother is dead, that doesn't mean I think she sucks. It means she's dead. No implied "and therefore..." is hitching along.

to time.

Cultural death isn't the same as biological death. It's harder to define. Lifespans in culture vary wildly. And a piece of culture can still exist and be dead at the same time.

A simple example, you can learn Latin on Duolingo, it's still around, but it's a dead language. Latin is considered a dead language because it's not a native language to anyone at this point. People adopt it, its presence is still felt, its ghost haunts our languages, but Latin, itself, is dead.

As an aside, let's be clear that me saying Latin is dead doesn't imply how important or valid I think it is. We get very hung up on that when it comes to cultural death, that saying something is dead is invalidating it. But that's not how it should be. When I tell you my grandmother is dead, that doesn't mean I think she sucks. It means she's dead. No implied "and therefore..." is hitching along.

Let's imagine a fictional rock band, Steel War Balloon. They were very active until 1980 when their drummer died, at which point they stopped making new shit and stopped touring. Some would call this the "death" of the band, although their music continued to be culturally relevant. Is Steel War Balloon dead? Sort of yes, sort of no. Nothing new is going on with them, but the spirit lives on.

The remaining members of Steel War Balloon died off over the subsequent years. Dead now?

Steel War Balloon was an inspiration for a lot of modern music. That's what artists would tell you, anyway. The influences aren't immediately apparent. Dead? More alive than ever?

Then, Steel War Balloon was cited as a perpetrator in the Me Too movement, and they were "cancelled." Dead now?

Steel War Balloon radio play dwindled. Dead yet?

Steel War Balloon, 100 years later, is only known (but loved) by a small group of people who are very interested in 20th century music. Dead?

This is where it all gets very confusing. Yes, Steel War Balloon music still exists. People wear their t-shirts, although you suspect that half the wearers could not name 5 SWB songs, and besides, SWB was a band, not a graphic design firm, so what do t-shirts matter?

I would say Steel War Balloon died at some point here, but it's hard to nail down exactly when. It's hard to say exactly what qualities in what measures mark something culturally dead.

Form Death And Singular Death

Just because we can make this MORE confusing, there's a difference between saying Steel War Balloon is dead and saying the type of music they made is dead. Because while Steel War Balloon may live a long time, most of its contemporaries won't, and the type of music they make will die off. Grunge is dead, even if Nirvana isn't.

I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to think how you'd answer this question outside the context of books: Do you think forms of content delivery go out of style? Think about paintings. Think about fine woodworking. How about...opera?

Do some people go to the opera? Yes. Do new operas get made? If I told you that no new operas were written in 2019, would you doubt that, or would you KNOW it wasn't true? Would you be able to prove me wrong with an example from your head?

The connectedness of the world allows us to extend the life of culture beyond its natural lifespan. Niche audiences can connect and be more vocal, and if we google, we can find people who are SUPER into opera. But, time was you could talk to people you knew and find someone who had been to an opera this year. Or ever. And not just that one opera nerd, person studying opera, or person related to someone who is a performer. Regular-ass people. Poll your friends, see how many have been to an opera or even considered going to an opera in the last year.

Let's not just beat up on opera.

The painting, as a form, isn't nearly what photography is. Every person you know carries a camera with them at all times, whether they mean to or not. Compare that to the number of people who carry a pocket paint set (and keep in mind, I'm betting the person with that paint set is ALSO carrying a camera). People take photos of famous paintings rather than reinterpreting and repainting them. How many people painted something this year? Much as I might not like it, I have to be honest and say the selfie is alive, and the painting is dead.

Novels are still being written, published, and read. My question, however, is about THE novel, the form, not individual books.

People are still painting. People still write and perform operas. People write sonnets. People make their own clothing. If you look hard enough, you can find someone who engages in any number of dead arts. This doesn't mean they're alive.

It's Not About How You Feel

Lots of readers are shaking their heads about the novel being dead, but I bet you were nodding along with the idea of opera being dead. Because you don't give a shit about opera, and neither does anyone you know.

But you're shaking your head at the novel being dead because you still care about the novel. You're personally invested in the continuing success of the novel.

I was personally invested in my grandmother. I did not want her to die. But that was irrelevant in the end. I would trade all the novels in the world to have my grandmother back. Sorry, Franzen, but I totally would. The rest of you would have to find something else to do.

But that choice ain't on the table.

The novel being alive and vibrant in your life doesn't make it alive in the culture.

Hate Me, But Only If It Helps

It was a David and Goliath situation. We weren't even David. We were the crabs on David's nutsack.

If that's how you want to defend the liveliness of the novel, go ahead and call me a hypocrite and a fool. I read novels. I write novels. I review novels. I buy novels. I love them.

I'd just ask you to keep in mind, when you tell other people the novel is very much alive, and when you're reasoning is, "This one idiot on LitReactor said they're dead. He's an idiot, therefore what he says is false, therefore the novel is alive" isn't going to get you very far. Nobody knows who I am. And while you're spot on about my intelligence, look at the facts: proving that I'm stupid doesn't mean the novel is alive. Calling me an arrogant, privileged white male isn't going to change the facts.

Hate me for writing this. Be angry at me. But only if it helps. Only if it feeds your desire to keep the novel alive.

Is The Book Dying?

One theory is that the novel is dying because the book, as an object, is dying. That pulp and boards won't hold our stories together much longer.

I don't necessarily agree with this. I'm one of the few people who might be in the camp of thinking the novel is dying but also thinking it has nothing to do with the death of the book. Reason being, the eBook does not offer significant advantages over the paper version.

Hang with me a second.

Jumps in media consumption technology stick when they provide a significant advantage to the consumer. We jumped from radio to records because we could control what we listened to. We jumped from records to tapes because music was now portable and less fragile. We jumped to CD's because we could skip tracks instantly. MP3 worked because we could store infinite music in little bricks. Streaming means we don't have to manage our music libraries anymore.

But the eBook? It's not cheaper. It's not a better reading experience (in fact, it's worse). While it DOES give you access to your entire library at any one time, that's not really an advantage for novels. The novel is a commitment. People don't dive in and out of different novels on shuffle the way they do music. The eReader requires money, charging, and wifi to be useful. The eReader is shittier to leave behind on accident. The modern tablet-style eReader also comes packed with other distractions more interesting than the books it's meant to display.

I don't think we're there yet. Kindle is the laserdisc of the reading technology movement, the 8-track. They're on the right track, but the advantages are still piddly shit.

No, I don't think the book itself is dead. Just the novel.

Is The Bookstore Dying?

The novel can't be failing if the bookstore is doing well! Er, wait. The bookstore is doing well, right?

I have a theory on why you think that. I thought the same thing.

In 2018 lots of outlets picked up the story about how the number of independent bookstores grew in the United States. However, this was an increase in independent bookstores, not an increase in

the total number of bookstores. With big book retail like Waterstones, Borders, and Waldenbooks disappearing, with Barnes and Noble reducing stores, with lots of other stores removing or reducing that aisle of paperbacks, there was lots of room for indies to pop up. But, it did not mean that people had more access to books than they did just a few years prior. Imagine a world where Subway closed up shop. The number of independently-owned sandwich places would explode, coming up with names like Bukowski's Ham On Rye and Pete's Pastrami Hole and Pete's Pickle Hole (most of the businesses I come up with have the same template: Pete's [blank] Hole"). But there's no way we'd see the total number of sub shops on the rise.

The fact is, in book retail, total employees and revenue are down. Growth is in the negative. When you look at the bookstore industry as a whole, the number of bookstores has decreased by 11%. I live in a place that used to have a Borders and a Hastings. Now it has nothing.

There's another dark secret to the indie bookstore world. Go to Powell's. Go to The Strand. They sell a lot of merch. They're destinations, landmarks as much as they are functional bookstores. I love them both. When I go on vacation, I leave space in my bag for books. And when I stand in line, I see that most folks just aren't as hardcore about books. This is pure anecdotal evidence on my part. I tried to find numbers, but bookstores are pretty tight-lipped about how much of their revenue comes from books.

Please, when you visit a bookstore, buy something. By all means. And I've been there, too many books at home, partner that'll kill me if I bring home any more. Doesn't change the fact of the line full of people with mugs, stickers, and coffees. Not so much novels.

Lack of habitat is a huge factor in extinction. When the number of bookstores is reduced, and when the front-facing space for novels in the remaining bookstores goes down, replaced with merch, we have to consider what it means.

The bookstore is not dead, but it's also not thriving in the way we might've thought.

The Midlist Author is Being Killed

It's very difficult, financially, to make it as a midlist author.

We like to point to the big players, the Pattersons and the Kings, and use them as evidence that a lot of money can still be made writing novels. This is like pointing to LeBron and saying, "Professional basketball is a viable career option."

This is already playing out in the film industry. The film industry has moved to a model where instead of making several smaller-budget movies that each get a modest return, they jam resources into tentpole films and have to make half a billion on that one film, otherwise it's a flop. Remember the tremendous flop that was *Batman V Superman*? That movie only made about \$200 million dollars in profits. That one movie ONLY made enough money for you and 199 of your closest friends to live your entire lives in total comfort. What a flop!

Books are in the same boat. Publishers have to keep it tight. They're trapped. I get it.

That being said, the best options for writers are to either be a HUGE success or to go self-pub. The midlist author is having a harder time getting published, and even when they do, they're not bringing

home the money. Author tours for midlisters are over. Promotion is harder to come by. It's go big or go home, er, go big or publish from home.

And the death of the midlist author means that there are fewer novels getting promotion. Fewer people in the game. The death of the midlist author is the death of the novel's middle class.

Novels Aren't People-Pleasers

Apps, games, web sites, all this stuff is designed to please humans. This is neuroscience, slot machine shit.

Novels aren't built the same way. Most novels don't come from a team of people who are concerned with the research on how long a person can go without getting that positive feedback, that casino payout that is calculated to the penny to come JUST often enough and to be JUST substantive enough to keep someone going. Stories don't really work that way.

Novels aren't necessarily designed to please people. They're usually designed to elicit other emotions from readers, emotions outside of simple moment-to-moment pleasure.

Buzzfeed is absolutely calculated to please people. To keep them on the site. To bring them back over and over. It's designed to keep you coming there again and again. The content's goal is to please just the right amount. The content is built to do that one job. Telling a story is secondary to giving readers those happy brain chemicals.

Novels are meant to tell a good story first, please people second. if they please people at all.

We're competing against things that understand the goals of entertainment in a completely new way.

A Rundown of The Novel's Old Turf

Let's consider the situations in which people used to have a choice: novel or nothing.

On an airplane, you basically brought a book or annoyed the person next to you. Now you have access to the entire internet. All your subscription services. A queue of movies and TV you'll never get through. And let's be honest, watching a movie on an airplane is a lot easier than reading a book. At least if you're easily distracted like me.

On a train. Mobile gaming has definitely supplanted books on the train, the bus, whatever. You used to see a ton of people reading. Now? Everyone's on a phone.

Before bed? That's phone time.

First thing in the morning? That's email time.

On the shitter? Phones. Which have the bonus feature of fitting in your pocket, meaning if you're on the shitter at work, you can bring your phone without the uncomfortable looks you'd get if you brought a paperback.

At a coffee shop? That's laptop land now.

If you're eating alone at a restaurant? Phone.

We used to have a lot of windows in our lives that were perfect for novels. And...well, we've nailed them shut.

How To Lose This Battle

Opera. Have you ever read this much about opera?

Does anyone outside of people who super care about opera give a fuck about opera? Hell, no. You either live and breathe opera or spend zero time thinking about it. It's not something a lot of folks dabble in. You're in or out.

Now, novels can go the way of opera. Novels can continue celebrating the old shit. They can look at the masses and say, "Fine, we're not here to entertain you, anyway."

Opera is a niche thing now. It's not popular entertainment. And that's fine. I got nothing against that. But I'd hate to see novels go the same way.

Novels don't have to disappear up their own ass. Novels don't have to become a form that exists for the people who write them and the people who critique them and no one else.

I think there are a few things we can do as writers and readers, concrete things that can change the tide.

There's contradictory advice coming right up. Not advice. Ideas. I'm not saying you have to use all of them. I'm saying you've got to be thoughtful about what the fuck you're doing. Because when you write a novel, you're not just writing a novel. You're saving novels. Or you're burying them.

Freedom Is Nothing To Lose

People not caring about novels means the freedom to do anything. And it's time novels really started using that freedom.

One of the beautiful things about comics maybe 15 years ago was that nobody gave a fuck about comics except for people who read comics. Which meant that they were free to be and do anything. I'm reading a book now, Warlock, and it's amazing. It's weird, it's cosmic, Adam Warlock's nemesis is himself from the future and with a purple afro. Comics could be this bizarre and out there because nobody was saying, "Whoa, whoa whoa. This isn't commercial. This isn't a movie."

It's like this: Think of the difference between a picture rail in a Starbucks and a picture rail in a one-off, small coffee shop. In Starbucks, there are stakes. If you hang some fucked-up painting, some artist's bizarre vision of the world, there's trouble to be had. Because people care. And Starbucks has shit to lose.

You, as a novelist, have nothing to lose. You can be ultra-niche. You can write about anything, and you can write about it however you want. Filmmakers can't do this. Bands can't do this. Novelists can. And so, we should.



We Can Learn From Our Betters

I'm calling app-makers our "betters" right now. Swallow your pride.

Could you tell your story in a way that gives readers a pleasing jolt at a regular interval? I think you could.

Could you design your novel to be pleasing as much as it is challenging for readers? I believe in you.

Can we, writers, bring readers closer? Yeah, we can.

Can we design shorter chapters that let people read while they're taking a shit?

Can we design stories that make it easy to drop something and pick it up again later?

Are we above having brief recaps a third of the way through?

Are we willing to look at the reading habits of actual humans and tell our stories in ways that conform better to those habits?

Are we willing to choke down that shit sandwich of pride and say that there's art, there's craft, and novels are both? And can we therefore balance craft such that we're creating something that works better for the masses?

Or, Can We Forget That Shit?

Powerbars. The thinking with those was that we could design a food with perfectly balanced nutrition. Careful design is going to feed us better than the randomness of nature, right?

Not so much. Those who study nutrition will tell you the best way to build your diet is to get as much of what you need from "real" food as possible. It makes sense, right? We've evolved to eat real food, and our bodies tend to make better use of it than lab-designed food.

This might also be how our emotions work as well. Although we might get pleasure from things like Snapchat, we might find that experiencing longform emotion in novels ends up being more emotionally nourishing than the experience that's lab-designed to give us those same feelings. "Real" emotions being like "real" food.

So, maybe the less like a designer emotional experience a novel is, the more like an expression of ideas and emotions is, the better.

What Novels Do Best

There are some things that novels do better than other forms.

House Of Leaves would be a terrible movie. Because it uses the form of a novel so well, creating an experience that only works in novels.

S. by J.J. Abrams is a novel that uses the form. It's best explored with the reader at the helm, not by a camera lens taking a reader down a set path.

Harry Potter works better in book form. Because there's no such thing as believable and unbelievable visual effects in a book.

First-person narration works fantastically in books, sucks in most other forms. There's always a separation in another form, but in a novel, you're right there in someone's head.

If you can, do something in your novel that doesn't work well in other forms.

We Can Think Of This As Competition

I come from the library world, and we've made a mistake for a long time: We never considered Amazon our competition.

Amazon is absolutely our competition.

This probably has something to do with the fact that whenever we considered our competition, it was a David and Goliath situation. Except we weren't even David. We were the crabs on David's nutsack. We felt powerless is what I'm getting at.

When you're writing your novel, especially once you've got the words on the page, think about your competition. Candy Crush. BuzzFeed. Vox. Instagram. The least ethical dating shows ever committed to streaming. Think about these enemies, think about how you can beat them, and do whatever you can.

Are we going to win? Are the crabs on David's scrotum going to turn the tide? Probably not. But we can give Goliath a hell of a time killing us.

Let's Give A Shit About The Masses

We need to stop tearing down popular books and authors. When we shit talk James Patterson, we're not turning people away from Patterson and towards something "better." We're shitting on the things people like. We're shitting on the rare novels that still earn a spot in the grocery store. We're shitting on the novels that keep the form alive.

**We all need
access to
something.
Something we
can make.**

Avant garde, artistic stuff is awesome, and it's the mass appeal novels that keep the form alive. James Patterson selling a billion books pays for cover design, shelf space, production, shipping, everything for a ton of other authors.

Listen, snobs. I'm sure the novel you love is better than *Along Came A Spider*. How has telling everyone about that worked for you? Did Toni Morrison or James Baldwin call and ask you to do this?

Take a deep breath. And ask: Am I doing this to promote these other novels, or am I promoting my own taste? Is this really self-promotion?

And is promoting yourself worth hurting the novel?

Last thought, here: You can promote a good novel without shitting on a bad one. You can say something is good without saying something else is bad. This is a lesson learned by elementary school bullies. Eventually, they learn that they can be good, interesting people through their own successes. You aren't stuck where you are, the only option being to push others down, making the level of general success lower. Make the things you love ACTUALLY successful instead of relatively successful.

The novel can't be about relative success. It needs to be goddamn undeniable.

Why It Has to Be The Novel

The most important thing we do as humans is make stuff. If you're not making something, you're missing out on what it means to be human.

Novels are one of the easiest things to make. You need a pen and a notebook. Like \$2 worth of stuff. You need some time and a basic grasp on a written language of some kind. That's it.

No studio time. No tryouts. No Instruments to maintain. No price-y tools. No physical danger. No costumes or uniforms. The novel is even better than the non-fiction book. You don't have to live an interesting life. You don't have to get access to interview subjects.

And while some people will argue this, the novel is one of the few things that's complete even if nobody else ever sees it. If you build a rocking chair and nobody sits in it, did you build anything? If you build a video game that nobody finishes, do those final bosses really exist?

The novel definitely exists, regardless of where it goes and how it's used. Nobody has definitively proven to me that anyone's actually read the entirety of *Moby Dick*.

Anyone can write a novel. They can finish it. There's no "affording" it. And it doesn't have to support the weight of someone else, literal or figurative.

We all need access to something. Something we can make.

The novel has to stay alive.

Big-Time Author Bucket List



Millionaire authors and billionaire authors and famous authors: It's too late for you.

Everyone else: Hear me out.

Now is the time to make a list of things you want to do on the off chance you become rich and famous. It's clear that once you become rich and famous, you lose perspective. You won't have great ideas. You just spend your time trying to maintain your riches and fame. Or making mosquito nets. Like netting has ever helped tens of thousands of people...

Money makes everyone boring. It's a big cosmic joke that as soon as someone has money, they seem to run dry on great ideas for spending it. This is why you have to make your list of wacky shit now.

What follows is my to-do list on the off chance I become a rich, famous author. Feel free to poach, adapt or avoid any of the ideas below.

Lose Money on an Event

I get paid to show up, and the event is so rad that it ends up costing me money. I feel like that's a sign a good time was had. Whether that be because I rented a Gravitron for the event or a deep fryer or any number of things you'd find at a county fair.

Earn A Nickname

I've never had a nickname, and I'd like to earn one. I'd also settle for a common prefix phrase to my name, like "notorious recluse" or "known masturbator." It doesn't even have to be a positive nickname. Just something to make me feel like a part of the action.

Kill the Keg Book Release

I come from Colorado Beer Country. Basically, you buy a keg, and you give out free beers until the keg is finished off. Based on my current popularity, me and 5 friends will have to drink about 30 beers apiece. More motivation to get gud, I guess.

Petelitzer Prize

I'll be starting my own literary prize, naturally. Will the judging be questionable? Uh, yeah. It's my legacy, after all. Will the criteria be the product of an absolute maniac? Again, duh. But the statuettes, those are going to be amazing. They'll weight upwards of 40 lbs. That's how we'll keep the speeches short.

Use A Blurb For Nefarious Purposes

"Hi, I'm Doug. I have terrible gas. I know I'm supposed to tell you how great this book is, but I've decided instead to just go ahead and do it this way. I have bad gas and I make bad decisions about book blurbs. Oops, out of space!"

Imagine this printed on hundreds of thousands of books. So good. So, so good. So much better than telling someone about my book.

Get Recognized From an Author Photo

Just once in public. Preferably while I'm with someone I'm trying to impress. I might have to do things to make sure someone puts the pieces together. Say the title of my book a few times. Drop quotes. Re-create the pose from my author photo. Whatever it takes, it still counts.

Get Band

Open for my favorite band? By reading? Yes, this is a mostly-terrible idea. Better bring a helmet. But writing is the most likely way for me to find myself aligned with Lucero of Memphis, TN, the greatest band of all time. I'm never going to play a good enough pedal steel to hang with them musically, so this is my shot.

Get Banned

Oh, god. The deliciousness of a ban. I don't need to explain what's so beautiful about this, right? I'd love to go to burnings of my book. Make a protest sign. Everyone else makes these quotable signs. I'm an author, damn it. I know the material better than anybody. I can make a great protest sign, and I can do that two-hand, jackoff motion people do with protest signs as good as anyone.

It's a big cosmic joke that as soon as someone has money, they seem to run dry on great ideas for spending it.

The Impractical Release

James Patterson did a book that was sent to readers and "self-destructed" in 24 hours. Wu-Tang did that album that was released to one dude. I don't know exactly what I'll do, but I wanna scratch that SUPER impractical release itch. Perhaps fill a trunk with copies and drop them off at Goodwills all over the States. Or have one copy INFESTED with bed bugs that I'll part with, the recipient knowing full well what's happening.

The OTHER Impractical Release

Seeing a beloved celebrity holding a book is a big one for a lot of people. I also want to see a celebrity holding my book. On the crapper. This is honesty. I want to bring back reading on the toilet. This is a great legacy.

I've often seen Joe Gatto of *Impractical Jokers* on the toilet. Because that happens on the show, pervert! I'd be honored if he was photographed reading my book on the toilet. Honored.

Slaughter Some Cows

I wanna start a beef with another famous writer. Someone who definitely doesn't deserve it. I think it'd just be so weird and fun to hear David Sedaris or Billy Collins say that I'm a "fuckfaced bastard asshole."

Have A Town Named After My Book

This would be so stupid and awesome. A town called "Ghost Dick." Plus, maybe I'd end up in a *Schitt's Creek* situation. Which would be fine. Stevie would be my new bestie inside of a week.

Highly Graffiti-Able Bus Bench

The bus bench is the most hilarious advertising platforms, and it's definitely the best one to vandalize. I'd love to make a bus bench that really lends itself to some creative Sharpie work. There will almost definitely be penises entering me, slapping me around, and doing other penis-y things. I recognize and embrace those penises.

Tell Oprah To Fuck Herself

Franzen didn't go far enough. Nobody tells Oprah to go fuck herself. I really have nothing against Oprah. I just feel like it needs to be done. Everyone needs to have someone tell them "Go fuck yourself" at some point in their life. Even Oprah.

Call Out Late Night

I hate when you see an author on a late night show and Fallon is like, "Oh, yeah, amazing, I read your book, it's amazing."

I'll be just a little famous, AND I have a weird-shaped head.

Here's the plan: Get booked on a late night show and bring a short quiz, easily passed by someone who read my book, not easily passed by someone who is pretending to be a reader. Then I go ahead and give the host my quiz on the air.

I don't expect these hosts to actually read every book by every yahoo who sits down next to a desk. I just wish they'd stop fibbing about it.

Be In An Author Band

Like that band with Dave Barry and Stephen King and Amy Tan. Then have a battle of the bands with their band. And lose. Horribly. There's only room for one terrible, awful, no good very bad band. And it's gonna be us. If you're interested, I'll just tell you now that musical ability doesn't mean much, enthusiasm is everything. Apply by purchasing one of my books and leaving it a 1-star review.

Be Drawn Into A Spider-Man Comic

Lots of famous people have made cameos in comics. And less famous people. And people the artists just sort of thought had weird-shaped heads. I think I've got an edge. I'll be just a little famous, AND I have a weird-shaped head. It's time this worked to my advantage.

Be Harshly Critiqued For My Speaking Role In the Movie Adaptation of My Book

Cameo? You bet. Bad cameo? Also, you bet. I'm gonna make Stephen King look like Marlon Brando.

Be Even Harshly-er Critiqued For My Outfit On The Red Carpet

I suck at dressing up. And I'm not as suit-ready as a Chadwick Boseman. I'll be dumpster diving at Björk's place. That IS a threat.

Demolition

Have you ever heard of Disco Demolition? Big thing in Chicago. Look it up.

I wanna do something similar. You bring in your copy of *The Scarlet Letter*, exchange it for my book, and then we'll destroy the copies of *The Scarlet Letter*.

I know people don't like book burnings, so no worries. We're going to freeze them with liquid nitrogen, then we have Stallone come around the arena on a big claw grabber thing, and then he'll punch and kick all the Hawthorne's to pieces, just like he did to Wesley Snipes' head in *Demolition Man*.

My Own Slot Machine

Let's get a book-based slot machine. There have been some like *Lord of the Rings* and *Charlie and*

the Chocolate Factory, but let's face it, those are based on the movies. I want one based on the book, damn it.

Someone ask Taylor Houston if slot machine names are italicized. I feel like that was a missing section in my MLA guidebook.

A Cocktail Based on My Book

Golf has the Arnold Palmer, football has the lukewarm beer enjoyed alone in an easy chair. My book needs a cocktail, and like a nickname, I feel a cocktail has to come from outside. But I'm going to suggest boiling hot whiskey poured into a beer that has a single ice cube floating on top. I feel like the experience of setting that in front of someone would replicate how I feel when I put a book on the Kindle store.

Motorcycle Tour

Go on book tour via motorcycle! Just me and my bike and a bunch of books. The State of Colorado has endorsed my motorcycle skills, and I've never made good use of them. Now's the time! My skills might be rusty, so I might have to sit on a motorcycle that's being towed behind a truck. Which is probably illegal. Which makes no sense when you think about it. How is that less safe than just riding?

Nudist Reading

I feel that an all-nude reading would be a pretty good stunt. This is assuming I get famous and rich either in the next 18 months (when my nude body is still socially acceptable) or in another 20 years (when I won't give a hot damn).

Have My Audiobook Used To Torture

You know how they play metal to torture people holed up in a building? What would be a greater badge of honor for an audiobook than having it played for the purpose of encouraging people to leave a hostage situation? Plus, in a way, I'd be saving lives. I'd be fighting the war on...whatever the war is on at that time. Terror? Drugs? I'd be a hero.

Fistfight My Critics

Only the twee, loser ones. From the Onion A/V Club, probably. And probably after the flu has run through the office a week before. And I'll get them all very drunk the night before.

It didn't work for Uwe Boll, and it can not work for me, too.

Have A Baby Named After My Character

Especially if I manage to get the character name I've been considering, Assface Liferuiner, into a novel.

A Poetry FAQ for Regular Folks



Poetry and country music have something in common.

When you go into the record store, you can get away with, "I like everything but country. Fuck that shit."

When you go into the bookstore, you can get away with, "I like everything but poetry. Fuck that shit."

Country music is going to have to dig itself out. Because it's poetry month, I've got a little insider knowledge, and I've only got time to solve one major cultural crisis today.

The problem is that people feel like poetry isn't for them. And they're right. Poetry isn't famous for being suited to regular folks.

Let's start with this: a list of frequently asked questions and some answers. Now, keep in mind, I'm not a poetry professor, and I have never owned a beret.

Without further talk about how unqualified I am for this, let's do it.

Q: Why should I care about poetry at all?

Some people will tell you, "You'll never know until you try." That's bad advice. Before I had a colonoscopy, a period I refer to as my personal B.C., I was fairly certain that it wouldn't be something I enjoyed. I was very right. Because there's nothing fun about a day of not eating, a night of firing diarrhea harder than you've ever fired diarrhea before, all capped off by getting a camera shoved in your butt at the crack of dawn. I suspected this wouldn't be enjoyable, and I was right.

But poetry isn't like a colonoscopy, okay? It's more like a musical or opera. You might be right, you

might hate it, but maybe what you hate is the thing you THINK poetry is as opposed to what it really is.

It's fine to dislike poetry, but read further and make sure you've got a good bead on it.

Poetry: Not as bad as a colonoscopy. How am I not Poet Laureate yet?



Q: Why does poetry make me feel stupid?

First off, is it poetry that makes you feel stupid, or is it people who love and/or write poetry? Two different things.

Lots of people who know about poetry make other people feel stupid. This is sometimes a thing they do on purpose, sometimes a thing that just happens unintentionally. If it's people who make you feel stupid, not poetry, then read some poetry in secret. Explore away from prying eyes.

If it's poetry that makes you feel stupid: You're not stupid. Okay? Get over that. If you're reading poetry that just plain doesn't make sense to you, you're reading the wrong things.

You know how you can walk into an art museum and some of the paintings are great, some are crap, and some are just confusing? EVERYONE has those categories, they just put different paintings into them. Not liking a painting or not understanding what the artist is doing doesn't make you stupid. Sometimes an artist is not speaking to you. Sometimes they make crappy things.

Same goes for poetry. Treat the library and bookstore like an art museum. Stroll through, and if something makes you feel stupid, just toss it in the "confusing" bucket and move on.

Q: What's the difference between a poem and a really short story?

It's a great question. Lydia Davis writes some short stories that could be called "prose poems," and she'd probably go there if there was money in it. Louis Jenkins writes prose poems that could easily be swapped into a book of very short stories.

Short version, there's no real difference other than the writer's intent.

Longer version, when I was a kid, I worked at McDonald's. The shake machine, you'd make a

strawberry shake. All the flavors came out of the same nozzle, so there was usually a little, tiny bit of strawberry left in the nozzle when you finished making that strawberry shake, so you'd get maybe a dime-size blob of strawberry in the bottom of the next shake, which was supposed to be chocolate.

Is a chocolate shake with a dime of strawberry in it still a chocolate shake? Probably. But what if you made two blobs? Three? If you got as close to half and half as you could?

The real key here, when you finished filling the cup, you had to ring it up as chocolate or strawberry. There was no "fraction of this, fraction of that" option.

Here's how this translates: When a poet is writing poetry, it might not be super clear, the line between poem and super short story. The only time it really matters is when someone goes to ring it up, or in this case, sell it to bookstores and online. It's gotta go online, in a spot in a bookstore. Eventually you pick a lane.

Bottom line, it only has to be labeled for the purposes of selling it, so you might as well go with whatever the writer says it is. They're not trying to trick you. If the book says "Poems" on the front, then it's poetry.

Q. How do poets know where to stop a line and start a new one?

Ah, the "line break."

Sometimes this is a prescribed thing. Like in a haiku, you have a certain number of syllables per line. But sometimes this is... think about it like another form of punctuation. It can indicate a few different things. It might be a pause. It might also be a way to put emphasis on a line, either at the end or the beginning of the line that follows.

Sometimes it's pretty random. That's not very thoughtful of the poet, but it happens.

Here's a way to get this down: What's something you know how to do without thinking about it? Usually something physical. Do your fingertips know where the keys are on the keyboard? Did you swim a lot and jump in the pool and just start swimming? Can you cook something without a timer or a recipe?

It's like that. Poets get a "feel" for it, same way you get a feel for when that scrambled egg is just right.

If you're reading a poem and the breaks just don't make sense to you, you and that poet might just not get along. Give 'em a couple shots, but if the line breaks keep tripping you up, it's probably not the line breaks as much as it is this poet's use of them.

Q. How important is the layout of a poem?

Layout is one of the things that's important to poets in ways it's not to fiction writers. Most fiction writers, I should say. The difference here is that the layout of typical fiction is designed to be ignored, to fade into the background. You're not really supposed to notice it. Sort of the way subtitles are

meant to be very clear but as unobtrusive as possible.

The layout in a poem is different. The layout is very intentional. Space is used as another form of punctuation, as a place to take a breath, or to emphasize something. Something might be right-justified, say, and in a good poem that makes sense based on the subject or tone of the poem. Sometimes there are extra spaces between words, lines organized in strange ways, and things that just look odd.

When you encounter a poem with a weird layout, just ignore the picture of the entire page and start with the first word. Then move onto the next and the next. Pretty soon you'll finish the whole thing.

Q. What's the deal with rhyming and not rhyming?

Rhyming is a choice, and sometimes poems rhyme, sometimes they don't. Poems definitely don't have to rhyme. I'd also say that rhyming poetry has been more fashionable at times. Right now it's not highly popular.

There are some received knowledge things, factoids you'll hear about rhyming being used to help people remember very old stories, like The Iliad. If you can remember this line ends with a certain word, then you know the next line rhymes, which gives you a hint to the next line. This is probably not true. It's a lot more likely that orally-recited, long stories were a little different every time and orators remembered the beats of the story, not the exact lines.

You'll read books of poetry with no rhyming poems, all rhyming poems, and you'll read some that have both rhyming and non-rhyming poems. Kay Ryan writes some rhyming poetry that's pretty easy to get into.

Q. How important are forms like haiku and sonnets and stuff?

If you're writing poetry, forms are a great challenge. Oftentimes the way writing (and art) is taught is with restrictions. You're not allowed to do this or that, use these types of words, say certain phrases, that sort of thing. Forms are a great way to press yourself, and when you press yourself, good things can happen.

I have a pet theory on forms for the reader side.

If you create within a rigid pattern, it's easier for the audience to read it the way you meant them to. It's closer to the voice you have in your head. Today there are lots of different tools to impart that information. The images on the cover. Audiobooks. The inevitable book to movie. But forms may be a way to impart more of the tone that doesn't come through in the words alone.

You'll read some poems that are in a form, and you won't even know it. And some "forms" are really more about tone or purpose than they are numbers of syllables or rhyme schemes. Sometimes a poet will start a poem in a form, and the final draft will move away from that form once the poet has figured out what they really want to do with the poem. I'd advise you don't worry about forms until you're interested in writing your own poetry.

Q. What About Slam Poetry?

Sure, slam is in the mix. My take is that slam is different from other forms because while most poetry is best aloud, slam has a performance aspect that's key to it being understood and appreciated. Reading slam is a little like reading the lyrics to a favorite song. It's something you'd do if you were already a huge fan or wanted to check a lyric, and it's probably a critical step to writing and performing yourself, but probably not the way most people experience it. Maybe the simplest way to think about slam is that it's somewhere in the triangle formed by written poetry, hip-hop, and freestyle rap.



I'd also say that slam is almost always political and/or identity-related, which makes slam somewhat unique. Most forms don't have a subject matter tied to them as strongly as slam.

Q. Is my favorite hip-hop artist a poet?

Is your favorite hip-hop artist Rakim? Because then, yes, totally.

Personal loves aside, if your favorite hip-hop artist fancies themselves a poet, then why not?

The one thing I'll say, if someone asks about your favorite poets, it's fine to say a lyric writer is your favorite poet. BUT, you should have some poets working in print or slam in your back pocket to compare them to. The world's not fair, and people will respect your opinion more if you say, "I think Boots Riley is the greatest poet of all time," and then you can demonstrate that you're comparing Mr. Riley to Philip Levine or Yusef Komunyakaa or Lucille Clifton. To put it another way, don't cite a hip-hop artist as your favorite poet because they're the only poet you can name. That's like telling your only son that he's your "favorite" son.

Q. Why did all my teachers in high school love Robert Frost and shit like that?

Well, this gets into theory on how canon is formed, so buckle up: English teachers often become English teachers because they like the stuff they learned in English class. So, they continue to pass on the things their teachers loved, and it goes on and on.

My favorite poem I read in high school English was "Short-Order Cook" by Jim Daniels. When we talked about it in class, I learned pretty quick that I was the only one in the AP English class who'd worked fast food and felt what Daniels was saying. I'm really grateful I got the chance to see this poem because it changed what I thought poetry was.

Poetry isn't all long-dead dudes who talk about the woods.

That said, if you like poetry, take a look at some of the classic writers. There are a lot of things about assigned reading that I hated at the time, but I can appreciate more as an adult. Honestly, it boils down to a lot of the ideas in poems having to do with later life, which isn't terribly relatable when you're 17 and have your life in front of you. It's the way reading *The Old Man and the Sea* when you're 35 is a great experience, and reading it when you're 15 is a snooze.

Q. How Do You Pick Out A Good Poetry Book To Read?

It's tough. It's much harder than a novel. Poetry is a matter of small differences in taste. But I have a technique I can recommend. Check out the poetry section at your library. Pull out a few books. Flip to the table of contents, and look for titles that interest you for whatever reason. Pick out a couple, and then flip to those poems. If you like what you read, if it makes you want to read more, then check it out. If it doesn't, put it back and try something else. Feel free to do this several times.

Comics vs. Television: "Locke & Key" – Skip The



I'm not surprising the world by saying, "The book is better."

I know this is not mind-blowing news, but in this case it's news you need to hear. Not because the series of comics by Joe Hill is better, but because the comics are MUCH better. And because so many plot points carried over in the show, you really can't watch the show first, then read the book. If you watch the show, you'll ruin the much better experience of the book.

I can only hope I'm not too late, but even if it is too late, or even if you've got no interest in *Locke & Key* or *Locke & Key*, you'll recognize some of the issues that came up in the translation from book to movie on this one.

Very minor spoilers for the show lie ahead, sticking to the level of basic premise.

Decompression Depression

Some likely signs you're watching decompressed TV:

- You're watching a show where everything happens in the last episode of the season.
- Your show takes little diversions that never pay off.
- You're watching *The Walking Dead*.

Decompression isn't about long or short. Decompression is when a series doesn't get a whole lot done in an episode. *Lost* might be one of the first shows where the average viewer felt this hard. In an entire episode, maybe one thing would happen. Just enough to bring you back a week later.

Things that are well-paced do one of two things (and sometimes both) with every scene: raise the tension and/or advance the plot. Things that are decompressed accomplish those things, but they

do it episode-by-episode as opposed to scene-by-scene, because they don't have enough story to fill the time.

Writers know different stories have different optimal lengths. Producers of shows think of stories like goldfish: they'll expand to fit whatever size container is needed. But rather than adding interesting or novel story elements, they take the existing elements and expand them, making the story less dense, or "decompressed."

Locke & Key the show is decompressed as all hell. There's a lot of backtracking and a lot of sideways diversions that aren't necessary. The comics handle it better. They tell the story in the appropriate amount of time and at the appropriate pace.

The Back and Forth Problem

Let's say that you discovered magic was absolutely real. Let's say this came in the form of moving into a new house and hearing whispers, which you could then follow to find keys. Each of these keys did magical things. For example, maybe a key could turn a regular doorway into a portal to anywhere there's another door. Like, you could walk through a door and be in Delaware. You could move all your stuff through a doorway and into your new house several states away.

If you discovered this key, and if you knew for a fact there were more keys with unknown powers hidden throughout your new home, what would you spend your time doing?

Did any of you answer by saying you'd hang out with nerds who want to make a horror movie? How about being on the hockey team? Would you devote one second of your time to red Solo cup parties? Fitting in at a new school? Helping sign people up for a 5K?

This family discovers real true magic, and while they're excited in the moment, the next morning they all go back to being worried about high school or being popular or whatever. This happens over and over and over. Every discovery of magic should raise the tension tide, but instead a wave of tension comes in, then it goes out completely. No overall, lasting increase.

The problem isn't so much the family's unrealistic reaction. It's the back and forth for the viewer that derails the whole thing.



Look, imagine you had a social problem, someone at work being passive aggressive. Then someone broke into your house and tried to kill you with a tire iron. If you have to tell both stories, which order do you tell them in? Exactly. Because once you talk about someone trying to kill you, Tammy never cleaning out the Keurig ain't gonna take you very far. You can't go back to that story.

The comics are better about raising tension and establishing a new baseline rather than deflating the tension and starting from scratch with every event.

Speed

There are 10 episodes of the show and only 6 volumes of the comics. Even if you're not a speedy

comics reader, you'd probably plow through the comics faster than you'd watch the show. So...why?

We all know that the book is a richer, deeper experience, and that's true of *Locke & Key*. What makes this case unique is that you could get that deeper experience in less time than it'd take you to have the worse experience. It's like driving past Disney World to ride the Gravitron at a shitty parking lot carnival. You're putting in a greater effort to have less fun.

Telegraphs

There's a satisfaction in being one step ahead of characters, but being miles ahead is just tedious. The *Locke & Key* show makes it very clear to the viewer where things are headed way too early.

**It's like
bleaching your
butthole.**

It's the viewer discovering the horrible situation just barely ahead of a character that makes things interesting. Take *Alien*. If we saw the facehugger crawl into that weird egg before the space miners got to the planet's surface, we'd have a long wait for an event that we already saw coming. The way it plays out in the movie, we know the egg is not good news, it opens, and we're like, "Nope, nope, nope," and it's a short wait for that thing to pop out and confirm what we all knew.

The viewer puts the pieces together or is straight-up told what's going to happen way too early in *Locke & Key* on Netflix. The comics do a better job of piecing out information for characters and readers at a matched pace, creating surprise instead of tedium.

Oh My God, Read Comics Already

I can give anyone a pass on the *Thor* comics. I don't think people should read *Journey Into Mystery* before they see *Ragnarok*. It's like bleaching your butthole: Not necessary, not fun, not even a good idea.

Locke & Key is a short, limited comics series. It's contemporary. The art is excellent. The writing is tight. There's absolutely nothing to know before you start, no background, no long character histories, no Weapon X project, nothing. You get in, you get out. Most libraries have them, often available on digital platforms for free checkout.

This is a great series to try out comics if you've been meaning to, or even if you haven't.

For fuck's sake, read a book once in a while.

Maybe: The Empathy-Building Writing Prompt



Can you get over it when some jerkoff spills your drink? When your neighbor's dog shits on your lawn and they don't have a bag? Can you be a more empathetic person? Can you deal with the assholes you don't like? Can you channel anger and frustration into something positive?

Maybe.

The Origins of Maybe

For a time, I was lucky enough to have regular Skype appointments with Tom Spanbauer. We worked on my writing, and we chatted a little. It was the biggest honor in my writing life, I talk about it all the time, and I'll talk about it until I die. Look, if you walked on the Moon, I feel like it'd come up pretty frequently, no? The closest I'm going to get to walking on the Moon is bragging about talking to the guy who wrote *The Man Who Fell In Love With the Moon*, so deal with it.

Once, Tom told me he was going to be late because he had a radio interview to do. I told him no problem, and I listened to his interview live. In it he talked about some of the horrors from the first days of the AIDS crisis, how terrifying it was, and he told some truly heartbreaking stories about some friends who didn't make it.

Our appointment started right after he got home. I told him his interview was beautiful and crushing. And I asked, "How do you not see these appointments, or your students, how do you not see their problems as tiny, trivial things?"

If you stack your problems against Tom's, you'll wind up feeling like a real asshole. I made the mistake of complaining on one of our calls about a cold I couldn't shake. Let me add some context:

I complained to a man living with AIDS about having the sniffles.

I complained to a man living with AIDS about having the sniffles. Yeah. But he never called me on it. He never made me feel small or like my problems were small. He listened. And in this particular case, he told me to drink some hot tea.

That's why I had to ask: How have you built this empathy?

He told me [paraphrased]:

I get mad. I get mad all the time. I'll think, The neighbor with his SUV running in the driveway, that fucker is wrecking the planet. But then I remember something the Dalai Lama said, 'When you meet someone, look them in the eye. You'll see a great battle waging.' Everyone has a battle. Maybe the guy with his SUV, maybe he had a fight with his wife. Maybe he hates his job. We all have a battle.

The Exercise

Whenever you're mad, when you end the work day and you're still carrying something, some anger or frustration, you get a pen and a piece of paper, and you start with "Maybe."

Write it at the top. Write it big. Then, use the space on the page to write out the "Maybe."

Write about the person you're pissed at. Write the setup that would allow you to forgive.

I'm mad at Tina because she was a dick to me in a meeting today. So, I write "Maybe" at the top of the page. And then I write:

Maybe Tina's husband was a jerk today. Maybe Tina's mom is sick. Maybe Tina's car has been in and out of the shop every month, and they can't figure out what's wrong, but damned if the CHECK ENGINE light doesn't flash every time she gets a mile from the shop. Maybe Tina's bills are piled up. Maybe Tina has a long commute. Maybe Tina really wanted to play saxophone, but now she's stuck in this office job. Maybe Tina has a knee injury, and the steps from her bed to the toilet are goddamn agony.

You go until you feel better. Until you hit enough to say, "I understand where Tina's coming from." Your goal is to look Tina in the eye, through writing, until you see her battle. Even if you have to make it up. Even if it takes hours.

How You'll Do This Wrong

I get it, torture the people I hate! Like that t-shirt, "If you're a jerk I'll put you in my novel!"

The goal isn't to hurt someone because they hurt you first. The goal is to wonder why someone acts the way they do, and to follow the thread of "Maybe" until you reach something that feels conclusive. No, this isn't a good way to use "Maybe."

I can't find empathy for a wealthy person. They're rich! They don't have real problems.

This is about building empathy, not expressing the empathy you already have. You won't get stronger by squatting the same weight every time you train. You have to add some plates to the bar. Likewise,

to build empathy, you have to make it hard on yourself. What could go wrong for a wealthy person that would make you feel bad for them? Does being wealthy help when you lose a parent? Do you have to come up with a very specific, very detailed scenario? Fine. Do it. That's the exercise, that's the work.

I don't think this person cares, so why should I care how I feel about them?

Yes, you're right, most people don't care how you feel.

Your empathy is yours to give, and how the person you're writing about feels about your empathy is irrelevant.

I don't want to be in the headspace of someone I hate!

Looking someone in the eye is a scary thing. But I'm not here to help you have a good time. I'm here to help you build empathy.

I don't want to be a pushover.

Nobody is saying you have to be a pushover. Empathy isn't about that. You can still be assertive with people. You can still advocate for what you think is right. This is about learning to see the individuals on the other side of something as real, human people. Look, having an ability and an increased capacity doesn't require you to use it. Being able to dunk a basketball doesn't mean you must do so every time you see a hoop.

I have a person who I'll never have empathy for.

Write a "Maybe" on that person. Do it over. Do it for weeks. Months if you have to. Maybe you'll never get there. But the one way I guarantee you'll never get there is by NOT putting in the work.

When you're constantly asked to be the empathetic person, the bigger person, it wears you down.

When you're constantly asking your body to run a mile, then another, it wears you down. Until you do it enough that it doesn't wear you down as much. You can adapt. You can do better. Putting yourself through a challenging regimen is how you get there. Will you still be tired? Absolutely. But your threshold is higher, and you'll be able to handle it better.

This Will Make You A Better Writer

Writing good characters is about empathy. It's about understanding where someone is coming from, why they act the way they do, especially if they do things you wouldn't. Build empathy, build better characters. Very simple.

It's also words on the page. Nobody got worse at writing by adding words to a page.

"Maybe" might give you some ideas for some atypical narratives. Can you write a narrative that makes a rich movie star with a wacky religious affiliation into a character people feel for? Can you write a narrative that draws readers in, and when they leave they're thinking differently? These are

the challenging stories to write, and challenging stories executed well are good stories. Empathy will put you on the path.

This Will Make You A Better Person

Tom is a good person. He taught me a lot. He taught me about writing. And he taught me about being a man. He taught me about humility. He taught me about being open, about being vulnerable while also being strong.

If "Maybe" is good enough for Tom, it's damn sure good enough for me.

If you do it every day, you'll start to get just the tiniest bit excited when someone pisses you off. Because now you have a "Maybe" to write later. You can take it off your to-do list.

You'll start to shorten the time between something happening and trying to understand the other person involved. Instead of reaching for the typical tools like anger or sharp words, you'll think, "Maybe..."

You'll build the guts to look someone in the eye.

The Good and Bad of Expanding the Definition of 'Literature'



What is literature? And what isn't?

Labels like "literature" expand and contract as a medium like books breathes in and out. Right now, a lot of the talk seems to be about expanding the definition of literature. Expanding and including seem to be the way we're headed.

Is this a good idea? A bad idea? Some of both? Does the expansion of "literature's" definition accomplish the goal of bringing more readers into the fold?

The Importance of Genres

Genre labels are hard to get right, but easy to spot when they're wrong. My library had *Fight Club* categorized as Sci-fi/Fantasy, complete with the little red spine sticker with a dragon on it. Non-spoiler alert: There are no dragons in *Fight Club*. Nothing remotely dragon-ous.

I'm going to start by saying that "literature" is a genre. Yes, I know it hasn't always been that way, but in today's book market, how would you better categorize books like *A Little Life* or Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* or Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*? I'm not sure how we package a book like *Beloved* without the tag of "literature." I don't know what you'd call a section in a bookstore where *Jesus' Son* goes if not "literature."

Lots of people use "literature" to mean "anything written down." That's fine, but that's not how I use it, and not how I'm suggesting we use it going forward. Here's why.

Expansion is Bad When It Muddies The Waters

Beloved and *Carrie* are both women's stories. Both focus on mother/daughter relationships. Both involve a supernatural element. Both involve societal outcasts. If you go through the major plot points, there's certainly stuff in common here.

And yet readers of both know that they aren't the same thing. Reading *Beloved* and *Carrie* are not the same experience. It's more than fair to say they were written with different readers and reactions in mind.

I see a benefit to keeping the "literature" genre tighter in this case. I like both books, but not in the same way. If I'm looking for something to read on an airplane, I'd go with *Carrie*. If I'm looking for a book to set on the nightstand and read over the course of a month, it's Toni Morrison.

When books enter the "literature" genre when they may better fit as a thriller or a mystery or a horror novel, I think we're breaking down a barrier, but we're also removing a useful tool for decision-making.

Expansion is Good When We're Talking About A Quality Distinction

Expanding the boundaries of what's considered "literature" is a good idea for people who use the term to denote quality. These are people who probably pronounce the word like, "lit-tra-tour" between sips from teeny tiny espresso cups, people who think their work for the New York Times Review of Books is interesting or relevant to anyone besides the writers of books and those writers' mothers. Seriously, the only reason that thing exists is so writers can go home for Thanksgiving and convince mom and dad that their MFA was a good decision.

"Literature," from where I'm standing, sets aside a kind of book, but it shouldn't be about whether or not the book is any good.

Expanding the definition of "literature" is good when fighting against the word/label being used as a weapon in the quality wars. Sorry, snooty types, but you'll have to come up with a new weapon. Come up with a better way to separate that stuff you like from an Edward Lee novel where a guy drills holes in peoples' heads and has sex with them.

Expansion is Good When It Results In Individual Expansion

I was steered away from Stephen King by the "literature" distinction. I felt like a horror novel about vampires was beneath me. I was incorrect. Perhaps even stupid. A dullard. I'm still stupid, but I have relaxed my ideals and come out far better for it.

Expanding the boundaries of literature, perhaps to include popular materials or materials that are tough to place in a genre, might help readers expand out into books adjacent to their interests.

Come up with a better way to separate that stuff you like from an Edward Lee novel where a guy drills holes in peoples' heads and has sex with them.

Expansion is Bad When It Confuses Occasional Readers

“Occasional Readers” is a term I use for people who consume books occasionally, maybe one or two a year, or maybe only when they do certain things like take vacations.

Occasional Readers need consideration on the issue of “literature’s” slippery definition.

While relaxing the definition of “literature” may bring heavy readers across genre divides, if one-book-a-year people are turned away from a good romance, which is what they want, because it’s being sold as “literary,” that’s a disservice to them and the book in question.

For Occasional Readers, books aren’t their entire lives. They don’t read ABOUT books all the time. We’re not doing them any favors by using them to make a point about flexing genres.

Expansion is Bad When It Bleeds The Genre

When movies like *It Follows* and *Get Out* and *The Witch* came out, we watched news media do everything they could to not call them “horror.” They were “psychological thrillers” or “genre-bending statements.” To their credit, most of the filmmakers resisted these labels and went with “horror.” And they were right to do so.

When we expand great horror movies outside of the horror label, we end up cherrypicking the best examples of a genre and putting them somewhere else. So when someone attacks the horror genre, you can’t defend it by saying “What about *Hereditary*?”

Expanding “literature” can have the same effect. Taking books that are excellent out of their genre (for example, saying *The Sirens of Titan* isn’t really sci-fi) might elevate the status of a particular book, but leaves a genre without its best works and examples.

Last Analogy

When I go get Thai food, they ask how spicy I want it. They ask if I want it mild, medium, or spicy. While the cook might put in a different amounts of spice based on these labels, the person eating the food will interpret the spice level based on their own experience and palate.

Generally, I’m a medium guy. Well, my mouth is medium. The other end doesn’t always agree.

My “hot” and yours probably aren’t the same, but these are still useful labels. They aren’t perfect, but they’re a starting point. Something to consider when I go to the Thai place for the first time, then another time, and eventually get it dialed in.

To me, the worst way to go about this would be for the Thai place to be like, “We’re going to expand our ‘medium’ label to include a lot more dishes so that eaters will try them out.”

The result wouldn’t be a bunch of satisfied customers. It would be disappointed spice-lovers and tender-mouthed folks going somewhere else.

When it comes to “literature” I don’t have a problem with the label changing. I just want us to do it thoughtfully. And we need to ask whether it’s the best way to bring more readers to the books they

want to read.

10 Hacks To Get The Most From Your eReader



Let's talk about some behavioral and non-technical things you can do to improve your eReader experience. I'm not talking about hardcore stuff like unscrewing panels or rooting your device or turning it into a Playstation 4 or whatever. Those guides are out there and...well, if you want to play a Playstation 4, they invented this thing called Playstation 4. Playstation 4, a device designed specifically to play Playstation 4 games, turns out to be the best gizmo when it comes to doing Playstation 4 stuff. Go figure.

We're focused on how you can make your eReader, a device ostensibly created for reading, a better device for reading. Because that's what it's made for, and that's what it does best.

And, we're going to talk about the way you interact with your eReader. You aren't reading enough, and it might be your own fault.

Only Give Yourself 3 Options At A Time

People love the concept of the eReader being an entire library in their pocket. It's a cool, futuristic concept, but it doesn't result in reading pleasure.

The way a physical library works, you go in, you have a massive number of choices, and you eventually pick out some stuff and leave. Back at home, you're down to a smaller number of choices for the next few weeks. When you go to the nightstand, you've got 3 to 5 options. Much easier to sort and prioritize than an entire library.

With a physical library, you filter down to a tiny percentage of what's available, take that stuff home, and then engage in reading as a separate process. You don't re-filter every time you read.

You can and should do this with your eReader as well. Most people treat their eReader like a pocket

library, and they spend hours wandering the stacks instead of reading.

Every three weeks (an average library checkout period), remove all but 3 to 5 items from your eReader. You'll have fewer options, fewer choices to make, and you'll get more reading done.

Bonus tip: If you use a Kindle, you can sort your books into Collections instead of actually removing them. Make good use of this option.

Get A Shitty Case

Get a case that makes your eReader look like a paper notebook or a regular-ass book. I don't mean to say that notebooks or books are shitty, but you'll have less to worry about if you leave your eReader sitting somewhere and it's in a case that doesn't look expensive. Deter theft (or your unfounded concerns about it) and you'll find yourself more likely to bring your reader with you.

Buy eBooks When You're In The Middle of A Good One

Don't buy when you're in need of your next read. This is like going to the store when you're hungry. When you're hungry, every cheese ball is a delicacy. You'll make bad choices based on the moment rather than what you're looking to achieve in the long run. And it's just too easy to buy too many digital books.

Instead, buy books when you are in the middle of a good book. This method keeps you from buying lousy books, and it helps build an appetite for your next read's flavor when you've got a specific book in mind.

Add Images To The Front of Your Reader Or Reader's Case

You've probably got a case, and if you do, all you need is 4 photo corner tabs and an instant camera or access to a printer. You can also fold paper and create a hand-drawn cover if you'd like. Mine would look like a deranged 5 year-old did them, which is an aesthetic I've learned to live with.

eReaders are lacking in the physical experience department. eBooks tend to be more forgettable, and I suspect this has to do with the fact that when I'm reading Book A, it's exactly like reading Book B in terms of physical experience. Adding a cover image, so you're seeing what you're reading every time you pick up a book, is one way to re-create some of the sensations of a physical book.

Ads suck. The last thing most of us need is another vector for ads to enter our lives. And ads distract you from the job at hand: reading.

Change Fonts

Most readers have different font options. When you start a new book, change the font and the size a little bit, make it different from the last book you read. This gives your brain another way to separate

books into different, more memorable experiences instead of feeling like one long book.

Warm Light

Instead of using the light emitted by your reader, use a lamp with a real bulb in it, especially at night. eReader screens, even if they're e-ink, tend to use LED bulbs instead of something incandescent. Using more natural light will help you read more and be ready to sleep when you're done reading.

Weights

One issue with eBooks is they don't have physical weight. Toting around Infinite Jest is no different from the lightness of a poetry chapbook. But they could be different! What if you added a small pocket to the back of your eReader and then added something heavy until the weight of your eReader was close to that of the physical book? We're missing sensory data when we use eReaders, data that differentiates different books. This sounds bonkers, but give it a shot.

Remove Kindle Ads

Lots of us got those cheaper Kindles with the ads. Ads suck. The last thing most of us need is another vector for ads to enter our lives. And ads distract you from the job at hand: reading.

There are two methods we'll suggest:

The first, chat someone at Amazon and see if they'll remove the ads for you. Now, they might not. They don't HAVE to, and although they were doing this off and on a few years ago, things may have changed. But they might. If you've got 15 minutes and a polite attitude, give it a shot.

The second method: Pay the difference. I know people don't love this idea, but hey, you should know it's an option.

Add A Wall Adapter with Cord To Your Packing List

If you go on vacation, an eReader is a nice thing to have. Do yourself a favor: Add a power strip with USB plugins and a couple feet of cord to your packing list. When you go to a hotel or AirBNB, chances are pretty good you won't have a convenient outlet or enough of 'em. Your eReader is going to lose to your phone. Don't make it a contest.

Get Rid Of That Branding

I HATE that I bought this device for reading that has an unnecessary, glossy word at the bottom. I really dislike it. I don't like seeing this branding every time I read. It would be like your Blu-Ray player throwing a light logo at the bottom of the screen while you watch a movie.

Cover it with a sticker, nail polish, whatever. Just get rid of it.

Now get reading.

The Truths And Lies About An English Degree



High School Seniors: You might be making higher ed decisions right now. Or, you're supposed to, but you're reading this instead. I support you either way.

College Students: You might be in the middle of a program. Maybe making a tough decision for the fall. Hope this helps.

Recent Graduates: On one hand, this will be almost useless for you. Bitter experience will provide all of these lessons. On the other hand, you can reconcile the truth now and save some heartache later.

I graduated with an English degree in 2006, and I've been in the job market since, and I've been living a life that revolves around reading and writing. I've got no motive for selling you lies about an English degree, and I think there's some good and bad.

Let's do it.

Truth: An English Degree Teaches You To Think Critically

When I watch movies, when I read books, when I experience just about anything, I think about more than a thumbs up or down. It's just my way, and it's something I learned in college. And, let's be honest, from Joe Bob Briggs on Monstervision.

There's a lot of hoopla circulating about colleges and universities "indoctrinating" students to think a certain way, but that's not how college went down for me. I feel like I should let you know that I'm from a conservative small town, and while I'm generally a left-leaning guy, I'm nowhere near the bleeding edge of progressive politics.

I learned that there are lots of different ideas and perspectives, and even bad ideas usually contain

a kernel of something interesting. I learned how to discuss ideas, even if you don't like them (or the people who put them forth).

A bad college program, it's the equivalent of Ikea. You walk away with the exact materials and cheap-ass tools that allow you to do one thing. You will come out with a nightstand, but it's nothing to shout about. You'll have the same nightstand as everyone else, and that nightstand isn't something that'll stand up to the rigors of everyday use. A good college program, you walk away with the know-how to build your own damn nightstand.

Lie: Employers Value Your Ability To Think Critically

An English degree don't impress employers much. I've been there, I recognize the value of the degree. But most employers, outside of certain fields, figure that they can hire someone who has learned to think critically AND has web design know-how.

You'll find a lot of articles regarding tech companies hiring liberal arts majors, business people talking up the value of education in the arts. But I'm just telling you the truth, when you get that English degree, no high-powered executives are knocking down your door.

If someone is telling you that an English degree is highly versatile in the world of careers, question their motives. Whenever I see these types of articles and opinions, they're written by someone involved in a university's English department. Listen to their opinion, and get a second one.

Truth: You'll Read Things You'd Never Read Otherwise

I took a class called World Literature By And About Women. We read a lot of books. By and about women. I might've read some of them on my own, but I can just about guarantee I would've never read *Like Water For Chocolate*, which is awesome. I wouldn't have read *The Iliad* outside of class, which I enjoyed (tip: get a non-rhyming version). Chang-Rae Lee wouldn't be on the list without an Asian Literature class, and I wouldn't have been exposed to the mass decapitations depicted in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* if it wasn't for an American Lit. class.

You'll read things you don't like, too. I read something like 18 Shakespeare plays and enjoyed exactly 1. I took a British Literature class with poetry that I really had to struggle to find value in. But this is an important separation between English majors and regular people: we don't just read shit we like.

Anyone can get online, find a syllabus, and read like an English major. But it's a pipe dream. You won't get it done. Besides, it's really helpful to have a support system when you read Hegel and come into class completely confused. At least with a professor at the helm you might get something out of that crap.

Lie: An English Degree Is Valuable In Business Communications

Nobody cares about the correct use of a semicolon in email. You'll be lucky if work emails are even comprehensible most times. And...people aren't wrong to write sloppy emails. It's a communication tool, and if you get the message, then it's as correct as it needs to be.

Effective and clean communication is a great skill, but it's not enough. You need to pair it with something else. The ability to write emails "correctly" is not as valuable as the content of those emails. Even if you know grammar inside and out, if you don't understand the technical details of your industry, your know-how isn't all that useful. If you're great at explaining a process to the public, that's a plus, but it's a lot more helpful if you've got the technical skills to add that explanation to a web site.

An English degree can make you an effective communicator. It doesn't provide you something worth communicating. And you need to find or build your megaphone.

Lie: English Is The Only Option If You Love Books

C

If you dream of having a sweet home library and lots of time to read, major in accounting. You'll have steady work, you can live anywhere, and you'll make a good living. Then you move somewhere you can get a cheap house, fill it with books, and bam, you're golden.

If you want to start your own small press, an English degree would help, but not as much as a degree in marketing.

Book love isn't one thing. Figure out what it is you like about books, what you'd like your relationship with books to be in the long run, and which skills, besides reading and writing, might help you get there.

Truth: You Get Out Of It What You Put Into It

English is a subjective degree, more like an arts degree than something like engineering, where you either know how to build a bridge or you fuck it up and some poor soul plunges into a river.

If you'll allow yourself to be called a cookie, and if you'd say it's fair to consider yourself a smart cookie, you can skate through an English degree without much trouble. If you're smart, you can probably get through the program without learning a damn thing.

If you're going to college to not have much trouble, you're there for the wrong reason.

Write fiction that exceeds the length requirements if that's what your story needs. Read more than the minimum. Take on the extra credit, even if you don't need the points. One of my teachers made us memorize poems and recite them aloud. I memorized longer ones than I needed to. Because instead of memorizing something that fulfilled the assignment, I memorized something I liked. That's when I "got it." That's when I stopped worrying about grades and getting by and started doing things because I wanted to do them.

An English degree is already of questionable value in the world outside academia. An English degree earned without applying yourself? That's not only worthless to employers and consumers of your work, it's worthless to you, too. If you don't learn anything in college, it's because you're not working to your capacity. If you want to take something away from college, you need to make something worth carrying.

Lie: Being A Starving Artist Is Fun And Romantic

You'll hear this lie from one kind of person: People who are no longer starving artists.

You know how we all make fun of the former high school quarterback who says high school was the best time of his life? The person who romanticizes the starving artist college days is the artsy equivalent of that guy. Trade the football helmet for a fedora, trade the letter jacket for a copy of *Ulysses*, you've got the same dude.

Being hungry sucks. There were some college days when the cupboard at my place was pretty lean. I sold shit to pay for dental bills. Yes, I had some good times when I was a "starving artist." But that's in retrospect, now that I'm okay. At the time, eating peanut butter on graham crackers for three meals in a day isn't all that fun or romantic.

If you're currently a starving artist and sick of people telling you to enjoy it, you're correct. If you're feeling like college isn't the best time of your life, you're right, it won't be, and that's a good thing.



Truth: It's A Barista Degree

Okay, it's true, a degree in English doesn't have a clear and direct path to many careers, and a lot of us have a hard time figuring out where to go next.

At the same time, listen to someone who's been there: It's okay to take a learning path that doesn't lead directly to a career.

People feel like they're wasting their potential if they get a degree in X and never use it. But that seems incorrect to me. Does someone who serves in The Marines have to do Marine-like work for the rest of their lives, otherwise they've wasted those years? Hell, no. They can apply things they've learned to whatever comes next, if they choose to do so. They can be proud they've accomplished something, and they can use that confidence boost to do something else.

You might be a barista with an English degree. You might be a delivery driver with an English degree. You might be an event promoter. You might take over a family business. Chances are pretty good you won't be doing something that requires what you learned in your English classes. Let go of the need

to use your degree in your work life. Because you might be a barista who is happy being a barista, and part of that happiness comes from the close relationship you have with books. You might end up being an office drone, like so many others, and what sustains you is the reading and writing you do when you're at home. Good thing you honed those skills.

Even if you don't use your degree to get a job, what you learn might just be what makes your life worth living.

Can Townies Write?



You want to write? Are you moving to New York? L.A.? Headed to an MFA program somewhere?

You're staying in the town where you grew up?

Can that work?

Writing and Publishing

Right off the bat, yes, you can stay in your hometown and write.

Publishing, that's another story.

Going to The Big City doesn't "make" you a good writer. A couple of the best MFA programs in the country are in Iowa and Wyoming—hick states. AND these programs are fully-funded, meaning you won't go totally broke.

You can write in a shed in Peck, Idaho just fine.

Publishing is where it get tricky.

When you live in The Big City, you meet people. People who publish anthologies and journals. People who can hook you up with other people. You meet a couple people, they get you hooked up with a couple people, and boom, you've got some publishing outlets. That's the route to publication you're not going to find in rural New Mexico.

Now, people will tell you the internet makes all of that irrelevant. On the internet, we're all the same! Yes, on the internet, we're all the same, which means that we all are equally unappealing to

publishers, and that face time means everything. Knowing someone who knows someone will take you a lot further than “the internet.” And that’s the thing about The Big City: You’ll know people.

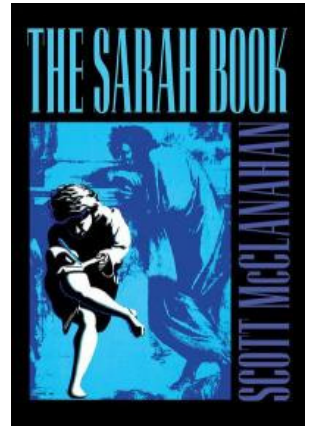
Some Heroes

Before we get too down, let’s look at some people who made it work. There are definitely some writing heroes from the smaller parts of The States.

Scott McInanahan lives in Beckley, West Virginia. No, I’ve never heard of it either. And it’s bigger than the place he grew up, Rainelle, population around about 1,500. If he can live there and write like he does, there’s hope.

Larry Brown lived in Oxford, Mississippi, which has a university and still boasts a population of less than 25,000. We’d all be lucky to write like he did.

Michael Perry—he’s not only from somewhere small, he’s made a writing career of it.



The Tyranny of Travel

Townies aren’t known for being well-traveled. Or at least that’s how people see them. Because when you’re a townie, your kind of travel doesn’t mean anything.

People who want to tell you that townies can’t write will tell you that you have to travel in order to be a “real” person. If you don’t hop on a plane and see Taiwan, you don’t really know what humanity is about.

This is also bullshit.

Travel is one way to learn about the world. One of many.

When people tell you that you have to travel, keep a few things in mind:

They have money. There’s no two ways about it. If you can be in a place other than home for two weeks, you have money. And we know you don’t need money to write.

The second thing, when someone tells you about travel, they’re telling you how THEY did it. A lot of times, when people are asked, “How should I learn about the world?” the answer they get starts with an implied “Here’s how I did it...” and it’s missing a, “But that’s just what worked for me.”

You can learn about people by traveling, but you can also learn about people by watching them grow. Meeting a lot of different people as a traveler is one way, having a deep experience with a small number of people, watching how they become different over time, is another.

Seeing the world is great. And it’s not the only way.

You’ll Never Find a Writing Group

A good group is always a help. A group that gives honest feedback and gets together and gets things done will help you.

A bad group is worse than no group. In a bad group, the members write to please each other. In a bad group, not much gets done.

Most writing groups are bad.

If you live in a small town, give up on finding a group. Even if there is a writing group, it'll be a bad one. It'll consist of someone who's writing a tortured fantasy epic and doesn't really want feedback, someone who is writing a memoir for the grandkids, and someone who has a lot of ideas and no mileage on their pen. This isn't so much a writing group as a collection of lost souls, like that room in Beetlejuice for ghosts who've been exorcised.

Odds are, no matter where you live, if you end up in a group, it'll be a bad one. You're better off accepting that solo, townie, outsider status for the blessing it is.

Your Toolbox Looks Different

I had this buddy from middle school. A fellow townie, he wanted to change his name from "Alex" to "Lex" in college. That's the kind of shit you can get away with when you move. When you go to a bar and see three people you knew from middle school, they're going to call you "Alex" forever. Not as a slam, because that's how they know you.

When you're a townie, you'll never escape who your parents were, good or bad. If you work a public-facing job in a small town, you'll see people you know all the time.

When you leave town, or if you live somewhere big enough, you can reinvent yourself simply by deciding to do it. When you're a townie, it's not such an easy trick.

I'm not going to say people who leave home are running away from their problems. But starting fresh just by deciding isn't a tool that townies have in their toolbox. They have to develop different tools.

Townies, when you write, reach into your toolbox. What's inescapable about your life? How do you manage it when someone asks how your dad, the absentee jailbird you haven't heard from in 20 years, is doing? What's the difference when you go to a party and you can tell who all is there just from the cars out front?

Townies Get Shit From Both Sides

Chuck Palahniuk touched on this in his essay, so I won't overdo it.

If you come from a small town, you grow up with people who work construction. They build cabinets. They process cattle. They run a ranch. They do real work.

When you're at home, you're not a real worker because of your artistic inclinations.

When you leave, you're not a real artist because townies aren't real artists. Shoot, if they really cared about art, they'd go somewhere it's appreciated.

You're kinda fucked wherever you go.

Townie Values

Townies values make it tough to go after a writing life. Our parents taught us that there's always someone better out there. And, if you grew up in a small town, you know it's true. You might be King Shit on your football field, but drive to a big city a few hours away, and when you're tasting turf the whole bus ride home, it's hard to forget the lesson: there's always someone bigger and better out there ready to chew you up like you're nothing.

It keeps you humble. Keeps you from stepping into some of the traps that others step into when they start thinking they know everything, that they're the best there ever was.

And it's hard to sell yourself with the kind of boasting that's necessary in the writing world.

There's nothing wrong with bragging when you write a damn fine book. That kind of confidence puts your book in people's hands, which is where it belongs. But you'll have a harder time of it, guaranteed.

Townies Can, But Should They?

The real message here is: Townies need to write.

Y'all, we have plenty of stories of coming-of-age in NYC. We have plenty of media that talks about working and living as a writer in L.A. We have enough stories about the person who pulls a Sweet Home Alabama and goes back to their roots.

We need your stories, townies. So get to work.

What Libraries Get Wrong About Summer Reading



This year I'll be involved in my 16th summer reading at the library. There's your bona fides.

The library and summer reading go together like John Carpenter and synthesizers. Wait, that's too cool. Not that I think summer reading is uncool, but c'mon, there's a limit.

The library and summer reading go together like glasses and retainers. There, that feels about right.

From time to time, a library loses its way. Does some weird things with summer reading that don't quite add up. I'm here to tell you about a couple.

It's especially critical because a lot of libraries might not be able to give you a summer reading this year, and you might be on your own. Whether you use your library or like to do some kind of summer reading thing on your own, this'll help.

Disclaimer

I've pissed off library Twitter and some other corners of the library internet in the past, so:

I recognize and appreciate the hard work that goes into summer reading.

These ideas are probably going to look A LOT like what some of you are doing, have been doing, and will do in the future. I speak from experience, having made almost all of these mistakes myself, and these are my personal opinions on how it all went. My intent isn't to crap on summer reading. It's to throw some ideas out there, ideas that will help people trying to create their own summer reading,

and ideas some people sitting in your meetings had and may not have spoken up about.

If you hate these ideas, that's totally fine. Good things often come out of bad ideas. Sometimes we never get to the really good stuff because people are afraid to put out an unrefined, unvarnished version of something.

Realistically, the opinions and ideas of one person aren't going to change the face of summer reading. Youths don't read my columns and say, "Yeah, he's cool. I'ma do what he says." So don't give me any nonsense about these ideas causing the collapse of the institution of summer reading in libraries.

Put bluntly: Don't shoot the messenger on this one.

Non-Readers

Many a library meeting goes silent when someone asks, "How do we use summer reading to turn non-readers into readers?"

This question is asked by and of library folks. People who read well over a hundred novels in a year. People who take vacations based on literary landmarks. People wearing clothing patterned with books.

These are great people and the completely wrong people to try and figure out how to get non-readers more interested in books.

I'd call myself mostly a non-reader as a youth. I thought books were boring. There were very few instances where I'd pick reading over ANY OTHER OPTION.

What turned it around for me?

Reading caught my interest when the books were taboo. I liked reading *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* when I was WAY too young. It was like a small, victimless crime, a little act of rebellion or something. Drugs, sex, crime, swearing, grisly murder, all the things that'd never fly on a screen, I could read about them. Now, obviously I'm not saying that you should hand your 5 year-old *The Baby Jesus Butt Plug*, but maybe your young kid...could read a book with a couple swears in it? Maybe some middle schoolers are ready for a Stephen King? Maybe you, as an adult, could read something that you were always curious about but embarrassed or afraid of? Maybe that Chuck Tingle book you've been eyeballing.

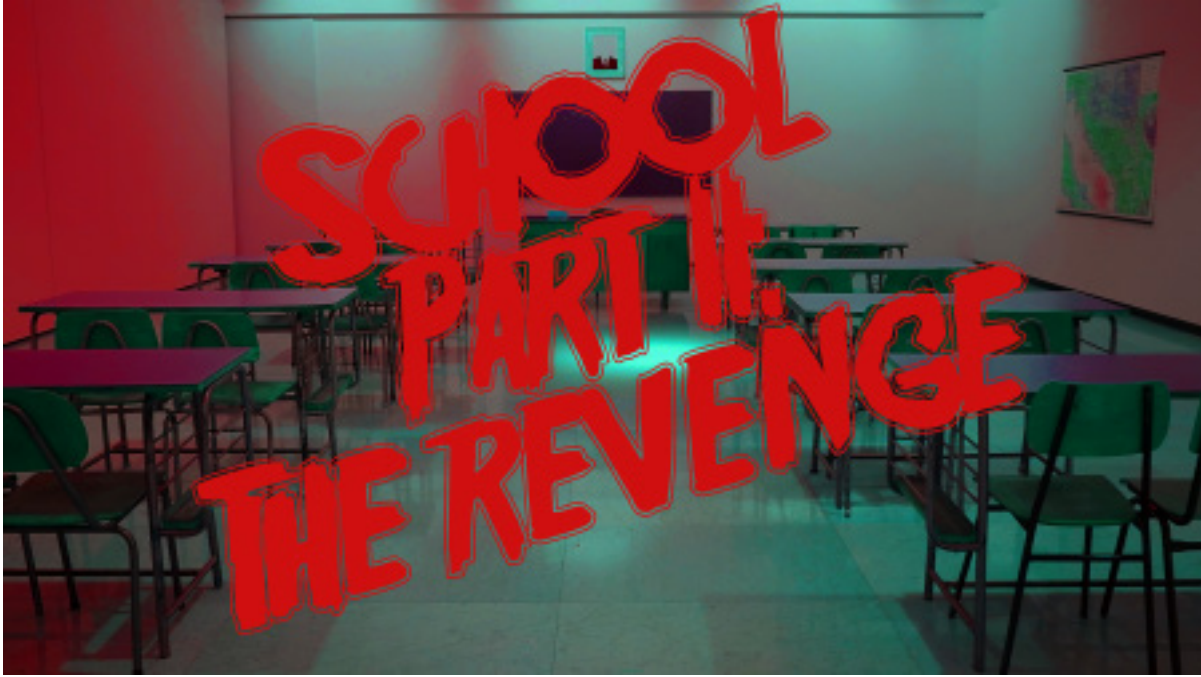
Encouraging some risky reading behavior isn't for everyone, but fortune favors the bold.

School Part II

Many a library gets involved in Lexile scores and shit like that. This is not only the incorrect way to do summer reading, it's de-motivational. You want folks to continue thinking reading is boring? Make the summer into *School Part 2: The Revenge*.

It's fine for a library to support a curriculum or help out a school that desperately needs it, but if you can, leave the STEM and the quizzes and requirements and all that stuff to the schools.

A quick rule of thumb: if your summer reading has anything that could be described as a "curriculum," you're doing it wrong.



Telling People What To Read

Don't make a list of required reading. Required reading is shit. The only people who like required reading are English majors, which admittedly, lots of librarians are. So it's not hard to imagine how required reading sneaks its way into summer reading. But c'mon, if marching people through "great" books made readers out of people, wouldn't everyone who graduated high school be in love with reading?

Even required categories are pushing it. If someone wants to read nothing but *Fangoria* all summer, why deny them that?

Figure out the difference between pushing someone into something they "should" read and giving them the tiniest little nudge towards something they WANT to read and just don't know about.

For you DIY'ers, don't read anything that feels like an obligation. If you're not feeling it, read something else. Summer isn't the time to plow through that stuff that you've always been meaning to get to. It's a time to have fun reading again.

Overcomplicating

I do these reading tasks, then I get to this level, and there are badges, and then if I get enough badges, plus the required Reading Bucks, then I can hop over to this rubric and—STOP! Stop it, okay?

Joe Bob Briggs said it best, sometimes movies have too much plot getting in the way of the story. When you have to keep track of a bunch of who's where and doing what why, you can't just enjoy

seeing someone get decapitated.

Make the idea simple, and make the path simple. Simpler is better.

Reading Is The Star

When you watch cooking shows, if the task is cooking a steak dish, there's nothing the judges hate more than a dish with a bunch of shit covering up the flavor of a steak. The steak should be the star, the hero of the dish.

Library summer reading loses this thread here and there. There are a lot of activities and other add-ons that aren't about reading. Some of this is fine, even necessary, but damn, reading should be the star of the library's summer. That's why people come to you. They go to the rec center for swimming lessons, they go to the state parks for outdoorsy shit. When they come to you, it's fine to serve them sides, just make sure those sides enhance the reading. Make reading the star of summer.

Custom

If you're putting a reading program together, is there room for people to make their own decisions? Is there room to let them set their own goals? Can you prompt kids and parents to sit down and say, "Okay, if you read this much this summer, what would be a reasonable reward?" Maybe for some kids it's that Xbox or whatever. Maybe for others it's a pizza night. Leave room to customize where you can. It strengthens the connection to books, and it strengthens a connection between two people as well.

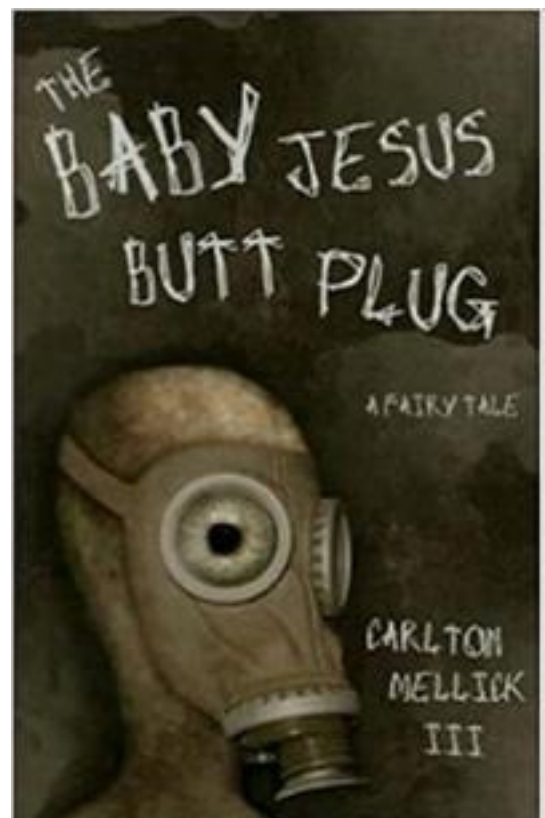
Leaving wiggle room, rather than implementing rules and structure, gives people control over their summer reading. Control is something that's in short supply this year, so let's enhance it.

It's Not Just About The Kids

Summer reading at the library can't be about kids and kids alone. Yes, that's your primary audience and yes, don't sacrifice appealing to kids to appeal to adults. But if you can, make some things that are targeted towards adults. Give them a way to participate without coloring in a picture of a hot air balloon. Because seeing adults they respect read gives kids a reason to read, too. Seeing their older, teenage brother reading a book and doing summer reading, how cool is that?

The question is often "How do we get kids to read?" An alternate version should be, "How can the people kids look up to, in their real lives, get kids to read?" Because they're going to be a lot more effective than we are.

If you're not a parent, high-five, and if can read conspicuously, you'll motivate others to read, too.



Dropping off in July

We do a great job getting people reading in June, getting people signed up, and then we get people dropping off. By mid-July, it starts to feel like summer's over already.

Save something in the tank for July. Even August. If you can get people reading in mid-July, you have them for life.

If you're doing your own thing at home, remember, summer reading is like a New Year's resolution. You'll start out hyped, and after a few weeks you'll barely remember when you could remember when you read something. Save something great to read in July.

Fun

Whatever you do, ask two questions:

Is it about reading?

Is it fun?

That's as complicated as it needs to be.

If there's anything and it's not about reading and fun, then it really doesn't belong in summer reading.

The Hottest Summer Trends in Books, Reading, and Writing



We're nothing if not trendsetters here at LitReactor. And while some outlets bring you the hottest fashions and spendy bullshit, we're bringing you the hottest literary trends for summer.

Get it? Hottest? Because the number of degrees is higher in summer? Because of Earth's tilt? See, people think it's about closeness, but it's all about the tilt. Another trend LitReactor was onto first!

We've got loads of sizzling, molten trends for you. Ignore them at your peril.

OUT: Word Design Covers **IN: Actual Images**

We've had about enough of covers with nothing but a bunch of big-ass words. Hello, there are words INSIDE the book. The last thing we need is a bunch of huge ones shouting what we already know at us from the front.

What's in?



A face. We've all been dying to see faces, and covers with faces are back.

BURN
AFTER
WRITING



Now look here. Same book, two different covers. A text cover and a beautiful, simple image. You can instantly see what it is, it expresses what's happening in the book, and it entices without shouting at you. Which one are you excited to dive into? Which one do you want to pull off the shelf and show people?



Lisa Frank colors. Remember when the outside of your school folder made you happy? Of course you opened it to math worksheets and misery, but at least the outside was rainbows and unicorns.

OUT: The Real Monster Is Us

IN: The Real Monster is a Real Monster

We get it, we suck. We've all seen enough Romero movies to know how this works

People want a bad guy who's a bad guy. Something pure, something simple, something they understand. In a runway show, you want some stuff that's out there, and you want a few things that people "get" right away.

Oh, and your bad guy should be something you can punch in the face. It's basic, and it's satisfying. This summer marks the return of the punchable bad guy. If your book has a bad guy that's like a metaphor for the state of capitalistic leanings in a post-whatever STOP. If it's possible for your bad guy to get punched in the face, you're on-trend.

OUT: Titles Like The Female Preposition Noun

IN: Titles You Actually Thought Out

The Girl on The Train. The Woman In Cabin 10. The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo. The Girl With All The Gifts. The Woman In The Window.

We're done with these, okay? I know you like the title you put on your draft, but give me something a little more thought out. *Alien* wasn't titled *The Woman On The Spaceship With the Alien*. They called it *Alien*. *Arrival* wasn't called *The Woman Who Could Talk to Aliens Good*. It was called fucking *Arrival*.

Writing a book and titling it like this, it's like putting together an entire ensemble and giving up right at the end, sandals and socks. Finish the look! You wrote a whole book, now take two seconds and come up with a title.

Out: Trump Hate Metaphors

In: Trump Sympathy Metaphors

Hear me out for a second.

If you haven't finished your big anti-Trump book yet, you're in trouble. Now, we might get another 4 years, in which case you might be able to bring that bad boy off the shelf, though with the speed of publication and the guarantee that there's a clock on his time, I'm not so sure. Not to mention, when real life is weirder than fiction, fiction has to find new stripes.

People have forgotten George W. Bush was HATED. Oliver Stone got crucified for making a moderately sympathetic movie about the dude in 2008. And now W's like this cute old man who does shitty paintings and shares candy with Michelle Obama.

The world isn't ready for the sympathetic Trump character type TODAY, but by the time you finish writing it, mark my words, you'll be on the inside track. Or hey, at least you'll be doing something different.

OUT: The Hardback, Paperback Progression

IN: The Collector's Hardback

You can't make money on the typical progression if you release in digital and hardback at the same time. Early readers will go to digital to get the book day-of.

There's still a market for hardback, physical media, but it's a market comprised of special people, and we should give them something special. Limited numbers on first editions, something added onto the hardback edition that makes it more unique. At this point, you're mostly selling hardbacks to collectors and hardcore fans who plan to keep physical books forever. Might as well sell them something they'll enjoy hanging onto. Add an extra chapter, an author's note, and make the hardback cover better than the paperback and the ebook. Sell me something good.

OUT: Reading on the Commute

IN: Reading to Decompress

Just like Mom Jeans, we never thought the long novel would come back. But just like Mom Jeans, like it or not, the long novel is back.

With the decrease in commuting, more people are reading for leisure than they are to kill the time underground between Brooklyn and The Garment District. Instead of reading a little bit on the train where you're half paying attention, getting short bursts, killing time, it's a longer stretch thing. In-depth novels that require concentration and surrender are back.

Sorry, Hot Dudes Reading, guess you'll have to turn your grotesque female gaze elsewhere. I wish you the best of luck in finding a new way to sexually harass total strangers and profit from it! You're creative, and sex sells, even when that sexuality is non-consensual. I'm sure you'll figure it out!



OUT: Gritty Reality

IN: Escape

Much like boxy sneakers got a bad name in fashion, escapism got a bad name in books. As if escapism is for people who can't handle reality or that by turning away from reality, you're doing the world a disservice.

Readers have a new need for escape, whether they're facing a terrible reality or just bored out of their Jordans.

Escape doesn't mean a utopia without conflict or tension. What we want is to escape OUR shitty lives, not shittiness in general. Make it interesting, and make it interesting on a visceral level so that once we get started, we lose ourselves in the action.

OUT: Lengthy Pro Book Reviews

IN: Quickie Amateur Reviews

We're all set, *New York Times Book Review*. What's the use of a book review so long that you might as well just read the whole damn book? It's like designing a sheer top with a peek-a-boo window. What's left to show us?

After I read 200 words of your review, I'm either in or out. If you can't entice me to read a book in a

couple hundred words, you're not that good, and I don't need another thousand words, thanks.

The fast, non-spoiler review that talks to the book's specific audience. That's what we want.

OUT: Academic Dissection of Classics

IN: Kooky Theories About New Stuff

Oh my lord, there is nothing worth saying about *The Canterbury Tales* that hasn't been said already. I'm calling it, it's done. It's like the little black dress: it'll always be a classic, but we don't need your take on it.

This summer, we want kooky theories about more contemporary stuff. What is the erotic subtext of *The Da Vinci Code*? Whatever happened to those *Left Behind* books, anyway? *Animorphs*? What even?

When we say fashion is cyclical, we mean fashion from the last 50 years, not 400 years ago. If you're going to drag something out of the closet and breathe new life into it, make it something that our grandparents might remember.

OUT: The In-Person Author Event

IN: The Rolling Author Event of Being Online

The novel has a serious "What have you done for me lately?" problem. A release every other year? That's not nearly frequent enough to compete with a killer Instagram feed where I'm seeing my favorite creators every day.

The author tour was already in the grave before *The Virus That Shall Not Be Named*. Even big authors might hit 3 or 4 cities. *The Virus* just helped the grieving family pick out a tasteful grave marker.

Rather than going on tour every couple years, you're on tour all the time. Instagram, Twitter, whatever, this is the new reality of author touring. Get comfy.

Drunk on Literature: 10 Themed Book and Brew Pairings



Reading and beers make underrated combos, like coffee and salty potato chips. Or Ranch and pizza (hey, I'm American).

Reading and whiskey gets you too drunk, too fast. Wine is just so fussy. And it's summer. Summer is the time for a cold beer and a book on the porch.

Let me, someone who's read a lot and sampled a fair number of beers, give you some pairings.

Rubsam & Horrmann Amber Ale and "The Tao of Wu" by The RZA



Both R&H and Wu-Tang can lay claim to being the pride of Staten Island. Have a beer or two, and you'll be open to some of The RZA's life philosophies. And even if you don't buy into them, you'll get some good insider info on Wu-Tang. It's win-win.

Weldwerks' Saturday Morning Toons and "The Squirrel Who Saved Practically Everybody" by John Swartzwelder



I'm a big fan of John Swartzwelder. And I'm a big fan of giving an insane-sounding beer a whirl. Not gonna lie, it doesn't always pay off, but damn, how many of the same IPA can you drink in a lifetime? A nutty book calls for a nutty beer: Imperial Milk Stout Brewed with Strawberry, Chocolate Fudge, Milk Sugar and Milk Chocolate. A good Swartzwelder book is like Saturday morning TV all over again, and the only worthy pairing is an alcoholic breakfast cereal.

Delirium Black and "Warlock" by Jim Starlin



The book is cosmic, dark, and weird. And it works. It's about a gold-skinned man who fights himself from the future, and his future self has purple skin and a purple afro and has become the leader of a universe-sized religious cult. Also a guy in a coma has become a cosmic god. It's nothing short of bonkers at every turn. A dark, cosmic book deserves a dark, cosmic beer.

Omission IPA and "Sing to It" by Amy Hempel



Sometimes it's about what's not there.

With Amy Hempel, this sounds so artsy-fartsy, it's about what isn't on the page as much as what IS on the page. But the beauty of her work is you can appreciate it even if you're not interested in dissecting it. You can just sit back and enjoy the ride.

Omission makes beers that are gluten-free or reduced gluten. And they're damn good at it. What's not there is what makes this beer special, but anyone can have a great time with it.

Iwate Kura Japanese Herb Ale and "Tekkon Kinkreet" by Taiyo Matsumoto



A distinctly Japanese comic deserves a distinctly Japanese beer.

Not since reading *Akira* have I found a comic so enchanting in its violence and tenderness. It's a distinctly Japanese quality that I've never seen captured in other countries' comics.

Originally dedicated to sake, this brewery started making beer using distinctly Japanese ingredients like yuzu and persimmon.

It's not an easy beer to find, but hey, what's a beer list without a little scavenger hunt?

Grand Lakes' White Cap Wheat and "Chuck Klosterman X"



The short version on this one, Klosterman writes great books to read in a bar. When you read at the bar, there's a good chance someone will ask what you're reading. Klosterman's essays give you a quick answer: "This guy is going through ALL of the KISS albums ever made and ranking them." This gives you the chance to strike up a conversation, if you want, or go back to your book, if that's your preference.

Why does this pair with the White Cap?

For a brief moment, I had a neighborhood bar: The Grand Lakes 26th St. Tavern. I was living the dream. The dream where you could walk a block or two, sit somewhere comfortable that wasn't overpowered by TV's and super loud dance music, and have a couple beers. I had some good times there, one of those times being the time I read *Chuck Klosterman X*, got a little loaded, and stumbled my way home.

Unfortunately, the good times ended when the owner sold the bar to a pair that opened a new taproom that does precious nonsense like organizing the beers on their menu by the temperature at which they're served.

RIP, Grand Lakes Tavern.

Quilmes and "Ficciones" by Jorge Luis Borges



Quilmes is an Argentinian beer that you can actually find in the States! If you go to one of those big-ass beer stores, you'll find it. Now, some people don't love it. It's maybe a little bit of the Bud of Buenos Aires. But I have to say, I'm an admirador.

Of course, if we're going Argentina, we're going Borges.

As a bonus, if you want to do it for real, take a small handful of peanuts and pop them right into the Quilmes. SALTY peanuts, like the kind you get on an airplane. It's refreshing, crisp, and the peanuts take some of the skunk out of your beer.

Goose Island Summertime and "Running With Sherman" by Christopher McDougall



Michelob Ultra markets itself as a sports beer, like a Crossfit beer. In the commercials you see a dude throwing around battle ropes, then clinking together Ultras with the super fit models who also apparently work out in the same storage locker and pay \$200 bucks a month to have access to a big tire to flip over.

A brief rant: A low-cal beer is a little like eating a low-cal donut. If you're eating a donut, eat a donut. A low-cal donut isn't a health food, it's pointless. If you're drinking a beer, drink a beer. Drinking a "healthy" beer is a silly thing to do. Just go for it. In which case, go for a Summertime Kölsch from Goose Island in Chicago. It's refreshing, and it's a beer. Hit a tire with a hammer, then flip it over, then fool around with some ropes or whatever, then treat yourself to a legit beer.

McDougall's story of running with a donkey (yep) is sporty enough, animal-centric enough, and the writing is crisp and clear. McDougall is kind of the anti-Crossfit, showing how human movement is more about the heart, less about the science.

Take this advice on both your beers and your books: if you over-science it, you won't enjoy it.

New Belgium Fat Tire and "Men Explain Things" to Me by Rebecca Solnit



Fat Tire is a beer everyone but me loves. I won't defend my dislike of it. It's a matter of taste, and in this case, the matter it tastes like is fecal. BUT I recognize and accept that I am alone in feeling this way about this beer and the rest of you seem to love it. So alone that I have to say I'm objectively incorrect.

I read *Men Explain Things to Me*, a book lots of you seem to love, and I don't get it. It doesn't work for me. Solnit getting dissed at a snooty, academic, leather elbow patches party in Aspen? The leap from talking about that, or the time a guy argued with her about something after a hoity-toity reading for which she was flown to Berlin, the leap from these events to talking about straight-up rape and murder just doesn't take it home for me. But again, so overwhelmingly in the minority that I have to believe I'm objectively wrong.

It was a chore to finish, like a Fat Tire, and like drinking a Fat Tire, I kept checking how close I was to the end so I could move on to something else. And in both cases, I'm so far off the mark, all I can do is assume that I'm objectively wrong and move on.

Rainier Beer and "Dear Runaway" by Peter Derk



This is my favorite beer. And this is a book I wrote. I'm trying to get better at pimping my own work, so here it is. It's plainspoken, but I like to think it's a pretty pleasant experience, whether it's a little at a time or a little too much at a time.

Wait, am I talking about a book or a beer here? I can't remember.

How Many Books Will You Read Before You Die?



Recent life events. We've all had a lot of shit that could fall under "recent life events," eh? 2020 is the year of "recent life events."

Recent life events got me thinking about death and what I'd like to do before I die.

Among other things that don't warrant mentioning, owning a stand-up arcade machine, and figuring out how to make cats immortal (in a good way, not an evil, Twilight Zone way), I want to read all the shit I want to read.

The question, then: How Many Books Can I Read In My Lifetime? And to make it useful for you, How Many Book Can You Read In Yours?

Quick and Dirty

Maybe getting a number right now is better than getting a number that's hyper-accurate. Maybe you want to start reading.

Here's a quick and dirty equation. If you want something more accurate, follow me down the rabbit hole, tailor everything to your specifics, and get a better idea. See how different the two numbers are, and let me know.

Just know that this version is meant to be the average, and the average is probably going to deviate from your real number for any number of reasons.

Calculate Your Number:

Step 1: 80 minus [your current age] equals the number of reading years you have left (adjust 80 to your projected lifespan).

Step 2: Multiply by 365 to get the number of reading days you've got left.

Step 3: Multiply by [number of minutes you estimate you read per day] to get the reading minutes left in your life.

Step 4: Divide by 60 (to turn the minutes into hours).

Result: The number of reading hours you have left in your life, which we'll call Y.

Step 5: Divide by average book time, in hours:

- If you're an average reader: 15 hours
- If you're fast or often read short books, comics, and poetry: 6
- If you have no earthly idea: 10 hours
- Result: X

Final: Y (reading hours you have left) divided by X (number of hours per book) = The Number of Books You've Got Left In You

As an example:

Step 1: 80 years - 36 years (current age) = 44 years left.

Step 2: Multiplied by 365 = 16,060 reading days left in my life.

Step 3: Multiplied by number of reading minutes per day, 60 in my case: 96,3600

Step 4: Divide by 60 to get the number in hours: 16,060 (note that this is the same number from step 2 for me, but if you read any number other than 60, this step is necessary).

Step 5: Divide by average book time. I put mine at 6 because I read a lot of comics: 2,676.

So, the quick and dirty math: 2,676 books left in my life.

How do I get there? How do I feel about it? Read on.

Part 1: How Fast Do I Read?

You're coming along for the in-depth, ride, eh? Alright, buckle up.

The first step is figuring reading speed as a per-book average. This would be more accurate on a per word basis, perhaps, but who is going to look up the word count of every book on their to-read list? If you're over a dozen books on your to-read list, looking up word counts is a shitload of work. The amount of time you spend doing that is better spent reading.

You might also be better off with a per-page average, but I still advocate for a good per-book average

for the sake of speed. Besides, pages are not all equal, and reading some books is faster or slower depending on how dense they are.

Eyes on the prize, a per-book average suits me just fine, and the hours I'd spend figuring out a more exact speed are hours I could spend reading, which is the goal. A per-page or per-word average would be better for estimating how long a particular book might take you, but that's not what we're looking at here.

I put a per-book average at 15 hours. Here's how I got there.

4 speed-calculation options:

Time yourself reading your next 10 books. This is the most accurate, most time-consuming method. Try and read a range of lengths in your next 10, and try to read naturally, not for speed. If you want to do this down the road, start tracking what you read, and write down a time estimate once you finish.

Check the audiobook length of 10 books of varying length. Your reading time will almost certainly be shorter. Reading in the head is quicker than someone reading aloud and performing. But, take the total audiobook time, reduce by 30-50%, and call it a day. Average audiobook reader speed is something like 150 words/minute, which is something like half as fast as a typical reader.

Check your actual stats: If you use a Kobo or some other readers, other than Kindle, you might find that your reader keeps stats on your reading time for various titles.

Take a test online: I took one that told me I read 369 words/minute. Now the hard thing here, you have to figure out a conversion of words to books. Also, when you're reading for a speed test, it's like walking when you're directed to "walk casually" in video. It's hard to do it naturally. I'm guessing my average reading speed is closer to 300 words/minute.

I decided to combine two of these four methods in order to come out with the average per-book time.

First, I did a speed test online that gave me a per-word speed. Then I gathered 10 random-ish books that I found page numbers for. Then, I figured it with a 300 word-per-minute speed and a 250 word-per-minute-speed. The 250 came out to 12 hours per book, the 300 puts me at 10.45. So, average the two, we get 11 hours per book.

Second, I used the audiobook times for those same 10 books. This gave me 16 hours per book when I took a third off the time, 11.5 hours when I went 50%. Average those two, we get 14.

If I put the audio method and the page method together, I get a lucky 13 hours per book.

Per-Book Average: 13 hours.

Part 2: The Comic Book Allowance

I read a lot of comics, and I'm of the opinion that comics count. I don't separate them into a different to-read list, so I needed to shorten the length of time on my per-book average. Because the graphic novels and trade paperbacks I read are closer to an hour. So I went ahead and took my time down to

6 hours per book, just under half, because I probably read 2 comics for every full-length book.

If you read a lot of comics, or maybe poetry or novellas, you should definitely make a reduction. Or, if you read a lot of dense, academic texts, a lot of classics, you might bump it up a little.

New Per-Book Average: 6 hours.

Part 3: How Much Time Do I Spend Reading?

I'm a binge drinker. READER. Sorry. You type something enough times, heh, muscle memory, you know?

I'll read very little one month, then binge the next.

I also read a lot more when I'm off work, traveling, whatever. So this is tough for me.

Maybe it's tough because I feel like I'm confessing something when I say I'd put my average at 45 minutes per day.

However, I'm going to play a little Idealistic Pete. Ideally, the older I get, the more leisure time I have, and the more I'll read. It's a little bit of a gamble, but hey, so is having a retirement account based in stocks! Haha! It's not funny! It's like walking into Atlantic City and putting your entire old age on black! Whee!

Let's put it at 60 minutes a day ideally, when we add in some longer reading days as I (hopefully, god willing) move into retirement. An hour a day seems like a good mix between an average and a goal.

Part 4: How long do I have left?

The most fun part, let's talk about when I'll die.

There are a lot of different ways to look up your life expectancy. I usually vet the accuracy of online tests based on the number of sidebar ads that feature busty models with text like "You won't believe what she looks like now!"

This one is the best. Because it put me at 98.

One BMI calculator put me at 83.3. Although I think BMI science is pretty fuzzy, there's a lot of correlative data, so it's something.

The other numbers I got were 91, 81.6, 87, and 76.4.

Overall, I end up at about 85. Which seems fair. And I'm a pessimist, which means 80 seems like a good target. Anything beyond that is garbage time, as they say. Maybe I don't make it, maybe I make it and trade in the book learnin' for hard drugs.

If you don't want to run through the tests yourself, knock a few years off 80 if you're diabetic, have an ongoing health issue, or plow down a sack of Doritos every few days. If you're a lady, go 87.

The Math

80 years minus the 36 I've already squandered is 44. Times 365 days equals 16,060 days. 1 hour per day gives me 16,060 hours of reading time left. Divide by per book average of 6, drumroll, 2,676. Rounded down.

WRINKLE: Goodreads

There is another method that should be considered with the per-book time average.

I track what I read every year on Goodreads. The numbers there give me an average of about 100 books per year. If I took that to my likely lifespan, another 44 years, I get 4,400 books.

This is much higher than my pseudo-scientific estimates, which is proof of either my pessimism or low self-esteem.

The Goodreads number might be a little inflated because I'll often read some children's books or like a Choose Your Own Adventure or something, and that gets counted in the goal.

That said, putting both numbers together, the speed calculation and the average from the last several years, gives me another data point. So let's get sloppy and find a number in the middle: 3,000.

What's 3,000 Books Mean?

I've got about 2,500 books on my to-read list. So on the plus, I'm looking pretty good there. But there's not a lot of wiggle room for new shit. Barring basically every good author succumbing to plague in the last couple months, I MIGHT need to add some more titles.

But 3,000? That's a good number of books. Possibilities are endless.

At the same time, it's a little like that old question: Would you want to know the moment you're going to die? Do you really want to know how many books you'll get through?

Maybe it helps you make good decisions. Maybe it helps you get into the mindset of, "If my next read was going to be my last, what would it be?" Maybe that's a good thing.

And maybe seeing the parameters of your life set out in black and white makes it all seem a little pathetic and pointless.

Boy, that'd be a real downer to end a column on.

And maybe seeing the parameters of your life set out in black and white makes it all seem a little pathetic and pointless.

What Neil Breen's 5-Hour Retrospective Taught Me About Making Art



I watched Neil Breen's 5.5-hour film retrospective about his process. This is the longest single movie I've ever watched. The amazing thing about it is the sound quality is horrible, the lighting is terrible, the ADR is lazy, and as a film, it's abysmal and hard to watch. And damn it, I actually learned something about making art.

For the unfamiliar, Neil Breen's *Fateful Findings* falls into the realm of movies like *The Room*. I think it's better. Way better. Because it's weirder, involves magic powers, and its creator, Neil Breen, isn't a one-trick pony. He's got 5 feature films under his belt, and he's still going.

Okay, his movies are bizarre and hilarious. But beneath the surface, as hard as this is to say, we share a lot in common. Breen started out making movies on the side while holding down a regular job. He doesn't have a formal education in film. He likes pushing his creativity. He's a DIY guy, down to minor things like the catering on set.

I'm working a job. I don't have an MFA in creative writing. I like pushing my creativity. I like doing things myself.

As much as I find his movies hilarious, I do think they come from a genuine place. I do think Neil Breen is expressing himself, and though it's far from perfect. Far, far, far from perfect. Far. Far away—though his films are far from perfect, the inability to perfectly express something through art is a familiar struggle.

We're all Neil Breen. And we can all learn something about art from Neil Breen.

A Brief Breen Filmography

Double Down: Probably best summed up by Rich Evans of Red Letter Media. Just look it up.

I Am Here....Now: Space Jesus tries to fix humanity, doesn't, but sort of does. Somehow this movie only has one "goof" listed on IMDB: "It's a plastic baby." So it's on the level of *American Sniper*.

Fateful Findings: This is the one to watch. It's the best confluence of Breen's style and ideas. An author/superhacker with supernatural powers and a magic stone deals with a drug addicted spouse, a reunification with a childhood friend, unexpected death, a teenage girl swimming topless in his pool, and a hostage situation. He is in a hospital room that is carpeted. There's a shower makeout scene involving a bloody head bandage that's even weirder than it sounds. Just...everything about it is a treasure.

Pass-Thru: A sort of Space Jesus redux character, maybe more murderous and living in a van, helps immigrants(?) who are maybe being human trafficked? Not really sure. Lots of drone shots and tigers.

Twisted Pair: In a display of quadruple balls not seen since Van Damme in *Double Impact*, Breen plays both himself and himself but evil. Do not trust any plot summaries you see of this movie. A plot summary of this is like summarizing an acid trip. It just doesn't capture the experience, and any attempt to do so with words is borderline offensive in concept.

And with that, we arrive at *NEIL BREEN 5 FEATURE FILM RETROSPECTIVE a Neil Breen film*, which taught me everything below.

Challenge Yourself

Don't always make things you're comfortable making. Each time you make something, push yourself to do something bigger, better, more technically difficult, or to just do something different. Maybe you're Neil Breen and the challenge seems to be "More blood each time!" Whatever the narrative, whether it's *The Notebook* or *What We Do In The Shadows*, "needs more blood" is the answer.

If you're an indie artist of any kind, one thing you've got is the freedom to try things out. You have the freedom to fail, and that's something you should take advantage of while you've got it. Fail now while you're small so you can succeed when it counts. Challenge yourself to the point of failure.

Remember The 4th Dimension

How does time pass in your work? That's a weird, basic-sounding question, but it's SUPER relevant in writing. How do you indicate the passage of time? Unacceptable answers include a day/night cycle, alarm clock, and seasons. Ever read a book where you really had no idea whether all this junk was happening in like a week or a year? If a book's done right, you should know without even knowing how you know.

Hopes And Dreams Are For Children

Breen has met a lot more dreamers than he has filmmakers. They dream of making this or that movie,

they hope to do this or that project. Like Breen says, hopes and dreams are for children. When you're an adult, it's time to work.

Work wins out over hopes and dreams. Too many creative types love to talk about their big ideas and such, and a whole shitload of them mock Neil Breen, but he's the one with 5 films under his belt. Or under his denim vest adorned with an asinine amount of hardware.



What You Learn By Doing It All

When you make a movie like Breen, you write, shoot, edit, do the music, mix the sound—you do everything. The results? Questionable. But if you're doing it all, you learn something.

When you try something like designing your own book cover, you start to learn what works, what doesn't, what's easy and what's hard. If you try to make your own cover, you'll have better criteria for hiring a pro, and you'll make good use of any revisions and conversations you have with that person. Get a basic idea of all the steps so you can hire the right people and make good decisions. Learn to speak their language.

This isn't me advocating for a completely DIY book. This is me advocating for doing the steps yourself before seeking help so that you can make better use of that help.

Professionalism

Neil is indie, but he's professional. He pays everyone. He does things so they conform to standard filmmaking practices.

Professionalism is underrated in artistic circles. Being an artist isn't an excuse to be late and blow deadlines. Being an artist doesn't mean you should get blottoed at a party or conference where you're mingling as a professional. Talent can take you a long way, and professionalism can, too. Make your deadlines, be communicative, and accept feedback like a pro, and you'll find a lot more people willing to work with you.

Efficiency

Neil does things very efficiently. He plans his shooting schedule tightly. He runs a small crew. He's efficient with time and with money.

Being efficient means he's able to make more stuff.

Efficiency is underrated in art. It's seen as the enemy of art. But it's not one or the other, art or efficiency, and if you can make art more efficiently, you can make more of it. You can make more mistakes, learn more techniques, and make better stuff.

Finance Matters

Neil has two pieces of financial advice, and financial advice is hard to come by in art.

Making your money back on a movie means you get to make another movie. Making your money back on a book means you get to make another book. Keep a budget. Stick to it.

The second piece of advice: get a job. Use that money to survive while you make art. Have money coming in that doesn't rely on your artistic project. This not only makes it easier to make your art, if you're not relying on the art to make a certain amount of money, you're free to take it in any direction you want. You can do things that are interesting to you. An income separate from your art buys you a level of freedom.

Social Commentary

Neil Breen adds scenes to his movies that he describes as social commentary that isn't preachy. I would...agree? I mean, many of his movies seem to have extended rants about bankers, lawyers, and insurance people. But they're sort of confusing and hard to parse. If they're sermons, I'm not certain what the takeaways are.

The difference between social commentary and preachiness? Social commentary presents the situation. Preachiness tells you how to feel about it.

The other difference, if you can make a comment without over-explaining, you leave something unresolved for the reader. This forces the reader to talk to someone else about it. This spreads the word about your book. It's win-win.

**The difference
between social
commentary
and
preachiness?**

Production

Neil's pre-production is a long process, post-production is a long process, and shooting is an extremely quick 22 days.

This is an excellent model for what you should expect with your creative process. Planning should take some time, editing should take your entire life, and the actual writing should end up the smallest portion. If writing and editing took the same time and effort, your book is a mess.

Motion

Neil always tries to add movement or motion to all of his scenes. You should, too. When you write, if your characters are static, tossing words back and forth, that's BORING! Your reader might not know

why they're bored, but that's the thing about boredom: you don't have to puzzle it out. It's a feeling. You've built an entire fictional world, and unless you ripped off my idea for ElmerWorld, the novel where everything in the world is glued to something else, there's a shitload of stuff that isn't glued down. Move something!

Be Around The Thing

Neil started learning about film by being an extra or playing roles he refers to as "atmosphere." By hanging around sets, seeing what was going on, he was able to learn a lot. And he got paid to do it!

If you want to be a writer, how can you hang around writing? Can you help organize readings for your local bookstore? Can you get a part-time gig with a printer? Be a reader for a small press? Work with kids?

Think about it. Breen did.

Beach Reads for Indoor Types



Trust me, you don't wanna hit the beach this summer.

If you're a person who fears pandemic, aka someone sane, then I probably don't need to tell you why.

If you're a person who doesn't fear illness, let me explain why you don't want to hit the beach, either:

For my day job, I travel through a lot of online spheres. Anywhere you surf, you'll find a lot of Clark Griswold types who are taking their GODDAMN FAMILY VACATION this year even if it means Mad-Max-ing it across America in a rented RV that is extremely stressful to drive but does provide the benefit of sleeping an entire family all in the same room about 18 inches from where they all urinate. And because the theme parks and cities are a big question mark, these folks are taking it to nature.

What does this mean?

It means, if you go to the beach, you'll be surrounded by carloads of people who've been bottled up together too long, are just remembering they hate the outdoors, and they are going to find out who took a dump in the RV toilet, after they specifically told everyone that it's number ones only, if it's the last thing they do. Rank amateurs who will spend 90% of their summer vacation wondering what the hell they were thinking.

These will be the people you're sharing the beach with.

All this means that finally, I may be able to convince people of my lifelong belief that the beach sucks and fuck the beach. People act like the beach is the only place the sun shines, like you couldn't experience sunlight except where sand meets water. People act like the ocean is this magical thing.

**There's
nothing about
the beach read
that requires
the beach.**

Guys, it's fish pee, certain doom, and whoever cooked up the ocean WAY oversalted that shit. I had an informant who worked in the Navy, and he told me that they dumped all kinds of shit in the ocean. He personally pushed a giant, unneeded desk off a boat and into the ocean. And a microwave. This microwave has been in the ocean for 20 years. Is there any way it didn't create a mutant by now?

The one thing I'll give the beach is the beach read. Beach reads are awesome. They're fun, they're relaxing, and they help you forget your troubles. But there's nothing about the beach read that requires the beach.

Let's take the beach out of the beach read. Let's look at beach reads for the indoorsman.

What Makes A Beach Read?

Y'know, besides being a book on a beach.

There are some key characteristics of beach reads.

They have to be gripping.

This has to be something that grabs your attention and keeps it. It has to be gripping enough that you can be at a beach, a well-lit location filled with mostly-naked humans, and if you have kids you're at least mildly concerned they'll die, and you're still mostly focused on a book. That's a gripping book.

They must tell a story.

I think a beach read's gotta be a good story. Short stories don't work. You have to pay too much attention. There's no coasting. Poetry, forget it. Even if you like poetry on the beach, you can only get away with it if you've got an airtight alibi that makes it certain you're not reading poetry on the beach to pick up chicks. Non-fiction can work, just make sure it's a story, not a bunch of research or an exploration of a topic or, god forbid, a soul-search. Don't learn how to do something or how to think. This is how people end up burying themselves in sand at the beach for fun. They were so goddamn bored by the book they brought that making a hole in sand was more entertaining.

They should be disposable.

Don't take this too hard, but a good beach read, once you finish, you have no problem leaving the book behind. Why carry that shit around with you all the time? You finished it, it's done, move on. You had the experience, and the book is just an empty shell, a vector for entertainment. A beach read isn't necessarily something that you simply must hang onto, lying and saying you'll loan it to friends, which you never do. You don't have friends who read! Who do you think you are? You know you're just keeping that book because you keep books. Beach reads need to be like Doritos. You consume, you enjoy, but it's not like you have memories of any single Dorito in particular.

They should make you feel good.

I mentioned Doritos already, let's keep that rolling. A Dorito is fun to eat, it tastes good, and that's about it. Nobody's eating a Dorito for any purpose resembling nutrition or powering the human body. Eating a Dorito is a slap in the face of self-improvement, and it feels damn good.

Why Do Beach Reads Get A Bad Name?

Because textbooks don't make good beach reads. Anything that makes you feel bad probably isn't a good beach read. Anything that requires the reader to do as much lifting as the writer is a bad beach read.

Learning, feeling bad, and working: These are qualities we ascribe to "important" books. If it does one of those three things, it's probably a big, important book that is on a bunch of lists and elbow patch types love to ask whether you've read it, usually by saying, "Have you read the latest [author's last name]?"

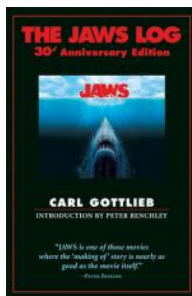
Beach reads get a bad name because they don't aspire to put their titles on the lips of those elbow patch types. And therefore are seen as failures of art by people who feel qualified to make decisions like that and totally aren't.

The Short List



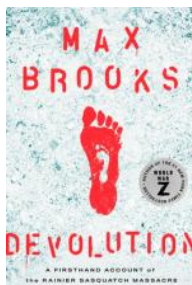
"The Elementals" by Michael McDowell

In this book, the beach is the enemy. The sand is a villain! It's like real life. If you, like me, know that sand is the worst part of the beach, perhaps the worst form of ground a person can walk on, a curse on humanity, you'll get into this one.



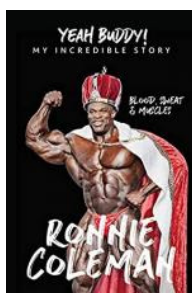
"The Jaws Log" by Carl Gottlieb

Jaws gave everyone a great reason to stay off the beach. But I'm guessing you've read that one or seen the movie by now. This "making of" book will demystify one of the greatest productions of all time while still confirming the beach is a hellhole.



"Devolution: A Firsthand Account of the Rainier Sasquatch Massacre" by Max Brooks

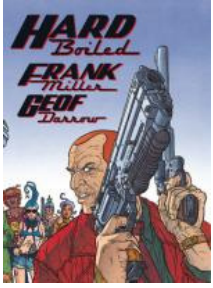
If everyone is going beach, go opposite! Max Brooks writes great, gripping books that bring more to the table than you'd expect. As a sidenote, this cover reminds me of a church lecture about footprints in the sand. Except the footprints are in the snow, and there's only one set because at some point sasquatch probably tore this dude's feet off.



"Yeah Buddy!: My Incredible Story!" by Ronnie Coleman

Ronnie Coleman is our most underrated national treasure, even more underrated than National Treasure 2. He's smart, funny, and his story is unbelievable. He won 8 consecutive Mr. Olympia titles, but he only started bodybuilding because it was a condition of free gym membership. This is like being the all-time greatest baseball player, and you only started playing pro ball because they gave you free hot dogs. Let

me just say, you don't have to like bodybuilding or athletics to enjoy this one. Plus, Ronnie Coleman had the ultimate beach body, and in this book you learn there's a price for all that beef.



"Hard Boiled" by Frank Miller and Geof Darrow

Imagine a Where's Waldo? level of detail where there are a billion things happening on every page. Now imagine Waldo is a gun-toting robo-man, and instead of doing fun stuff, everyone on the page is engaged in ultra-violence. The story is smart enough to be sparse and get out of the way so the art can sing. If you're a beauty-in-violence kind of person, this is it. If the haphazard beauty of nature is a snooze, try the meticulous blood-soaked art of Geof Darrow.



"Space Invaders" by Nona Fernández, Natasha Wimmer (Translation)

A weird little novella, and "weird" is a compliment in my book. The beauty of a novella is that you can do it in one go and feel great about yourself. "Damn, I read an entire book today!" This one verges on being too dense for a beach read, but Fernández keeps it short enough that it's like a piece of fudge: too intense to eat a shitload, but just enough is just enough.



"Unmemory" by Kristi DeMeester

Creepy and short, this one's about an Xmas movie that traumatized a kid, and now that she's grown up, she's looking to figure out just what the hell it was she watched. Horror doesn't go great with the beach, and neither does Christmas.



"The Nest" by Gregory A. Douglas

This was one of my first book club reads because I made an awesome book club. This presents a slightly different kind of beach: a horrible, new-england-y, autumnal beach. Really, the way for you to decide whether to read this book or not is to know that my sister quit when a young girl is devoured, genitals first, in graphic detail by cockroaches. To be fair, a dude also gets devoured genitals first when he tries to have sex with a literal hole in the ground. Multiple people being devoured genitals first gives you an idea of the taste level on this one, and there's a beach scene that is wild, ridiculous, disgusting, and over-the-top AFTER you've read about cockroaches eating people for a couple hundred pages. If you make it that far, you'll find it hilarious.



"NBA Jam" by Reyan Ali

I devoured this shit like mutant cockroaches devouring a bunch of new englanders stuck on an infested island (see above, or just know this means "quickly and with gusto" and that I'm often found in a kitchen late at night, and if you turn the lights on,

I'll skitter away). You might not think the story of NBA Jam's creation would be all that interesting, and you'd be TOTALLY WRONG! The book is packed with great stories, and it's a rare non-fiction that's both exciting and feel-good. this one will make you want to get off the beach and in front of the TV.



"Cinema Sewer vol. 1" by Robin Bougie (Editor)

The big advantage to reading this one OFF the beach is that you don't have to deal with the looks you get for reading a book with articles about weird movies that blur the line between indie cinema and straight-up pornography. And then some movies that are just straight up raunchy.

Tricking People Into Diverse Reading



The online internets are filled with diverse book lists right now. This is a good thing.

In an attempt to get people to read more and to read a wider variety of authors and books, I'm suggesting a new tactic. Not an "instead of" tactic, another one. The same way a golf bag has a bunch of golf clubs in it, you can use a bunch of methods to point people to new books. Like golf clubs in a golf bag, different methods are better in different situations. I think. I don't really know how golf works. I assume a sand wedge is for hitting a ball out of the sand, but the other clubs don't have convenient, explanatory names like "the really far from the hole iron," so I get pretty lost outside of sand wedge.

These methods are intended for the people who are not currently "on your side." They probably don't agree that Ta-Nehisi Coates is right, and they might not know who he is. They probably didn't think *Get Out* was a fascinating meditation on black bodies wrapped in a horror movie. They may be fairly distant from your values, or they may be close but in need of a small nudge.

What I'm suggesting is a goal-oriented approach for promoting diverse books in order to get a certain subset of people in the door, people who maybe don't agree with some causes, don't agree with some groups, and they're not going to pick up books that address any of this stuff.

Just because it bears repeating: I'm not saying you have to do any of this or attempt to reach any of these people. If doing any of these things would violate your principles, then don't do them! You do you.

What I'm suggesting, for anyone interested: let's talk about traps.

Where We Get It Wrong

We're going to start with common methods that don't work on the target audience. Keep in mind, I'm saying these methods don't work if your goal is to reach some middle-ground people. These methods are great at accomplishing other things. A mouse trap is great at trapping a mouse, but if you're after roaches, you'll need a different trap.

Every effective trap has three basic elements: It has bait, it tricks the mark into entering voluntarily, and the mark does not perceive the trap until it's too late to escape.

Let's talk about where our current methods miss the mark.

Telling People To Read Books To Accomplish A Goal

For example, "Read These Books To Become Culturally Aware."

Or, handing a book to your cousin and saying, "Read this so you can be less terrible."

Right now some of you are saying, "But I love those book lists and wouldn't have found Author Z without them!" That's a sure sign that you're not likely of the group we're concerned with here. Those lists and suggestions are booming, they have an audience, and you're it.

The biggie here is that nobody likes to be told what to do. If you need proof of that, all you need to do is realize that wearing a mask, which protects you from a terrible virus, has become something people rally against simply because they were told to do it. If people won't protect themselves from POSSIBLE DEATH because they were told to do so, what are the chances someone will read a book because of an implied demand?

You can't attach a written note to a fish hook that says, "Bite this to become my dinner." That's not what the fish wants, that's what you want. A demand makes for lousy bait.

Shouting at People

Hey, it feels good. Damn good. So damn good you could just...yum...WHOA, sorry, lost track there. It feels good to shout at people, but eyes on the prize.

Referring to goals here, if your goal is to change someone's mind about the act of reading a book, shouting at them is counterproductive.

You're not going to debase someone to the point that they give in and read bell hooks. It's not going to happen. At best, they'll walk away SAYING they'll read the book, and every time they see a bell hooks on the shelf somewhere, they'll remember you, that person who was a jerk to them.

Shouting is a form of forcing compliance. You don't care how the person feels about what they're doing so long as they do it. Compliance is not an effective method for getting someone to read a book. If it was, we were all assigned books in school, and we'd all be literate as hell. If compliance worked for readers, the social pressures in a book club would mean you read every book, every time. And did you?

Shouting doesn't make the person think they're doing something by choice, which is necessary for an effective trap.

The Equation

You have to take yourself out of the equation.

I'm going to keep referring to the goal: leading people, who are not predisposed to read broadly, and are perhaps resistant, into more diverse reading habits.

So, your goal, as book pusher, is not to make your circle of online friends think you're wise. It's not to install yourself as a cultural, social, or political expert. It's not to present your system of values by listing things that encompass and inform those values. It's not even to promote books as therapeutic or empathy-building tools. It's not to get retweeted.

The easiest way to blow it, when trying to elevate another voice, is getting caught up in making sure you get credit for doing so.

Being self-involved almost always means your mark will slip out of the trap. It's why James Bond gets away. The self-involved villain has to give a soliloquy instead of snapping the trap closed. You're not the villain here, so don't act like one. Set the trap, watch the person walk in, and don't pause to tell someone how good you are at trapping.

What To Do Instead

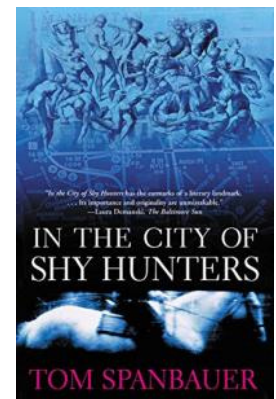
To review the three basic elements, a trap has bait, it tricks the mark into entering voluntarily, and the mark does not perceive the trap until it's too late to escape.

Each of these methods presents a more effective trap.

Bait-First Approach

When you go fishing, and when you're thinking about bait, you can't think about what YOU like to eat. You have to think about what the fish likes. Bait the hook with an entire Wendy's Double Stack and you'll waste not only a burger, but a whole lotta time.

Tom Spanbauer's *In The City of Shy Hunters* is an incredible experience of a book that related the AIDS epidemic to me in a human, tangible way. I love this book. It's my all-time favorite. My desert island book. The book I keep a spare copy of in my trunk because I'd hate to end up somewhere with nothing to read.



I also recognize that it's a dense, literary book that is not going to appeal to everyone, and it's not going to speak to everyone. It has graphic depictions of sex between men, it depicts a powerful gay black man, and cops are villains. It's my favorite book, and I don't consider these "problems." I recognize that the reader we're talking about today is likely to be repelled by these elements, and if they're repelled, they won't receive the message I'm hoping they'll absorb.

To someone outside the fold, I might suggest *My Pet Virus* by Shawn Decker. Decker contracted HIV in the 80s from a blood transfusion. He's not gay, but he does talk with gay men and has found a lot of support from the gay community. If I'm talking to someone who doesn't read widely, this story is probably more easily digested.

I know, it feels like I'm watering down the idea. And I am. Because my intent isn't to present the most stirring, harrowing version of the story. My intent is to get someone to take a step in that direction. Someone who isn't me.

The bait is meant for the mark, not the trapper. Remember that when you're suggesting a book.

The Voluntary Approach

Ronnie Coleman is one of my favorite people. If you haven't seen the documentary about his life, you need to. Required viewing. Or, read his book, *Yeah, Buddy!* Also excellent.

Ronnie finished college, graduating cum laude with a degree in accounting, and he started looking for accountant jobs. He applied all over, and he didn't get any bites from accounting firms. I don't think it's a stretch to say that in 1984, even as a top student fully prepared to work in accounting, being a black man with a Louisiana accent wasn't helpful when it came to getting a gig.

Ronnie doesn't really speculate about why he didn't get hired. Ronnie tells readers he didn't get a job, and he leaves readers to speculate.

For some readers, the ones I'm talking about, it can be helpful to read about a situation without resolution. If a book presents readers with a question, and if the question isn't resolved in the text, the only way to find resolution is for readers to think about it themselves or talk it out with someone else. In this case, that means they're thinking or talking to someone else about racism. And they're doing so at their own direction.

Look for books that present situations with implied questions. Asking an implied question engages readers in a different way. It opens a conversation outside the book.

Answering the question limits the engagement to the book/reader relationship. It takes an open-ended question like, "Why didn't Ronnie get hired?" and turns it into a closed question: "Do you agree or not?"

An implied, open question lets the drawn-in reader continue to read, even if they are a little suspicious and would disagree with the obvious conclusion. They move further into the trap. And the more you read about Ronnie, the harder it is to deny that he worked his ass off and deserved better.

It's Too Late

Many a library will set up a display or create a list of books for Black History Month or Pride or any number of other events. These are good things to do.

The issue with these displays or recommendations or a list of books with a title like, "Read These 10 Books to Understand Racism" is that it requires people to self-identify as being in need of further wisdom. People don't think of themselves as in need of more education, even if they are. It's an easy out for people who've done some diverse reading, but maybe not enough.

These lists also provide an early warning system for someone avoiding the issue entirely. Someone who thinks, "I'm tired of talking about this," is going to steer clear of a list like "Fantasy Novels That Are Feminist AF." This is how we end up with the people who need these lists the most avoiding them

entirely.

This means you miss everyone except the people specifically looking for that list.

But let's rewind a bit. Is our goal to get people to read the LIST, or is it to get them to read the BOOKS?

Here's how you switch up recommendations so they reach today's intended audience.

You make a list of horror authors, and you list a diverse set of authors working in horror. You list books about personal finance, and you list a book by a thought leader in the field who is black. When you have a go-to list of how-to writing resources, you include Colson Whitehead's "How To Write" NYT article, or you list *Scratch*, which includes essays from Roxane Gay, Alexander Chee, Porochista Khakpour, and a ton of other excellent writers (this book is great for the financially-curious writer, by the way). If you're lucky enough that people respect your opinion, when you share your go-to books, you mix it up.

Someone loves horror novels, and they're drawn in by a list. It's only after they've read through the list, maybe even after they've read some of the titles, that they realize they've read something they wouldn't have otherwise. By the time the trap is sprung, they're all the way in. No opportunity to back out. They're already caught.

One More Time

I've said this a dozen times already. One more: Remember what success looks like here. Success looks like someone who never would've read Victor LaValle reading Victor LaValle.

This is another golf club in your golf bag. Not an argument that you should throw all your other clubs in the lake and only use this one.

Although maybe go ahead and do that if you're taking this literally. I think throwing golf clubs in a lake is probably AT LEAST as fun as playing golf by the rules.

10 Gems From 100 Years of 'The Elements of Style'



I can't keep a pair of pants looking presentable for more than 3 years. My body is well over 20 years old, way under 100, and it's hit and miss with this damn thing.

And somehow the same book has been assisting writers for 100 years?

The original version of *The Elements of Style* was published in 1920. Let's put this in context. If you ate the way people ate in 1920, you'd be eating Hoover Stew, which is a fancy name for hot dogs and mac and cheese. You'd also be at the very beginning of prohibition, which is contradictory: Hot dogs and mac seems like a very drunk idea. But the lack of booze may explain the clearheaded nature of *The Elements of Style*.

A style guide that's pre-internet, pre-word-processor, even. Think how much the world has changed. Yet some of the advice here is as important today as it was then.

The Elements of Style, the original 1920 edition, is only about 50 pages long. And at 50 pages, it might be too long for most of us.

So, as a community service, and as a praise for this book's longevity, here are some highlights.

1. Breaking the Rules

It is an old observation that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of

doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules. After he has learned, by their guidance, to write plain English adequate for everyday uses, let him look, for the secrets of style, to the study of the masters of literature.

The quote about learning the rules and breaking them has been attributed to a lot of different people. Pablo Picasso, although that attribution is questionable. Alexander McQueen, though he was born in 1969, which would make this a late quote. Even the Dalai Lama had this one thrown his way.

Strunk's version is the earliest version of the saying that I can nail down. And it explains that breaking a rule should be done to achieve something. So whenever someone in your workshop claims "I did that on purpose," feel free to ask them which rule they broke, what they planned to achieve, and whether they think they managed the intended effect.

2. Writing is Problem-Solving

One suggestion, if you can't keep the apostrophe rules straight, is a workaround. Instead of "Achilles' heel", just say, "The heel of Achilles."

The idea of a style guide giving you workarounds is just fantastic. Instead of memorizing rules, start thinking about writing as a series of small problems to solve, and solve them your way.

3. Use Concrete Language

Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.

*He showed satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward. [no]
He grinned as he pocketed the coin. [yes!]*

This is an amazing example of so many rules that have been said so many ways. Show don't tell. Use on-the-body description.

Based on one line that describes the same action, I know which book I'm reading and which one I'm tossing aside.

4. Tattoo-Worthy Advice

Vigorous writing is concise.

That's a tattoo right there. Not enough people use "vigorous" to describe something done right. I think sex is the only thing where "vigorous" is used. Let's sex up writing and be vigorous about it.

5. Minimalism

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.

Great analogies. I might compare this to a modern thing, good code shouldn't have unnecessary

lines. "Unnecessary" doesn't mean omitting description or detail, which is the common complaint about minimalism. This complaint is usually a veiled gripe about the hard work of editing. You can describe a field of flowers all goddamn day if you want. Just know when it's finished, and step away.

6. The Fact That

"The fact that" should be revised out of every sentence in which it occurs.

*I was unaware of the fact that [no]
I was unaware that (did not know) [yes!]*

*the fact that he had not succeeded [no]
his failure [yes!]*

*the fact that I had arrived [no]
my arrival [yes!]*

You know what? Yes. You're right. "The fact that" is a phrase that should be like a big flag. "Hey, you can say this more directly and forcefully."

7. Interesting

Interesting. Avoid this word as a perfunctory means of introduction. Instead of announcing that what you are about to tell is interesting, make it so.

That's a goddamn mic drop. If something's interesting, you don't have to prepare me for it. It will stand on its own as interesting. Just like good-looking people do not have to announce themselves: "Prepare for my entrance, and prepare to see that I am good-looking." I think most of us will figure it out.

Strunk mentions "clever" as well, that it's overused. He's right. Cleverness is for watch-makers and Velociraptors jumping out at Muldoon.

8. The Literal Debate

Literal, literally. Often incorrectly used in support of exaggeration or violent metaphor.

*A literal flood of abuse. [no]
A flood of abuse. [yes!]*

*Literally dead with fatigue [no]
Almost dead with fatigue (dead tired) [yes!]*

This one might ruffle some feathers, but I tend to agree, and I have a reason!

We have plentiful modifiers that do the work currently shouldered by "literally." And with the alteration of "actually" to be received as an aggressive nerd correction, the word "literally" has an important use, and there aren't many words that do the same work. It's meant to express the concreteness of

something happening, not the level of it. A "literal shit storm" would be an exploding septic tank. A "literal shit storm" applied to a bad meeting? Why not replace "literal" with "complete" or "total" or "a shit storm so severe NOAA was tracking it on radar hours beforehand"?

9. People and The Public

"The people" is a political term, not to be confused with "the public." From the people comes political support or opposition; from the public comes artistic appreciation or commercial patronage.

Strunk thinks it's possible to both dislike something politically and appreciate something artistically. Just throwing it out there.

10. Thanking You in Advance

This sounds as if the writer meant, "It will not be worth my while to write to you again." In making your request, write, "Will you please," or "I shall be obliged," and if anything further seems necessary write a letter of acknowledgment later.

Ugh, yes. Don't thank me in advance. It's also a sort of mandate: Because you'll be doing this, I'll thank you now. If I can take the time to do something for you, you can take the time to thank me once the work is completed. Or, if you're giving me an order, just grow up and do it. Don't pretend like I'm doing you a favor.

Happy Centennial, boys.

How to Purge the Thousand Story Ideas Running Around In Your Head



Because we make good movie decisions, my girlfriend and I watched *The Boy*.

The Boy is about a haunted doll named Brahms. That's really all you need to know, or all I can say without wrecking it. I mean, the movie is pre-wrecked. Because it's *The Boy*, and it's about a haunted doll named Brahms.

Weeks after watching it, I was asking my girlfriend about *The Boy* because I'm STILL trying to figure it out. And she says, "You know, you should probably just decide what happened so you can stop thinking about it."

I am relationship-savvy enough to know that this means, "I do not want to hear any more theories about The goddamn Boy." But she was right. I needed to kill that process. The brainpower wasted on *The Boy* should be wasted on something else.

For the record, I've decided how *The Boy* works. Ask me if you're interested.

When you write, you have ideas. Lots of these ideas never go anywhere. But they can still drag down your brain speed. They still use up small amounts of resources until you're willing to let some of them go.

Let's see if we can't close some of those tabs, push the energy towards something else.

Piggy bank

You can get some sweet banks out there. Or a cookie jar. I always thought a cool ceramic cookie jar would be like the ultimate "I am an adult" thing to have in the kitchen. Which is weird because it's a Spider-Man full of Oreos. Maybe because I feel like only an adult can eat an amount of cookies less than "all of the."

As soon as you have the idea, write it down on a small notepad, then deposit it into your bank. You can even get this Miss Piggy bank. Apparently someone thought it was a good idea to deposit cash in Miss Piggy's cleavage?

Purge the idea from your mind, stuff it away, and forget about it. The bonus of a bank is that it's hard to retrieve a sheet of folded paper.

Visual Map

A weakness of something like a spreadsheet or a notebook is that you can't see the scope of things. You can't see how different ideas relate.

Instead of throwing your ideas in a spreadsheet or a notebook or a digital file, give your ideas a layout as a map. Write on an actual map. Make one of those corkboards with the red string that doesn't seem to help much when someone's catching a murderer on TV.

Sketch Reminders

Write each idea in a notebook or on a post-it, and draw a very small image to go along with it. Just a 30-second sketch of a character, event, whatever. It doesn't have to be museum-worthy, just draw something to connect to the idea. Apply a sketch, exercise the idea in a sketch as well as text, and you're good.

Get Boned

Attach each idea to a small figurine. Then you'll have something tied to the memory. A bucket of army men is great for this. Or stones. Or legos. I'm partial to these skeleton warriors.



You can write the idea on the object, attach a small piece of paper, or just hold the object, think about the idea, and then set the object on a shelf. Visualize yourself putting the idea into the object. It slips out of your head, into your fingers, and then into the object. I know this is some hippy shit, but it works even if you're not into slacklining.

Expiration

You won't get to most of your ideas. I hate to break it to you, but you're mortal, and there is more *Better Call Saul* coming, and it's not all going to happen.

A common method for purging "stuff" is to throw it in a box, seal it, and if you don't open it in a year, you toss it out without looking inside the box.

Seal up your ideas. If you don't go back to them in a year, they can go.

Memory Palace

This idea is popularized in *Sherlock*, but it's a very old idea. Set up a physical space in your mind. A house. Start with just a blank front room. When you have an idea, you add something onto your house. So you have an idea, you build a hallway to represent that idea, and each time you walk down that hallway, the idea that prompted the construction of that hallway comes to mind.

You can do this in a less classy but more linear way if you think about the haunted house ride from the county fair. Get in a roller coaster, get on a track, and what's the first setup? A dracula thing? And what's that associated with?

Flashy Flash

Maybe your idea doesn't have much flesh. Just write a quick flash fiction on it. No more than a couple sentences. This'll help you decide if it's going anywhere, and it'll get your mind churning on it. Instead of a thing to remember, the concept is there, and now it's a problem to solve.

And hey, maybe it sucks. This is a quick way to figure it out.

Graph

Set up a large sheet with 100 boxes. That's how many ideas you're allowed to keep at once. Write 'em down, one per each tiny square. Once the sheet is full, if you want to add a new idea, an old one's got to go.

This way you limit the number of ideas you've got going at once.

What If Books Aren't The Answer To Our Problems?



I was wrong about what an “adult slumber party” is. Turns out it’s a polite way to advertise that you’ll go to a house and sell a group of people dildos.

I was wrong when I figured that red and white wine were interchangeable when you were cooking.

I was wrong when I was a kid and I figured if I could get my hands on a big enough TV, I’d have way more lines to the top of the screen, and Tetris would be a snap.

Rather than going through a list of times I was wrong (a column I wanted to write that was rejected for reasons of length and taste), my point here is that I’ve been wrong more than a few times, and I’m not afraid to admit it.

The last few months have been an embarrassment, just generally, and an embarrassment of riches in terms of books. Books that will teach us empathy, books that will provide a new perspective. Books that came out decades ago and are just now getting their due. And a lot of these books and lists of books are set on the table with an implied or explicit, “Reading will make things better.”

What if we’re wrong? What if books are not the answer to our problems?

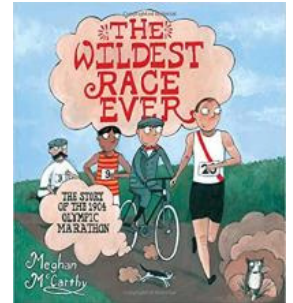
Cue Anger In 3...2...1...

Before you fire up the outrage machine, indulge me for a few seconds while I talk about giving rat poison to athletes.

In the 1904 Olympic Marathon, runner Thomas Hicks was denied water and instead given a mixture of strychnine and egg white. MORE THAN ONCE. Why? Because as the book *The Wildest Race Ever* puts it:

It was the early 1900's, and science wasn't as advanced. Hicks' trainers thought giving him this was a good thing to do.

The Wildest Race Ever is written for children, and it does a great job distilling a difficult question: Why did people do something so wrong? They thought it was a good thing to do.



I do think books CAN help. I think books HAVE helped. I'm a personal example, and I've witnessed it in others. But what's in the gap between what I THINK and what I KNOW?

We're offering books as a solution to some big-ass, longstanding, complex issues that affect everyone. Issues that won't be resolved until we can all get on approximately the same page. I'm a fan of the goals, and what I'm questioning is the methods of getting there.

What if books aren't the answer?

What If Books Aren't Good Vehicles?

Reading isn't for everyone. For a long time, this has been an intellectual distinction. If you're smart, you learn about the world through books. If you're dumb, you don't.

I'm not so sure this is true.

When I replaced the spark plugs and ignition coils on my car, watching a YouTube video was WAY more helpful than a written text. I get information from a video that I don't from a book. I see exactly where a bolt is from the perspective I'll be using. I can gauge how much effort it takes to turn that bolt. I get a better idea how long something is going to take.

When I hear someone over the phone, I get tone, I get speed, I get other things that don't always come through in print.

Are books the best way to convey information, emotional or otherwise? Or have they been the primary method so long because they're relatively easy to create, spread, and reuse? Does the popularity of the book as information vessel need a reevaluation in light of new technologies being so readily available to so many people?

Are Books Usable For Enough People?

Illiteracy rates are one thing. 19% of adult Americans can't understand a newspaper. The collections of words are completely meaningless to them. Another 50% can't read a book written at an 8th grade level. Pile on top of that the need to get nuanced emotion and complex philosophies from a book...

If something like a quarter of your neighbors can't even understand the collection of words, how surprising would it be if half your neighbors couldn't really evaluate what was said, mull it over, and

make good use of it?

How good is a tool that works for half the population?

Do Books Take Too Long?

If you're speedy, a book can take 5 or 6 hours, easy. Is this a reasonable ask of most people?

Picture the person you have to. Picture the person working multiple jobs who, if they get an extra two hours in a week, immediately falls asleep. Picture the lazy person who just doesn't want to. There are an awful lot of people who, for whatever reason, won't spend 5 hours reading in the next year.

There are people who can't spare the time, people who won't spare the time. Regardless of the reason, all of them fall in the category of don't.

Do We Trust the Research?

We've all heard the research that reading, especially fiction, makes you a more emotionally-intelligent, empathetic person.

Most of the data on this comes from a single study which has not been replicated, was based on a flawed test, was completed via Amazon Mechanical Turk (if you don't know what that is, you can make a few cents, maybe even a dollar, by taking surveys or performing other tasks, so the idea is to do them as fast as possible), may not have measured what it was meant to, and, most damning of all, proved correlation without causation.

Causation and correlation are a huge problem in trying to reverse-engineer human behavior, but I'll make a quick stab at it: A shrimpy kid in junior high might say, "I was watching high school football, and most of those kids are big." And then this observer, who's not too bright, would join the football team, thinking he'd grow as a result. Yes, football players tend to be big. No, playing football is not what causes them to be big.



Are lifelong fiction readers more empathetic because they've been reading a lot of fiction, or do they read a lot of fiction because they're empathetic, and therefore this material has always appealed to them? Did the fiction habit create empathy, or did the empathy always exist and the fiction habit was a natural fit?

Not to put too fine a point on it, but Comparative Literature Professor Arnold Weinstein said:

People used to comment that the people who ran the concentration camps probably knew Goethe and Schiller by heart.

So, even if fiction creates empathy, there's been no study on the application of any empathy learned through reading.

Give people something they can read in the time required to take a dump.

Much as I hate to say it, I think we believe the study that says fiction makes empathy because we want it to be true. Because WE read, and we want to think of ourselves as empathetic.

My artsy side wants to believe it's true. My science-y side doesn't think this one passes the sniff test. Even with my deviated septum and overabundance of nose hair, something smells off.

The Morning After

We do a good job of encouraging people to read something, but when it comes to connecting books to real life AFTER they've been read, there's just not a lot out there.

This is some of the secret sauce that made Oprah's book club work. It wasn't like a book was announced, you read it, and that was the last time you ever heard about it. You'd see ongoing discussion, you'd see the author talk about it. And you'd know that millions of other people read it, or at least had bought a copy and read 3% of it.

People who push books are like math teachers who give students a pile of worksheets, and then never collect them, grade them, or ask how it's going. Oh, and the students have to buy those worksheets themselves. And we walk away feeling like we really helped someone.

And by the way, many workplaces have tried to do book clubs to bridge this gap. I applaud the effort, but can someone honestly discuss a sensitive topic when the person holding their paycheck is heading up the chat?

Not A Rosy Picture

When I ask about the ways we might be wrong, that books might not be the answer, it's a downer.

But maybe we shouldn't count books out just yet. Maybe books can adapt, and maybe we can adapt them to be more useful tools for change.

Squash The In-Fighting

The aforementioned reading empathy studies got derailed pretty fast because there was a battle about the difference between literary fiction and popular fiction. In the study, readers of "literary" fiction were found to be more empathetic than those of popular or genre fiction.

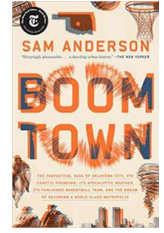
This turned the whole thing into an in-fight between book nerds. This is not the kind of fight that gets a lot of pay-per-view buys.

In-fighting about books and genres is the kind of thing that turns non-readers off right away. They don't know the terms, they don't understand the passion, and the last thing ANYONE needs is another online fight to get involved in. And, it makes them say, "Shoot, I don't want to waste time reading the wrong kind of book."

Instead of fighting with each other about petty shit, let's look at the real work that needs doing: Getting non-readers to read.

Writers: Make It Faster

As much as I was interested in *Boom Town* by Sam Anderson and its detailing of the weirdness that is Oklahoma City, I checked out some of the specs and said, "While I'm interested, damn, I'm not 448 pages interested!"



One academic told me, in confidence, that *White Fragility* was a good, 14-page academic paper that was inflated into a book, and those extra pages exist only so the thing has enough width to sit on a bookstore shelf.

Create your art, everyone. Do your thing. And if you want that art to make change, if you want your audience to get your message and act on it, you might reach more people if you give them something they can read in the time required to take a dump.

By the way, faster doesn't always mean shorter, it means faster. Whether your book is faster because it's half the length or it's faster because you've written it in a way that's easier to understand, making your book faster extends its reach.

Read and Recommend Books for Kids

As an adult, I read many a book of non-fiction intended for children. They are great because:

- They are brief
- They give you what you need to know
- They expect their audience to know NOTHING about the subject, so they explain EVERYTHING in simple terms
- They know that keeping an easily-bored reader interested is part of the game.

The aforementioned children's book about the first marathon, *The Wildest Race Ever*, was amazing. I read a children's book about the invention of Day-Glo, and it was awesome. The children's book about Philip Petit is way faster than the movie, and it's way better.

Push these on yourself, and push them on other people. They really work, and they're accessible for people of different reading levels and different levels of knowledge going in.

Making and Consuming

It might be that books ARE the answer, but I'm starting to think it's in creating, not consuming, that we find ourselves renewed.

All the people you recommend books to, have you told them "I would read a book you wrote"? Because you should. Sometimes that's all it takes to push someone over that edge.

Keep Asking Questions

When we hear the word "panacea" most of us think of a miracle cure, a one-stop Swiss Army knife of a pill that gets rid of hemorrhoids, joint pain, and corrects your vision in one go. The word "panacea"

comes from a goddess, Panacea, who was able to cure any malady.

Panacea is not real in medicine. Any physician will tell you that. What helps one patient is going to be the precise wrong thing for another. There is no cure-all. Except possibly pizza.



When we think of social, political, and societal problems, not many of us use her name, but we still harbor hope that Panacea, in some form, will save us. That the next form of this goddess will come and solve world hunger, climate change, inequity of all kinds, and wipe out all of the problems we've built for ourselves.

I'm a pessimist. I don't think Panacea is coming to save us. And if she's taken the form of books in an attempt to do so, she blew it.

As a book person, I'm inclined to believe in the power of reading. And I also see book people, myself included, unwilling to even consider that books might not be the answer to every problem for every person.

So let's do it. Let's consider it.

If it turns out I'm wrong and books ARE the answer, then we've reaffirmed what we'd hoped, and we've come up with reasons why. We can better advocate for them. We can make them better. We can be more precise, more cunning with the ways we're writing, selling, and using books.

If they aren't the answer, then maybe we can admit that and move in a new direction. Or, maybe we can look at their shortcomings and make a better attempt at using them for the purpose of change. Maybe books aren't the answer to one problem. Maybe they're the answer to another. Maybe they're art, and maybe art is antithetical to purpose.

Whatever conclusion you come to, let it be complicated. Let it be something new. Let it be something that you wrestle with, and once you think you've got it pinned, wrestle with it again. Ask yourself the hard question because the hard-won answer is worth it.

The Best and Worst Book Furniture



The comfortable chair will always have a place in reading. The gizmo in the reader's hands might change, but the chair has been pretty similar for just about as long as we've had legs and activities that make those legs tired. Sure, there are cosmetic changes once in awhile, cup holders because we're too lazy to hold objects, reclining ability because why not always sort of be in bed?

But I've always felt there's something else out there. Something more that I'm missing. Something new in furniture for book lovers. So, readers, I took a look. And I've returned from my internet sojourn with some good news and some bad news.

Worst: Chair In Bookshelf



Let's start with how low this chair is. Am I supposed to crawl on the ground to get in a chair? Doesn't a chair, meant for comfort, kind of defeat itself if I have to crawl around to get in it?

Let's middle with how much this guy looks like he's returned to the uterus. I got nothing against a

good uterus. It's just sort of the same way I feel about high school: served its purpose, and I'd prefer not to go back.

Let's end with how annoyed I would be when every time I got in, some books would wobble off the shelf. That's what I need, a reminder that I'm fat coupled with a chore every time I sit down. What a winner.

Worst: Wheelchair. But Not THAT Kind of Wheelchair



Sometimes I like to look at a piece of furniture and say, "What problem does this solve?"

When you read, do you have to move your entire book collection with you? No. Because books come in these convenient, carry-able units called...books. Pick one out, take it to the chair, and if need be, move the chair.

With this chair, you move the entire book collection, and the chair, all at once. Which is not something anyone has ever needed to do.

Here's the 3-part, design-lite solution:

1. Buy a chair you can move around. Wheels are good, carpet skates work if you've got carpet. Alternatively, just put the chair where you want it and don't move it around. What are you, a Bezos? You have so much room at home you need to move chairs around? Buy another chair, then. Or hire someone to move your chairs for you.
2. Put your books somewhere. When you need one, move the one you need. Leave all the other ones you don't need right where they are.
3. Some of you might be thinking it's convenient for moving. I have a better answer: Wheelbarrow. A ramp and a wheelbarrow make any move a snap. And what are you thinking, that you'll take multiple trips with this book chair? That's insane. That thing is way heavier than a wheelbarrow, it takes a lot longer to load it up with books. Trust me, wheelbarrow is where it's at.

Worst: Bed Bugs and Beyond



There are two very popular vectors for bed bugs that I know of: Books and Beds.

I applaud the book industry for somehow foisting bed bugs onto the bedding industry and getting them named "bed bugs" instead of "book bugs." We dodged a bullet on that one BIG TIME.

The plus here is that if you do have bed bugs, you can super concentrate them in one part of the house. I've tried this with spiders. I let them have certain territories, and if they stay in those territories, we're good. Recently an earwig violated the treaty completely, and everything's been chaos since.

Maybe some see a whimsical sleeping arrangement here. I see a platter on which you're served to bloodsucking pests.

Best: Reading Chair With Wall



Let it be known that I am a fan of furniture that blocks out the world in one way or another. Even the attempt makes me happy because I feel like, "Okay, someone else out there gets it, everyone is annoying."

Part of a reading chair's responsibility is to what you ARE doing, which is reading, and part of that chair's responsibility is to what you're not doing, which is interacting with other people.

I don't love that the person in this READING chair is lapping it up, but whatever, good enough.

Worst: Kickstool



The standard kickstool is a brilliant piece of engineering, and there's a reason you see them all over. For those who aren't in the know, your standard kickstool has spring-mounted casters, which means the stool is mobile when there's no weight on it, but apply even a small amount of weight, the springs compress, and instead of sitting on wheels the stool lowers and the ring at the bottom makes solid contact with the floor. Which means you can stand on it without taking a hilarious pratfall.

Any stool with any other wheeled setup is stupid. Even with brakes. Do you trust those brakes with your life? Because you know, eventually, you're going to stand on this. Just to do something "real quick." "Real quick" is a phrase that precedes almost every household accident.

If you like these, I guess consider which titles you'd like to look at as you pass in and out of consciousness because you broke all of your bones standing on a charming wheeled stool instead of the practical version that has been around for 60 years.

Best And Worst...Can't Decide: Throne of Books



My main complaint, whenever you see something like this, is that the books usually suck. It's a catch-22, possibly made of *Catch-22*. On one hand you can use shitty, mass-produced books. You could open a factory devoted to making these chairs out of Alex Cross novels 24/7 and you would never run out.

On the other hand, who wants a chair made out of lousy novels? Do I want to be enveloped by Reader's Digest Condensed Books? Do I want an 800-pound pile of shitty books in my home?

But then, on a third hand you didn't even know about and I just busted out from under my sweater, if I use books I like, isn't that a waste of books? Isn't this whole seating thing a job better suited to, I don't know, wood or metal or plastic? Like, chair materials?

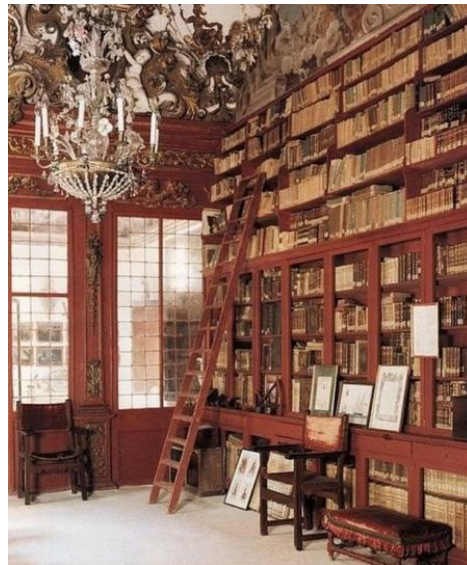
Worst: Book Bath Tub



I like orange Tic Tacs, and I like steak. My Orange Tic-Tac Crusted Steak was NOT popular at this summer's cookouts, aka me alone in the kitchen cooking a steak at 7 am because fuck it.

Point being, combinations aren't always the sum of their parts.

Best: Rail Ladders



This is the piece that separates The Men from The Boys. I mean that very literally. This ladder would allow you to shelve alphabetically distant things quite far apart, and *The Men Who Stare at Goats* by Jon Ronson would be a good distance from *The Boys* by Garth Ennis.

It really is the furniture that makes a shitty pile of books seem like a Home Library, or maybe even A Study. Maybe because it provides the illusion that you're futzing with books ALL THE TIME. So much so that you've purchased furniture and attached it to the wall.

If you want to show off your book love without being a dick about it, rail ladders are the way to go. These other fancy pieces, they're showy, but they're really more about an eye for design than a love of books.

Best-to-Worst: Sunflower Chair



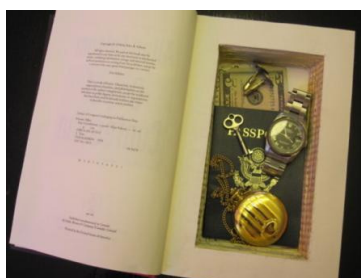
Maybe I've been a little hard on this stuff. After all, it's art. It's design-y. And design isn't always meant to be useful.

So I took a look into this one. What if I decided to buy it?

Here's how it works with this fancy furniture: You find the designer. They link to the manufacturer. The manufacturer is in Italy or Japan. You can email them to inquire about the prices. They don't list prices, you ask them to consider giving you a price. And I don't know how much it costs to get something shipped from Japan or Italy, but I'm pretty sure the raw materials alone would break the bank.

If I wanted to spend thousands of dollar on a chair, I'd get one of those chairs that holds 4 or 5 people and has an engine on the front.

Best: Book Safe



I'm partial to a good bookshelf. I bought a cheap, plastic one from a catalog when I was a kid. It took 8 weeks to show up, and even though it'd been 8 weeks, I hadn't managed to save any cash to put inside it by the time it arrived. I mean, I was like 10. Also, it was all plastic, so I suppose it wouldn't be an effective safe anyway.

I made a second bookshelf after high school. I had to buy a complete Shakespeare for class, and it was of a thickness that would hold any items I wanted to save. My brother, however, correctly pointed out that Shakespeare stuck out like a hemorrhoid among all my comics.

Worst: Pallet Furniture



I hate pallet furniture. You see this shit all over, but let me explain a little something: Pallet wood is cheap. Lotsa times it's coated in crazy chemicals. You know what pallets are great for? Stacking a bunch of goods on and then moving with a pallet jack or forklift. That's it. And they're really good for that. You know what they're not good for? Everything else.

Best: Book Bench



Why am I tortured by things that I like and turn out to be designed for kids? Target, listen up, idiots: Make the kids' clothes in adult sizes.

I like this idea. I'd sit down to put on my shoes, next thing I know, BAM, I'm 40 minutes late for work because I got absorbed in a book.

Keyboarding Games: Your Writing Still Sucks, But It Sucks Faster



The first time I played basketball at a friend's house, I was the only kid still deploying the two-arm, underhanded "granny shot." Everyone else shooting overhand was a completely new thing to me. This was a sure sign of a self-taught player who spent a lot of time alone at the hoop.

Self-taught practitioners usually have some quirks to the way they do things. Sometimes these are charming, little things, like the kid who jumped along with Mario until the first time he played with friends and realized what he was doing (I was ALSO this kid). Sometimes the quirks are more of a problem, like the self-taught mopper who's rubbing the mop head on the floor front to back instead of in a sweeping, graceful side-to-side motion that actually accomplishes the task of cleaning a floor.

My typing style is somewhere in-between quirky and bad. It's ugly, but it gets the job done.

Is it worth my time (or yours) to work on those typing skills? Would a writer save some time and energy with a little bit of back-to-basics? Will I get to type the word "inbred" over and over?

All About The Base

I took 4 tests to get a ballpark speed.

Test 1: 65 WPM.

To be fair, a pop-up popped up in the middle of this test. But I'm not a sore loser.

Test 2: 68 WPM.

This one had me typing up a text about how horribly depressed people with Alzheimer's and

Dementia can be. Neat! I'm learning AND typing.

Test 3: 50 WPM.

This one has my typing what I can only assume are the liner notes to a Radiohead album? Not even kidding. I repeatedly typed "Thom Yorke," which violates my sense of the way "Tom" is supposed to be spelled.

Test 4: 76 WPM!

This with a sidebar video ad.

Training

To attempt some training, I played games. TYPING games! Edutainment!

1. Baby Type



This one greets students with an absolute racket of MS-DOS noise when you fire it up. It's not even music. I don't think it was ever intended to be music. But it begs the question: What is it? And why would another human being create this?

The game is the same thing over and over. You move this character, which appears to be a... caterpillar's head, down a path by typing. You have to type fast enough to outrun bad guys or pneumatic presses or things like that. When a baddie catches you, you're eaten.



This is really demotivating as a student. My ability to type being tied to the life of a character is a little heavy. Maybe it could just be, I don't know, a failure means he doesn't press his pants before going to work and looks a little disheveled? Becoming food for another creature is a harsh punishment.

When you die, you're treated to a de-motivational leaderboard where some assholes set records on this game in the mid-80's. Well, at least there's some comfort in knowing it's entirely possible they're dead. NOW who's the faster typist!?

2. Wizard of Id's WizType



Nothing like a 70's newspaper comic strip to really bring in the kids!

It doesn't take long for this one to get old. You shoot lightning bolts of annoying noise at a...maybe snake. Maybe a genie? Hold on, let me educate myself...

Okay, this character is known as "Evil Spirit" and lives in the Wizard's cauldron. According to Wikipedia, this Evil Spirit has mentioned that it has a sewer wisp as a girlfriend. Likely story. We all know the kid from school who claimed to be dating a sewer wisp who went to another school across town.

Did you know that *The Wizard of Id* is still going? Not by its original creators, but by some grandsons?

The game is pretty crappy, but it's also so damn old, and hey, if I made a newspaper comic strip and someone offered me money to make a typing game I'd go for it. If anyone wants to make a typing game based on my life, I will give you an excellent deal on my likeness. I think the premise is "Pete

was writing a column when he got distracted and read about a thousand *Wizard of Id* comics. Hurry and help him finish!"



3. Dvorak On Typing



I've heard of this Dvorak method, which is an alternative keyboard layout that supposedly allows for easier typing. I say "supposedly" because there has been some evidence to the contrary among nerds who care about this stuff. Nerds of a degree that's difficult to assess. Measuring such high levels of nerdiness is like something being so hot that you can't get a temperature gauge close enough to measure without melting it.

This one is barely a game. It gives you a setup, you're a knight beating the shit out of Pan, then another knight, then a dragon on a pile of gold, and you do it by typing. But it's not really clear how the action on screen relates to the typing. Maybe it does. I don't know. I was too busy typing. And not caring.

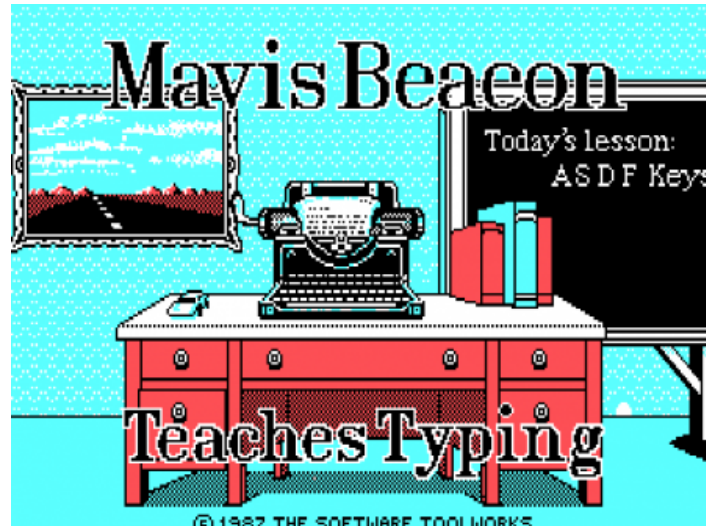


The Dvorak on this game is not the same Dvorak who came up with the alternate layout. Apparently he's that dude's nephew. Jesus, ANYONE could get a computer game back in the day.

"I'm the nephew of a guy who invented a cockamamie keyboard layout."

"Oh my god, how do you not have a game yet!?"

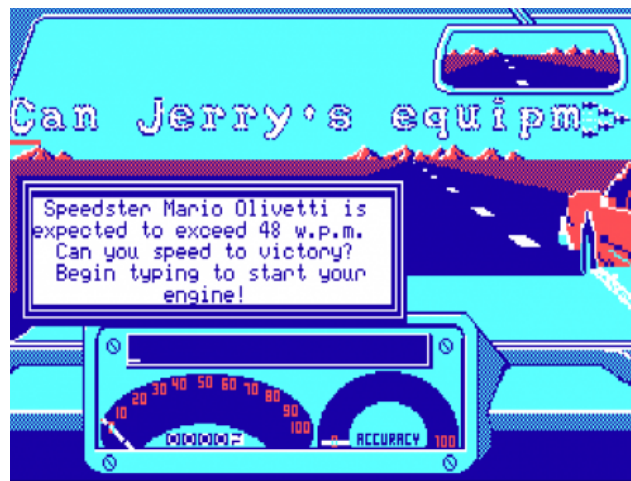
4. Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing



Ah, the classic!

It turns out Mavis Beacon isn't a real person. Just a made-up mascot for typing software. I don't know who I thought she was. Some kind of typing champion? I mean, there's more than one guy named Dvorak, so Mavis Beacon doesn't seem too far out there.

You mostly type nonsense sentences until you get to the ONE GAME, which is a race against...Mario Olivetti? I can only assume this is a mash-up of Mario Andretti, the driver, and the Olivetti brand of typewriters. Someone was having a lot of fun being real cute with this one.



The game sucks. It's barely a game. But the colors are definitely just old enough to be cool again.

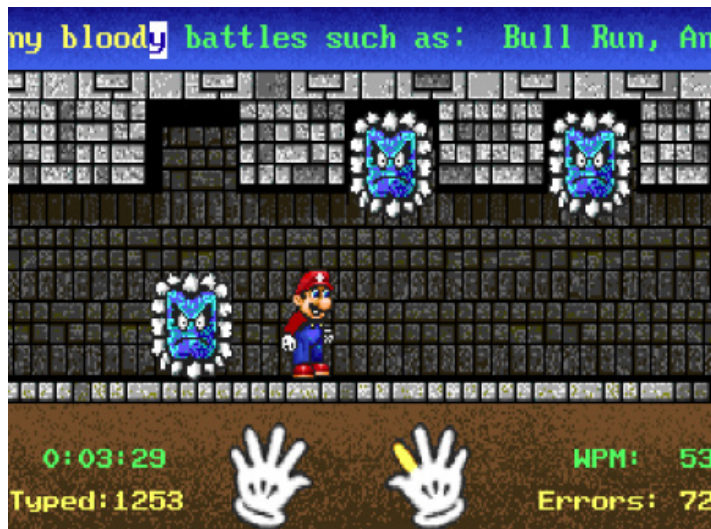
5. Mario Teaches Typing



We had this “game” at home when we were kids. I think I played it twice, maybe. Dress it up with all the Mario you’ve got, typing is still typing.

My patience for this sort of thing is low because it’s based on this home keys shit. So you do a level where you type nothing but A, S, D, F, J, K, L, ;. And semicolon being a home key is outrageous. Who decided that? It’s gotta be one of the most worthless keys on the keyboard. Why not just have it be another spacebar? Semicolon is a key that’s pressed WITHOUT SHIFT and yet an emdash is still a special character?

Then you get to the actual typing, and you’re typing about...The Civil War's bloodiest battles?



Wha? Why wouldn't they have you typing about, I don't know, SUPER MARIO and his super adventures!?

6. Typing of the Living Dead

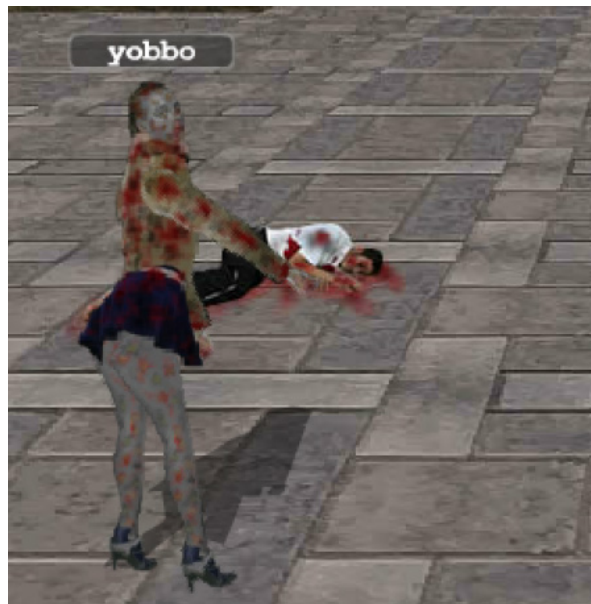


This one was...pretty great.

Okay, it's a knockoff of a really good game. But it still has its charm, and I made it to the LAST LEVEL before I died. Technically, I completed the objectives, so if I can type fast enough to solve a zombie apocalypse, how much faster do I need to get?

One curious thing about this one, the words were...different. I saw "yokel," "beaver," "snatch," "turgid," "inbred," and repeatedly "x-rated." I will admit, this was a lot more fun to type than "lkdd;;" But it does make me suspicious that this was designed by a teenager.

Also, this:



Not only do I type "yobbo" to make this zombie die, not only does she seem to be in an oddly short skirt, and not only is her anatomy so weird that it's like I SHOULD be able to see her entire butt, but I can't, but maybe I can and what I'm seeing is, in fact, her butt—not only all of that, but her expression, whenever she comes on screen, looks directly at the player like, "You're looking at my weird butt, aren't you?" Well, yes, but not in a remotely sexual way. I'm just trying to figure out what happened here.

I do think someone stole my idea when making this game. Did you ever see those novels written to

help high school kids learn SAT words? I always thought they should write really raunchy erotica with SAT words in it. That'd get a teen's attention. A teen over 18, of course. Really put the anal back in ANALogy.

Results of Re-Testing

Test 1: Improvement of 6 words per minute.

Test 2: Improvement of 5 words per minute.

Test 3: Improvement of 15 words per minute ("Your typing speed is crazy").

Test 4: Improvement of 8 words per minute.

Booya.

Analysis

I've typed "anal" into this column more times than I'm normally comfortable with.

Okay, my typing did improve a little with a pretty small effort. But there are some problems here.

One, these tests really test how quickly you can transcribe, not type. When I'm writing fiction, it's from my head. Wait, my heart. Wait, my gut. Whatever, it's all output, no input. I don't have to process something incoming, then push it out. It's all internal. So I don't know how functional these tests and this training might be.

Two, it's not like I was obsessed with improving my speed when I wrote by hand. How much time would I waste learning shorthand when I could just continue writing fiction?

Three, and this is the biggie, it's not my typing speed that slows me down. Let's be honest, wording things right, or right enough, takes a lot more time and energy than hitting those keys.

The glimmer of hope here is that if you really suck at typing, you can probably improve with just a little work. I'm old, I'm only half-decent, and I made some strides in a pretty short time. It might be worth your time.

Besides, it's always a good time to type words like "turgid" for the sake of learning.

A Brief History of Vintage Writing Software



Maybe it's just me who's been seeing a lot of writerly complaints lately. Mostly about how hard it is to write.

Truth be told, we're damn lucky. It's never been easier to write.

Let's wipe out one more excuse to NOT write by looking at how hard it used to be to type words onto a screen and turn them into a book.

Before Software

It might surprise you to find out that computers and word processing developed separately, on their own, in parallel, before someone got the wise idea to use a computer to create editable documents. Maybe to say that might "surprise" you is a little strong. I'm guessing no readers just shit themselves here.

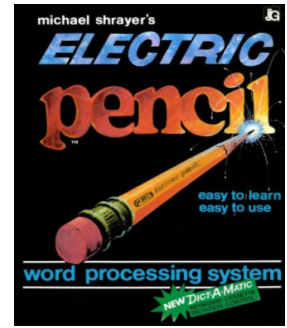
One of the first popular word processors, the Vydec Word Processing System, which let you type, edit, save to floppy disk, and print, cost \$12,000. Which is like \$60k today. Cha-ching.

Wang Laboratories made a more reasonable system that was sort of the grandpappy of what we see today. It was a hell of a lot more affordable, and besides, who can put a price on "wang" jokes? (By the by, if your name is "Wang" and you don't care for wang jokes, my name is "Peter." How a name from the Bible came to mean "penis" is a total mystery to me. Also, I have to deal with "Petering out." Some lazy bastard made my name synonymous with being a quitter. So I'm a penis or a quitter. Rad.)

Electric Pencil (1976)

Electric Pencil was word processing software for the TRS-80, which was a top-selling computer sold by RADIO SHACK, if you can believe it.

Radio Shack still exists, and in fact might not be a bad choice for finding PPE at the moment as most people have forgotten about Radio Shack entirely. Radio Shack also sells things like a battery tester, a device that, well, tests batteries. Is there any purpose to a battery tester? Isn't any device that requires a battery also a battery tester? You just put the battery in and see what happens? Oh, and the battery tester is powered by the battery it tests. Users are warned that testing should be done quickly so you don't drain the battery you're testing.



The TRS-80 was popular enough that Radio Shack still sells these vintage shirts with the logo of their old computer emblazoned on it. If you want to test for true nerd-dom, I HIGHLY recommend sporting one of these bad boys:

Electric Pencil users had to modify their computers because the TRS-80 Model I didn't have lower case. Now, I don't fully understand the technical details, but a fella had to add a little memory to the TRS, as well as a manual switch that turned the memory on and off. Oh, and when you were done with that, you had to add a Control key to the keyboard.

Folks, this was the kind of shit you got into with word processing in the 70's and 80's.

Wordstar (1978)

If people involved in fisticuffs shout "Worldstar," maybe writers should be shouting "Wordstar" into their cameras whenever they finish banging out a manuscript. I don't think these videos will be as popular, but hey, did you start reading a column about word processing software to be popular? Because if you did, you should probably strip off that Radio Shack sweatshirt and maybe, I don't know, get some hair gel?

Wordstar made use of an overlay to help provide commands.

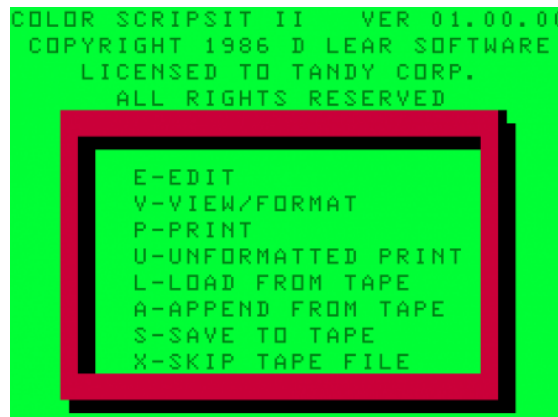


See, keyboards didn't have the same standard items, such as arrow keys. So you might use a whole combo of buttons to type.

Perhaps Wordstar came across your radar a few years ago when George R.R. Martin revealed that he writes on Wordstar 4.0, a release from 1987. He doesn't care for automated corrections. As he puts it: "I know how to use the Shift key:"

It might be the ultimate productivity tool, a word processor that doesn't even suggest the existence of an outside world. Buuuuut I guess we'll see if The Winds of Winter ever actually arrives. By the way, I don't italicize the titles of hypothetical books.

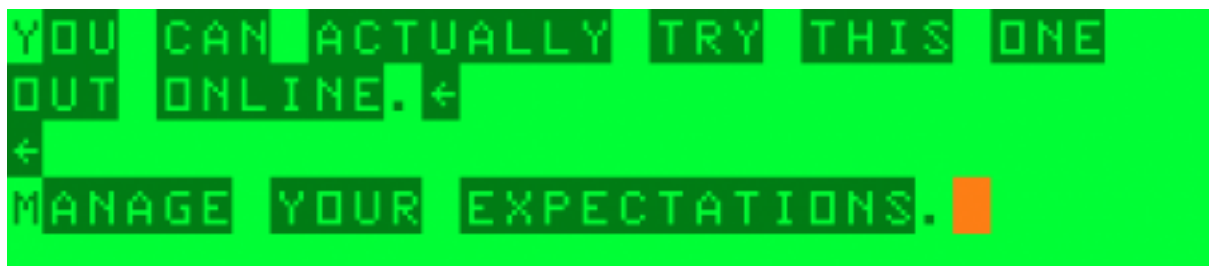
Scripsit (1978)



My two favorite things about Scripsit:

One, it came with audio cassette-based learning. Which is pretty brilliant. Someone hit on the best method of helping years before all these YouTube videos for Photoshop help. I'm guessing the Scripsit tapes didn't start with 15 seconds of unnecessary, weird music, like dubstep Enya for some reason, but they did the job.

Two, spellcheck was available. For an extra hundred bucks! Now that's how you make that money. Sure, you can type with this. But unless you want to sound like a dolt, you'd better fork over that hundo.



Word Juggler (1982)

Looks to be an overall good word processor. And CHRIST ON A BIKE, it cost \$295! In 1982 dollars. That'd be \$792.07 today. Just for the word processor!

It did support Qume, Diablo, and Xerox printers, and what I love about that is that Xerox really does make more sense as a name when it's next to Qume and Diablo. It's like, "Oh, yeah, I guess most of this stuff was built and named by nerds."

Zorlof The Magnificent (1982)



Zorlof was a pretty good word processor, and it wasn't too expensive. It could wrap text, so it knew, by itself, when to make a line break. If you started working on a document today, and it just blasted off to the right until you told it to stop, you'd be pretty flummoxed. It's really the little things that people like this rad wizard brought to the table.

Zorlof's best feature was its very metal artwork. Which really only appears on the front of the manual and probably on the box art (I couldn't find the actual box art, but one has to assume).

However, this awesome artwork was probably Zorlof's downfall. As a reviewer from Creative Computing said:

I had seen the full page advertisement for Zorlof several times, but had not paid any attention to it. I am interested in games, but have little time for them, so I am not attracted to game advertisements. Only when a friend called my attention to it did I realize that Zorlof is not a game, but a word processor and a darned good one.

The manual, sadly, isn't written like a fun quest or something. It's a total snooze. They even have a blank page on page 52, and did they put an awesome Frank Frazetta wizard pic? No, they went with the very IRS "THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK." Does no one else think it's super ironic to put something on a page, making it no longer blank, that tells the page is blank? Shouldn't it be like, "The following page is intentionally left blank"?

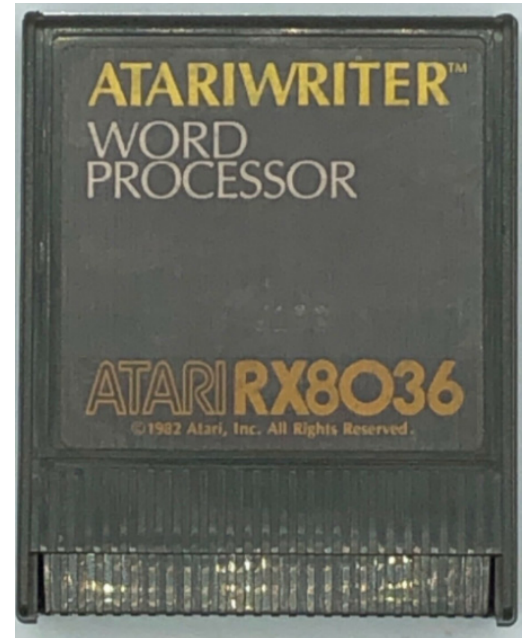
AtariWriter (1982)

AtariWriter was put on a cartridge for the Candy/Colleen computers. Yes, you can jump on eBay and buy what looks like an Atari cartridge, but instead of blasting aliens or playing a janky *Pac-Man*, you get all the thrills of word processing.

Atari had the habit of naming their computers after ladies. So we had Colleen, Candy, Pam, and Stella. Because I'm five, I find the description of some of Candy's specs hilarious. I recommend reading this aloud in the style of Cheech Marin outside the Tittie Twister in *From Dusk Til Dawn*:

Atari engineers wanted slots, real slots, like Apple][type slots, but this didn't happen. Sadly the timing was just wrong for Atari.

Yes, sadly, the timing just wasn't right, and Atari was not able to get those sweets Apple II slots they wanted.



pfs:Write (1983)

In a write-up for Byte magazine, Janet Camerson lodges some well-worded complaints about pfs:Write:

...you can add another year to your life in the time it takes to save material.

And the instructions were badly spiral bound. So Cameron said she was constantly losing pages and had to resort to sorting through loose paper. These were the kinds of things that separated good and bad pieces of software back in the day.

Sprint (1987)

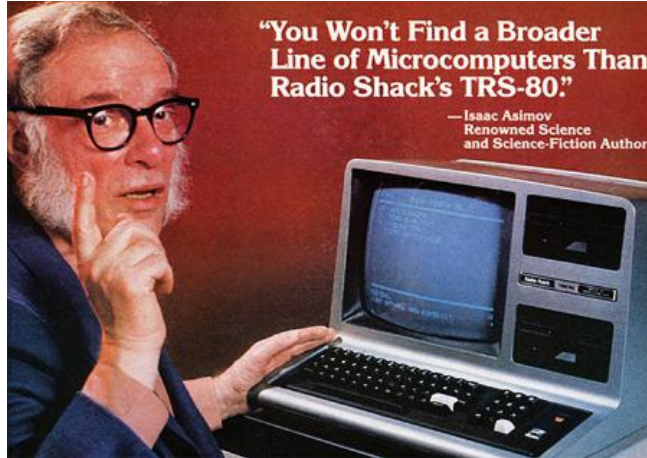
This came out in...1987, and it had crashproofing! They would demo this at trade shows by starting a document, unplugging the computer, plugging it back in, and once it restarted, the typist could resume work where they left off. How in the hell did someone figure this out in 1987, and then we lost it for decades?

On the other hand, Sprint was fairly unstable, so it could just implode completely without any external issues. Maybe that has something to do with it. It's like if you had a car with technology that meant it would never, ever crash, but it may just spontaneously combust. I guess if your issue was the very specific thing that precipitated your fiery death, it'd be a plus?

Back To The Present

We've got a lot of convenience today. You can use Google Docs, grab something like Jarte, which runs on a flash drive. And all of it pretty much works.

I do miss some of the things that went along with the old software. For example, endorsements by people like Isaac Asimov. I do like a nerd sci-fi writer in a 70's jacket and chunky glasses plugging software.



We're pretty lucky, you and me. We don't have to learn a complex layout, worry so much about a computer spontaneously exploding, or bust out a soldering iron. We can just jump on any computer and start typing.

You can jump right on an idea.

What the hell are you waiting for?

Reviewing Chuck Palahniuk's Reviewers



Laura Miller's dirty, hit-job review of Chuck Palahniuk's *Diary* started all this.

In 2003 Miller reviewed *Diary* for *Salon*. And the review was so foul that in a rare, unprecedented, and unrepeated, move, Chuck Palahniuk himself responded to Miller's critique:

I have never responded to a review, perhaps because I've never gotten such a cruel and mean-spirited one.

Please send me a copy of your latest book. I'd love to read it.

Until you can create something that captivates people, I'd invite you to just shut up. It's easy to attack and destroy an act of creation. It's a lot more difficult to perform one. I'd also invite you to read the reviews Fitzgerald got for "Gatsby" from dull, sad, bitter people -- like yourself.

Chuck's review of Miller's review was pretty fair. Her "review" of *Diary* was less a review of the book itself, more of a review of the cultural phenomenon that is Chuck Palahniuk:

As with SUV commercials, the target audience seems painfully clear: It's that strangely oversize fellow you sometimes get seated next to on airplanes or in bars, the one who loudly testifies to "laughing my ass off" all the way through Palahniuk's "fucking twisted" books and then glares, as if daring you to deny that such a thing is possible or that he is one dark and edgy dude...His fans may yet grow out of his cartoonish fiction and into a better remedy for debased consumerism: art about the complexity and paradoxes of human beings and their fate.

These "strangely oversize fellows" who like Palahniuk, not Duras or Woolf, were a made-up problem

for Miller. She didn't like being seated next to them in bars? These guys, and I consider myself one of them, do not go to bars where someone "seats" you.

Trashing a book is one thing. When you put a book out there, you have to accept that some people are not going to like it, and they'll make fun of you. But that's not the deal people make when they READ a book. Trashing a book's audience is a total dick move.

Chuck was the gatecrasher, writing books for people who don't typically read books. Miller set herself up as gatekeeper. And like most gatekeepers, she has a pretty specific and narrow idea of what human beings are, and what they are is evaluated by what they like.

Miller was wrong about *Diary*, but only in a lot of ways.

She's not the only one to make bad critiques of Chuck's work. He's an oft-misunderstood writer.

Let's jump in a time machine and look at some reviews of Chuck's work and just how wrong they were.

Adjustment Day - Publisher's Weekly, 2018

The over-the-top premise is classic Palahniuk, but he stumbles in its delivery, focusing more on the farcical aspects of these societies rather than on the characters living in them, resulting in a thin story.

People who want to sound smart critique stories for lack of character development or character agency.

Not all stories are improved through character agency or character change. Sometimes a book is about forces that overpower the individual.

Adjustment Day applies a nonfiction perspective to a fictional story. When you read something like a World War II history, something like *With The Old Breed*, characters are like pieces on a game board. And that's how non-fiction works sometimes, less focus on character, more focus on what those characters are doing. The premise is the star.

Characters having deep profiles would dilute one of the themes in *Adjustment Day*: identity politics. In extreme form, taken to the max level as they are in *Adjustment Day*, identity politics would tell us that it's less important what an individual thinks or feels than it is to know their demographically-compiled identity. In this respect, the book treats characters, narratively, the same way their fictional world treats them.

This review type, which proposes "fixes" to a book, needs to be careful. It's one thing to patch a couple plot holes, but it's another thing to propose a book that functions differently at its core. If your fix fundamentally changes the way a book works, maybe instead of writing the review, you should just go ahead and write this other, "better" book. I look forward to it.

Damned - GQ, 2011

This review is titled "Fuck Chuck: The Seven Worst Sentences From the New Novel, Damned." Wait, sorry, it's called "F*\$% Chuck" because they don't have the stones to use a dirty word.

Two of the examples:

Even through the dirty lenses, fogged with dead flakes of scalp, I can see Adolf Hitler crumpled beside me.

The noxious Great Ocean of Wasted Sperm continues to spread, engulfing the hellish landscape around it.

Damned and *Doomed* are exactly what they were meant to be: Chuck's bizarro/teen lit/Judy Blume mashup. Bizarro readers will recognize a lot of the sorts of things that happen here and might find them a little tame. But mainstream audiences will enjoy the over-the-top-ness of a Judy Blume narrator encountering goddamn Hitler.

This review gets everything backwards. Forget the fact that pulling seven sentences from a novel is a ridiculous way to make a point. Given the choice, a magazine that shudders at the idea of typing the word "fuck," or a book with an ocean of curdled semen? Guess I'll grab my snorkel. No, not that one, the semen snorkel.

Beautiful You - Bookmunch, 2014

The decision to start a book with a rape scene is not one lightly made. The decision to start a book with a woman being raped in front of a courthouse full of men, none of whom help, most of whom watch, is not one many writers would be brave enough to attempt. The decision to write the scene in a jovial tone, not exactly playing for laughs but certainly with one eyebrow raised is, to be blunt, really fucking stupid unless you can back it up with the most powerful, sensitive, insightful novel ever written. You can't, oh let's say for example, write a parody of a Mills & Boon novel that is less self aware than the original.

Just about every reviewer claimed to understand that *Beautiful You* was satire. They make sure to tell you this so that you know they're intelligent, then they go on to review the book as though it's an earnest novel, complaining about stereotypes, tropes, and yes, rape used as a plot device.

Smart Bitches, Trashy Books is an EXCELLENT romance fiction site, and they wrote a great piece (more than one, in fact) about rape in romance, why it's had such a prominent place in the romantic past, and why there's a continued presence in the romantic present. I'll sum it up for you: Romance can get rape-y.

Roasting the romance genre without bringing rape to the barbecue would be a total cop-out. And reviewing *Beautiful You* as though it's an applauding participant in the inappropriate, posed-as-romantic rape scene is like blaming *Blazing Saddles* for the existence of racism in westerns.

If you're just exploring ideas via book review, that's cool, just let me know. If you're like, "I don't know if I really buy the premise I'm about to put forth, that the effects of parody and sincerity might be

similar," that can work. But slamming *Beautiful You* for the rape that's very much a part of romance fiction is some silly shit.

Tell-All - The Onion A.V. Club, 2010

The trivia is gone in Tell-All, but he's found a far more obnoxious means of padding his text. In what he calls a Tourette's syndrome of name-dropping, the book is packed with names in bold font, many of which are so obscure that modern readers won't get the references without research.

Tell-All comes in at a brisk 192 pages, and you can skim over all the references. The point is obviously not to understand each of the specific references. It's to understand the general tone.

This is what the narrator in *Tell-All* would know. It's her area of expertise. This narrator would speak in Hollywood nonsense and name checks, and part of what works about this character is that her knowledge is essentially worthless, celebrity-based trivia.

One of Chuck's talents is that he manages to highlight the stuff you have to pay attention to. A mildly savvy reader won't get bogged down in the extras.

Read *Tell-All* the way you read a gossip rag. Don't go word by word. Being from *The Onion*, you should know a lot about skimming for the good stuff without getting bogged down in beating a premise to death.

Lullaby - People, 2002

*Among sick puppies, Palahniuk is the top dog. After all, this is the man who commended terrorism as a cure for the blahs in *Fight Club*...His jabs at consumerism are as well-aimed as ever, but like some of his other books *Lullaby* ends by tap-dancing in its own gore. Palahniuk has said that his grandfather killed his grandmother before committing suicide, and that his father was later murdered; rage tends to snap the leash of his satire.*

Let's start with "Palahniuk has said." That seems more than a little backhanded. A little "this allegedly happened." Pretty goddamn disrespectful.

This whole review has it wrong from the start, confusing the art and the artist. Is Chuck the man who commended terrorism? No. He's the man who wrote the novel that presented it. These are two totally different things.

And then bringing in the author's personal life to suggest that this is the root of rage felt by the reader? A therapist, someone who is good at analyzing people, would know that trying to size someone up based on a novel they wrote is foolishness. It's extra foolish for a book reviewer to give it a go.

There are times when this type of critique, looking at the artist who made the art, is useful. Non-fiction, novels that are basically novel-as-memoir. But attributing the values of characters to novelists, saying Chuck is an advocate of violence, is ALMOST as boring as it is incorrect. To my knowledge, Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of Super Mario, has not once smashed a turtle by jumping on it.

I take umbrage with these reviews, particularly when applied to Mr. Palahniuk. Because he is a very nice man who's had a difficult life, and he takes it out on his fiction. A healthy, productive way to deal with this sort of thing.

Stranger Than Fiction - Esquire, 2001

Still, it's too bad the book doesn't examine more completely the remarkable story of the murder of Palahniuk's father and the trial that followed. Instead, it's a passing detail. For the most part, Palahniuk seems unwilling to draw a single conclusion about his subject matter (except the emptiness of his own fame and the fact that he likes Amy Hempel, fights that will bloody few fists). Palahniuk shows but doesn't tell, and after a while it gets annoying. Are we presupposed to know what Palahniuk thinks about his subject matter? As a guy who tends to root for male writers, I'm sorry to say that we probably already do.

I'll never understand the person who wants the conclusion drawn for them. The stories in *Stranger Than Fiction* are FAR more powerful without Mr. Palahniuk telling readers how to feel about them.

And c'mon, dummy, how do you think he feels about the murder of his father? Awesome? Boner-riffic?

It's classic amateur hour to write a beautiful piece about a deep topic and to end it with some form of "And what I learned is this..."

You don't resolve the tension for a reader. You let the beast out of the cage, give the readers some hints, and then force them to wrestle it back into a cage.

I'd recommend a book for children as those seem to be better at outlining exactly the lesson to be learned. But, Jesus Christ, even *The Giving Tree* doesn't tell you how to feel.

Pygmy - New Statesman, 2009

*But the tale of Pygmy is an extended, indulgent exercise in "foreigner-people-no-speak-English-very-good" prose. Whereas novels such as *Trainspotting* or *A Clockwork Orange* create their own languageworlds in order to absorb readers in surreally affecting new environments, Palahniuk's efforts amount to little more than a series of hollow stereotypes that mock and parody their targets. There are a few smirks to be had here and there, but the effort required to conquer Pygmy's cloying observations on American life yields few rewards. This isn't the side-splittingly hilarious take on world affairs it was obviously intended to be.*

You're critiquing *Pygmy* while making up your own word, 'languageworlds'? C'mon. That's just slamming two words together. Seems like some indulgent, "book-reviewer-speak-English-SO-good-he-has-to-make-up-new-words" prose.

Oh, and linking that many words together with dashes? Hard to say if it's lazy or just dull. Y'know what? Why pick? It's both.

Twitter Bots for Writers



Twitter is a shithole.

Okay, that's not fair.

Twitter is a hole. And unfortunately, it only takes one person shitting in a hole for any hole to become a shithole. So, by that common standard, Twitter is definitely a shithole. But I don't want to put that on anyone in particular. Instead, I want to tell you about a way we might be able to shovel some of the shit out. And I'm here to hand you a shovel.

What's A Twitter Bot?

A Twitter bot is, basically, a program that automates some functions of Twitter.

Sometimes these are goofy fun. The now-dead @Betelgeuse_3 would reply to any Twitter user who tweeted "Beetlejuice" three times.

@wayback_exe generates screenshots of old web sites using Wayback Machine. Entertaining as hell.

@earthquakeBot tweets when an earthquake over 5.0 on the Richter scale is detected. I highly recommend this if you are not freaked out enough by geologic events.

@censusamericans tweets mini biographies of Americans based on Census data. From lives to data and back to lives. Good stuff.

You Give Bots a Bad Name

Bots have a bad rap because some people use them to spam nonsense. Or pornography. On one hand, robots delivering pornography to one's digital doorstep sounds like the future to me. On the other, it seems like this pornography tends to wreck your credit or your computer. Or both.

But bots aren't bad. They're just tools that perform the tasks set up by their programmers.

You could use a wrench to smash someone's face in, or you could use it to fix some plumbing.

Don't let your preconceived notions about bots get in the way.

How Writers Can Use Bots

The most basic functions of bots involve retweets, likes, sending messages, things like that. Those are the super easy things to do and a good way to get started.

What sorts of things could you do?

You could create a bot that retweets open submissions windows.

If you've got a book coming out, you could retweet anything that mentions your publisher.

You could automatically follow anyone who tweets using a certain hashtag.

You can automate following people back.

You can automatically follow everyone who tweets a certain phrase.

You can automatically DM someone who follows you, and you can set this up so the automated DM includes a link to a special piece of content. [*EDITOR'S NOTE: Most people HATE this, especially if that content is a link to where they can buy your book.]

Let's Get Machiavellian

Did you know that Machiavelli wasn't evil? He wrote this book, *The Prince*, about how to succeed in the world, ruthlessly, but not because he was saying this was a good idea. The Prince is really an expository piece that shows the world is kinda fucked-up.

Creating a useful bot can be a boon for you personally. Tweeting things that help others can be a great way to boost your own signal online.

If you tweet about open short story submissions automatically, you'll probably start building an audience that cares about short stories online. You build an audience that cares about short stories online, BAM!, you've got a group of people who might be more interested when you tweet about a short story you've placed.

Also, if you've done a lot of submitting, you know that having a following online is something they occasionally ask about. Hey, if you've got 8,000 Twitter followers, that helps a publisher's chances of

getting a return on their investment, and that gives you a little more bargaining power.

These aren't the most altruistic reasons to make a Twitter bot. But if your genuine way of helping others helps you out as well? Sounds like a win.

How-To

I'm going to tell you the basic steps, but you'll need to look into this more.

First, if you want to create a Twitter handle that does your bot stuff rather than tweeting from your current account, do that.

Next, you need to apply for developer status. So you'll go through the steps, tell Twitter you're making a bot, and they'll either approve it or not. Just be honest, and if your proposal doesn't work, they'll let you know.

You then build your bot.

I went with a paid service to do this, so it's about \$5/month. I do not have the coding background to build one from scratch, and besides, my purpose here is to save time.

This made it pretty simple for me. Check out this outline and decide whether it's right for you.

Back to the Hole

Before you start your bot army, one more thing that's good about bots.

It's really easy to waste time on Twitter, telling yourself that you're building your author brand. We all start that way...and an hour of scrolling later, we've made zero headway in building a brand, though we have heard some very interesting conspiracy theories. My current favorite? Taylor Swift only carries empty purses. Why she does this and how this theory started, I do not know.

Anyway, you can waste HOURS looking at pictures of Taylor Swift holding purses, wondering if all her bags are empty or if perhaps she's much stronger than she looks, or you can use a bot to automate some of your shit, spend less time on Twitter, more time writing.

Here's my recommendation:

Most of us use Twitter in two ways, with varying ratios. One way is for "professional" stuff, and the other is for "personal" stuff.

Pick one of those two and set up your bot(s) to handle that. Then, when you log in, you can focus on whichever piece you have left.

I don't do a great job with the professional stuff, so automating that helps me a lot. Then I know that when I go to Twitter, I'm just screwing around. I look at my empty purse pictures without deluding myself that I'm being productive.

You can do it the other way, too. If you find yourself constantly pimping your new book, automate

some fun into your timeline so your followers get a better ratio.

The Joys and Sorrows of Loving Obscure Books



I'm not the king of obscure books or anything. But I like to dabble. You've got 728 pages of skateboard "journalism" from the 90's? I'm in. Books with words in the title that book banners would prefer didn't exist INSIDE the books, let alone in a raised font on the cover? I'm your man.

But it's not all skater parties from the 90's and "Fuck" titles. Loving obscure books comes with its downsides, too.

Con: It's a Little Lonely

You aren't going to find people in real life who enjoy *The George Miles Cycle*. And even if you do find those people, how do you know? How do you bring it up? *Hey, just casual conversation, now that we've tackled personal finance: What do you think about the juxtaposition of realistic violence and graphic sex in novels, sometimes to the point that there's no discernible difference between slicing someone open and making love?*

Pro: When You DO Find Your People, It's Awesome

Enjoying obscure books and finding your people, it's like enjoying *Dark Star* and finding someone who put "Benson Arizona" on their Halloween playlist.

Yeah, A LOT of people like Star Wars, and you can talk Star Wars with just about anyone. But finding a *Dark Star* person makes for an instant connection. It doesn't happen every day. It's special.

Con: It Gets Pricey

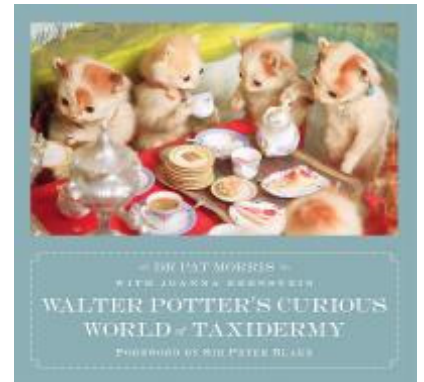
You're not gonna find most of the stuff you read on the library bookshelf. Or at your local-ish bookstore. This earns you some street cred, and unfortunately, street cred is not accepted currency at Amazon.

You're gonna have to buy a lot, and the used market is tough, probably because a lot of this stuff had a short print run, and those who buy it don't part with it too often. Most of us need to frequently consult our copies of *Empire Beneath the Ice*, which tells what "really" happened at the end of WWII, including the Nazi UFOs and super bases in the Arctic. You can't just read it once and part with it.

Pro: Your Bookshelf Is Interesting

Most home libraries, cue Shania, don't impress me much. I don't judge the person based on the books they have, but let's be real, most bookshelves are a snooze.

But when I see an oversized biography of Curly from *The Three Stooges* next to a book of taxidermied and posed animals in human scenarios... good chance I'm pulling something off the shelf.



Con: Your Bookshelf Is Interesting In The Wrong Way

I wouldn't say my relatives are conservative, but they're more conservative than *The Baby-Jesus Butt-Plug* or *The Faggiest Vampire* sitting on the coffee table. It's not the most welcoming thing to have that kind of shit out when relatives come over, so there's a little patrolling that has to be done.

I know some of you are saying, "My house, my rules," or whatever, and that's cool, you do you.

I'm not ashamed of who I am... okay, I'm not ashamed about everything about who I am, including my reading habits. But I also consider myself a polite host.

It's a little bit like this: You can be unashamed of your sex life and still have good boundaries and consideration. You can have a healthy and fun sex life AND move the fist-shaped dildos and lube barrels out of the living room when you have company.

I'm not going to force my love of obscure books on the unwilling.

Pro: You Rarely Get Caught Up In Book Arguments

Book people love to argue about some bullshit. But here's how it goes when you don't read normal shit anyway:

Argument: The canon is way too white and male.

Me: Also very few descriptions of cybernetic vaginas.

Argument: The new, popular book is problematic in the following ways.

Me: Um, totally. I haven't gotten around to that one yet, but have you read the new Swartzwelder? Do

you think it was disrespectful to Titanic casualties to show the captain ramming the boat into all kinds of stuff on a dare?

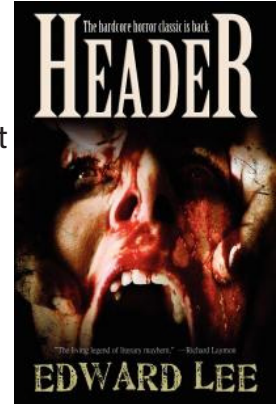
Argument: Genre is so beneath literary fiction it's not even funny.

Me: On that note, where does a book that consists entirely of some dude's weird YouTube DM inbox go?

Con: Movies Are Less Impressive

It takes a lot to get a movie on the screen. It has to go through a lot of people, raise a significant amount of money. Books are a little like that, but weird indie shit isn't. Just some fool and a dream.

Which means that weird books can be outrageously weird in ways that movies just can't seem to match. I've heard so many people say that *Texas Chainsaw* is horrifying, and I'm like, "Have you read *Header*? Read *Header*. *Header* will convince you that *Texas Chainsaw* is appropriate for schoolchildren."



Pro: You're Not Alone

Start traveling the weird book circles online and you'll find out there's a reason this stuff exists. Goodreads, YouTube, wherever, you'll find people who have fun with the same shit.

Yes, some of these circles are filled with jerkoffs who are trying to out-weird each other, the obscure books version of the English students who are asking if you've read X, Y, and Z so they can tell you that THEY have read X, Y, and Z. But overall, you'll find some good people.

It's a little hard to put yourself on a pedestal for reading trashy cyberpunk about a rogue doctor.

Self-Indie Publishing: Self-Publishing Without the Stigma



Are you stuck in a submitting rut? Just sending shit out over and over without a bite? Are you thinking about just saying to hell with it and going the self-publishing route?

There's another way. If you give me a few minutes of your time, I'll present another option that will allow you to publish while also saving you the stigma of self-publishing.

Welcome to the new world of Self-Indie Publishing

Why The Stigma?

Self-publishing is stigmatized by a few different groups.

One group is made up of traditional publishers, which includes big publishers and indies. A traditional publisher's existence is threatened by a healthy and vibrant market of self-published books. In a time when bookstore and library browsing is WAY down, and an age where you, as someone submitting for publication, are expected to already have your own social media following, do your own marketing, and push those copies; traditional publishers are fighting tooth and nail to prove they still have a place, that what they're offering you is valuable. They DO offer things of value, but not all of the things, and rather than trying to demonstrate their value, some traditional publishers spend time trashing the self-pub world.

I get suspicious because in ALL REALMS OTHER THAN PUBLISHING, we love mom and pop! We trust mom and pop to make us nice meals, we prefer mom and pop stores when it comes to visual arts, we love DIY, local artists. But when it comes to books, mom and pop can go fuck themselves,

and you've got to wonder why...

A more surprising group of detractors is traditionally-published authors. You are...not a threat to them. They're just tired of going to Thanksgiving and having an uncle say, "Oh, yeah, this lady I met on OkCupid is a published author, too. She wrote something about a group of unicorns who go to a wizard school. You and her have a lot in common."

The most outspoken bootstrapper-hater on the planet who is looking to dismantle power structures wherever they appear, if they're a published author, when it comes to publishing, they flip. All of a sudden power structures exist to protect people from THE HORRORS OF BAD BOOKS. You should do what they did, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, work harder on writing, work harder on submitting, and understand that this is totally a merit-based system that will reward your combination of good writing and hard work submitting.

Someone who doesn't believe that merit-based systems work, and someone who uses bootstrapper as a slur, will 100% tell you that the answer is to work harder within the guidelines of the existing system.

Published authors, I can already hear you screaming. But let me just say a few things to you all:

If you're already published, keep going. You do you. You'll be happy if you look back on a life of great work. I'd wager you won't be as happy if you look back on a life spent gatekeeping and dunking on self-pub folks.



And let's be honest with each other. A LOT of you got your start by publishing with an "indie" that was really a one-person operation run by someone you knew personally. Like, a lot of you started out this way. I've seen the names, I know how this works. I publish you in my journal, you publish me in your anthology. It's a little bit of a circle jerk out there, and by the way, I'M FINE WITH THAT. Circle jerks get a bad name, but that's because they're no fun when you're outside the circle. As long as you write a good book, jerk away! Just remember, when you're looking down on someone trying to escape the self pub stigma, getting your start with a micro press run by a literature buddy is awfully close to self-pub in all but the technicalities.

Ethics

I consider myself a mostly ethical person. I'm generally a rule-follower. However, I think it's permissible to skirt the rules in situations where the rules are unfair, and especially if nobody gets hurt.

Are the rules of traditional publishing unfair? Probably. Publishers hold all the cards.

If you have a problem with the ethics here, let me pitch it this way: I'm suggesting a method by which the power of the publication industry can be redistributed among a greater number of people as opposed to having the power siloed among very few.

Sound like a familiar pitch?

Is anybody going to get hurt by what I'm suggesting?

Some might argue that readers will be tricked into reading a self-pub book, thinking it's from a publisher. I think this is fine.

If, as many say, self-pub books stink because they have bad editing and bad covers, then there's no chance readers will get tricked, right? If it's totally obvious, the difference in quality, then there's nothing to worry about.

If the book is good, then yes, a reader got duped. But the only thing they were tricked out of was their own false ideas about what a self-published book really is.

The Plan

I'm going to outline a plan I call the "Self-Indie Plan." What you're going to do is basically set up a one-person "publishing house" for your book that appears, to most outsiders, to be a legit indie publisher not owned and operated by you.

Step 1: Decide your level of secrecy

Do you want this to be iron clad, or do you want someone with 15 minutes of internet research to be able to declare that your jig is up?

I very much doubt that a lot of people would go to the trouble to, say, check the registration documents for an LLC to discover that a publisher was a one-person operation. So you might only need a small amount of cloaking to convince everyone that you're on the level.

But hey, maybe doing it the super tactical way is just a little more fun. Besides, you'll learn something.

Step 2: Come up with a name

Your fake publishing house needs a name.

It can be to your advantage to come up with a name that's sorta generic. If you're looking to put out a horror novel, something like Edgy Darkness Press is fantastic. Because when someone goes to look you up, it's hard to find something that's not very clever.

If you're going literary, name it after any street in Manhattan.

Another way to do it, call your publishing house something like Bench Press Press or Standing Vertical Press or Drill Press. Because these are popular phrases with the word "press" in them, you'll be obscured in the land of bro science.

Put some thought into a thoughtless name, a name that if people struggle to locate, they'll blame themselves.

Step 3: Come up with a logo

Something simple. Don't overthink it. Look at Random House. Look at Penguin. Overthinking it just makes it obvious you're a faker. A simple outline image will be totally fine.



Step 4: Get an Address

This is the first optional step depending on your privacy concerns, so feel free to drop this according to your needs. If you don't think anyone will look into this too hard, you can use your home address.

The next step up is using a friend's address. Someone willing to pass on some mail.

I recommend using a virtual address. There are plenty of services that will give you a real, physical address in your state.

You can also use a PO Box, but that can cause some problems when you decide to...

Step 5: Form an LLC

This is boring, but it's WAY easier than you think. I did mine in about 20 minutes. The reason you form an LLC is two-fold: One, the LL's in LLC mean "limited liability." So let's say you start your hypothetical small press and someone sues you. They can sue you for company assets, but if you have a retirement account from your 9 to 5, that stays with you.

The other reason is that you can use your LLC as the name for everything else. So you can put that on your web space, your other application-y stuff, and do all your business as one LLC, which keeps your name better buried.

Some states don't allow virtual or PO Box addresses for LLC formation. Look into it where you are.

Step 6: Web Site

You need a basic web site. A main page, a page for the books you sell, one of those dumbass "About Us" pages, and maybe a blog. Put something about submissions somewhere, just make sure to tell everyone that you are not accepting submissions at this time.

This does not need to be amazing. You DO need a good URL, however, for verisimilitude. If your URL has "squarespace" or "blog" or something like that in it, you're missing the point.

That said, it can be to your advantage if the web site doesn't look TOO good. If you've submitted for publication to small presses, academic presses, and so on, you know what I'm talking about. If you don't, look through a bunch and you'll get the idea pretty quick.

Step 7: Build a Past

Most blogs will allow you to backdate a post, and if you can't do that, just add the date in manually, change the font and size accordingly, and you should be good to go. Go back to about 2016. You only need about half a dozen posts. Spread them out, and make each one about how this time you're going to commit more to this blog thing. This just makes it look like your press didn't pop up yesterday.

I also recommend setting up a figurehead for your press. Make it an older person who isn't interested in technology and social media. Get them an AOL contact email.

Step 8: Laying more Past

Okay, on your web page where you show your catalog, post up some fake books. Seriously, get some fake titles, fake covers, and fake author names, post 'em up, and then put a black bar that says SOLD OUT across each one. You can even add some text at the top of the page that says, "Such and such press does limited run pressings, after which rights revert to the authors."



Again, don't get cute. Don't make things that look TOO fake. Don't make it too joke-y.

If you don't have the ability to make realistic covers, just have a generic "SOLD OUT" cover image for the books that are sold out.

Step 9: Social

Go ahead and grab the Twitter/FB/Instagram for your stuff. You don't need to post anything. Just get your logo in there and the URL in the bio. Remember, if you post stuff, it'll be dated, so people will know that there's been some funniness going on.

Step 10: The Explanation

Okay, if you want to lay in an explanation for why you don't have any activity on social, here are a couple options:

The Takeover: concoct a story in the blog, then throw it out on social. So, your first post everywhere is something like "The story thus far," then you link back to your site where you say, "A small press is a passion project, blah blah blah. We were friends, then business partners, and then things fell apart. I don't want to get into details, but it was not an amicable split blah blah blah. At the end of the day, what matters is that I've recently got control of all things [NAME OF PRESS] and we're looking to the future!"

The New Hire: Here's your first post: "Hi, my name is Maddie. I'm working on some eMarketing for [NAME OF PRESS]. [FIGUREHEAD OF PRESS] is pretty anti-social-media (as many of you know, lol), but in the interest of doing right by our authors, I've been brought on board to handle social media. So plan on seeing a lot more of [NAME OF PRESS] around here in the future!"

Step 11: Get Your Book On There

Just make sure your book doesn't look TOO amazing compared to the other offerings from the press. You'll have to put in some fake work to make sure the previous offerings, the books themselves, look pretty decent.

Get a nice cover. AND you can't publish through Amazon. You have to send out electronic or physical copies from somewhere else. If it's Amazon's publishing, the jig is up.

Step 12: The Next Book

Now you've got a book published by a real press! So when you go to publish, that goes on your cover

letter thingie. Or when you submit a short story, don't forget to include this info!

Because the real idea here isn't just to publish your current book, it's your next book, and the book after that.

A Last Note On The Irresponsibility Of Doing This

I mean, sure, it's underhanded.

But what's the difference between someone who is a total, hated liar and someone who is admired for doing whatever it takes?

Success. The difference is whether or not you succeed.

If you do this and you succeed, imagine telling the story of how you got your start now that you're a published author with a dozen novels under your belt. If people love your books, they won't hate you for going the long way round to get them in the world.

So do me a favor: Only take this road if you've written a good book. One you've revised, edited, and worked your ass off to get down on paper. Take this road because you've got a damn good book, we all need to read it, and there's more where that came from.

Chuck-alikes: A Chuck Palahniuk Read-alike List



Chuck-alike definition: Books like Chuck Palahniuk's.

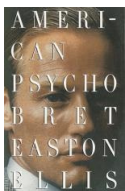
Chuck's books attract people who don't always enjoy the books they were assigned in school, the books that hit bestseller lists, the books that you find in book clubs. Which means Chuck's fans have to be a little more clever when we're looking for other great books.

Here's a HUGE list of Chuck-Alikes, non-Chuck books that might please the Palahniuk fan.

They're divided up into categories, because a Chuck-alike can be a lot of different things, all with some sort of that Chuck-y goodness.

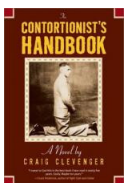
The Classics

These are oft-recommended Chuck-Alikes from over the years. A lot of them were published around the same time as *Fight Club*, and a lot of them have a hard-to-define feel that goes down easy with Chuck's stuff. They mostly come from the transgressive fiction movement, like Chuck's earlier books.



"American Psycho" by Bret Easton Ellis

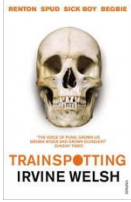
I thought this one would have a huge resurgence in 2020, but I guess people preferred to misread 1984 instead.



"The Contortionist's Handbook" by Craig Clevenger

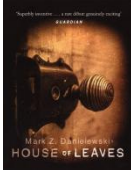
This book sounds like one of Chuck's, has a Chuck-like music, and it's a good thing. It's not like some other posers who are doing a bad Chuck impression. Clevenger is a great writer who's also hosting some live online writing workshops for Goleta Valley Library. You should

check 'em out.



"Trainspotting" by Irvine Welsh

Pro-tip on this one, you can read the screenplay version if reading the words written in an aural, accented style is an annoyance to you. Which I'll admit, it totally is for me.



"House of Leaves" by Mark Z. Danielewski

Read this one at night with some Tool playing softly in the background. That's how it's meant to be read.

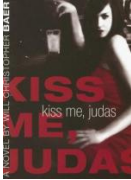


"Geek Love" by Katherine Dunn

In my top 5 books from this list for so many reasons. There's an edition with a glow-in-the-dark cover that I've always coveted.

The Forgotten Classics

These are books that were bandied about a lot in Chuck circles, but they've fallen out of recommendation popularity. Which is a shame because they're great.



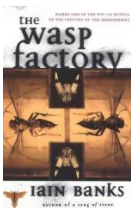
"Kiss Me, Judas" by Will Christopher Baer

Baer dropped away for awhile, but he's back in Twitter form! This book, and the others in the Phineas Poe trilogy, are hard, dirty, and tight.



"Suicide Casanova" by Arthur Nersesian

You will HATE Nersesian's characters.



"The Wasp Factory" by Iain Banks

Animal torture, baby murder. This one lacks some of the lightness of a Chuck book. Which is saying something.



"Generation X" by Douglas Coupland

Coupland is still around, still writing great books. But they've gotten a little...artsty/academic or something. I dig the new Doug, but it's not for everyone.



"The Average American Male" by Chad Kultgen

"Toxic masculinity" WAY before that was a thing people talked about. And hilarious. You might not think it's funny. If you don't, just stop reading it and pick up something else. This

book has been out since '07. You'll be fine.

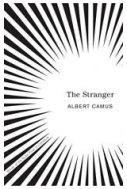


"Last Exit to Brooklyn" by Hubert Selby Jr.

I don't know what happened to Mr. Selby, and I no longer investigate authors I haven't heard from in awhile. New personal policy. Okay fine...Oh, he's dead. We live in a sad world when you find out someone's dead and it's kind of a relief. Rest in Peace, sir.

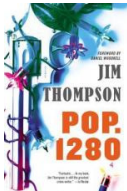
The Ones Your English Teacher Might Call Classics

If you want to read something Palahniuk-esque that might have the fringe benefit of getting you an A on a book report, here you go.



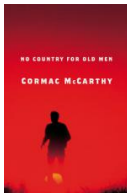
"The Stranger" by Albert Camus

Slim, minimal stuff.



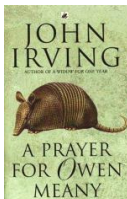
"Pop. 1280" by Jim Thompson

Pulp-y and quick, like a Palahniuk crime novel.



"No Country for Old Men" by Cormac McCarthy

Tight story, dark perspective. Things happen, which isn't always the case in literary fiction.



"A Prayer for Owen Meany" by John Irving

There's a flavor here. And a story from which the characters can't escape.

Books From Chuck's Fellow Workshoppers

Books by people who've worked with Chuck as peers in more recent history.



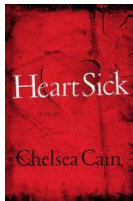
"The Stud Book" by Monica Drake

Lots of lip service was paid to Drake's *Clown Girl*, and Chuck gave it a huge boost when it was published. But I think this book is a lot better. Better story, better reading experience.



"The Chronology of Water" by Lidia Yuknavitch

Co-workshopper and co-teacher of Chuck's, Lidia Yuknavitch has a pretty stunning memoir here. Don't concern yourself with what it's about. Just open it up and start in.



"HeartSick" by Chelsea Cain

My old boss, a library manager, went to a book event and saw Chelsea Cain read. She said, "She was so put together and looked so nice and sweet, and then she read one of the most horrific things I've ever heard." For the record, this old boss of mine is now a Chelsea Cain fan.



"Wild" by Cheryl Strayed

I hesitate to recommend this one in some ways, it's not exactly in the same vein. But I think if you're looking for a lighter version of what Chuck does, you might hear echoes of it here.



"Burnt Tongues Anthology" edited by Chuck Palahniuk

These stories were the result of folks online reading Chuck's prompts/lessons and taking them to heart. Often with brutal and hilarious results.

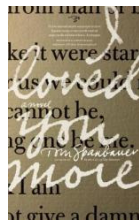


"Criterion" by Tyler Jones

Jones worked with Chuck as well as Chuck's teacher, Tom Spanbauer. Which brings us to...

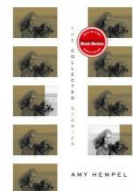
Books That Outline Chuck's Writing DNA

His teachers, both immediate and removed.



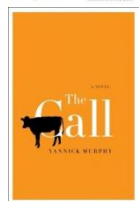
"I Loved You More" by Tom Spanbauer

In The City of Shy Hunters is my favorite by Tom, but *I Loved You More* is a great book that also really explains a lot of Dangerous Writing techniques like Big Voice/Little Voice. It's a beautiful read, and you'd be a better writer if you went for it a second time, looking at it as a textbook.



"The Collected Stories" by Amy Hempel

Hempel was a fellow student of Tom Spanbauer, and he uses a lot of her stories as examples. Chuck does as well, especially "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried." *Tumble Home* was a lot of Chuck readers' first stop on the search for Chuck-alikes.



"The Call" by Yannick Murphy

Murphy is one of the more unsung but still dazzling writers to come out of the same stew.

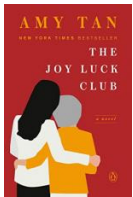


"Peru" by Gordon Lish

Lish was the teacher who taught Spanbauer and Hempel. So we can trace the lineage back that far. He's an excellent editor, and his own books are divisive, but they're another step on the journey.

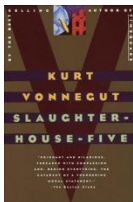
Books That Have Influenced Chuck

Interviewers, please, for the love of god, unless you're interviewing an author who is brand new to the game, check and see if there are readily-available answers to the "Who are your influences?" question before asking. Like these:



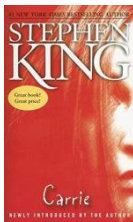
"The Joy Luck Club" by Amy Tan

Calling *Fight Club* a read-alike for *The Joy Luck Club* is weird, but it's a weird world. Wear a helmet.



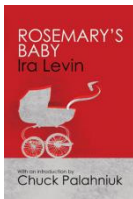
"Slaughterhouse-Five" by Kurt Vonnegut

Style, the mixture of darkness and humor. This one is a big influence.



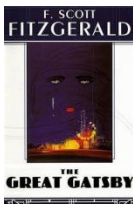
"Carrie" by Stephen King

Most of the writers who came to prominence in the 90's hid their Stephen King influence, but now that literary reputations don't work the same way, most have come forth with the King book that influenced them.



"Rosemary's Baby" by Ira Levin

Chuck even wrote an intro for this one.



"The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Another one that a lot of people don't love, but the structure and sequencing of events are definitely something Chuck has spent a lot of time thinking about and dissecting.

Books that READ Like One of Chuck's

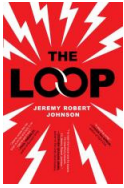
Titles that might give you a glimmer of reading a shiny new Chuck.



"Frisk" by Dennis Cooper

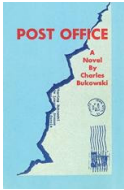
From the author:

I present the actual act of evil so it's visible and give it a bunch of facets so that you can actually look at it and experience it. You're seduced into dealing with it. ... So with Frisk, whatever pleasure you got out of making a picture in your mind based on ... those people being murdered, you take responsibility for it.



"The Loop" by Jeremy Robert Johnson

JRJ has a lot of books that have a feel akin to Chuck's different books. They've both worn a lot of hats, and they both deliver, big time.



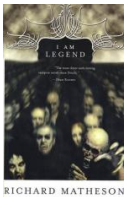
"Post Office" by Charles Bukowski

The "K-Mart Realism" bible. Bukowski's been dragged through the mud, mostly because of so many imitators doing bad impressions. But what most people don't understand about dragging Bukowski through the mud, he's been there all along. Doesn't bother him a bit.



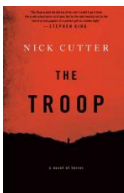
"I Miss The World" by Violet Levoit

People describe this one by comparing it to being punched in different parts of the body. Depends on the reviewer and their experiences with being punched, I reckon.



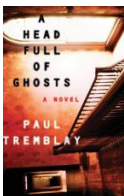
"I Am Legend and Other Stories" by Richard Matheson

There's some Matheson in Chuck somewhere, especially in his horror stuff and short stories.



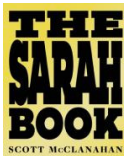
"The Troop" by Nick Cutter

Nick Cutter wrote a *Fight Club* knockoff as Craig Davidson (or at least a book that was marketed that way), but *The Troop* does a better job walking that line of almost pushing the reader away but somehow compelling them to keep coming back.



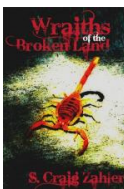
"A Head Full of Ghosts" by Paul Tremblay

A fine, contemporary use of a non-fiction device to tell a fictional story.



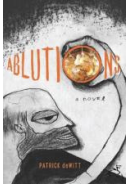
"The Sarah Book" by Scott McLanahan

Imagine a sort of rural Palahniuk.



"Wraiths of the Broken Land" by S. Craig Zahler

Palahniuk and Cormac McCarthy had an ugly, violent-as-fuck baby.

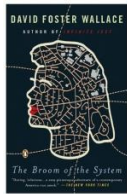


"Ablutions" by Patrick DeWitt

I recommend this story to anyone who will read it, but with the caveat that nobody else do the second-person novel, ever. DeWitt did it, but reading the attempts of others is painful.

Gerry's Kids

Editors mean a lot. Gerry Howard, Chuck's longtime editor, has edited a lot of other big names and big books in his time. Here's just a few.



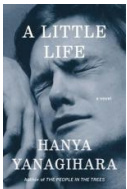
"The Broom of the System" by David Foster Wallace

Howard could probably be credited with "discovering" Wallace.



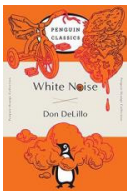
"The Subject Steve" by Sam Lipsyte

The master of the sentence.



"A Little Life" by Hanya Yanagihara

Well it's depressing, and it was a HUGE hit.

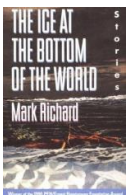


"White Noise" by Don DeLillo

This one probably fits in with a lot of categories, but Don's definitely one of Gerry's Kids.

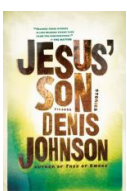
Recommended By Chuck

Whether these are like reading a Chuck book depends from title to title. But there is no shortage of gems here.



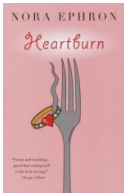
"The Ice At The Bottom of the World" by Mark Richard

The king of the short story.



"Jesus' Son" by Denis Johnson

Also the king of the short story. It's a type of fiction, not a country. There can be two kings.



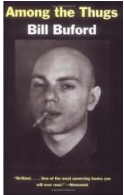
"Heartburn" by Nora Ephron

Might be a bit of a surprise here, but with its structure and use of objects, it's a good read. There's a reason Nora Ephron wrote like a hundred hit movies.



"Miles From Nowhere" by Nami Mun

Wonderfully dark and depressing, it feels like a book that could've come out in the early 90's along with a lot of Chuck's contemporaries.



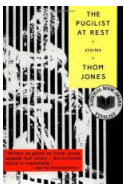
"Among the Thugs" by Bill Buford

A Hunter S. Thompson type of embedded, gonzo journalism that takes quick turns from entertaining to vile.



"Knockemstiff" by Donald Ray Pollock

Damn you, Donald. You kept that idea going, that mystique of the undiscovered writer genius working a factory job somewhere. Speaking of..

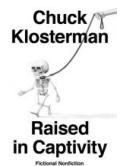


"The Pugilist at Rest" by Thom Jones

Jones was working as a janitor, I believe, and was only discovered later in life.

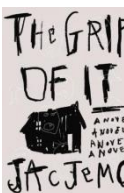
Left Fielders

When you learn how to recommend books in library school, a good teacher will tell you to recommend one title that's almost exactly like the one a reader enjoyed before, a second that's similar but not exactly the same, and a third that's a left field, gut feeling. Here are my left field Chuck-alikes.



"Raised in Captivity" by Chuck Klosterman

Very short "fictional non-fiction," which is fictional stories written as though they were real. The journalistic sensibility will appeal, and the premise of each story is unique and fascinating.



"The Grip of It" by Jac Jemc

The style is really different, but there's something about the story taking the stage in front of the characters...I don't know, just my gut.



"Us" by Michael Kimball

A very plain story told in a plain, almost obsessive way. The style is the star, and it shines.

Too Young for Horror?



Most of us saw someone get decapitated a little before we were ready.

Most of us had a parent who didn't read a movie description, an uncle who liked to show us monster movies and fill us with sugar, and some of us just managed to fight sleep long enough to go deep into cable channels and see heads rolling, someone punching right through a dude, or maybe even a bit of nudity.

Chances are you saw some horror before you could totally handle it.

The message I've got for you today is that this is not only okay, it might be the best way to experience horror. "Experience horror" being the fartsy way of saying, "Watch a guy's face melt while you're still in footie pajamas."

Are You Ready For It?

Horror you're ready for isn't scary. I don't just mean that in a jump-scare kind of way. I just mean that the more life you experience, the more things you do, the less unknown there is, and the harder it is to connect with that feeling of fear.

The X-Files had me peeing myself as a kid. I was pretty sure that my chances of being abducted by aliens were somewhere between 100% and 200% (I guess 200% means I'd get abducted twice).

Since then I've been seasoned. Beaten down, if you will. The imagination doesn't keep me up at night so much as which tasks I'll need to finish for work tomorrow. I now fall asleep watching *The X-Files* most nights. The only horror to be found is the episode where the smoking man is a failed novelist. That one hits hard, but in a different way.

A horror experience you're ready for? It might be fun, it might be enjoyable. But it's not scary.

If the purpose of horror is to scare us, then you might be missing out on a rite of passage if you don't get a taste before you're ready.

Getting Your Hands On Something

There's a transgression involved in watching an R-rated movie when you're way too young, and that makes the viewer more complicit. It's not like I just happened upon this thing, it's something I made an effort to experience. That adds something to the mix.

If you read Stephen King's *IT* in middle school, you're a little young, and pushing through those 1000+ pages is a feat. It's an act. It's intentional. It makes you a part of the horror.

As an adult I can read and watch whatever the fuck I want. Getting my hands on some hardcore horror is no more difficult than getting a cozy mystery with a pun title like "Cat's Out of The Baguette."

As an adult, you're not doing anything wrong when you read and watch horror. As a kid, you're transgressing. It helps. It heightens the experience.

Keeping Kids From Horror Changes Horror

Horror's dirty secret used to be that it was often R-Rated while truly being aimed at 15 year-old boys. *Friday the 13th Part 2* has one of the all-time most gratuitous nude scenes in the history of a franchise that basically invented the needless topless moment.

It's nice to have new, more mature horror movies that are "adult" because they hit on some more complex topics and ideas rather than being "adult" because a woman walks into a lake to skinny dip, by herself, at night, for no apparent reason of her own or of the plot's necessity. Just clothes off, in the water, back out, and then the movie continues.

Big horror movies and lots of writers have abandoned some of the bullshit, but I wonder, what's the effect when horror is no longer made to scare people who are "too young"? *Hereditary*, *It Follows*, *The VVitch*, *Ready Or Not*, *Raw*, *Us*, *The Platform*, many of them seem to be less truly frightening than they "really make you think." A 15 year-old isn't going to enjoy *Hereditary* with the possible exception of a very brief, shocking moment or two.

Mainstream horror may have taken a criticism-based turn, maybe somewhere around the early 90s and the publication of *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* as well as *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. At that time, there was a lot of academic study of "low" culture, and it seemed like a new thing, looking at "low" culture, especially horror and slashers, with a critical eye.

I'm of the opinion that the trend of looking at low culture with a critical eye is just about as tired now as the trend of making horror for 15 year-olds was in the mid-90's. It's one thing to look at *Chopping Mall* with a gender studies bent. That may have interesting results. Because it's not meant to be cultural commentary, it may say something about culture that's less...careful. Less manufactured.

Looking at *The VVitch* as a film critic, perhaps a social critic? The movie seems specifically designed for that purpose.

Sometimes you want to watch something adult and thoughtful, and horror is a great way to create social commentary...and sometimes you want to watch killbots chase middle-aged "teens" around a closed shopping mall, bursting their heads apart with lasers. Not every experience lends itself towards writing a thesis.

I'm not saying it's one or the other, *Get Out* or *Friday the 13th Part 2*, take your pick. Both movies exist, and both types continue to be made. I'm saying that we'd lose something without horror designed to scare people who really are a little young to be in front of the screen or to have the book in their hands. That audience matters to the genre as a whole. If horror isn't built for people who are "too young," we'll lose some of the most horrifying stuff. Or at least a lot of Tom Savini gore effects (which deserve a wing in the Smithsonian).

Can You Still Feel The Feels?

Age is the most common way to get to horror before you're supposed to. *The Stuff* is scary as hell when you're 9, hilarious and confusing as an adult. But getting to it young isn't the only option. It's not the only way to access that same feeling of unreadiness.

During a family medical crisis, I wasn't really ready for blood and guts. Thinking about all the stuff inside the skin was always a reminder of something I didn't want to think about. Thinking about death was hard. Heightening the fear with a real life connection? That shit works.

Reading about a plane crash on a plane is an experience.

Watching *Evil Dead* the week before you go to a cabin in the woods is perfect.

Look for the places, the times when you're not ready, and see if you can reconnect with the real impact of horror. By "real impact of horror" I mean "Sheer terror of watching people in a flying metal tube plunge out of the sky while they burn alive."

Try it. Find something you're afraid of, find a book about that shit, and mash it all up. Think about reading horror as more than just paging through a book. Think about it as an experience.

What if you took a drive into the country, parked at a rest stop near a farm, and read *Clown in a Cornfield*? With your car doors unlocked.

What if you read Stephen King's *IT* near an open, flowing drainage pipe?

You might not get back to that feeling of watching *Friday the 13th Part 2* when you were WAY too young. But you'll feel something.

What's Scary In Small, Indie, and Self-Pub



If you want to be scared this October, turn away from the mainstream. Tell Publisher's Weekly to piss off. And stop looking to big publishers to bring the pain.

If you want to get scared, go small.



A Small Press Is Worth Following

You can follow a small press, like, Death's Head Press, publishers of *The Magpie Coffin*, and if you find a couple things you like from them (you will), you're on the path to a lot more fun.

You can't follow Hachette. There's not an aesthetic there. I'm sure they would say they have one, and they would be happy to describe it at length. But you've got David Sedaris, Jason Reynolds, Elin Hilderbrand. All great, successful writers, but I don't think there's a through-line to be found.

Smaller presses haven't lost the thread of what a publisher does. If you like Death's Head, you can walk over to their table at a con (when tables and cons are a thing again) and pick up just about anything from them, and you can reasonably expect you'll enjoy it.

Following small presses is a great way to widen the stable of authors that you ALWAYS read when they come out with something new.



Let's Get Gross

Books like *The Essential Sick Stuff* by Ronald Kelly and others from Silver Shamrock Publishing are definitely in the extreme category, something I don't see a lot of from bigger houses.

It's more niche, which doesn't mean it's unprofitable, just that it's going to be difficult to get placed in bookstores, airports, all that shit. It's not going to make the front page at Amazon.

And let's be clear: We need books that don't show up in goddamn airports.

Gross is good. Gross is great. And small presses aren't afraid to get dirty.



Keeping it Brief

Independent publishing loves novellas, which seem to be not so fashionable for bigger houses. Their loss.

Novellas are perfect for horror. You get in, you shit your pants, you get out. It's sort of like horror movies. When it comes to scare-em-ups, give me two 90-minute movies over a single movie that's near three hours.



I Mean REALLY Brief

I Am Not Your Final Girl comes in at 91 pages of horror poetry! Hear me out: Even if this sucks, it's not a waste of your life. It's a waste of your lunch break. You get into a 600-page jobber, and you have to get a good hundred in before you can give it up with a clear conscience.



The Indie Spirit is Joyful

I've always said that if you're having a shitty time writing it, I'll probably have a shitty time reading it. I suspect that Cameron Roubique had a good-ass time writing *Kill River*, a book about a spooky water park.

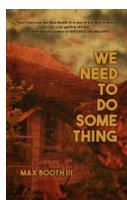
You can feel an energy, a joy in the writing on a lot of these indies, something you don't feel as strongly with so-and-so's 15th novel in the such-and-such series where you just know they're like, "What book am I working on? The one that pays for my kid's new school clothes."

It's weird to mix "joyful" and horror together, but you know it if you've felt it. It's like watching *Hatchet* and its sequels: You can tell someone was having a blast.



It's Fun To Tell People What You're Reading

I mean, you can continue telling people you're reading *The Shining* or whatever. But what if you could tell people you're reading *Cocksucker*? *The Fucking Zombie Apocalypse*? *Dead Stripper Storage*? How about adding THAT shit to your Amazon wishlist? Your Goodreads "Currently Reading" list? If you want to get in on that fun, Grindhouse Press has you covered.



Genuine Surprise

Mainstream books will have twists and plot devices. But small press is where you need to go if you want to be genuinely surprised. If you want to turn a page and say "Holy shit!" then get *We Need To Do Something* by Max Booth III and put out by Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing.



They Publish Misfits

Just about every book is sold on a "It's like X crossed with Y" pitch. "It's like *The Fault in Our Stars* mixed in with *Hunger Games*!" Shit like that. Some great stuff doesn't work that way. Because IT'S NOT LIKE THE OTHER STUFF OUT THERE! If you want something that's original, look for something small, like *Schrodinger's Telephone* by Marion Stein.



New Twists On Classic Ideas

The mainstream idea of a new twist on an old classic is digging up the corpse of an old property and slapping a story nugget out of it.

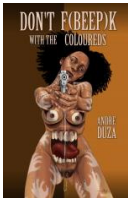
Indies aren't afraid to take a concept to a new, scary, fascinating place. They're not afraid to experiment. Because there isn't a giant budget and shit tied up in it. They can do what they want!

Which brings you great stuff like *Camp Slaughter* by Sergio Gomez. Like a camp slasher, but so much better.



When You Don't Know What To Expect

That's the best time to be scared. Don't read ABOUT it, just read *Dear Laura*. Go in naked.



Indies GO THERE

We're talking about a book called *DON'T F[BLEEP]K WITH THE COLOUREDS* now.

Deadite Press will not disappoint.

You can have your "sly, artistic meditations" on race in America with a couple scares in 'em. I'll take this. See you on the other side.

How to Write Horror That Sticks



Why do we still talk about *The Shining*? Why did someone make a documentary about off-the-wall *Shining* theories in 2012, almost 25 years after the movie's release, and 35 years after the book came out? Why can you still buy pajamas patterned after the rug in *The Shining*?

Why don't we talk about *The Long Walk* this way? Why hasn't *Slither* become the movie that's referred to time and again?

What's the difference between a good horror story you forget about in a couple days and one that haunts you?

A Mixture of Emotions

In *Aliens* we get a brief moment where the Marines are basically boned, and Vasquez and Gorman are in a vent, surrounded by xenomorphs, and they activate a grenade. They hold it together, and even though Vasquez calls Gorman an asshole, their closeness and physical actions provide a surprising moment of tenderness, of human connection.

It's another emotional texture to offset the terror without deflating it.

Something that is just scary can be scary as hell, but it won't keep you thinking about it long. You need a mixture of emotions. Give the reader a moment of tenderness, sorrow, or shame to hang onto.

When To Stop Deflating

Rising and falling tension is a huge topic of debate in writing, so let me just put in my perspective: It's okay to deflate the tension up to a point, but you don't want to do it too many times, and at some point you have to put that work on the reader.

Forcing the reader to do the work of deflating the tension for themselves makes them complicit. And it forces them towards the finish.

Don't kill the tension late in the story. Don't have a great one-liner that blows it up. Don't give them the indication that everything is going to be okay. Don't put in a line that's too clever and reminds them they're reading a story concocted by a writer. Your tension is the hot potato, and in the end, the reader should be left holding it.

Any Sensation Other Than Visual

We get tons of visuals described in books. Remember that vision is our most-used sense, but it's no more replicable in words than smell, taste, and touch. We're just used to describing things that way, shortcutting by saying "She saw a dead body" instead of telling the reader about the smell of a garbage bag full of rotted chicken, and that when she touched his arm, his skin was loose and tacky (and you set up before that his skin was clean, smooth and taut so we can see the transformation, right?).

Go through your story and highlight places you've used visuals, and ask yourself whether they can be replaced with other senses and what you might gain from doing so.

Make People Wonder

The Platform is a horror movie with a very clear message. Nobody is going to mistake that movie's message or interpret it in any way other than the one way that the filmmakers intended.

This is fine if your goal is to spell out a thesis statement like "Capitalism may not be the best," but if you want your story to have a long life and maybe even change someone's mind, ask a question instead of providing an answer to an existing one.

Look at *Beetlejuice*. Is it about white flight? Wealth? What you do in life echoing in death? The tension between life being for the living and respecting the dead? Outgrowing teen angst? Yes, it's got little pieces of all those things, but it's not definitively ABOUT any of them.

The Platform functions as a statement, *Beetlejuice* as a set of questions.

This isn't me telling you to not piss off one side of the political spectrum or the other. This is me saying that questions have more staying power than statements, no matter how powerful those statements may be.

To Explain or Not to Explain

Make good choices about how much time you'll spend explaining and where that exposition comes in the story. If you write a zombie story, I do not need a long, made-up scientific explanation about how zombies happen or operate.

Forcing the reader to do the work of deflating the tension for themselves makes them complicit. And it forces them towards the finish.

The explanation is important for you, the writer, but when you finish a draft, ask which parts are important to the reader. Jason Voorhees is a killing machine, and his motivation is about as meaningful to me as a steamroller's motivation for flattening shit.

Just to warn you off the biggest mistake: too many horror stories wedge in a bunch of exposition at the height of tension near the end. But to get this explanation, you have to slow down the chase and give the audience a very artificial-feeling breather. This rarely works.

Reduce Exposition Through Dialog

Dialog is not scary.

Can you give me the exposition in anything other than dialog? Go through your rough draft and wherever there's dialog, see if it can be replaced by action. If you replace even a quarter of your expository dialog with something, ANYTHING other than dialog, it'll transform your story.

Horror Beyond Death

A lot of horror relies on death as the stakes. The good guy fights for his life, the final girl struggles to survive. But what if the stakes are something other than death? What if the stakes are something much bigger than the characters, as in Stephen King's *The Stand*? What if the stakes go way beyond death, like in *Event Horizon* or *Hellraiser*? What if a character's death is a given, and what they do before they die is what matters?

If you can manage this, it also gives you the option to have a climax be something other than a death, which is an overused climactic event, even outside of horror. Death is dramatic and affecting, but in print, you have to give us something else now and then.

What Good Are Books?

What is something you can do in a book that doesn't work well on screen? First-person narrative is great in books and rarely works on a screen. Doubting what one is perceiving can work well in a book, but on a screen it's usually a little tortured (or feels like an artsy gimmick. If you've seen *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, you know what I mean).

If you're writing a horror story, the best way to keep it alive is to make it something that works best as a written story.

David Sedaris' 'The Best of Me' for Readers and Writers



David Sedaris is putting out *The Best of Me*, a book of his self-selected best stuff.

What would a David Sedaris fan get out of the intro, and what's the big idea behind a "Best Of" collection anyway?

And what can writers learn from the existence of this book (without ever reading it)?

Greatest Hits: A Good Idea?

Actually...yeah! I think it's a great idea.

Lots of writers put out collections, but they're more along the lines of..."complete" collections.

I've got a complete stories of Flannery O'Connor that I'd gladly trade for a volume half as long and twice as tight. *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* is 752 pages, and with the lengths of her stories being what they are, that's about 30,000 stories, give or take. Raymond Carver's *Selected Stories* is 960 pages. How grueling was that collection process?

Sedaris' *Best of Me* weighs in at 400 pages, just a little longer than a typical novel. It's about 15% of what he's put out in various books at this point. Give me selective, keep the complete.

Bringing in New Fans

One thing that a greatest hits album used to do for bands was bring in new listeners. Which sounds

weird, right? Can't people just listen to the albums?

The Beatles have 213 songs, and they come from different eras in the band's progression. In 2000 they released *1*, a compilation of all their number one hits. The album is the 4th best-selling album in the U.S. since these things were tracked (1991 and on) and is the best-selling album of the 2000's, worldwide. One would think there's absolutely no need for a Beatles greatest hits album, and yet, here we are.



Before you say, "But Pete, albums are such a 2000's thing!" I know that, and I agree with you. And consider that while streaming music has completely changed the purpose of greatest hits albums, there isn't a similar thing for books. You can't just stream David Sedaris' best stories, free, in a playlist order of your choosing.

People love a greatest hits. It's the perfect gateway for new fans and the perfect revisit for old ones.

Money

Of course, why not make some money?

This becomes the easy gift if you're gifting Sedaris, and Sedaris is a gift-y author. He's got a Christmas-specific book, something few authors boast.

Take a note, writers: Make an easy book for gifting.

Oh, also, WAY too many best of's come out after the author is dead. Shouldn't they see the money in their lifetime?

More or Less

Some of Sedaris' books do not work if you try and read them straight through. His diaries are a lot of fun, but I don't think they work as a block of straight reading. His book of fables, same deal. You start to become numb to the fun of it (like reading about a hundred *Onion* headlines in a row, they get less funny).

Picking and choosing from different things gives a reader better variety.

No "SantaLand Diaries"?

"SantaLand Diaries," the story that really put Sedaris on the map, is not in this collection.

This omission might sound a little like seeing Metallica, knowing that they will not play "Master of Puppets." I don't know how often Metallica and David Sedaris are compared, but here we are.

And it is a lot like seeing Metallica without hearing "Master of Puppets" because, yes, you'll be disappointed going in. But you're still going, and then you'll be like, "That was about 3 hours of non-stop hits. I'm okay with this."

Sedaris himself says that he thinks the writing on "SantaLand Diaries" is "clunky." And maybe it is. I don't know. I guess when you're David Sedaris, you get to choose whether or not you want to keep playing the hits. Besides, he's got another great Christmas story, "Six to Eight Black Men."

He doesn't need it. Neither do you.

No Zoom, No Social Media

David Sedaris doesn't do Zoom, doesn't do Instagram, doesn't tweet. I assume he's not on Nextdoor even though I feel like he'd really enjoy it.

Sedaris himself says that he's very fortunate to have found fame in the pre-social-media era, which means he has the luxury of continuing to live in the pre-social-media-era by choice.

I'm for it. I'm a fan of writers who don't get social.

He says he thinks it makes him a happier person to stay away, and:

There is literally nothing you can print anymore that isn't going to generate a negative response. This, I believe, was brought on by the Internet. It used to be that you'd write a letter of complaint, then read it over, wondering, Is this really worth a twenty-five-cent stamp? With the advent of email, complaining became free.

Writers, take a note: You know, all of us could stay away from this bullshit if none of us pitched in. Just saying.

Writers, another note: Sedaris is publishing his second book of journal entries. Meanwhile, the days of the book of tweets are over. Just something to ponder, y'all. Maybe a couple paragraphs a day, written out and done right, will serve you better in the future.

The End?

Does a greatest hits mean Sedaris is out of gas?

I think not.

Calypso, his latest book of new releases, is excellent and only 2 years old.

And based on the intro from *The Best of Me*, it sounds like Sedaris still has a healthy amount of imposter syndrome, which seems to drive 99% of writers (the other 1% being driven by self-destruction):

I'm not the sort of person who goes around feeling good about himself. I have my days, don't get me wrong, but any confidence I possess, especially in regard to my writing, was planted and nurtured by someone else—first a teacher, then later an agent or editor.

Just a final note to you all, agents and editors, who are usually writers, too. And a note (of absence) to reviewers.

The BS Parts of the Submission Process



This is going to sound like the embittered ramblings of someone who's been rejected by a whole lot of publishers, lit mags, and agents.

I guess this is the part where I explain why that's not true. But I'm skipping that. Because, readers, if you've gone through a fair number of submissions, you'll know that I speak the truth here. Once in awhile, an embittered jerkface, like myself, gets it right.

And publishers, take some notes. Sure, this is a bitter version with too many swears. But you're not doing yourself any favors with some of your nonsense.

Cover Letters

This is some job interview bullshit that doesn't even work for the corporate hiring process, so why publishers insist on it is beyond me. What are you hoping to gain? Has anyone ever written a cover letter so dynamite that you published their shitty story?

Just replace this with "Three sentence summary of the work." That and the work, that's all you need.

Bio

Unless you're publishing nonfiction about science shit, you don't really need this. Someone with a life that sounds amazing might do a terrible job writing about it, and the person with the most mundane bio of all time may tell a story that's way more gripping than it has any right to be.

And by the by, if you need this so you can make sure you're publishing diversely, just ask me to check

some boxes instead of writing some flowery shit about where I grew up.

Which brings us to...

The Diversity Statement

Watch, I'll make one up now, on the spot, no editing:

Pete's Fiction Hole accepts submissions from all writers, and we especially encourage women/BIPOC/LGBTQIA+ and other folx to submit their work. Pete's Fiction Hole is a magazine that recognizes the colonizing and marginalizing role lit mags have played in society, and we are seeking to change that narrative.

I'm half-assed, I'm a dope, and if I can whip one up, I guarantee you that whichever lit mags are putting white guys on the top of the pile, their submissions site has a beautifully-worded statement about how they want to amplify diverse voices.

Save some time, save some keyboard strokes, grow some balls and just have some submission periods that explicitly exclude straight white guys. Or say who you don't want in your submissions. THAT'S a statement. If someone doesn't like it, they can start their own lit mag and do it their way.

Next option: If you insist on a statement, gimme a list, or give me a number. "We're proud that our publication history from 2015 on shows 50% of our published authors are POC." If you can say you publish 50% POC, the value you put on diversity is evident in your practices.

If you're not doing anything concrete here, stop wasting everyone's time with your crafted statements.

"Simultaneous Submissions Allowed"

No shit. Isn't that really MY choice anyway? How would you possibly know?

I just take umbrage with the language of it. "Yes, we'll deign to allow you, peasant, to send your silly submissions elsewhere. We're so allowing of your behavior."

Just say: Let us know if it gets published somewhere else.

Oh, and tell me HOW I'm supposed to let you know. Email? Submittable?

Fees

Well...I have a more nuanced view on this than yes or no.

I think it's okay to charge to submit. Two Dollar Radio puts out good stuff, and they charge \$2 for submissions. That doesn't even buy the time of whoever opens all the submission emails. When

**If you can't
pay writers,
you can't take
submissions.**

we're talking \$5 or less, especially for a full book, everyone can just calm their shit.

Now, if you charge in the \$20+ range, let's do some math on this: You're above an hour's minimum wage here, so I expect you'll spend an hour with my manuscript, whether that's reading or providing feedback. And yes, I expect feedback for higher fees.

We Donate A Portion of Submission Fees To Charity X

Uh, begging your pardon, but if you donate my submission fee, isn't it ME that's making a charitable donation? Which I assume I can't get a tax write-off for, but maybe you do?

If you want to donate the entirety of the fees you receive, that's cool, just go ahead and do that. Just don't ask me to make a charitable donation and pat YOU on the back for it.

Would You Like To Receive Our Lit Mag?

Well, this IS a pickle. Because I just waxed on about how much I love your mag in my letter, so I've clearly read it and don't need a copy? Or maybe I should say yes?

Selling your lit mag to hopefuls is just barely, just the tiniest hair different from charging submission fees. Pros sell their lit mags to readers. Chumps sell their lit mags to potential contributors.

Included With the Price of Submission is a Copy of the Journal

Hey, great! This is like the time I ran the 400 meter dash in the Olympics, and though I didn't win, they gave me a signed picture of the guy who did.

Wordy Descriptions of Your Press

C'mon. If you wanted to publish a manuscript, just do that instead of opening submissions. I came here to submit work, not to read your ramblings. This is like the part of the menu at a restaurant where it says "Our Story" and basically the story is "We decided to open a restaurant." No shit?

Little tip: Bullet points are free. And maybe if people are screwing up in the submission process, it's because they don't want to read a novel about how to do it.

We Can't Pay Contributors At This Time

At this time? When are you planning to pay contributors? Because maybe I can submit then?

I'm sorry, but if you can't pay writers, you can't take submissions. Period. They are better off putting the work online themselves than they are submitting to something that isn't going to pay them.

The Artsy-Fartsy Pics On Your Submission Site

While I can never see enough pictures of a dilapidated set of stairs leading to the beach, a disused railroad, or a dilapidated bar, spare me the high-contrast, and god forbid, black and white photos of the encroachment of nature into suburban sprawl or vice versa. Enough already.

Stop Including Weird Symbols Like (and * in Your Press' Name

I die a little inside when I copy and paste this name, over and over, complete with its precious non-character characters.

Jokes In Your Submission Stuff

Notice I said "jokes" as in plural. One joke. That's your limit. If you've got one damn good joke, lay it on me.

You Will Be Informed If Your Work Is Accepted

Which is their way of saying "We'll notify the small percent of people we publish, otherwise, don't expect to hear from us."

When a press starts up its submission process, there's always a question of "How many subs can we take?"

The answer is "How many can we respond to?"

If I make the effort to fill out all your shit, the least you can do is send me a "No thanks."

When I Click On Your Submission Link And Get Your Main Site

Get your shit together.

The Bullshit About What You Publish

We publish transgressive and morphologically novel novels...

Let me make this a lot simpler: Tell me what your readers respond to. Link me to a couple of your most successful stories or the ones you feel best exemplify what you're going for. How about that instead of the whole thing where you tell me a whole lotta words and a whole lotta nothing?

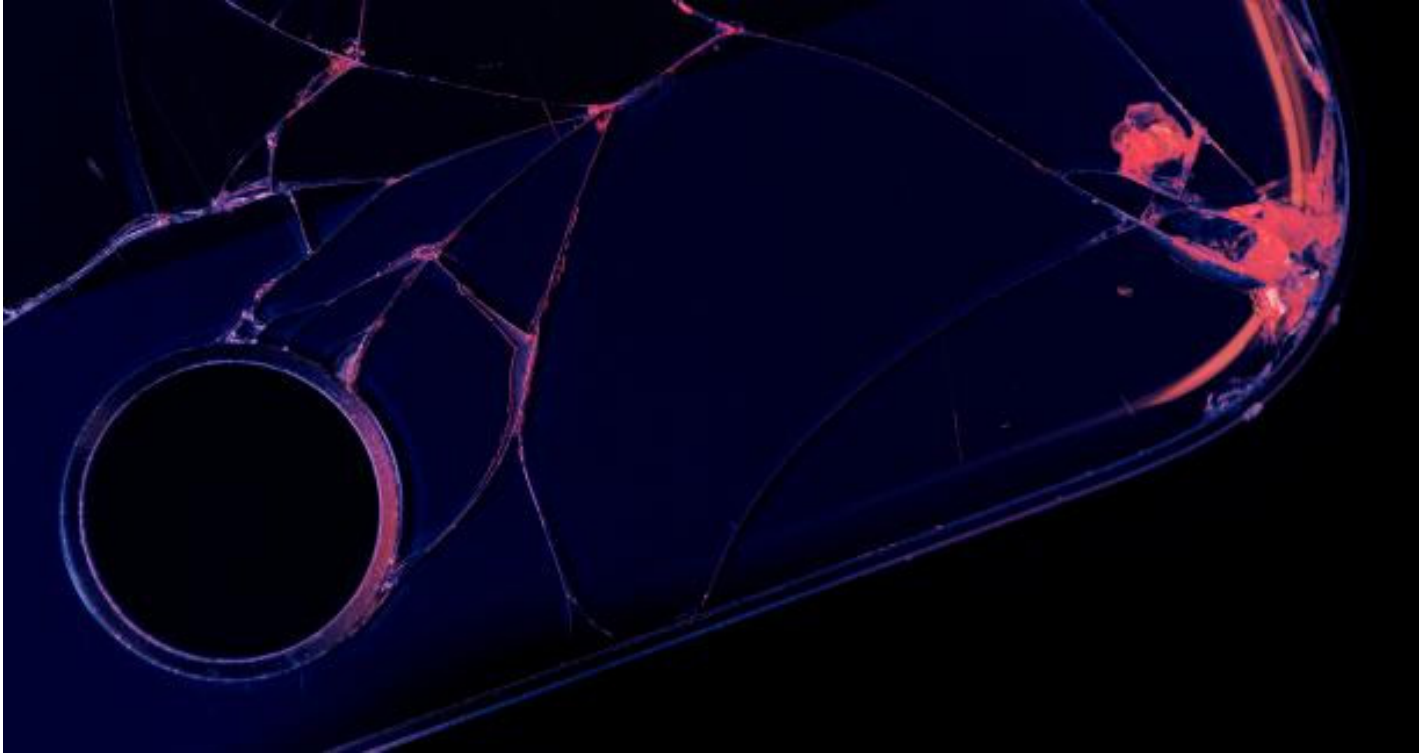
I Don't Need Options, I Need Rules

Double-spaced, 12 pt, Times New Roman, numbered pages, no author name anywhere on the manuscript. Anything else will not even be considered.

That's it, done.

Don't tell me you accept like 3 different formats, don't tell me that you accept a 3 or 4 different fonts. The time for me to explore options is in the work, not in the formatting.

It's Time To Change the Virtual Event Game



We're all goddamn sick and tired of virtual events. And I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but they're not going away anytime soon.

Let's talk about how you make your virtual event suck less.

Why It Needs to Change

Unlike a live event where people sit down and they're trapped, your virtual event is in direct competition with everything else on the internet. Everyone at your event sits in front of their window to the world, and there is absolutely nothing preventing them from doing other things. If you want people to pay attention, you have to be better.

And then there's the audience's side of this. People spend their time and money on you and your books, and you owe it to them to provide something of value. Don't just take what you do normally and do it in front of a computer. Nobody needs that.

Truth be told, the event game has needed to change for a long time. There's room for it to be more fun. Take this as your opportunity to make the change. Make it an EVENT, damn it.

Get Your Shit Together

You know how at a reading you'd see an agent or a publisher rep, usually a lady dressed and done up a lot fancier than everyone else in the room, and she always seemed nervous and was running around, trying to make everything perfect? That's you now. You're that person AND the performer.

I know some of us are laid-back, chill artist types who figure everything will work out, but if you're

not sweating the details a week out from your event, you're missing something, and your audience pays the price.

Sign in 30 minutes early, get totally set up, and then just put a title card in place letting people know you'll be there at start time. If 100 people show up for your event, and if they wait 15 minutes for you to figure shit out, you've just wasted 25 hours of collective time.

Before Your Event

The last thing you want is for your event to feel like work. Tell everyone to come to the stream with supplies. Send them on a quick scavenger hunt that is related to what you're doing/reading. You can even email attendees a couple times in the days leading up, telling them about a small task. That way you're reminding them about the event, exciting them, and making the event more than just a single hour.

The last thing you want is for your event to feel like work.

Break Out

Everyone sits in front of the same godforsaken screen ALL DAY doing the most mundane crap. Get attendees to change the environment. Tell them: Change the lighting, use a candle, dress up like you're going out, prepare a meal, watch from your bed, do something to make this different from what you're doing every damn day.

Disable the Computer

Have attendees lay a blanket across the keyboard and mouse, just create a small barrier to checking email, working, whatever. Tell them to wear gloves.

Tell everyone to come with a messy snack. Seriously.

Whatever it takes, discourage scrolling around, clicking around, anything that's a distraction from the event.

Connect To Bodies

In a virtual space, you don't have that feeling of bodies. There's an energy that doesn't translate. So, see if you can incorporate that into your event, see if you can connect everyone's body to the story.

Chuck Palahniuk's "Guts" connects to bodies so perfectly:

Take in as much air as you can. This story should last about as long as you can hold your breath, and then just a little bit longer. So listen as fast as you can.

It sounds cheesy, but see if you can do it. Add scents to your story, common ones. Prep the audience to collect spices from their kitchen, and as you go through the story, framed with a recipe, you have them smell cinnamon, cardamom.

Have them open something carbonated, and have them feel the fizz in their mouth.

Have a character in your story light a match, and stop and tell your attendees to do the same. Let them feel it in their fingers.

If your event is in winter, read a story that uses cold, and have people watch from the garage.

Is it a gimmick? Sure. But you're a writer. Since when are you above gimmicks?

Giveaways

Give some stuff away at different points. Simple swag. Homemade bookmarks. Sign and send a printout of the story you read. Get a damn button maker and make some buttons. Make your signature into a stencil and then people can have their books signed. Make something that fits in a normal envelope and send it out.

This can be a secondary way to try and get people to do the prep. Let them know giveaways are only going to people who are clearly in the garage, freezing their balls off.

Format

Look at other types of events, outside the world of readings. Can you replicate them?

A progressive dinner moves from place to place. What if your event starts as embedded video on website X, then moves to Y? What if people have to solve some kind of small puzzle to progress? What if the material is only available for a limited time, so there's pressure to solve the puzzle quickly?

An escape room requires people to work together. What if your audience has to work together to solve a small puzzle for the event to continue?

What if you read a piece, then before the next piece, you post a scavenger hunt with point values assigned to different items. Items have to be displayed in webcams, and once a certain point threshold is reached, you move on?

The format can be a lot more fun than you reading a sheet of paper.

Audience Fade

When you go to a live reading, the audience has three phases: they are individual and noticeable people, they are nonexistent, and they are collective.

In the noticeable people phase, we're talking about the beginning of the event and the Q&A. During these phases, you want to allow audience members to have more of an identity. So, to make this happen at your event, open the chat at the beginning, before things start. Tell everyone to come with a quick something, to type in their name and a favorite candy bar, a favorite sandwich, whatever, just avoid a favorite book or author because that shit doesn't lend to conversation. Give them a springboard. Get them talking to and noticing each other.

In the nonexistent phase, imagine the part where the lights go down on the audience. People are discouraged from using phones or talking with each other. This should be similar in your event. Shut down the chat. Don't display other people on webcam. Audience is nonexistent.

The collective phase is the hardest, live and virtually, but it's what separates great events from forgettable whatevers. People will like your event more if it makes them feel like something larger than themselves. So in this phase, the audience needs to feel like they're front and center, but as a group rather than individuals. Santa Cons are a good example of this. If everyone is Santa, then no one is more special than anyone else, and everyone is part of this larger thing. Tell everyone at your event to dress as Santa. Or to make a paper bag mask. Or to sit next to a lit candle. Or to have some kind of uniformity going on. That way, when you do something like open up for questions, everyone can see the other attendees are part of a collective. They're having a connected experience.

A Short Tour of Gimmick Covers



Back in the day, the closest thing to a bookstore in my town was the rack of paperbacks in the grocery store. V.C. Andrews, Stephen King, and one book that I always giggled at because the title was *Bitch Factor*. Oh, *Bitch Factor*. I've never forgotten you.

One of the greater pleasures of grocery store paperbacks was the gimmick covers. A little die-cut window, some texture, really anything that made the book stand out from the other similar titles. And from *Bitch Factor*.

The digital age has all but doused the flames of gimmick covers, but if you're in the market, maybe you'll find a little inspiration.

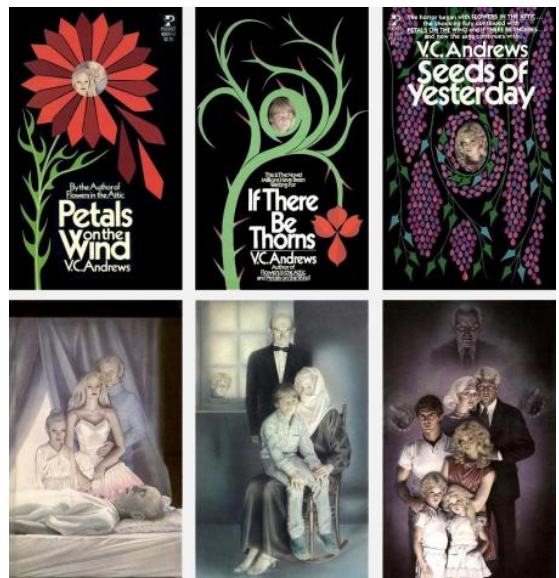
Die Cuts

V.C. Andrews really put the DIE in die cuts.

I'll leave a little space here for you to finish laughing at that great joke and move on.

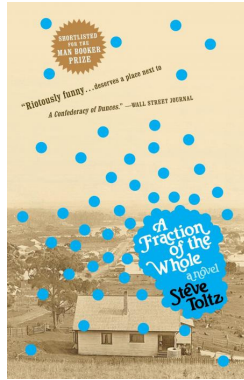
These die cuts were always a little surprise, right? You've got a window out in front, then you open it up and get the bigger picture. It gets you to turn at least a single page, and once you turn that first page, maybe you're hooked.

V.C. Andrews artist Lisa Falkenstern explains the thinking behind the design:

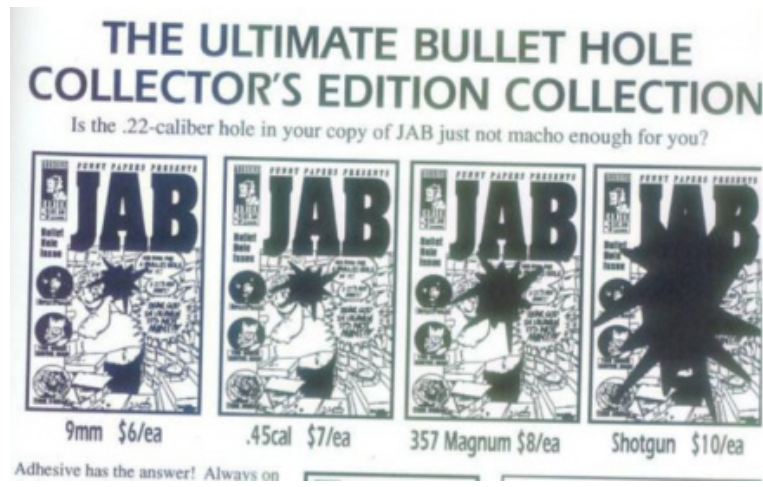


Having two covers allowed for a clean interesting front cover and a stepback art that could show all the characters in the book.

There are tons of other die cut examples. Steve Toltz's *A Fraction of the Whole* has a replica of a scattergun shot, which is pretty easily accomplished with a hole punch.



But maybe my favorite version is *Jab #3*, a comic that was shot through with a bullet. Yep, each issue was authentically shot.



And the interiors made use of the bullet hole:



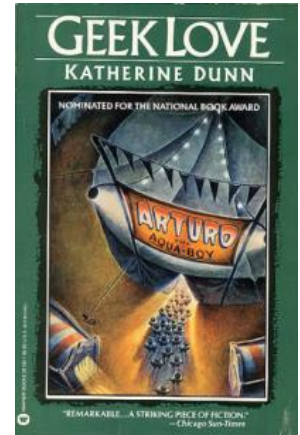
It's a little less tidy than a traditional die cut, but hey, you've got an extra couple hundred bullets lying around, right? I know some of you do. I was at a sporting goods store back in March, and I saw you all buying ammo like you were going to stop hordes of people in the post-Corona-pocalypse. If only you could see the future and know that these folks would complain of being suffocated by a bandana being placed gently over their mouth and nose. Could've saved a lot of dough.

Glow in the Dark

My favorite entry is the glow-in-the-dark *Geek Love* that I saw in a bookstore and didn't buy because I'm a stupid idiot asshole.

Now, I THINK this is it, but I can't find much mention of it glowing in the dark, which makes me wonder sometimes if this is a fantasy I invented.

Either way, a glowing book cover is pretty awesome. You stop reading for the night, set it on the nightstand, and boom.



Mosaic Spines

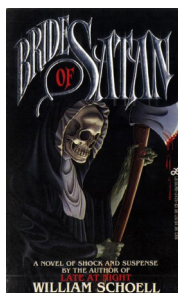
Sometimes a book set will work so that a picture is formed by the collected spines. My preference on these is that the spines look like their own thing on their own, and then put together, they form something special. You'll see some of these where the spines look cool together, but on its own, each one is basically a blob of nothing. Don't waste my time with that shit.

Foil

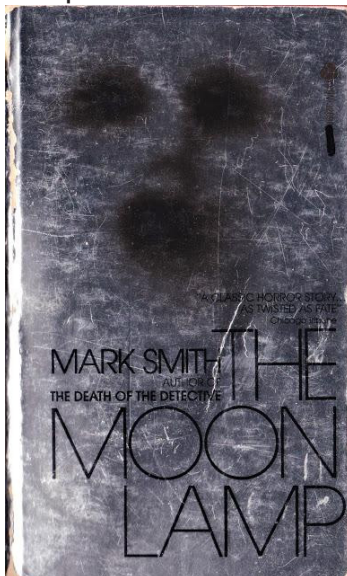
What I love about foil is that it's a high/low thing. You get your fancy Shakespeare or whatever, foil embossing all over that damn thing.



AND, you get a cheesy paperback, same deal.



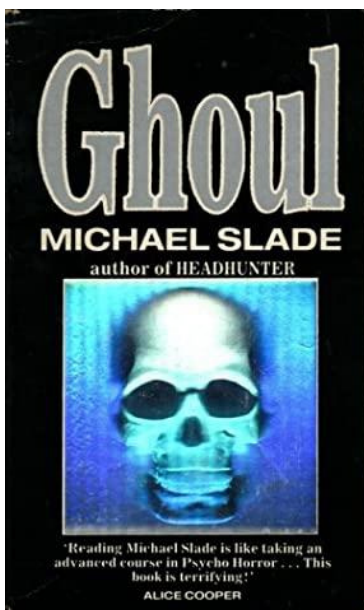
And there's definitely a more is less aspect to foil:



I mean, good lord, did someone's dad own a foil factory?

Hologram

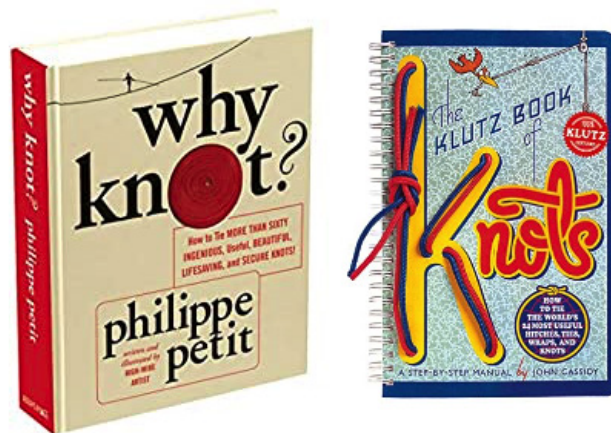
Holograms were a huge thing for trading cards in the 90s, so of course they made their way to book covers.



Holograms never quite worked how I'd hoped. For one thing, they always had a rainbow look. So you could have an awesome skull, but then it was this sort of...rainbow skull. And then you've got the sort of weird, blurry image. It's just a great idea on paper, but it doesn't work out...I guess, also on paper, but you know what I mean.

Realia

"Realia" is a fancy word for "stuff." Like having a piece of string on a knot-tying book.



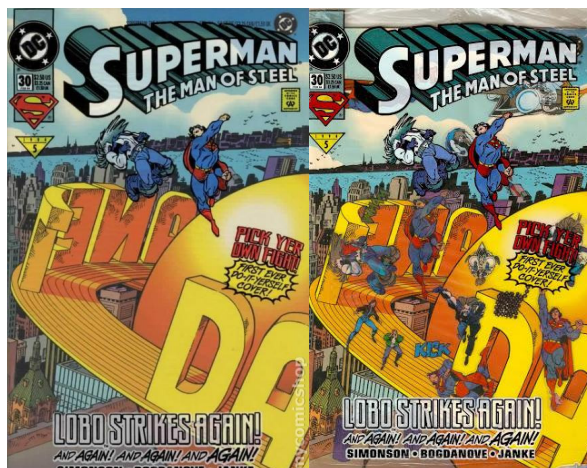
Maybe this is a big thing with knot books?

There's also this pretty amazing *Eclipso* comic which came with an actual plastic gem.



Probably not as useful as a string in a knot-tying book. Unless you play a lot of dress-up of third-tier DC characters and want something semi-authentic to complete your Eclipso getup.

Man of Steel 30



This issue of *Man of Steel* comes with stickers of Superman and Lobo, so you can make your own cover, sort of, of two space aliens kicking the shit out of each other. I know you've always wanted to take a shot at this sort of thing, aliens with anatomy that fortunately matches up in such a way they can have a slugfest. Now you can! And you don't have to learn how to draw. Even a little.

Nudity



The cheapest gimmick, the cheapest special effect, is always nudity.

27 Indie Bookstores to Support Online in 2021



Let's get straight to it. These are some indies that go beyond the ones you hear about all the time, and they have some special offerings that'll help you pick out the right gift.

Look, sorry guys, but there isn't enough room for everybody. And we had to set some standards. A lot of bookstores out there are awesome, but they don't offer the services people need to shop at the moment.

Shipping, at least in the U.S., needs to be available.

I also tried to pick shops where you could browse at least some of the collection online.

Let's do it.

John K. King, Detroit

They have a pretty incredible collection of rare, sometimes-expensive items that you're not going to find anywhere else. Like a piece of letterhead signed by Harry Houdini, or a brick from the hospital where Harry Houdini died. And some non-Houdini stuff.

Not for everyone, but if you've got the cash, and you've got someone in your life who would truly appreciate a first edition, a piece of signed ephemera, or something along those lines, this is a collection you'll want to look at. The collection's a good browse just for the hell of it.

Left Bank Books, St. Louis

They have their store cat front and center, and if you look through their used books, even with shipping, the prices are damn competitive. You can get signed books, too: David Sedaris, Aimee Bender, Chuck Palahniuk, Walter Mosley. AND you can build a wishlist here.

Quimby's, Chicago

A great indie book/comics store, always a great stop in Chicago. They're running a Custom Zine Package service this year. You pick a dollar amount (\$25, \$50, or \$100), tell them what you're looking for in general, and they pick out a set of zines for you. That shit's super personal, and it's so cool that someone's still putting zines on shelf and has cracked the code for getting them to readers.



Book Revue, Long Island

With a ton of great lists on the front page, including book lists for kids, this non-Manhattan bookstore boasts a nice collection of rare books as well.

Alabama Booksmith, Birmingham

One unique deal here, EVERYTHING is signed. Everything. And the prices on them are very reasonable. You'll find lots of newer books, signed, right at list price.

Skagway News Depot and Books, Skagway

One of the beauties here is that the shop is also home to Lynn Canal Publishing, who put out a *Best of Skagway*, *Alaska Police Blotter*. Being from a medium-sized town, trust me, the police blotters in towns of this size are amazing. It's like Nextdoor mixed with ID Channel mixed with a collection of all the dumbest shit your buddies did when they were a little too wasted. This kind of thing makes a great, unusual gift.

RJ Julia, Madison

The Connecticut bookstore not only has an awesome selection and is totally adorable, they also offer an online quiz to connect you to your next book, AND you can even put some reading preferences in for someone else and set them up to receive a curated title every month. Changing the game!



Talk Story Books, Hanapepe

The western-most bookstore in the U.S. (take THAT, Cape Alava, Washington), Talk Story is a great community resource, they have a ton of categories that'll help you pick gifts, AND they not only have a bookstore cat, they have a Pusheen-esque version of her that's just dynamite.

Farley's Bookshop, New Hope

They've got a great small press section, perfect for finding something that even a big reader has never heard of.

Loganberry, Shaker Heights

Featuring Stump the Bookseller, where people list plots to books they can't find and others try to come up with the titles. Lots of closed cases, and LOTS of new ones every day. It's a book sleuth's dream.



Haunted Bookshop, Iowa City

Don't know what to get someone? Or maybe what YOU want? Try a Surprise Me! bag?

Another thing this store does well, you can browse based on a custom price range. So you don't have to torture yourself looking at things you could never afford in a million, billion years.

Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash, Red Bank



A great store, a Jersey landmark, this is one that needs to survive. They've always got a great collection on eBay, and don't miss the Git 'Em Spotlight for the occasional great deal on one-of-a-kind stuff.

Hyde Brothers, Ft. Wayne

With custom mixes BASED ON THE STORE'S CATS, you can spend as little as \$10 to get a set of curated books. They also clued me into a pretty great list of Indiana bookstores you might want to check out.

Atomic Books, Baltimore



Let's just look at some of the categories you can browse on their site:

Art Books: Lowbrow/Outsider
Books For Strange Children
Society: Freaks & Sideshows

Also, it's the store where you can send John Waters fanmail. I mean, c'mon. Check out the Atomic Canon for some good options for the book weirdo in your life.

Mutiny, Denver

You can get books, and you can get that good coffee. They also have a great collection of Denver books and Denver comics.

Spotty Dog Books, Hudson

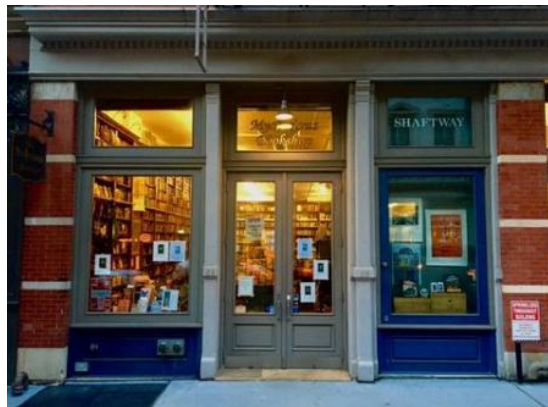
I'm worried that bar culture won't survive the pandemic. I think the best shot we've got is supporting bars one way or another, and one way to do it from your couch is to buy books from a bookstore that also has a bar.

Also, like several indies, you can buy digital audiobooks from Spotty Dog via libro.fm.

Weiser Antiquarian, Cape Neddick

Look, I don't really understand occult bookstores, but this one has a pretty big collection, and the website is hard to make sense of, which, to me, are the signals of a solid collection of occult books.

Mysterious Bookshop, Manhattan



Look, face it, maybe you want to buy the newest capital-L literary book for your grandpa, but he wants a damn mystery. Mysterious Bookshop has some exclusive titles from some HUGE authors that you won't find anywhere else, and they've got a great gift guide.

Dragonfly, Decorah

There are SO MANY of these great little bookstores around the country, and I'm so glad Dagonfly has online purchasing options. Northeast Iowa ain't a fun place in the winter, and it'll be a lot sadder if they lose Dragonfly.

Klindt's, The Dalles

Like a lot of good bookstores, Klindt's has a ghost. Where are the ghosts gonna go if these shops close down?



Klindt's also offer local delivery service, which I'm guessing most of you won't be able to use, but consider: This is a pretty amazing service for the locals. People who can't get out can really get a lot out of this.

Country Bookshelf, Bozeman

Not only do they have great books in print, they have ebooks, audio, and you can even watch films with 30% of ticket prices going to the store. Innovation is the name of the game, and we should reward everyone doing it.

Wicker Park Secret Agent Supply Co, Chicago



Part of the 826 organization, this store teaches writing classes and gives kids and teens the chance to see themselves as authors. Buying here helps keep the program alive.

The Writer's Block, Las Vegas

Imagine trying to make it as a bookstore in Vegas. A place that sells BOOKS in LAS VEGAS. That's a tough proposition in the best of times, which these ain't.

Changing Hands, Phoenix

Another great beer/books pairing, and this is one you want to get to post-pandemic. Don't let it slip away.

Annie Bloom's, Portland



Browsing is one of the most-missed parts of bookstore shopping, but Annie Bloom's provides an updated, online version of their Staff Picks table that's the next-best thing.

Old Firehouse Books, Fort Collins

Colorado has been moved up the ladder to a red COVID status, which means Old Firehouse is

completely closed to the public at the moment. This is a HUGE DRAG during the holiday season. Please consider shopping here if you can.

City Lights, San Francisco

Imagine you're in one of the most expensive cities ever created. And now you're trying to make it there as a bookstore. Yeah.

A Couple Other Book Lover Options

- If you've got a comic book geek in your life, Houchen does some awesome hand-binding of individual issues. Ask your geeky chum before sending their books in, but this makes an awesome gift.
- If you want to repair a book for someone, look into a book binding or restoration service. I like the look of Jay's in New Mexico. He'll go so far as to match fonts to create a new cover and binding that matches your original.

A Rundown of the Big Boys

Okay, you almost definitely know about these. If you don't have a good local store, and if you can't find what you're looking for, here are the big indies and a couple special things they have to offer.

Powells, Portland

They've got subscriptions for adults, subscriptions for kids, a book scent, and some unusual, exclusive gift lists.

The Strand, NYC

Look...I know that some of us have our qualms with the ownership and relations to staff and everything. But let's look at our reality as reality: It's not a question of whether we'd prefer The Strand or a different version of The Strand. It's this version or Amazon.

They've got an INCREDIBLE set of subscriptions, broken out by book type. It's a lot more comprehensive than anything I've ever seen.

Tattered Cover, Denver

What can I say, this is my formative bookstore. It was more than an hour away, in the big city, and it's where I was able to find the great stuff I HAD to read. They have some pretty great recorded online events, like this one with Max Barry, you can catch free. Their Love Letters to Authors shows the spirit embodied by the store.

Book People, Austin

Book People has been good to a lot of indie authors. Check out their subscription options.

The Last Bookstore, Los Angeles

They've got new items and gifts available. Possibly the best gift is a staff guide to the city. Bookstore staff are usually great guides to big cities because they know how to have fun, and they're not goddamn billionaires.

A Last Plea: Buying Local

There's a kind of bookstore I love: The Shithole. You know the kind. Where the books are piled goddamn everywhere. They probably have a set of National Geographics that will never sell. They have a bookstore cat that cannot be touched. There's plywood out front because a car ran through the building...17 years ago.

I love this kind of bookstore. Deeply.

Browsing this sort of store is more treasure hunt than it is looking for a specific item. You won't find treasure, but the dream is there.

Don't let the dream die. If you have one of these bookstores nearby, shop there if you can.

If you can't, consider a store that's a little smaller. It's not easy to keep a bookstore afloat in a town of 20,000 people. This year, you can help keep books all over America. Please do.

The Case for Amazon



Some columns you write to make people happy, some you write to make yourself happy...and some you write because they'll make no one happy, but something's got to be said.

Amazon is doing some things right. And not just in a, "They make a lot of money, might makes right, ends justify the means" sense.

Amazon has, in some ways, made the book world a better place.

Cheap Books Are Accessible Books

My library system buys from a supplier, and we get a 40% discount on most things. Which is huge. But when I looked up Rick Baker's massively-expensive *Metamorphosis* book, Amazon had it at a very close price:

A screenshot of an Amazon product page for the book set "Rick Baker: Metamorphosis: Vol 1: 1950-1989, Vol 2: 1990-2019 - set". The page features two images of the book set, which includes a bust of a creature. The price is listed as \$159.03 with a Prime logo. A yellow circle highlights the price and the "See all formats and editions" link. Another yellow circle highlights the "Estimated Product Price: \$136.25" in a green box. The page also shows the publisher (Cameron Books), ISBN, and other details.

Rick Baker : Metamorphosis: Vol 1: 1950-1989, Vol 2: 1990-2019 - set OPAC
Contributor(s): [Rinzler, J.W.](#) (Author), [Alinger, Brandon](#) (Editor), [Landis, John](#) (Contribution by), [Jackson, Peter](#) (C)
by J. W. Rinzler (Author), Brandon Alinger (Editor)
★★★★★ 273 ratings
See all formats and editions
Hardcover
\$159.03 ✓ prime
1 Used from \$226.38
4 New from \$159.03
1 Collectible from \$449.99
This deluxe two-volume set explores 40-plus-year journey as a special ma
OPAC

ISBN: 1944903437 EAN: 9781944903435
Publisher: [Cameron Books](#) ([View Publisher's Titles](#))
US SRP: \$250.00 US - (Discount: REG) **Estimated Product Price: \$136.25**
Binding: Hardcover
Pub Date: October 22, 2019
Copyright Date: 2019
Annotation: This deluxe two-volume set explores seven-time Academy Award-winner Rick makeup effects artist. Features a foreword by John Landis, a preface by Peter
This item is Returnable
OPAC

Amazon presenting an individual consumer nearly the discount of a library supplier is pretty damning.

I get it, underpaying workers, making huge profits in other areas, that's what enables Amazon to have low book prices. While I can't endorse all of the Amazon practices that make books cheap, I stand behind this statement: cheap books are accessible books.

During times in my life when I can afford it, I buy books from places that might charge a little more in hopes of keeping bookstores alive and thriving. But that's a choice I've been lucky to have now and again, and some people don't get to make that choice.

Cheap books are a good thing for readers.

Online Inventory

I don't know what some bookstores expect, that you're gonna just call around and ask for something you're looking for? Like a goddamn animal? I wrote about indie bookstores, and there were SO MANY others that I wanted to include, but I couldn't because they have no online purchase options whatsoever. Not even merch or gift cards.

Not only does Amazon have an online inventory, but it actually works. If I don't nail the spelling on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, or Fyodor Dostoevsky, or Michael Ondaatje, or Annie Proulx, it points me in the right direction. It lets me limit by subject or rating or other factors. I don't have to be an expert in boolean logic to find a damn book that I pretty much, sort of, mostly know the title of.

Amazon set a standard when it comes to a functional online inventory. I see this as a good thing.

eBook Game Strong

Without Amazon, I don't think the eBook would be where it is today. eBooks might be the strongest book-related argument I can make for Amazon as a pusher of books.

Before you quibble about preferences for print and so on, let me just drop this: large print.

The print book market failed people with low vision for decades.

Before eBooks, if you were a reader with vision problems, and if you didn't like books where a plucky cat helped a grandma solve a mystery, you were up a creek. Because that's about all you were gonna get in large print. Now, ANY BOOK that goes on an eReader is push-button convertible to large print. That doesn't matter to everyone, but for the people who've had enough of feline sleuths, it's huge.

Surly Clerks

In a Chicago bookstore, I picked up a copy of a Chuck book (I can't remember if it was Chuck Palahniuk or Chuck Klosterman), and the clerk working there gave me some static when I brought the book up to the register. Not like a ton, but he made it very known that the author I was reading was beneath his personal literary standards.

Amazon does not force me to interact with some MFA failure dweeb who's got a \$700 refurbished Olivetti Lettera at home with a small stack of pages for his novel in the works, which is now a novella, or maybe a mini memoir.

Clerks give bookstores, comics stores, and record stores some of their character. This is not always a good thing.

Self-Publishing

Amazon's self-publishing options are the simplest and most robust publishing and distribution options in human history. Anyone with the basic skills it'd take to get a gmail address can put a book on the kindle store and prepare it for print-on-demand. No money down. No experience necessary. You don't have to know people who know people.

If we want to talk about the equity and diversity in publishing, I challenge anyone to provide a clearer, more accessible path to publication that is as unbiased as Amazon's.

Any big publisher could set up SOMETHING. A novella database, 10 rotating self-pub books, limited editions that are pre-order and print-on-demand only, SOMETHING that brings new voices to books, and brings new eyes to the publisher's other offerings. And they haven't.

From A Rural Point of View

When you're far away from ANY bookstore, let alone a really great one, it's hard to get your hands on something like a Tom Spanbauer book, a Dennis Cooper book, or anything non-fiction that wasn't an absolute bestseller.

Amazon delivered, literally, when the rest of the world didn't seem to care much about places like the one I grew up in, places where your best shot at books was whatever the grocery store had in the rack of paperbacks next to the magazines. Amazon allowed someone in a rural part of the country, about 20% of Americans, to get their hands on the same stuff people were reading on the coasts and in MFA programs. Living podunk didn't mean reading podunk.



Clerks give bookstores, comics stores, and record stores some of their character. This is not always a good thing.

Browsing

Amazon is a reliable discovery tool for new authors and books. If you find a book you like, the list of "Customers Also Bought" will keep you in good stuff for a long time.

I gotta be honest, brick and mortar, when I find a pile of Nicholas Sparks next to my beloved Tom Spanbauer, it doesn't do a lot for me. When you put Storm of Steel in the War section, I get where you're coming from, but it just doesn't make sense next to one of those books that catalogs various military aircraft and lists their specs. It's like putting *Moby Dick* in the fishing section.

Discovery is an important aspect of book buying and reading, and Amazon's virtual storefront facilitates discovery.

Where Do We Go Next?

I don't think Amazon does all the things above because they love people and they're thinking about some poor, elderly man who couldn't read Carlton Mellick III books UNTIL THE KINDLE CAME ABOUT! I don't think they created a self-publishing platform as a diversity initiative. They do everything in service of making money.

In Chuck Klosterman's *I Wear The Black Hat*, Chuck defines evil as the person who knows the most and cares the least.

Amazon fits that definition of evil. They know A LOT about how to sell books, and they are certainly contenders for caring the least about people.

However...I think we can acknowledge that Amazon is doing some things right. And maybe the answer here isn't to be the opposite of Amazon in every way. Maybe it's about copying some of their good qualities and backing it all up with actual care and concern for readers.

You might not be able to out-price Amazon, but you can have a staff that make bookbuying joyful. You can arrange your shelves to facilitate discovery. You can get a computer science intern to help you make your online catalog usable.

Identify some "book deserts" and offer them targeted advertising and a small discount.

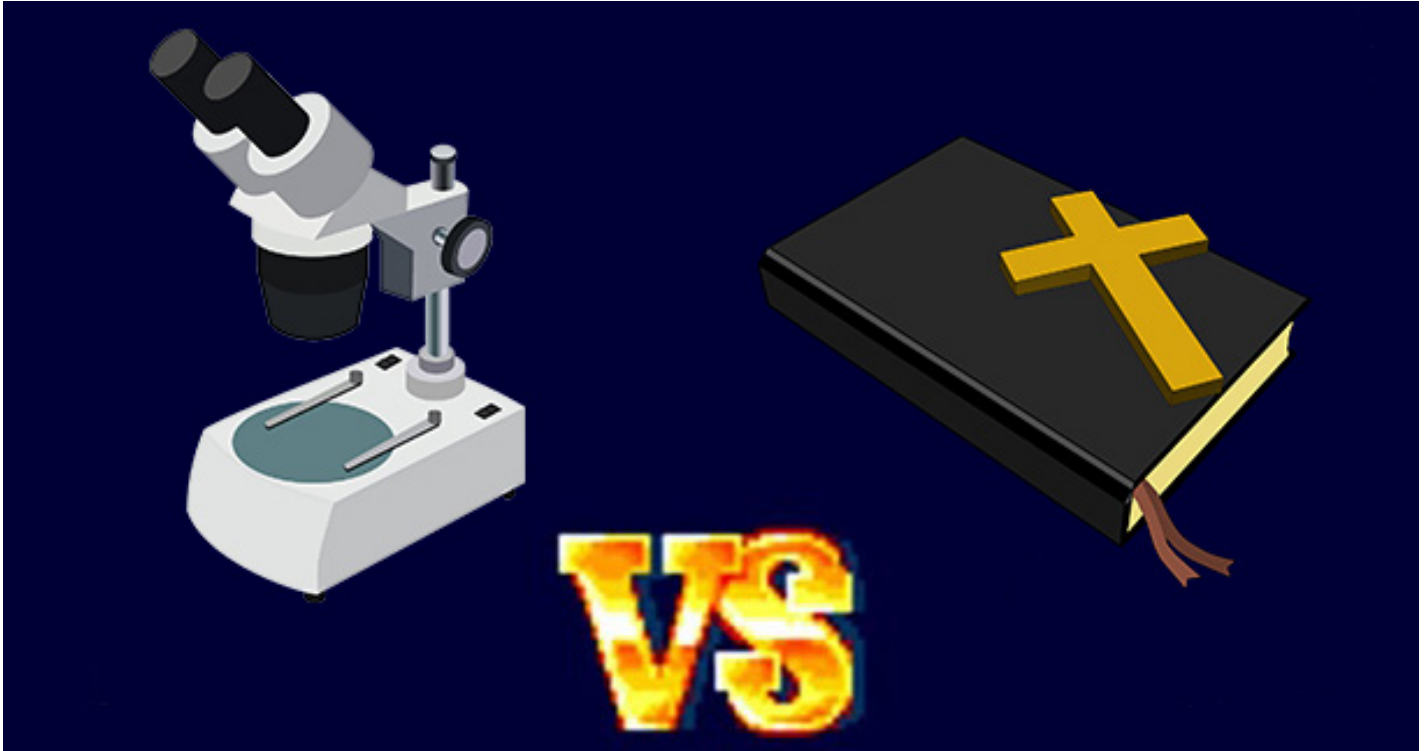
Create your own set of small-print-run titles that you can't find anywhere else.

Add wish list functionality to your site.

Work with self-pub people, somehow, some way.

It's not evil to know the most so long as you also care.

Science Versus Faith in Fiction



Science is a tool writers use to make their characters trustworthy and their stories believable. Science fills in the gaps. Science ties our world to new, fictional worlds.

Science is an overused tool in fiction.

What Faith Is

Here's the briefest version I could come up with to show the difference between the use of faith and science in fiction:

In *World War Z* the movie, the plot ends up revolving around finding a method to stop zombie attacks. Zombies behave in a scientific way, a theory is formed, tested, and a scientific solution is found in a lab setting. The end.

In *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), here's the explanation for how zombies work:

When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth.

That's it. Why zombies do what they do, how they behave, it's all speculation by a few characters.

One movie seeks to explain by science. The other by faith.

Science doesn't always mean real, hard science. Faith doesn't always mean Jesus.

The Bad Tradeoff

When *Star Wars: Episode One* told us about the science of midichlorians, did that make the force any

more credible? More interesting? More useful as a story element? More emotionally complex? Did it change the way the force functioned? Did the producers put together a heart-pounding trailer that promised to finally reveal the mechanics of the force?

No.

Everything we needed to know about the force was explained by a little green puppet in the swamp. Faith in the force was enough. And in fiction, "enough" is better than "too much."

It's so easy to over-explain with science. To overdo the science and make the leap less interesting. To take the mystery and interest out of your fictional world and replace it with useless, invented facts.

Don't trade off faith for science in your stories.

Numbers and Figures

A common technique for writing a character who can "handle himself" is to give me a bunch of numbers.

If my character, Detective Hardass, tells you he's got a firearm with a 100 mm barrel, what does that mean to you? If Detective Hardass told you the muzzle velocity was 762 m/s, do you think that's a lot or a little?

And if your reader isn't familiar with this stuff?

Instead of building competence in a character with numbers and facts, build a character that I *believe* is formidable. Create a voice or a way the character conducts himself that gives me faith. That serves you better in this gunfight, and it serves you better if you want to try a car chase later, or a barroom brawl. General belief works for all of those things where if you tried to share a bunch of facts each time, it'd be a snoozefest.

If you're writing a gunfight that's a snoozefest, you're messing up.

Intimacy

Science is not something that a reader invests in. It's something they're told. When you and I know the order of the planets in our solar system, that's not exactly a big connection.

When you and I believe the same things about what happens after humans die? That's another story.

Faith is asked for by the writer, and the reader chooses to give it. By giving faith, readers participate in the narrative, just a little. If readers believe in something or someone in the story, and if they turn out to be wrong, they lose something, and they feel that loss.

If the reader places faith in the narrator, they WANT the story to turn out a certain way. They will root for certain things to happen.

Faith enmeshes your reader with your story.

Where Non-Fiction is Headed

Qualitative data is becoming a bigger and bigger part of the academic world. It's becoming common to see a thesis studded with POV-based stories that illuminate what's going on.

Non-fiction has caught onto the power of storytelling outside of charts and graphs. Or, to put it another way, non-fiction recognizes that science functions a lot better when it's rounded out with story.

If there's room to tamp down the science in a thesis to make room for stories, and if people doing academic work are recognizing that faith-building matters in a narrative, you damn sure better be looking towards faith for your fiction.

How Readers Feel About Themselves

We are becoming accustomed to taking things on faith. The entire idea behind "#BelieveWomen" is based on taking things on faith. Oftentimes these are incidents or situations that are nearly impossible to prove in a scientific sense.

If your narrator is someone who has not traditionally been believed, for any reason, valid or stupid, you've got a great setup to build faith with a reader. If your narrator is an outcast for whatever reason, and if their message to readers is, "I'm going to tell you this story, and you probably won't believe me, nobody believes me," that gives readers a reason to believe. A reader can be the one person who listens to someone else, and they get to do it in a safe, low-risk situation.

The reader will feel good about themselves. They can feel morally superior, smarter than those around them, and they can feel flattered that the narrator has chosen THEM to hear the story.

Common Tricks

Science is a good tool, and it's a common tool.

Watch, when you read your next few books, you'll spot the science. You'll be wishing the writer tried something else.

One of the best ways to stand out as a writer is to do something else. Something that's simple and works for readers, but something you don't see every time you open up a haunted house book or a crime procedural.

It's not one or the other. It's both. Faith builds science, science builds faith.

Too many of us neglect faith, and it weakens our fiction.

Next time you reach for science, pause, and give faith a whirl.

Writers Don't Need Social Media



Social media. We hate it, but as writers, we have an excuse: "It's part of the gig!"

For us, it's NECESSARY! All the hate, the stupid arguments, all the politics, all the getting angry at celebrities we don't even really know for doing things we don't understand...it's all part of the game, right?

Somehow, we're all just trapped in this fucking dystopian nightmare where writing down stories also involves shit like Snapchat filters and TikTok stardom?

That's what I thought, but now I'm asking: Is it, though?

Is it necessary? Is what you're doing with it necessary?

Could you be a writer without social media?

But, But, But

Every time I talk about this, I get a bunch of feedback (ON social media, of course) saying that I'm a huge idiot. This feedback comes in two flavors:

Flavor One: I've sold A TON of books thanks to social media, and you're a HUGE idiot.

This feedback always comes from a writer you and I have never heard of. It'll be someone who wrote either a bizarre-looking novel of self-discovery or something like a 10-minute summary of a pop business tome.

Flavor Two: Hey, as long as you're writing, expressing yourself, sales don't matter.

Let's just address both flavors at once: If I wrote an article called "Why You Can't Run a 4-Minute Mile," I'd get some feedback from a handful of people who've done it, and I'd get some feedback from a handful of people who were like, "Dude, it doesn't matter. The run is in your HEART!"

And while those are both fine statements, I guess, I'm still correct. Almost everyone, if not everyone, who reads that column will not be able to run a 4-minute mile. So, saying "YOU can't" is accurate.

Maybe some of you are reaping huge rewards from social media. But most of you aren't.

ROI

Ask yourself: What's the return on investment with social media, and how am I measuring it?

Most of us will do a vague, "I'm building a brand," kind of thing, but what does that mean, really? Just "the more tweets, the better"?

How confident are you that social media brought in book buyers? Are you able to directly attribute these sales?

Have you compared social media use to other forms of advertisement?

How does social media compare to pricing deals you can set up?

The whole premise that social media marketing is worthwhile (FOR YOU), without some real-world testing, is bullshit speculation. And nobody does the testing. Why? Because we all know what we'll find: It's not all that helpful, and we have no excuse to use social media.

The Gamble

The comparison of social media to a slot machine is used a lot to make the point that sites like Twitter reinforce user behavior, like doomscrolling, but less common is the comparison for someone trying to market their shit. Social media marketing and social media "just for funsies" work the same way.

Lots of you probably have 100k tweets under your belt. And yeah, you pull that slot machine's arm 100,000 times? You'll have some wins.

It's a lottery. Some will make HUGE gains, but almost everyone will expend resources for no gain whatsoever. There's very little meritocracy on social media, very little work in, product out. It's as good as random.

Scummy Behavior

You've seen it. The tweet that goes something like

"Let's boost indie authors. Retweet this and tag your favorite!"

You retweet with your favorite indie, perhaps not realizing that you're also retweeting the image the original tweet's creator added in, usually the cover image for their own book.

This is some scummy shit. By pretending to give a shit about indie authors, this person is boosting their own signal on the back of other indie authors.

This is the worst version of the post meant to elicit responses the original creator doesn't give a flying fuck about. It's just a more complex version of "What's your favorite Halloween movie?" or the slightly more creative "I'm looking for horror books. Let me hear what you like!" Nobody gives a fuck what randos on Twitter like. If I want a list of horror movies, I will not ask Twitter. That's idiotic.

Remember, when a fellow writer tells you that social media is an absolute necessity, they aren't just giving you an economic fact, they're defending their own shitty behavior.

It's Not Just Money

Does social media make you happier? I don't really hear from people who love being on social media. Hell, even a cat adoption resource I follow gets a boatload of shit every time some yahoo thinks, based on their zero experience, that a cat is being mistreated in some way.

When you're on social media and selling your stuff, consider whether the exchange of happiness for book sales is worthwhile. How many times has social media wrecked the entire day for you, and what's the monetary value of that?

Even if social media IS a tool that improves your sales, what are you willing to give up for those sales?

Working for Free

We don't pay writers, but you do get publicity.

That's the classic line delivered by bad publishers, right?

If you think that deal sucks, how about this one:

We won't pay writers, and there's a worse-than-random chance you'll get any publicity at all. AND any publicity that you do will be done by you.

That's the promise of social media. You add content to their platform, for free, and the implied promise is that you'll gain notoriety.

Most of us wouldn't consider that deal from an indie press. Why are we doing it for multi-billion-dollar corporations?

Hurt

What are the chances of social media hurting you versus social media

You add content to their platform, for free, and the implied promise is that you'll gain notoriety.

helping?

There are plenty of folks out there looking to write articles about the latest online kerfuffle, real or imagined. There are not a lot of people looking to write articles about what a good Twitter follow you are.

Nobody can make a judgment about how you use your Instagram in light of a national tragedy if you don't have one.

A Better Plan

Write a lot, write good stuff, and then pay someone to do your social media for you. OR, write a lot, write good stuff, work a full-time job, and pay someone to do your social media for you.

I'm a fan of the tipping point theory, which in this case would probably say that when you're first starting, the publicity you do isn't going to be effective. As you grow a little bit organically, you'll have a base, and from there, marketing is a bigger deal.

Why are so many of us acting like medium-famous authors when we're not even mildly famous yet? Me doing a bunch of social media promo is like me looking at flights for the author tour in my mind.

Make That Money

Social media takes the world's content and uses that as scaffolding to sell ad space. You post on Instagram, and in between your pics and your buddy's, there's a paid ad for some bullshit.

Make that money for yourself.

Write more blogs, fewer tweets. Set up ad revenue for yourself on your site. Set up links to products using sites like Bookshop to make a few bucks off your work.

Post your pics on your web site, not your Instagram.

If you Tweet a joke a day, throw that shit on Patreon, release them to people who pay you a dollar a month. Maybe you won't make anything, and if that's the case, then you know the monetary value of your sense of humor.

Stop working for the man, start working for you.

Wants and Needs

I'm not here to tell you that writers CAN'T use social media. I'm here to say you don't have to.

If you like it, great. Have a fucking blast.

But if you hate it, do the legwork that lets you do the math. You'll find that even if social media brings

**Stop working
for the man,
start working
for you.**

you a handful of sales, it's not the make or break of your career.

And if you want to be a writer, not a social media manager, convert your time online to time writing another book. Maybe it doesn't sell, but at least at the end of it you've got a book.

Book Promotion Scams You Can Try From Home!



Is there anything better than the story of a scam? I've got one to get us started.

My mom, to reduce her sewer bill, came up with a scam.

My mom's sewer bill for the entire year is calculated by the city tallying how much she puts into the sewer for one month. They get that number, multiply by 12, bam, sewer bill set.

What the city didn't count on was someone willing to go pretty far to save a few bucks. If my mom put as little as possible into the sewer during her bill calculation month, she'd save some dough.

She bought extra socks and underwear so she wouldn't have to do laundry. She showered at the gym. All to save, eh, probably a few bucks.

Unfortunately, her scheme came crashing down when she discovered the bill wasn't calculated from the first of the month to the end. The tracking period straddled two months, starting on the 15th of the first month and running to the 15th of the second month. So my mom spent the first half of her measurement time using as little water as possible, then the second half using way more than normal. The bill evened out and she would have to wait another year to give it a second go.

Selling and promoting books through good, honest work is great. But there's something to respect about a workaround, a scheme. A good ol' scam.

Besides, even when it doesn't work out, it's fun to tell people about later.

Enjoy.

The Scholarship Scheme

This one comes to me from a relative who was mentoring a young person entering college.

Imagine you're a doctor who wrote a memoir/advice book. One way to move copies would be to write a great book and promote the hell out of it.

Another option: Slap some pages together, open up a monthly scholarship, and require that the students who want the scholarship write an essay on your book. Okay, it's certainly operating at a loss. And, alright, this is just the smallest, tiniest step from paying someone to read your book. But the upside is that you look like a real charmer. You're giving out a scholarship! Who can talk shit about that?

The Rounding Out the Resume Fast One

Want to be known as more than an author of crap?

Plenty of books in public domain.

Charles Dickens with an introduction by you? Why not?

Annotated Shakespeare with annotations by you? Couldn't hurt.

If you credit yourself with a "translation" of *The Dream of the Rood*, will many people know that this is originally in English?

This is especially good if you're in academic-y, literary circles trying to get taken seriously. Provided you're not such a buffoon that people (correctly) assume you're full of shit and set out to prove it.

The One-Day Bestseller

You can get that little orange "#1 Seller" banner on Amazon without too much trouble if you use your head. Or your foot. One guy did it with a book that was just a picture of his foot. Now, we need to recognize this is the internet, and perhaps a foot picture is more in demand than a novel of self-discovery. But if you can rally maybe a dozen people to buy your book on the same day, and if you can put your book in a fairly unpopular category, and if you make sure and release your book NOT on a Tuesday, and if you shoot for July when there's not a lot of book action going on, BAM, you've got a bestseller on your hands. Or feet.

Mail-In Madness

Let's say I fancy myself a Chuck-Palahniuk-alike as a writer.

I buy up a bunch of copies of *Fight Club*. Those movie tie-in copies that nobody wants.

Then, I get some info about my book printed on cardstock with one of those mailer cards, like the kind you find in magazines. Get some text like, "If you loved *Fight Club*, this is the book for you." Make it look like a publisher-created thing. Glue that shit into the end of your *Fight Club* copies, sell them

cheap as hell on Amazon, watch the sales roll in.



The Full Refund Scam

Casper Mattress does this one with their 100-day "sleep on it" trials, which you've heard about if you're a podcast listener. I'm sure Casper will in fact take back the mattress after 100 days if you don't like it, but for the most part, all of us are too lazy to return a mattress unless the thing is HORRENDOUS. It could be filled with beer bottles, but most of us would say, "I mean, the bottles are intact, so it's not, like, jagged." To undress a bed, carry it down the stairs, and re-box it? I mean, c'mon. If you have that kind of energy, you're obviously using crank, in which case you don't need a bed.

Sell your books with a money-back guarantee. Hell, in the fine print you can even put that it has to be returned in the original packaging, that you'll only return the proceeds, not the full cost. This makes people feel like they aren't taking a risk when in truth they're taking the greatest risk of all: Pitting their laziness against their cheapness.

The Swordquest

David Blaine's memoir supposedly contained clues that led to buried treasure. Neil Strauss allegedly buried treasure somewhere and left clues in his book, *Emergency*.

David Blaine's puzzle was allegedly solved (I'm using the word "allegedly" a lot here, you'll notice), though I question the whole thing. A \$100,000 prize buried on an estate that seemed to be rented, in perpetuity, for this purpose? And book sales would even this out? Fishy. Strauss' stuff is still out there, and I guess if you want to trust the journalistic integrity of the person who wrote *The Game*, that's your choice.

This scam is very easy to manage. Just claim that your book is the guide to something of far more value than whatever shit you wrote. Shouldn't be difficult to clear THAT bar!

There are three simple ways out:

One, when people can't find the treasure, you can always say that the interpretation of your cryptic clues is incorrect. If that doesn't work...

Two, you can always say, "Some kid must've found it." Everyone believes the story that some bastard kid wrecked everything for everyone. We've all been there. If that doesn't work...

Three, you bury a treasure of "great value," without letting everyone know it's of great value TO YOU. A picture of my beloved grandma? How dare you say it's not valuable!

Reverse Grandma Scam

The grandma scam is where you call someone's grandma, pretending to be her grandson, and ask for money to get out of a jam.

The reverse grandma involves *Tidbits*. You know *Tidbits*, that little "newspaper" that you can get at diners? The one old people love that tells you facts about America that probably aren't true, but...you know what? I'm not going to attack the journalistic integrity of *Tidbits*.

You take out an ad in *Tidbits*, claiming to be a grandmother whose grandson wrote a book. You say how much you love your grandson and want him to succeed. So you bought a ton of his books, and you'd like to give them away to people who pay the shipping. Boom, your book is on old peoples' bookshelves all over the country, just waiting to become death donations to Goodwill.

Online Dating Scam

Set up a shitload of online dating profiles that drop your book's name here and there. For this to work, you probably have to pretend to be an attractive woman. Pro tip: Public libraries in small towns are a great resource for old yearbook photos.

The Incredible Deal

Involving physical copies you donate to thrift stores or little free libraries, you add an exorbitant price to your book's jacket, making it seem to some that they must be getting a great deal.

And/or: Make sure to add copies of your "rare" book to Abebooks.com and other rare book sites, eBay, what have you, and list a ridiculous price. Then, make one outlet where they can be had for a "steal" aka "actual price."

Friends In Higher Ed Places

If you're a writer, chances are you know a writer who teaches. All they have to do is add your book to the curriculum, either as required or a list of "suggested" texts.

I know, even SUGGESTING that someone in higher ed would do this is ridiculous, right?

Tell that to the prof I had who, if you messed up anything grammatically, would force you to buy his

comb-bound, home-printed "textbook" of grammar exercises. You know what, Ben? You're a jerk who's class I hated when I was in it! Where are your grammar exercises now!?

The SAT Study Guide

Okay, your book lived its life, did its sales. How can you pump it up for another round?

Repackage it as an SAT vocabulary study!

Did you know that novels with SAT vocabulary words help students retain those words 78% better than flash cards?* Hopefully you answered "No" just now, because I made that up. I even put an asterisk there like it refers to something. It definitely doesn't. Turns out you can just push SHIFT+8 and boom, there it is.

I always had an idea for this, BTW. What would get students to actually study SAT vocabulary? Erotica. What if there was SAT vocab embedded in erotica? They'd be sure to read and retain everything. Now, this obviously hits a pretty hard and reasonable brick wall because it's basically selling pornography to minors. But hey, if they're old enough to take the SAT...eh, I won't finish that.

The Cardiff Giant Scam

You start by establishing yourself as an explorer of something, like abandoned houses. THEN, you mysteriously keep finding old copies of the same book. Why is this book at all these locations? What's the connection? People will have to read and find out. Wink.

The Intentional Fuckup

Want people to talk about your book? What's better to generate chatter than fucking up on purpose?

Title with a misspelled "You're"? Sounds like a ticket to a BuzzFeed list. Essay about how William Faulkner's experiences shaped his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*? Sounds like a win.

It'll crush your soul, but being wrong on purpose is sure to buy you attention.

What Would Books Look Like If Big Publishing Collapsed?



This last fall, Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster merged, creating a mega publishing house, the ultimate Rat King of publishers, if you will, that could be putting out about a third of mainstream, published books this year.

When something this huge happens in an industry, it often means that the industry is either thriving or dying.

What if we woke up tomorrow and big publishing was gone? What would the world look like? Would there be books?

What would happen without big publishing?

Reviews and Reviewers Would Be Relevant

I like reading, and I, like a lot of people, don't want to spend my reading time sussing out which books are moderately worthwhile and which are trash. Or, maybe I should say, I love trash, but only a certain kind of trash. Please point me towards your good trash.

If I don't have the gatekeeping from big publishing, I need someone else to mine the vast self-published and indie offerings for the good stuff.

Reviews and reviewers are relevant now, but only to readers who are a little on the hardcore side. Readers who spend about as much time reading ABOUT books as they do reading books. But if we needed a reviewer's help to sort through thousands of books that all looked the same? If book buyers for stores and libraries had only reviews to lean on, no big publishers out there to trust as that first

line of defense? Reviewers would not only be useful, the industry would boom.

The Bookstore Experience

Browsing would be big again. Instead of coming to the bookstore knowing what they want, people would come hoping to find a type of something, but not a particular something.

Bookstores would have to section things differently. They'd have to make better use of display. Without the marketing and quantities that come from big publishers, it'd be harder to be certain what the "big books" are. Without the big publishers and their ability to refund unsold copies, bookstores would have to be choosy about ordering new stuff. The people who worked there would have to be on top of what's new.

Maybe I'm just being nostalgic, but going to the bookstore on a Friday night, Blockbuster Video style, planning to be there a couple hours and to leave with something that looks good? Sounds like a party.



Awards

Awards would be far more relevant as a sign of quality. Without major awards having the simplicity of big publisher pipelines, they'd have to dig deeper, cast a wider net, and be more selective.

Especially your "literary" awards, your Pulitzer, Pushcart, Costa, PEN America. Who can tell the difference between one bildungsroman and another? How the hell am I supposed to know which of the dozen novels of a college professor in crisis and in love with a younger woman is worth pushing through?

The End of the Blockbuster Book

As publishing has changed, and as other media has developed, it seems like we might be having longer intervals between blockbuster books. Your *Harry Potters*, your *Da Vinci Codes*. With the collapse of big publishing and the tied-in collapse of big book marketing, the likelihood of having blockbuster books goes way down.

In a way, this is a good thing. It means that more books are getting a handful of readers as opposed to a handful of books getting most readers.

In another way, it's not such a good thing.

One challenge to book culture is that, unlike movies, few people end up reading the same books. There are too many books, and they take too much time and effort. I'm pretty sure most people I know saw Avengers: Endgame. Most people I know have seen some Star Wars. But most people I know haven't read something as mainstream as Let The Great World Spin.

Blockbuster books did fulfill book culture's need for common touchstones.

While I don't think books like The Da Vinci Code are amazing pieces of art, they provide a link between people who read a lot and people who read one book every couple years. They provide an inroad for people who may not read a ton of books. Similar to how The Mona Lisa perhaps isn't the most incredible, impressive painting, but it gets people into the museum and talking about art, blockbuster books get people in the door and talking about books.

Losing the blockbusters hurts book culture.

Books Might Be More Personal

The big publishing business model requires that books sell a high-ish number of copies to keep the machine chugging along. Arguably, this means that a lot of what comes from big publishing is homogenized, palatable for everyone, and that the books that end up getting the most attention are those that will please large audiences.

With small presses and self-published authors running the show, it's entirely possible we'll see a huge variety of stuff. Without the need to support a large system, books can afford to be more niche, pleasing a smaller number of readers in a deeper way.

We May Lose Some Great Books

In the collapse, I assume that most publishers would sell off those properties that are no longer generating income. Out of print books, books that were never super popular.

Who these would go to and what those individuals would do with them is a complete unknown. However, it's very likely they'd end up in a lot of hands that never re-released them, either because they didn't have the drive or the means.

Many a great book might end up lost.

We May Miss Out On Talented Authors

Big publishing's collapse... won't be the complete end of books. But when a big ship sinks, a whole lot goes down with it.

There are some very talented authors who are not talented marketers, graphic designers, and self-promoters.

A world without big publishing will require that authors be good at these sorts of things.

A person can be a talented author and a talented marketer, but what becomes of the author who's a great author and sucks at everything else?

Anthologies Would Be More Useful

I'll just say it, I'm not a huge fan of anthologies based around a theme or and intellectual property. I usually end up hating some of it, liking one or two stories, and forgetting the rest almost immediately. It's usually a waste of time.

But with the need to find new, talented authors worth following, I'm a whole hell of a lot more interested in anthologies, especially edited by people I trust.

It May Begin The End of Books

Stay with me here.

Big publishing collapses, and the money, power, and jobs in that industry go with it.

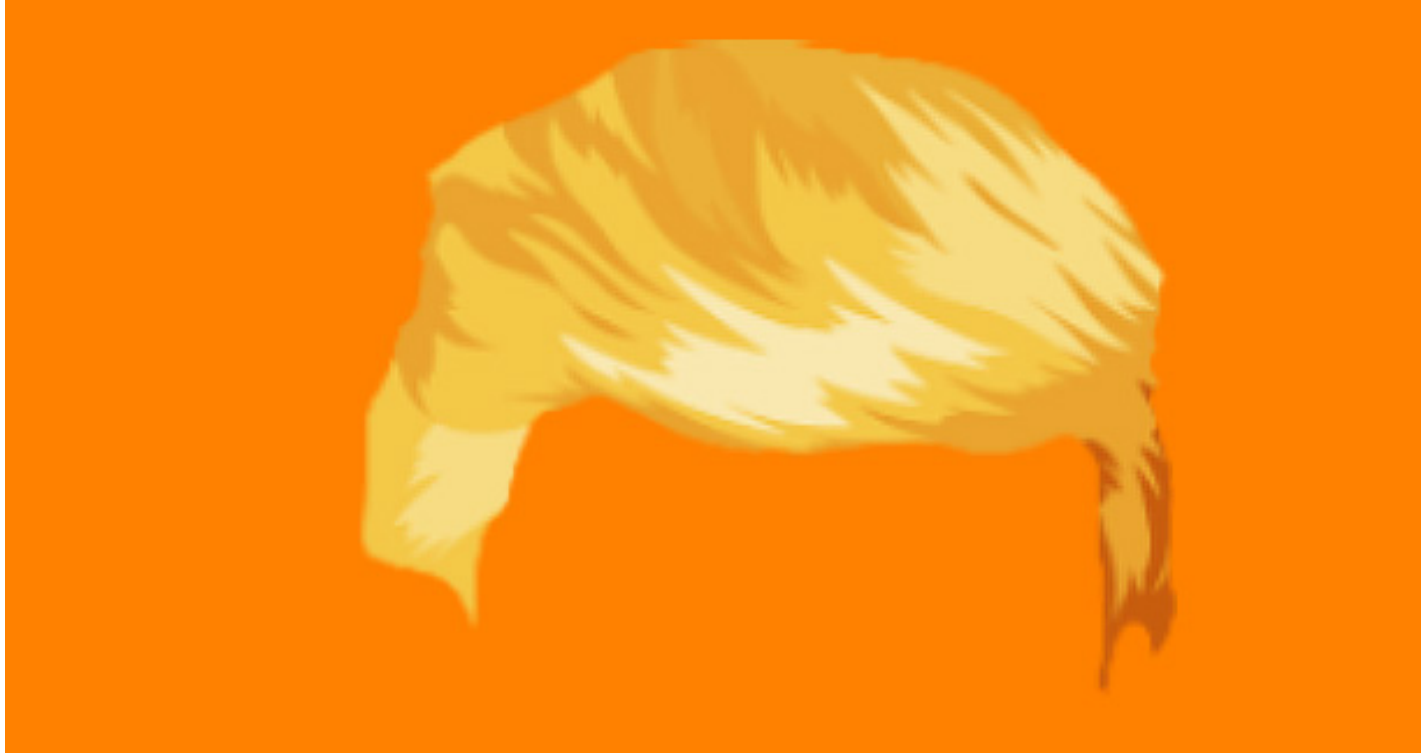
I don't think big publishing is doing charitable work. But I think its work, power, and influence has the good effect of putting books into the hands of readers. Over 10,000 people worked for Penguin Random House in 2019. That's 10,000 people who, one way or another, were driving people towards books.

Without a powerful industry pushing books, without those 10,000 people coming to work and getting books out there...do books fade into the background?

Sure, plenty of hardcore readers will remain. But maybe reading comes to occupy a space more like woodworking or candle-making or playing text-based adventure games. Some people do these things, and they love them dearly. But they're not common, everyday things for most.

Big publishing's collapse won't kill books right away. It won't be the complete end of books. But when a big ship sinks, a whole lot goes down with it.

Politics, Cash Grabs, and Hair: The End of the Trump Parody Book



If you haven't sold off your Trump parody book by now, you're screwed.

It was a fun ride and all, but it's over.

I know, I know, impeachment, yadda, yadda. Trust me. Once the dude is de-White-House-ed, one of two things happens:

1. He becomes another reality TV star, again. Ripe for parody, but book-length parody? For the bookish crowd? Eh.
2. Maybe he does get in actual trouble, and instead of parody books, we get books with titles like *Deceit of Our Great Nation and 1,460 Days of Deceit*. They love the word "deceit" for these sorts of books.

Let's take a look back and see what got published, what was popular, and what, if anything, can be said about this whole mess of Trump parody books.

Children's Books

I mean, take your pick, they're all the same sort of thing. "Trump's a baby" is the basic tenet here.

These are a little baffling to me. Who are these for? Kids who are of an age young enough they can't read yet, but somehow also understand and have

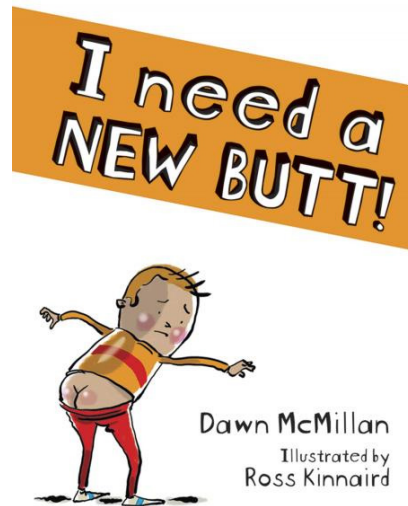


opinions on politics? Yes, I know your kid held a sign at a protest and tells you "Daddy, Trump is mean." I hate to burst your DadPride Bubble, but if your kid were raised by a hardcore conservative, at age 4 they'd be outside Planned Parenthood, holding a sign that says, "Glad I wasn't aborted."

But hey, just in case, feel free to comment with the most salient point your child has brought up, on purpose, about... how about America's place in world economics?

These books are such a hardcore cash grab. Throw a hundred words between hard covers, hook up with an illustrator, and you've got a gag gift that retails for \$17 bucks.

If you want to give someone a gag gift that's got staying power, get a picture book about butts or farts. That shit's evergreen. Everbrown? Whatever, it's funny forever.



Quote Collections



I can definitively say what becomes of these books. Because I've seen the process before.

Behold:



During the W. years, there were countless books of this type. And there still are, they still exist, it's just that nobody wants 'em. They populate thrift stores, used bookstores, and there are 116 copies on Amazon to be had for less than \$5.

Let me put it another way: If you saw someone reading a book of George W. Bush quotes in a coffee shop... wouldn't you wonder what the fuck was going on? Was this the only book the reader could access for some reason? Are they writing a biography of W.? Is this person a time traveler? Is a curse involved?

Books don't have to be great forever in order to be great. But a book with a 4-year shelf life is a terrible investment of time to compile, publish, or read.



The Joke As Manipulation

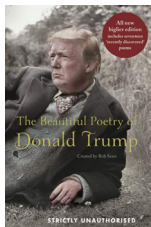
This one is a little inside baseball. You have to know some specifics about Trump to really enjoy it.



What skeeves me out about these books is the way they manipulate readers. They make a reader feel clever. The reader spots the parody points, and that makes them feel like they're smart. It's like a mystery with an easily-guessed outcome. People keep reading them because they like how those books make them feel. "I solved the mystery shortly before the detective!"

This kind of humor is more an emotional manipulation of the reader's self-esteem than it is a joke. Making a reader feel smart is easy. Telling funny jokes is hard.

The Poetry Book



This one is interesting for the exact amount of time it takes to read three of the poems.

Someone took Trump quotes and transformed them into sensitive, personal poems. Good premise. Then it overstays its welcome. Like an *SNL* sketch where you get the

joke, and then it goes on and on without escalating or twisting the joke to make it something new.

This one, and books like it, get full credit for creativity and effort. But the joke with the highest input of effort is not the funniest.

Tingleverse

When it comes to the Tingleverse, there's always room for a special category.

Our buddy Mr. Tingle, excuse me, DOCTOR Tingle, has put out the following Trump books:

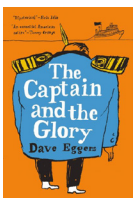
- *Pounded In The Butt By The Handsome Physical Manifestation Of Tromp's Twitter Ban That Should've Come Years Sooner But Fine Now That It's Here High Five*
- *Upset Tromp Supporter Pounded In The Butt By His Search For Meaning Now That His Bigoted Cult Leader Has Been Voted Out*
- *Domald Tromp Pounded In The Butt By His Fabricated Wiretapping Scandal Made Up To Redirect Focus Away From His Seemingly Endless Unethical Connections To Russia*
- *Slammed In The Butt By Domald Tromp's Attempt To Avoid Accusations Of Plagiarism By Removing All Facts Or Concrete Plans From His Republican National Convention Speech*
- *Domald Tromp's Ass Is Haunted By The Handsome Ghost Of His Incriminating Tax Returns*
- *Redacted In The Butt By Redacted Under The Tromp Administration*
- *Sentient Fort Pauls Manofort Is Charged In The Butt While Tromp's Foreign Policy Advisor Georgie Papadop Admits He Lied About Hiding Inside*
- *Domald Tromp's Anal Impeachment*
- *Domald Tromp Pounded In The Butt By The Handsome Russian T-Rex Who Also Peed On His Butt And Then Blackmailed Him With The Videos Of His Butt Getting Peed On*
- *President Domald Loch Ness Tromp Pounds America's Butt*



And this is leaving out the books about Mike Pence, other politicians, and some political-but-not-Trump-specific titles. This isn't even ALL of his Trump books. Historians will have a hell of a task in reassembling the publication career of Chuck Tingle.

If you know anything about Dr. Tingle, you know that he's perhaps a literary genius, perhaps a financial genius, and perhaps a man caught in a hell of his own making. With someone like Trump in the world, Dr. Tingle had no choice. Someone had to be pounded in the butt, and with the entire world watching the same person, the intertwined fates of Trump and Dr. Tingle were sealed.

The Subtle Not Subtle



Dave Eggers. I mean, if you're reading Dave Eggers, the chance that you're conservative is like zero. Is there one conservative, diehard Eggers fan out there? Are you that unicorn? Can we study you?

Dave Eggers wrote this sort of allegorical, parody thing. It's pointless. Even if you agree with the politics, the events of the book basically follow the events of Trump's last four years. Take America, make it a boat, boom, you're there.

It's not bad. It's just a little disappointing for the former literary wunderkind, who I guess is a wunderman now?

This one just feels like a rough draft that doesn't go far enough. It makes plenty of good points, but... who cares? I could write a book called *400 Reasons You Should Throw Out Your Silverware Drawer Sorter*, and I could definitely make 400 good points on that one (don't test me). But it'd be boring.

Being right and being entertaining are not the same thing.

The Lessons

Trump might be above parody. Or below it. Either way, he's immune to it. Like any effective grade school bully, he manages to make fun of everybody in a way that sticks, and he himself is teflon.

If I'd been knee deep in a Trump parody when he called a deadly pandemic the "Kung-Flu," I'd have crumpled up my sheaf of papers or crumpled up my laptop (I have excellent grip strength and buy VERY cheap laptops) and tossed everything out. How do you parody a parody?

The good news, in a situation where the margin of parody is thin, we can learn something about future parodies.

As a reader, I've got one ask of parody writers: Don't waste my time.

Overstaying your welcome, writing a 200-pager when 80 will do, is wasting my time.

A joke premise needs to be backed up by genuinely funny contents. If the first and last joke are on the cover, just make a poster.

A poorly-masked joke that relies on a reader feeling clever, mistaking recognition for humor, is boring at best, a little gross at worst, and a waste of my time. My self-esteem is unbelievably low. Your book used up a little shot of my self-esteem for a brief high.

Check yourself: Maybe your book was fun to write, but is it fun to read?

Worst of all, the greatest waste of time, the greatest sin: Don't write something boring.

Trump is a lot of things. The one thing he's not? Boring.

If you've written a boring parody book about Trump, you've wasted your time, my time, and some of the best, ripest parody material of all time.

Don't make the same mistake next time.

And hey, maybe we luck out and there is no "next time." In which case this column is worthless, and I'm 100% okay with that.

Displeasing, Offensive, and Bad: Three Tiers of Crappy Books



Amateurs finish a book, and if it sucks, they say it sucks, and they leave it there.

Real readers go further. They figure out why it sucked. Partially because they're curious. But mostly, and most importantly, because figuring out why you disliked a book helps you avoid reading another pile of shit just like it.

Writers do the same thing. You can't finish a book and say, "Well, that sucked," and expect to learn anything.

Let's say you finish a lousy book. What's the next step?

Buckets.

When a book sucks, it goes into one of these buckets: Displeasing, Offensive, or Bad. Figure out which bucket the sucky book belongs in and you'll be closer to Reading God status.

Here's how it works.

The Unreadables

We're starting at the bottom and working up.

Unreadables don't even get a bucket. They don't deserve one.

The easiest way to talk about these is with an example. Here's a bit from some slash fiction I read FOR A PROJECT:

One day, Leonardo DiCaprio from when he was on Growing Pains was out skateboarding, being a cool kid and wonder why he was randomly only in one season of Growing Pains. While contemplating life and his possible future of dying frozen off a huge ship because that chick from Titanic was too much off a fatass to share the dresser piece so he dies.

Get the drift?

Here's the Unreadables test: If you were on some kind of magnet prison island in space, and the only way to escape was to create a cohesive summary of an Unreadable, you'd be better off doing what you could to make your space tube where you sleep as cozy as possible, because you're not going anywhere.

When something is unreadable, don't waste time on buckets. Just put that shit in the toilet bowl in your mind and flush it away.

Displeasing

This is the lightest, least damning version of a sucky book. This book makes you say, "I didn't like it." But probably not in a passionate, hateful way.

A displeasing book has the basics. It looks like a book. It reads like a book, and you understand the plot or thrust of the whole thing. You can picture the audience for it.



To make a comparison, if we look at Stallone's oeuvre, *Daylight* might fall into the Displeasing Bucket. It's not bad (*The Specialist*). It's not so bad it's good (*Over The Top*). It's not offensive. It's just kinda... there. It's okay if you've seen *Demolition Man* a dozen times, you can't watch *Tango & Cash* because you only watch that when you're drunk, and it's currently 7:30 AM. If you're just looking to kill time with your old pal Sly, *Daylight* will get you there.

A good check for the displeasing bucket: maybe it's displeasing to you, but you could see how it'd be pleasing to someone else. I'm sure there's someone out there who LOVES *Daylight*, maybe even puts it in their Top 5 Stallone's.

When you come across these, here are some angles to consider:

- Would small changes make me feel differently?
- Are the things I dislike about this the same things others really like about it?
- Was I sold this book based on false promises, or did I pick up something I really shouldn't have?
- Was it the story itself, or was it the WAY the story was told?

Offensive

This is the hardest one to talk about publicly. Whether or not you take offense to something is more loaded than whether or not you thought it was pleasing.

But it's also the most important category because not all offensive things are bad, and not all bad things are offensive. Being offensive doesn't make something bad. It makes it offensive, and if you want to learn something about books, you've got to put offensive books in their own bucket.

Remember that these are personal, imaginary buckets, not buckets you have to literally create with a trip to the hardware store, paint, and a new Instagram feed, buckets that your friends, family and Twitter followers will be able to root through to see which books you put where. These buckets are meant to help you pick and write better books. They are meant to be personal, not communal.

I'm going to tell you some of the things that help me make the decision on a book: Does this belong in the Offensive Bucket? You can use these as jump-off points to make your own stricter rules, or you can lighten them up to suit your needs.

A book does not hit my Offensive Bucket because I suspect others might be offended by it.

A book doesn't necessarily go in my Offensive Bucket if characters say and do offensive things.

A book doesn't necessarily go into my Offensive Bucket if the author, outside the text, is an offensive person.

A book is pretty unlikely to go in my Offensive Bucket if it's over 100 years old.

A book may go in my Offensive Bucket if I find it intellectually or emotionally dishonest.

A book may go in my Offensive Bucket if it contains a thinly-veiled moral lesson or is trying to make a heavy-handed moral point, regardless of whether or not I agree with the moral.

A book may go in my Offensive Bucket if I feel personally attacked.

A book may go in the Offensive Bucket if it touches on something that's a personal issue for me in a disrespectful or casual way, even if it's fairly inoffensive and I wouldn't find it offensive if I read it at another time in my life.

This is the hardest bucket for most people, and I just want to remind you, for about the 5th time, that this isn't a bucket you need to talk about publicly. You do not need to share or defend decisions about what does and does not offend you.

You WILL benefit from having this separate bucket because it will force you to consider whether an offensive book may still be useful or have more good in it than bad.

If you come across something offensive, some questions:

It's like coming across a van that's completely crushed in the junkyard and taking offense to the scantily-clad barbarian woman airbrushed on the side.

- When did it cross the line?
- Once it crossed the line, was there any possibility for redemption?
- If I read this completely detached from society, if no one would ever know I read it, would that change how I feel?
- Did it cross MY line, or did it cross A line?
- Did the way I felt change as I read, or did I go in and come out feeling the same?

One last thing here: I don't bother categorizing Unreadables or Bad Books as Offensive. It's like coming across a van that's completely crushed in the junkyard and taking offense to the scantily-clad barbarian woman airbrushed on the side.

Bad Books

A bad book is a book that just doesn't work.

Let's talk Harry Stephen Keeler for a moment.

This guy was known for doing some very, very weird stuff. Here's a description of one of his books:

A man is found strangled to death in the middle of a lawn, yet there are no footprints other than his own. Police suspect the 'Flying Strangler-Baby,' a killer midget who disguises himself as a baby and stalks victims by helicopter.

Keeler's got a habit of revealing key characters in the final pages of a full length novel. One mystery even reveals the killer in the LAST sentence. That's like dropping your girlfriend off at the airport, and as she's slamming the car door, she says, "Oh, by the way, I'm pregnant" and then walks away with her suitcase.

Cormac McCarthy breaks the rules in a good way, like making up words here and there. Keeler's way of breaking the rules, it's like Cormac McCarthy suddenly revealing that the dad character in *The Road* was an android in the final page.

In review:

Displeasing Books: "Not for me."

Offensive Books: "Not for me."

Bad Books: "Not for anybody."

What Good Are Sex Scenes in Fiction?



I'm not here to talk about bad sex.

Okay, maybe just a little.

Fiction has some terrible sex in it. There's even a Bad Sex Award, which was sadly not presented in 2020, but you still want a highlight from 2019, right?

Highlight:

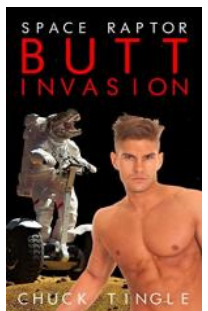
With the fondling, Katsuro's penis and testicles became one single mound that rolled around beneath the grip of her hand. Miyuki felt as though she was manipulating a small monkey that was curling up its paws.

You know...writers will tell other writers, If your character shoots a gun, you need to go out and shoot a gun. So maybe along with that, we should suggest that if your character is going to give a handjob...

Anyway, I'm not here to talk about bad sex. I'm also not here to talk about great sex. I'm not here to talk about sex in romance and erotic books because that's a completely different ballgame. Sometimes boobgame. Sometimes velociraptor game.

I'm here to talk about the HUGE collection of mediocre, boring, useless sex scenes in books. I'm here to talk about the awkward, out-of-place sex scene in a movie, the one you watched with your grandpa, and both of you were blindsided by a sudden, surprising, ill-fitting, and unnecessary sex scene.

Why are these scenes there?



Why do writers include afterthought sex scenes?

How can you spot the difference?

Boring Sex Fails to Reveal Character

Writers squeeze every action for character. The way a character ties their shoes tells the reader something. The way a character washes dishes tells the reader something.

If your sex scene doesn't tell the reader anything about your character, you've blown a great opportunity. [*Uh, phrasing? —Editor*]

A sex scene is a great chance to either reconfirm your character or show another side of a character.

Bad Sex Resolves Tension

When you have a romantic tension building in your story, remember that when and if your characters bang it out, that shouldn't be the end of the tension. You can do better.

Sex can close the tension of a will they/won't they, but you should only close that tension if closing it opens up a back door to greater tension. [*Uh, phrasing? —Editor*]

Resolving the entirety of the tension with sex is like ending a book with the antagonist's death. It's... fine? But you can do better.

Sex Turns Exhausting When It Goes On Too Long

Most of us take longer to eat a pizza than we do to have sex. So here's a tip:

Write the longest description of eating pizza that you can. Go on a little longer than you think you should. Include smells, tastes, temperature, everything you can.

Now cut it down to a tight paragraph or two.

Print this out, tape it to the wall, and if you're writing a sex scene longer than that, you're going on too long.

Sex Is A Snooze At A Distance

Whenever there's a chance to do something in books that's not possible in film, that's an opportunity you need to grab.

One of the huge advantages of sex in books, as opposed to sex in movies, is that you can do more than just see it. You can feel it. The descriptions are On The Body. The reader is much, much closer.

If you're working on a sex scene, and if the reader feels like they're watching it from a camera mounted on the ceiling, the reader is too far away. Get closer. Skin on skin.

It's easy to film a sex scene too close. It's hard to write a sex scene where the reader is too close.

Obligatory Sex Is Tedious

Maybe I'm totally alone on this, but I do not care about James Bond getting laid. There's no part of me watching that's like, "Oh boy, I hope James gets to do passionate intercourse!"

Meh-ntercourse comes from writers who feel like you couldn't possibly have a book without sex. They're checking the box. Is that innuendo? Can we start that? [*Yes. —Editor*]

Anything you're putting in your book because you "feel like you should" is a waste of everyone's time.

A sign that you might be adding obligatory sex: If the setting is night, in a bedroom, between two people, you imagine softcore music playing, and they're having fairly vanilla sex, you MIGHT be writing meh-ntercourse.

First Time Sex Has Been Done

Way, way too many sexual encounters in books are a buildup to the FIRST sexual encounter between characters. It's not always bad, it's just unimaginative.

As you're working, try out the second sexual encounter as the one you get more detailed on. What's the difference? What does that earn you?

Sex Told is Sex Dulled

Don't give me sex through dialog or inner thoughts. This is the ultimate "show, don't tell" moment. What does a giving partner do? Don't tell me that he's willing to toss her salad. Write him tossing with gusto.

Cinematic is Stale

There are certain things you can't show on screen. There are certain things you can't ask a couple actors to do.

The characters in your book aren't real. You can kill them, you can make them win the lottery, and they can do just about anything, sexually.

Why not have them do something interesting?

Sex Is Boring When It's Your First Thought

I've learned not to trust myself. When I want to show something like love in a story, the first thing I'll reach for is a physical act of affection.

And that's when I need to check myself.

Because sex might be the right tool, but there might be something better.

If I want to show a loving, intimate familiarity, I might show a character getting in on the wrong side of the bed to warm it up for a partner.

If I want to show a young, passionate fling, I might show two characters, sweaty, obviously just after sex, eating a jar of frosting with spoons, standing in the kitchen.

If I want to show a rocky relationship, my protagonist might be watching porn on his phone right before bed to put something in his head and help him perform.

Sex isn't a bad tool, and it's not something to avoid in your story. But if it's the first tool you reach for, try reaching for something else and see what it earns you.

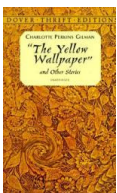
Say Something Nice: Good Things About Bad Books



Because it's government-mandated Love Month (that's how Valentine's works, right?), and because my understanding of love is that it's weird and uncomfortable, and because I do so much complaining, I decided it's time to say something nice.

Below is a list of books that I don't like for various reasons.

And now I'll do my very best to say something nice about each one of them.



"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

I've made no bones about my dislike of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic tale of horror and feminism and maybe, like, a chick stuck in the wallpaper who's maybe sick, or maybe the problem is that a MAN just thinks she's sick.

The truth, though, is that I don't hate this story. I hate the interpretations of it. Gilman has been very explicit, telling everyone what it's about, and frankly the endless debate of what it "really" means is pretty disrespectful. More disrespectful than calling the protagonist a "chick," for sure.

The Nice: It's got a horror element to it that I can get behind. Whether it's a sick woman, a Freddy Krueger, a dollboy, whatever it is, you can't really go wrong with a scary person in the walls.



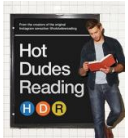
"Vertical Run" by Joseph R. Garber

I was tricked into reading this because somehow I thought it was the book that was the basis for *Die Hard*. Never mind that this one came out a full 8 years AFTER *Die Hard*. And that it has almost nothing to do with people stealing money from a skyscraper. Look, I'll own that this was not a well-informed, smart, decision on my part.

At one point in this book, our main character needs a disguise, so he bleaches his hair and combs it forward. This "disguise" draws A LOT of attention his way and causes everyone to assume he's gay. This was apparently what he expected and intended? And apparently this disguise is so authentic (again, consisting entirely of bleaching his hair and combing it forward, making NO other changes to his appearance) that a trans prostitute will not take No for an answer and tries to force her services on him. When he turns her down, he winds up surrounded by a gang of trans prostitutes with straight razors.

I'm not going to get into the bizarre/bad politics or the math on why this makes no sense, because the book itself doesn't warrant that deep a dive. If we go that route, we'll be here all day, and we'll have wasted a day of our precious, short lives discussing Vertical Run. You know what's wrong with it, I know, too, let's move on.

The Nice: I guess if you're a fan of action movies that seem to almost dare you to try and make sense of them, this one might have a little bit of that vibe? I don't know, I'm reaching here. The hero replaces "Yippe-kay-yay, motherfucker" with the absolute garbage "Up your poop with an ice cream scoop." I can only work with what I'm given.



"Hot Dudes Reading" by Some Ladies Who Are Probably Hiding Out So They Can't Be Forced To Appear In Court

I HATE *Hot Dudes Reading*. Hate it. It's probably the most intentionally sexist thing that you'll find front-facing on mainstream bookstore shelves (unless you happen on a front-facing *Vertical Run* and feel that its sexism outshines its transphobia and outright stupidity. There's a case to be made). If you took these photos at a public beach, published them in a book without consent of the "models," and captioned them the same way they're captioned here, you'd have new legislation named after you by now. Also, HDR's aesthetic, almost moralistic stance against Kindles is so fucking laughable that I don't know how they can hold a camera steady long enough to snap another predatory picture. It's like Alex Jones trying to distract from his...everything by saying that he recycles.

But the challenge is to say something nice, here...

The Nice: I believe girls and women need to hear that they can be whatever they want. I guess I believe that enough to extend it to the belief that, should they choose to be, girls and women can be sexist trash pigs, too. HDR outlines a path towards becoming a real piece of shit in a way that was formerly reserved for men only.



"Blankets" by Craig Thompson

Blankets is an emo story about a guy who...I don't even really remember. I think he's in love? All I remember all these years later is that the guy is wracked with guilt because he jerks off, like ONE time, and there's a fly crawling on the tissue he jerked off in. Sorry, that's

crude: There's a fly crawling on the tissue IN WHICH he jerked off.

I have a high tolerance for emo coming of age books, especially when they're illustrated as beautifully as this. But for me, *Blankets* just feels a little too precious.

The Nice: This was one of the vanguard books, along with *Maus* and *Persepolis*, that brought comics into bookstores and libraries. Okay, they had to label them "graphic novels," but once that door got kicked open, the Spider-Men, Hulks, and Captains America all stormed into libraries and bookstores. *Blankets* was the doorstop that wedged that door open.



"Feminist Baby" by Loryn Brantz

I wish this had been around when I was little. My mom read me *Complainer Asshole Baby*. Really stuck with me, clearly.

I've read this book. Not TO a baby, but I don't think it's really intended for a baby. It's intended for parents to show everyone else, "Look what good people we are, we're raising a feminist baby."

Babies are stupid. It's not their fault, they're little, their bodies and brains are developing. But if a baby acts in a feminist manner, it's by accident. It's not a choice. A baby will die in 5 inches of water. My older brother ate a dead fly off the carpet when he was a baby. Budding feminists? Please.

I mean, if it's possible to be a feminist baby, doesn't that mean there's also a misogynist baby out there? Who is this monster baby? How did this happen? Which books is THAT baby reading?

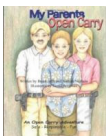
The Nice: Everything gets commoditized and sold eventually, even feminism. At least this one brought some money into the book world instead of putting it into the Etsy shop of some hustler with the guts to charge \$35 for a plain text "Future is Female" t-shirt.

"License to Love" by Gina Robinson



There's just so much about this book that doesn't make sense. Why would a rocket launcher have a bayonet? Why would you go by the stage name "Lani Torres" if your real name is the far more stage-y "Lani Silkwater"? Why would you name your main character Rock Powers?

The Nice: This book prompted my first and only time drinking wine in the bathtub while reading a book. Wine is disgusting, the hangover is hot trash, but the wine drunk is damn fine.



"My Parents Open Carry" by Some People I Don't Want to Alert Because They DEFINITELY Have Guns

This is like the opposite end of the political spectrum from *Feminist Baby*, and it makes the same errors. And then a whole bunch of other errors, too.

The authors wrote this book because they said they noticed a dearth of children's books featuring families that open carry. (For those unaware, "open carry" is when you carry a gun on your person, visible to all, so like in a hip or shoulder holster with no jacket over it.

People do this when they go to the grocery store and shit. I'm not here to explain WHY, just WHAT.) Now that they mention it, I don't remember a lot of open carry in children's books. I do not recall Pop, while he was being Hopped On, having a gunbelt. I reckon some children's books, like The Twits, would have ended a lot faster if there'd been a pistol within reach.

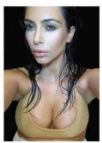
Here's one of the opening paragraphs of this "children's book":

The Strong family consists of Richard Strong, his wife Bea and their 13 year old daughter, Brenna. The Strong family live in a modest home in a medium-sized town in the Midwest.

Blazing prose, that. Really set up to capture a child's imagination.

Look, let's set the really asinine politics aside for a minute: Even if you're pro-gun in every form, many times, many ways, you still don't want this book. The drawings suck, the plot is nonexistent. It's not a book. It's a pamphlet with colored pencil drawings.

The Nice: I think it's fair to say this book sets back the cause ever so slightly, so I'm here for it. I'm not a total hardliner on guns, really, but I think open carry is silly. In a state where you can concealed carry, like mine, the only reason to open carry is to prompt an argument, which is never coming, by the way, because you have a GUN.



"Kim Kardashian West: Selfish" by The Titular Kim Kardashian West

Kim Kardashian's selfie collection (I refuse to call it a "book") does absolutely nothing other than what it promises: showing pictures of Kim Kardashian's butt. Here's her butt in Thailand, here's her butt near an elephant. Here's a famous waterfall, out of focus, in the background, behind my butt. The letdown here: why not give us some selfie hints? I'm interested in upping my selfie game, and it's one of the few things you seem to know A LOT about, so why not make with some pointers?

Nope, it's just pictures with an occasional small caption, usually about who did Kim's makeup.

The Nice: The nudes are printed on black paper, so you can identify their position by simply looking at the top edges of the page stack, sort of the way you could flip to the pictures in a movie adaptation paperback. Saves you some time, and I respect filth that knows it's filth.



"Eat Your Own Cum Tutorial" by Ivana Tastit (really!)

This goddamn book has cursed me. I put a review of it on my web site, and to this day it's still the highest-trafficked page I've got. You pour a ton of work into a blog, a podcast, what have you, and what happens? A pamphlet about eating jizz is the only thing anyone seems to care about.

The Nice: I mean...it does provide a framework that would probably help someone eat their own ejaculate. It's pretty simple, mostly just psyching you up to go for it. But it's not rocket science, right? It's just...eating cum. I don't know if there's a lot to say about it on a philosophical level.



"Toy Cemetery" by William W. Johnstone

Oh, *Toy Cemetery*. How I love to hate you.

On one hand, it's perhaps the most bonkers thing I've ever read. There's a child molestor, incest, murders, people being transformed into dolls (maybe), evil dolls, good dolls that fight the evil dolls, a giant monster of some kind, sinister fog, supernatural control over the passage of time.

The first third or so was pretty amazing. Then...it almost felt like Johnstone submitted the first third, then got an advance, used it for cocaine, forgot about the whole thing, and the night before it was due, put it all together, shipped it off, and whoever was proofing it was like, "Fuck it, this is my last day, let's just put the apostrophes mostly in the right places and I'm outta this hellhole!"

The result is like what you'd get if you combined David Lynch with Tommy Wiseau: a film with some unbelievably weird shit in it, but filmed so badly, perhaps intentionally so, that you can't really say what's going on at any moment.

The Nice: It's a mixed bag, but if you can accept this the way you can accept being on shrooms, just sit back and let it happen, you can find something to love here.

The Best and Worst Things We Can Do With 'The Great Gatsby'



The Great Gatsby has entered public domain, meaning you can take it and do just about whatever you want with it. Nobody can stop you from printing an all-over t-shirt with every word from first to last, "In" to "past." Nobody can stop you from recording your own jazzy audiobook version. Nobody can stop you from finally making that *Gatsby: Revengeanceining* first-person shooter.

With all this new freedom...what are some of the best and worst things we could do with *The Great Gatsby* now?

...and Zombies (Worst)

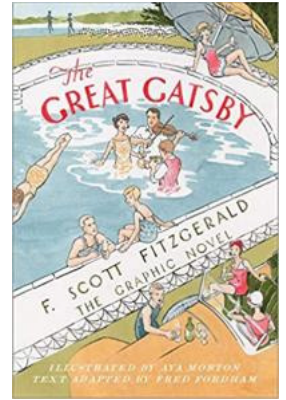
Pride and Prejudice and Zombies was a first, and it was followed by a number of others that added a monster twist to some classic tales. *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, *Android Karenina*, *50 Shades of Frankenstein*, *The Mummymorphosis*, *Attack of the 50-Foot Emma*.

These vary in their laziness. Some are legitimately new stories with the classic as the base, and some are...cheap. Boring. Take a book, add a couple zombies, boom, you're a novelist.

It's not that the idea of adding a wolfman to a classic was horrible. I, for one, wouldn't mind seeing just about every Shakespeare character getting torn apart by a gill man. The problem is that it's been done. We got it. And as fun as it was, the joke is in the concept, not so much something I'm looking to read an entire book about.

Make It Gorgeous (Best)

A lot of great, creative cover work happens with books that are in the public domain because anyone can take a crack at it. It's a great graphic design exercise, and fans of the book can look forward to some truly gorgeous editions hitting shelves.



Gender Switch (Worst)

You can really only go one of a couple routes with a gender switch:

One: You can go the route of showing the plight of a gender other than male. Only problem, there's an entire section in the original *Gatsby's* Wikipedia entry on how the book is pretty concerned with gender in the Jazz Age. So a version of *Gatsby* that talks about gender in the Jazz Age has been written, and it's called *The Great Gatsby*.

Two: You can go the route of writing an almost identical book with gender-swapped characters, demonstrating that gender is a meaningless construct. You're coming from a solid place, in philosophical terms, and you've found the most boring, drawn-out way to make your point.

What separates a gender swap that works from a gender swap that doesn't is simple: There has to be more to the swap than making a point outside the narrative. There has to be a reason for me to read THE STORY. There's nothing wrong with having a complex, new take on any of this stuff. Just make the delivery vehicle, the novel, worthwhile.

Copy and Compose (Best)

If you want to learn to write a novel, *Gatsby* is a great one to imitate. Set yourself up with a specific time period, similar characters, and take them through the same paces. Compare your work to the actual book. At the end, you might have something close to *Gatsby*, and now that's totally fine AND you can sell it. You might end up with something really different, and that works, too.

Shipping (Worst)

Two guys cannot be friends, admire each other, or have any kind of relationship in media without being shipped. Exhibit A: the television program *Supernatural*. I'd never even seen the show and saw some of this shipping, and then discovered the characters are brothers? That's weird, man. I'll stick to pornographics where the sex is between STEPsiblings, thank you very much, you sickos.

Shipping Jay Gatsby and Nick Caraway is a hacky idea. Look, I just had the idea. If I have the idea, that's a sure sign that it's not terribly creative, and you need to go further.

Endless Movies (Worst)

Little Women? There are 6 film versions of *Little Women* and 12 TV movie versions. That's 18 movies based on the same book. Instead of casting a new version of *Little Women*, I want to put together my dream cast for a movie ABOUT casting the new *Little Women*: "Jesus Christ, again? Alright, fine. Who's like a little outspoken on social media, but not like TOO outspoken? She'll be Doris or

Rhiannon or whoever. Is it time for lunch yet?"

I'm not shitting on *Little Women*, I'm just sayin...there are other books out there, y'all.

When something goes public domain, it's easier. I get it. But maybe set aside some money, buy some book rights, and make something new.

Predict The Future With It (Best)

The Roaring 20s followed the Spanish Flu epidemic and what was predicted to be a horrible economic situation after the usual downturn that follows war. What everyone thought would be a lousy time was...kinda awesome, at least economically. Sure, the whole thing went to hell inside of a decade, but what a ride!

Forget It (Worst)

I know *Gatsby* is potentially on a de-canonization list. And the effects of turning public domain can be an unknown. Maybe it works in the book's favor, maybe it removes some of the market forces that push titles.

I'd like to make a brief argument for remembering it.

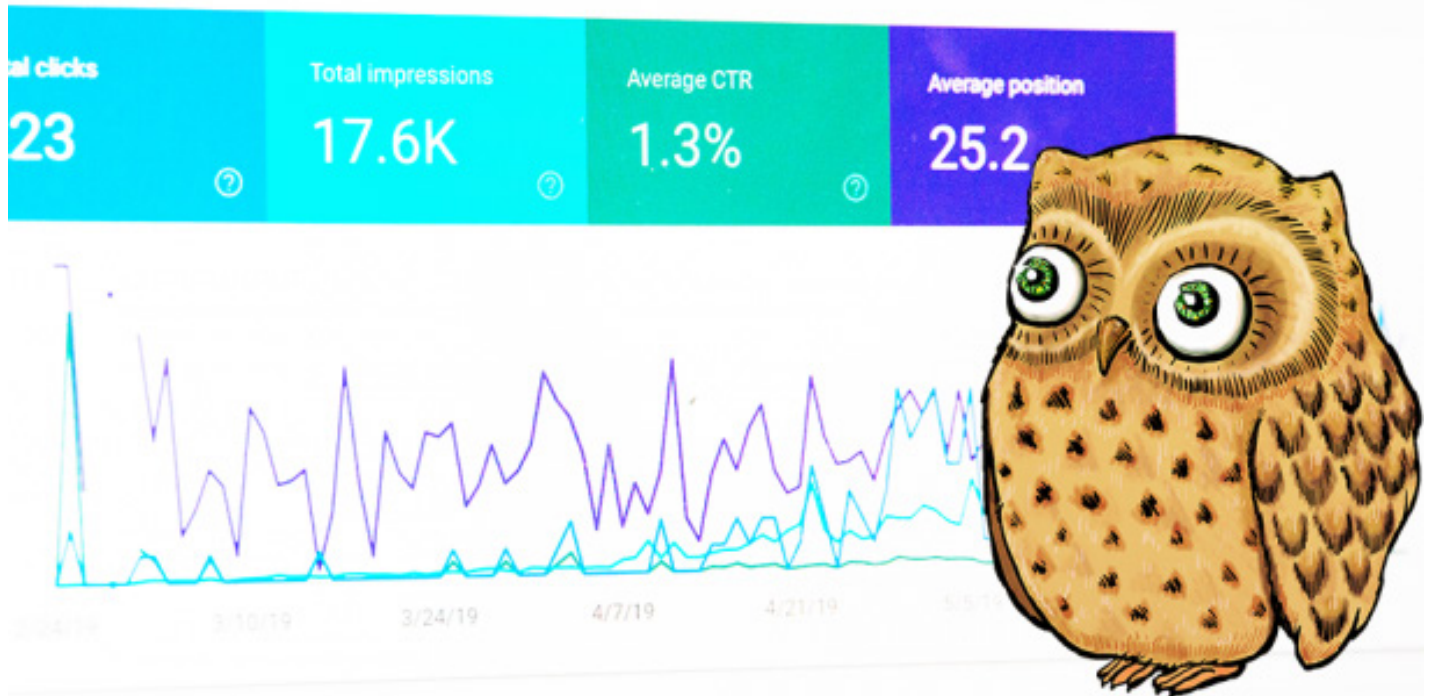
It's got an interesting structure. It's got a style that's easy to follow. It has a basic set of characters. It's short. It's a touchstone because so many of us have read it, and touchstones are in short supply in the book world. It's simple and tragic.

We should not be having high schoolers read this. That's idiotic. If I had to pick one book for every person to read, it wouldn't be *Gatsby*.

This isn't the one book I would save if all the world's books were burning.

But I think there's plenty that's worthwhile here, and that is contained in the text, not just as a culturally relevant book.

Old Book Marketing Wisdom That Needs To



Bill Veeck was a baseball team owner who did some crazy shit. He held a game where the fans used cards to vote on the team's strategy throughout the game while the team's manager sat in a rocking chair. He gave away livestock at games, including, one time, a horse.

And Bill Veeck made a lot of moves that changed baseball for the better. Bill was the first person to bring up the idea of selling Yankee caps to the general public. He was the first one to suggest that instead of selling tickets for an entire series, each game could have its own ticket. He also hired the first black player in the American League, Larry Doby, and after three players on the team refused to shake Doby's hand, Bill fired them.

Sometimes received wisdom is awesome. It gives you a headstart on something. But sometimes received wisdom, those "this is just how we do it" things, like saying it would be stupid to sell Yankee caps or have black people and white people play ball together, isn't really wisdom at all. It's malarkey. Bullshit. Nonsense someone was told, and now they're telling you.

The best way to check received wisdom is to test it. Step outside what you're told and give it a whirl.

Let's step out into the world of book marketing wisdom and see what we can shake loose.

Balance Pushiness and Humility When Selling Your Book

Worst advice. Most writers need to be more pushy.

You'll always have a pushy asshole who just can't shut up about his book, but you know what? He'll be like that no matter what you tell him. Meanwhile, there are a ton of you who can stand to be a hell of a lot pushier.

Here's how to know you're pushing the right amount: Exceed the right amount, be told by someone who cares about you and loves you and knows you well that you're being too pushy, and then back it up two steps.

Sell Your Book As "X Crossed With Y"

Don't sell your book as X crossed with Y unless crossing X and Y is a new, interesting idea or intriguing combo. When you tell me it's *Hunger Games* crossed with *Twilight*, that tells me nothing. The gap between those books is like the gap between stones on the Egyptian pyramids: Not even wide enough to slip in a sheet of paper. When you tell me it's *Infinite Jest* crossed with *A Prayer For Owen Meany*, now I just feel like you're telling me about all the books you've read, not the one you wrote.

If it's a book that's like Michael Bay directing *Sleepless in Seattle*? You've got my attention. *50 Shades* meets *Jurassic Park*? Okay, I'm listening. But don't bother giving me touch points with no distance and nothing interesting happening in between. That space in between your touch points is where your book lives. If that gap is too narrow I'll read the two already-established poles and call it good.



No Need For Buying Beyond The Book

Why do bands have merch tables?

Because A) It's an easy way to make some money, and B) When someone buys a band's shirt, they're turned into a walking billboard.

Why aren't you offering something to buy beyond the book? Both as revenue and as marketing?

Even if it's as simple as an enamel pin, a new one exclusive to every title, that's something. Lots of books have a workbook or themed journal alongside them. Why not yours? Jesus, it takes 30 minutes and zero dollars to get a print-on-demand t-shirt going. Maybe you only sell one. That's fine. That's a couple bucks in your pocket and one walking billboard out in the world.

You Have To Space Out Your Books

Publishers will space out an author's work, even if the author has finished material ready to go. The wisdom here is that they want a full sales cycle for each title without overlapping.

Let's talk about why that's dumb.

For one, fans can definitely read as fast as authors can write. Two, when you find a new author, and they've got a shitload of books out, it's an exciting moment. Three, when you've got everyone's attention with Book A, why lose it before you put out Book B? Four: James Patterson.

Social Media Is God

The longer we bow to social media as the end-all, be-all, the more it becomes the end-all, be all.

Appear on podcasts, make videos, write columns, design apparel, put your jokes on Patreon, try something else!

I'm not telling you you can't use social media to market your book. I'm telling you that if your entire marketing plan, whether it's one you came up with or one your marketer came up with, hinges on social media, you should ask some hard questions. And if you turn over all the marketing power to social media for this book, don't be surprised when your options start disappearing before you can sell your next one.



Let's Court Professional Reviewers

Courting pros is fine, but you might get further courting bookstagrammers, booktubers, and so on. You can probably get more out of them with less input, and they're more fun to work with, anyway, because they don't act like stuck-up jerks who are doing you a gigantic favor by reviewing your book.

Professional reviewers (meaning people in *The New York Times* and shit) speak to the same people over and over again. Reaching out to a larger group of people, each with a small following, gives you a more diverse audience, which is great for cultivating diehard fans, and it puts your book in front of people who wouldn't see it in *Publisher's Weekly*.

Oprah Doesn't Put Books Like This In Her Book Club

Changing the material to suit sales is no longer the name of the game.

The most famous example I know of is the removal of a pretty intense section from the original manuscript for *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed.

Supposedly, her editor told her that this wasn't going in the book because Oprah does not pick books where the author jerks off her own grandfather.

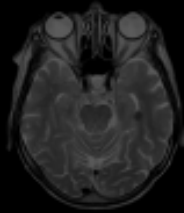
Writing a book isn't an act of marketing. And marketing isn't about adapting the creation to be sell-able. It's about having something great thrown on your desk and figuring out how to demonstrate its greatness to everyone else.

The Author Tour Is Dead

Post-COVID, you need to get back on the author tour game. People are going to be hungry for anything that happens that isn't in front of a screen.

Author tours are expensive, and they suck for the author, but damn it, they build a fanbase.

Why I'm Not Submitting for Publication Anymore



Everybody has their 2020 story.

Here's mine:

January: I get the flu. Twice. Then, after a pretty terrifying afternoon, I discover that someone in my life, VERY close to me, has a medical situation. I'm not going to spill all the beans here because it's not my story to tell, let's just leave it at this: think of the 5 scariest, worst pieces of medical news you can get. This medical situation she's/we're facing, it's probably in that top 5.

February: We discover that she'll have MAJOR surgery in May. The outlook is better than we initially assumed, but still pretty damn frightening, and we'll have to live with the uncertainty for the next 3 or 4 months. The thing she's got, it's pretty unusual for her age. One in a million. Beats the odds in the worst possible way.

March: COVID. Because I work in eMarketing, I work 50+ hours every week for a couple months there. I'm fortunate to have a job, but it was a stressful time. There's some guilt because I'm a little grateful. Because me and my loved one, we're both at home. We have more time. We take walks, go to bed and get up together every day.

April: We wait and see whether surgeries will be possible or if COVID patients will fill the ER. I get mega-pissed about people doing unsafe things, risking COVID without considering situations like ours. Magical thinking sets in. This person in my life, she puts a houseplant in the garbage because it's pretty much dead. The leaves look like banana peels that've long since passed their prime. I rescue the plant, put it in a warmer part of the house, cut off the dead leaves, which is most of them. I know it's insane, but I don't want the surgeons to give up on my loved one if things look bleak, so maybe if I don't give up on this plant, I don't know, somehow that translates.

May: We do paperwork. The paperwork everyone tells you to do and nobody does it. The paperwork we all joke about with stuff like, "Just put me in a coffee can and throw me in the ocean." We both fill everything out, my stuff and hers. I thought it might help if she didn't have to be the only one. It doesn't.

June: Surgery day. The surgeon signs the site with a marker, then they wheel my loved one away and I hope it's not the last time I see her. I get a text that says, "The procedure has begun." An hour later, an ominous "The procedure is complete." No other info. Someone takes me to a small room with two chairs facing each other, a private room, the kind of room where they can tell you anything, maybe the worst thing you've ever heard.

I have a running trick: When you're exhausted, don't worry about how far you still need to go. Look up, find a landmark, like a light post, and just make it there. What happens after that, you worry about it when you get there. I can't make it all the minutes it takes for the surgeon to come in and tell me what's what. Minutes are too long. So I count my breaths. I make it one breath in, then from there, I figure I can make it as long as it takes to get the breath out.

Surgery goes well. Everyone is okay. I spend 2 days visiting in the hospital. I'm the only one allowed, she's only allowed one visitor, and I'm doing my best to take care of her while also communicating with everyone about how she's doing. I take her home. She's okay, but a scare the following day has us back in the ER, and she's unable to lift even 10 lbs. for at least a month. We set up a step stool in the shower, she sits on it, and I clean her wound site every night. It's 13 staples long, and I count them to make sure I've cleaned the entire site.

September: Possible infection at the surgery site. Multiple, multiple doctor visits. An infectious disease specialist. Another surgeon. Concerns that the infection is bone deep. This would mean a repeat of the surgery.

November: After 2 months of doctor visits and MRI's, the infection clears up on its own. I turn 37 (snoogans).

I've had some depressed times, and those suck. I've had some very broke times, and those suck, too. But 2020 has been, far and away, the worst kind of time. I don't even know what to call it. They don't have a word for it the way they do for "depressed" and "broke."

I've always thought of myself as a rock, you know? Very steady, very reliable. But when it's someone else going through something, and when you're totally helpless, and when all you can do is watch and hope...it's weird, man.

Your world gets real small. A space about the length of 13 surgical staples was my everything. And in the middle of this, the entire world outside was in complete chaos. Every day there was something about the President. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, COVID, mask fights, all this shit was going on, too, and while I did my best to care about things outside that 13-staple line, I didn't do a great job. Because that 13-staple line was more than I could handle.

Something I didn't expect is that when the surgery was done, even after the infection cleared, it wasn't back to business as usual. And I don't even mean that in reference to COVID. I mean, when you go to bed every night and watch to make sure the person next to you is still breathing, and

you've got a surgery date in mind, and after that date you'll maybe sleep next to your loved one again, maybe you'll sleep next to them and they'll have severe disabilities, or maybe you'll never see them again, that feeling, all that weight, it doesn't just go away. You don't just wake up feeling pretty good once things are medically stable. You don't wake up feeling pretty good months after that. Maybe you never wake up feeling pretty good again. I don't know. I'm still waiting.

2020, everything that happened, it's one of the few things that I couldn't bring myself to write about. It's usually a great way to process shit, to work on your pain. But this was just too big. Writing about it, trying to tame it, it didn't seem right. My normal coping tool failed me, big time.

Let's talk about anger.

If I came out of 2020 with anything, it was a new understanding of how hard it is to be the relative, the close friend, the person who is right up next to the pain and can't do a damn thing about it. You're helpless, and you're worthless, and nothing is fair. Nothing. There are thousands, millions of people more deserving of this ailment, and they're all fine. And that's another thing: It's not like there's a cosmic reason someone MUST go through this stuff. There's no set number of people who have to do it. It's just the way things are. There's no reason, there's nobody doling out as much as we can handle. Some people live healthy lives, some people don't, and who gets what is not meaningful.

I started getting angry. I was angry at "thoughts and prayers" people. Not the people who offered them, the people who said that thoughts and prayers are bullshit. When someone says that, it tells me they've never been in a real bind where it's nobody's fault and there's nothing left to do. Because thoughts and prayers were all we had. I wanted them.

I'm still a little angry.

I don't mean to take on someone else's problem as my own. And at the same time, if that's what you're thinking while you read this, that I'm pulling at your sympathy: Fuck off. You know? Just fuck off. I wouldn't trade 2020 for all the pity in the world. I really wouldn't. Implying that I would is something I will go after you for, hard. Don't play with me.

If you're reading this and thinking, "So-and-so had it worse, Pete's a whiner," you're totally correct, there are people who had harder years than me. And you can also fuck off.

I don't normally like stories and essays that tell people how to feel, so instead of doing that, I'll tell you what you can DO: If you are reading this and thinking of arguments and contexts and "think about it this way" methods of downgrading the shittiness of my 2020, you can fuck off. Feel however you want, say it however you want, just know that I've already pre-responded with a hearty fuck off.

At some point this is about writing. Let's get to the writing part.

Writing is something I like to do because it's fulfilling. With everything happening in the last year, I don't feel fulfilled by my career, I don't feel fulfilled by my relationships with other people. I don't feel fulfilled by cooking a good meal. Most everything seems very pointless right now. When someone at work asks a trivial question or makes a correction to a typo, it's all I've got in me to not spill my guts, tell them about 2020, and ask if they still think their question matters.

This is not my normal state. This is not something I'm proud of. This is no way to go through life.

But when I can write something good, I do feel some satisfaction. I do feel like I can do something that matters a little.

I've submitted stories and manuscripts on and off, and this year, and maybe forever, who knows, I'm done with that.

It's not why I started writing, not why I've kept writing, and not the aspect of writing I look forward to in the future.

I don't like it.

Submitting is a pit. It's a job application, except instead of me doing something for money, I'm doing something I love and that means something to me, so when I don't get the gig, I take it harder.

Submitting time isn't writing time, but it has to happen during writing time, during the time set aside for working on stuff. With things the way they are, with every year somehow shrinking my writing time, I'm taking time back where I can, and one easy switch is to write more, submit less.

Writing makes me happy. Time at the keyboard or with a pen, it's fast time. Some people call it "flow," but I just call it fast time. You can blow an hour, easy, when you're doing something that's fun. "Fun" isn't the right word, but you know what I mean.

Submitting doesn't work that way. I don't work on submissions for hours on end, look up and say, "Whoa, look at the time!"

Submitting is about being a famous writer, or maybe, more charitably, about being a known writer or a writer who can make a living from writing.

Right now, I don't care about being a famous writer, and the cynical side of me, which is in charge, thinks that being a paid, full-time writer is an unattainable dream. It'd be great, but it's not going to happen, so maybe it's time to stop. Stop behaving like the famous writer you're not.

Submitting puts your work in journals and magazines and anthologies, and only writers read that shit. You know I'm right. Ask every non-writer in your life whether they've EVER read a lit mag or a journal.

I don't want to write for writers. I'm flattered when a writer enjoys something I wrote, and I have no hate in my heart for other writers. It just means a lot more to me to hear that someone who doesn't usually read got into something I wrote. That's my direction, that's my path, and submitting doesn't get me in the right hands.

I'm not submitting because right now, I need writing to be about joy. About feeling good about myself here and there.

I need it to be about me.

My world remains small. It's longer, maybe a couple hundred staples now. But I'm still measuring in staples, which tells you all you need to know.

I do feel lucky. I have a good job. My close friends and family have mostly avoided the worst consequences of COVID.

I even got mad at my loved one. She smashed a spider on the wall and left its moshed corpse just sitting there. And I was angry because I didn't understand why she couldn't just clean it off herself, and I'd been doing everything around the house for months, and why couldn't she do this one thing?

The irritation...it felt great. Because feeling that irritation at someone, that's normal. It was coming up on close to a year since I'd last got steamed at her. Every time I felt it creep up, even a little, I squashed it down. I thought, "If she doesn't make it, you're going to be so mad at yourself for getting all upset over stupid bullshit." I thought, "You might not have a ton of time left together, don't waste it being angry." And this time, this smashed spider, it was the first time I felt normal.

Without submitting on my mind, I write differently. Probably worse.

But when the world shrinks down, when you take submission off the table, you win back a little freedom. Freedom to write about whatever you want. To say it wrong. To write a complete garbage line and keep moving forward, knowing you'll never come back and fix it.

Because when you're not submitting, your writing doesn't have to "work." It doesn't have to DO anything.

Because I'm not submitting, I started writing about it. About 2020. Someone asked me what I would've done if my loved one didn't make it. I never let myself think about that before. But now, because it's not exploitative if it stays with me, because it's not something I need to explain, I can write about those imaginary lives where things didn't work out.

Some of them are grand. I sell everything, buy a pickup with a topper for the bed, put a mattress in it, and just...go.

Some of them are small. I live the same life, but I do listen to every new Taylor Swift album. My loved one, she's a Swiftie.

In none of them am I motivated to grand things. I don't raise a shitload of money for research or learn a new skill or turn the pain into something useful.

And that's okay, too. There doesn't have to be a lesson. Stories don't have to mean anything. They just are.

Who Owns The Story?



Let's say you and I date (I'll apologize now, prepare do be disappointed, even in the hypothetical).

Let's say you're an artist, and in the course of our romance you ask if I'd be willing to pose nude for a painting. And I agree. Again, prepare to be disappointed.

You paint me naked. And you flatter me a little bit because, you know, we're dating, and I'd appreciate an extra inch here, a subtracted inch there, some hair removal. Lots of hair removal. Butt area, primarily, for hair removal.

You're extremely proud of this painting, and you busted your ass on it (while shaving mine). It's your best work to date. Others who see it agree, the painting displays your talents and evokes emotion in the viewer.

Then we break up (again, I apologize. There's only so much apologizing I can do before you need to start taking some responsibility here). And we're dividing possessions.

Who owns that nude painting?

On one hand, it's a depiction of me. I might be embarrassed by it. So It probably should go to me.

But it's not as simple as a saucy Polaroid I gave you for your birthday (for the last time, so, so sorry). You made it from thin air. Well, not AS thin as it would've been if you'd painted it of a 22 year-old Pete, but you know what I mean.

I think we can both make a good case for ownership of these images. I'm depicted, but you did the work.

By the by, if you're upset by my hypothetical question regarding the ownership and potential commodotization of my own fictional relationship and nude image, please reference the previous column on Hot Dudes Reading, which is actual sexualization and commoditization of highly-recognizable people in images, provided without consent, and once we've addressed that, we can come back to how angry you are about a hypothetical.

Writers

If you're a writer, you've probably encountered a situation like this on some level. You've written a book or a story, maybe even non-fiction, with someone at the center, someone from your real life, and you question who the real owner of this story might be.

Let's explore some of the criteria you can use to decide whether or not you've got the right to tell a story.

Legally

I am not a legal expert. I'm just going to say some things that shouldn't be used as a basis for a court case because that would be a terrible idea. I also started this column talking about my ass hair, in case you needed a reminder of the context here.

Mostly, courts rule in favor of artists on stuff like this. If your depiction of someone is "highly creative," then you're likely in the clear, and a piece of creative writing is generally considered highly creative.

We'll move forward to talk about personal ethics instead of legal considerations.

Recognizability

A close-up photo of someone's face and a faraway photo of them in a crowd are two different things. A picture of the back of someone's head is different than a picture of their face.

When it comes to photo, recognizability kinda works like this: If you take a photo of me, and people who do not know me and see me in real life come up to me and say, "You're the guy from that photo!" then you've depicted me in a highly recognizable way.

Someone is always going to be recognizable to their friends and family, even if they're a face in the crowd. So someone intimately familiar with a person will, of course, be able to recognize that person from just about any photo, so it's unreasonable to say that a depiction of someone is "recognizable" because their mother recognizes the mole behind their left ear.

Likewise, in your story, a depiction of someone will probably be recognizable by their friends and family, but if it's a depiction that wouldn't make them recognizable to an average person, I think you're on solid ethical ground.

It's unreasonable to say that a depiction of someone is "recognizable" because their mother recognizes the mole behind their left ear.

This is a little more complicated in modern times. If I wrote a memoir in 1985, I could probably talk about someone in great detail, and you couldn't just jump online and find a picture of the person I depicted. Today you can jump on Facebook and see who someone dated, who their friends are, and you can probably put the pieces together. However, let's remember the rule: The person depicted isn't being recognized when they're out and about because of the book you wrote. They're being recognized due to internet sleuthing, which you, as the writer, aren't in control of. The sleuths were prompted by the book, but that's not what triggered the recognition.

I think, as the writer, the ethical thing to do is depict the person, but you should change details that don't change the nature of the story. Name, maybe some aspects of personal appearance, job, stuff like that.

Also, be mindful that your social media presence might make someone more recognizable, so perhaps it's a good idea to remove some of those old photos and posts for the sake of their privacy.

Humiliation: Go with Your Guts

You know Chuck Palahniuk's story "Guts"? The person who bought the ingredients for cramming a carrot cake up his ass? That's a real story.

Everyone in "Guts" is more or less real.

You can honor a person by telling their story. Which gets weird when you're talking about a humiliating story. But by my estimation, there are two factors at play here:

Factor One: Humiliation that's not connected to a person, where 99% of people wouldn't know who the story is about, that's humiliation designed to connect and make other people feel good, not to make the original actor feel bad. Telling a humiliating story about someone while they're in the room is a dick move meant to make that person feel shitty. Telling a humiliating story about someone that nobody knows gives people the chance to see that it's okay to do something dumb. It prompts them to be more open about their stupid moments. It's what makes us human, right?

Factor Two: Something humiliating used artistically, a story told with craft and care, honors the story. It does right by the person and by the material. If you put hours and sweat into a humiliating story, rather than just tossing it off as a quick 15-second video? That means something.

You Can Ask

The surest way to secure the rights to something? Ask. It's not always the easiest way to get the rights to something, but it's the most rock solid. Show the person the material, ask how they feel about it, and if they give the thumbs-up, you really can't go wrong.

However, I'd put up three reasons why this may not work for you:

One, if you go this route, there's no unwinding. You can't really go ahead and publish it anyway when you're 100% certain you're going against someone's wishes. You can't unring that bell, as they say. Once you get turned down, moving forward anyway has a different meaning.

Two, it's possible that a person you wrote about is not generally in favor of you and your future activities, so they may say no because, well, they have their reasons, unrelated to the depiction.

Three is more complicated. When you write, you're supposed to kick certain people out of the room. For example, I couldn't write anything if I was worried about what my mom would think. Please do not send her this column with my discussion of my own ass hair. If you're depicting someone, you can't depict them accurately without kicking them out of the room. Unless you're like Alex Ross and you have your dad figure model for Superman, chances are you're going to show some warts.

This brushes up against the ideas of consent, and I recognize that. It's very imperfect in that way, and I'm guessing this'll cause some people to have strong opinions about it. Like I said, asking is the most rock solid way, and it's not always the right way in this very specific circumstance of depicting someone in a piece of writing.

Having never had sex against my will nor having never been depicted in a piece of art without my consent, I can't say that there's a huge difference or what that difference is. But my suspicion is that if you're feeling like they're the same, you should ask someone who experienced both of those things, and they'd probably be able to illuminate the differences pretty thoroughly.

Who Will Tell The Story?

This part is a little weird because, well, it goes against the idea of Own Voices a little bit. So I apologize in advance.

You might, through a relationship with someone, have insight into a world that you're not part of, but adjacent to. And although it'd be best to have a novel about, say, an adult woman struggling with a serious eating disorder BY an adult woman struggling with a serious eating disorder, that might be a false choice.

Unless your loved one is a novelist, you're not really taking away from that person's novel by writing your own. Because their novel will never exist. I'll even go so far as to say that if you both wrote a novel about the same thing, the same single day, they'd be two very different novels.

It's my opinion that a choice between reading the multiple available versions of that story is a choice that should happen on the part of readers. I also think publishers need to be mindful about the ways they're publishing and promoting first-person narratives and experiences versus adjacent ones.

But I don't think this should stop you from writing the story you feel you need to or want to write. Don't stop yourself from writing the story. Make the thing before you decide how you feel about it.

Commerce

Really, the ownership question only starts to feel icky when you try and make money.

And all I really have to say about that is the same thing I say about just about every aspect of writing: Selling and writing aren't the same thing.

Write your book now. Worry about the ethics of selling it later.

**Make the thing
before you
decide how
you feel about
it.**

Chances are, by the time you get the thing finished, it'll go directions you didn't predict, and it'll present results you feel differently about.

Really, all of this is of no concern when it's a document that lives with you and only you. There's no ethical question, in my mind, of whether or not it's appropriate to create something. It's when you present it for public consumption that things change.

Who Gets to Decide?

You do.

Some of you need to be empowered. Some of you need to tell stories.

Some of you need to recognize that your fear in telling a story might not be about ownership. It might be about something else.

Some of you need to take the truth and tell lies with it. As Tom Spanbauer says, "Fiction is the lie that tells the truth truer." Maybe your truth is that you dated someone with an artificial limb. And you have stories about it. And it's part of your life. Maybe you can tell that story without talking about a prosthesis. Maybe that's not really what the story is about. Maybe the lie you come up with tells the truth truer.

I'm not here to police who owns which stories. And really, while many others have tried, they don't get to decide, either. The decision they get to make is which stories they'll buy, read, and support, not which stories you'll create.

If you leave with one thing, leave with this: If you're not sure a story belongs to you, figure it out by writing it. Just make sure you knock it out of the park.

Why The WandaVision Reception Is Insulting to Comics



Let's look at some reviews of Wandavision:

Shirley Li, *The Atlantic*:

She's not the first superhero to be affected acutely by emotional pain; everyone knows that quote about great power and great responsibility. Yet for an MCU project, the choice to focus on Wanda's inner life is revolutionary.

David Poland, *Movie City News*:

WandaVision launches a potential new "forever" paradigm in entertainment. Disney and Feige are creating something that is brand new, even if they are using nostalgia.

Houston Press:

WandaVision is hopefully a chance to allow more unique ways to tell these stories that dominate our media culture.

Okay, I'm happy you're all enjoying *WandaVision*, and as much as I feel like a broken record, I'm going to say it again: You all need to read some comics.

Unique, Revolutionary, Fresh

While *WandaVision* is new to the cinematic side of things, it's nothing new to the source material:

comics.

Just to make sure we don't get it confused, *WandaVision* is a new idea for superheroes on film, but it's nothing new for superheroes, or for comics. I want to head this off before we all remember this big step happening on the screen instead of in the stapled pages of a comic book.

Tom King wrote *Vision*, a miniseries from 2015, and it's great. It's not, as *The Verge* puts it, "The perfect follow-up to *WandaVision*." It was first. By a long stretch.

And it's better.

Seriously, every issue uses a different storytelling method, not just different set dressing. It's less a comic book, more a storytelling clinic. The depth and breadth of storytelling techniques goes way, way beyond homage and parody.

Tom King also wrote *Mister Miracle*, which has a similar feel. It combines a war between worlds with the grind of being a new parent. It's excellent.

The comics world is full of stories like these. I'd go so far to say that in the last 15 years, there are more stories like this than there are like *Infinity War*.

WandaVision is unique, revolutionary, and fresh in the world of superhero TV. But for comics, it's yesterday's news.

From the perspective of a comics fan, hearing how fresh this concept is...it's a little like you saying you've tasted a brand new food, it's amazing, it's called A BURRITO. This is not a new food, y'all, just because it's only now available in your neck of the woods.

The Lie

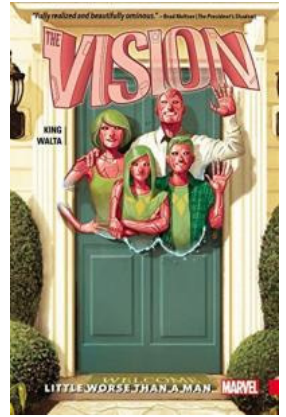
In most comic book movies, the stories are about superpowered people doing superpowered things.

In more and more comic books, the stories are about superpowered people doing superpowered things, but the superpowers are not the focus of the story. Super stuff is the storytelling vehicle, the vessel, not the core.

Fiction is the lie that tells the truth truer. That's what Tom Spanbauer always says. If he wrote for Marvel Comics, I guess he'd say the proportionate strength and speed of a spider is the lie that tells the truth truer.

In *WandaVision*, superpowers that let you mold reality to be what you want (or what you think you want) are the lie that tell the truth truer. The nature of the truth being told is up to you, the viewer, to decide.

This is not a new storytelling method for comics and superheroes. This is the root of the creation of Marvel Comics' offerings starting in the 1960's.



I'm happy that *WandaVision* is using superpowers to tell a story that's not necessarily about superpowers. But credit goes to comics for doing it first, and if I'm being honest, doing it better.

Check Your Filters

Comics, and especially superhero comics, have a reputation for being stupid, and that reputation has been solidified by the choices of filmmakers to focus on stupid stories.

Again, I like stupid stories. I'm *Demolition Man's* biggest backer. Stupid stories are fun.

However, because most people come to comics through movies and TV, I can understand why they would expect comics to be, well, stupid. Fun, but stupid. Most of the material they've seen adapted is more stupid-fun than it is emotional or smart. *Infinity War* quite literally tells the audience not to think about how time travel works in the story.

The only reason most people think comics are stupid is because you've been presented with a lot of stupid comics-based stories in movies and TV. *WandaVision* is a departure, so it's getting a lot of praise. It's not unwarranted, but I encourage you to refresh your understanding of comics. Read something new. Something without a hero you know. See what it's really about.

Whether it's about real emotion:



Or people building relationships with other unusual people:



Comics have a bigger range than you think.

It's not that *WandaVision* is a phoenix rising from the garbage heap of comics. It's not that comics are stupid and this is a rare, smart departure. It's that movies are stupid, so stupid comics make good movies.

Why It Matters

Look, we're not going to pretend like this is the most important crisis in film. Or in comics. Or in any genre, really. It doesn't even scratch the top 100.

But here's the thing: Being a fan of comics is always, ALWAYS about telling people that there's a lot more to comics than superheroes punching each other in the face. There's a lot more than capes and boob windows. There's a lot more than immortal chimps who run detective agencies.

What's a little off-putting about the reception of *WandaVision* isn't the positives about the show, it's the fact that *Iron Man* came out in 2008.

You've all had 14 years to read some comics, just a few. You've all had 14 years to say, "You know, maybe there's something more to comics than I thought..."

And based on what I'm seeing, most of you didn't take that opportunity. Based on the critical reception of *WandaVision*, this type of storytelling, and the general idea of superheroes not just punching all day, is a brand new idea to a lot of you.

Comics are the medium being strip-mined to feed the movie industry, and that can be a great thing, but maybe fans could take a little initiative and read a goddamn comic here and there. I'll list a handful below.

I'm just asking that instead of pretending like a thoughtful, character-driven story is a new thing for comics, we all recognize it's a new thing for comics adapted for the screen.

And maybe, if you like *WandaVision*, if you were pleasantly surprised, it's time to watch fewer movies and read more comics.

Why Bad Writers Are Good Mentors



Let me tell you about my best coach.

He was a running coach, mostly worked with distance runners.

He taught me how to train, how to coach, how to recruit students who'd never thought of running (it's as easy as taking interest in their lives and saying something along the lines of "Why don't you come out and run with us? I think you'd like it, and I think you'd be a fun person to have out on the track.>").

In just a year, he took me from shitty runner to...not embarrassing runner. And over a few more years, he turned me into a pretty decent coach.

My coach is a good guy, and he was a great coach.

Notice that I haven't said anything about his personal athleticism yet?

Look, I love this guy, and I don't want to say anything negative about him. He played football when he was in college, and he was built for it.

I had coaches who were WAY faster on the track. I had a coach who was an Olympic hopeful in his day. I had a coach who was on American Gladiators! And while they could've put a whoopin' on this coach, no sweat, they were not the awesome coaches that this guy was.

The best coaches and the best athletes aren't always the same people.

The best writing mentors and the best writers aren't always the same people, either.

Record Scratch

Before you get all up in my face, notice the difference between these two phrases:

Sometimes, bad writers are good mentors.

Being a bad writer makes you a good mentor.

See the difference? I'm not advocating that you find the worst writer available and pick them as your mentor. I'm advocating that you consider factors other than the NYT bestseller list when you're looking for a mentor.

When they're looking at coaches, a foolish boxer will pick a great fighter. A smart boxer will pick a great coach.

What You Learn When You Suck

Someone who is naturally talented can walk onto a golf course and smack a perfect drive like it's nothing.

Someone who isn't so talented walks onto a golf course and absolutely drills the ball onto the roof of a nearby(ish) house. Just hypothetically this happened to...someone. Who has no business playing golf and has a set of clubs with the thrift store price tags still on 'em.

When you're naturally talented, you can get away with sloppy habits. You can practice less. Miss a training day? Eh, no biggie. If you're a talented writer, you can bang out a short story the day before workshop, show up, and people will mostly be impressed.

A good mentor has struggled, and in their struggles, they learn little tricks to shave a few seconds off your 5K. They learn cues that help you add 1 pound to your best deadlift. They learn that the little things make a tiny difference, and they know that if you're not naturally talented, you have to do a hundred of those little things, cobble together a hundred tiny little tricks, all to compete on at the level of "decent."

A mentor who is naturally talented doesn't have as deep a toolbox. When something isn't right, they're not as quick to figure out where things went wrong and how to get them back on track. A mentor who's struggled for every little gain, every little skill, they'll know how to solve your problems, and they can teach you to solve problems for yourself.

Ego

Great athletes are used to BEING the high water mark, not coaching someone to it. Whether it's ego about being replaced or ego regarding what the upper limit should be, naturally talented, triple-A athletes struggle when they have to coach someone beyond their own personal levels of achievement.

If the only thing you'll get out of your mentor/student relationship is the technical knowledge, then you don't need a mentor. You need a manual.

A writer who hasn't seen a lot of personal success, they're very used to working with people who are more talented than they are. That doesn't phase them whatsoever. It feels normal and natural for the student to surpass the teacher.

If your mentor has an ego problem, it becomes your problem, and what's so diabolical is that it's a problem you can't solve for your mentor. You're stuck until they grow up.

Coaches and mentors growing and improving, that's a great thing. But they need to do that on their time, not yours.

Good Enough is Good Enough

Most athletes have a non-elite coach that gets them started. Usually a high school coach. Most athletes don't stick with that coach forever.

When you're looking for a writing mentor, don't worry about shooting for perfection right off. Stop thinking about your next mentor as your one and only mentor who has to be with you all the way through your career.

Stop thinking about starting at the tippy-top with your mentor. If you're running a 30-minute 5K, you don't need an elite coach. You just need a good coach.

If you need a writing mentor, chances are you don't need an elite mentor. Just a good one.

Learning Something Else

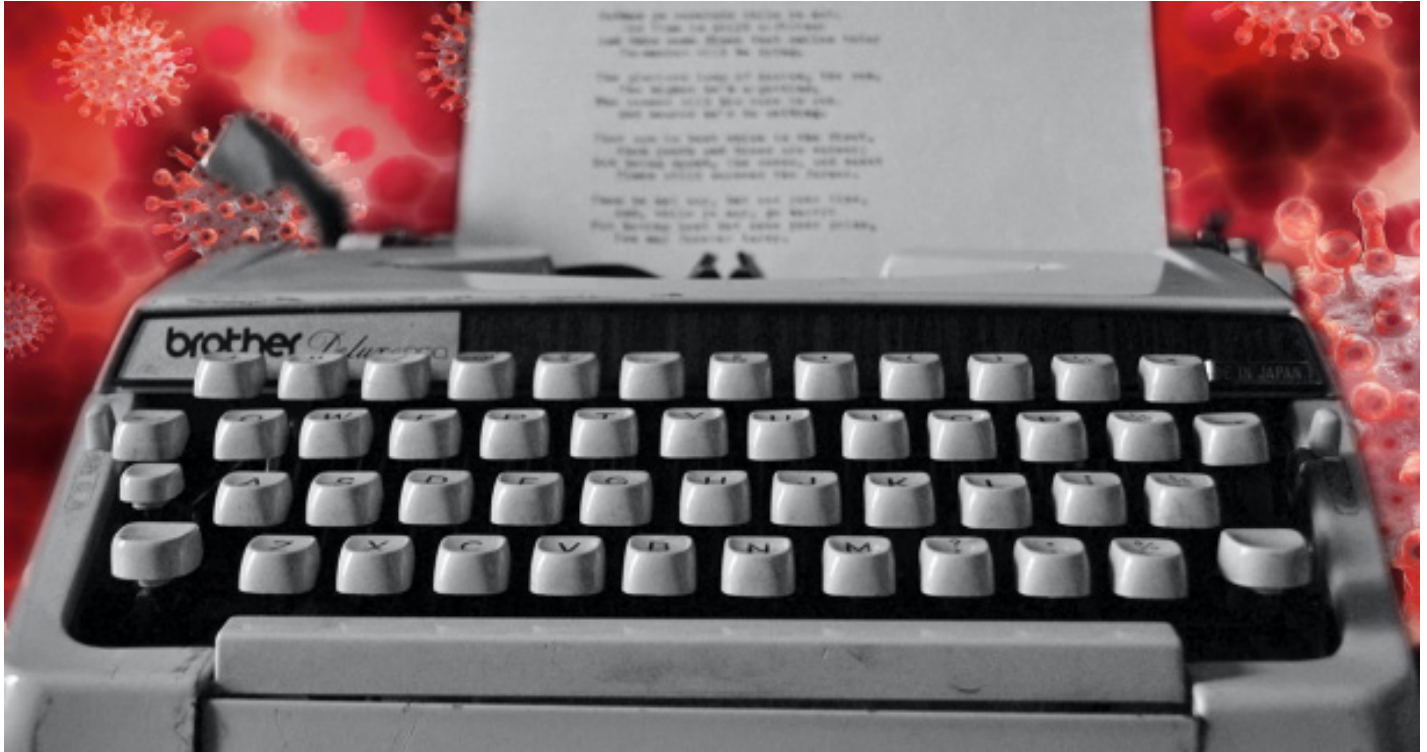
There was this one time, I'm on the bus with my coach and a bunch of other coaches. These other coaches, they're talking about how high school and college, that's the best part of life. While they're re-living their glory days, my coach, he doesn't interrupt anyone, but he leans over to me and he says, "Don't listen to them. Whatever part of my life I'm in, that's the best part. If the best part of your life is in high school, that's sad. You'll live a lot of years on the downhill if you go that way."

My coach taught me a bunch of running drills, and he taught me a lot of other stuff, too.

If the only thing you'll get out of your mentor/student relationship is the technical knowledge, then you don't need a mentor. You need a manual.

Find someone you can get along with. Find someone who has the time and the inclination to help you. Even if your writing doesn't improve a ton, if you have a good relationship with your mentor, you'll have something new to write about.

Why You Didn't Finish Your Novel During COVID



It's been too long since I've heard a really bizarre conspiracy theory about COVID.

And when the wacky theories about something dry up, you know it's coming to an end.

It's too early to call COVID completely over, but based on the slowdown of bonkers theories around it, we're getting there. It's been a bit since I've heard a new theory as stupid as government chips being in vaccines, Amazon creating the virus, or Asian people, in general, having anything to do with it (I'm Polish, and that'd be like blaming me because you ate a bad Polish sausage at the ballpark, which, by the way, is impossible).

Didn't you always figure that during an event like this, where you were stuck inside, where there was nothing to do, that you'd bang out AT LEAST a book, if not two? That a world without distraction would be ideal for writing?

And yet, you didn't finish your novel.

What the hell happened?

Your Life Didn't Change

Maybe you didn't finish your book because your life didn't change. There are two flavors of a life that's mostly unchanged during COVID.

Flavor A: You've got a job or obligations that don't change much during a pandemic. If that's you, COVID didn't free you up at all. In fact, you were probably busier. You get a pass.

Flavor B: Your life didn't change because you ignored COVID. If you got on a plane after March 2020,

and if that wasn't 100% required, then what you've learned is that you will not buckle down and work when conditions for doing so are perfect, when everything about the world is encouraging you to stay home. Maybe you should've stayed home like the rest of us, and maybe your unfinished novel taunting you is your cosmic punishment.

If your life didn't change because of things outside of your control, don't beat yourself up, but also recognize that global pandemic wasn't enough to provide you more writing time, so it's pretty unlikely that writing time will fall in your lap. You need to fix this problem for yourself.

If your life didn't change because you're a stubborn ass and probably a little selfish, recognize that if a potentially fatal virus can't convince you to stay the fuck home and write, if the threat of illness and death isn't enough to glue you to your keyboard, absolutely no external factor will. You'll have to find motivation somewhere else.

It's pretty unlikely that writing time will fall in your lap. You need to fix this problem for yourself.

You Were Distracted

To say that there were a lot of distractions in 2020 is like saying that going to bed a normal man and waking up a cockroach was "somewhat inconvenient."

However, if your book wasn't interesting enough to keep you engaged in writing it during 2020, it probably won't be interesting enough to keep your readers engaged in reading it in 2021, either.

Your book is going to be in the real world, and distractions are part of the real world. If you didn't finish your book because it wasn't interesting enough to compete with 2020, you can either wait for the world to become boring (I put this somewhere in whatever year the Sun flares out) or you can fix your book.

Your book has to be more interesting than the real world for at least as long as it takes a person to read it. If you weren't interested in it on that level, don't expect anyone else to be.

You're Not A Writer

If you aren't taking a crap every now and then, something's wrong. Some people go every day, some every couple days, but for any human, if you go too long without taking a dump, you'll be pretty uncomfortable.

If you're a writer, and if you don't feel compelled to write on a regular-ish basis, something's wrong. Doesn't have to be every day, doesn't have to be every week. But if you're not writing, and if that feels natural to you, you might not be a writer.

COVID knocked a lot of people out of their routines, and this is good and bad. It's bad when your routine was being sober at 11 am on a weekday. But it's good when your routine was to blow \$80 bucks at Target every weekend.

If COVID knocked you out of your writing routine, maybe that's bad, and it's time to get back on the horse. Maybe it's good, because maybe writing isn't what fulfills you. Maybe it's something you felt

like you SHOULD do. Maybe it's something you just got used to doing, but it wasn't scratching the itch anymore.

If you got knocked out of your writing routine, instead of cramming yourself right back in, take this as a chance to figure out if this is really how you want to spend your life.

Post COVID

So you weren't the writer you wanted to be during COVID.

Pre-COVID and post-COVID, those are the long periods, the critical periods. The time that passed during COVID, those two years, those will fade. A lot of what you slacked on, that's all forgettable and forgivable. But only if you change.

Instead of crying over your unfinished novel, be the writer you want to be in the post-COVID era, a period that's also known as "the rest of your life."

**Instead
of crying
over your
unfinished
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era.**

Mistakes I Made With My Self-Published Book Covers



I've committed the worst sin of self-publishing. No, not failing to hire an editor (well, okay, I did that one, too. A bunch of times). No, not falsely representing myself to try and get my books on digital platforms used for library checkouts (wait, I TOTALLY did that one, and I won't apooogize).

I must confess: I made my own covers.

If you get one piece of advice about self-publishing (which you won't, you'll definitely get WAY more than one piece, totally unsolicited, but if there was an award for Most Common Advice it'd be this): Don't make your own covers.

What most people won't say is why this is a bad idea. You know, beyond the generic, "They look crappy."

What is it about a homebrew cover that just doesn't fly? How do people pick them out immediately? What are the mistakes that I made? How can you avoid repeating them?

Right Now Versus Right

The excitement of self-publishing got the best of me more than once. So, I'd make something "right now" instead of making something that was right.

An ugly cover is like a crime: sometimes you'll get away with it in the moment, but there's no such thing as getting away with it forever.

Instead of making a cover quickly, make it right. You're self-publishing. Nobody is going to remember

if you blew your self-imposed release deadline because it took you a couple extra days to get a cover. Everyone will remember that cover if it sucks.

Not Picking a Theme

John Swartzwelder has some fairly boring covers, but he's got a standard, and damn it, 15 or so books in, I can't help but get excited when I see a new one.



Amanda Lovelace changes out titles and colors, and other than that puts out the same cover over and over.



For a self-published author working in one genre, a certain uniformity isn't the worst idea in the world.

If you don't like screwing around with covers, work hard on a single, nice template, change out the title and some colors, and call it a day.

Given the choice between 10 unique, ugly covers and 10 same-y but decent covers, put me down for decency. For once.

The Tools Matter

You can make a cover in Microsoft Publisher. But...don't.

It's been like 15 years since my first self-pub, so I have an excuse, but you don't. You can jump online and find options that'll give you Photoshop quality, in terms of pixels per inch, and much better font and design options than Microsoft's design program, which really doesn't even fulfill the aesthetic needs of a B+ Lost Dog poster.

I know it seems like there's a high barrier to entry on some of these programs, but those "barriers to entry" can also be called "competencies." Or maybe "features of the program required to produce a decent product."

Using Kindle Cover Creator

Again: Just don't. The cover creator is the most underwhelming feature of publishing on Amazon. I would love to start an award, a challenge, to use only the cover creator and its built-in assets to create a cover that doesn't suck.

If you think those covers look fine, take a cover you designed over there and remake it using a better tool. As you go, you'll tweak a bunch of shit that's not tweak-able in the cover creator, and you'll see how those little options make all the difference.

It's also a red flag for "I'm self-published!" Wear your self-pub status as a badge of honor, but don't wave it as a red flag.

Not Evoking the Text

When you make your own cover, you are mega familiar with the book's contents, not just the surface, plot-level shit. Use this knowledge to create a cover that's enticing and interesting to new readers and also evocative to people who have finished the book.

Your understanding is much deeper than that of a hired gun, so capitalize on that. It's one of the few advantages you have over a pro.

Not Mimicking Good Covers

You don't have to use a knockoff as your final cover, but just like the way you learn storytelling by writing like your favorites, learn how to make covers by designing like your favorites. Find a cover you love and remake it. Again, not as your final product, but as a learning tool.

Looking Only To Books For Inspiration

When I'm stuck, I'll check out the greeting card aisle.

Greeting cards have weird layouts, mess with color in big ways, and might provide you an inspiration that's unexpected and still pleasing to look at. And they're of similar proportions/dimensions to a paperback book, so you can usually scale the design.

T-shirts can work, candy packaging. Look outside the book for ideas, and take pictures, save ideas you can come back to later.

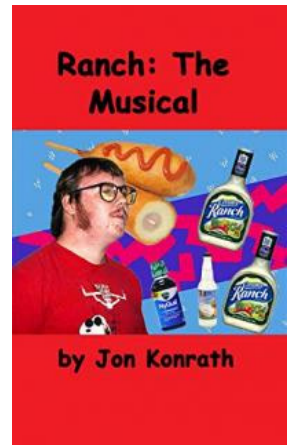
Don't Assume People Are In On The Joke

Sometimes I'd make a silly cover for a silly book. Which makes sense in a certain way, but in another way, it's insane.

You could get away with this if your book showed up in a bookstore or a library. Because something about a legit binding, an actual physical object you can hold in your hands, something about that works if you have an intentionally bad cover. But online, nobody is going to know that YOU know that the book looks ridiculous and that this is intentional.

Going the "shitty on purpose" route is a mistake, even if that matches the book's theme.

On the other hand, Jon Konrath takes everything I just said and shoves it right back in my stupid face, so what the hell do I know?



Using Unaltered Stock Images

If you use a stock photo or image, especially a free one, be aware that there's a good chance it's been used before, and there's a good chance it'll be used again. If you use a free image, make sure to alter it in some way so that only someone who peruses this stuff A LOT will recognize the image.

For the love of god, don't put something like "typewriter" or "bookshelf" into a free picture site and use something from page 1 of the results.



Don't use this. Don't.

Abiding By All The Rules

The rules exist for a reason, and a lot of the reasoning behind the current rules of cover design exist because of the ways books function, as objects, on retail shelves.

You're self-publishing, so why bother making something for bookstore shelves, where your book will probably never show up? Make something that looks good on a screen. Make something that looks good with a field of white behind it. Look at the colors and fonts on the websites you'll use to sell, and make something that stands out.

You're self-publishing, so you don't need to make something that is polite, clean, and generally not disgusting. Make something weird.

You don't have to put a publisher logo on there, you don't have to devote a certain percentage of the space to your name, and you don't have to ugly up a nice design with a blurb if you don't want to.

Listening To People Who Decree That Self Pubs Must Hire Pros

I've experimented with roasting my own coffee. With fixing my own car. I've experimented with a circular saw. I've tried out all kinds of shit more complicated and with a much higher risk level than making a shitty book cover.

No matter how bad you screw up a book cover, you get to hang onto all your fingers.

When someone tells you "You can't do that," when you're discussing a matter of taste, like making your own cover, what they're really saying is, "I wouldn't do that."

Yeah, you wouldn't. And if you're unwilling to accept that small level of risk, or to understand why someone else might, I'm betting that all the pages between your slick, well-designed cover reflect that risk-averse mindset.

You CAN make your own cover. And yeah, you'll make mistakes, and when your mistakes take the form of art for public consumption, you'll probably hear about those mistakes from people who... aren't all that nice.

But you'll still have all your fingers. Including the middle ones, which you can use to express how you feel about being bossed around by cowards.

Content Marketing for Authors



If you don't know what content marketing is, and if you're not using it to sell books, give me a few minutes and I'll give you a whole new world of marketing options.

And if you're a writer who hates marketing, read on.

What It Is

Basic, real-world definition, not some Webster's bullshit:

Content Marketing means that instead of using traditional advertising, like maybe an Instagram post that shows a snippet of a positive Goodreads review, you're using actual, useful, enjoyable content as the method of speaking to your audience and selling them your shit.

A classic example: Let's say I run a resort in a ski town, and I'm trying to convince people to visit in the summer. I could throw up commercials, billboards, whatever, and I could just say, "Come here this summer." Or I could start blogging things like, "The top 10 places every Coloradoan must visit this summer." Nine of those places I might be unaffiliated with, and one of them is my resort. Readers find this article useful in planning things to do this summer, and because the article is legitimately researched, well-written, and easy to consume, it drives people to visit the listed places, which improves their summer, and it drives them to visit my place. Boom, everyone wins.

Another layer deeper: I run a grocery store, and I put out a list of recycle/reuse options for food packaging. People use these options, the world is better for it, and I not only get my name out there, I associate my store with positive change.

The difference between content marketing and traditional marketing is that I've sold my shit by embedding it in actual, useful, appropriate content. People get a little something out of just reading

that list, even if they don't visit my resort or my grocery store. They learn a little something, maybe get a laugh, and that's a better use of their time and a more effective use of my skills as a writer.

A Few Quick Examples

The traditional end of the marketing spectrum is the Lowe's ad you hear 10,000 times on Spotify. Just "Come on down to Lowe's, we have wood and shit." Content marketing is a workshop at Lowe's where someone, free of charge, shows you and a group of people how to caulk bathroom tile, and you try not to giggle even though someone says the word "cock" about 80 times. You get that content, the lesson, and chances are pretty good that you'll walk away with an armful of stuff.

Instead of making stickers for your bookstore and plastering them all over town, you make a map of the city, a functional, useful, map, and your business is prominently featured.

For a visual example:



This is traditional marketing. A billboard that tells you to consume a product.



This is content marketing. Street art that's bought and paid for by a company, so that they can have it on the side of their building, devoid of an actual ad, beautifies the area, gives people something pleasant or meaningful to look at, and it provides your building with an identity and gives people a reason to visit. It sells your business, and it provides something desirable at the same time.

Isn't That A Little Shady?

Sure, if your plan is to get kids smoking by creating a menu of great candy and cigarette pairings. Nothing like a menthol and a Junior Mint!

And yes, there's a cynical view of capitalism that would say adding a street art mural to the side of a Starbucks is a disingenuous, therefore evil, thing to do.

But you're not Big Tobacco, and you're not Starbucks. You're Lil' Author.

As long as you believe the thing you're selling will make people's lives better, marketing is an okay thing to do, and content marketing is a better use of everyone's time, energy, and attention. Even if consumers never use your product, well-executed content marketing can still add value to someone's day.

If marketing is on a good and evil spectrum, well-done, genuine content marketing is way, way closer to good than bad.

Why It's Big For Books

You're watching *Chopped*, and the chefs open up the basket of mystery ingredients to find a really lean piece of meat inside. What's the right move? Break out the pancetta. Why? Because those really lean meats "need help."

Your book needs help.

I'm not saying your book sucks anymore than I'm saying a really lean piece of antelope sucks, I'm saying that to sell it, you'd be wise to throw a little something extra in the pan with it.

Books are hard to sell because they are long, intimate experiences that are hard to summarize without ruining. They're hard to sell because there's a shitload of them, and the nuances between similar books are difficult to highlight. They're hard to sell because readers sort of want novelty, and they sort of want to read something familiar.

You don't HAVE to use content marketing for your book, but damn, don't turn down the metaphorical pancetta out of pride, because you think your book should sell itself on its inherent greatness. When it comes to selling books, that kind of pride is a mistake, and makers of pride-based mistakes get chopped.

Authority

When a reader comes across a book, especially an indie or self-pub book, they'll always ask themselves why they should trust THIS author with their time and money.

Content marketing establishes your authority in the fields of books and writing. It gives people a reason to think your book isn't a horrible piece of shit without you saying directly, "Read this, I promise it's not a horrible piece of shit."

This works in two major ways:

One way is by demonstrating you know what you're talking about. If you start a podcast about writing technique, and if you share a lot of good, sound advice (even if it's coming from your guests, not you), people will assume that you've applied this advice to your book, and they'll be curious to read the product of that advice. If you've written a lot of insightful, smart book reviews, people will assume that you've applied this same criticism to your own work. If you seem to know what you're talking about, people will listen, or at least be less resistant to giving you a shot.

The other way you earn authority through content marketing is by placing your book with items that are held in high regard, and if the other items or authors or books or whatever are legit, it lends your book some legitimacy, too. Top 10 lists are the first thing that comes to mind, but it doesn't have to be that plain. Take bookshelf photos, show your taste, and have your book in there. Do blackout poetry with a bunch of books, and include a page from one of yours. Place your book adjacent to others, literally and figuratively, and let those other books lend some of their authority to yours.

"If you advertise for the sales, and if you don't get those sales, you're left with nothing."

It's Anti-Viral

What I don't love about viral marketing is that it's here, then it's not, and instead of a sustained effort that keeps your name out there, you have to start from scratch with each book you want to market. A viral campaign or piece for Book A will be tired and dead by the time you're ready for Book B. Viral shit is great if you want to make a career as a marketer, but it's not the best road if you want a sustained career as a writer.

Plus, anyone who tells you they know how to make something go viral is totally full of shit. Going viral is like winning the lottery: you might be able to live off the winnings forever, but you probably won't win, and you're better off with a steady income.

Content marketing is consistent, steady work that you get to regulate. It's less subject to the whims of Twitter's algorithmic mood swings. And you actually get to make stuff.

To paraphrase Neil Gaiman: If you advertise for the sales, and if you don't get those sales, you're left with nothing. If you advertise for the joy of creating content, and if you don't make any sales, you've still got the work.

Modern Name Recognition

Whatever Chuck Palahniuk writes, I'll buy it and read it. He can just start numbering his books for all I

care, screw titles.

Your problem, as Lil' Author, is that you need to build that name recognition, that trust in you as a writer, and it's really difficult to do that through writing great books alone. Because to build that recognition, people actually have to READ your books.

Content marketing can help you build that trust, that product/name recognition, and content marketing can provide that in small, digestible chunks. Those little pieces of content don't require a reader to trust you for 240 pages and for \$10 bucks. It's no money down, maybe a 5-minute time commitment, and boom, your relationship has begun.

A Quick Set of Ideas for Books

Use the blog on your author website to take on a project. Any project will do, but preferably something that's at least peripherally related to the book(s) you're selling. Critique celebrity bookshelves, review the reviews of books. Go out on a limb a little, just to get me interested.

The podcast market is saturated, but that's okay, you're doing content marketing, so what you derive from doing your podcast is meaningful. Interview authors. Ask them about the worst writing tips they ever heard. Ask them about the weirdest questions they were ever asked at a reading. Or, skip that, and review books, review fanfic, whatever.

Start a YouTube series about handbinding books, and handbind your own shit.

Start your own award that highlights something you think is admirable or stupid about books. Can you imagine how great it'd be if you were a writer of erotica who started the bad sex award?

Create a series in whatever format you'd like, with the goal of editing a book you hated into something that you find passable.

Show people how to set up their own home library, go through building shelves, lending, all that good shit.

If you have a job, which, what am I saying, OF COURSE you have a job other than writing, take the skills from your day job and relate it to writing. Show other people how to do something.

Copy and Compose: Do a series of copy and compose exercises, and use lines from your own work intermingled with others you like.

Newsletters: Newsletters straddle the line between traditional marketing and content marketing. I like to point people to Chip Zdarsky's. Subscribe to it. Check it out. I always get a laugh out of it, and him sending me something funny to my inbox every week or so keeps me on the list.

Review pens.

Provide a guide for refurbishing a typewriter.

Basically, take something you already know about or know how to do, relate it back to books, writing, or the subject matter of your books, and boom, you've got the content.

Success Story

Grady Hendrix put in the work with The Great Stephen King Reread, and he reaped the benefits. After writing long, in-depth, very funny reviews of all of King's books, in order (minus the *Dark Tower* and Bachman books), Hendrix established himself as a name in the horror community. He showed that he understood how horror works. And because this project continues to live online, it will always bring people to Grady Hendrix.

He's done a podcast about horror, and he did the *Paperbacks from Hell* book, which is awesome, and which would make anyone interested in reading a novel Hendrix wrote. He gets to show that he's funny, smart, and that he can make reading about even the stupidest shit an enjoyable experience.

The Great Stephen King Reread is excellent content marketing because it points people to Hendrix, showcases his talent, and because it appears to be a project he took on out of pure love. People will identify with and reward a true labor of love that provides them joy. If it just so happens to move units, all the better.

Last Pitch: It Feels Better

Content marketing feels better than traditional marketing. Because you feel like you're helping people out, not just begging, tricking, or bombarding everyone.

Lots of writers and artsy types get skeeved out by marketing because they picture guys shaking hands on a golf course and throwing money around to make you buy shit you don't need.

Marketing, content marketing especially, is also responsible for making people more comfortable with COVID vaccines. It's almost certainly responsible for introducing you to new authors. It's given you a shitload of laughs.

Marketing is like anything: There's nothing inherently bad about it. It all depends on how you go about it and why.

If you shudder every time you think about marketing, come up with a content marketing project, and give it a whirl. You might find that you like it, and hell, you might even sell a book or two.

Alan Wake: A Look Back At Video Gaming's Best Writer Character

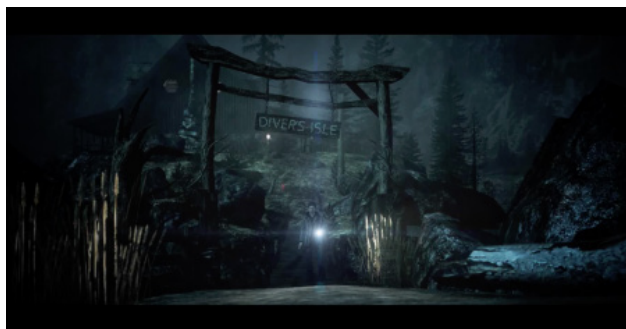


Alan Wake turned 10 last year. You're excused for not marking the occasion. I hear there was some other shit going on. But it's 2021, I'm juiced up on vaccine, and one of the side effects is catching up with everything we missed during the pandemic.

And so: *Alan Wake*.

A Brief Re-Introduction

This is just a little bit for those of you who are unfamiliar with *Alan Wake* and for those of you who forgot. I mean, it's been a minute.



Alan Wake, star of the game *Alan Wake* (not to be confused with Alan Woke, which is a different guy for a very different kind of game) is basically Stephen King. Or, the video game version of Stephen King, which means he's a bit younger, probably reloads a pistol much faster, and...I hesitate to say he's handsomer than King, but I'm 100% sure that anyone who's done that fantasy casting thing for

the *Alan Wake* movie throws Milo Ventimiglia in the role. So I'll just put it in your hands. If you want to talk about who's hotter, a 40-something movie star or a 70-something writer who nearly got killed by a van, that's your right. You monster.

In the fictional world of *Alan Wake*, Stephen King does exist, by the way, as do Raymond Chandler and Bret Easton Ellis. So *Wake* isn't his fictional world's Stephen King, they exist alongside each other. This is something that I think is super interesting, whether or not real-life characters also exist in specific fictional worlds, and this is something nobody else seems to care about, so let's move on.

Alan Wake has written some successful thriller/horror novels, and after his last book was an enormous hit, he decides that it'd be a good idea to take a little time off, recharge from his whirlwind book tour, and maybe rest his way out of some writer's block. Why is a busy book tour always a "whirlwind"? It's never a "cyclonic" book tour. Never a real "nor'easter" of a tour.

Of course, because *Wake* and his wife, Alice, decide to travel to a Cabin In The Woods for their vacation, ghost-y stuff happens almost immediately, and we're in the thick of a game that sort of crosses action, survival horror, and a little bit of underdeveloped driving because, eh, why not?

As you move through the game, it becomes less and less clear whether you're crazy or if the whole world is crazy, and the line between reality is blurred. Like, really blurred. Go into Photoshop, hit that Gaussian Blur filter, move the slider ALL THE WAY to the right, and that'll give you a good idea of the blur factor.

You take some Stephen King, add in a good dose of *Twin Peaks*, and you're there.



Gameplay

Basically, you play as Alan, running around, getting from place to place in the spooky, scary, dark woods where every structure is crumbling to pieces and probably haunted.

The baddies in the game are ghostly, ethereal monsters that sort of materialize out of nowhere and are meant to be possessed townspeople. Because the town of Bright Falls, the game's location, is a blue collar kind of place, there are plenty of terrifying lumberjacks, fishermen, and other burly, hard-to-kill ghost types. If this happened in a medium-sized city, I'm sure the insurance adjusters would make for some resistance, but perhaps they wouldn't be quite as intimidating.

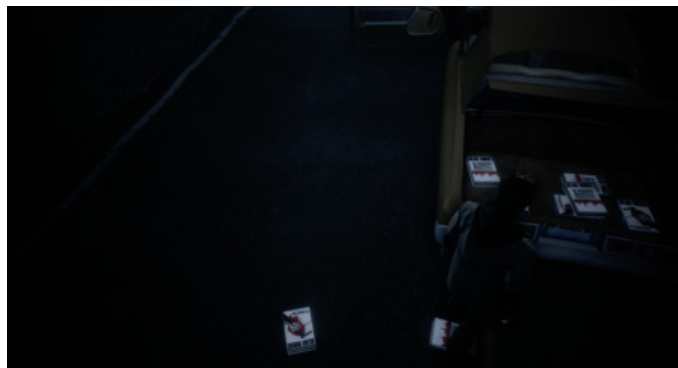


The game relies on two basic mechanics: light and shooting. You use lights, like a flashlight, flares, or other lights that you puzzle out, to de-power the bad guys, at which point you blow them away with a pistol, shotgun, or whatever's handy.

You've got your action sequences, your horror set pieces, some light puzzles and platforming, and there you go.

Wake As Writer

Your introduction to Wake comes after he's apparently crashed his car and suffered a head injury. By the time the game ends, Wake must have an unbelievable case of CTE. He takes more shots to the head than an NFL cornerback.



Wake's backstory as a writer immediately checks out. His trunk popped open in the wreck, and Wake's got a bunch of copies of his book stashed back there. I'm not sure that the biggies like Stephen King or James Patterson roll with copies of their books in the trunk. Although it'd be sort of embarrassing to be James Patterson and not have a book to sign, right? Those things are EVERYWHERE, so you know that the one time he actually needs one, there'd be none in sight.

Let's tally up some of Wake's additional writer-ly qualities:

Part of the story centers around Wake's writer's block, and he kind of freaks out on his wife when she brings a typewriter along on their vacation, innocently thinking that maybe the vacation would break the block and Alan might want to have the option to type a little. A well-meaning person doing a nice thing but missing the mark regarding a writer's particular quirks is dead on.

Wake is in terrible cardiovascular shape. He can run for like 30 seconds at a clip, maximum. Then he runs out of energy and he's slower than my grandma. Well, slower than she was after her second hip replacement, once they hooked her up with that \$6 Million Dollar Man shit. Even when there's a goddamn ghost murderer with an axe chasing Alan, he can't seem to suck it up and put on a sprint. I find this "stamina" limit pretty annoying in games, but I guess this one gets a pass. In theory, Wake is a normal guy, not an action hero, so getting winded from an uphill sprint through the woods isn't totally unreasonable.

In an early sequence, after being chased by a murderous ghost, the ghost taunts Wake by saying he's a hack and that his writing isn't all that hot. I don't know that everyone would put a harsh critique of their work on the same emotional level as a literal vicious attack from a ghost monster, but for some of us sensitive souls, it checks out.

Let's put a cherry on top: Wake has a ridiculous cardboard cutout of himself to promote his books. I love those things. Has there ever been a weirder way to promote a book than a life-size cardboard cutout of the author? "Here's a big picture of a guy who wrote a book."

Just...why?



Where He's The Best

There are other writers in games. I know there are fictional writers and entire books in *Skyrim* and shit like that. But...these really are mostly set dressing, right? And besides, who's going to sit there and read an entire novel, turning the pages with an Xbox controller? Although a quick search just revealed to me a *Skyrim* book title: *The Lusty Argonian Maid*, and a second quick search just revealed to me that an Argonian is like a dinosaur woman. So maybe I'm the fool who's missing out, here.

What makes Alan Wake a notable writer in games? A) He's the main character, B) It's actually important that he's a writer as opposed to some other games where things like the profession of, I don't know, "plumber," are mostly about fashion, and C) There is a game mechanic that involves

finding manuscript pages, and these can reveal more of the story as well as giving you some heads-up when some scary shit might be coming up.

I won't spoil the game's plot, it's not necessary to do so, but suffice to say that the writerly aspects of Alan continue to be plot-central throughout the game. The reason the events begin has to do with writing, the middle part involves writing, and the end concerns writing.

Plus, it turns out that the struggles Wake goes through to write a novel parallel the struggles the development team had when they were working the kinks out of the game. The creative process of making the game is reflected in the game's narrative, and that's just...cool. I dig it.

The Sexy Parts

The real title of this section is "Ludonarrative Dissonance," but who the hell is going to read that crap? Might as well title a section, "An Academic Examination That Sucks The Fun Out Of Everything, Even Video Games."

I'll make it easy. Ludonarrative Dissonance (LD) is what happens when a game's story and atmosphere don't match the gameplay. Another way to say it, if the way the story and environment make you feel isn't enhanced by the things you do to actually play the game, you're experiencing LD.

Bioshock is one of the most-cited examples of LD. Bioshock has an interesting story, heavy on philosophy, it's got stunning environments, and what you do within that narrative and those environments is mostly run around and shoot people in the face. It's almost like one team did story and atmosphere, and one team did gameplay, and those teams never spoke to each other.

The games that have the lowest levels of LD are probably racing games. In *Mario Kart*, the story is that you're a character from this quirky world, and you're having fun racing go-karts. The gameplay consists of you having fun, racing go-karts. The story, the environment, and the gameplay match up completely.

Alan Wake falls somewhere in the middle. Most of the gameplay is you running around and bustin' ghosts, for lack of a better term (there's no better term for ghost murder than "bustin'," don't even bother looking). Hitting ghosts with light seems like a reasonable way to dispose of them, and that works along with the narrative. I'd expect an author can work a flashlight and point it at stuff. On the other hand, capping ghosts with a pistol is fucking crazy and doesn't really fit the narrative.



Ghosts and supernatural monsters coming to life from Alan Wake's writings is a good idea, but if the answer to confronting a ghost is to go Dirty Harry on him and blow him away, that's less interesting. Since when can you kill a ghost with a revolver?

If a gun can kill a ghost, does it even need bullets? And if so, why?

There's a missed opportunity, and it does hurt the game a little. The best parts of the game are walking around and spooling out the story, and the scares are fun, but blasting monsters with a pistol is a little repetitive and didn't make good use of the whole setup. I get it, it's a video game, so if there's no shoot-em-up parts, what's the point? But...I think *Alan Wake's* cinematic presentation and interesting concept aren't enhanced by most of the action.

Verdict

Alan Wake is a good game. Maybe not a great game, although it came out 10 years ago, so it may be that if it came out today, some of the things I didn't love about it would be different. Also, I have to confess that I played through it in mostly one big, 6-hour chunk, and that's not how it's meant to be played. It's my fault for not getting to it earlier and dashing through it the same way I did *As I Lay Dying* because it was assigned reading, and I put it off to the last minute. See, kids, this is what's awesome about getting older: The homework you have to push through is a video game, not a long-ass, poetic novel.

Alan Wake's presentation as a video game is a benefit. Going through the events and the scares helps embed the player into the story. It makes you feel a little like you have agency in the story, like you need to take action to figure out what's going on, where a movie, you can just let it happen on its own. Video games are a great vehicle for horror in that way.

The video-game-y-ness is also *Alan Wake's* greatest weakness. I was a little annoyed at some of the video game stuff. Like, why do I have to press a button to pick up each individual item? Whatever you've got, I'll take it. This game isn't really one where you can leave items behind and get 'em later, so there's no reason to leave anything, and so there's no reason to have me push the button three times to pick up three flares. It breaks the dream a little, makes it a game instead of a story.

The shooting and running and stuff was fun, but it's not 8 hours of fun. Once you get the basic method of play, you've got the game. The enemy variety isn't super high. The gameplay portions and story portions just feel like two separate things, and for someone like me who was more invested in the story and puzzling out the plot, the game aspects start to feel like they're getting in the way instead of making the whole thing more fun.

Barry

Barry is the biggest missed opportunity in the entire game.

Barry, Alan Wake's literary agent, is my favorite character. He calls Alan "Al," and he's a fast-talking, New-York-y guy in what he thinks of as outdoorsy clothes: a red version of George Costanza's puffy coat, highwater cargo pants, and a Hawaiian



shirt.

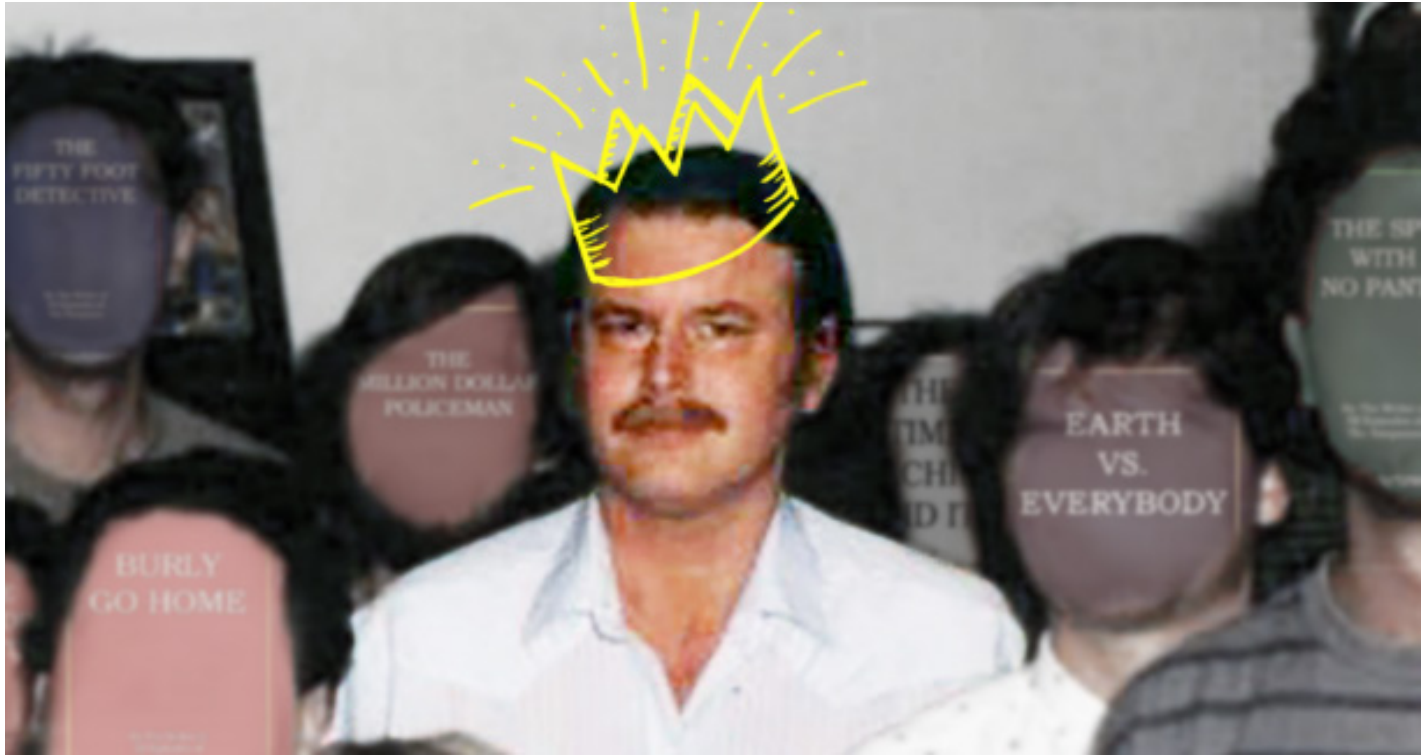
The moment I saw this character, I kinda wished that's who we played as. Why can't this guy be Alan Wake? Doesn't a schlubby, mouthy, New-York-y guy make as much sense as the ruggedly handsome Wake? Alan Wake was fine, but after you see his agent, Alan feels a little like a porn star who threw on a pair of glasses so we could buy her as a professor. Barry is the real deal.

Am I saying that handsome people can't be authors? No, but I AM saying that you don't get many games where you get to play as a dumpy middle-aged city slicker being menaced by ghosts in the woods. This was our shot.

I can't be the only one waiting on that DLC, right? *Alan Wake: The Barry Chronicles?*



The Swartzwelder Method: Because Writing Should Be Fun



For the first time in...maybe ever, John Swartzwelder gave an interview.

Who's John Swartzwelder? Even if you're not sure who he is, you've been touched by his work. If you've ever heard the phrase: "Alcohol: The cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems," I'm talking about the dude who wrote that. If you have an opinion on the "good" era of *The Simpsons*, you're almost certainly talking about the Swartzwelder era. If you've ever read a detective novel that begins with: "As my exciting story opens, I am being punched in the stomach," then you've read one of Swartzwelder's hilarious books, and I'm a little concerned that you don't remember who he is. You should get checked out.

In the interview, Swartzwelder debunks several long-held theories about himself. Yes, he did have a diner booth installed in his kitchen for writing, but no, it wasn't the actual booth he often occupied in an actual diner. Yes, he did negotiate his contract so he didn't have to go into the office every day, but no, it wasn't just because he wanted to smoke.

Frankly, I don't recommend the profile. It mostly de-mythologizes a living legend, and how is that fun? I hate it when some clever fucker uses science and logic and FACTS to make the world less fun, like when a scientist demonstrates that glitter is bad for the environment. So you're telling me that fun is responsible for climate change? Well...I guess I'll need to buy a skimpier set of swim trunks, then, because you can pry my glitter out of my cold dead hands. And vacuum it out of my cold, dead carpet.

There is one super useful part of John Swartzwelder's interview, however, where he lays out his writing method. I call it: The Swartzwelder Method.

Catchy, eh?

How It Works

Swartzwelder's method is to bang out a draft that he knows is horrible, all in one go, if possible. Then, he comes back and edits it the next day.

It's like a crappy little elf has snuck into my office and badly done all my work for me, and then left with a tip of his crappy hat.

These crappy drafts include stand-in dialog, maybe a stage direction with no joke. It's mostly made up of all the boring parts of typing out a story so that way, the next day, it's an empty vessel just waiting to be filled with funny.

As Swartzwelder puts it:

I've taken a very hard job, writing, and turned it into an easy one, rewriting, overnight.

Swoopers and Bashers

When someone says there are two kinds of a thing, it always precedes them telling you what those two kinds are. Nobody ever says, "There are two kinds of writers," and then just leaves it at that. Someday, if I'm ever interviewed, that's my plan.

Me: "There are two kinds of writers."

Oprah: "Care to elaborate?"

Me: "Oh, uh, I guess not. I'm not really sure what the two kinds are. Just pretty sure that two is the number."

You'll see writers put into two categories: Swoopers and Bashers. Swoopers sweep through a draft fast and fix it later. Bashers go painstakingly sentence-by-sentence, making everything perfect as they go.

The Swartzwelder Method probably speaks to swoopers already, so it's a soft sell. I do want to highlight a key difference, though: Save the fun for your second, third, and however many passes. Give yourself something to look forward to beyond that first, wild ride.

As for bashers...

I don't respect bashers. Get out of here with that shit.

Bashers have a reputation for being exacting, putting everything in its place. They look down on swoopers for being anarchists on the page, and this is incorrect. A swooper is also very exacting, they just do the more exacting work in subsequent passes instead of right off. Compare it to woodworking. You can say you're being efficient and exact by taking one thorough pass with a sander, but you're really doing a better job if you start with a coarse grit pass, then go medium, then fine. A thorough job done once might not always yield better results than a sloppier job done three

times. Cited Source: My masturbation journal.

Anyway, Bashers, you really should give this Swartzwelder Method a shot. I know it feels like it goes against every fiber of your being, but it's not that big a deal, it's just that every fiber of your being is stupid and you've been living life wrong. I know striving for perfection seems fun, but trust me, it ain't.

Plotters and Pantsers

Plotters and Pantsers is another way to divide writers into two groups. Plotters plot out the entire story first, Pantsers go by the seat of the pants and figure out the story as they go.

You can use The Swartzwelder Method as either a plotter OR a pantsler. Because the Method isn't about plot or not. It's a way to deal with the sad, stupid fact of life that says you can have a great idea for a novel, you can even have great lines in your head, but at some point you have to apply ass to chair and get it in print. If we could just beam the idea of the story straight into people's heads, we'd do it that way, but unfortunately we're still tied into these narrative options of books and movies that don't let you just share the idea of a story and make it meaningful, you have to give it shape.

The Swartzwelder Method might help you break out of feeling like that writing part is such a drag. You do that boring, tedious work of cramming all the basics onto the page as fast as you can, and then you get to go back and add explosions and butts and time travel and non-chicken-type dinosaurs.

Coal Into Diamonds

One of the things that speaks to me about the Swartzwelder Method is that it's similar to something said by Tom Spanbauer. I respect both of these men deeply, and they are very different artists.

Tom would say, "You have to shit out the coal before you can turn it into a diamond." Meaning: You have to fill a page with words before you can turn that page into something beautiful. And if you think you're shitting diamonds, I've got a jeweler who's ready to disabuse you of that notion right quick.

I guess what I'm saying is that this method is corroborated by one of the best comedy writers of all time and one of the best literary writers of all time. This is like Republicans and Democrats agreeing on a piece of gun legislation. If two people so different can agree on something, it's worth taking a look at.

When It Breaks Down

There are some situations where I might not recommend the Swartzwelder Method, or when I'd recommend a modification.

If you're working on a 600-page literary fiction novel, use the method in 10-page chunks. Bang out 10 pages, edit those into something pretty decent, then do the next 10. Also, if you're working on a 600-page literary fiction novel, I hope you've also got room in your schedule to build a time machine because that shit ain't selling unless you can shoot it back to 2005.

If you're on part 6 of an epic fantasy series, so you know the characters and the plot and where this

is all going, the Swartzwelder Method might be a mistake. You need to make sure you're keeping everything engaging and fresh, and I think banging it out fast might make it easy to just maintain the exact tone and structure and plot of the previous books, kind of go on auto-pilot, and call it good enough.

If you're teaming up for something like a work document, I'd skip it. I mean, I'd skip the method because it'll look confusing and scary to everyone who isn't you, but I'd also skip the work document. Write like three good jokes instead. The world doesn't need another work document.

Why It's Great

Sometimes you need a little section of a story to get you to where you really want to be, but once the story is complete, you can take that scaffolding away. When you go Swartzwelder, it's easier to quickly trash those scaffolding pieces. You don't fall in love with these unnecessary scenes the way you do when you spend a lot of time with them.

It's great for papers you have to write for school. Seriously. It's MUCH easier to go back and fix everything once you've got the roadmap laid out. Bonus, if you screw up and don't get everything fixed, you at least have SOMETHING to turn in, and who knows, maybe the teacher will just skim it, see that it looks decently long, and give you a B-. Which is more than you deserve.

Fun

What I love about the method is that there's an emphasis on fun. Remember when writing was fun? If there was a way to make it fun again, wouldn't you at least give it a shot?

Typical novel-writing methods mostly front-load the fun. You have fun swooping through a draft or plotting it out or whatever, then you're stuck cranking at the keyboard to bring it to life. Front-load the boring, stupid part, and save the fun for last.

I mean, when have you ever tried to write in a system that's based on making it fun? Where that's the whole idea? Who even knew such a thing existed?

Maybe I should let Swartzwelder sum it up:

I was sleeping like a baby — waking up every three hours screaming and crapping my pants.

Okay, that has nothing to do with his writing method. Just, damn, his books are funny. You have to read them.

What Is Identity Marketing?



A column about identity is a dangerous thing to write. But identity marketing is something that affects your life, and you need to know about it.

If you're a writer or bookseller, you might do it intentionally, you might do it unintentionally, or you might have it done for you with no regard for your opinion on it.

If you're a reader, you're being sold books (and other stuff) through identity marketing.

Whoever you are, whatever your relationship to your identity and others, identity marketing is here, and you'd best read up on it.

Disclaimer for Lack of Disclaimer

Because this column touches on the topic of identity, I wrote an entire disclaimer chunk. But you know what? I'm tired of forcing you all through long paragraphs that only exist to appease a person I created in my head who will read this in an intentionally dishonest way.

I'm here to tell you what identity marketing is, not to tell you how to feel about it.

Nutshell

Identity marketing is using the entirety or a portion of your authentic identity to sell something. This could be an assigned, non-elective identity (race, gender, ability, etc.) or an elective identity (political affiliation, cause-based, interest-based).

Elective and non-elective identities are complicated, but in the microcosm of identity marketing, let's look at it this way: You have two hammers. One was given to you, one you picked out. We're looking

to drive a particular nail here, and both hammers will drive that nail just fine.

What's Different About It?

Identity marketing recognizes that an author's personal life, beliefs, and behavior are factors book buyers consider.

Readers are increasingly selecting books based on facets of the author's identity. Spending a set amount of time reading only authors of color is a common practice. Reading only women for a year is common. Avoiding authors who've engaged in questionable or illegal behavior is common. Avoiding authors on the opposite end of the political spectrum is common.



Identity marketing recognizes that the artist, as well as the art, affect sales.

Examples

With non-fiction, especially non-fiction concerned with identity, it's easy to see how identity marketing works.

Between The World And Me is an impossible sell if it's by a white man. Or, it sells, but to a VERY different audience. Ta-Nehisi Coates' racial identity is important to selling his book.

Jazz Jennings' book cover is a big photo of Jazz. Her book is a memoir about being a trans teen, and that identity facet is critical to the marketing of that book.

Those are pretty obvious, right? And it's because those books are directly concerned with topics of identity. Let's look at some different examples where the identity marketing and books aren't so closely aligned.

Stephen King tweets about politics. It's pretty well-known that King is not conservative, to put it lightly. Even though his well-known works aren't terribly political, he makes his political identity very public. As a privileged, white, male author in a position of power, his stances market his books to people who might otherwise assume he doesn't care about marginalized people. Plenty of people only want to read books by authors they consider good people, and King can put himself in that camp by being clear about his political identity.

Donald Ray Pollock is known for coming from an extremely blue collar background. That portion of his identity is marketable because everyone loves reading grit lit by someone who's actually gritty. There are plenty of gritty crime books, but not many are written by someone who worked in a paper mill until age 50.

Sending stories to anthologies that publish only writers from certain identity groups (racial, experiential, political) can be a form of identity marketing. Adding that you've won an identity-specific award (country-based, language-based, race-based, religious-based) to your bio or the front of your book can also be a form of identity marketing. Consistently engaging with certain topics online, whether through social media or other means, can be a form of identity marketing.

But Pete, Having An Identity Isn't A Marketing Activity

Donald Ray Pollock didn't work at a paper mill until he was 50 as a diabolical plan to market gritty books. However...

Here's the first bit of text from an NPR interview:

Pollock worked in a paper mill and meatpacking plant for 32 years before becoming a writer.

Here's how his bio starts:

Donald Ray Pollock is an American writer. Born in 1954 and raised in Knockemstiff, Ohio, Pollock has lived his entire adult life in Chillicothe, Ohio, where he worked at the Mead Paper Mill as a laborer and truck driver until age 50, when he enrolled in the English program at Ohio State University.

The opening of another interview:

At age seventeen author Donald Ray Pollock dropped out of high school to start work in the small town of Knockemstiff, Ohio.

Pollock's identity as a blue collar person from a rural background serves as his sales pitch. His identity is an entryway for readers to understand a little bit of what he's about.

Jason Reynolds is a wonderful author and speaker, and although it's not usually stated in text, most interviews with him and profiles of him feature his picture. He's a young, handsome black man. He's often smiling. He does not look like a leather elbow patches type of author who is set to bore a roomful of kids talking about the history of literary canon. He looks relate-able, especially for kids, especially for kids who might not like typical required reading, especially for people of color.

Jason Reynolds is a very authentic, nice, fun person, and he's not that way just because it's good for business. However, being Jason Reynolds also happens to be damn good for business.

Having an identity is not, in and of itself, a marketing activity. However, when you are a public figure attempting to sell a product, your identity and your product become enmeshed.

Let me put this another way: If you use Instagram for photos of yourself and your life, and if you have no product to sell, that's not marketing. If you start mixing commercial activity with personal activity on Instagram, the barrier between those photos that are for you and those photos that are for the world evaporates. The barrier between identity and identity marketing activities might stay clear in your mind, but for any outside observer, they're non-existent.

But Pete, It Sounds Like You're Talking About Branding

Yes, it does. They're related concepts.

With branding, you set up your brand, and then you actively shape your actions and outward appearance to create and reinforce that brand. Chuck Palahniuk's Twitter presence is an example

of branding. His tweets are almost entirely about events, releases, and occasional books he's recommending.

You'll notice he doesn't market his identity, though. You won't see pictures of him at the beach. You won't read tweets that are his personal thoughts. Chuck Palahniuk is gay, but he doesn't talk about that terribly often, and you won't see him weighing in on LGBTQIA+ issues online.

With branding, you set up the brand, and you follow the brand. With identity marketing, you live an outward life, and portions of that life will intersect with and be perceived as marketing activities.

So, What's My Identity?

I'm guessing you already have some ideas, basic census stuff, but let me give you some ways to consider other identifiers outside of the obvious.

If you dropped dead, what would appear in the first paragraph of your obituary? Would they identify you as a "family man"? An "activist"? A "God-fearing Christian"? A writer? A sister or a son? A Mets fan? Which parts would be different if the obituary was written by your mom as opposed to your first roommate? Sometimes those disagreements represent the best place to define your identity.

If you went missing, what would be in the one paragraph people would put on a poster alongside your face? Imagine you're a cat, and the people looking for you list the places you might wind up, the sorts of things that would cause you to wander off.

If you were filling out a dating profile, what would you list as a dealbreaker? That's related to your identity.

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be? Whether you like it or not, that one thing is central to your identity.

If there was an asteroid headed to Earth and everyone on the planet had to write one paragraph explaining why they should get a seat on a space ark that would preserve human life, what would your pitch be?

When It Works and How

Roxane Gay is known for talking about issues related to gender and feminism. She identifies as a feminist, albeit a "bad feminist." Her Twitter feed identifies her as a feminist, and her Twitter feed is also her best marketing tool. The feminist facet of her identity builds an audience online. If you are concerned with the modern state of feminism, you have to follow Roxane Gay. What Gay says is culturally relevant, and her book releases become more than just drop dates, they're events in the world of feminism.

Neil DeGrasse Tyson is almost the personification of astrophysics, and he puts out little space facts and ideas online constantly. He builds an audience through this activity, and when it's time to sell something, people are listening.



Craig Johnson shows up to events in denim, in a pickup, and the bed is full of books, and he's happy to help get them unloaded. He's the closest living person you'll meet to his Walt Longmire character. Johnson's identity, which gets mashed up with Walt's, keeps people interested in Johnson and his newest title, and it speaks to the type of person who reads authors they could sit and have a beer with.

For you, if you're an unknown author, your identity might be an easier entry point to your work than the work itself. Reading an entire book is a commitment. If people see you as someone they like and agree with, if your identity is unique, and authentic, if your voice is one they want to spend time with, if your identity sets you up as an authority on what you're talking about, they might just take a chance on your book.

When It Backfires and How

When you write about a culture other than your own, you need to be careful. See: *American Dirt*.

When your identity is as an unlikable curmudgeon. See: Jonathan Franzen.

When your identity is inauthentic in an essential way. See: James Frey.

When people see your identity and product as a mismatch. See: Country music stars who are outspoken Democrats.

When the perception of your marketing activity is that it is commoditizing identity.

One Big Cautionary Note

You know how it'd be unfair to critique someone's diary the same way you would a published memoir? Your identity, if you hang onto it for yourself, isn't something that's really up for critique.

If you put your identity on front street, and if it dovetails with your marketing, some people will see that as an open door to critique your identity and its authenticity.

I don't need to tell you that the internet can be a nasty place, and when you reveal something of yourself, those random online blows aren't so random anymore. They hit hard.

It's not fair, it's not right. It's reality.

Where Do You Go From Here?

That's entirely up to you.

Some people will see identity marketing as selling out, selling a piece of themselves to sell books.

Others will see identity marketing as a way to connect with the people who need their books the most.

Some will see themselves as having nothing to hide, and therefore identity marketing is not a

problem. Others will see their identity as separate from their work, as theirs to retain and control.

Some consumers will see identity marketing as honesty. Some will see it as shady. Some book buyers want to trust the artist, others are turned off by attempts to put the artist in front of the art.

The only bad decision on this one is an unconscious one. One you're forced into.

Consider identity marketing, consider how you want to engage with it, and select your path.

Kindle Vella: What Is It?



If you're a self-pub loser like me, you probably got an email about Kindle Vella, Amazon's new self-publishing system/platform/thingie. If you're a self-pub success story, your ASSISTANT probably got an email about Kindle Vella, and they printed it out, sealed the printout in a real, paper envelope, and then you used an ivory-handled letter opener to open it. This is how I assume the wealthy handle email.

What is Kindle Vella, why is it, who is it, and what good is it, anyway?

Who Is It?

Wait, what? That's a dumb question. That doesn't even make sense.

What Is It?

Vella is a new platform for digital, serialized stories.

Because it's not 1927, I'll excuse anyone who doesn't know what that means. If you ARE a time traveler from 1927, you were smart enough to time travel but don't know what a serialized story is? You make for an interesting Venn diagram, sir.

A serialized story is a long story broken up into sequential episodes, so you'd read one chapter in one issue of a magazine or newspaper, another chapter in the next, and so on.

Why Was This So Popular?

Phantom of the Opera, Heart of Darkness, The Jungle, In Cold Blood, Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: all "classics" that started life as serials.

If you were a publisher, a serial let you crank out a chunk of a story, see if it had legs, and then only print the entirety if it was popular. Remember, it was hard as hell to print a whole book back in the day. It was totally worthwhile to find out if a book was a total dud before you took the time to get it printed.

And hey, serials sold papers.

Also, consider that back in the day, literacy spread faster than wealth. Serials meant you could sort of buy a book on the installment plan because you'd never save enough to buy one outright.

If serialization died, why revive its corpse?

Why Did Serialized Stories Fall Out of Favor?

Short answer: newspapers used to be more about entertainment. Then that entertainment moved to TV and radio, and the papers focused on news. There have been a couple projects that dabbled in serialization over the years, but for the most part, while serialization lives on in comics, TV, and podcasting, the serialized novel is dead.

How Might Vella Be A Good Decision?

If serialization died, why revive its corpse?

Two or three years between books is a long time. Unless you're a big, big author who just released his biggest book, the hype for Book A is long dead by the time you get to Book B. Vella might be a good alternative to activities like tweeting and blogging to keep your name out there, especially if you're a fiction author and your strength is in fiction writing, not tweeting and blogging. The Amazon cesspool might be a preferable alternative to the social media cesspool in a "Would you rather burn or drown?" kind of way. Slightly in Vella's favor: At least by the end of all that work, you've got a novel.

The other thing is that the novel, as a format, has to change or die. Where it used to be common to have a book on the nightstand, people are leaving books for other forms of entertainment. Perhaps creating a novel with small, digestible chunks in mind will improve overall readability, reach new audiences, and give the novel a new niche in the culture. Maybe an episodic style will give us some new takes on the novel. Maybe the "Everything old is new again" approach can breathe some life into the novel.

How Does Vella Work For Authors?

You set up publication dates for portions of your story, and people can buy them. The price is set by Amazon, based on 100-word increments. Quick math is that you make 2 cents for every sale of a 500-word story chunk, and if someone hangs in there for an entire 50,000 word novel, you'd make two bucks from that reader. You don't have to finish your entire story before you upload and schedule, each portion works as its own thing.

How's This Different from Kindle Self-Publication?

You publish in chunks, and Amazon sets the price instead of you choosing your own price.

Why Is Amazon Doing It?

Every time I write about Amazon, I get the impression that everyone's itching to hear about how evil Amazon is. If you're an "earning money is inherently unethical" kind of person, this section is for you.

I can only guess how this works for Amazon because I do not work for Amazon, and Jeff Bezos has not been reachable by screaming "Alexa, call Jeff Bezos" into any of my devices or at the one person I know who is, unfortunately, named Alexa.

So here are my non-legally-actionable (fingers crossed) theories.

Token Books

Let's talk through the advantages of tokens using the economics of 1990's mall arcades.

At an arcade, you cram \$5 bucks into a token machine, 20 tokens plink out, and they're only usable at that one arcade. Whether you spend all 20 that day or get your tokens, turn around and walk out, the arcade has your money.

Tokens don't spend like money. It hurts less to blow 20 tokens than \$5. People spend more than they intend to.

The biggest value of tokens to the arcade: if you leave with some tokens, those tokens might eventually draw you back, in which case you will probably spend a little more money, end up with more extra tokens, and the cycle continues.

Investment

Not to get too finance bro, but here, let me put on my fleece vest and loafers...just get some hair gel... rev up some arguments for the redeeming qualities of Wolf of Wall Street...

Imagine that you pay me \$10 bucks a month for all of 2021 because you just love me, and I invest it every month. If you pay me the total \$120 in one lump sum at the beginning of the year instead, I can invest that entire sum and earn on it for the entire year. You pay me the same total, but my earnings will be higher.

Scale those small potatoes numbers up to big, honkin' Russetts that Amazon is dealing with, and you start to see why digital tokens and payment up front might work in Amazon's favor.

21st Century Commerce

Kindle Vella forces customers to engage with Amazon more frequently to see whether an update has come. Instead of me checking Amazon every...2 years or so to see if my favorite author has something new, now I'm checking every week.

Amazon is well aware that the more often you get people to Amazon, the more they'll buy. Every time someone passes through Amazon, that's additional money for them.

Should You Go For It?

Maybe you've got an unkillable mad-on for Amazon, so anything that sends people their direction in any way is an ethical dilemma for you. That's probably the best reason I can see to stay away, and it's pretty weak. I mean, enjoy regaling your friends with the tales of how you've avoided Amazon. I'm sure you're a blast and a half.

Me? From my point of view, there's not all that much new under the publication sun, so when something different pops up, I'm on Team Why The Hell Not? I'll try reading something on Vella, and I'll put something out myself. See what happens. Because...why not?

13 Authors Redefining the Novel Without Being Obnoxious About It



I like “experimental” novels about as much as the next guy, and because I’ve never been in an MFA class, “the next guy” hates experimental novels.

What I DO like are books that push the novel into new and interesting territory without being all showy about it. Books that read like good books, and while they’re at it, they widen the boundary just a little.

The novel needs to change or die. Here are some people fighting to keep it alive, and listed with each author is a book that exemplifies how.



"Raised in Captivity" by Chuck Klosterman

I talk about Chuck Klosterman so much that I owe my girlfriend a small amount of money every time I bring him up in conversation. I’m not sure if she’s tired of hearing about him and wants me to stop, or if she’s okay with it because it’s such a lucrative side hustle.

Klosterman is writing fiction in a non-fictional way. This is hard to describe. The best I can do is to say that he takes a premise, varying from mild to wild, and then every other aspect of the story is spooled out in a non-fictional, logical way. One way to save the novel might be to give it some non-fiction, journalistic, objective flavor.



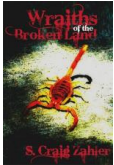
"Burnt Sugar" by Avni Doshi

Whenever the reviews of something are all 1-star or 5-stars, you should check it out.

This one gets mixed, but passionate, reviews because the narrator is honest, bitter, and

unlikable. Readers who like to think of characters as their buddies will hate, hate, hate this book.

If you subscribe to the theory that unlikable female characters are unwelcome in fiction, and that they aren't marketable, and if you don't like that fact, *Burnt Sugar* is the chance to put your money where your mouth is.



"Wraiths of the Broken Land" by S. Craig Zahler

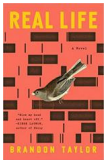
Zahler writes pulpy, violent books that are straight out of the 70s.

How is doing something from the past "redefining" the novel? Because writing books that feel like they came out of the 70s takes a certain bravery in the current age. Some would call it "a certain cultural backwardness," and that's their prerogative.

Zahler:

I hope people enjoy [my books and movies], but I'm not going to make different creative choices so that more of them do.

For me, that's the sweet spot. That's what I want to hear from more writers.



"Real Life" by Brandon Taylor

Real Life depicts a lot of what's being talked about anti-racism non-fiction, but it takes a different stroll. It has an interior vulnerability that's not always present in non-fiction, especially in men, especially in books meant to serve as activism, where vulnerability can work against the goal.

Real Life is an experience from the perspective of a young, gay, black man without a lot of "And then he learned" and "The moral is..." tacked on, leaving the reader to do the work, forcing the reader to reach for conclusions instead of outlining them completely. That's a way the novel can continue and advance a difficult conversation, and that's a way for the novel to retain meaning separate from non-fiction.

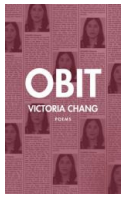
Fiction feels more open to critique, interpretation, discussion, and varying opinions. It feels acceptable to talk about *Real Life* as a book, as a piece of narrative art, where non-fiction books on the topic of anti-racism feel unassailable, and the boundaries for acceptable conversation and ideas around them are narrow.



"Work" by Bud Smith

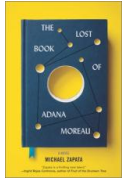
Bud Smith works a blue collar job, and a lot of his stuff is written on his phone when he's got a few spare minutes. And in the best possible way, his books feel like it.

Bud is taking the novel, this hoity-toity thing, and handing it back to everyone. He's very much of the "If I can do this, so can you," attitude. That's what we need. Fewer novels tortured out of an antique typewriter that someone overpaid for, more books tapped out on a phone while you're waiting for someone to unload a trailer.



"Obit" by Victoria Chang

Obit is a series of obituary poems for things the author lost after her mother's death. Fiction needs to learn from poetry. Fiction needs to take what's going on in poetry and run with it. Fiction needs to understand the frozen moment the way poetry does. And fiction writers, a small piece of advice: sell a book of poems first. Poetry is subjective and small, and it's a great foothold in the publishing world.



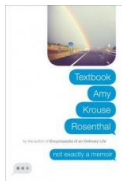
"The Lost Book of Adana Moreau" by Michael Zapata

A book within a book is nothing new, but it's possible that this sort of book, which revels in the joy of books, is the path forward for the novel. Maybe the novel's future is as a niche-interest object, something like vinyl records. Maybe a deep dive into fandom keeps the novel alive, even if it's alive for a smaller number of people. Maybe books written not just for readers, but for truly devoted book lovers, are the answer.



"Antkind" by Charlie Kaufman

Even though it'll make me sound simple, I'm going to admit, I thought the *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* movie adaptation was a huge piece of shit. I admit that because there are others like me out there, and I want to tell them: Don't give up on Charlie Kaufman. *Antkind* is a divisive, damn strange book. You'll find that people who hate it have an easy time crystallizing their hate, but people who love it, pro reviewers who are used to condensing this kind of shit, have a damn difficult time putting their love into words. There is something special and unusual going on here.

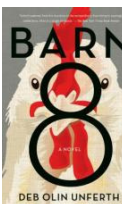


"Textbook" by Amy Krause Rosenthal

Textbook was the first interactive book I've read with the possible exception of a Chuck Klosterman book that, in its original run, contained the author's phone number (at the time of publication, he was of small enough notoriety and the technological age hadn't really hit yet, so this was less insane than it sounds. Also, if my partner reads this, I now owe her money).

Amy dabbles in the close-to-gimmick books, but what makes her shit work is that the gimmick draws you in, and then the folksy, pleasant, fun experience of reading keeps you close. *Textbook* is a good read, even if you don't interact with it. *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life* is a very fun read, a collection of anecdotes given shape, even if you don't care for the conceit.

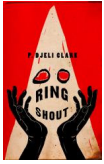
Amy sadly passed a few years ago, but hey, I think her work is still changing the novel, showing writers and readers that you can reconsider how the novel works without being fartsy about it.



"Barn 8" by Deb Olin Unferth

I mostly snuck this one in here because LISTEN UP, CITY PEOPLE WITH BACKYARD CHICKENS: You don't need a rooster. They'll make noise all damn day. Google "Buy sexed chickens [your state]" and stop being an asshole. Petfinder is full of roosters born on backyard farms because some dumbass didn't understand how chickens and eggs work.

Also, dope-ass book, writer who pushes the boundaries, and so on.

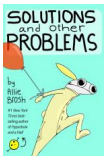


"Ring Shout" by P. Djèlí Clark

With *Get Out*, everybody wants to talk about how it's a meditation on this and that, because everyone has to prove they're smart and that they got it, and the unfortunate thing is that they miss out on talking about how kooky (in a great way) the plot is. It's something Stuart Gordon totally would've done.

Ring Shout is the *Get Out* of horror novels, a book that takes a patently ridiculous concept, ties it to a modern social issue to give it heft, and then that weight transfers back to the horror genre. Pretty smooth. It's also like *Get Out* because everyone is tripping so hard over each other, trying to be the first one to talk about how it's "the perfect book for this moment," and what that means culturally, that they too often forget to talk about what a wild ride it is.

If *Get Out* is a revolution on the screen, *Ring Shout* is its equal, maybe even better, on the page.

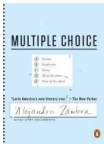


"Solutions and Other Problems" by Allie Brosh

Allie Brosh's books are the best mash-up of novels and meme culture committed to paper. Others have tried, others have succeeded, but none of them are as good as Allie Brosh.

What's really subversive is the blend of the hilarious and the heartbreaking. There are really painful moments in this book, and there are laughs to be found INSIDE those moments.

Allie Brosh mashes up the fast, in-the-moment, memetic culture of the internet with a deep authenticity and heartbreak. She's one of the few delivering what the internet has promised.



"Multiple Choice" by Alejandro Zambra

We don't talk about novels enough. We don't argue about them, read them as families and friend groups. This isn't the fault of the novel, it's just that with so many novels out there, and because each novel takes the time of 5 or 6 movies, having a common set of books you've read along with someone else is unlikely if not impossible.

Multiple Choice begs you to read along with someone else and compare answers. *Multiple Choice* is an incomplete reading experience until you go through it with someone else. This is the sort of thing that keeps people talking about novels, and people talking about novels keeps them alive.

The First Date Book Walkout Question



"You're on a first date with someone, and they tell you the name of their favorite book. You immediately leave. What's the book?" - @ogbrenna.

It's the question that kicked off a storm of tweets.

The question was solid, but the answers were liquid. Or stupid. Is stupid the opposite of solid? Is liquid the opposite of smart? You know what? The answers were shitty. The answers I saw were stupid, liquid shit.

Here are the worst answers, why they're the worst, and as a service, I've added correct answers, too. If this question ever comes up again, you'll be ready with better, more interesting answers.

"Anything by Ayn Rand"

Why people give this answer:

People who say an Ayn Rand book is their favorite are probably Libertarians.

Why this is the wrong answer:

Libertarians are usually rich dudes. The kind of people who see streetlights as a commie plot are people who can probably afford some secret eye surgery that lets you see in the dark, rendering streetlights useless.

If you're on a date with a rich dude, order the steak. Get some wine. Let his droning about eminent

domain fade into the background while you take a trip through Flavor Country. When he heads to the bathroom, get a filet to go. If he's unhappy with your eat & run & eat again tactic, just hit him with a Rand quote: "Freedom (n.): To ask nothing. To expect nothing. To depend on nothing."

The correct answer:

Capital by Thomas Picketty

I'm not comparing economic ideologies. I just think the description of an overly-long, thinly veiled metaphorical novel about economics is probably wackier and more entertaining than a description of an overly-long, completely naked description of economics. If I have to be bored by something, I'd rather be bored by the description of an off-the-wall action movie than a documentary, know what I mean?

"Mein Kampf" by Adolf Hitler

Why people give this answer:

Because they have a fantasy of sticking it to a Nazi.

Why this is the wrong answer:

NOBODY is going to cite this as their favorite book on a first date unless that date is happening at a white power punk rock concert that turns into a deadly game of cat and mouse. So unless your date is happening within the fictional world of the film *Green Room*, this answer is more about your power fantasies than it is about books.

Maybe there's someone out there who's like, "Pete, this happened to me!" And to you, the one person who can say this happened, I have to deliver some bad news: You weren't on a date with a Nazi, you were on a date with someone desperate enough to leave that they brought up Hitler.

The correct answer:

GOOP Clean Beauty by The Editors of Goop

I'm operating under the theory that a shocking declaration of white power won't come in the form of a book discussion on a first date. HOWEVER, a declaration of white NONSENSE under those circumstances is possible. GOOP is the pinnacle of white nonsense. Take a stand against white nonsense.

The Bible by...whoever wrote that down?

Why people give this answer:

Because they think they're clever for taking a book discussion and turning it into a religious discussion.

Why this is the wrong answer:

It's not really about taste in books, it's about religious beliefs. That's a fine reason to be incompatible with someone romantically, but why twist an interesting question about books into a boring question about religion? You know how religious people will knock on your door and ask if you've accepted Jesus Christ? This answer is the atheist version of that: cramming religion into a discussion that was just fine without it.

The correct answer:

A Brief History of Time by Stephen Hawking aka The Bible of Science

Look, I just don't believe anyone who says they understand this book. I'm not 100% convinced Stephen Hawking understood this book. And he wrote it. The only way I'd be convinced is if Hawking himself explained the shit to me, and he's dead, so he'd have to explain either in ghostly form or through a Ouija board, which adds an additional level of skepticism and probably contradicts a good chunk of his work.

"The Catcher in the Rye" by J.D. Salinger

Why people give this answer:

Because they haven't read enough since high school to come across a book that's actually bad.

Why this is the wrong answer:

I'm putting a new rule on *The Catcher in the Rye* hate: If you read it for school, and if you graduated more than 5 years ago, find a new book to hate on. If you don't have a new, worse book in your life by the time you're in your 20s, you're not reading enough. Also, if *The Catcher in the Rye* is the worst book you read in high school, you've got nothing to complain about.

The correct answer:

Out of Africa by Isak Dinesen

I think people want to avoid someone who is actually like Holden Caulfield as opposed to someone who enjoys reading about Holden Caulfield. Holden Caulfield expresses love for *Out of Africa*, so that's the obvious choice here. Besides, it's a book written in the early 1900's by a white woman in Africa. I...don't see that conversation going well.

"Fifty Shades of Grey" by E.L. James

Why people give this answer:

Because it's an easy target as a "dumb" book.

Why this is the wrong answer:

I've heard from multiple older men that when their wives read this book, things sped up in the bedroom for a bit. You're on a date. Do the math.

The correct answer:

Pillars of the Earth by Ken Follett

People call *Fifty Shades* "mommy porn," but this is the true, secret sex book for repressed moms. And it's WAY grosser, like incest-y gross. Which, whatever, but I don't have time for the artifice of a long-ass book ostensibly about building a church, written in painstaking detail, all just to hide a sex romp. You're on a date with someone who will bang you only once a year on your anniversary, and it'll be weird, man. And not good weird.

"Trump: The Art of the Deal" by Donald J. Trump

Why people give this answer:

Because everyone is STILL using Trump as a (lazy, easy-to-reach-for, most obvious) human punchline.

Why this is the wrong answer:

Do you remember that part in *Beetlejuice* where Delia is renovating the house, and her husband Charles asks her to leave one room in their new home as-is? One room that's a sanctuary from the influence of modern art?

Delia Deetz: If you don't let me gut out this house and make it my own, I will go insane, and I will take you with me!

Charles Deetz: Yeah, well you know, maybe the house could use a little remodeling. Uh... But, why don't you just leave this room alone, okay?

I'm going to propose a radical experiment: Can we just agree, as a community of readers and book lovers, that we don't have to bring up Trump in the book world to make cheap jokes? Not because I think he's awesome, because Trump jokes are practically punctuation at this point. Can we rope off this one sector of culture and pretend that he doesn't exist within it? The government could use a little remodeling. Uh... But, why don't we just leave books alone, okay?

The correct answer:

The Heist-est Heist Ever Heisted: A Heist Story of a Heist by Peter Derk

If you're on a date and the person sitting across from you cites this book as their favorite, you're on a date with me. This is a worst-case dating scenario. My advice is that you respond by telling me your favorite book is *Mein Kampf*. I know it sounds extreme, but getting out of this situation as quickly as possible is the right move.

Things Casual Readers Don't Care About



Let's talk casual and abnormal readers.

Casual readers get in a couple books every year. Maybe more if they're in a book club. They unwrap a book on Christmas, but they don't get a book from EVERYONE they know. They might stop at a landmark bookstore on a trip, but they aren't packing an almost-empty suitcase for their book haul.

Abnormal readers always visit a library or bookstore when they take a trip. They bring more than they can read if they'll be away from home. They've vacationed to a literary landmark. They've bought the same book twice because they forgot they already owned a copy. They have an "emergency book" in their trunk.

A lot of books, and articles about books, are written for abnormal readers because abnormal readers are a sure-thing audience. And a lot of abnormal readers have a hard time relating to casual readers.

Content aimed at casual readers would give the industry so much more. More business, more diversity, more options. It expands the boundaries for the sorts of people who are involved in book discussions, which is the key to getting more people reading, talking about books, and engaged with the book world.

That's why I present you with a list of things casual readers don't care about.

High Culture Examinations of Low Culture

Applying rigorous, literary critical theory to low culture is VERY 1997. I did it myself. In college I wrote a paper on the movie *White Chicks* and its examination of race and gender, and you know what? I had to bullshit the entire thing because *White Chicks* doesn't examine race or gender. Not a thoughtful film, *White Chicks*.

ENJOY crap culture, have fun with crap, don't be ashamed. But nobody needs a Derrida citation in a piece about *Too Hot To Handle*, a show based on the premise "Can you NOT give a a handjob for 30 days?" Just remember: When you grab a piece of low culture and wring it like a wet rag in search of meaning, the only thing squeezed out of it is the fun.

Deep Discussions of Canon

You know that friend who's really into bourbon? To an obnoxious degree? They talk about the grains and shit? They compare the flavor to lumber?

For casual readers, canon talk is just like that. Bourbon is fun, books are fun, both get you where you need to go, but deep discussions about the intricacies? Pass.

Academics: you created canon, you constructed your own problem, and now you're fixing it. Excellent. It's a perfect circle jerk. We'll leave you to it, let us know when you've finished.

The Story Outside the Pages

I listened to a lot of the chatter around *American Dirt*. Casual readers, even people who care deeply about a lot of the issues surrounding the book, enjoyed it. Abnormal readers did not.

Normal readers told me about the story. Abnormal readers told me about the shameful marketing, problems with blurbs, and the betrayal of the Own Voices movement. They told me about the book world, not so much about the book.

The lesson is that casual readers respond to books, not so much articles, tweets, and essays about books.

Ridiculous Novelty

You know how movie critics will slobber over some movie that's all artsy and weird, and you go see it and think, "The fuck.."? And then you're too scared to admit that it made no sense, so you just cuddle up in your *Demolition Man* blanket and try to forget the whole affair?

The Lighthouse. We're talking about *The Lighthouse*. Get out of here with that shit.*

Movie critics have seen so, so many movies that anything that deviates from the norm is at least mildly interesting, and mildly interesting is at least SOMETHING. Plus, when you have to write a review, it's easier when the shit's weird. What's left to say about *Fast & Furious*? At this point Vin Diesel seems so tired I think he's envious of Paul Walker's escape from the franchise.

Casual readers aren't burned out on interesting stories told in a clear way. And casual readers don't see their review as a necessary part of the reading process. Ridiculous novelty is for abnormal readers only.

The Selection Process

Most casual readers have a casual selection process. Instead of consulting a long TBR on Goodreads or in a notebook, they pick something off the shelf they've had for years, grab something at the airport, or take a trip through the library's New Books section and call it good. There's a gamble to it, an element of luck or maybe even randomness.

I used to discourage this, but now I think it might be part of the fun for some people. There's some luck involved, and maybe you'll unearth something new and exciting.

For abnormal readers, selection is part of the reading process. For casual readers, the low stakes risk-taking is another, different flavor that enhances the reading experience.

Literary Fiction

When normal people see this designation, like in a bookstore, they don't know what the fuck it means. And...that's not unreasonable.

I think it used to be more of a distinction of certain qualities, a certain "classic" or "modern classic" status. That's long since faded, and literary fiction is basically anything that doesn't have a werewolf, post-apocalypse brought on by some wacky natural event, or sex scenes that are fun to read.

At this point, "literary fiction" mostly exists to give abnormal book people something to fight with each other about. It's not a useful way to steer a reader to the right book for them.

Can we all just agree to call this "General Fiction" and move on? "Non-Werewolf Fiction" would also be acceptable.

**The Lighthouse rules. -editor*

Goodreads: A History of Where It All Went Wrong



The right person will tell you Goodreads is like a digital coffee shop where people can chat over books.

A different, also right person will tell you Goodreads is the world's biggest hellhole, pretending to be a literate, high-society book salon when it's really just an excellent place to absorb abuse for having an opinion on a book (or, god forbid, for writing one).

What happened? Who's right? Where did it all go wrong?

Origin

Goodreads started innocently enough when Otis Chandler, who previously worked the technical side of dating apps, put his skills to work for something far less likely to end in the proliferation of dick pics: books.

By the way, I didn't say a life in books absolutely would not end in dick pics. Nobody is saying that there's a life path that doesn't end in dick pics.

Chandler thought, "If I could only get my all friends to put their bookshelves online and say what they thought of them...[that] would just be a really good way to find good books."

By the by, if you're wondering why I haven't mentioned Chandler's wife and Goodreads co-founder Elizabeth Khuri Chandler yet, it's because I hate women and am an active participant in their erasure.

Kidding!

As she herself says: "Goodreads was Otis' idea, but he enjoyed making it something I would want

to use." Elizabeth Khuri Chandler did the PR, branding and marketing for the first five years, and she was a sounding board for the project. Otis would run various things by Elizabeth and her English major/Journalism buddies because he figured they'd be a core audience.

Thus, Goodreads was born.

Why Did Goodreads Get So Big?

Lots of articles will give you touchy-feely, "finally book nerds had a home" reasons for Goodreads' success. But I don't think those account for the spread of Goodreads. Here are a few theories of my own.

The Rise of Teen

In the mid-2000s, Young Adult book options were pitiful. You'd have your *Chocolate War*, a handful of bad Judy Bloom knockoffs with more handjobs, and that's about it. But in the second half of the decade, teen-centric post-apocalyptic trilogies, sad girls in pretty dresses, and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity exploded onto bookshelves in libraries and bookstores.

Fandom was a huge part of the teen lit boom. Teen lit fans skewed younger and more tech savvy, and the target market for these books also happened to be the target market for social media. Goodreads started up in 2007 and really hit its stride around 2011, which coincides with the teen boom and the desire of teen lit fans to gather and geek out about books.

The Engine Room

Goodreads acquired a book-recommendation engine that was better than Amazon's. Better how? The Goodreads engine was based on your ratings, not your purchase and browsing history. You know how you'll buy something wacky on Amazon, just a goof, like a Nicolas Cage sequin pillow, and then you're getting recommendations for a Nicolas Cage shower curtain and a Nicolas Cage cage for your dog? By simply going on user ratings, Goodreads worked around that shit.



Social Media Suck

Before Goodreads, book blogs, especially niche, genre blogs about horror, extreme horror, erotic horror...well, a bunch of blogs with black backgrounds and eye-piercing electric green fonts, were abundant, ripe, and ready to be fed into the Goodreads machine.

Social media sites like Goodreads sucked up all the small, independent content sites online, mashed them up, and spewed out the results as the pink slime of internet culture, aka timelines. Convenient for me, the reader who wants to check out what a variety of people think about a book, but shitty for the book blogger.

We didn't know it then, but social media was in the process of making the internet easier to browse and way, way less interesting. Goodreads provided a hub for book lovers, but it also took some of the stank off it.

Tracking Craze

Fitness trackers, diet trackers, sleep trackers, goal trackers, to-do lists, there's even a tracker on your phone that tracks how much you're using your tracker apps. The compulsion behind data-fying activities is strange, but it's real.

Goodreads provided personal data for readers. How many books did I read? How many pages? What was the longest book I read? How does this year compare to last year?

The Room for Authors

On Facebook and Instagram, your pleas for people to buy your books are lost in the wash of politics, people taking bad pictures of their ugly-ass kids, and advertisements for their Mary Kay nonsense. On Goodreads, selling your books makes a lot more sense.

The price structure for Goodreads ads and giveaways doesn't slam the door on smaller presses and even self-pub authors. I don't want you to mistake them for cheap, but giving away 100 eBooks for \$100 is much cheaper than shipping 100 hard copies, and it does at least give you, the indie author, a shot.

Readers and reviewers are a big part of Goodreads, but the hidden, secret backbone is heavy author use.

A Crazy Little LibraryThing Called LibraryThing

To tell the Goodreads story in a more complete way, let's look at The Goodreads That Didn't Make It, aka Librarything.

Librarything looks and feels like an elementary school library catalog that was put together by a stoned 20-something intern over one summer where he did nothing until July 25th, then in a mad rush, cataloged the entire library before students came back. The elderly school librarian was extremely impressed because the 20-something added a couple graphics and a sans serif font, which was a little extreme in the librarian's opinion, but it undeniably "jazzed up" the site's appearance.

The LibraryThing story is one that uses words like "metadata" and "OPAC." There's a bigger focus on cataloging than discussion. It's just...not fun. I don't think it's meant to be fun, or it's only meant to be fun for the very specific kind of person who gets off on MARC records.

If you have two roommates, Librarything is the studious, reliable roommate who you want around when rent's due. Goodreads is that roommate who's annoying as fuck, but 15 years down the road, all your best stories are about Goodreads.

Amazon Makes the Buy

Amazon bought Goodreads for \$150 million in 2013, though founders Otis and Elizabeth stayed on for a few more years.

For a lot of people, this is when things started to go downhill, and it's hard to argue against that.

In an interview from 2014, you can almost smell a defensiveness on the part of Otis and Elizabeth when the topic of Amazon comes up. The interview starts with excitement about books and reading and connecting people, and then, when the Amazon deal comes up, it's a little more corporate. All the buzzwords like product, platform, and metadata are lined up and accounted for.

I have some advice for Otis and Elizabeth: Don't worry about the haters. If someone offered me \$150 million to kill my mother, I would consider it. I wouldn't take it, but I wouldn't be insulted by the proposition, that's how much \$150 million is. Offer me \$2,500 to kill my mom, I'll call you an asshole. Offer me \$150 million, I'll turn you down, but more politely than I should.

Yes, getting \$150 million is 100% selling out. But if I'm honest, even if Goodreads is run into the ground, I couldn't tell you that I would turn down \$150 million to preserve every idiot's right to review a book with a series of gifs.

Eventually the founders left and turned over the reigns to Veronica Moss, head of "Revenue and Operations." Moss worked in marketing for Hotwire and Pandora before landing at Goodreads. I don't want to be the person who says the current CEO of Goodreads doesn't really care about books. I don't know that to be true. However, I offer her background and past employment as a valid reason to be skeptical, to wonder if Goodreads is really about good reading anymore or if it's more about data collection, generating revenue, and propping up Amazon.

Where People Get The Amazon Thing Wrong

Amazon isn't an evil, abusive landlord in the case of Goodreads. When they bought Goodreads, their promise was to "do no harm." They've fulfilled that promise, but they also haven't made things any better.

Think of Goodreads as a decent housing complex in a middle-class neighborhood. Amazon bought it, and while they haven't done superficial upgrades that priced everyone out, they also haven't bothered doing a whole lot of basic maintenance either. It's not actively shitty because of sitewide problems, but it's also not something that improves, well, ever.

It's stagnant, and as the world develops around it, Goodreads looks worse and worse.

Where Recommendations Went Wrong

Remember when I told you how Goodreads used a different book recommendation engine? Did that strike you as odd? It should've, because this is where Goodreads started to get way off track.

Allie Townsend in *Time*:

...Goodreads prided itself on this idealistic human-to-human book discovery that the site offered. It was part of the "Aren't you sick of robots telling you what you want?" digital boom. And it was appealing. The web felt like a community again...

Goodreads removed the emphasis on person-to-person book discussion and placed a digital recommendations engine between individual users. By becoming more like other recommendation

engines, Goodreads turned away from its original appeal.

Where Social Went Wrong

Books are an underrated escape from the digital. When you read a book, there's no FOMO, there's no comparing your life to someone you know in real life, and really no need to participate in the book beyond reading. The book doesn't ask anything of you, and it doesn't make you feel like shit.

The social aspect of Goodreads is fun, but it's also led to competitiveness, To-Read lists that'll never be finished in a dozen lifetimes, and for some readers these aspects remove the best part of reading: It's not social. When books get social, another escape hatch from the digital world slams shut.

Where Reviewers Went Wrong

Some of the problems with Goodreads are on us readers, let's be honest.

All of this was best outlined by the whole Kathleen Hale scandal of 2014 in which Hale semi-stalked a Goodreads reviewer who called Hale a "rape apologist" and turned out to be a total catfish. Lots of bad behavior all around on that one.

Professional reviewers have to maintain relationships in the book world, and if they interpret an author as being a "rape apologist," they need some good evidence to back it up before they commit their thoughts to print.

Amateurs can pitch their subjective interpretation of a book's first 15 pages as the book's objective truth.

And the hell of it is, Goodreads reviews are often rated highly because they're funny. If the user wants to get attention and Likes, savaging a book is the shortest route.

Try it. If you rip a book a new one in an amusing way, you'll get a golden shower of Likes. Here, go ahead, I put up this book specifically so you can go and give it negative reviews, just to see what happens. Seriously, this exists for the sole purpose of you taking a shot. Prove me wrong.

Where Authors Went Wrong

Authors scrap with reviewers on Goodreads, even if the review is not personally attacking or unfair. Authors will comment on a middling review, not in a super intimidating way, but in a way that signals, "Hey, I saw this."

This trainwrecks the Goodreads experience for readers. You don't have to take flack from a reader who @'s you on Twitter just to talk shit, but sharing their subjective, negative opinion on your work on Goodreads is a totally appropriate thing to do.

I'm not optimistic for the future of Goodreads, but I concocted a scenario where things improve.

I don't know how to put this gently: When you're an author, you have to accept that readers want to read and evaluate your book as if you're not a real person. Maybe we authors need to consider leaving Goodreads as a place for readers to do that.

The Future

I'm not optimistic for the future of Goodreads, but I concocted a scenario where things improve:

Say Amazon decides to turn Goodreads over to an employee. Say Amazon decides to give this person a lot of leeway because there's not much to screw up. Say this person happens to enjoy Goodreads and has some ideas to improve it.

This seems like the most likely way to see Goodreads bounce back.

For this to happen, we users have to keep Goodreads chugging along. The longer Goodreads goes, the more opportunity there is for change.

Let's all do our part.

Reviewers: There's a difference between saying a book sucks and saying whoever wrote it should eat a dick burrito with sewage salsa. There's a not-fine line between critiquing what didn't work in a book and completely roasting the author's personal life, appearance, and dead mother.

Authors: Just leave reviewers alone. If that means you can't use Goodreads because the temptation is too great, then so be it. Our choices, even good choices, have consequences, and a consequence of being an author might be that Goodreads isn't much fun for you anymore, it's business.

Goodreads: Add features that emphasize human interaction and de-emphasize machine learning, at least for regular users. Oh, and maybe you could consider actually using Goodreads on a regular basis, see what annoys the shit out of you, and fix those things.

Prep for Your Interview, Sell Some Books



Don't you want at least a couple people to see your interview and buy your book? Don't you want someone to read a profile of you and spend a couple bucks? Don't you want to be on a podcast and see at least a little jump in your web traffic?

Of course you do. Let's get you prepped with a little program I call Preparation H. The "H" stands for "hella," as in "Hella Good Interview."

I know, nobody says "hella" anymore, but that's the best I could do and still make the hemorrhoid joke, the jokes of my people.

Here's a quick guide to make your interviews smooth as a freshly Preparation H'ed ass. Wait, ew, no.

Here's a quick guide to make your interviews smooth as a baby's behind. Eh, also gross.

Here's a quick guide to make your interviews as smooth as the peanut butter with the good chemicals in it that keep it so super smooth.

It's Not All About You

With podcasts, web shows, all that shit, a good chunk of fans tune in regularly because they enjoy the host. The interviewer is part of the draw.

If the host has some room to speak, the listeners get what they want, listen to the whole episode, and enjoy it. You'll be seen as a "good guest."

Check out your interviewer's work. Come prepped with a couple questions for your interviewer. Make

it about them. Just a little.

Your Books and Authors

You will be asked, "What are you reading now?" "Who are your influences?" or "Which books are out there that more people should read?"

Tailor these recommendations to the likely readers/viewers/listeners of the outlet interviewing you. If you are interviewed in a metal magazine, recommend something that would appeal to that crowd. If that crowd seeks out your recommendations and loves them, that gives you credibility.

Funny, Interesting, Quotable

Here are 10 questions that almost every writer will get at some point:

1. What's your opinion on writer's block or technique for breaking it?
2. Do you listen to music while you write, and if so, what?
3. Tell us about your process. Do you outline?
4. What's your advice to writers starting out?
5. What's your advice regarding agents/big publishers/industry stuff?
6. Can you give us a little bit about your background?
7. Did you always know you wanted to be a writer?
8. What do you do when you're not writing?
9. What's your opinion on social media?
10. What's next for you?

People will read your interview and decide whether or not they want to read your book as a result. Someone funny, interesting, charismatic, or who has something different to say, even just a cute little story, will get more readers than someone who says, "Writer's block is a myth, sit down and write."

Turn a boring question into another reason for someone to find your work.

Decline to Answer

Agreeing to an interview isn't the same as agreeing to answer any and all questions. You're not under oath, you're not getting paid.

Turn unwanted questions back on the interviewer in a gentle way. If the interviewer asks you about your family, you can say, "Families are complicated. I'm still not sure how I feel about my family sometimes. You know what I mean?" If the interviewer asks about your politics, you can say, "I'm not always sure what to think on this stuff, but I like hearing what other people think. What do you think?"

How To Be Rich and Famous

If someone asks you a marketing question or how to get an agent or whatever, instead of telling us your same old boring journey, give us one tip. One thing you did that was a little different or unusual and that might be useful for someone else.

Plug and Drop

This sounds like a weird addition to the Preparation H plan. Because butt stuff.

Don't plug your book at the very beginning. Nobody knows you yet, and nobody's going to look you up before listening.

Don't wait until the very end. Audiences don't always make it to the end. They sense the wrap-up, and they shut it down.

Get it in once you've established yourself in the interview, and then forget it.

Oh, and a little tip: Make a simple URL that takes me where I need to go. Don't give me some long, complicated shit, don't send me to Twitter where I can get distracted by a billion other tweets. Set up a URL redirect on your website, or, if you're not a tech person, buy a simple domain and set it to forward to wherever people can buy your book. This is a 5-minute process, it costs \$10 max, and it makes you look like such a pro.

Do People Want To Spend Time With You?

Nobody wants to spend more time with an author who was rude to a beloved internet personality.

Nobody wants to spend more time with an author who was boring.

Nobody wants to spend more time with an author who thinks they're hot shit.

Successful interviews end with the viewers/listeners/readers wanting to spend more time with you. If they want to spend more time with you, boom, your book is the perfect way for them to do that.

Do I Have To?

Interviews don't HAVE to be all about sales, and you don't HAVE to be likable. But if you're not trying to sell books, and if you don't care what people think of you...why do an interview?



Taking Yourself Seriously Is Killing Your Writing



Here's the best advice I've ever received from someone who starred in *Robocop 3*:

Take what you do seriously, but don't take yourself seriously.

These are the wise words of Jeff Garlin, who you might know from *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or *The Goldbergs* or from his role as "Donut Jerk" in *Robocop 3* (Garlin's description of the movie's place in the trilogy: "Y'know, the good one.").

Why am I bringing this up here?

Because writers could really use a better understanding of the difference between taking what you do seriously and taking yourself seriously. Might be a big quality of life improvement for some of us. And it's a DEFINITE quality of work improvement.

Let me show you what I mean.

Enter: Roxane Gay

Roxane Gay writes pretty serious books. She reviewed her own book, *Bad Feminist*, on Goodreads, like this:

This writer certainly has a LOT OF OPINIONS. I mean...

She reviewed *An Untamed State* on Goodreads, too:

Pretty decent debut novel. Protagonist loves to exhale.

Gay writes serious shit, she works hard, she writes A LOT. She takes what she does seriously. And obviously doesn't take herself too seriously.

People treat Roxane Gay respectfully, and they take her work seriously. That's the point. The work determines how other people treat her, not her level of self-seriousness.

It's working for her. It can work for you, too.

The Mediocre Writer's Tool

Self-seriousness is a tool mediocre writers reach for too fast and too often. If you failed to take your work seriously and cranked out a mediocre story, why not just take yourself seriously instead? Maybe some of that seriousness will transfer to the story, right?

Go ahead! We have many great personas to choose from:

- Two-Fisted Tough Guy Crime Writer
- Hyper-Academic Literary Fiction Writer
- Writer Who Says "I Think Words Are Important" As If That's A Unique Perspective
- Hard Drinking Writer With A Dark Past

If you find yourself reaching for a serious persona to bump up the seriousness of your latest book, I get it, we all screw up. But maybe next time put that effort into the work instead. Please? Your uber-serious tweets are making me eyeroll so hard and so often that it's starting to be an ophthalmological concern.

Unserious Writers Grow

When writers take themselves too seriously, they stop growing. Because growing involves trying new things, and new things bring the risk of looking like a dork. When you take yourself too seriously, looking like a dork is not an option.

Don't write for your ego. Don't write to reinforce your own seriousness.

Be an amateur sometimes. Try something new. Keep growing. Keep giving me new reasons to read your stuff. If you don't take yourself too seriously, you've got nothing to lose.

Control

Here's a complete list of what you control:

1. How good your book is.

You don't control who reads it, you don't control what they think of it, and you sure as hell don't control what they think of you. You can take yourself seriously, but that doesn't mean anyone else is going to.

Taking yourself seriously feels like control, but it's not.

The closest thing you have to control is writing an undeniable book. Focus on that.



You Do You

Hey, take yourself as seriously as you want. You do you.

Me? I'm a goofy bastard. There's no denying it. I walk funny, I giggle when I'm delighted. I'm just not cool, and if I took myself seriously, I'd be the first and last person to do so.

My plan? Write stuff so good, so undeniable, that even my goofball self can't wreck it for readers. I'm not there yet, I wouldn't say the one about the ghost detective who fights a blob hit the mark, and the one about the heist that involved precision defecation wasn't quite there, either. There's a lot to overcome here.

I'll get there. And I'm having fun along the way.

I'm not going to yell at any authors to smile in their author photos. I won't print up whoopee cushions with your overly serious quotes on them (although now that I've thought of it, it's very tempting). If the very suggestion that you take yourself less seriously made you furious, don't worry, I'm not talking to you. You're already too far gone.

But if you want to join me, me and the clown brigade welcome you with open arms (with a bunch of scarves and shit shoved up the sleeves, but still, open). Um, and apologies to those of you who are afraid of clowns. That and the pictures probably makes my invitation sound like a threat. It's not. Probably.

10 Years of LitReactor News: A Followup



2011. Wall Street was being occupied. Sharper Image was getting into the eReader game with the worst tablet ever made. *Fifty Shades of Grey* was shocking soccer moms with its dirty, dirty, dirtiness and shocking the rest of us with its inexplicable success.

And of course, a plucky little lit website called LitReactor was there to talk about it all.

To help celebrate our 10th anniversary this October, I present a small sampling of news we covered over the last decade. We've got some follow-ups, some bad news, and some odd turns nobody could've predicted.

Let's do it.

Whatever Happened to the eBook Self-Publishing Bubble?

eBook self-publishing took off in the early 2010's, and there was A LOT of hand-wringing and pondering about the future of literature.

Instead of shaking the foundations of publishing to the core, eBook self-publishing gave us some great stuff, some bullshit, and a whole lot that nobody cares about. We've had a few breakout stars and a whole shitload of losers. So...the exact same thing as traditional publishing, and with close to the same ratios.



Whatever Happened to All Those eReaders That Aren't Kindles?

eReaders were the shit in 2011. Sony made one, Barnes & Noble made one. Nintendo was going to make the Wii U into a reader until they decided to barely even make GAMES for it. Sharper Image got in on the eReader game with The Literati, the worst eReader of all time, which is why I cleverly nicknamed it "The Shiterati."

The eReader boom is over. The only survivors seem to be Kindle and, for a few damned, lost souls dedicated to fighting the evil Beelzebuzos, Kobo. The first iPad came out in 2010, ending the short gap between the reign of e-ink and beginning the rise of versatile devices that can be eReaders, gaming platforms, and peddlers of porn.

Whatever Happened to Signing eBooks?



How does an author sign an eBook for an adoring fan?

At one time there was a service called Kindlegraph, later Authorgraph, that'd let you sign eBooks somehow. I tried signing up for it today, and I waited hours for a confirmation email that never came. But the lack of email was a confirmation of sorts: the service is probably dead.

We asked the wrong question in those early days. Instead of asking how we were going to sign eBooks, we should've been asking what we were going to do instead of signing books.

Whatever Happened to Mark Z. Danielewski's "The Familiar"?

The Familiar was a 27-volume, serialized novel. Each volume was enormous, and each had the creative layouts Danielewski (*House of Leaves*) is known for. It was planned for release over the course of 10 years. The whole thing was brushing up against being the "novel-killer," the book that changed what narratives looked like, according to the news at the time.

After 5 of the planned 27 volumes were published, the book was cancelled, reportedly due to the

expense of publication outpacing sales. Which, duh.

I don't want to call it a failure. 5 books is a good run. Maybe a better description is "overly-ambitious." Like James Cameron making 9 *Avatars* ambitious.

Whatever Happened to That Children's Book by a Serial Killer?



Charles Kembo was convicted of killing 4 people. He landed in prison, serving a 25 to life with no possibility of parole.

After the murders, Kembo found the time to publish a children's novel about saving the environment. It was published under a pen name, J.D. Bauer, Kembo took on a woman's persona for interviews, and, oddly, while speaking as "J.D.," Kembo claimed to like writing in darkness, nude. I'm fascinated by the question of whether this was honesty, or if Kembo thought this would be something that a typical children's author would say.

The reviews of the book are...not bad, considering. Although this one provides a head-scratcher:

4.0 out of 5 stars

Not a bad first effort; rape scene may be inappropriate for some children.

Kembo is still locked up, eligible for parole in 2030, and a frequent subject on any number of true crime podcasts, such as Crimey Crime Crimes, Truth and Crimsequences, and Crime and Punishment: A Non-Dostoevsky Podcast.

Whatever Happened to the Mortuary Named After a Crime Writer?



Dundee University held a contest/fundraiser that promised to name their mortuary after a crime novelist. And damn it, they followed through.

The mortuary ended up being named after Val McDermid, who's been banging out crime novels since the late 80s.

They also named the Stuart MacBride Dissecting Room, and they slapped labels on a series of submersion tanks named after Jeffrey Deaver, Harlan Coben, and Kathy Reichs. There's also one named after Lee Child, but instead of naming it the "Child Tank," they went with "Jack Reacher Tank." Good call.

Whatever Happened to All Those Pet Owls Abandoned By Harry Potter Fans?

Before the little blue bird of sorrow, aka Twitter, ruined J.K. Rowling's life, there was another bird threatening her reputation: owls.

Reports trickled in that *Harry Potter* fans purchased pet owls, realized that owls, though cute, are nightmarish monsters, and released them into the wild, leaving every tree in the UK littered with throwaway owls.

It turns out people are stupid, but most people aren't stupid enough to actually go out and get a pet owl. Or...maybe they're too stupid to figure out how to get one. Regardless, thorough examination of the data showed there's no uptick in homeless owls that'd coincide with *Harry Potter* releases. You're off the hook on this one, Rowling...

Whatever Happened to Those Ladies Who Read Topless in Public?

Ah, the Outdoor Co-ed Topless Pulp Fiction Appreciation Society. A group of women (and allegedly some men) who would read outside topless, exercising their right to let the gals breathe that fresh NYC air.

Their site is down at the moment, but it was active as of March 2021. If you roll over to The Wayback Machine (I'm not linking you to an archived page of boobs, I can't compete with that shit) you can scroll through pictures of topless women. Although I have to say I'm not terribly impressed with the ratio of book/reading pictures to just topless pictures.



I'm criticizing a web site for having too many pictures of topless women. I've become everything I hate.

Whatever Happened to Those 300,000 Books Set to Be Burned?

In 2005, a woman named Shaunna made a mistake. When her neighbor died, and when the widowed wife of that neighbor was planning to burn his book collection, Shaunna bought it for a little over \$800 dollars.

She bought more than 300,000 books. They were stored in a house of their own, which had to be reinforced to hold the weight of the books. Arguments over how to sort, sell, and donate them contributed to Shaunna's eventual divorce. She said she was going to end up burning the books because she didn't have any way to sort and donate them. Which, you know, pissed a bunch of people off.

According to Shaunna herself, she "finished" sorting the books. What that means, exactly, isn't totally clear, but she's down to a manageable 15-20 boxes that she's decided to keep.

I say we let her off the hook on this one. Her good intentions paved a path to hell, and damn it, she walked it all the way to the end.

Whatever Happened to Bookstores Charging to Browse?

Yes, for a brief time, there was chatter about bookstores charging people to browse. When the idea showed up in *The New Yorker*, readers flipped their shit.

To be fair, this chatter mostly, maybe even entirely, came from people who don't own or operate bookstores. This was one of those "Op-ed guy from a completely different business has a wacky idea" kind of things, far as I can tell.

I don't love the idea, but if you know of any bookstores doing it, hit me up. I think the perfect location for my new venture, Pete's Book Hole, is two doors down from a bookstore that charges people to browse.

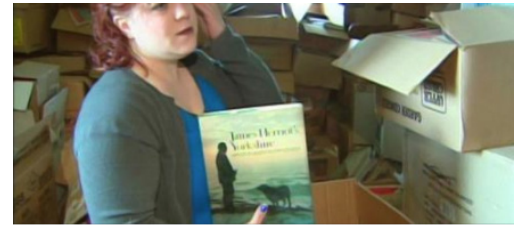
Whatever Happened to E.L. James' How-To-Write Book?

E.L. James was planning a how-to-write book, but instead she's put out 2 more books from the *Fifty Shades* world with a third on the way.

People, this IS the how-to: fuck craft, get that money.

Whatever Happened to Publisher's Weekly's Best Bookstores of 2013

In 2013 we reported on *Publisher's Weekly's* Best Bookstore of the Year shortlist. How are they doing today?



THESTAR.COM

Saskatchewan woman prepares to burn the books she worked so hard to save

👍👎 2

4 Comments Seen by 50

👍 Like

➦ Share



Tennille Richard

How many do you have left? Were you able to sort through all of them?

Like · Share · 50w



Shaunna Ray

Tennille Richard I finished. I have 15 - 20 boxes I kept for myself.

Like · Share · 50w



- Chaucer's Bookstore: Open
- Magers & Quinn: Open
- Maria's: Open
- Maclean: Still Open
- Square Books: Open

That's 5 out of 5 for everyone counting.

It's possible to run an indie bookstore. Not easy, but possible.

Whatever Happened to the Nurse Who Inspired Stephen King's "Misery"?



Although Genene Jones was scheduled for early release in 2018, the DA brought her up on new charges in 2017, and through some legal whatever, she remains locked up.

Jones DEFINITELY chalked up two murders, and it's projected that she murdered up to 60 people. Er, sorry. Babies. She killed between 2 and 60 BABIES. She was injecting infants with drugs, then hoping to look like a hero when she "saved" them. Apparently, the administration at her employer purposely destroyed records to avoid further prosecution, so it's hard to know for sure just how many times she ran this scheme.

So, I guess you're free to drive recklessly through the Colorado mountains without worry of a woman holding you captive in her house. For now, anyway.

Whatever Happened to St. Mark's Bookshop?



Lots of indie bookstores came and went over the years, but none got as much digital ink on LitReactor as St. Mark's in NYC, and it's because the St. Mark's story makes a good stand-in for so many indie bookstores.

Founded in the late 70s, St. Mark's was the model, the perfect, quaint, yet still punk bookstore. It had famous clientele like Jacques Derrida, Daniel Craig, and Susan Sontag (drunk). It was the kind of neighborhood bookstore we all want to open up in our neighborhood.

There's the simple version of the story, which is that this lil' ol' bookshop was priced right out of the neighborhood by mean ol' New York so someone could open a Starbucks. Which isn't exactly a lie, but it leaves a lot out.

St. Mark's had a plagued history of bad decisions that included moving to a new space without consideration of the costs, cycling books through the store too quickly, shipping a ton of shit back and forth without regard for costs, and not only keeping lousy records, but actively deleting sales records bookbuyers needed to help them make good choices.

Up to the economic collapse of 2008, St. Mark's had a good deal with their landlord, Cooper Union, a private college. I don't want to get into it, but through the poking around I've done, Cooper Union looked to be a decent landlord. They did what they could, but St. Mark's still had to move to a third, cheaper location that'd be their last and was marked by empty shelves and some unpleasant staff.

St. Mark's closed in February of 2016.

It was a blow. A literary landmark shutting down is never a good thing. And while I like to think there's a place in the world for a badly-run-but-still-beloved bookstore, Manhattan is not that place. It's too crowded, too unforgiving, and the rent is too damn high.

I hear summers are nice in Rawlins, Wyoming...

Whatever Happened to Ray Bradbury's House?



Remember when Bradbury's house was for sale? Well, clearly none of you bought it.

The house was sold under pretty normal circumstances. The iffy part: The purchaser, an architect with plans to demolish and renovate the house, claims he had no idea that the house was Bradbury's. And even when he found out, he didn't really give a shit:

I could make no connection between the extraordinary nature of the writer and the incredible un-extraordinariness of the house. It was not just unextraordinary, but unusually banal.

He's not wrong. The house itself was not architecturally significant. But I don't think anyone was arguing that the significance of the house was in its architecture.

The efforts to preserve the house were too little, too late. Here's the property today:



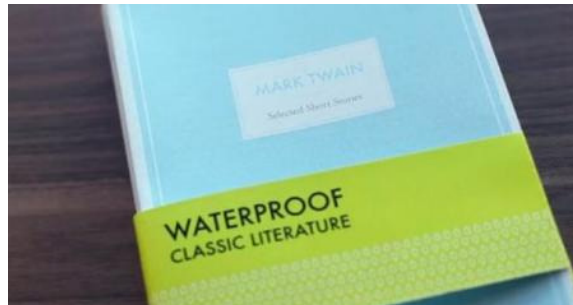
There's certainly an argument to be had that sometimes a house is just a house, and we don't need to save everything. I just wish that argument hadn't happened at 10265 Cheviot Drive.

Whatever Happened to the Goat Farm That Could Be Had for an Essay?

For an essay (and a \$150 fee) you could enter to win a goat farm valued at \$350,000. But here's the catch: The farm would only be given away if the hosts received 2,500 entries. For those keeping track, that's \$375,000. Unfortunately, the sellers didn't receive the required entries, so they didn't give it away. Guess we'll just have to pick from any of the other 1,800 memoirs out there by foolish writers who fantasized about a rural life and then realized goats aren't pets and farming is damn hard work for damn little money.

Whatever Happened to Waterproof Books?

A company Kickstarted a line of waterproof books, which came out, but there hasn't been a lot of movement beyond the four initial titles, which were boring, public domain classics. If you want to go waterproof: Jaws by Benchley or The Deep by Nick Cutter. Get something that'd be enhanced by reading it on the water. Damn, at least go Moby Dick.



Whatever Happened to Cormac McCarthy's "The Passenger"?

It's been a minute since Cormac McCarthy published a novel. 7,884,000 minutes if I can get all *Rent* about it.

In 2015 we got some details about McCarthy's work in progress, *The Passenger*, and every year since, like a ritual, Book Depository lists December 1st as a potential release date. There was a brief moment of excitement in 2020 when the release date was listed as being in October 2021 instead of December 1st. But it's since been changed to December 1st, 2022.

All we know for now is that the novel follows a female lead, and that it's long.

Whatever Happened to the Bookstore That Offered Discounts to Open Carry Customers?

An Austin, TX bookstore gave customers who open carried a 10% discount.

For those who don't know, open carry is when you carry a non-concealed weapon. Like having a gun in a hip holster. This is currently legal without a special permit in 30 out of 50 U.S. states.

The store closed its brick and mortar in 2017, although they promised/threatened to continue spreading the good libertarian word via a bookmobile.

It seems their social media was also mismanaged. I present to you this highlight from the store's Facebook:

Because the former managers decided to turn BNB's YouTube channel into a 24hr Kratom commercial, the YouTube channel was banned for violating community guidelines promoting drug use. After a lengthy appeals process, YouTube has decided to keep the ban in place.

Whatever Happened to the Tingleverse Dating Sim Game?



Supposedly, Chuck Tingle and game developer Zoë Quinn were working on a Tingleverse dating sim for all the buckaroos out there.

I say "supposedly" because...it's a little complicated.

Zoë Quinn was at the center of the whole Gamergate thing, so it's tough to come by information about her that's not from a hateful nerd or an ever-forgiving nerd.

Here's what I know for sure: The game raised \$85,000 on Kickstarter, it doesn't exist at this time, and the last update came 2 years ago.

Tingle later tweeted that he has nothing to do with any videogames. Pretty emphatically:



I can't confirm this part, but the word on the street is that Tingle claimed he and Quinn talked about the Tingleverse a bit, he explained how it all works, and he allowed the project to move forward, but his involvement was limited to a few Twitter conversations, and none of the Kickstarter money went into his pocket.

Is there a way to wrap this up by saying I'm confident that Tingle isn't at fault here, and I'm not interested in assigning the fault anywhere else?

Whatever Happened to the 9 Year-Old Who Blurbed Alan Moore's Novel?

When Moore released his epic novel *Jerusalem*, he used a line from a 9 year-old's fan letter as his

book blurb:

All in all, you are the best writer in human history.

Whatever happened to the kid?

He's only like 16. I don't assume this level of fame went to his head and he pulled an Edward Furlong. Looking into it any further makes me feel like a creep. Let's assume he's cool.

Library Lightning Round



Because I worked in libraries for a long (long, long...dear god, so long) time, I figure I'm the right person to answer some common questions about libraries.

The idea here is to answer the questions pretty quickly, so please excuse me for being a jerk. It's jerkiness of brevity, not true assholery. For true assholery, please see, well, anything else I've ever written.

Is the library open, what with COVID and all?

Depends where you live, but for the most part, libraries are open in some capacity. Lots of libraries started up curbside services during the shutdowns last year, and lots of them beefed up their online offerings.

Can library books spread COVID?

Libraries were all over this shit and geared up the REALM project early in the pandemic. REALM stands for...something, I don't care, libraries fucking love acronyms, and I'm over it.

REALM started with a focus on whether materials could spread COVID, so we could figure out whether it was safe to reopen libraries and museums (shit, I think I just figured out $\frac{3}{4}$ of that acronym...). In brief: it's theoretically possible to get COVID from a material that someone with COVID used, but it's also theoretically possible that I could fall into a timewarp and have love affairs with all three of the Catwomans from *Batman '66*.

If I want to be extra safe, should I just microwave my stuff?

If you want to die in a fire instead of taking the extremely low risk of getting COVID from a library material, that's a great way to do it. Library materials contain metal tags/stickers most times.

What's the best library hack anyone can use?

Let's say you check out an eBook and send it to your Kindle. And let's say you're not quite finished with that book when it's set to automatically return. If you were to accidentally, by chance, have your Kindle in airplane mode before that return date, the title wouldn't be returned until you reconnected to a network of some kind, and yet the book would be back in digital circulation. So you get to keep it and someone else could check it out. There is no punishment or way for anyone to know this is happening, and I only tell you this because I would hate for you to do such a thing accidentally without realizing that you're committing a victimless, harmless, impossible-to-trace crime.

Do libraries throw away books?

The good libraries do.

There's a thing libraries do call "weeding." This is removing books from the collection. It's called weeding because it's comparable: weeds are plants that show up in your garden, but they're not desirable plants, and they use up the resources that the desirable plants require. To an outside observer unfamiliar with gardening, it would look insane to rip living plants out of a garden. To the outside observer unfamiliar with libraries, it would look insane to throw out books. But the same principles apply: libraries have limited space, and publishing is infinite.

Who decides what stays and what goes?

You. Any library will take use of a material into account. If a book is checking out 10 times a year, it'll have a place on the shelf. If it sits there for 2-3 years untouched, its days are numbered.

What's the hardest thing you ever had to throw away?

Armloads of children's books. They needed to go, they were in terrible shape and the library was changing its shelving around and needed space. But still, not fun.

What's the hardest thing you ever had to keep?

A memoir by a guy who "successfully" went through elective conversion therapy as an adult.

Bed bugs. Libraries have them, right? Can I get them from library books?

Every library deals with bed bugs at some point. Yes, even your quaint, small town library. The good news is that libraries are prepared and know what they're doing.

It's no more risky than staying in a hotel, getting on a bus, or going to a theater. If you want to be extra safe, put your books in a seal-able plastic bag, set them aside, and if you don't see any bugs within a few days, chances are you're safe. If you don't see any within 10 days, that's as close to a guarantee as you'll get in this life.

What do you think of eBooks?

I think they're sold on a lot of things that have nothing to do with reading. Having your entire library at hand is only a distraction when you're halfway through a book.

That said, eBooks are a fucking gamechanger for people who need large print.

If I listened to an audiobook, can I tell people I "read" the book?

People will ask if you've read a book for 3 reasons:

1. You're in a book club. Experiencing 25% or more of the book club selection for the month makes you an A+ book club member. Do it however you like.
2. Someone wants to tell you THEY'VE read a book. People who try to out-book everybody are obnoxious assholes. Give them whatever answer will make them go away.
3. Someone wants to talk to you about the book in question. You can participate in that conversation regardless of whether you read or listened.

That's 3 for 3 where I say go ahead.

What's the difference between a public library and an academic library?

Free parking.

Why do so many homeless people hang out at the library?

Remember when it was a big thing for Starbucks to let people hang out as long as they want, regardless of whether or not they bought anything? That's how public libraries are all the time.

But in my library, it's kind of a problem. There are A LOT of them.

If you want to reduce the number of homeless people in the library, for their welfare or for your own reasons (frankly, I don't care what your motive is as long as the outcomes are welfare-oriented), improve the safety net in your community. The library isn't necessarily where people want to be all day, and a lot of people camping out there usually reflects a lack of options.

Do librarians hate stuff like "Fifty Shades" and "The Da Vinci Code" and "The Martian" and "Ready Player One"?

I love those sorts of books! They bring people to reading. Let me put it this way: The people who read David Foster Wallace were readers before they got to him. E.L. James brings people who don't typically read into the fold. I'm in favor of bringing new people to reading. I think we get more interesting stuff down the road that way.

How do I get my book in the library?

I wrote a whole column about that. The fast answer: Be Local, Ask Politely, and Don't Spam The Shit Out of Every Library in Existence Thinking It's the Path to Authorial Glory.

Is the sexy librarian stereotype true?

Why don't you buy me a drink and we'll find out?

What we'll find out is that the answer is "No." But I'll still take that drink.

Why is the library better than the internet?

Because the library isn't trying to sell you anything you don't want.

Do librarians have special training?

Librarians in most places have a master's degree in library science (or some other, similar degree with more words in it), but it varies from place to place.

So not everyone who works in the library is a librarian?

Technically, no. But only uptight dorks will correct you on it. I've worked with plenty of people who had the degree and didn't know the first thing about helping people, and I've worked with plenty of people who didn't have the degree and could do librarian-y things that'd blow your head right off your body.

I'm applying for a job in a library. Any advice?

Don't tell them you "love to read" or "love books." Every applicant says that. It doesn't help you stand out. I know, that sounds bizarre, but TRUST ME. It's like applying to work at a bank and saying you like money.

Do librarians get to read all day?

Do McDonald's employees get to sit around and eat hamburgers all day? Or at all? No, they don't, and I know that because I ALSO worked at McDonald's, and the amount of eating we got to do (none) was a huge letdown.

What's the deal when you hear a story about someone who returned a book like 50 years late? Do they have a billion dollars in fines?

The only thing that makes sense for criminals of this caliber is to hunt them down like Lance Henriksen hunted down Chance Boudreaux aka Jean-Claude Van Damme in *Hard Target*. Most libraries fail to devote nearly enough resources to recovering a World Almanac that someone checked out in '87.

How do book bans work?

They don't. Don't do them.

I'm sure you've got other questions, like about whether I ever broke up an enormous turd with a coat hanger (yes), or whether I ever got on the roof to retrieve a wallet a kid threw up there (his own wallet, and yes), or how long I spent with a guy trying to find a pack of screws on Amazon that had free shipping and would save him 40-cents (in a way, I'm still there next to him and will be for eternity).

When this was an online internet column, I invited you to ask your other questions. Now, fuck off, too late, chump!

Yahoo! Answers: Books, Reading, and Writing



Yahoo! Answers is dead. But from Late 2005 to May 2021, it was the primary place to ask questions about, well, everything. You'd get terrible, poorly formed advice riddled with grammatical errors, but damn was it fun.

Sadly, some questions remain unanswered. Which is why I dug back through questionable internet history to make sure everyone got definitive replies about about plot holes, reading methods, writing, and how babby is formed.

What is the best book of all time?

If you want a surefire way to hear you're an idiot, declare something the best of anything at any time in any context.

That said: *The Long Walk* by Stephen King is the best book of all time. You have to pick a hill to die on eventually, right?

What makes David Sedaris' book 'Naked' humorous to you? If you didn't find it funny (I'm currently in this position) that's fine too. But please explain why.

Honey, if you're asking for an intellectual explanation of why something is funny, you're not the target audience for David Sedaris.

How important is age in romance novels? It seems that all the romance novels I read involve an 18-25 year old woman, and a 30+ year old man. Would you read a romance novel if the ages were reversed?

With almost no effort I managed to find a bunch of romance novels featuring an older woman with a younger man, and I present to you some of the funnier titles:

- *MILF: Wrong Kind of Love*
- *Dating a Cougar*
- *The King's Spinster Bride*
- *Old Enough*
- *Red's Hot Honky-Tonk Bar*
- *The Librarian and the Wolf*
- *The Pool Boy*
- *The Hero Sandwich*

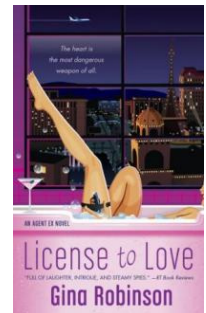
Is it a smart idea to put the names of people you know on a book? Is there a possibility that they'll chase you around with torches and forks out their anger? Or will they just find it funny?

Nothing about writing a book is smart.

As for putting real people in your novel, here's the secret: Put assholes in your books, copy them exactly, but change their names. They'll never recognize themselves because assholes rarely recognize that they're assholes.

Are there any other good romance book??

I've read exactly one: *License to Love*. But *The Librarian and the Wolf*, being a milf-y romance, sounds like it might be a hoot.



A poem written on the bus today. Do u like it?

the morning after

The sun shimmers off her curly light brown hair

Her eyes now shut in slumber, nothing could compare

Her lips the color of blood from just underneath the skin

I could sit for hours and hours just watching her angelic face

Her breasts sit up perfect, not too big and not too small

I'm gonna stop you right here, even though you had a lot more.

Enough has been written about "perfect" boobs. Enormous, freakshow boobs that eventually smother their owner in her sleep? I'm in. Boobs that are somehow warped by an accident or something? Yes. Possessed boobs where the left one is good-natured and the right is evil, and the boob owner has to decide which boob to listen to? You bet. Boobs that shoot battery acid instead of milk? I'll go there with you. But don't give me this Goldilocks, just right, perfect boobs bullshit. We get it, you saw a nice pair of cans. Get over it.

What should I write my book about?

I am wanting to write a book. I just don't know what to write it about. I really enjoy writing stuff about teenage girls who get into trouble (with alcohol, boys, drugs.. etc.) . I love writing about pregnancy and relationships. Also, i am interested in writing about teens with mental/health problems.

I also enjoy writing about crime. Like detectives solving crimes and stuff.

You are a true unicorn among writers: someone who has no ideas but wants to do the work of writing.

Let's see...a teenage, troublemaking girl meets a boy. The boy is a vampire, but he's also an alcoholic, so he only feeds on people who are shitfaced (it's the only way he can consume alcohol, mixed with human blood). He doesn't kill, though, just consumes enough to get wasted. Then, one morning, a bunch of bodies with puncture wounds in the neck are found. The vampire swears to his girlfriend that he had nothing to do with it, but he has no alibi and was blacked out at the time because it was 50-cent PBR night at a local hipster bar, and drunk, spindly hipsters are the perfect prey. It's up to one plucky girl who makes bad choices to solve the case. Also she's pregnant, and she's not sure if the baby is the vampire's or a vampire hunter's. And Adderall is kind of like her Popeye's spinach, and she uses it to help her solve the crime.

I need an idea for a writer/author tattoo.?

I am very much in love with tattoos and writing. I have been published before for poetry and articles, but I am now taking a crack at a book. That is my biggest goal. I want something that when I look at it reminds me to get up and write. Stop putting it off for tomorrow. And a tattoo is the perfect way to do that, and it allows people to learn more about me. Any ideas?

Get a porcupine, but instead of quills, it has dicks sticking out all over (I call this a "Porn-U-Pine"). For every chapter you write, you can cover up one of the dicks. Until your book is finished, you'll have a dick-covered rodent on your body.



Okay I love to read. My parents will not let me buy books.?

That means I have to read the kiddy books. I'm not doing that. I am also a computer geek is there anyway there are cheap books to buy for teenagers or free ones on the computer or something.

There's this building in your town called a "library." I know it doesn't have the word "book" in the name, but trust me, there are books inside. You give them some info, they give you a plastic card, and then when you want to take the books home, you show them the plastic card. You have to bring the books back, but here's the trick: You use the time between taking the books home and bringing them back to read them. For free.

How do I create my own voice when writing?

Did you ever see the *O'Pioneers!* movie with Heather Graham? She was a little kid in it, and she was

doing her best, but when she was in scenes with her movie dad, who had a Swedish accent, she would pick it up. When the dad wasn't in the scene, she dropped it. Heather Graham wasn't practiced enough to know when she was doing it and when she wasn't.

Beginning writers have a voice, they just don't know when they're drifting away from their voice. Seasoned writers know and course correct right away. That's the only difference. It's not about developing a voice, it's about being consistent with the one you've got. That comes with practice.

why do i hate books???????????????? my parents piss me off to read them.i tried to read novels ,every kind. but all of them were boring. Probably because books are boring. Some of us like boring things, but anyone who says books are boring is 100% correct.

If your parents are on you to read more, I'll give you two options:

1. Get some poetry books from the adult section in the library. Little, slim ones. All you really have to do is read a couple poems from each book and talk about them a little. It's not like your parents are going to be able to ask you about the plot or characters or whatever.
2. Read *The Long Walk* by Stephen King. As established earlier, it's the best book ever. At least when you're done you'll know for sure whether or not you like books.

Is there a difference between a novelist and an author?

Novelists talk about how hard writing is. Authors get paid.

Would you read my book? I'm writing a novel, but I have a feeling the plot is too weird and confusing. Basically, one of the states got a hold of something all of the other states wanted, and the other states broke into a war about it. The government, trying to bring order, installed a 50ft wall surrounding each state. Then they assigned each state a job (like agriculture or electronics). Y'know, to show that all of the states need each other. But because the jobs were so specific, like medicine, technology, weather, and so on, the states fell to poverty.

This is a stupid idea. Which I don't want you to take as a "no." Stupid ideas, done right, are fantastic. If you treat it like a stupid idea, like the *Demolition Man* of books, I'd absolutely read it.

I've got this character in my story who lacks a name. Okay, so she has dyed black hair, a piercing on her nose and a tattoo of a vine on her shoulder. She's mean. Not like, snobby bitchy mean, but mean for no reason other than she's bored and thinks of something clever or sarcastic to say. She wears mostly black, but has a sexier twist on it.

Thanks in advance!

-Cat

The irony of someone named "Cat" asking this question is just *chef's kiss*

**are writers allowed to create new places in towns that already exist? HELP!!!!
can I as a writer create new place in for example Boston or San Francisco that doesn't exist? thank you :D**

I RARELY say this, but based on the stupidity of this question, I'd prefer you not write a book.

Is this sentence correct: She didn't realize that her craving for sex had reached the highest in her life.

No. I'm pretty sure that when someone reaches the horniest part of their life to date, they are ragingly, achingly, drippingly aware.

I really enjoy writing but have always considered it to be more of a hobby because I see it as similar to the artistic majors, which I relate to a "starving artist" type of profession and that's not appealing at all. I just don't want to be directionless and broke all the time. Writing would provide me happiness, but I also need stability and security. Where do I begin?

Let me give you the grown-up's version of "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life": "Do the thing you can tolerate, that brings you only to the brim of boiling over, and that other people will pay you for, and that combined with a little luck might see you make it to age 65 without going into a coat closet in your rental apartment and putting a revolver in your mouth. This life path will leave you a marginal amount of time for pursuing your dreams, as long as you don't fuck it up by having a kid, a house, a pet, or a mildly-costly collection."

what is your schedule for nanowrimo?

October 25: Oh, yeah. I should do that this year. This time for real.

November 1st: Hit my word count!

November 2nd: Almost, no problem, make it up tomorrow.

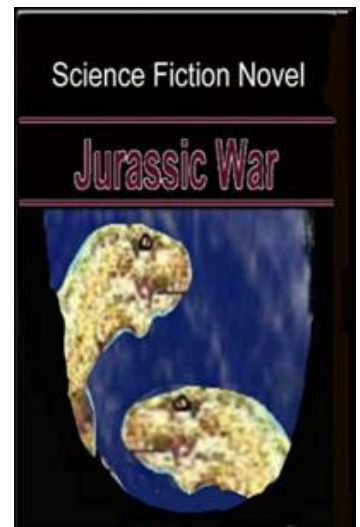
November 17th: Fuck, I forgot I was doing that.

November 20th: Well, I'll still finish the project. No sense in letting it go to waste.

December 12th: Wait, what was I writing?

Do you annotate your books as you read them? You know what I realized? If smart readers annotate books, why would there be un-annotated books in the used book market? are they not smart

I'm currently reading a book called *Jurassic War* by Charles Hinton, and in it a dinosaur zoo/dinosaur meatpacking plant has a jailbreak, and thousands of dinosaurs start killing people. One soldier is fighting dinosaurs, pulls the pin on a grenade, gets chomped and swallowed by a T-Rex, then the grenade explodes inside the dinosaur, blasting it to pieces. I'm taking copious notes in this book. It's the only way to reconcile the dumbest book I've read in a very long time.



Was William Shakespeare really a homosexual as speculated?

Speculation on Harry Styles' sexuality is gossip blog bullshit. Speculation on Shakespeare's sexuality is SCHOLARSHIP.

I find this question boring because Shakespeare wrote so much shit that there's a line or two to support absolutely any theory you could have about him, and there's another line to refute that one, and we could do this all day.

The most interesting story I found in researching this question was that sodomy was SUPER illegal back in Shakespeare's day, and sodomy covered a guy standing on a balcony, putting his penis in some wine, and then splashing the wine on onlookers, an act that resulted in his execution. My English teacher told me these Shakespeare people knew how to party, but killing a guy for spilling a little cock wine on a crowd of onlookers? Seems uptight.

Can you throw away a book? I know this sounds trivial, but I find I cannot throw away a book. Once I finish a book and don't have room for it any longer, I simply can't toss it in the trash. It's like destroying or throwing away knowledge.

I'd like to start a service where I dispose of books for people, like a sort of book-based hitman. I travel the country, you leave the door unlocked, and when you come home from work, your unwanted books are gone. I'll take a mentee under my wing, even though he'll eventually betray me. I'll fall in love with a woman who is a hoarder of rare books. We'll duel in her library as it burns around us. She'll have to choose between her lover and her books. It's not going to be an easy life, but few lives are easy these days.

I'm writing a book, and I need to know if this is a good way to start it. Be brutally honest please:

Jimmy Sedgwick sat in the sand, running his fingers through the rough terrain, staring up at his castle.

His castle.

Tall towers dominated the sky

Never start with a name. And if you have to, don't start with the name Jimmy.

Candyman: A Monster Named 5 Times



We had Clive Barker's short story:

Candyman

Then we had a trilogy of movies:

Candyman

Candyman

Candyman

And now, with *Candyman* (2021), we've said his name for the fifth time:

Candyman

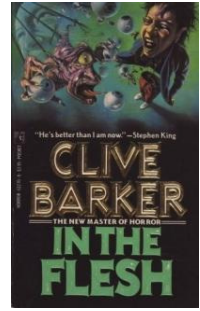
Candyman tells us more than the story of a hook-handed, bee-infested slasher. It tells us about how we build monsters and how they take on a life of their own. And there's no old-timey shit to get in the way, no questions about everyone eating psychedelic wheat, no academic musings about whether or not Clive Barker really existed. Everything from the first kernel of a story to the recent buzz is right here.

Spoilers

I'll talk about *Candyman* (2021) without spoiling it until the final "Hot Take" section. The original short story and original Candyman trilogy are spoiled worse than raw chicken cutlets left in the trunk of your car in Texas heat.

The Forbidden

When Clive Barker was 3, he saw a skydiver fall to his death at an airshow. When he was trying to make it as a writer and had trouble paying bills, he worked as a prostitute. (Some people will say writing is basically emotional prostitution. I don't disagree.) And when he was a kid, his grandmother told him that there were bad men in public restrooms, waiting for a little boy to come along so they could cut off his penis. This penis-chopping story is the origin of "The Forbidden" and the seed of Candyman.



Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* started coming out in 1984, and they make up over 800 pages of creeps, gore, and magical terror. "The Forbidden," from book 5 (In the Flesh) contains most of the critical DNA that would shape Candyman: Candyman is a legend who haunts an area of urban decay. The main character, Helen, is a white, upper-crust type cataloging graffiti for an academic project. Most of the major events of the first movie are here, but Candyman is without a backstory, and he haunts a housing project in the UK instead of being stateside. Oh, and he's White.

The most stirring, most unique part of the original story is that Candyman suggests to Helen that by being his victim, her death will be important. She will live on as a cautionary tale, an urban legend herself. People will say, "That's where that woman was killed." Candyman wants Helen to consent to her own murder. He coerces, puts her into a somewhat hypnotized state, but he wants her to WANT to be his victim. It's a creepy take on the slasher.

"The Forbidden" reminds readers that you and me can't touch monsters, but if monsters want to touch us, we're always within their reach.

Candyfans won't find a lot new in "The Forbidden," but it's a quick read and only one of the many fantastic stories in *Books of Blood*.

Candyman (1992)

I am the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom. Without these things, I am nothing. So now, I must shed innocent blood.

From the opening shots to the score to TONY FUCKING TODD to the disgusting visual of Candyman's wounds crusting over the fur on his coat cuffs, *Candyman* is just about perfect.

The movie stays pretty true to the short story, but unusually for a book-to-movie transition, the movie has more backstory and depth than the original story, and a few of the additions are the bee's knees.

Candyman was Daniel Robitaille, a portrait painter, the son of a slave. He and one of his subjects, the daughter of a wealthy White man, fell in love, had a child, and a lynch mob cut off Robitaille's hand, jammed a hook in, and smeared him with honey to attract bees, who stung him to death. Now he haunts Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing project.

In the movie, Helen wrecks Candyman's reputation, people stop believing in him, and he tells her that she's forced him to kill again so that people believe. A little different from the story, but still a unique slasher motivation. There's also a more sexual/romantic thing between Candyman and Helen going on, which (I know, this sounds like it can't be true) was still fairly taboo on screens in 1992. *The Bodyguard* with Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston also came out that same year, and its depiction

of a romance between a Black character and a White character was the source of quite a bit of talk at the time.

Plot description doesn't do the movie justice, so let's skip it. Stuff happens, Helen thwarts the Candyman, kind of, but not really, and we get a little twist at the end. It's a solid horror movie with practical effects, some disgusting gore, and Tony Todd with a faceful of actual, live bees.

Of course, we can't talk about *Candyman* without talking about race. And we can't talk about that without talking about Cabrini-Green.

Cabrini-Green

I'm not here to explain why housing projects don't work and how to fix them. Looking to me for an intelligent take on this stuff is about as smart as saying "Candyman" in the mirror 5 times. I just want to give you a little history of Cabrini-Green because without it, Candyman might look totally different.

Cabrini-Green was a Chicago housing project that started getting packed in the early 40s. Post-WWII, a bunch of factories shut down in Chicago, leaving the city and residents in a tough financial spot, and Cabrini-Green suffered hard. The green space was paved over, apartments were poorly constructed and barely maintained, and if an apartment was burned or badly damaged, it'd just be boarded over and left.

By the 80's, Cabrini-Green had a gang problem that spilled over onto all the residents. In the first 3 months of 1981, Cabrini-Green has 37 shootings, resulting in 11 deaths. The insides of the buildings are full of graffiti, malfunctioning elevators, and the garbage was known to clog the chutes up to the 15th floor.

A couple brutal crimes committed against children (Girl X, 9 years old, and Dantrell Davis, 7) got national attention, and between them, the violence, and a Chicago mayor's failed attempt to reside at Cabrini-Green, Cabrini-Green's reputation was cemented.



You know that obnoxious shit where someone says, "In this movie, it's like L.A. is a character, too"? In *Candyman*, Cabrini-Green makes the story, it's a very alive setting. But it's not a character. It's a force of nature. If you've never watched the first movie, at the very least, check out the sequences filmed in Cabrini-Green.

More important than Cabrini-Green as backdrop, the move to Cabrini-Green is what prompted

director Bernard Rose's decision to make *Candyman* Black.

Another Chicago housing project (ABLA, not Cabrini-Green) was the location of a particularly awful murder that inspired some of the *Candyman* story as well. Between the mirrored medicine cabinet in Apartment A and the same cabinet in Apartment B was thin drywall and a pipe chase, which meant it was easy to come through the wall, "through the mirror," from one apartment to another. Which is how Ruthie-May McCoy, 52, was murdered.

Without Chicago housing projects and Cabrini-Green, there might be a *Candyman*, but he might not be as legendary, and he might not be Black.

A current thread about *Candyman* (1992) will tell you the housing projects were exploited to make a terrifying movie which made people afraid of the projects and painted residents with a broad, horrible brush.

In an article in *TIME*, different *Candyman* creators, residents of Cabrini-Green and others who grew up in Chicago shared differing opinions:

Candyman (2021) director Nia DaCosta:

The original film definitely fed into a fear of the Black community, and the Black man in particular. I didn't want to do this approach of, 'Oh, god, this terrible place where terrible things are happening, because these brutes are living here.' This is a community that was chronically underserved for a very long time.

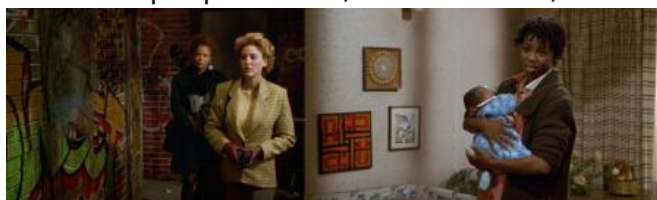
Teddy Williams, who lived in Cabrini-Green:

*It was like a little village: everybody knew everybody. There was gang activity, but also a lot of structure amongst others that weren't involved: after school programs where they'd have games, trampolines, screen painting, quilt sewing. We put on dance routines and dressed up like the zombies in the Thriller video...I think the community was mostly okay with the movie, because it put us on the map again. The only thing we would talk about is that *Candyman* could never live over here and do what he was doing, because he would get f-cked up.*

J. Nichole Brooks:

The folklore could actually save your life. For example, 'Do not go under the viaduct west of Comiskey Park unless there's a White Sox Game.' You grew up thinking the boogie man was all over Chicago—and for the most part, it was true.

There's an important-but-underrated moment in *Candyman* (1992) when Helen leaves the hallway of Cabrini-Green and enters Anne-Marie's apartment. We move from a dark, filthy hallway to a bright, small apartment that Anne-Marie is clearly doing her best to make a home. Her apartment is decorated just like the apartments of people I knew, moms in rural, white Colorado.



Some interpretations are going to be that a white filmmaker used Cabrini-Green to up the production value and scare factor of his movie. Others will say that the depiction wasn't entirely wrong, and why shouldn't there be a modern ghost story in Cabrini-Green? The only stance I want to take is that *Candyman* is a subjective piece of art, and I don't really think there is a "correct" and "incorrect" way to interpret something like that. Different people will take away different things. To me, this is the sign of a complicated, complex idea, and I choose to make room for those sorts of things in my life.

Candyman II: Farewell to the Flesh

Legend has it that the first *Candyman II* script was similar to *Candyman*, but it focused on gender instead of race. However, the studio decided this was "too risky" and settled for a boring slasher.

Candyman II takes the trope-y horror route of magical talismans in service of defeating the Candyman once and for all, a definite downgrade from the terror and mystery of the first movie.

The biggest change to the Candyman lore is the change to say Daniel Robitaille was born a slave. Virginia Madsen, Helen in the first movie:

They made the Candyman into a slave which was terrible because the Candyman was educated and raised as a free man. [Candyman director] Bernie wanted to make him like an African American Dracula which I think it was so appealing to the African American community because they finally had their own Dracula. The Candyman was a poet and smart. He wasn't really a monster. He was sort of that classical figure.

Candyman II isn't a total garbage movie. It just doesn't make good use of the established story, and it doesn't have a new hook, either. It's *Candyman Lite*, which nobody wanted then and nobody needs now.

Candyman III: Day of the Dead

Candyman III opens with a *Baywatch* star walking around in her underwear. That tells you most of what you need to know about it.



The barely-clad star, Donna D'Errico, plays Daniel Robitaille's great-great-granddaughter. She wants people to remember Daniel Robitaille as an artist, a painter, and a gentle soul as opposed to the murderous Candyman of legend, which is...actually a pretty good sequel premise. It could go a number of new, interesting ways. Or you could do what the makers of *Candyman III* did and abandon the premise inside of 10 minutes so Candyman can start hacking people apart.

We have a comically evil police officer who is very thorough in covering the asshole bases (drunk, racist, sex pest...), a magical abuela who explains how to defeat Candyman LIKE THREE TIMES, and a pretty awful scene where Candyman is sort of having ghost sex with his own great-great-granddaughter, which, maybe we're supposed to forget they're related?

Tony Todd is tragically wasted. As he is in most movies, but in this one, it really stings. You have Tony Todd on set, someone has to do some voiceover narration, and SOMEHOW you threw narration duties to Donna D'Errico?! Tony Todd should be narrating audiobooks. He should be the voice that tells you not to stand between the doors on the train. He should be a Waze narration option. If you have the chance to get Tony Todd to narrate anything, I don't care if it's a cereal box, you do it.

At this point, Candyman is nothing more than a boring slasher, terrorizing mostly random people until some White woman can do some sort of magic and banish him to the nether realm for the few years it takes to make a sequel.

Candyman deserved to go out with something better than this.

Canceled Fourth Movie

Supposedly there were talks about a fourth *Candyman* film, and Tony Todd was heavily involved. The story would take place during a confining New England blizzard, and Candyman's backstory would involve him being a former professor at a women's college. But the fourth movie never got off the ground, possibly because of rights issues, possibly because *Candyman III*. Which is too bad because it sounds like a revamp and a new, interesting direction.

Candyman (2021)

New Candyman (that's what I'll call it for clarity) is far from the best *Candyman* movie, but it's the hands(hooks)-down best *Candyman* sequel.

New Candyman follows McCoy, a Black, male painter, going through the Candyman mythos, similar to Helen in the first movie. Most of the events of the first movie are canonical in this one and play out in a way fans of the original will appreciate and newbies will understand. McCoy's march through the *Candyman* lore doesn't feel super unique, but it's not insulting, nor is it narrated by a *Baywatch* star, so points for making good choices.

Wait, shit, Yahya Abdul-Mateen II (McCoy) was in the 2017 *Baywatch* reboot. That has to be the most bizarre, unlikely *Candyman* connection yet.

There are some solid horror sequences, and the final form of Candyman makes for a pretty haunting visual. There's a chilling scene in an elevator, and there's some ever-progressing body horror that's nothing terribly new to gorehounds, but it'll shock the portion of the audience who occasionally dip into horror but probably didn't watch, I don't know, *Psycho Goreman* (you're missing out). The

sequences with paper dolls are wonderful, though they're underused.



When we get into some deeper themes, the movie stumbles. Director Nia DaCosta, referring to a portion of the movie that discusses the real-life tragedy of Girl X at Cabrini-Green:

That line of exploiting racial pain in order to make art for White people was really what that was all about...But also struggling with your own history, and how as an artist — or a person — do you reconcile it?

When DaCosta is making THAT movie, the story about art and commerce and selling pain, it works. And the Candyman story works, though not as well. The problem is that the two stories are almost completely separate until the movie's final 10 minutes, and the rushed attempt to bring them together at the very end just doesn't work. You know how you can put a scoop of protein powder in a glass of water, and no matter how much you stir, you've still got chunks? That's kind of how *New Candyman* feels: You can swallow it, but you'll have to chew a little more than you'd like.

I'm not a believer that the last 5% of something is the make or break. *New Candyman* isn't perfect, but it's worth your time. Ignore the online chatter about it. It's not the greatest film ever made, and it's not trash, either. You won't solve racial inequality by seeing it, but you won't come away a worse person, either.

I want to leave you with a rating, like thumbs up or stars or whatever. How about this new ratings system: "Is it worth risking COVID to see this in the theater?" I'm giving that a "Hell, no." But it's worth the price of streaming at home before some asshat ruins it for you.

The Candyman Legacy aka Pete's Hot Take

What review of a movie would be complete without a hot take? Reminder, this portion contains spoilers for *Candyman 2021*.



The ending is kind of a hot mess. Burke, who was at the laundromat, serves as a sort of "Magical Black Man" who somehow knew everything about how Candyman worked, how to make his own Candyman, and how to set that Candyman to target specific people and become a spirit of Black empowerment and vengeance. It didn't really make a lot of sense, it was weird that things happened exactly as Burke said they would, the switch to our POV character being McCoy's ex instead of McCoy was rough because we barely knew her, and most importantly, the cops shot McCoy, however it was murder-by-proxy as orchestrated by Burke. Cops pulled the trigger, but Burke set everything in motion, created the situation very intentionally, and it would seem he's more than a little responsible for McCoy's death.

In *New Candyman*, McCoy is not a monster. He's as much a victim as anyone else. A vessel set to a task, possibly against his will. I don't think this will make him iconic (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II spends most of the movie zombified, which is an unfortunate use of the guy).

Sherman, the Candyman McCoy encounters throughout the film, isn't a monster, either. He's a victim, he doesn't speak, and it's unclear whether he has any agency or free will. You only see him in brief flashes. He's not visible enough to be an icon.

Burke is the villain, but he's not iconic. He's a Renfield. Nobody writes Renfield's name on the wall. Nobody whispers his name.

I understand that what I'm saying here has been said by others. Here's the hot part, the reason it matters:

We like our villains in horror. They're what make horror unique and interesting. If someone wears a t-shirt at a horror con, that t-shirt will not feature Heather Langenkamp or Corey Feldman or Neve Campbell. It'll feature Freddy or Jason or...Scream guy. Scream? Are we just calling him Scream? Even when you've got an arguably iconic hero from horror, Ellen Ripley or Laurie Strode, they just can't compare to their xenomorph or Michael Myers counterparts.

In horror, the villains, the monsters, are what bring us to the theaters, and what bring us (regrettably in the case of *Candyman III*) to the sequels. Candyman, Daniel Robitaille, is the iconic Candyman character and one of the only Black horror icons. He's Black Dracula. He brought us to the new movie. He transcended the movie and really WAS "the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom." When I was a kid, "Candyman" was the name you dared other kids to say in the mirror, right up there with Bloody Mary.

In transforming the Candyman from Daniel Robitaille's iconic monster into an anti-hero, a symbol of justice, *New Candyman* leaves us with a message, but as iconic characters go, we're left empty-handed.

The original movie works like a razor blade wrapped in a chocolate bar. You take a big bite, you watch it for the iconic, scary Candyman, you go for the horror, and you can't help but be affected when you see Anne-Marie's apartment or the fear in Jake's eyes when he talks about Candyman. You bite, you chew, and you get cut deep because you were expecting nougat (whatever the hell THAT is), not a blade. You were expecting a slasher, and you got a lot more.

Instead of concealing the blade in chocolate, *New Candyman's* razor trap feels like the candy that drops from nowhere in the movie's mirrored elevator scene, a piece of hard candy with a razorblade clearly sticking out of the top. It'll catch your finger, but nobody is putting that in their mouth. It'll cut

you, but it's not as affecting as the thought of biting down hard on a blade.

Without that candy to conceal the blade, without that enticement, I don't know that the viewer bites as hard or gets cut the same way. Without the iconic bad guy, without the Black Dracula, I don't know if the movie's hook pierces as deep. I don't know if the wounds last as long. I don't know that this newest Candyman will inspire kids sleeping over at each other's houses to dare each other.

Go ahead. Say his name.



Last Call

I just want to put in a plug for my charity of choice, Off The Street Club in Chicago's West Garfield Park. Chicago holds a special place in my heart and family history, and if any iteration of Candyman left you wanting to help Chicago out, or to help real people who could really use it, consider Off The Street Club.

Stick the Landing: How to End a Horror Story



Too many horror story endings unravel like a half-assed mummy, fall apart like the chunks of a chainsawed traveler who gassed up in the wrong Texas town, or confuse the hell out of everyone like a *Blair Witch Project* remake that's totally unnecessary, but I guess someone felt like a drone would really bring a lot to Blair Witch lore.

How can you avoid the most common slip-ups? What do readers hate? How can you stick the landing in your horror story?

The Good Guys Lose

Too many writers take the "good guys lose" option off the table too early in the writing process.

When you write with absolutely no chance that the good guys will lose, readers will get that vibe throughout the story, and the tension vanishes. If you take the stakes off the table, you're left with a bunch of stupid asparagus, which only serves to make your ending stink as bad as your asparagus-steeped piss.

Your characters don't have to die, that's not the only form of losing. They can lose something that's meaningful. They can lose their sunny disposition. They can lose the ability to function as they did before, physically or emotionally. They can fail.

And they don't actually have to lose, I just need to feel, as a reader, that they might lose, that the possibility exists.

Nick Cutter's book *Little Heaven* is a great example. Read it. Dathan Auerbach's *Bad Man* works this way. Read it. In movies, *Alien 3* is a good example, or you could try *The Empire Strikes Back*.

If The Object is the Answer

If your ending hinges on an object (or talisman, key, magic book, spell to recite, virgin willing to take a vampiric risk) solving the problem, then you've got two options.

Option 1: The object is revealed or accessed close to the end, and it's spectacular, surprising, or unexpected in some way. Honestly, this isn't my preference, but it's do-able provided you deliver the goods.

Candyman 2 blows it on this one. We spend half the movie looking for some magic mirror, but it's not special or weird, it's just a regular hand mirror, and destroying it gives us exactly the expected result. No more dramatic than flipping a light switch (light switches are the crux of my horror movie, *The Dad*, which is about the ghost of a dad that haunts a house whenever a light is left on in an unoccupied room. If you just flip the lights off, he goes back to watching ghost football in the garage, which he "converted" by putting a lamp and an easy chair out there).

Option 2: The object is with us throughout most of the story, and it gains more and more significance so that by the end, it's meaningful in ways beyond its ability to kill the monster. This is especially good if the object's meaning changes throughout the story.

In *Army of Darkness*, the Necronomicon is the object Ash quests for. Then it's an antagonist when he tries to get it from the graveyard. Then it brings on an army of the dead. Then it has to be protected. Then it's used to send Ash back to his own time (sort of, mostly). The object stays the same, physically, but its meaning and purpose changes. Imagine how stupid *Army of Darkness* would be (in a bad way as opposed to its current greatness in stupidity) if Ash quests for the book, then uses it to get a magic cross necklace, then uses the magic cross necklace as a key to open a mausoleum...you get it.

Using the same object, slathering on layers of meaning and significance, lets the reader invest in the object, so when it's used to slay the monster, it's more triumphant, more interesting, and more fun.

Twists and Surprises

Bad twist endings doom your story, and so-so-twists mostly go unnoticed. It's only the best, most incredible twists that elevate your story, which is why I recommend the humble surprise over the full-blown twist.

The surprise is a cousin of the twist, but instead of forcing the reader to re-think everything they thought was true, it ups the ante just a little bit. The surprise is the *Moneyball* of endings: It's a solid hitter, gets on base more than most, and even though it's not hitting homers, you'll wind up better off.

In *The Monster Squad*, the kids are readying to send Dracula back to...hell? Black Smoke Lightning Land? Whatever, and they need a virgin to read some passages from a book to make that happen. They enlist the older sister of one of the kids, the only female virgin they all know, to read the passages. When the magic doesn't work, SURPRISE, they find out the sister



isn't a virgin at the absolute most inconvenient time.

It doesn't trainwreck the movie, doesn't force the audience to reevaluate everything they thought they knew. It's just a small surprise that keeps the tension high and adds a little more surprise, a little value to the ending. The thing you thought was going to work doesn't go exactly as planned.

Ending on a Death

I don't love ending on a death. It's most appropriate for horror or action, but it's been co-opted by every genre and kind of worn out. Literary fiction likes to end on a death, and if literary fiction is doing it, you know it's been done, well, to death. Death as the resolution of the problem is just so... expected.

If you've written a story where the character's death is almost a kindness, a release, my compliments, and if you can, think of something worse than death. Something scarier. Some way for the terror to continue, or for death to be something other than the end of horrors for the character. If death is the easy way out, you're on the right track, and you can do better.

If you insist, if your story is going to end with a death no matter what I say, add something in, peppered throughout the story, some narrative device that can outlive your character and inform the reader about what happened next. Otherwise, you only have a couple options: afterlife or fade to black, neither of which are all that compelling. If you use a newspaper clipping, don't let this be your first. If this is a clip from TV, don't make this the first one.

Character Choice

Imagine an ending to *The Ring* where Naomi Watts doesn't have a choice. Where she's forced to dub the tape for her son, or where she's unable to reach the equipment to do so. It's completely plausible the story could've gone that way. I'm certain there was a studio discussion about whether or not our main character could do something bad, make a selfish choice that protects people she cares about while dooming some other unknown person. Her choice to do the wrong thing is what makes the ending work.

An ending where a character makes a calm, calculated, difficult, even bad choice might bring more to your story than ending with a series of scares with your character running from one moment of survival to the next. When it's a mad dash for safety, the readers is along for the ride, but the moment it ends, the feeling fades. When there's a choice to be made, and only two bad options, the reader is invested in which the character will choose, and the ending sticks because the reader will wonder which road THEY would pick.

Why It Matters

Writers focus on the opening to a story, and for good reason. It brings readers in.

If you do a fucking great ending to a story, it serves as a sales pitch for your next story. If I read someone, and if they do a mindblowing ending, I'll tolerate more boredom at the beginning of their next piece because I have faith that it'll be worthwhile. If I'm thinking about the ending of a book a week later, I'm reading something else by that writer, guaranteed.

Your opening sells your story to new readers. Your ending turns those new readers into fans.

Writing Good Gore



Webster's defines "gore" as "a small usually triangular piece of land."

Wait, that's not right...the definition we're all looking for is...EIGHT definitions down?! Does anyone cool work at Webster's? Can they hire like one cool person?

We'll just use our own definition: **Gore is the gross stuff, the stabbing, the shredding, the exploding heads and pierced eyeballs, the blood and guts and then more blood that usually make for peak disgust in a horror story.**

Like sex, explosions, and hilarious jokes about dictionary definitions, gore adds a lot to a story, but only if it's done right, done in the right context, and avoids some of the normal mishaps.

Sharpen your knives, or maybe dull them, whatever floats your boat, and let's carve into some how-to's for writing gore.

The Honesty of Gore

When a horror movie has a disgusting visual, it usually works one of two ways: They tastefully cut away, or they show the whole thing in bloody detail.

Here's what I want to say about that choice: If you can't stomach writing it, then maybe it shouldn't happen at all in your story. If you're going to deal with a decapitation, then show us a head in a Wendy's bag, covered in maggots, Baconator and human brains mixed together in a roadside stew.

I know, what some of you write renders that advice inappropriate. I'm not advocating that every

bloody detail has to make it into your finished story. I just want you to write the gore in a draft, go all in, then edit down. Even if you only give us a glimpse of some carnage, a single line, that glimpse will be more powerful and affecting if it's the best line picked from 20.

Here's an exercise I want you to try:

1. Watch the hobbling scene from *Misery*. It's a great blend. On the first hit, we go there. On the second, we shy away a bit.
2. Re-cut it, write it out in a storyboard style, and re-create it so that instead of seeing the sledgehammer hit a foot, we cut to outside the cabin and a distant scream. This is the version that's afraid to go there. Play it back in your head. Is it as affecting?
3. Now, give it a second re-write. Overdo the gore. Make it a bloodbath. Make the scene go on way too long. If you start to feel like you're going to throw up, you're there.
4. Compare all three versions, your two re-writes and the original. Notice that the gore-less version is far less memorable. It's boring. And notice that the gratuitous version has a point of diminishing return. You put viewers through more than was necessary to get your point across.
5. Ask yourself: Is it easier to hit that mid-point by going over-the-top and coming down, or taking the coward's road and amping it up?

Bodies Understand

Don't say that when the guy stabbed the monster, it was like slashing through a rhino's hide. How many people do you know who've gone at a rhino with a knife? Who knows what that feels like?

Yes, intellectually, you understand that the author is explaining the creature has tough skin. Gore isn't supposed to be intellectual, it's supposed to elicit an immediate reaction. Using a simile like rhino hide puts the information in your brain, and it stays safely in your brain. Doing it another way puts the information in your body, and it ping-pongs back and forth between the body and the brain.

The creature's skin was tough, but once the blade pushed through, it was like slicing apart a watermelon. The creature's skin cracked just ahead of the blade's edge, and the insides were soft and crisp.

Nobody's stabbed a rhino, everybody has sliced open a watermelon.

By the way, the test for whether or not you did it right: A reader thinks of your book the next time they cut open a watermelon.

Here's an exercise for this:

1. Go to the store and buy 5 items from the produce section. 5 things you don't touch or taste all the time.
2. Cut them open with a knife. Maybe use the wrong knife, try a serrated knife or a pair of scissors. Try a butter knife. Open up something like a bell pepper with your fingers.
3. Write down the sensations. How are they the same? How do they differ? How much strength does each take? How do you experience things like juciness or rigidity through the blade and into your hand?

Don't Neglect the Senses

One of the weaknesses of writing is that we too often think about it cinematically. Movies use visuals and sounds and that's it. A character can smell something disgusting, but they have to wrinkle their nose and explicitly tell us, which doesn't remotely compare to the overpowering stink of walking in an actual sewer or the stench of a rotting corpse. Or a corpse rotting in a sewer.

That means that if you go with something else in your written gore, you can scratch an itch that movies can't. You can make a smell the bigger part. You can use taste. You can talk about the physical sensations as they happen, whether the gore is being done to a character or by a character.

Bring taste, smell, and touch to your gore and you'll connect with readers on an immediate, body level. Bring in things that are hard to show on film, like textures, viscosity of fluids, stuff like that.

Here's an exercise:

1. Pick out one of these head explosion moments from film.
2. Write the head explosion you selected from the POV of the character whose head explodes. What do they feel leading up to the explosion? Focus on smells, tastes, textures. Give me something unexpected, maybe a runny nose instead of a bloody nose, pressure in the eyeballs. Give me something I can't see.
3. Write it again, this time from the POV of someone else in the room. What hits them? Does it hit them in the face? Is there an initial barrage of gore, then a mist of blood that floats on the air? What's the temperature of the stuff that hits them?

Unpack and Repack

If the hero tastes blood as a chainsaw grinds through someone, "He tasted blood" isn't good enough. We all know what blood tastes like, so why not take it further? Tell me there was a warm, cough syrup flavor to it, maybe something chemical because the taste mixed with the oil on the chain or the saw's exhaust.

Whatever phrases you're using, unpack them, then repack them so they're tight and avoid repetition.

Try this exercise to unpack and then repack your gore:

1. Write: "He tasted blood, and the taste was like..."
2. Finish the sentence with the taste
3. Go back and erase the "He tasted blood" part
4. Erase the "like"
5. Fix up the sentence to be nice, and boom, you've got something that gives me a little extra.

Some Science

A recent study of gore came through with some findings that'll help you out.

One, people have vivid memories of gory scenes, but very poor memory of what happens in the moments preceding the gore. Make sure you



don't put an important plot point moments before your gore. But, if you want to sort of include a clue or piece of a plot puzzle, this is a great place to hide it in plain sight.

Two, vomit and feces didn't affect viewers as strongly as killings and brutal, bloody depictions, unless the person depicted did something disgusting with the vomit and feces.

Three, what they called "sociomoral disgust," things like racism and child abuse, didn't bring up a gore response, and viewers tried to think through the scenes rather than just straight-up reacting. These things bother people, but in the brain, not the body.

Last, for whatever reason, people who witnessed gory scenes emerged feeling optimistic that good would win out in the end. Why? I have no fucking idea, but I guess gorehounds are optimists at heart. Who knew?

How Writing Gore Can Save Your Life

Next time you're experiencing some discomfort at the dentist, go into your writer brain. Catalog what you feel, what you taste, what you hear. Catalog that burned popcorn, metal, tooth smoke smell from the drill. Record the taste. As soon as you leave the office, write down what it feels like for tiny bits of tooth to hit the sides and roof of your mouth, how the sound is different with the drill in your mouth, how you could feel the vibration in your sinuses, inside the front of your skull. Pay special attention to the sensations that you couldn't see or hear.

If you're confronted with gore, and if you have a lens to put between you and it, then you might actually be able to put aside your personal revulsion and get through it a little easier.

Why We Take Grammar So Personally



In case you don't believe the headline, here are a few select comments from a LitReactor grammar article:

Please, find a new topic in which to meet your deadline and/or quota. You have begun to bore those of us with both sense and sensibility. You and I both know you are a poseur, unfit to preach to others. Mend your ways.

If you're going to get on a prescriptivist high horse and write an article about grammar mistakes, at least try looking up each claim before you make it.

Suggestion: look up "word" in the dictionary - and take a linguistics course!

What about impacted bowels?

I swear that last one is real and surprisingly relevant.

After I listened to the return episode of *Unprintable: The LitReactor Podcast*, and after I basked in the glow of being called "LitReactor's greatest asset and top hunk" (or something like that, who can keep track of all the compliments tossed around) I listened to the hosts count down the Top 10 All-Time Most-Popular LitReactor Columns. A bunch of them were about grammar, and one, the top article, had hundreds of comments and resulted in the writer getting a flood of emails, many of which were... passionate and not cool.

Where's all this passion coming from? I feel like everyone I knew slept through English class, and now they're all lambasting people for prepositions at the end of sentences. Why do we take grammar so personally?

One last quote:

MAJOR nit here: most of your issues are semantic, not grammatical.

Okay, yes, we're using "grammar" in a broad sense. Some of this is usage, semantics, whatever. I'm throwing it all in a pot together. If that bothers you, comment below with a rating of my stupidity. I just ask that you please use my patented 37-star scale. 1 star being Pretty Stupid, 15 stars being Even Stupider Than You Thought, 37 stars being so stupid that you change the rating back to 15 because if I'm that stupid, there's no way I haven't fallen into an open manhole or something and died by now, and who wants to speak of the dead that way?

Our Parents

Your first experiences speaking and being understood were intimate. The words, the way you said the words, the order you put the words in, all of that came from the people closest to you. It came from the stories they told you before bed time, the little phrases they used around the house, all this personal stuff. It's literally burned into the sign your grandfather lovingly created in his woodshop and hung above his garage that said, "The Johnsons," complete with misplaced apostrophe.

When you go after someone's grammar, it's a little like a "Yo mama" slam. I don't know that "Yo mama's so stupid she doesn't understand subject/verb agreement," cuts all that deep, but it's still kind of a nasty place to go.

When you slap down someone's grammar, they slap back for their mama.

We're All Gonna Die!

When you're young and you see Webster's adopt a word or phrase you've used, maybe one that got you a red mark on an English paper, you feel validated. You feel like the culture is listening.

When you're old and you see Webster's adopt a new word that you think is stupid, you feel out of touch, and it's a reminder that you're no longer relevant.

Fighting for traditional grammar rules is about fighting to see your ideas and values as valid, and if we can get a little cosmic, it's about fighting to be acknowledged as being a tiny, relevant blip in human existence. Even though we'll all be dead, there's a weird comfort in thinking that 100 years from now people will still speak in a way that you'd recognize. Changes in grammar take that comfort away. Changes in grammar remind us that we're all going to die, we're all going to die soon, and we'll all be forgotten almost immediately after we're dead.

I'm So Smart

People who are smart and don't have two squirts of creativity among all their body fluids love to find objective ways to critique art. Objective methods are the most useless, boring ways to critique art, but these sorts of critiques appeal to other dorks who don't know how to make anything of their own.

When you slap down someone's grammar, they slap back for their mama.

Objective critiques are easy to understand. They make it easy to put a piece of art into a “good” or “bad” bucket.

Talking about the “bad grammar” in a story or a book is a way to try and morph an issue of subjective taste into an objective issue of knowledge. “I didn’t like this book because it is functionally incorrect.” Which is a way of saying, “I cannot enjoy this because I’m too smart.”

Nobody likes a high horse-er, and when you mount that grammar steed, everyone wants to knock you out of the saddle.

Grammar is Culture

Here’s the basic thing underlying most grammar discussions: “High” culture uses proper grammar, “low” culture uses variations.

Rich people speak properly, poor people don’t.

Northerners use proper grammar, Southerners don’t.

Educated people know how to write with proper punctuation, stupid people don’t.

People who read LitReactor grammar columns use proper grammar, people who exclusively read my columns don’t.

When someone feels their grammar is threatened, whether it’s by someone explaining a rule or someone making a new one, they feel like a piece of their culture is being judged as low or bad or inadequate.

Nobody Cares What You Think

Grammar isn’t about you. Sorry. Nobody’s even trying to find out what you think about it.

And frankly, this is a good thing.

If we came up with some realistic way to poll everyone—maybe everyone gets a ballot—it’d be a nightmare. It’d be like voting on that weird, obscure town charter shit that nobody understands. If everyone got a vote, it’d be two months before a hacker rigged the vote so the period was replaced with a tiny image of a cat’s butthole.

When grammar changes are made, it’s a pretty clear statement that you have no power and that your opinions and ideas do not matter. It’s not about you. It was never about you. It never will be about you. This is true of most things, but that doesn’t mean anyone wants to be reminded.

How Can You Take It Less Personally?

Learn the basics. If you understand the machine, you know that when it breaks down, it’s nothing



personal. Besides, learning the right way means you'll have access to people and things that you might miss out on if you refuse to learn.

Break the rules for a reason. If you break a rule for no reason, you're a jerk. If you break a rule to achieve a goal, and if that outcome is more important than the original rule, you're a genius.

Accept that nobody cares if you're smart. You're smart, that's fine. I'm hot, you don't see me adding beefcake photos to all my columns. Nobody cares that I'm a shredded specimen, and nobody cares that your brain is buff as hell.

Put it in context. Grammatical errors are less dangerous than neglecting to use a turn signal. Correcting someone's grammar is less helpful than donating a dollar to a charity. It's not that important.

Remember that it's not about you. When someone says the grammar in your latest column sucks, it's not really about you, it's about them. When someone uses lousy grammar in a column, it's not about you, it's about them. Don't make things that aren't about you into things about you. Nobody needs that.

Writing Advice For My Younger Self



It's close to my birthday, which means:

1. I'm a Scorpio, easily the most metal sign. Suck it, Virgos.
2. I take No Nut November as a personal attack.
3. It's time to get a little reflective.

This year, I looked back at three pieces I wrote in college. I was a baby writer in college, just starting, and it shows.

Which is perfect because I've cracked the code on giving writing advice. See, most people get pretty defensive when it comes to writing advice, but in this case, I'm giving the advice TO MYSELF. I'm not saying YOU need to cut out the drinking and drugs, I'm not telling YOU that YOUR graphic diarrhea sequence doesn't work. I'm telling ME that.

But hey, if you happen to learn something by listening in on the advice I'm giving myself, all good with me.

"Rat Poison and NyQuil"

This is a short story based on the best kind of true story to turn into fiction, which is a story that you heard from your friend, who heard it from his dad, who's a cop. Cop Dads have their pluses and minuses. On the minus, you go to a graduation party, and Cop Dad wrestles a high schooler to the ground and handcuffs him because he thinks that'll be enjoyable. It's not. On the plus, Cop Dads tell the most fucked-up stories.

Here's the real NyQuil rat poison story: Cop Dad responds to an emergency call where a woman ate a bunch of rat poison and then chugged NyQuil. The idea was that she'd kill herself with the poison,

and she'd be in that blissful NyQuil sleep while her body shut down. Unfortunately, she downs both, wakes up, feels fine, and dials 911. In the ER they discover that the rat poison already went to work and destroyed her insides. Somehow the NyQuil interacted with the poison and made it so that while the woman was dying, she wasn't in a lot of pain (yet), and the NyQuil was making the process slower. So this woman was fully upright and functional for the next few hours, she knew she was doomed in a very immediate way, and there wasn't a damn thing to be done about it.

The story I wrote was basically that, but longer and more graphic.

The part of the story, the fictional story, that people commented on most was a section where I described the woman starting to fall apart and have some pretty serious diarrhea in the car. The character described her diarrhea as so powerful that it felt like a jet lifting her off the seat, like a Bugs Bunny cartoon where Bugs was in his rabbit hole, Elmer Fudd stuck a hose in the hole's other end, and Bugs came shooting out, seated on a geyser.

I'm still mildly proud of Past Pete for this because it's genuinely disgusting.

Advice For My Younger Self:

Young Pete, This isn't a bad setup for a story, but it's not really a story. I know you heard this tale and were really excited to put it on paper, but next time, maybe just let it roll around in your head for awhile until it connects to something that's more like a story. If you've got a wild story, connect it to something commonplace. If you've got a very believable, common story, connect it to something wild. Those bridges make much better stories than the landmasses at either ends. Maybe the story has something to do with Cop Dads telling fucked-up stories. Maybe the woman had a cop dad, and the one story he didn't tell her was about this NyQuil/rat poison lady, and maybe there's a reason he never told anyone...

Oh, and the ending where the character just sort of dies is lazy and boring. Ending a story at the moment of death is the ending equivalent of starting a story with a morning alarm clock or a character's name.

"A Baby's Head Makes a C# When It Collides With Porcelain"

Okay, Panic! at the Disco, with the long titles.

This is a short story about a kid who had a terrible head injury because his father dropped him in a bathtub. As he grows into an adult, his sense of time gets all fucked up, and for him time doesn't have a linear order. In other words, he experiences events, and he can remember them, but if you took one event from each of the previous 10 days, wrote it on a notecard, and asked the main character to put the notecards in order, he'd be completely unable. Somehow, this fucked-up headspace makes him able to create music that causes people to actually feel the sensations and feelings being expressed. He can write music that makes people smarter, or music that makes the listener appear handsomer to others.

I know that's already a lot, but I made it even more over-the-top by writing the entire story, then breaking it up into non-chronological order so the reader would experience the world the way this musician does.

Advice For My Younger Self:

When you're describing a confusing, hallucinatory, odd experience, don't try and make it feel, to the reader, like they're having the experience. Don't write inner monologue that gets more and more sloppy as the person gets drunk in order to make the reader feel like THEY'RE drunk. Don't change the font colors to make it seem like people are sharing a drug trip with the character. Don't blur the text to simulate a character losing their sight. The reader won't feel drunk or high or whatever, they'll feel like they're reading a frustrating story.

Making art is about taking an experience, an emotion, or whatever, and translating it so that other people can understand it. Trying to do that by giving the reader the same experience doesn't work. If someone wants to feel drunk, they can do that by drinking. Duh.

The other hard truth I need to sell you: readers aren't going to go pore over your story with a finger pressed hard into the page until they finally "get it." Don't count on someone working really hard to understand your story. You can make puzzling things happen, you can do unusual stuff, but give the reader a foothold. You can get away with a lot in a fiction class where everyone in the room is required to read your work. But this sort of story doesn't fly in the real world.

"Starry Night Over Greeley"

This was my first writing success, an essay about my hometown. I got an Honorable Mention at the school lit awards, but I lost to some lady who wrote some bullshit about reading books in the bathtub and studying abroad or something. I'm not bitter that I lost, I'm bitter that I was punished for losing by being forced to listen to this boring-ass bathtub essay read aloud.

"Starry Night Over Greeley" is a little emo, but it's a 21 year-old's essay about reconciling the mixed feelings that come with growing up in a home town that was generally nice but also this one time there was a weird, yellow fog all over town that turned out to be smoke from a fire that tore through an entire warehouse at the lamb plant, and for three or four days everyone was breathing in incinerated sheep skins and wool. Emo is understandable.

Advice For My Younger Self:

The essay hits its stride maybe 20% of the way in, and you can do without everything before that.

I know you worked hard on it, and the beginning isn't bad, it's just not as good as what comes after. Writing isn't like algebra: you don't need to show your work. Yes, you had to write that intro section to get to where you ended up, but that doesn't mean you had to keep it in the final draft.

Start as close to the end as possible. Be more willing to let go of stuff. You're a person who writes more than you need. Cut, then cut a little more than you think you need to.

...this one time there was a weird, yellow fog all over town that turned out to be smoke from a fire that tore through an entire warehouse at the lamb plant...

Advice For You, Reader

y

Sometimes, when I remember my old work, I start feeling like I'm losing my touch, like I used to be so creative and alive in my youth, and now I'm a shriveled jerky rod with no ideas and no flare.

When the work is in front of me, when I can look at it instead of remembering it vaguely, I can see that I've come a long way.

My advice for you, when you hit a birthday, look back at something you wrote during a period you think of as your early days, a time that feels like your energetic, writing youth. After looking, you'll be happy to be the writer you are today, trust me.

And if you're not? If you feel like that old stuff is better? That's motivation to get to work. If you're a worse writer today than you were in college, when you wrote about a diarrhea geyser, that can only mean you need to apply ass to chair, pen to paper, and write SOMETHING.

The Stories and Worlds of Philip K. Dick's Grave



Philip K. Dick's stories built worlds where time reversed and people had to be unburied before they suffocated, worlds where people used a store-bought spray product to fix breaks in the fabric of reality, worlds where space travelers competed to bring the best hallucinogens to humanity.

The story of Philip K. Dick's grave also built more than one world, more than one story about how things wound up the way they are.

By the way, I wouldn't normally start a column, a story, or anything with a name. But for the name Philip K. Dick, I make exceptions, and I won't apologize.

The Grave

Let's start with today, with the one detail that's literally set in stone. The one detail I've touched.

This is what Philip K. Dick's grave looks like today.

This grave is the jumpoff point for our trips into separate, parallel story worlds, worlds where Philip's parents gambled on his survival, where Philip died and his twin sister lived, and even a world with burial before death.



The Tragic Deaths of Jane

Here's one story, the one that just about everyone agrees on:

Jane and Philip were fraternal twins who came a good six weeks early. For those of you who haven't quite finished *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, those last six weeks of bake time are important for babies. Especially their brains, lungs, and fat.

Philip was about 4.5 pounds when he was born, Jane a pound lighter. I know those numbers don't mean a lot, so the story goes that the babies were so small that their mother, Dorothy, tucked them both into a shoebox, which was set on top of the oven as a sort of incubator.

Dorothy wrote Philip an apologetic letter about the twins' chaotic first weeks at home:

For the first six weeks of your life, you were both starving to death because the (incompetent) doctor I had could not find the right formula for your food and because I was so ignorant I didn't know how desperate your condition was. I did know that things weren't right, but I didn't know how to get other help.

Here's where the story splits.

One story goes that Dorothy discovered a \$50 per child health insurance policy for the kids, and the Dicks were on the way to the hospital when Jane died, but Philip survived.

The other story goes that a MetLife agent happened to stop by the house, and the Dicks got a \$50 per child life insurance policy for their babies. Meaning they may not have wanted their babies to die, but they did put money on it. The policy came with a nurse's visit, which probably saved Philip's life, but it was too late for Jane, who was more underweight and had also been badly burned by a hot water bottle Dorothy was using to keep the babies warm.

The way one story is told, the storytellers take the Dick parents to task. They say Dorothy was careless and Joseph, their father, was mostly absent. They say that gambling on your kids dying is pretty cold.

The other story, told by people who are more charitable, says the Dicks kept their babies away from the hospital because they were poor. That they did their best.

Both stories end in the same place. It's just a matter of whether or not it matters how we get there.

Two Janes

Twins Philip K. Dick and Jane C. Dick are buried in Fort Morgan, Colorado, a town you've never heard of.

Fort Morgan is real Colorado to me, but a different storyteller would see another world in Fort Morgan, a couple buildings out on the plains where nobody'd really want to live.

The story of why Philip is buried there is tied up in the story of why Jane is buried there.

One story goes, after Jane died, she was shipped to Fort Morgan where her fraternal grandparents were living. For this version of the story, I have to speculate why Jane was sent there. Maybe the Dicks, who were on the verge of moving from Chicago to San Francisco, didn't want Jane buried alone in Chicago, and perhaps they didn't know what the situation would look like in San Francisco, so they went with a stable option, a very literal version of meeting half-way. At least Jane would be buried next to her grandparents when they eventually passed instead of being left entirely alone in a city with no family.

The other story that ends in Fort Morgan goes like this: the twins were born, and the Dicks began their trip cross-country not too long after, even though the twins were not healthy. Jane either died on the trip or was in bad health by the time they hit Fort Morgan, a likely planned stop with family.

Jane's death, listed in the Death And Stillbirth Index, tells one story, that Jane died in Cook County, IL, on January 20th, and that she was buried on the 25th.

Jane's headstone tells a different story, saying she died on January 26th.

In one story, one world, she lived an extra six days. In another, she lost those days, but she died at home.

The stories converge again here, with Philip's death. Philip's father, Joseph, outlived Philip by a few years, and it was his choice to reunite Philip's remains with Jane's. Philip, Jane, their father, and their fraternal grandparents all share a resting place in Fort Morgan, CO.

Another Hole in the Universe

There is another divergence in the story of Philip's grave.

One story, the romantic story, goes that Jane was buried, and her and Philip's headstone was set in the earth in Fort Morgan, Jane's name and death date on one side, Philip's name on the other, a blank spot just waiting for the inevitable date. In this story world, Philip spent his entire life knowing that blank spot on the gravestone waited for him. Philip K. Dick's Wikipedia page confirms this story world:

[Philip was] buried next to his twin sister Jane, who died in infancy. Her tombstone had been inscribed with both of their names at the time of her death, 53 years earlier.

The other story is one I got from the cemetery superintendant via email. I'd asked about Philip's headstone because it appeared newer than other stones from the late 20's. Here's what he said:

...so the stone at Philip's gravesite was placed after he passed away... until then there was only a temporary marker for his baby sister, a very common marker to be left in our Cemeteries.

In this story, maybe there never was a stone with Philip's name on it. Maybe the idea that haunted

Maybe the idea that haunted him was, like so many others, one that Philip invented.

him was, like so many others, one that Philip invented.

Jane's Final, Real Death

Philip thought of Jane often, sometimes as a story, sometimes as a lot of different stories.

In one story Philip concocted, he was dead, buried somewhere on the Colorado plains, and Jane was alive.

In another story, published as *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*, Philip describes a series of visions he had and possible reasons they came to him. One story Philip used to explain the visions was that they were Jane contacting him from beyond the(ir) grave. In another one of these visions, Philip saw a savior named Tagore who is covered in burns, harkening back to baby Jane's burned legs.

In some of these stories, Philip blamed himself for Jane's death.

Another story goes that Philip considered most of his writing to be re-enactments of his time with Jane, parental neglect and his fortunate recovery:

...the ultimate problem confronting me all my life has been the senseless injury to and neglect of my sister.

Whatever Jane's story was, it was bigger than the story of a baby who died only weeks after her birth.

In *The Bomber Mafia*, Malcolm Gladwell puts it like this:

The psychologist Daniel Wegner has this beautiful concept called transactive memory, which is the observation that we don't just store information in our minds or in specific places. We also store memories and understanding in the minds of the people we love. You don't need to remember your child's emotional relationship to her teacher because you know your wife will; you don't have to remember how to work the remote because you know your daughter will. That's transactive memory. Little bits of ourselves reside in other people's minds. Wegner has a heartbreaking riff about what one member of a couple will often say when the other one dies—that some part of him or her died along with the partner. That, Wegner says, is literally true. When your partner dies, everything that you have stored in that person's brain is gone.

Of all the places, all the worlds, the one that devoted the most to Jane was the world inside the mind of Philip K. Dick.

And with Philip's death, that space died, too. Jane died, too.

Grave Matters

Here's the story I tell about Philip K. Dick's grave. The one that goes the way I like.

Philip and Jane were born in Chicago, and Jane didn't make it long in her small, burned body. But what remained of her, whether that was all contained in Philip or a real force somewhere in the universe, brought us stories. Whether Philip was inspired to tell Jane's story over and over, or whether

Philip didn't have a choice and was trapped in an endless loop of re-living their shared tragedy, the end results are hard to argue with.

Philip and Jane's grave has inspired stories, too. Stories that can't all be reconciled with each other. Instead, we have to look at them as stories from parallel Earths, all true and untrue at the same time. We have to accept that reality might not ever be one certain, exact thing.

I think Philip would like that.

Thanks for taking this trip with me. For your patience and readership, I have a reward:



I took a copy of *Radio Free Albemuth* to Philip K. Dick's grave, and I did a rubbing of the cat image from the headstone's center. It's not perfect, it's not even pretty, and in fact the one pictured here is a second attempt (there's another, uglier rubbing in the book's front), but it's real, it touched the stone, and I'll send it to one reader, totally free. All you have to do is comment here, say whatever you'd like, whether it be "RIP PHIL" or "#RememberJane." Whatever the comment, that's your entry. I'll pick a random winner, and I'll send the book your way. You've got a week from the initial publication of this column to enter.

The 12 Days of Writersmas



Writers are not hard to shop for.

I don't know how writers earned this reputation. Which other professions/hobbies come with this "hard to shop for" nonsense? It's not like you hear people saying "Tailors are so hard to shop for..." It's not like writing makes you immune to the charms of a personal hovercraft.

Let's cut the legs off this rumor with a list of things you can get for a writer, or things you as a writer can get for yourself (surely some of you have repelled all of your friends and family because a bunch of you are jerks).

1. Review the Damn Books

The simplest, easiest, best gift you can give a writer is a 5-star review on Amazon or Goodreads, or barring that, on your blog, Instagram, BookTok, wherever you do stuff. Screenshot the review, throw it in an envelope, write "Merry Christmas, thanks for the great read!" across the top, and you're done. Cheap, quick, simple, and actually helpful. If your writer friend is worth giving a gift, they're worth a 5-star review. If you're a writer, you can review your own book. Kind of masturbatory? Sure. But it's slightly less masturbatory than writing a book in the first place.

2. Thermal Binder

This bad boy is the solution to all your supply chain woes. It's really not that hard to use, and paired with a printer, you can make books that actually look pretty good, at least on first glance, and would probably trick people into thinking your book was legit instead of



being printed and bound by a guy with no pants. I don't mean a guy who isn't wearing pants at the time of binding, I mean a guy who no longer owns pants because he no longer needs them. He prints his own books in-house! That's pants-burnin' time, baby.

3. 'Fun Home' by Alison Bechdel

This is a terrible book. It sucks. Unless you're Alison Bechdel's former English teacher, I can't fathom why you'd be interested in how smart and well-read Alison Bechdel is, certainly not 232 pages interested. Why do I put this on the list, then? Because you give it to your writer friend, tell them to read it, and then on the back page you write, "See, this got published and gets a ton of praise, and your stuff is way better than this." Just so you don't think it's a personal thing between me and Alison Bechdel (who, I assure you, has no idea who I am and has not wronged me in any way), *On the Road* also makes an excellent choice.

4. Week of My Life Calendar



For every week of your life that passes, you fill in a little box on this calendar. Sometimes we need a tactile reminder that our lives are slipping away while we waste them reading articles about stuff to buy. Other than this article, of course. This one is worth your while. There's jokes! Wait, don't leave—

5. Tattoo Gift Card

Earlier in the year I got a good idea for a motivational tattoo for writers. You go into the tattoo shop and get a Porn-u-pine, a creature that's like a porcupine, but instead of quills it's covered in a bushy nest of dicks, right smack on your forearm. Make those dicks disgusting, whatever that means to you (if you're not sure, this would be the appropriate time to seek out my OnlyFans). Then you cover up one dick for each chapter of your manuscript you finish, each short story you submit, whatever your goal is. It's not for everyone, but some of us have to get down in the hole before we can start digging ourselves out.

6. Smelling Salts

We've all been there, a day when you've only got 15 minutes to write and need to bang out a couple pages. Powerlifters swear by smelling salts for quick bursts of activity. Why not writers? I've heard of writers using caffeine, cocaine, adderall, all



sorts of stimulants, but smelling salts are conspicuously absent. Is this because nobody's thought of this brilliant idea, or is it because all the brilliant books were written while the writer was flying on smelling salts, and they're guarding their secret? It's definitely one of those two things, which makes this gift a win-win.

Warning: LitReactor is not responsible for mishaps resulting from overuse of Cerebus Strength Hellfire Smelling Salts. —editor

7. Giant Map of Your Town

Walking is the best thing for writing. You'll have more ideas while you walk than you will sitting on your ass. Walking is less wasteful than taking a long shower, and some of us don't have a sensory deprivation tank at home, alright? To make your walking more useful, and to generate more ideas, get a giant map of your town, print it out in poster size, and try and hit every street where you live. You'll see new things, think new thoughts, and get out of your rut. I've also heard it said that novelty makes your life seem longer, so if you want to have a longer life (because you're a weirdo who hasn't had enough already), a walk somewhere new might be the ticket.

To get one, look up "[your town name] GIS." Almost every city and town has a large-scale, high-quality street map available free to the public.

8. Rock Tumbler

Polishing crap rocks into beautiful objects is the perfect metaphor for the writing process. Something about feeding rocks and sand into a canister, letting it run for a day, and seeing the results really shows you that it's possible to accomplish a lot if you put in the time. Will you find it demeaning that people are willing to pay more for polished rocks than they will for your short stories? Probably. But I've got a secret for you: rock money and story money spend the same. Besides, it's awesome to use a machine to do something that happens naturally and to do it faster and better. Suck on that, nature!

9. LitReactor Shirt

Mutual appreciation of Litreactor is a path to making fast friends with other people who use this site and who like reading and writing. I've found this to be true, and trust me, there is no other way by which I make friends and influence people. If you wear this to a bookish event, you'll be one of the cool kids.



10. Coffee Roaster

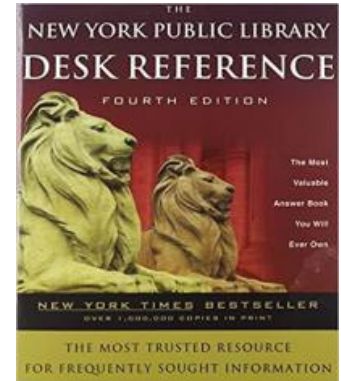
Any writing gifts guide is going to have a coffee thing, so let's get it over with. Roasting your own beans is kinda fun, and it pays for itself within a year or two (green, unroasted beans are cheaper, and they don't really go stale like roasted beans do, so you can buy a shitload at a time). The real beauty is that it takes 20-30 minutes to do the whole process, and you have to monitor it a little. Seems like a good time to get some writing done. PLUS: Get you some little paper bags, roast up beans, and give them to people as gifts. Even if they suck, nobody will have the heart to tell you (and if someone does, see if you can get this person to read drafts of your shit, because they're obviously into honest feedback).

11. Record Player

I'm not one of these weirdos who romanticize the sound of vinyl. What's great about getting a record player is you set a record on it, nice and low, you work, and the player interrupts you now and then to turn the record over. It's better for writing than Spotify, plus you don't have to hear about goddamn Home Depot again. We get it, Home Depot, you like orange, you sell lumber. Does this really require multiple reminders every hour?

12. NYPL Desk Reference

Internet research kills books. I'm 100% convinced. It's not that facts obtained through research kill works in progress, it's that the research goes online, and that leads to something adjacent, and pretty soon you're watching your third hour of Charles Barkley's fucked-up golf swing. This handy reference book answers a lot of common questions without being as much of a rabbit hole. If the answer isn't here, then it's not all that important, and you can just throw some placeholder text in there and move on. This book will save your WIP.



Small Press Xmas Lit Tour



My mom had this artsy friend who did the best holidays.

On Easter, she'd host these massive egg hunts at her house. The eggs were always gorgeous, marbled with layers of waves of color. Usually by the end of the night, she'd be too drunk to remember where she'd stashed all the eggs, her handwritten map disappeared, and dozens of colorful eggs would stay outside until they rotted enough that she could sniff them out.

On 4th of July she'd drive up to Wyoming and load up the trunk with so many fireworks that her car could be classified as an IED.

And on Christmas, we'd grab the newspaper, plot out a path past the houses listed as having the best Christmas decorations, and spend the evening driving. At each house we'd have to rub the fog off the inside of the windows to get a look. My mom's friend always scouted out the best houses, the brightest displays, and the hidden gems.

This year, I want to play the role of my mom's artsy friend and take you on a tour of the brightest, best shining lights that are our small presses.

Also, the first time I was ever drunk was at this artsy friend's house. I was a child. I got into some hot cocoa that tasted funny, and I passed out on the floor. This is your invitation to grab a stiff drink because this is another Christmas-themed list, so you might need it.

Clash Books

There was this old guy, famous in town because every Christmas he packed his yard with homemade, hand-painted wooden character cutouts from every kid's movie ever made. I mean EVERY kid's

movie. You'd go the year *Toy Story* came out, boom, you've got Woody and Buzz. You go when *Monsters Inc.* was new, boom, Mike and Sully. The real beauty was he didn't get rid of the old ones, just crammed them in next to the new ones until his yard was so bright and full you could spend hours sitting and looking. If there wasn't a huge line of cars behind you, that is, and there was ALWAYS a line of cars. It was eclectic, but the guy's personal style and handmade touches brought it all together, not to mention that he had no qualms about grabbing Disney's copyrighted characters and telling The Mouse to go fuck himself.



Like that old man, Clash has an aesthetic, but it's not one you can pin down easily. Instead of having a narrow idea of the sorts of books they publish, you'll see all sorts of different things coming from them, and somehow it all fits. Each year is a new discovery, and alongside everything they've published up to now, the catalog is beautiful, defies tidiness, and it's bursting with energy.

Preorder *The Pussy Detective* by DuVay Knox. Why? Because Blaxploitation Bizarro sounds can't-miss, and having the word "Pussy" in the title might limit its exposure. But I can say it all I want because LitReactor isn't for total dweebs.

11:11 Press

11:11 is publishing short stories and *Feral Angels* by Peter Christopher in 2022. Call it The Ghost of Small Press Future.

Peter Christopher is a forgotten gem of minimalism, a student of Gordon Lish and close personal friend of Tom Spanbauer (he's the Pete acknowledged at the beginning of Tom's novel *I Loved You More*). His books have been out of print WAY too long.

11:11 is like this house close to my elementary school. They had this big evergreen tree, and they wrapped lights around it perfectly. The lights, those old-school, soft color bulbs, were pushed in deep enough that you weren't just staring at naked bulbs, and instead you got this glow effect that would be haunting if it wasn't so pretty. 11:11 Press has a catalog like that. It's challenging, it's not the biggest spotlight on the block, but when you take the time to appreciate it, you're blown away.



Dzanc Books

Gordon Lish is such an important figure, and his last book, *Death and So Forth*, put out by Dzanc, kind of came and went without nearly enough fanfare.

Dzanc is like that one house that decorates every year, does an incredible job, and doesn't get the credit it deserves for hitting solid triples year after year after year. It always looks great, you'll never catch them with a burned-out bulb, and the track record is undeniable.

Game Over Books

The Fainting Game (And Other Stories) is meant to be read and enjoyed with the images it brings to mind, not images on a screen, not with another person. It comes with a prescriptive way to read it, and I like that. I don't like a book that tells you how to feel, but a book that's fucking with the way we read is welcome.

There was this house we used to stop by, and they set up a shortwave AM radio station. They'd put up a board with directions on how to tune in, what the playlist was, and how long it took to repeat. It was more than just strings of lights, it was an experience. *The Fainting Game* is like that.

Long Day Press

They sell a branded toothbrush. There's nothing I like more than a "Why the fuck not?" aesthetic. The whole fun of a small press is that you can do things because damn it, you feel like it.

One year somebody walked over the the frozen lake near our house, making tracks in the snow, which ended up being an enormous, lake-length dick, complete with balls. It was the talk of the town, and the real genius of it came later when the city didn't wipe it out or remove it because technically the lake was NOT safe to walk on, the ice being too thin. So it sat out there undisturbed for months.



Never assume that just because it looks chaotic and weird that it doesn't require artistic talent. And the weirdest art requires the heftiest portion of guts.

Tough Poets Press

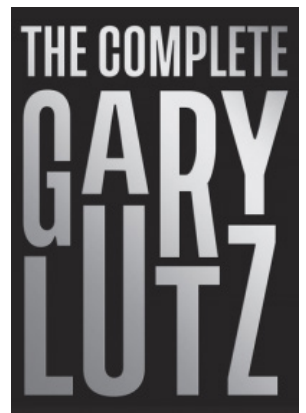
Tough Poets specializes in shining up underappreciated gems, like the work of Russel Edson.

My mom was a single mom, and one year she put up a string of lights on the house, and she didn't take them down. We sort of forgot about them until I got the idea to turn them on for my brother's birthday. In late June. That second life of those lights was way better than the first. I say we all give our Christmas lights a second whirl sometime this year. Let's call it late June.

Tyrant Books

I saw this house this year where they had a full-size German Shepherd statue, wreath around its neck like a collar, Santa hat, the whole bit. Someone had turned the statue, so instead of facing away from the house, the dog was angled mostly towards the house so the people who lived inside could enjoy it. I love the idea that someone decorated that dog, was like, "Why should everyone else get to enjoy this?" and turned it so they could see it from inside.

Tyrant Books feels like a publisher that puts out books because they're like, "I want to read this. Let's put it onto paper, get a cover, and then I can enjoy it. And I guess we can also sell it." I love a publisher that puts out books that they



themselves want to read.

University of Hell Press

University of Hell Press publishes books that shouldn't work.

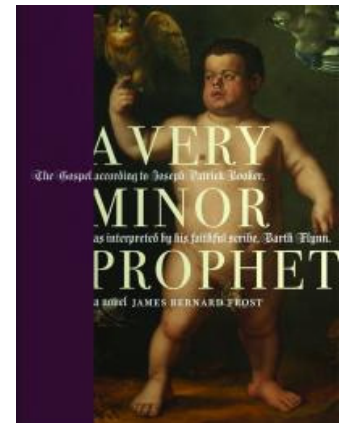
High & Dry is a book that shouldn't work. I should hate it. It's a memoir where a guy mostly recounts his alcohol abuse. If I described it to you, it'd sound like a 70's *I Hope They Serve Beer In Hell*. But it's so much better, it works, it's funny and it's sad.

We found this house last year, and they had those light projector things that you stake in the yard. I hate those. But they'd aimed the different lights up at a huge, naked tree, and the projector lit up the different branches with swirling colors and pulsing light and dark. I shouldn't have liked a projector-based display, but somehow, it worked.

Hawthorne Books

Hawthorne is that house in the fancy, literary neighborhood you feel a little weird about driving past, but you have to because their light display is so elegant. The surprise comes when you drive by on Christmas Eve, and they're in the driveway handing out styrofoam cups of hot chocolate. Because they're kind, real people.

A Very Minor Prophet is a must-read for everyone, but especially for anyone who misses the Portland of 20 or 30 years ago and maybe feels like they'll never see it or touch it again.



Kennydale Books

Kennydale publishes only John Swartzwelder. It's basically a one-man publisher created to publish one man's books. But I can't stand another year without everyone knowing about the great John Swartzwelder.

One of my favorite Christmas light tour stops is this freaky animatronic Santa that's on some dude's porch. It's not too far from my house. Less than one playthrough of "All I Want for Christmas Is You" and you're watching this full-size Santabot jerking and gyrating so hard that it looks a couple hip swivels away from dancing itself to pieces.

The Santa is set on a covered front porch, and there are no lights on him or around him. He's this shadow, thrashing non-stop in the darkness. The first time I saw him, I thought he was an actual human dude out there dancing his ass off to music only he could hear. It's just the oddest, most hilarious thing. Why does someone own this? Why do they put it out there in total darkness?

Kennydale feels like that to me. Their offerings are strange and unusual, but they grow into something you look forward to year after year. They've become a personal favorite, the can't-miss publisher. Swartzwelder's dancing to the music only he can hear, and the product of that dancing is some of the funniest shit you'll ever read.

SIGNED COPIES OF ALL JOHN SWARTZWELDER BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE ON EBAY SELLER'S ID:
KENNYDALEBOOKS.

Make eBooks Into Decent Gifts



eBooks weigh nothing, they don't get stuck on cargo ships, and they allow people to read hardcore erotica without anyone nearby being the wiser.

I guess that last one could've just been "they're discreet," which would have been a discreet way of saying it. But I'm not known for my discretion.

eBooks should be the perfect gift, right? But the problem with eBook gifts is that they feel cold and robotic, like sending out an email instead of a Christmas card that folds in half and seals with wax. eBooks just sort of poof away, you don't really hear about them again, it just...doesn't feel like anything actually happened. Nobody ever actually held anything in their hands. Nobody looks to their bookshelf and thinks of you. There's no experience, just a commodity.

Let's turn those eBooks into decent gifts. Decent gifts that sometimes make people (discreetly) horny.

Draw It

Buying someone that new Mel Brooks book? Get yourself a blank greeting card and redraw the book's cover inside the card. You don't have to be good at art, your crappy art is charming, handmade, and shows that you care. In fact, if you suck at drawing, it's a small act of vulnerability to send someone your crappy art, and that openness deepens relationships.

Share Notes

Let's say you get a book of hilarious short stories, like *New Teeth* by Simon Rich. It's sort of tough to share digital notes directly with another individual, but that's okay, there's an easy workaround: Read

the book, handwrite notes, take pictures of your notes, and send them as emails. The notes don't have to be about the book, they can be about where you read the book, how the neighbor's stupid lowered Honda was making a fucking annoying noise the whole time you were reading, whatever. Give them a connection to you that lasts throughout the whole reading process.

Book of the Month

Instead of dumping eBooks on someone all at once, send them a book every month for the next year. Buy the books now, schedule them out, and then you'll have touchpoints with your loved one all year long. If you don't want to spend money on a full dozen, if you're not like a dozen eBooks in love with the person, schedule them out at random intervals so they'll come as surprises. A plus of doing it this way is that the newest book will jump to the front of their library, so it's a little harder to forget about them as a batch.

Book Selection

Your local library almost definitely has a book selection program, sometimes called a Reader's Advisory thing, sometimes Personalized Reading List. Input your friend's info to get a gift guide, then fulfill it, and include the guide so your friend can see all the books they might like, even if you don't buy all of them. And really have the library do it. That way, if the choices are way off, you can both laugh about it instead of the other person awkwardly pretending they love what you sent. Make the selection process super transparent, and show the recipient that you didn't just buy them a book, you worked to find them THE book.

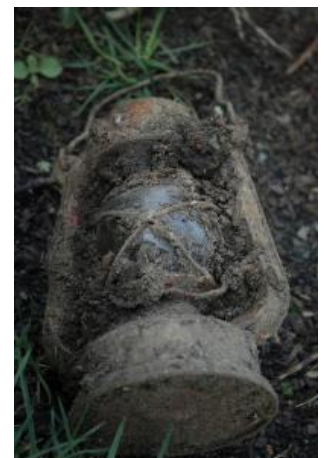
Favors

There's usually a little space to personalize the email notifying someone of their gift, so just add this text: "This email also serves as a coupon for [insert your sexual favor of choice]." This is not a good suggestion for your boss, your employee, your neighbor who mostly ignores you, etc. But for the right person, it can really make the gift of Sam Tallent's book pretty damn memorable on a completely different level. Bonus, if you do get one of those aforementioned sexy books, just say, "That thing on page 212? We should do that."

Sensory

Send along something that brings more senses into the reading. If you get *The Cabin at the End of the World*, send a pine-scented candle. If you buy an electronic copy of *The Road*, send an oil lamp. If you get them a Willie Vlautin book, easy, make a quick Spotify playlist of Vlautin-penned songs to go along with the book. Add another sense to the reading experience and pump it up. Bonus if you can add that sense through a playlist, recipe, or something you can send electronically.

Show the recipient that you didn't just buy them a book, you worked to find them THE book.



Your Voice

Record a voice note on your phone, say hello, tell the person you're sending a book, why you picked that book, then read the first page or two out loud. Send them the voice note. This isn't for everyone, but if you're sending your mom an eBook, definitely do it. She'll be happy to hear your voice. You're no James Welch, but that's okay, your loved one will forgive you for that.

Read Together

Send a book neither of you have read, and tell your friend you're going to call every month. There are certain books that work best for this, like *Dangerous Games to Play in the Dark*. It's not an epic fantasy or thrilling piece of fiction someone will read in one shot. It's chunked, something they can pick up 10 minutes before you call, and it still gives you something to talk about.

With this one, you're not really sending them a book, you're sending them an opener for a conversation.

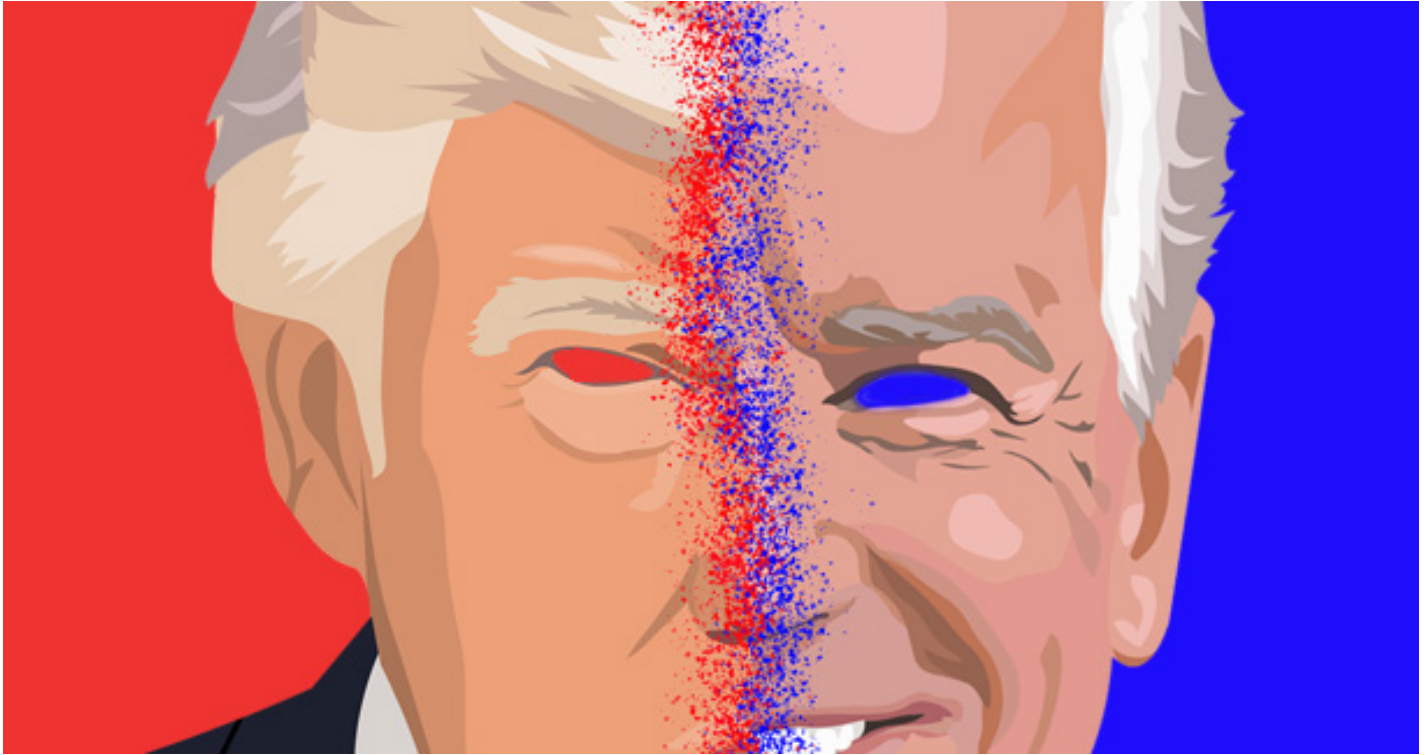
Adventures

Choose Your Own Adventure is always an option, and working through it together over the phone or Facetime is pretty fun. *Ocean of Lard* is a good choice, as is *Trial of the Clone*, but I'll recommend *Try Not To Die: In the Wizard's Tower*. Writer and artist Michael Sage Ricci is the Dungeon Master we all wish we had. Send an adventure, and work through it together.

Send Agent Cold Beer

I read *Agent Cold Beer* with my book club. It's short, it's incredibly stupid, and it's so much fun that you'll be able to talk about it forever. Just include instructions like, "I'm going to call you to talk about this book on January 10th, so you better read it by then because I have to talk about it with someone because maybe I can stop my brain from melting." Don't worry that it's listed as book 2. You'll be fine.

Conservative vs. Liberal Book Bans



Because everything is so great right now, I figured why not talk about an issue we can all disagree on: book bans. Especially: the different, mutually disgusting flavors of conservative and liberal book bans.

Let's look at both and uncover how they're different and how they're alike.

Spoiler: they're alike because they're both stupid.

What Is A Book Ban?

A book ban is any action you take with the intended or unintended effect of creating a barrier between the book and its reader.

So, preventing sales of a book? That's a ban. Preventing distribution of a book? Ban. Taking a book meant for children and putting it in the adult section? Ban. A bookstore refusing to carry a title for reasons other than lack of interest or availability? Ban.

Declining to add *Fifty Shades of Grey* to a middle school library's collection? Not a ban. Sharing your opinion that a book is not very good? Not a ban. A publisher no longer printing an unpopular, undesired book? Not a ban.

I know, there are some other behaviors that would and would not be bans, but most of them are covered here. We're good to go.

Conservatives

You really like to ban entire topics rather than certain books. You take a shotgun approach, striking down anything that discusses race, even if it's as simple as "It's not super fun to be the only Black kid in school," anything with a gay character—even if they don't engage in any sort of sexual activity, or anything that might have a single sentence about jerking off.

As with most things in life, your book bans can be summed up by a single *Simpsons* moment:



The weakness of your bans is the same as the weakness of your politics: you don't know when to say, "None for me, thanks, but you go ahead." You're not imaginative enough to consider that while your kid might not be ready for a book, that might be because you've stunted your kid. Perhaps the way you're raising your kid isn't the number 1, best all-time way. Maybe it's not the worst way either, but you won't even explore other ways, and you're passing that lack of intellectual curiosity onto your kids. Instead of raising independent free-thinkers, you're raising kids who depend on mommy and daddy to tell them what's right and wrong in every scenario.

Let me just give you this message: Nobody, when asked when they knew they were gay, answers, "Oh, I wasn't gay, but then I read a teen novel about two gay characters, and although I was not attracted to my own gender before, I thought it sounded like a neat idea and gave it a whirl." Nobody uses drugs because a novel brought the option of drugs to their attention. Nobody put down the final Harry Potter book and then sacrificed a goat in the woods. Nobody living on the street will cite a book as the turning point where everything went wrong.

If you talked to like one gay person, one drug user, or even someone who just doesn't attend church on a weekly basis, you would know that easy access to books is not the problem.

Liberals

What grosses me out about you is that you'll wear \$28 dollar enamel pins that proudly yell "I read banned books," while participating in a walkout where you're effectively banning a book.

I've heard a lot of great phrases about liberal book bans, like "It's not censorship, it's creating friction" or "It's not a ban, it's an economic consequence for bad behavior." "There are other books by non-problematic authors that do the same work." "We can't wipe a book from existence, we are just one

lil' ol' shop."



quill books & beverage

@quill_books_bev

...

(2/4): We respond to concerns about censorship by reminding people that we do not have the power to ban a book; we are a small, private business with a finely curated selection of books that reflects our values.

11:13 AM · May 8, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

At least the conservatives have the fortitude to admit they're talking about tossing books on the fire as a method of protecting their values. I'll take an honest dumbass over a smart liar.

Just own it. Recognize that you can't crow about intellectual freedom and banned books while also banning books. Maybe you feel like it's justified, and maybe it IS. I'm not here to argue that, I'm here to say that you need to accept that you ARE banning books as a means to an end. You ARE sacrificing one ideal, intellectual freedom, for another. If your weapon of choice is a book ban, treat that shit like an atomic weapon, acknowledge what you're doing, make peace with it, and respect that weapon's terrifying power. Just don't be shocked by the fallout when the winds change and the tactics you used are employed to censor books you really like. And don't pretend like what you're doing is no big deal.

Your bans also seem to have more connection to writer behavior than the contents of particular books. Sherman Alexie and Junot Diaz are writers whose books were long-touted and have since been removed from circulation in a lot of places. Books by Andy Ngo and Woody Allen were banned almost entirely by people who had not read them and were basing the bans on the behavior of the writers leading up to that point. It's not about the books, it's about the author's behavior in the world outside the books. You found a way to punish the writer, and it feels so good that it justifies punishing curious readers and removing their chance to judge for themselves. Those folks are just the eggs you've got to break to make your utopic omelette, right?

The most distasteful facet of your bans is that while conservatives are always crying about the children, you target books aimed at adults, which means you're treating adults like children. It means your bans come with this moral and intellectual superiority. You figured out this book was bad or inaccurate or that the author was a bad person, and in your infinite wisdom you're rescuing me from needing to make the same discovery. You act like I'm supposed to be thankful. My hero. My savior.

What Both of You Agree On

You are both hypocrites. Liberals, you supposedly don't like censorship, but you'll go for it when there's a bad guy who needs to be punished. Conservatives, you don't think government should meddle in your affairs, but you run to the school board and congress to protect your kids from critical race theory.

You are both under the mistaken impression that book bans are an effective way to stop the spread of a book. Many a writer has bought...maybe not a house, but like a really nice coffee table thanks to the sales boost that came from a book ban.

You both fail to recognize that books reflect reality more than they shape it, and banning a book to solve a problem is like punching a mirror to clear up your acne.

You both fail to understand that books are like a Practice Mode for life. They're a safe way to explore and be confronted by aggressive, bad, stupid, whacked-out ideas. You both fail to consider that we will all encounter these things in life, and encountering them first in a book gives readers the opportunity to think about how they would react, what they might do, and the sort of people they want to be when they're called upon to make a difficult choice.

You rarely read the material before participating in the ban. It'd help if you did. You'd look less foolish at least.

You both get your book news from the same super-biased sources that give you your regular news. You're both acting on hot takes designed to get clicks and rile you up.

Oh, and holy shit, you both compare each other to Nazis way too often. Did you know that Nazi scientists attempted to create conjoined twins by sewing two siblings together? Like, more than once? Comparing someone who goes to a PTA meeting or someone who stages a walkout at a publisher to a person who strapped a child into a chair with a device that smashed a hammer into his head repeatedly until he went completely insane is...let's call it "an under-considered reach."

The Advice Portion

My Advice to Conservatives:

Pick up the books your children are assigned, read them with your kids, and talk about them together. Ask your kids open-ended questions like, "How did this part make you feel?" or "What do you think you would do in this situation?" Talk about whether or not a book reflects your values, and if not, why and how? I hesitate to say this, but books you have a moral disagreement with can be great tools for reaffirming your family's ideals.

If you think a curriculum is tilted towards only one version of politics, bring that to light and suggest SOME replacements or supplements to balance the curriculum rather than just demanding the removal of materials and creating a void. Perhaps request that a reading assignment can come with a list of options rather than a single, prescribed book. And, holy shit, you're always talking about being resilient and bootstraps and all that. If your kid is ruined by a book, then your kid was not going to make it anyway.

My Advice to Liberals:

Your way forward is writing, publishing, and marketing books that reflect your values, requesting copies at your local bookstores, reading, rating, and writing reviews for books that, in your opinion, do good work. The way you handled the American Dirt situation is what I'm talking about: you didn't try to ban the book. You recognized the problem isn't American Dirt, it's an industry, and American Dirt is an example. Banning American Dirt would not have solved, or even addressed, the problem.

The sales of social-justice-minded books in 2020 were enormous, a juggernaut. When Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote *Black Panther*, sales were mind-blowing. You are not the underdogs in the book world, you're winning the culture war in the world of books, which means you have the luxury of choice. You can fight for the things you love instead of fighting against the things you hate.

My Advice to People Who Don't Engage in Book Bans:

Stay far away from these other dipshits.

Will Libraries Ever Recover From COVID?



You've probably put some thought into whether your uncle is going to come out of COVID unscathed. Maybe he's vaccinated. Maybe he's unvaxxed and hoping for the best while he drinks his 34th Dew of the day. Maybe his vaccination status is unknown, but he's one of those cockroach men who'd survive getting hit by a flaming bus constructed entirely of spoiled chicken, so, regardless of COVID, he'll keep Ski-Doo and Swisher Sweets in business for a few more years at least.

But what about your library? Is your library going to make it?

To Be Clear

I do not want the library to close.

Without closely studying the Bible, Library Closure is, I'm pretty sure, a horseman of the apocalypse, one who rides in on a sensible Subaru with a Sport Mode that she's kind of afraid to try. But still, apocalyptic.

What We Know

The American Library Association's annual report for 2021 is mostly full of good cheer and (deserved) pats on the back for library staff who did their damndest over the last couple years. But it's pretty short on hard numbers.

The numbers we do have are not encouraging.

99% of libraries were closed for at least part of 2020. I guess some rebel yell library was out there keeping the doors open, and I salute your courage/stupidity.

Some libraries reopened for summer 2020 and had to close again, and others didn't reopen for almost a full year.

I'm just one guy working in one library system, and I've talked to a few colleagues. Checkouts, program attendance, door counts, computer usage—nothing is bouncing back the way we'd hoped.

And with an all-time record number of COVID infections tracked the very day I'm typing this, the future...isn't so bright that I'm reaching for my shades.



Is Anything Rosy?

eBook and streaming checkouts went way up!

You know what else was way up during the last couple years? Jigsaw puzzle purchases.

Is this because jigsaw puzzle makers cracked the code and started printing up awesome puzzles? Or is it because people had a lot of free time and a lot of their preferred entertainment options were unavailable?

The eBook wave isn't one that libraries created, it's one they rode. And as things reopen and people can go back to, I don't know, drinking in shitty bars where they serve margaritas with Coronas turned upside-down in them, the eBook wave will fade.

Restrictions

If a library mandates masks (or enforces a state/local mandate, or mandates vaccines or testing), anti-maskers will be less inclined to use the library. If a library does not enforce a mandate, people with functioning intelligence will stay away because the new Patterson isn't worth getting COVID for. Either way, an audience is cut out.

I'm sure some of us are looking at the anti-whatever people and saying, "Good. Fuck 'em! You choose to go unvaxxed or untested, and the library being closed to you is a consequence of your choice."

The problem is that we're not talking about a few people. We're talking about closing the library to somewhere between a third and half of the population.

**Your choices
might not
kill you or
someone you
know. But
they're killing
your library.**

People will go to the DMV, and they'll wear masks or do what they have to because there's really no other choice. Library use is voluntary, and people are hard-headed enough to deny themselves the library to make a point.

Will the Staff Recover?

Last year I got two "just dropping a line" emails from HR workers at other libraries. Both of these emails were from places I applied to over three years ago. When you're contacting people three years later, you're in trouble. When you're contacting ME three years later, the stench of desperation is smell-able through the computer.

Library employees always do things they didn't sign up for, that's nothing new. It's just that there's usually a better ratio of expected library work (managing the collection) and stuff you didn't sign up for (telling people that, yes, you have to wear your mask in the 600's, AND the 900's, AND the Mysteries, AND...).

I don't know if staffs will heal. I don't know if the people who retire early are replaceable. I don't know if new people will be excited to join a field that burns through employee morale faster than a double flamethrower wielder can torch a fireworks factory.

Money

Budget goes down, the library gets worse. Always.

The COVID truth is that the library's budget is going down.

The library's curse is that people use the library more when the economy is horrible. So, when the library is least able to provide for the community, that's the time the community will reach out to the library most.

Putting this all together, crappy budget equals crappy experiences, which equals crappy public perception of libraries, which equals crappier budgets, and the cycle continues downward.

Were Libraries In Trouble Pre-Pandemic?

A Pew survey from a few years back found 90% of Americans thought their public library closing would be a bad thing.

The same study found that only about half of those surveyed had actually used their library in the last year.

People like their library, but about half of them like it only in the abstract. COVID has accelerated us into the concrete present.

The question is not whether people think a library closing is good or bad. The concrete question is more like "What would you be willing to sacrifice to keep libraries in your community?" "Would you vote for a sales tax increase?" "Would you vote for libraries over roads?"

People love libraries in theory, but if they're not using their library, and they ARE using the roads or the rec centers, we're doomed.

Can and Will

Libraries can survive and recover. The question is whether they will.

I think it will require some painful, unnatural things on the part of libraries. A couple suggestions:

You're going to have to go hard in the paint on budget advocacy. You need citizens in your corner. Loud, aggressive ones. You know how gun people freak the fuck out when you talk about restricting guns with something like a 7-minute cooling-off period? That's the kind of person you need for library advocacy. People who are like, "You want my library's budget? Come take it from me." You need people willing to go toe-to-toe, look firefighters in the eye, and claim that the library's budget is as important as the fire department's.

Libraries have to be willing to change. You need to have new conversations where nothing is off the table. When someone suggests getting rid of storytime, don't panic, hear them out, consider the possibilities. You don't have to axe it, but you have to be willing to talk it through. Libraries are playing a new game, and the 2019 playbook just won't work.

Don't Work In A Library? You Can Still Help

If you're an advocate for defunding the police, tack on where you want that money to go. In a lot of places, libraries and police compete for the same dollars. Perhaps the slogan "Fund the library" will win you supporters who don't get behind "Defund the police." This is what we refer to as a "win/win" scenario.

Use Your Library. Use demonstrates need, and need helps libraries make their budget pitch.

Run for your library's board positions.

Do your part to stop spreading COVID. If you want things to be like they were before, you need to get a vaccine, and you need to stop sitting in restaurants, getting on airplanes, and doing all that other shit you were doing before. We're talking about record infections, right now, right here.

Your choices might not kill you or someone you know. But they're killing your library.

Debunking The Bad Science of Books and Reading



The joke among readers and writers is that we all got into the arts because we suck at math and science.

Sometimes, I'm not so sure it's a joke.

I keep seeing these TERRIBLY unscientific studies about books and reading passed between readers and writers.

Studies like these.

The Emotional Empathy Test

Whenever you see a headline about how reading makes you more empathetic or emotionally intelligent, you'll probably be linked to the same, one-time, very flawed study.

As one scientist puts it, the test used in this study

[is] a poor tool...[but] it is the only measure that we currently have ... which is why everybody uses it.

I fart constantly and to a degree that's a medical marvel. Me being the best person my girlfriend has ever dated doesn't make me a delightful partner. I'm just the closest thing she's got.

But let's put that aside, the farts AND the testing. Let's pretend that there is an accurate way to measure empathy, and that reading does increase the empathy in someone's brain.

The study isn't able to determine if the empathy gained through reading is ever applied.

Which means that a reader might shove an elderly woman in the gutter and walk on her back to avoid getting his shoes wet, and the only difference between him and a non-reader would be that he'd better understand what that elderly meat bridge was feeling while she burred away in torrent of melted bus runoff.

Is unused empathy stored up in the Think Bank worth writing articles about? Probably not.

Growing Up In A Home With Books Makes Kids Successful

Okay, these dumbasses...

You've probably heard a version of this one, the study that says kids who grow up in a home with books are smarter, richer, more successful, and so on.

But did these kids make it because of their home library, or is there another factor at work here?

Scenario A: If you have a home library with lots of books, a ladder on rails and a drinks globe, you're rich. Even if you didn't have this dream library, having space for a good-size library in your house means you probably didn't have to cram 3 siblings into one bedroom. Being rich is probably your best bet for future success.

Scenario B: You had a lot of books, not because you were rich, but because your parents put their limited resources to use buying books. Books are SUPER important to them, and they will probably pass their values down to you.

I guess the headlines "Rich people tend to do better in life," and "Children who were often encouraged to read by their parents succeed in school," aren't exactly electrifying.

eBooks are Worse Than Print

Take your pick as to why. Less retention of information, weaker connection to characters. In most of the ways people have come up with, eBooks can't compare to print.

Let's throw a wrench in these gears:

The first Kindle is right around 15 years old, the first iPad only 12. That means the first kids who grew up with a reader or tablet in the house are probably around middle school, and kids who learned to read on screens and read on them exclusively are even younger, maybe not born yet.

Isn't it therefore possible that reading in electronic formats is "better" in every possible way, but we haven't seen those effects yet? Is the problem in translating an activity from one format (the paper and ink we all learned to read with) to another, less familiar format?

Put a Toyota Corolla driver on a track, one lap in their trusty, unkillable, 4-cylinder whip, and then a second lap in an F1 car, and their fastest lap will be in the Corolla. Not because the Corolla is inherently better, just because the driver's used to it.

I distrust these studies for at least a few more years, until a generation who learned to read on screens can be tested.

Reading Saves You From Alzheimer's

The problem with this study is that the researchers have no clue whether patients stopped reading because of the onset of the disease or if the disease kicked in because they stopped reading.

Did grandma stop reading cozy mysteries and therefore got Alzheimer's, or did grandma get Alzheimer's, and as it gradually set in, it was harder and harder for her to follow the adventures of an elderly sleuth and her plucky kitty pal?

Again, the headline, "Elderly Alzheimer's Patient Robbed Of Yet Another Joy By Unstoppable Juggernaut of Disease," isn't newsworthy, even though I did my best to make it sensational.

Correlation/Causation

I can make this really simple: basketball players tend to be tall. A shrimpy, young kid can be excused for noticing this and shooting hoops for hours and hours, figuring that playing basketball will make him taller.

This is confusing correlation with cause. Yes, basketball players are tall, but a career in basketball isn't why Shawn Bradley smacks his head every time he fails to duck through a doorway.

Yes, reading is correlated with a lot of good things, but it's not necessarily the reading that causes these good things.

Why Are We Always Fooled By This Junk?

We want to believe that reading is good for us.

It's the same reason you'll find people citing studies about positive effects of red wine, coffee, and chocolate: If it turned out we just happened to nail it, and we just happened to like all the right things, that'd be awesome! If the things that feel good to us also happen to be the things that benefit us in other ways, we're EVEN MORE right!

Chocolate, red wine, and coffee are great, but nothing beats being right.

Should I Just Quit Reading?

You know what I like about mozzarella sticks? They're uncomplicated. You don't eat a mozzarella stick with your health in mind. You don't eat a mozzarella stick to impress someone. (You might try to eat 50 mozzarella sticks in 15 minutes to impress someone on a first date, but let me advise you that this will not work).

There is one reason to eat a mozzarella stick: To eat a mozzarella stick.

If you want to make people more empathetic, be a therapist. If you want to avoid Alzheimer's and dementia, wear a helmet. If you want your kids to go to Harvard, get them a tutor.

Don't read a book to accomplish some other goal.

Read a book because you want to read a book.

What Happened When I Put My Self-Published Books EVERYWHERE



Everyone needs their personal Johnny Appleseed moment.

Apple pie isn't my thing. Hot, slimy fruit might've been a treat in the olden days, but today we've got Gushers, thanks.

My thing, the apples I want to grow everywhere, are my own, self-published books.

And I decided to Johnny Appleseed them all over online, every corner of the internet I could find.

Here's how it went.

The Writing And The Work

My romantic, self-published author life crashed down in all of about three mouse clicks.

The fantasies of restoring antique typewriters, rabid fans demanding my latest title, the interviews about how I did it, how I showed the traditional publishing world what it means to be a true Writer, all that burned up before I even finished my first set of uploads.

This is my life now: Me sitting in front of the computer for hours, entering passwords, typing in strings of texted-to-me numbers that verify, Yes, I am Pete. No, this is not some other dumbass trying to put this

The self-pub game is a war of inches. It's a battle of selling 5 more copies this year.

ridiculously stupid book out into the world.

Hey? Lady? Lady who works at Penguin Random House, filling out these forms all damn day for book after book after book in preparation for their drop dates? I see you. I don't know if anyone else sees you, but I see you, and please hit me up, I'll send you some snacks or something.

You Wonder What The Hell Is Going On With These Self-Pub Outlets?

Smashwords: You don't accept .docx format, only .doc? .docx has been around since 2007. Dude...

Internet Archive: There is so much metadata here I can't even.

Apple Books: This uploading system was developed by either a genius whose vision just didn't work out as they hoped or in a weird contract work situation with The BTK Killer.

Google: You guys are cool.

Scribd: What's with this name? "Scrib-D? Scribd?" Wha?

Wattpad: I think I just uploaded my book to an outlet primarily concerned with erotic werewolf fiction. Not a complaint.

The Rage Period

Hours into verifying info and creating passwords, I took a break to wander Twitter. Always a bad choice.

But I guess I fulfilled the goal of Twitter check-ins: pissing myself off.

If you've been swinging around the writing scene, you know at least a couple "hustlecore" authors, the ones who talk a lot about how hard they're working and so on.

Writing isn't hustling. Tweeting isn't hustling. Those things are working.

This thing, this endless form-filling, formatting files, click-clacking and copy/pasting to push maybe one more copy of one book in the next year? This is hustling.

But then I remembered that the only thing less useful, less in the hustle spirit than writing Tweets is getting pissy about Tweets. So I got back to the work.

The Self-Doubt

Any dumbass can put a book on the Kindle store. I've done it, and I've seriously contemplated legally changing my name to "Any Dumbass" to drive the point home that if there's something I can do, it's something you can do.

What changes when you put your book everywhere, you expect at least ONE outlet to email you and

say, "Uh, listen, we're onto you. Nice try with this bullshit. You might be able to fool Amazon, but we have SOME standards."

Let me cheerlead you: If you put in the work to write the thing, edit the thing, get a cover going, and then you put in a full day's work blasting the file out, one way or another, you earned it. You cleared the bar.

Whether or not your book sucks isn't up to you anymore, and it isn't up to any platform. It's up to readers.

All The... Small Things

You're 5 hours in, loading shit to Kobo's store, and you think, "What am I doing? Do I know anyone who's got a Kobo? Have I ever seen a Kobo?"

Kobo has about 13% of the U.S. eBook market, which isn't huge, but it IS the second-biggest seller of digital books after Amazon.

But if I sell 13% of the books on Kobo that I have on Amazon...geez, it'd be convenient if I'd sold a hundred books on Amazon. Just for the math...

Look, maybe I only sell a couple on Kobo. Only a couple on Google Play. Only a couple on Apple.

No one act of self-publishing gets you there.

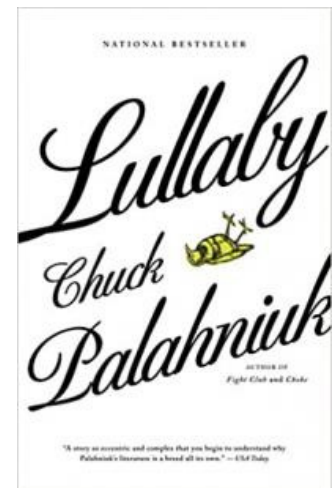
The self-pub game is a war of inches, man. It's a battle of selling 5 copies last year, 15 this year, 50 the next.

You Remember Why You Like Writing

Writing is frustrating some days, but it's way better than navigating forms, linking this shit to that shit, getting the right kind of account on this service and that service, all that bullshit.

Compared to this crap, writing feels like riding a rollercoaster, drunk, after you just took the world's most satisfying shit, and it's your birthday, and your cat came back to life.

If writing feels a little boring or it's hard to motivate yourself, spend a couple days just dicking around with this nonsense. You'll be begging for the excitement of writing one of those boring literary short stories where nothing really happens.



Am I Famous Yet?

Today? No.

But this article goes in the queue 5 days before it gets published. You are basically reading this in the

future.

I'm not famous today, but 5 whole days from now? Seems certain.

As a character from Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby* said:

When you think about it from a native plant perspective...Johnny Appleseed was a fucking biological terrorist.

That's what I walk away with. Not fame or fortune. A new willingness to terrorize people with my books.

What You Need: A Checklist

You're going to follow in my footsteps? Alright, let's do this:

- Computer: Do not try and do this on a tablet.
- Your Book in: PDF, .doc, .docx, and epub. That should cover you just about everywhere.
- Your cover in: .png, and .jpeg.
- Photo editing software: You will find an outlet that needs some weird-ass file size, dimensions, whatever.
- Your book's info at the ready to copy and paste: Pub date, description, full title, professional reviews, price, all that junk.
- Financial Info: Some spots will force you to link your bank, so get ready.
- Your phone: a bunch of things have two-factor authentication now, you'll need your phone.
- Checklist: All your titles and all the places you want to put them, set up in a grid, ready to check off.
- Subjects, Tags, Categories: Make up a list of 5 or so of each that you can plug in or search when you get your book going.

The David Foster Wallace Trap



David Foster Wallace wrote *Infinite Jest*, and he trapped himself in pretty spectacular fashion.

What does that mean?

Caught Up

Before you get all caught up, yes, I know David Foster Wallace had some problems. I know he was a complicated man. Nobody is looking to make light of DFW's hard row.

I won't force you to agree that there was a better way out for David Foster Wallace. That's a deeply personal question that nobody living can answer.

For now, just be willing to ask the question: Was there, perhaps, a way out of the trap?

Because after we ask that question, we can ask another, better question that's relevant to you right now, today, here.

Stuck

Wallace wrote *Infinite Jest* in 1996, and it'd be his last completed novel.

Here's Wallace in 1997, the year after *Jest* came out:

A lot of my problem right now is I don't really have a brass ring, and I'm kind of open to suggestions about what one chases.

After reading about Wallace's work on the novel that would become *The Pale King*, you have to ask whether Wallace couldn't find the brass ring because he'd written *Infinite Jest*, and he was still looking up.

He was looking for the brass ring somewhere on a level above one of the greatest literary fiction novels ever.

Not that anyone asks for advice on getting stuck, but if you asked me, trying to write something better than *Infinite Jest* is a great way to go about it.

This is the trap. One of the greatest novels ever written is a wonderful reading experience, a sea change in publishing, and for its author, it's a trap.

Why Do Something So Unfun?

Wallace was NOT having fun while he worked on *The Pale King*.

Wallace:

I am tired of myself, it seems: tired of my thoughts, associations, syntax, various verbal habits that have gone from discovery to technique to tic.

Wallace also compared writing *The Pale King* to "trying to carry a sheet of plywood in a windstorm."

Reading some of Wallace's thoughts, you get the impression that he was bored, tired, and being pretty harsh with himself. He was battling the book as much as he was writing it. And he blamed himself.

You get the impression that Wallace might've felt like *The Pale King* was what he SHOULD write, not what he wanted to write.

In a letter to Don DeLillo, Wallace writes:

I do not know why the comparative ease and pleasure of writing nonfiction always confirms my intuition that fiction is really What I'm Supposed to Do, but it does, and now I'm back here flogging away (in all senses of the word) and feeding my own wastebasket.

This writer's trap, this fighting to screw a book together, works like a spider's web. The more you struggle against it, the more tangled you get. The harder you fight, the worse it gets.

Expectation

I think he didn't want to do the old tricks people expected of him,' Karen Green, his wife, says. 'But he had no idea what the new tricks would be.'

If you blew everyone's mind with your last book, your options are to accept that the next one won't do the same, or you can try to blow everyone's mind again.

Which makes your situation much, much worse.

It changes the conversation in the writer's head from the one they had on their first book: "Wow, this is turning out really great!" to one that's more negative, more loaded: "If this doesn't turn out great, I've let everyone down."

You want to impress people with your work, but there's a difference between trying to do something good and trying to avoid something bad. Those two things hit different for the writer.

Why You Need to Hear This

Let's do this serious. Let's turn the chair backwards and straddle it, and let's you and me talk.

What we're really talking about is a combo of depression and writerly ambition.

When you start cataloguing the writers who ended up dead because of depression way too young, it's goddamn nightmaric.

And a lot of writers, like Wallace, will consider changing their medication or stopping their treatment because, in some way, they feel like their sadness is at the core of who they are, as writers. Maybe not as people, but as writers.

A lot of writers will question whether, if they treat their depression, they'll still be creative.

If writers get stuck, they want to change something up, and that's not always a positive change.

Which is putting your work, your output, above you, the person. It's valuing your work more than you're valuing yourself.

And I'm tired of that, man. Just fucking...I want that to stop.

It's About You Now

I don't mean to pick on David Foster Wallace. I mean to drive it home: If this can happen to him, it can happen to you.

If he can't write his way out, what chance do you have?

The Question: What If You're Struggling Right Now?

If you're down in the hole, and if your only companion is your novel, consider: You can try to heave your novel out of the hole, use your last energy to push it out into the world. But your novel isn't going to rappel down and rescue you once it's topside.

If you get out, and if you leave your novel behind, you can get help, and you can always come back and rescue your novel when you're healthy, well-equipped, and you've got some people to lend a hand.

Stay With Us

Here's something David Foster Wallace said to his students:

It's going to take me, like, two weeks to learn everyone's name, but by the time I learn your name I'm going to remember your name for the rest of my life. You're going to forget who I am before I forget who you are.

Give me another 50 years of that Wallace, of that man, even if we don't get another 50 years of Wallace the writer.

And that's what I want you to hear: While I love reading your books, I wouldn't choose your books over having you around a bit longer.

Your only value isn't as a producer of words.

Stick around with us.

Defending Romance Novels



People say a lot of mean things about romance novels, romance readers, and the romance publishing industry.

I'm going to say some mean things back.

Romance novels aren't real books!

Okay, this is like the book world version of that one guy who's like, "Driving stick is the only driving that's real." Aren't they just the worst? You'll be talking about how garlic seems overpriced, and this guy will jump in like, "Oh, speaking of, I was SO glad I had my stick shift last winter!"

People who are really into driving stick: get that tub of goo you use to make a DIY dildo mold of your penis, and make a duplicate of your shifter knob to marry on one of those weird reality shows where people have sex with rollercoasters and stuff.

People who say romances aren't real books: stop sharing this opinion online. Instead, write long letters about classics to that one college professor you had who would ONLY assign classics. This is the only person who might, perhaps, possibly give a shit.

Only lonely middle-aged women read that crap!

Lonely, middle-aged women are the only ones reading anything these days. When lonely, middle-aged women stop reading, reading, as an activity, dies.

The idea that a genre's no good because its biggest fans are middle-aged women ends up being an indictment of books and reading as a whole.

Romance readers ONLY read romance!

Most people have like less than five things in life that bring them joy. Why do you want to take one of them away? What does that gain you or your cause? They're not going to jump ship from romance and read your piece of shit book.

Romance novels give people unrealistic relationship ideas!

So does porn. I say we keep both.

The plots are unrealistic!

Romance readers know that. They live the same real, hard, sometimes-shitty lives the rest of us live.

If you want to talk "realistic," be a middle-aged woman and just generally live life. That's more reality than you can handle.

I could write romance, easy, make a ton of cash, and the only thing holding me back is that I don't want to put that crap in the world!

No, you couldn't. If you could, you'd have done it already and be ignoring this column from the deck of your superyacht.

Happily Ever After as a guarantee makes it boring! What's the point?

Every time you masturbate, you have a pretty good idea what the ending is going to be like. Does that mean it's boring? Not worth replicating? You did it once, got the idea, and never went for it again?

There's a prescribed beginning, middle and end, like X has to happen before page 25, Y has to happen before page 50. That's stupid!

If you think other genres don't have clamped down ideas about what they want and in how many pages, you've never submitted fiction. At least romance has the balls to be explicit about it.

All romance novels are the same!

Are you telling me romance is worse than fantasy, a genre that has been wringing every last fart of an idea out of J. R. R. Tolkien's old underwear for decades now? Are you telling me that romance is less creative than literary fiction, a genre of college professors writing characters who are college

professors writing about being college professors? Are you really going to sit there and attack the creativity of romance, meanwhile Peter Parker's been rebooted back to high school more times than the flunkingest student in all of history?

The writing in most of them is really bad!

That's 100% accurate, but only because the writing in most of anything that has writing is really bad. TV? Mostly shit writing. Instructions for anything? Shit. The Rosetta Stone? Overrated.



Those Fabio covers are so stupid!

You're referring to the famous "clinch" covers. That shit is so outdated. It's like complaining about pop music by referencing Bing Crosby.

Romance Writers of America is a mess, wasn't there like some racist bullshit going on over there?

At this point, organizations like this and their awards presentations only exist to piss people off and cause controversy. It doesn't matter if it's Oscars being so white or Stokers being so stoked—whatever. These "associations" are just the tortilla chip that serves as a vehicle for controversy and gossip.

The allure of romance will replace real-life relationships for some women!

If a woman would rather have a relationship with a pile of books than you:

- That woman likes books a lot, and that's fine. If she's happy, everything's fine.
- You need to step up your game.
- You're being blown off, and you should just take the hint.

Fine. But I'm still not reading romance!

Cool. You don't have to read anything.

You DO have to shut the fuck up when people are talking about books you know nothing about, though.

Writers Lifts: Sharing the Love or Twitter Pyramid Scheme?



When you see the hashtag "WritersLift" it should smack you across the face the same as when you see the word "LuLaRoe."

Writers lifts are a pyramid scheme—excuse me, "multi level marketing" scam. They take advantage of you, suck you dry (in the bad way), and leave you with no benefit.

Allow me to explain.

What A Writers Lift Pretends to Be

Someone will jump on Twitter, say, "Let's do a #WritersLift!" The tweet usually comes with a request to tweet out your website, book cover, shopping links, etc. in a long thread along with a bunch of other authors.

The presented idea is that by creating this long thread of books and authors, an indie author pulls a little more attention than they would solo.

Sounds good, right?

What A Writers Lift Really Does

Brief Twitter 101:

Let's say you and I follow each other on Twitter.

And let's say you follow an author, we'll call him @PyramidSchemeAuthorDouche, and he puts out a tweet that says, "Let's do a WritersLift! Hit me up with your books, links, etc."

When you comment, like, or interact with @PyramidSchemeAuthorDouche's tweet, I may see that liked tweet, your retweet, or your reply because I'm following you.

What I see may be as subtle as your tweet with a line above indicating that there's something that prompted your tweet, or it may be as blatant as seeing the quoted retweet and most of the original tweet embedded in yours.

Everyone else who follows you might see the same thing. And because indie authors tend to group up on Twitter, a lot of indie authors end up seeing the original tweet.

When a tweet gets lots of likes, retweets, and comments, it spreads further. The algorithms of social media see a tweet moving up quickly, and they then show the tweet to more people. Once it pierces the bubble of @PyramidSchemeAuthorDouche's normal following and starts getting traction outside that bubble, it increases even faster because the algorithms figure it's great content that a lot of people must want to see.

Why It's a Scum Scam

While the writers lift helps @PyramidSchemeAuthorDouche's original tweet spread further, it doesn't spread the subsequent tweets, including yours, a whole heck of a lot.

The idea @PyramidSchemeAuthorDouche is low-key pushing is that by creating this long chain, everyone in the line will get more attention. But that's not really how Twitter works. The only people who will see your link in that chain are A) People who follow you already, and B) Someone who sees the original tweet and decides to just look through a long chain of replies by random-ass authors linking to their bullshit.

When you engage with a writers lift, your tweet will be seen by almost no one outside of your normal Twitter following, while the original tweeter's tweet will spread far and wide.

Essentially, you're taking your share of social media attention and passing it up the chain to the person at the top.

So it's not strictly a pyramid scheme, because the pyramid scheme at least has the decency to pass SOME money onto the layers of people below the very top.

The People You're Not Reaching When You Participate

Agents do not go through long lists of writers lift tweet strings. It's not where Mr. Random House is looking for the next big thing.

Readers/book buyers are not going through these lists.

The starter of a writers lift makes no guarantee or attempt to control the quality of the books that make up links in the chain. It's not like the original tweeter is really endorsing these books.

The lists of books are functionally useless to readers and publishers.

So Why Do It?

@PyramidSchemeAuthorDouche does it to boost his Twitter presence. He gets retweets, likes, follows, all that shit, all the while pretending to carry the flag for indie authors.

Don't be fooled, the only flag he's carrying is one with his own Twitter handle scrawled across it.

The Scum Scale

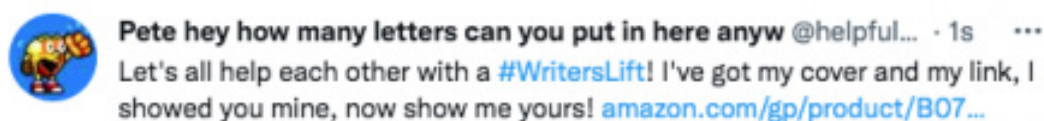
There are more and less scummy versions of the writers lift, which are more or less scummy based on how blatantly they outline what they're doing.

The Blatant



This is the version where someone says, "Let's do a writers lift, I want followers / Here's my book." It's not really a writers lift, per se, it's just begging for followers. This is silly, but fine, whatever. At least it's transparent.

The Slightly Sneakier Version



This usually comes with promo of a book, and the person does say they're promoting their own book, so at least they're telling a portion of the truth. It's borderline, it's dishonest about the level of mutual benefit, but at least it's clearly a give and take.

The Sneaky, Bullshit Version



In this version, I pretend like I'm here for YOU, and I don't necessarily mention my own book...but it just so happens to be linked and have an image right there, ripe for the retweets. Convenient, no?

Won't Participation Get Me SOME Attention?

It's vaguely, hypothetically, scientifically possible that someone who initiates a writers lift will like your post, which makes it vaguely possible that your post will show up in the feed of someone who already follows that initial tweeter. But is that enough to convince someone to buy your book?

Maybe the best way to put it: How many writers lifts have ended with YOU buying a book by someone other than the initial tweeter?

If You Do Writers Lifts:

I don't have a problem with someone taking a bite out of Penguin Random House's marketing. I have a problem with writers lifts because you're stepping on the back of other struggling indie writers in order to boost yourself.

It's hard to market a book, and there are a lot of indie writers out there who aren't too Twitter savvy. You scumlords are taking advantage of everyone else's ignorance in order to promote your own work. You're taking their desperation, which most indie book folks feel, and turning it into your personal store of social media energy.

It just...sucks. You just suck.

What's the Alternative?

If you want to help indie authors, tweet about their books in ways that don't force a reference to your original tweets. Tweet about them in a way that's not about you, it's about them. YOU can tweet out their links. You can tweet short reviews of their books. You can link to their newsletters. You can

retweet their tweets if you enjoy them.

This will require you to actually read some indie authors so you can recommend their books and know what the fuck you're talking about.

It's a lot more work. Which is usually the case when you're doing work for yourself instead of tricking other people into doing it for you.

Withholding: The Secret To Comedy Writing



We live in a world of endless advice on writing serious books, mysteries, crime thrillers, horror novellas, artsy memoirs, biographical pamphlets...

What's missing is the chatter about comedy writing. We really should talk about it more. We might get more funny books that way.

Let's talk about a powerful, underrated tool in comedy writing: withholding.

The Bad Rap

Withholding has a bad reputation as a storytelling tool, mostly thanks to thriller and mystery writers who have a hard time writing themselves out of a corner.

How am I gonna get this character from here to there without them first explaining what they know...okay, how about I'll just have him say "No time to explain." Gruffly. Make sure he does it gruffly. Oh, and maybe he'll reload his gun. He'll put in a new MAGAZINE, not a clip! Authenticity is what makes my books work.

Okay, that's enough making fun of thriller writers. For now.

I'll make this very simple: Lots of things that don't work in thrillers are perfect for comedy.

Withholding From The Reader

Let's go through some different types of withholding, starting with the worst type.

Withholding from the reader happens in a story when the characters know what's going on, the narrator knows (if the narrator is separate from the characters), and the only person in the dark is the reader.

This almost never works. Because it makes the reader feel stupid. If your book makes the reader feel like the stupidest person in the room, and if you're not talking about, like, dark matter or Stephen Hawking shit, your story will please no one.

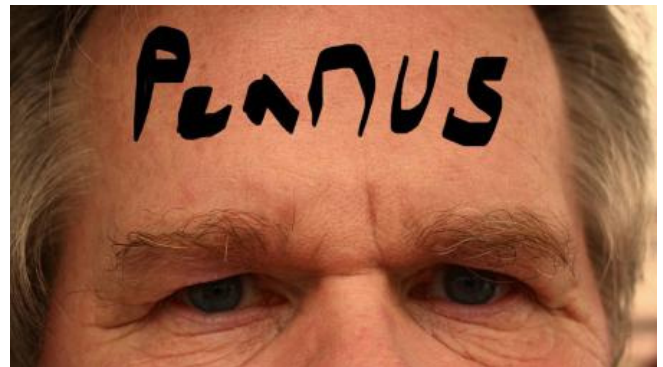
Or, sometimes withholding from the reader is used as a cheap way to keep the mystery mysterious. If your detective found a clue earlier and didn't tell anyone, including the reader, that's withholding from the reader, and it's a flimsy way to extend a whodunit.

But we can make it work in comedy.

Let's make up a fake comedy detective. We'll call him Freddy. Freddy Gumshoe. No, wait, Freddy Cumshoe. That's funnier. Everyone mis-hears "Cumshoe" as "Gumshoe" and then says how it's a fitting name for a detective, and then Freddy has to decide whether or not to correct them with his actual, embarrassing name...

Two versions of the same story, narrated by Freddy:

I was walking through the grocery store. I got this look from this old lady like I'd tipped over her grocery cart and ran off laughing. The guy at the checkout, who's always there, didn't ask for my club card, just scanned everything and stared down at the conveyor like the secret to life was written on it somewhere, and he was just waiting for it to come around. It's when I got out to my car that I saw "PENIS" written across my forehead in black ink. I did my best to clear it off, but I had to stop by my mom's house...



Version Two:

Okay, so I'd passed out the night before, and someone wrote "PENIS" on my head. I was walking through the grocery store...

The best way to tell this story, the way you'd tell it to a friend, is the first way. Have one or two incidents before we know what's going on, walk us through it from Freddy's perspective first, and then add in a third incident where we can laugh about it in a different way.

Freddy, at the point he's telling the story, knows that "PENIS" is written on his forehead. By withholding that information, we get to have a little mystery, then the reveal, and then a third incident involving the same joke, but now from the perspective of someone who knows what's going on.

We can wring the maximum amount of funny by withholding from the reader, briefly.

Withholding From The Character

Your reader can know things your character doesn't, and this makes for great comedy.

If our detective, Freddy, is walking into the bad guy's lair, it's funniest if the reader knows the lair is swarming with baddies and Freddy doesn't:

I walked into the abandoned warehouse, eating a Clark bar and whistling as loud as I could. It's kind of hard to whistle and eat, but I never back down from a challenge. Sometimes I like to use my holster for a second Clark bar, so I'll leave the gun in the car. This has never been a problem before, but then...

If the reader is just as surprised as Freddy that there are bad guys swarming inside the warehouse, the joke doesn't work. If the reader KNOWS what Freddy's walking into, they get to enjoy just how outrageously unprepared Freddy is, and that humor is spooled out over a longer period.

Aftermath

There's a story from my life that I like to start this way:

Let's be clear: I peed ON my pants, not IN my pants.

The scene of me peeing (ON!) my pants is less funny than the scene of me showing up at an event in hastily purchased velvet pajama pants that look like something Paris Hilton would've worn in the early 2000s. The mechanics of peeing pants is nothing special. The aftermath of showing up in velvety pants and then being forced to tell the story over and over makes the situation a lot funnier.

You might get more out of this if you show the aftermath rather than outlining the entire scenario from start to finish.

And it hands over the work of explaining to Freddy, who has to deal with this in his own words. His way of explaining the situation is going to be funnier. He'll minimize the peeing part. The distinction between peeing ON and IN his pants will be super important to him and only him.

Withhold Without Pissing Off Readers

When people talk about what they "wanted" from a story and didn't get, what they're talking about most times is what they expected.

You can twist up someone's expectations and end up with something great, something they'll love. You just have to remember that what you give them needs to be the equal or better of what they expected.

In other words, let's say I wanted to pull a little gag, so I bring a pizza box to a party, but I took out the pizza and replaced it with something else.

When someone grabs for a slice, opens the box, and sees a pile of dogshit, they're pretty unhappy.

When someone opens a Domino's box and sees a bunch of neat, lined-up tacos sitting in the box, it's

funny, and while tacos are unexpected, they're a more-than-decent substitute.

When Authors Read Their Own Audiobooks

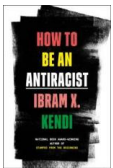


I'm on the march through an audiobook read by the author, and let me tell you, it's about as painful an experience as getting a vasectomy.

And the vasectomy has a slight advantage because it only takes 15 minutes.

When should authors read their own audiobooks? And when should they turn it over to the pros?

What happens when an author reads their own work?



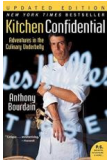
Ibram X. Kendi: Lectures and Performances

In the audiobook version of *How To Be An Antiracist* I was bored, okay? Bored in a way I wasn't bored by the text.

It's a plodding listen. That's how it felt, anyway, so I did the math. Kendi reads his book at a pace of about 2.3 minutes per page. To put this in perspective, I listened to a long mystery set in the west where we've got a bunch of laconic cowboys and such. That one clocks in at a brisk 1.5 minutes per page.

Kendi is an academic, so it makes sense that his delivery feels a little like a college lecture. The problem is that it lasts almost 11 hours. 11 hours of college lecture spread out over 11 weeks is doable, but compressed into an audiobook timeframe? It's rough.

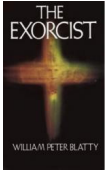
Delivery styles that work for, say, an hour, become unpleasant after 5 hours. You might be a good reader or speaker for 1-hour chunks, that might be your strength, but don't forget to consider how you'll have to change up your style as things get longer.



Anthony Bourdain and The Benefits of Dying

Kitchen Confidential pulls some extra gravitas in audio form because the author/narrator is dead. You're listening to his voice from beyond the grave. And in this case, instead of being creepy, it's nice. It feels like a good thing that Bourdain's voice was captured and we can still hear it.

Audio is powerful, direct. You hear a little bit of who the person really was.

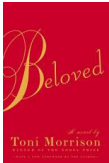


William Peter Blatty and Writing That Sounds Like Writing

Blatty has a GREAT voice, but the problem is the source material. *The Exorcist* is writing that's meant to sound like writing.

If your writing style is conversational, casual, if your goal is to make all your prose sound like a real person speaking out loud, then you've got a much better shot of pulling off your own audiobook.

If your book sounds very "written," which it probably will if you're in that hardcore literary sphere, hire a pro who can bring a spoken feel to more writerly prose.



Toni Morrison's Guts

Beloved works because it's a stone cold classic, and it feels right that Toni Morrison would read it. It's like listening to Mark Twain read a book or if we could see Shakespeare in one of his own plays.

Morrison's delivery has a warmth to it, and I wonder if a professional reader would have brought that same tone. Because *Beloved* is such a dark book in so many ways, I don't know if many readers would have the guts to read it the way Morrison does. It's like being inside a cabin with space between the boards. First it's dark and cold, but you start to catch the light popping through the cracks.

This is a reading that only Morrison could bring, tonally and in terms of performance, because she's the only person who could read it with this much life and still keep it respectful.



Jenny Slate Keeps Obnoxious In The Box

I didn't think I'd love Jenny Slate's voice, but it turns out she's actually kind of great at narrating her own book, *Little Weirds*. Her narration voice and her cartoon voice are very different. Which, duh.

Here's the problem: Jenny Slate is Tammy on *Bob's Burgers*, Mona-Lisa Saperstein on *Parks and Recreation*, and she pops up in a lot of animation with her signature, whiny-but-hilarious delivery.

The issue here isn't the performance or the material, it's the marketing. It's a tough sell because you have to convince listeners/readers to listen to an audiobook narrated by someone who's known for performances that are intentionally unpleasant. If you can get readers in the door, they'll finish the book. Which is why I'm telling you to give it a shot.



David Sedaris IS David Sedaris

Sedaris is a rarity in the world of writing because his shows and live readings are as popular, if not more so, than his books.

And yet Sedaris does not have what I would call a “traditional radio voice.” I wouldn’t imagine most people would hear him and think, “Get that man on the radio doing Subaru commercials, stat!”

Sedaris is perhaps the ultimate writer to point to when someone asks what it means to “Find your voice.” The way his books are written, and the way he reads them aloud, feel almost the same. Nobody else could narrate his books. Nobody.

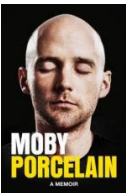


Nick Offerman/Amy Poehler/Tina Fey/Mindy Kaling/Elvira

If you’re an author who’s known for writing and performing comedy, I’d say go ahead and read your own book. Especially if your characters and your speaking style somewhat match up with your actual personality.

Wouldn’t it be super weird to listen to a Nick Offerman book NOT narrated by Nick Offerman, especially if Not Nick Offerman kept referring to himself in the first person?

BUT, you might think twice if you’re a stand-up comedian who is writing a book that is basically a scaffolding for your bits. The rhythm and so on of stand-up doesn’t always work when you’re reading aloud without audience laughs.

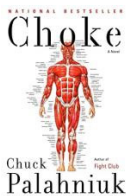


Moby: Dehydrated

Moby's memoir, *Porcelain*, is a good book that is read so, so flat. Moby sounds like a courtroom stenographer reading back an entire court case about tax law in Missouri in the 1850's.

Here's what I kept thinking while I listened: Why do I care about Moby’s life more than Moby does!? Is the cover a snapshot of Moby reading himself to sleep?

One thing a pro will do is add textures. They’ll modify the different voices a little to make them distinct. They’ll read things with varying levels of passion to keep things from feeling flat. It’s just...damn, this one is a shame because it’s a good book, but it’s a ROUGH listen.



Chuck Palahniuk Doesn't Choke

I love *Choke* as read by Palahniuk because listening to the way Chuck reads his own book gives me some ideas about how he lays things out on the page and how the words sound in his head. The way he reads gives insight into the way he writes and edits.

It's not a performance that's for everyone, but for writers, it's a clinic.

If you’re reading as a form of studying to be a better writer, sometimes hearing it from the author can be a big advantage.

Bookstore Nightmares



TONIGHT on *Bookstore Nightmares*:

Denver, Colorado. Home of the Rocky Mountains, Rockies baseball, and an indie bookstore with a rocky sales season.

After a smooth takeoff, Jerry's was flying high, selling lots of books and making lots of readers happy. But the store hit some turbulence, and now it's in a tailspin, the pilot is drunk, and there's nowhere close by to land, it's all volcanoes and spikes, and the only person who is sleeping through all of it is having night terrors.

It's bad. It's really bad is what I'm getting at.

I'm Pete. I'm traveling the world, visiting struggling indie bookstores and shouting at them in order to make them better places to buy books, better advocates for authors and reading, and perhaps I can shake them awake from their...

Bookstore Nightmares.

Format Note

This was supposed to be a TV show with a lot of fast cuts and cool graphics, with me having knives and shit thrown at me, but apparently nobody wants to make a TV show about lousy bookstores with a host who is "uncharismatic" and "combs his hair to the wrong side" and is "kind of unpleasant" and "smells really bad."

I argued that you can't smell me through the TV, so they really only had 4 or 5 good reasons to not

make it a show.

Anyway, for now it's just this written, journal format.

Exterior

Jerry's looks cute and quaint from outside, the name painted on the large glass window out front. But the parking sucks. Bookstore parking always sucks because bookstores like to be in busy downtown areas, and all the parking spaces get used up by people who are going to bars and restaurants and bars with arcade games. You know, fun places. Places people want to be in.

Before I headed into Jerry's, I had to put on a disguise, just to make sure no one would recognize me. So I changed out my track pants for khakis, and the illusion was complete.

Let the Nightmare begin.

Uptown Funk

First thing, if a bookstore has a cat, the rule is that I should find that out when I see the cat.

If I know there's a cat because I smell it first, there's a problem.

Jerry's definitely had a cat. I took a deep whiff and put the age at...12.
Male. Orange boy.

What?

Gordon Ramsay can tell the difference between frozen and fresh fish and everyone thinks he's awesome. I can breathe in cat piss smell and tell you everything, and I'm a distasteful weirdo who can't grow sideburns?

The world is unfair.

Jerry

I reached onto the bookshelves and pulled off a stack of mysteries, then immediately started berating Jerry. I understand this is the most effective way to fix a restaurant or rescue a bar, and it probably has to do something with pawn shop stuff, too.

"Look at these paperbacks. Old, stale, vile, rotten inventory. Do you even date these things?"

Jerry shook his head, No.

"If you date them in the corner, you'll know how long they've been on the shelf, you donut. Then you can rotate them out."

Jerry scratched his face, and he said, "I don't know about that donut thing...but actually, dates might

**If I know
there's a cat
because I
smell it first,
there's a
problem.**

be smart.”

I said, “I see all these piles out front, and I can only imagine what you’ve got in storage. Show me to the back.”

Jerry’s Back Side

The back of the store was nothing but piles of unsorted books. Patterson hardbacks, middle books from 2010’s vampire series, and an entire wall of surgical center green, copies of *A Million Little Pieces* shelved 4 deep.



In the middle of calling Jerry a donkey and a donut and some other things, I hit a bookshelf and copies of *Wild Animus*, the cockroaches of *Bookstore Nightmares*, hit the floor.

I shouted, “My god, man. Is this the best you can do?”

Jerry started telling me some story about how he and his wife put the inventory together, and now she was dead, and he couldn’t part with it. Or maybe she left him for someone else with a better rod. I can’t remember, he was grossing me out because he started crying and stuff, and I sort of tuned out.

Jerry At Work

As usual, I spent the day watching Jerry serve customers. He barely looked up when people came in the door, he pointed people to back parts of the store instead of walking them to the place they wanted to go, and he just didn’t seem to give even one shit.

I knew what we needed was to turn Jerry around and get him to see his passion for books again.

I Get Real With Jerry

I’ve been advised by legal counsel to not get too far into exactly what happened when I tried to help Jerry reignite his passion for books.

I feel pretty sure I can say that I tried to get him to hike a 14,000 foot peak just an hour or so outside Denver, and when he said he was out of shape and didn’t see what this had to do with selling books, I may have pulled a pistol on him and motivated him the rest of the way up the peak, and, okay, maybe I squeezed off a couple rounds when Jerry slowed down, but the gun was never pointed at

Jerry's center mass.

The Menu

The first thing I changed was the offerings at Jerry's.

"Jerry," I said, "You have a splatterpunk section with two books in it, and one of them is about punk music. You have a steampunk section with a book about making dumplings. And there are a lot of other sections here that are weird and understocked and don't even have anything to do with your apparent misunderstanding of punk."

Jerry said, "Isn't it good to have a wide array of options?"

I said, "Maybe it's better to do a smaller number of options right than to do a shit job of a bunch of things. Wouldn't it be a lot easier to just specialize in a few things, like, I don't know, wouldn't it save you time to just have a crappy mystery section, a crappy thriller section, some dirty books, then call it a day?"

I screamed in his face, "Does McDonald's make pasta!?"

Jerry scratched his face on that one, too. "You know, maybe you're right. I could put the energy into doing a few things right. instead of a bunch of things half way."

The Interviews

Jerry was resistant to some of my suggestions. So I interviewed some former customers and showed the tapes to Jerry.

Customer 1:

Jerry's? Oh, yeah. I bought some books there once. I always mean to go back...actually, I did a couple times, but he's, like, never open at the same time? And he's closed at 4 P.M. on the weekends? What's up with that?

Customer 2:

I wanted to support a local business, and I went in there so he could special order me some books. He was really nice, but it took...I think 6 weeks to get them in. In the meantime, I got the eBooks, read them, and I just didn't have the heart to tell him that I didn't need them when they came in. I would've cancelled the order, but it took so long I forgot!

Customer 3:

There's no bathroom in there. I got that thing where the book smell makes me have to shit? So I can't go in there.

The Remodel

I brought in my crew to remodel overnight.

My crew was only me, and I forgot all my tools and stuff, and I got a little drunk, then a lot drunk. Then I was briefly worried that I was sobering up, so I got even more drunk.

The upside is that the big remodel reveal was exciting for me, too, because I couldn't remember what the fuck I did.

Turns out not much, just put up some directional signs and plugged in some lamps so you could see the shit in the store. Oh, and I had the nasty green carpet steam cleaned because before it looked like the felt from a pool table in a biker bar where they didn't so much play pool as spill chili Fritos and murder people.

"Wow," Jerry said, "I guess occasionally cleaning up the carpet is a good idea. Maybe we should vacuum once a...once ever. Just not common practice for used bookstores."

He ran a finger along a bookshelf, which had been dusted for the first time ever. "Maybe cleaning sometimes would make this better. I can't even smell Vagabond."

I said, "Vagabond? Would that be your cat? Orange, 12 years old, maybe...15 pounds?"

The store owner nodded. "How did you know that?" he said.

I said, "It's amazing what a little cleanin—" and I didn't get to finish because I had to run outside and vomit.

Once that bout of vomiting was done, I showed Jerry his brand new point of sale system, which was just a tablet with a credit card swipe on it.

Jerry said, "Hey, so I can take credit cards now? Even for purchases of less than \$17 dollars?"

I nodded, and I said, "And get this: your inventory is in here. So if someone calls you and asks for a book, you can tell them right away whether you have it or not. AND they can look for themselves online, AND they can order titles, too."

The Future

I don't know what the future of Jerry's will be. I hope he sticks to what I've shown him. It's not fucking rocket science. Run a vacuum once a week, get some lighting, change the litter box, rotate the stock. Learn to specialize so people come to you for something specific instead of just hoping they'll want the same crap they could get for two bucks at Goodwill.

I just hope he can keep it together.

And at this point I walked off, and if this were a show, I'd be muttering something under my breath, but the mic on my lapel would pick it up, something like, "My god. *Wild Animus*. Are you joking?"

Tune in next time for another episode of *Bookstore Nightmares*, where I'll hit another failing bookstore, give them the same goddamn advice, they'll follow it briefly, then ignore me, lose their business, and blame Amazon.

The Banality of Evil In Fiction



Just in case you don't feel like reading this whole article, let's get this out of the way: Don't write a character who's evil because "he has an uncontrollable lust for power."

That shit is boring. There's no story in it.

I'd love to tell you more if you've got a minute, but if you're busy, just know that a character who is evil because he's a power-mongering evildoer is a snooze.

A Little More

Hey, you stuck around! Good on you. And me.

Evil in fiction is under-discussed, even though for every hero, we've got a villain. For every good deed, there's at least one evil plot.

Why don't people think through evil a little more?

Where's The Villain's Journey, Joseph Campbell?

Let's talk about evil in fiction, how to spice it up, and what to stay far, far away from.

Generic Lust For Power

These are your old-school James Bond villain types. People who make moon bases as a step towards...something more spectacular than a moon base?

Yes, I know, I know, there are real-life examples of people who seemingly want to boost their power (bank account) beyond any reasonable measure and for no real reason. This, readers, is where we find the difference between A Story and A Thing That Happened. That's another column for another day.

When your villain is driven mad by a quest for power, your hero and your villain (assuming the villain is the evil one) don't really have any personal beef, they just have opposite goals. It feels like they're both punching in to fight each other for a chapter, then they punch out and go drink at the same bar.

THEY don't care about each other, so why would a reader care about either of them?

Here's how you address the generic lust for power: Start the story once the villain has already achieved their dastardly plan. Let us see what the villain does with all that power. The rise to power has been done, but the hovering in the power seat? Not so much.

Make It Smaller

Let's look at the Emperor from *Star Wars*.

The drama of someone trying to rule the galaxy is just too big, and it's not clear how the galaxy would be worse with Palpatine in charge. Or whether it would. Or what that would even look like.

Blowing up an entire planet is fucked-up, no doubt. But it's so vast that it can't be personal. It doesn't resonate, it's not evil that we can feel in the gut.

The evil of forcing Vader to fight his own son, then to jump in and kill that son while Vader watches, THAT'S when the evil goes from generic to gut punch. When Palpatine laughs and smiles, when he takes real pleasure in killing Luke in front of his own father, THAT's something we can understand.

If your evil is gigantic in scope, express it in a scene in a much smaller way. It'll help.

Devil Shaped Holes

In *Avengers: Infinity War*, Thanos wipes out half the population of the universe because he thinks the universe is overcrowded. Apparently he's never driven west-to-east across Nebraska.

We all had the same thought: If you have a magic oven mitt that can do anything, and if you're concerned about the universe having limited resources, why not double, or triple, the universe?

When an Avengers writer was asked this question, here's what they said:

He didn't double the resources in the universe because that's not what he's trying to accomplish, and also because he's an unhinged, sociopathic supervillain who is basically on a holy crusade. Thanos' plan only has to make sense to him, and in terms of fitting his character, it's perfect.

Okay, so the real reason Thanos doesn't go the other way is because there'd be no movie. Got it.

Evil should be dropped into your fictional world, and then it should poke around until it starts doing

evil shit. And the evil shit should make sense for the type of evil dropped into your world.

When evil exists for the metafictional purpose of creating a story, it'll taste as stale as a three-day-old bagel.

Hanlon's Razor

We all know about Occam's Razor and its ability to help us solve mysteries, but fewer know of Hanlon's Razor:

Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.

Real life example: Most fender benders aren't about someone trying to do you harm. They're about driving in a stupid way.

Let me ask you which character is more interesting:

A character who does evil things for a grudge he's held for 20 years, or a character who has made a very bad, very thoughtless decision, and that bad decision has put the character in the villain's chair?

Stupid action, even with non-evil intent, can easily bring about an evil outcome.

Pragmatism As Evil

There's a great section in *World War Z* where a guy named Redeker comes up with a plan to evacuate a portion of South Africa after the zombie outbreak.

Basically, the plan is to relocate a large number of people to a place where the landscape provides lots of natural barriers and obstacles. The only problem is, a large number of people moving on foot will be followed by zombies. If the people are followed, they won't be able to establish a safe area.

The plan is to leave pockets of people behind. They'd be occasionally resupplied, but ultimately their purpose is to distract the zombies and keep them from moving towards the safe zone.

Where it gets downright maniacal is when you see that at the core of the plan, able-bodied people with the skills to rebuild society are selected to go to the safe zone, and people who don't fit those criteria are left as bait, sacrifices to the zombie hoard. Which means old people, sick people, disabled people, or people without useful skills.

The Redeker plan works. It's cold, it's calculating, and it saves lives, maybe even the entire southern portion of the African continent. But at a tremendous ethical cost.

Pragmatism can be a great version of evil. It lets your villain do something bad, but for reasons that... actually make sense. Redeker makes a great evil character. He's evil, but only because he's willing to do something extreme, willing to see people as numbers and resources. He is evil, and he does an evil thing, but it might have been necessary.

He's evil, but only because he's willing to do something extreme.

As a note on this: Your evil person doesn't have to be unfeeling or even totally on board with what they're doing. They can just be the person with the knowledge and power to do the evil thing. They can be in an extreme circumstance where they view their actions as a difficult choice, emotion versus pragmatism.

Every Way Evil

In *The Walking Dead* comics, Robert Kirkman learned over time, and he perfected evil.

The first straight-up evil character is The Governor. He makes people fight in an arena, he's a rapist, he kills people left and right, mutilates a main character, he's incompetent, he's just the worst in every possible way.

Then Negan comes along. Negan seems more evil in some ways. He puts no value on human life. BUT, he does not tolerate sexual assault. Rapists he encounters don't come out alive. He also doesn't just kill people for no reason.

He's plotting, he's extreme, he's violent, but he's not evil in all the ways.

Way too many evil characters are evil in every possible way. It's like, if there's a checklist of ways to be evil, you don't have to hit all of them, and in fact, if you pick and choose, it gives your character a little something.

Scorpion's Sting

In the *Simpsons* episode "You Only Move Twice," Homer goes to work for Hank Scorpio, who turns out to basically be a James Bond villain.

What makes him memorable is that he's SUPER high energy.

Too many evil characters are morose loners who mope around and ooze evil. Frankly, in the real world, I'd prefer that. Sad sacks probably won't accomplish quite as much evil as charismatic people who love to lead groups.

Wouldn't you like to read a comic book where Lex Luthor was a high-energy go-getter? Sure, he's trying to kill Superman, but all his employees' desks double as ping-pong tables, and he's cured a bunch of diseases, Metropolis' public schools all have more useful technology than they can handle.

Wouldn't it be interesting to read about a version of Dracula who really has a lust for life? Who loves that he's immortal? Who's having a blast?

Give it a ponder: Would my evil character be more intriguing if he had a personality?

Why 2021 Was America's Worst Reading Year



Why did you fuck-ups stop reading last year?

A Gallup poll told us that Americans read fewer books in 2021 than they had...maybe ever.

What the hell happened?

The decrease in average number of books read per adult last year wasn't so much about people going from reading one or two books a year to reading nothing. It's mostly due to people who normally read a shitload slacking off in 2021.

The big decreases were in groups that are traditionally power readers: college grads, women, and the elderly.

This Is A Really Bad Thing

The decline of the power reader might not sound like a big deal. But a lifetime of gastrointestinal distress has taught me that things that seem like no big deal can morph into a crisis faster than you can say, "wet fart."

People who pick up one book a year are nice and all, but they aren't picking up some awesome, weird shit from an indie press. They're picking up something quick and convenient, which means something that's a bestseller. If people read one book every year, it's not going to be a Brian Evenson.

Without power readers, we lose the market for the best stuff, the niche

**The books
most people
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haven't
convinced
them to read**

stuff. We lose bookstore placement and the ability for smaller publishers to make it.

The other worrying part is that the decline of power readers means we're not growing new power readers. The same number of people are still dabbling in books, but none of them are crossing over into reading as a lifestyle.

The books most people are reading haven't convinced them to read more.

The COVID Answer

The obvious answer to any statistical anomaly right now is a general, "COVID, man. Damn that COVID."

Yes, it's possible homemakers read less because they were doing more work at home, what with kids being home and all. Maybe old people read less because they were still busy dying in 2021. Maybe college grads stopped reading because COVID...because COVID.

I have my doubts.

Because the decrease in reading has been coming for some time now.

And, if we leave the answer at "COVID," we relax and assume that once COVID fades, readers will bounce back. No need to change the game, those readers will return to reading's warm bosom on their own.

I'm not so sure that a do-nothing approach is a wise course.

Even if bringing readers back is a losing battle, I'd rather die with my boots on.

I Blame The Internet

When the same Gallup poll saw peak reading in 1999, less than 1% of Americans had high-speed internet at home. In 2021, 77% had high-speed internet, including high-speed streaming, endless selection of naked movies, gaming, all sorts of shit, at home.

This could be a correlation, not a cause. It could be a coincidence.

But let's say the problem IS the internet. When the problem is the internet, you only have two options:

One is to go the Ted Kaczynski route, become a hermit who lives in a shack in the woods, rail against technology, blow up some people who probably didn't deserve it or really have anything but a tangential relationship to technology, use the threat of further violence to publish a manifesto, get caught, and then have all of your ideas discredited because you were a weirdo living in the middle of nowhere sending bombs to college professors, so even though your ideas about technology are surprisingly sound, nobody can take you seriously.

Option two is to recognize that books are now in competition with things that are more entertaining and talk about how we adapt.

The Division of Culture

Wikipedia hosts a very handy list of number-one bestsellers by week.

If you look at bestsellers by week from the 90s, it was pretty common for a title to hold onto the top spot for 4 or 5 weeks. Out of 52 weeks where a book could claim that top spot in 1990, only 14 different titles managed it, meaning there were only 14 number-one bestsellers.

By the way, in 1980 there were 8 titles over 52 weeks. In 1960 only 2 books were number-one bestsellers, and they duked it out all year long.

In 2021, 38 books claimed that top spot over 52 weeks.

The segmenting and dissolution of a monoculture where lots of people have the same experiences can be a good thing. It makes more room for a larger number of voices and ideas. It's not all bad to see a different top seller every week.

But what is lost is the common cultural touchstones. The only likely way for two readers to read the same thing is if they discuss it beforehand and do it on purpose.

If you wanted to connect to someone over a new artistic or cultural experience in 2021, you had to look to politics or a Disney product. Not a book.

Book Culture Is SubSubSubSubCulture

People care more about a woman who became famous from being in a sex tape, who was married to a rapper, who has now left that rapper after having a child they named North West, and now she's dating a tattooed weirdo comedian from Staten Island—people care WAY more about the day-to-day minutiae of these events than they do about Cormac McCarthy putting out two books in the same year.

Who covers the red carpet at the Pulitzers?

How many people can name the current poet laureate?

Book culture was once a dominant form of culture, or at least a factor in culture. No longer.

What's Possible In Books Remains Static

For movies, games, and TV, there were limits to what you could achieve.

Movie lengths were kept short enough that you could have two nighttime showings of the same movie without making people stay out until midnight. That is, until *Titanic* proved that you could make sacks of money with a long movie, cut to today and we have a 3-hour *Batman* and a 4-hour *Justice League*.

Video games were limited by the low capacity of game cartridges, then they moved to discs and downloads.

Most people couldn't afford to buy an entire TV series on disc every weekend. With streaming, we all have more TV than we can watch.

Visual effects on video, games, and TV are almost unlimited.

These other modes of storytelling are getting better, they're pushing their limits, and they're figuring out how to tell longer, more complex stories. They're getting to places where they can tell stories that weren't possible 20 years ago. And they still tell short, simple, stupid stories, too.

They can do it all.

Meanwhile, books haven't really gone anywhere new.

What was the last big innovation in books?

Books: Cannot Compete, or Will Not

Books can compete if we all bust our asses and make them worthy competition.

Writers: You've got ONE PAGE, maybe, to hook your reader. The internet is not going away. People are not slowing down. You can't write for readers who existed 20 years ago. Deal with it.

Editors: Shorter, shorter, shorter. Shorter chapters, shorter sentences, shorter books. I've seen a buttload of books that look pretty interesting, but I don't find much of anything 400-pages interesting.

Publishers: You need to start coming up with things that only books can do. My money is on risk. You can take a risk on a book that's unreasonable for a movie or a video game. You can do things, risky things, in a book that would be unreasonable to ask an actor to do. You can narrowcast on a new level.

Booksellers and Book Pushers: Seek out and promote those books that are unique experiences. Give people opportunities to talk about the same book. Push books that aren't heavy. Highlight reading experiences that seem to attract people who don't read a lot.

Readers: Here's your reading challenge for this year: have fun. Read things you enjoy. Not homework, not something meant to make you a better person. What's the Love Island of books? If you had to read a book to turn off your brain and just enjoy, what would that book be?

Take those itches you scratch with Netflix, and get in there with a book instead.

Is Bizarro Dead?



If you've ever filled out a proof of life document, I'm sorry, you've had a rough life.

For everyone else: a proof of life document is something you fill out because it's likely you'll be abducted and held hostage.

What you do is write some questions, call it four, and then write the answers. Seal them up, put them somewhere that a confidant can get to them, and then, when that ransom call comes in, the people trying to get you back can confirm you're still alive.

The questions are ones only you know the answer to. Sort of like those security questions when you forget a password, but even more obscure. Who was in your first sex dream? Which of your brother's CDs did you accidentally break?

They should be personal.

I'm worried Bizarro lit might be dead. For me, personally. Nobody can declare a sector of literature dead for everyone, but for individuals, shit can definitely die.

I'm here to break the seal on my personal proof of life document for Bizarro, ask the questions that'd help me say whether it's dead or alive, and see if it's time to give up hope.

Question: Is Bizarro Still Punk?

When Bizarro congealed into a movement sometime in the late 90s/early 2000s, it was the punk-est of punk genres.

Repellent to traditionalists.

Bizarro mocked publishing with its DIY aesthetic.

Bizarro had an energy you only see with punk shit.

Its fanbase and its best practitioners mingled.

It was intentionally different in a way best defined by publisher Rose O'Keefe:

Basically, if an audience enjoys a book or film primarily because of its weirdness, then it is Bizarro. Weirdness might not be the work's only appealing quality, but it is the major one.

The bad news: nothing punk can stay.

Punk music, punk books, street art sold in galleries, even the most punk dude you knew turning into a suburban dad—the death march from punk to pop is less a path we all walk, more an inescapable vortex.

For me, though, the punk question isn't about Bizarro selling out or some bullshit like that.

For me, it's about Bizarro getting too good.

Bizarro, being punk, was rough around the edges. The prose wasn't perfect. The stories didn't always hold together completely. It was unpolished. Accessible. Attainable. A Bizarro novel was a story, but it was also a set of instructions for doing it yourself, even a prod to give it a go.

And I don't feel like that anymore.

I can't write like Brian Evenson or Gemma Files or Andre Duza. I can't compete with Carlton Mellick III's new stuff, like *Stacking Doll*.

For some fans, that change would indicate a genre more alive than ever.

For me, I don't know, I miss that excited feeling when I finished a Bizarro book that was like, "Yeah, you know what...I could jump in on this."

The feeling that the people doing it weren't superhuman. They were just punks. Like me.

That was something I only got from Bizarro books, something that made it unique, and I don't feel it anymore.

If Bizarro was a cat, I would've last seen it 36 hours ago, it was in a weird mood, and now I'm searching the house because I think it might've done that thing cats do where they sneak off and hide before they die.

Question: Has Something Taken Bizarro's Place?

Yes.

I mean, no, not in my heart, but in culture, yes. And, I guess, also in my butt.

Weird erotica replaced Bizarro.

It used to be that when you saw an article or a Tweet highlighting a strange cover, it was a cover that was familiar to a Bizarro reader. Now it'll be a cover familiar to readers of monsterporn.



It used to be a guy wearing a suit made out of cockroaches to survive a nuclear holocaust would be the highlight of a discussion of weird books. Now it's probably sex with a dude who transforms into a honey badger.

If BookTok was around in Bizarro's heyday, *Ass Goblins of Auschwitz* would be all over it instead of *Ice Planet Barbarians*.

I used to be cool. When someone pointed out a weird book, it was usually a Bizarro, and I was like, "Oh, yeah, I read that one."

Now I can't do that anymore. Because my beloved Bizarro has been replaced with space raptors invading someone's butt.

Weird erotica is the new, younger, sexier replacement.

Question: Do I Feel Bizarro Slipping Away?

Yes, somehow, yes.

It's little things.

Jeremy Robert Johnson's *The Loop* winning the Wonderland award. It's a good book, it's a good pick, but it's probably the most mainstream novel to win the award.

The Bizarro section at Powell's, home of Bizarro, shrinking down to a nub.

Bizarrocon has been shut down because of COVID.

It's hard to describe what's in my gut.

If Bizarro was a cat, I would've last seen it 36 hours ago, it was in a weird mood, and now I'm searching the house because I think it might've done that thing cats do where they sneak off and hide before they die. I don't know it's dead, I don't necessarily have a great reason to think it's dead. But I'm damn concerned. Ripping everything out of the cupboards and closets concerned.

Non-Question: Death and New Life

Bizarro might be dead to me in some meaningful ways.

But perhaps it's been reborn in a way that I don't recognize yet.

Because it's undeniable, one advantage of the digital age is that books don't really vanish anymore. I can still get damn near every Bizarro title ever put to print.

I see a lot of small presses that aren't devoted to publishing Bizarro exclusively, but still put out a Bizarro here and there. Instead of more central Bizarro outlets, it seems like everyone's getting in on the game where they can.

Weird shit is more relevant to more people than it once was. Would we have Otessa Mosfegh without Bizarro? Jeff Strand? Would as many people know Stephen Graham Jones? Would we have *Ring Shout*? *Mad Max: Fury Road*? *Mandy*? *Willie's Wonderland*? Other, non-Nic-Cage movies?

Bizarro, dead or alive, made the world a weirder place.

Which means that even if Bizarro is dead, we've got no reason to grieve.

Ice Planet Barbarians: F***fest or Snoozefest?



Alien abductions, blue man sex, wormlike parasites, spaceships, Star Wars references, sassy heroines, oral sex puns—*Ice Planet Barbarians* is...a lot. And BookTok has taken note, dusting the frost off this bad boy 7 years after it was originally published.

One brave reader—me—decided to investigate and find out whether the book really is a rock solid banger or a flaccid slab of blah.

Let's lube up and slide on in.

Basically

Georgie is our heroine. Picture a youngish Sandra Bullock. Oh, and conveniently, that's what Georgie looks like. I recommend people spend time thinking about Sandra Bullock in general, it just makes for a nice couple moments, but in this case it's actually useful.

Georgie is having an average night until she's abducted by aliens.

You might be thinking that I've skipped a lot of backstory and character building, probably our hapless heroine spilling coffee on herself at her high-powered magazine job. Nope! I counted, and 215 words into the book, we're in space.

Georgie, along with about a dozen other women, are held on a spaceship, and best they can figure they're meant to be breeding stock for their alien kidnappers.

THEN, the kidnapping aliens dump their human cargo. Best I can figure (I use this phrase a lot with romance novels), it sounds like maybe some kind of Space Cop was pulling over the alien spaceship,

so the aliens dumped their cargo somewhere they could retrieve it later. Sort of like throwing a bag of shrooms out the window when you're getting pulled over on the highway.

The humans are scared, injured, low on supplies, and they're basically in a space shipping container, stuck on a planet Georgie describes as "Not-Hoth."

Georgie leaves the shipping container because reasons, and she encounters our hero, Vektal.



Vektal is tall, dark blue, and horny. Horns on his head AND enthusiastic about getting it on. He goes down on Georgie almost immediately after they meet.

Vektal and Georgie try and communicate, and that's some of the fun of the book, their learning to understand each other. The narration goes back and forth between them, Georgie telling her side, Vektal telling his side. It's a little like a reality dating show that way, where we see them together, then they go into narrator/confessional mode and we hear their inner thoughts.

Vektal is completely smitten with Georgie, and Georgie describes Vektal's cock so often that I could draw it more accurately than I could draw my own at this point.

There's a hell of a lot more, including the return of the evil aliens and some glowing parasitic worms who serve as a sort of intergalactic Tinder (it's complicated. And gross. So I guess it's EXACTLY like intergalactic Tinder), but I think you get the gist.

What I'll Give It

I am not a romance reader. I've only read one other romance, which I loved because it was about two warring Vegas magicians using an elaborate illusion to invade Area 51. Oh, and one of the magicians was named Rock Powers.

Ice Planet Barbarians is not pitched at me, it's not meant to please me, and it travels in book circles I mostly avoid because they are sexy and too many titles feature topless men that make my body look like a baggie full of mayo left in the sun. But...I'm sold on *Ice Planet Barbarians*.

It starts fast and keeps moving. We don't waste a bunch of time with worthless backstory that wouldn't matter because we're in space, so who cares if Georgie has a job that she'll never do again, you know? It's just, BOOM, we're in space.

Georgie is voice-y and fun. She's not someone you'd want to buddy up with in your Feminism 101 class (more on that soon), but you are 100% inviting her to a party.

Ice Planet Barbarians is weird. It's much weirder than some of the things I've read that are TRYING to be weird. Its weirdness comes from a genuine place. It's my kind of weird.

What Doesn't Work

Consent is the biggest bone of contention when it comes to this book.

There are a couple sexual assault things from the bad guys, but the bigger sticking point is that the meet-cute involves the titular barbarian going down on Georgie without her consent and mostly, kind of, against her wishes. It's complicated.

The phrase "it's complicated" probably wasn't invented for the idea of unwanted oral sex from an alien in a romance novel, but here we are, 2022, baby.

It's easily the most uncomfortable part of a book that also features a 7-foot alien killing an ice planet mastodon to get at some glowing parasites inside of it.

If lack of consent of any kind in fiction is something that you just can't hang with, do not read *Ice Planet Barbarians*. Seriously. You'll hate it.

And you'll be pissed at people who call it a light, fun read.

What The Hell Is Wrong With Romance Readers?

Lots of readers are kind of horrified by the consent issue (just check the top Amazon reviews). They're not wrong. It's easy to imagine some small tweaks that'd make *Ice Planet Barbarians* a gentler, more pleasant read.

Let's take a second look, though, for the sake of romance readers, some of whom I've met, and all of them are really, super nice.

I looked over some of the current bestsellers in romance. We've got a woman who has the hots for her English professor (power dynamics, anyone?), and LOTS of romances between a woman and her boss, including a woman who storms into her boss' office and finds him whacking off while moaning her name (jerked straight from the Louis CK headlines).



There are also romances that are very consent-forward. There are romances that are meant to be empowering. There are romances that emphasize condom use and safe sex.

We all have to agree on lines for real life, what we will and won't tolerate.

When it comes to fiction, though, we don't all need to agree. I, for example, refuse the "hitman with a heart of gold" in all non-*Grosse-Pointe-Blank* stories. With fiction, we can let people set their own lines, and we can let readers cross their own lines, too.

We've all got to set our lines and stick to them.

And we've got to let others do the same.

Why Is IPB Standing Out?

I went to a bar one time that had a weird, intentionally-creepy theme, like a haunted carnival or something.

There are plenty of themed bars that bring you in with promises of a good time, but they're a letdown

once you're inside. It's worth seeing once, but you'd never go back.

With the carnival bar, I went there for the theme, and once I was inside, it was pretty great. Cheap drinks, good jukebox, no TVs.

That's how *Ice Planet Barbarians* works. The bizarre theme brings you in, and then it doesn't suck, AND THEN you start having fun.

Ruby Dixon knows what she's doing:

Not every book has to be a Pulitzer-winning thinkpiece. I've always read escapist, happy fiction, so that's what I want to write, period.

If I was trying to impress someone on a first date, I might skip the carnival bar.

But if I just wanted to have fun, carnival bar is where it's at.

If I want to impress someone, I probably won't spend too much time talking about Ice Planet Barbarians.

If I want to have a good time reading? I'll pick up another Ruby Dixon.

Oh, and if you're a writer, I'm just going to lay it out there: This kind of basic storytelling might not be something you do a whole lot of. But readers are into it. They're spending money on it.

Just sayin'

The S-Word: Never Tell Someone They "Should" Read A Book



The S-Word for book recommendations isn't "shit," it's "should."

Although telling someone they "should" read a book is a shitty thing to do.

It sounds harmless, but you're putting people in a spot they don't appreciate.

And the result is that they'll turn away from a book they'd love.

Let's talk it out.

What People Should Do

If two years of pandemic taught us anything, it's that people hate when you tell them what to do.

Doesn't matter if it's for their direct benefit, doesn't matter if it could preserve their lives. If you tell someone they shouldn't dine at Burger King, something they didn't even want to do up to now, they'll be cheeks-deep in a Whopper before you can say, "Have it your way."

Is anyone out there looking for one more person to tell them what they "should" do? Is anyone actively seeking a relative unknown to give them advice on their day-to-day life?

Nobody likes to be told what to do. This extends to reading.

Tell someone what they "should" read, and you light the fuse on a defiance bomb.

I can't explain it, I can't tell you why we're all this way. It just is.

What's The Stuff You "Should" Do?

Take out the garbage. Start exercising. Call your mom.

"Should" stuff is the sort of stuff that you think will make you a better person or give you a better life, but "should" doesn't feel good. "Should" is not fun.

"Should" books aren't fun books. You don't hear anyone say, "You've been busy and exhausted lately. You should read a John Swartzwelder."

Reading doesn't always have to be fun, but most readers can figure out the "should" books for themselves. There's no shortage of "should" book recommendations and people who want to tell others what to read.

Use your energy to recommend books outside the "should" box.

Waste Of Space

If you're recommending a book, you might have a few lines, a few seconds, maybe a couple-hundred characters to get someone's attention.

Don't waste even a sliver of that already-tiny opportunity to say, "You should read it."

The text of your recommendation should make that part clear.

**Humiliation
won't draw
anyone into a
great book.**

Tainted Waters

When you're in a gym and someone gives you pointers on your form, usually with the phrase "Here's what you should do..." you can just about guarantee the advice-giver is some dumbass whose primary squatting experience was gained taking a drunken shit in an alley one night.

You might be a great book recommender, you might have the right intent, but you have to remember there are a lot of dillweed meddlers out there who've tainted the activity. Authors pimping their own books when they don't fit the bill, publishers who just so happen to recommend lists of things they published this year. People who run for-profit book clubs. Booktokers looking for those Likes.

These experts use "should" language all the time because it's important to them to be seen as experts. They've ruined "should" for the rest of us.

Embarrassment

When I used to coach middle school track runners, sometimes I had to have a talk with a kid who was entering puberty. A talk about body odor.

I'd never have this chat in front of the kid's friends. I'd definitely never use Twitter to tell a kid that a couple swipes of deodorant would solve the problem.

Telling another person what they "should" read in a public or online setting can be humiliating for them. It implies that they're doing something wrong, and it exposes that in front of everyone. It feels like everyone is watching to see how they'll respond.

Humiliation won't draw anyone into a great book.

Love Triangle

You told me what I should read, and now I'm reading, looking for the part that made you think I should read this particular book.

"Is it this section? That one? Hey, just what the hell did he mean when he told me to read this, anyway?"

The reading experience isn't about me and the book now, it's an investigation into what you think of me, as demonstrated by the book.

That's a terrible way to read.

Alternatives

Say what YOU liked about a book and what it meant to you. That way, when you're like, "I was pretty into the weird sex on an alien world with an Ice Planet Barbarian," the listener can make their own decision about whether or not they'd like that sort of thing. They can judge you instead of you judging them.

Say what other readers liked about it. Say what other fans of the book are like, in general. "Longmire readers like mysteries with some humor thrown in and characters you can really grow to like over the course of a series."

Talk about the vibe. "This book gives me a very *Better Call Saul* vibe. It's kind of hard to describe, but I just get a similar feel from it."

Make it clear that you're not suggesting a book instead of their current read, or even that this book has to be next in line. Just that they might give it a look.

Don't say someone "should" read a book you wrote. That's the ultimate arrogant jerkoff move. Tell them about your book, why they might like it, and let them decide to read it.

Just leave off "should." "Should" almost always comes at the beginning ("You should read this, it's a story about...") or at the end ("...a group of people try to save an arcade with a topless car wash. You should read it!") of the recommendation. Leave it off. The person you're talking to isn't THAT stupid. They can tell by your tone and your words that you're endorsing the book.

The Biggest Bit

When you recommend books to someone, it's about them, not you.

Squash the desire to be the person who recommended a great book to someone else. I know, it feels amazing, but you need to check your ego and remember that the point of recommending a book is to get someone to try it out, not to make you feel good.

Besides, if you nudge enough books into the path of the right readers, you'll get a thanks now and again.

Don't use a book recommendation to make someone else love, respect, or reconsider their opinion of you. Don't recommend a book so people see you as well-read.

A book recommendation should do one thing: put the book in the reader's hands.

"The Nineties", "Sex, Drugs, Cocoa Puffs", and Worsening Readers



Chuck Klosterman wrote two books about the 90s, one purposely so, one not so much.

Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs, Klosterman's best-selling book of essays, was written about 90s pop culture and came out in 2003. It examines 90s shit like *The Real World* and *Saved By The Bell*, and it does it in a very 90s way: taking seriously those things we considered bubble gum nonsense.

Klosterman's *The Nineties* came out in 2022, and it's a more intentional look back at the same decade that does...some interesting stuff.

Comparing these two books, about the same time period, by the same writer, showed me three things:

- Books are better now.
- Readers are worse.
- Critics have bottomed out completely.

Let's have a look.

Books Are Better Now Than Ever

Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs is a series of mostly disconnected essays about various topics, and its main gimmick is "What if we looked at fluffy, trashy topics in a serious-minded way?"

A newer idea at the time, but we're over it now, right? We've all heard the podcasts that dissect

bad movies, seen the *I, Tonya*, the *Pam and Tommy*. We all accept Ta-Nehisi Coates writing long, groundbreaking pieces in *The Atlantic* while also writing Captain America comics.

The intersection of "high" and "low" culture isn't new, and it's not enough to bring readers to books.

The Nineties is about the 90s, but instead of trying to look at the past through the lens of today, the book tries to make the reader understand what it felt like to live in the 90s. It's less a written persuasion, more an immersive experience where the reader is meant to perceive the defining events of the 90s as someone living in the 90s.

Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs is a good read, and it was a great direction for essays at the time. But it's also easy. "How could we have missed something so obvious 10 years ago" is the easiest sort of thing to write.

The Nineties combines pop culture, personal essay, and philosophy in a way that feels seamless, and it manages to be a new model of experiential reading without being all up its own ass about it.

How Readers Have Gotten Worse

Klosterman has made a career out of asking questions.

In *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, he famously put out a list of hypothetical questions. Some are silly, some are more philosophical, and my favorite is still:

You have won a prize. The prize has two options, and you can choose either (but not both). The first option is a year in Europe with a monthly stipend of \$2,000. The second option is ten minutes on The Moon. Which option do you select?

Everyone I know chooses Europe, and everyone I know uses the same reasoning: "There's nothing to see on The Moon."

How about the entire fucking planet Earth FROM The Moon, numbnuts?

You'll drink free on that story forever. But hey, I'm sure The Eiffel Tower is cool. Numbnuts...

Anyway, *The Nineties* is also more about questions than it is answers. Some readers are not liking this.

From Goodreads:

I found this book impenetrably weird and genuinely don't understand what points he was trying to make about, well, anything.

Much of the book is frustrating, I felt like yelling at the pages 'Klosterman, push harder!' Anytime he gets close to something like insight, he walks away from it. And so many of the opinions-taken-for-fact in this are just unverifiable.

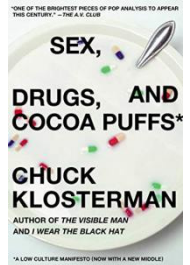
And the shift in reader preference isn't just from questions to answers, it's from questions to answers that represent the hottest, most unreasonable takes. It's like we've all decided the most valid and

engaging form of writing is the *NYT* Op-Ed that takes an obviously unreasonable and indefensible position (the one I'm working on: aliens are abducting and impregnating women, and therefore it's important that *Roe V. Wade* stay intact).

Why Readers Have Gotten Worse

Klosterman says that the 90s was a very easy time to be alive (for most Americans, relatively). We were only at war for 43 days of the decade. The economy was great. Violent crime was low. We didn't have social media.

I think, because things were easier for most readers in the 90s, we were okay with books asking questions instead of providing answers. Which is why *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* didn't hear the same criticisms as *The Nineties*.



Today, we don't want questions about The Moon, we want answers, and we want bonkers answers like, "The Moon represents the fascist dream" or "The Moon is the newest critical race theory battleground."

When we read *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, we read to explore someone else's thoughts, and when we were left with a question, we could take things further from there.

As we read *The Nineties*, we're looking for answers, either to reinforce our feelings or to give us a springboard for our own hot takes.

We readers are like that annoying asshole who considers a conversation to be either talking themselves or waiting to talk again, never listening.

We could listen more.

How Critics Have Bottomed Out

More than one critique of *The Nineties* goes like this: *Why did Klosterman write this book? What's the larger purpose or work it's doing? Does this need to exist?*

These utilitarian questions represent the dumbest-ass ways of looking at a book.

It's 2022. Books are not the most efficient or most in-depth way to deliver information or ideas. They're not the furthest-reaching or most flexible art form.

Books exist in 2022 because people enjoy the book experience.

This newer form of common criticism, critics asking a book to justify its existence, is boring as hell. And grading books on "usefulness" is like grading the inside of sewage pipes on "pleasing coloration."

But the worst part is that it doesn't really tell me anything about the particular book. "This doesn't have a clear reason for existing" is so generic that it wouldn't pass muster for a 4th grade book report, although the teacher would probably be impressed by the philosophical nature and a little confused on how to grade the concept of art as being useful as presented by a kid who's 9.

If you want to review a book by saying it's got no purpose in existing, I have no choice but to double-back and ask what the purpose of reviewing a purposeless book could possibly be.

How I'm The Absolute Worst

One more quick thing I pulled from this.

The star rating for *Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs* on Amazon is 4.3 stars.

The Nineties? 4.4 stars.

When I read *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, it was easy for me to ignore the bad reviews and see the overwhelmingly positive shit.

When I read *The Nineties*, I heard a few negative things and took it as a sign that everything is awful when it seems the majority of readers are digging it.

The bad shit sticks with me. I need to work on that...

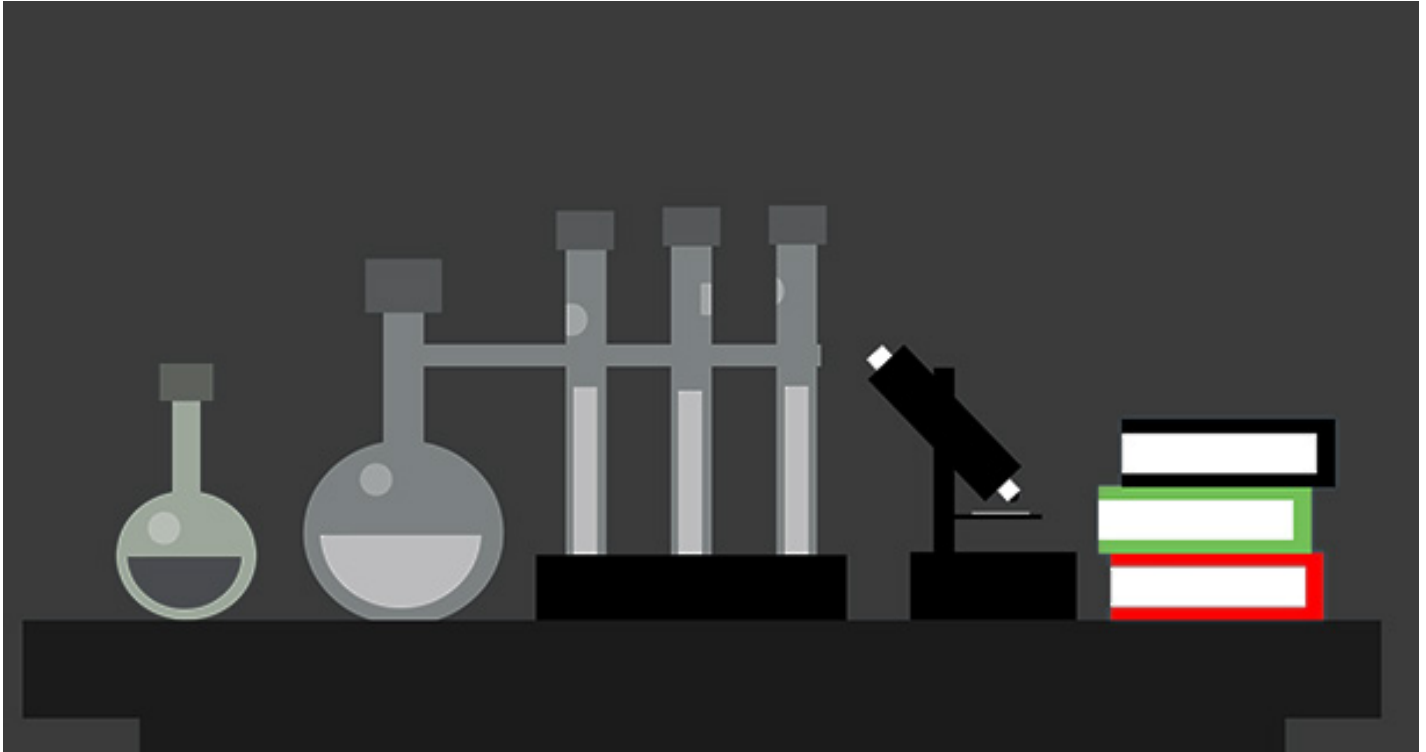
The Dream of the 90s Is Alive

The Nineties is a book that comes from a writer who worked through the 90s, all the way up to now, and never stopped growing and getting better. Klosterman has the perfect set of escalating, complimentary skills: his writing gets clearer all the time, and his ideas get more complicated and weird.

The Nineties is doing something new and different. It's an attempt at an immersive experience, making a person feel like they're in the era instead of reviewing the past, is a new direction for books, and if books are going to make it to the 2090s, they're going to need some new moves.

Maybe the best thing I can say: *The Nineties* is a book that the 90s would be proud of, provided it could get past its own Gen X apathy and allow itself to accept some well-deserved praise.

Build A Gaiman Writing Lab: Experiment and Get



If you ever want to make sure you do something: declare, in an article, that you'll never do it.

After writing a whole column about how I'd never re-read Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, I re-read Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*.

On a related note: Stay tuned for my next article: How I'll Never Outdance mid-2000s Usher.

What hit me reading through *Sandman* again, almost 35 years after it was birthed, is that lots of what Gaiman would do later—*American Gods*, *The Graveyard Book*, *Mythology*—it's all scattered throughout *Sandman*.

The kernels and flashes might just pop up as a panel here and there, but the little bits of Gaiman's entire career are all lined up in *Sandman*.

Almost like Gaiman wrote himself a to-do list in the form of a comic book.

First I felt ripped off. I paid twice for this shit!?

But then I calmed down and remembered: whenever you feel ripped off, try and figure out how the ripper-offer pulled it off and whether you can replicate it.

The Writer Problem

Writers don't generally get paid to dick around. You don't get paid so much for your experiments, you get paid for your products.

And when your products aren't viewed by a lot of people, you don't really know how they're being

received.

Gaiman solved those problems with *Sandman*, his lab space.

Sandman was a book with a main thread, but it diverged wildly from its main characters, its settings, all that shit. Which meant Gaiman could experiment within *Sandman*.

And *Sandman* brought versions of stories that could be expanded later for a larger audience. So Gaiman got to see what people liked.

And that brings us to the ripoff: How can I make fiction in a lab space where I write, get some feedback, and get paid to do it?

Discrete Fictions

Instead of putting every idea into a novel, write the short story first. Or, write a section, a chapter, as a short story, and see how it goes.

It's a lot easier to bend a story to your will than it is a novel, you know?

Send that shit out all over the place. If it gets published, hey, you made a little cash and you have some feedback that you're doing something right.

If it doesn't get published, rework it or publish it yourself, make a few bucks, and move on.

Chopping your long-ass books into smaller fictions gives you more chance to get feedback (someone might take a chance on a story as opposed to a whole book, if you hook them hard enough), and it gives you more product to sell.

Experiment short, then extend your success into longer pieces.

Patreon/Substack/Twitch

It might not be a boatload of cash, but if you start a newsletter or a read-aloud podcast or weekly novel excerpt newsletter or whatever, take an hour to set it up on Substack or Patreon or Twitch, and you'll at least have SOME cash coming in and SOME reason to make sure you're creating and putting out work regularly.

You can choose to give it away free on all of these platforms, but using them gives people an easy option to throw some cash your way.

As a bonus, you can get some idea of whether anyone's interested in what you're doing before you spend the time and energy polishing it to perfection.

Tweet No More

Stop giving Elon your work for free.

Whenever you go to write a tweet, write it down in a notebook instead, and turn it into a story.

If it's worth tweeting, it's worth turning into something you get paid for.

You might think a tweet like, "What do you all say to a short story about Freddy Krueger getting stuck in the form of a TV with arms and legs and having to live out the rest of his life as a TV?" is a way to collect feedback, but people will press a little heart button even if they have no intention of reading that story, ever, let alone purchasing it.

And, what they're really liking is THE IDEA of the story, not the story itself.

Transform your tweets into actual work, and put it somewhere you can get paid.

Other Formats

What Gaiman started in comics sometimes turned into short stories, novels, even kids' books.

An idea can begin in one medium and bloom in another.

It might be easier to make a little coin if you draft your story ideas, make your lab space, in video, plays, podcast scripts, livestream chats, and so on. Find a shitty beat and make songs out of your ideas, like Wesley Willis. Design the book covers for the books you'll never write. Post a daily comic strip.

It's not always easy to get paid for writing, but if you have another skill, you might be able to commodify that a little more easily and see which ideas seem to attract readers.

Assignment

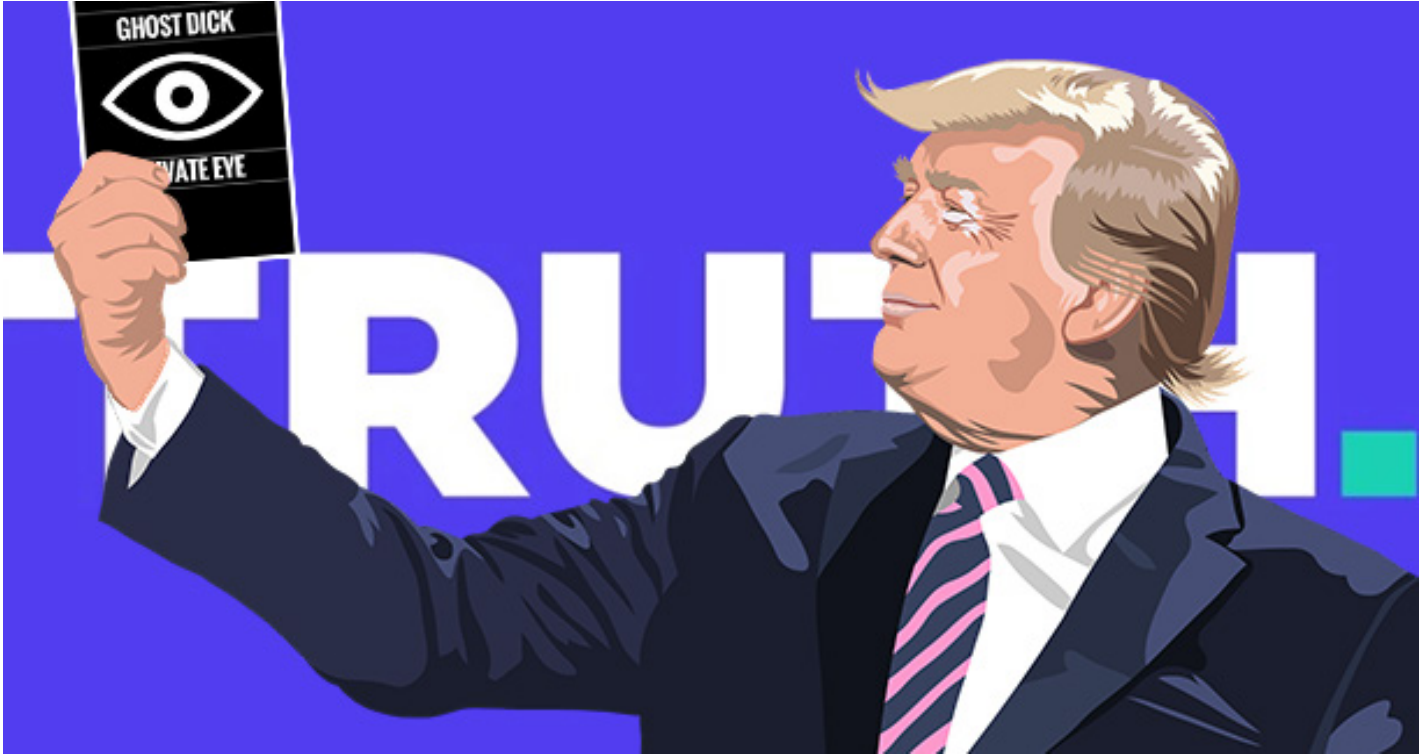
Every day, before you go to your regular-ass, boring-ass, ass-ass job this week, put a notecard in your pocket. By the end of each day, you must emerge with ONE story idea, one line of dialog, one SOMETHING written on your card.

An interaction with someone, an email, whatever, something that'll spark one story idea needs to come from every work day this week.

Then, the next time you're chatting with friends, bring up the stuff on your notecards, and see which ones prompt your friends to tell their own versions of the stories. Those are the ones you need to write.

Get in the habit of using your boring days at work to come up with ideas, and hey, enjoy being on the clock while you do it.

Selling Books on Truth Social



Truth Social is taking social media by storm.

What?

There are pathetic storms that don't really have lasting impact, right?

Either way, is it possible that Truth Social, Donald Trump's new social media platform/spite project, is a fertile ground for book selling?

Let's find out.

The Ground Floor

Social media platforms always start slow.

Twitter used to be home of the inane micro-blog, shit like, "Had lunch, yum!"

Instagram started as a place to photograph said lunch.

TikTok started as a humble platform where people do dances. And look at it now! It's...still that, but very popular!

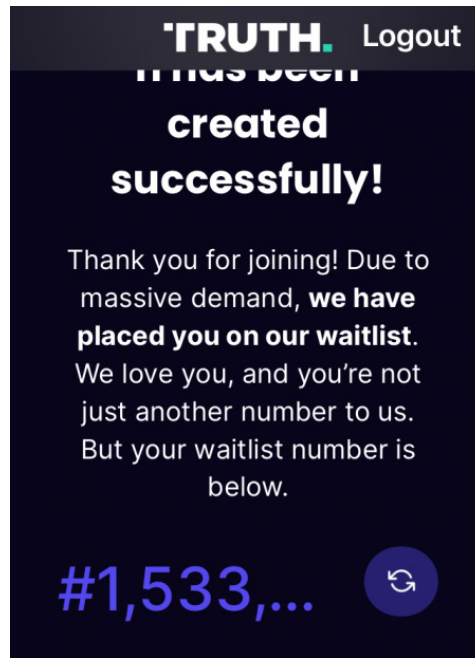
Truth Social isn't big today, but starting small and shitty is sort of how social media works. Truth may follow the others and go from small and shitty to BIG and shitty in the near future.

You Matter

On Twitter or Facebook, or YouTube, TikTok, extremely basic websites, MySpace—to use them, you enter some info, and bam, you're in.

Truth Social puts you in a queue.

Then they give you this highly ironic screen that tells you you're more than just a number, and here's your number.



In the spirit of Truth Social, which is probably the best place for wacky conspiracies online, I'll share an unfounded theory as to why Truth doesn't just open the floodgates to new users:

It sucks.

And if Truth can slow the tide of people jumping on, they slow down the flow of information outlining exactly how much it sucks. Which some might call the truth.

Ethics

While I waited for approval, I debated the ethics of selling on Truth Social with myself.

That debate was short, and went like this:

I mean, fuck ethics. If conservative weirdos want to buy my books, hey, their money spends.

Buying Adspace

While I waited some more because the approval process is slow as shit, I checked whether you can pay for ads on Truth Social.

Nope.

Try any other platform, they make it easy as hell. Spotify, Google, TikTok—you don't even need a TikTok profile to throw an ad on TikTok.

Hell, LitReactor has affordable rates and reaches a very dedicated, book-centric audience with an easy-to-use setup. Wink.

Truth Social, what are you doing? People want to throw their money down a digital toilet, you've got a gigantic one. Sell me a flush!

Creating a Persona

Finally, I was in!

First things first, I had to create a persona to engage other Truthophiles (this is what I started calling them because of the frothing, sexual excitement some display over on Truth).

For my profile pic, I took a selfie of me slumped in an easy chair, looking constipated as all hell. Which seems to be the selfie of choice of conservative men my age.

Then I Truthed about things I thought conservatives liked.

That's what they call Tweets over at Truth Social: Truths. So you don't Tweet, you Truth. You don't reTweet, you reTruth. I'm tempted to say this is the only difference between Twitter and Truth, but that'd be like saying the only difference between fresh feces and old dried up turds is the temperature.

I used hashtags, some of which I made up, I think:

#SaveAHorseRideAConservative

#SaveAHorseEatACow,Boy

#LiftedTrucksAreWellSpentBucks

#OWLED (this is short for Owning Woke Liberals Every Day. It has not taken off)

And then I peppered in plugs for my books.

I was Truthing hard.

And Truth was not making it easy.

What's It Like To Use Truth Social

Truth Social is a goddamn ghost town. Although that might be insulting to ghost towns because ghost towns were usually popular at one time.

Also, lots of bots roam the streets of Truth, so I guess whether or not Truth is deserted depends on your views of AI personhood.

**I was Truthing
hard. And
Truth was not
making it easy.**

Not many conservative thinkers or speakers or politicians or what have you are actually on Truth Social. Most of what you'll find there are fan accounts for fourth-tier politicians whose closest experience to Presidency is sniffing dollar bills soaked in someone's ass sweat.

What's the app like as far as user experience?

In the 90's I tried to play Tomb Raider on a completely underpowered laptop with a trackpad. The computer was so slow you had to sort of predict how long it would take to reach the edge of a platform, push the jump key a few strides early, and hope you'd correctly predicted the lag. I never really figured out whether my gun fired when I tapped the key, heard the gunshot sound, or saw the firing animation, all of which happened at different times. Everything was janky and wrong about the way I interfaced with Tomb Raider. This is sort of how it feels to use Truth Social.

Why Truth Doesn't Work

Imagine McDonald's adds a pretty solid vegan menu to their offerings. In response, Burger King installs plexiglass boxes on the side of each restaurant where a dude chainsaws the heads off of live cows 24/7 to make the burgers that are eaten in front of the slaughtered cows' mothers.

What Truth doesn't understand is that when you've got a problem, like Twitter being too progressive, the answer isn't always going full blast in the opposite direction. In the above example, BK could just lean into being a carnivore's paradise, but a full-on Extra Cruelty Menu isn't really pleasing anybody.

I thought Truth was going to be like Twitter, just more conservative overall, but Truth goes so hard on conservative politics that politics is all it offers.

Who in the fuck wants an all-politics social media platform?

Did I Make That Money?

I did not. I did not make that money.

However, I barely move any copies on ANY social media. So...sales-wise, Truth Social sucks about as hard as everything else, which is to say that it sucks completely.

At this juncture, I will declare that I've made the ethical decision to remove myself from Truth Social. It is my hope that others will see this bold move and purchase my books to support me.

Any sales port in a commerce storm.

Ethics Revisited

There's probably a future where a right-wing platform actually works, or an existing platform could change in such a way that it becomes more right wing. When that happens, writers will have to make a hard choice about where and how they promote their books.

Or, maybe not. Maybe they've already made that decision.

Because there's no such thing as ethical selling on social media.

Your book might be good, your heart might be pure, but Tweeting about it brings people to a platform where your goodness is surrounded by an unending, churning moat of bullshit for people to wade through.

There's no ethical version of bringing people back to that moat, and every time you sell your book on social media, you stand on that moat's far shore, cup your hand to your mouth, and yell to complete strangers, "C'mon, take another dip!"

Here's my last Truth: social media is a shit moat, and when I see a shit moat, it doesn't really matter to me whether the shitters who filled it are conservative or progressive.



Things I Never Want To Read In An Opening



If you're on the search for an impossible writing task, here's one for you: Write an intro to a column about intros.

THAT'S pressure.

A bit back I was on the hunt for some books with great openings. I found a few good ones, but, damn, a lot of books have crappy openings. Even modern books are making the same mistakes we should've trashed a long time ago.

Here are some of the worst ways to open your book. Please, just...don't.

Names

Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy.

-The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis

Names don't tell me anything. How old are these people? What do they do for fun? Are they good kids or little assholes? Are they kids, or are these lions? Witches? Wardrobes?

Names are empty info. Might as well tell me blood types.

I can tell you how the name thing sneaks into a book.

You write a whole book, you craft these characters, you love them, you go through so much shit with them, so by the time you're done, their names mean something.

What you forget, though, is what it was like when you first settled on those names, when they didn't really mean anything. That's the experience your reader will have.

I can think of an exception, though:

They say Maniac Magee was born in a dump.

-Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli

When your character's name is "Maniac," feel free to put it in the opening.

Clocks and Calendars

Nobody tells a great story about something that happened at work by starting at the VERY BEGINNING OF THE ENTIRE DAY.

"Okay, so my alarm goes off at 6. I brush my teeth, and I start thinking about..."

We get it, people wake up, brush teeth, shit out shits, and do normal stuff. Putting that in your story is like having a preface that reads, "The whole time this story is happening, these characters are also breathing and their hearts are beating." Oh, okay, groovy.

When you start with a time or a date, you're telling us that you just have no idea how to start your story. And if you have no idea how to start your story, I lose confidence in your ability to middle and end your story, too.

A Landscape

The connection we feel to a place comes from the instant information we get from our bodies, not from spooling that info out over a couple paragraphs. Words are just not the ideal way to deliver that sort of sensory information. They're slow, and they never get you all the way there.



Any landscape photo gives a better sense of place than carefully-wrought prose ever could.

You can describe the environment later, but if you start off your book by telling me about arroyos and shit, if that's your most exciting opening, I don't have a lot of faith in your book.

The Reset

Of all the things that drive men to sea, the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women.

-Middle Passage by Charles Johnson

This one starts with a banger, but it leaves me with a problem: The first sentence is a complete thought, and it's a good line, it does give me hope there will be more like it, but it's almost an entire story by itself.

Which leaves the reader forced to reset, already, at the beginning of line two.

What works better is an opening that feels incomplete without the sentence that follows. Something that forces me to resolve the opening by reading the next sentence. Put a question in my head, leave something dangling for me to pick at.

Age

If you say your character is 35, people understand that, but if you say your character is breaking out a nose hair trimmer for the second time this week, that gives your reader an age range while also giving the reader something better than a number. They probably won't remember a character's exact age, but they'll remember the perfectly rendered feeling of humiliation that comes with your body betraying you in weird ways as you age.

**Your opening
is the time to
think a little bit
commercially.**

A Job Title

Most job titles are pretty boring and don't really describe what people do. What's a "Library Technician III"? What does that person do? And what does that job title tell us about the person? Anything?

In the old "show, don't tell" tradition, just show the person working. I'll understand what kind of job they do, and if the character describes how they feel about the job or how they perceive it, I'll also learn something about that character at the same time I learn something about the job.

The Worst To The Best

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

-1984 by George Orwell

1984 starts with a trifecta of crap: weather, season, and time.

And the twist at the end tells us that George Orwell knew those things were boring as all hell, and he put them in there on purpose to set you up for the surprise that comes at the end of the sentence.

If you've written an opening sentence you're not sure about, try to twist it like Orwell did.

Imagine it's the opening to a different kind of story, a sci-fi story or a comedy. If you can twist it 1984 style, if a little effort makes it into a far more interesting sentence, then scrap your opening and do something else.

Your opening is the time to think a little bit commercially. To think about a reader standing in front of a bookstore shelf with thousands of options within reach. What is going to make them pick your book?

Damn sure won't be "Pete sat down to write a column about novel openings on a sunny, mild, spring day."

The Bookish Hugeness Of Fall 2022



Summer sucks for readers.

And I don't care what you all say, summer sucks, in general. It's hot, everyone smells. It turns out that powdering your crotch to keep the sweat at bay kills you, and yet, some days, given the choice between whiffing the odor when I take my pants off or being dead, the grave doesn't sound so bad. At least it's cool under the dirt.

The best thing about the summer is that it ends. And with summer's end, especially THIS summer's end, comes some truly huge book releases.



"The Passenger" by Cormac McCarthy: October 25, 2022

McCarthy fans know it's been way too fucking long since we got a book from him. 16 years is one way to put it, but I prefer to think that if I put down *The Road*, his last novel, and immediately impregnated someone, that kid would be (kind of) able to drive by now.

Now, look, I'm not going to puff anyone up, the description of *The Passenger* sounds kind of weird. Like some nonsense where a writer of submarine-based thrillers is taking a crack at literary fiction, but he can't resist calling one of his characters "Bobby Western."

But let's be fair, the description for *All The Pretty Horses* certainly does it no justice:

All the Pretty Horses is the tale of John Grady Cole, who at sixteen finds himself at the end of a long line of Texas ranchers, cut off from the only life he has ever imagined for himself.

I'm going with faith. If you tasked me with selecting one writer to believe in, I'll go McCarthy every time.



"Toad" by Katherine Dunn: November 1, 2022

I'm not always big on posthumous novels because, well, sometimes a person finishes a novel and sticks it in a drawer for a reason. Sometimes the thin wood of that drawer and the author's steely resolve are the only things protecting the world from a truly shitty novel.

But with *Toad*, I've got a few reasons to believe we're in for a treat.

First, *Toad* was meant to come out in *Geek Love's* spot.

A lot of times when you see a novel come out after the author's death, it's a first novel, something really, really unfinished, some garbage that only hits the shelves because the author's legacy is strong enough to breed completionist readers.

It's not usually something from the writer at the height of her powers, which Katherine Dunn was at the time of *Geek Love's* publication.

Second, the reason she didn't release it. Here's Dunn's son, Eli Dapolonia:

It was written in a very dark period — she was kind of down, kind of depressed...She was normally such a positive person, so she decided she didn't want it published.

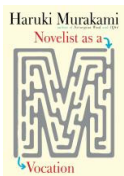
I don't need to revel in Dunn's particular tragedies, but...if I'm going to start turning down books by writers feeling the blues, I'm going to run out of reading pretty fast.

Third, it seems like Dunn's last book, *Cut Man*, which was set to come after *Geek Love*, won't be released any time soon. Again, Dapolonia:

She didn't want it out there...Those were her wishes.

If *Toad* was a Katherine Dunn Estate cash grab, I'm pretty sure we'd be seeing *Cut Man* right now, too.

So, because it's from Dunn at her best, it's reason for not coming out was more personal than artistic, and because it seems her estate is willing to let money stay on the table, I've got every reason to believe *Toad* is going to be fucking fantastic.



"Novelist As A Vocation" by Haruki Murakami: November 8, 2022

I'm a sucker for two things: Books from Japanese authors and books about writing.

Novelist As A Vocation is both.

If I'm a sucker for THREE things, that third thing would be sports books, and Murakami's previous non-fiction, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, was damn fine.

Murakami's running book gives me confidence that Murakami's writing book will give us something worthwhile. I mean, it's got to be easier to write about writing than it is to write

about running. No offense to any runners out there, I count myself among you even though it'd be charitable to call my wheezing shuffle a "run," but damn if there aren't a shitload of BORING running books out there. "Oh, you put one foot forward, then the other? Riveting."

By the way, if I'm a sucker for FOUR things, the fourth thing would be pizza. I do not know if this book will involve pizza, but I'm doing that thing where you wish for the life you want in an attempt to manifest it.

Hey, it works every summer. I wish for the summer to end, and it always does.



"Stella Maris" by Cormac McCarthy: December 6, 2022

Stella Maris isn't exactly a sequel to *The Passenger*. It's not exactly part of a series. The two books are just sort of interconnected, far as I can tell.

This is the sort of nonsense that I'd dismiss completely if anyone but Cormac McCarthy were doing it. I'd figure they'd just chopped up one book into two, or I'd figure they had an unexpected hit on their hands with the first book, so they ballooned out a second book. Either way, I'd figure it was a cash grab.

But that's almost impossible here. Nobody really knows if *The Passenger* will be a success. It could be a bomb, and if it's a bomb, you can just about guarantee *Stella Maris* will bomb even harder. This is a lesson I learned from the *XXX* movie franchise. As in the movies starring Vin Diesel and Ice Cube. I'm not referring to all of pornography as a "film franchise."

This whole endeavor is a risk. It probably doesn't look like it to bookish people, but in the larger context of the actual, real world, we're talking about risk on the level of doing up close street magic without bringing a condom (I assume street magicians are constantly being offered sex).

Do people really remember Cormac McCarthy? Did people who read *The Road* because it was an Oprah pick ever get into *Blood Meridian*? Is this the book everyone's been waiting for, or just me?

But you know what? I really don't give a shit how anyone else feels about this. Because if you're not pumped, you're objectively wrong.

And it's good to see publishers taking a risk like this. I'm in.

Where Is The Guy Fieri Of Books?



Guy Fieri wasn't my favorite person on Earth, and then he dumped a garbage can full of nachos out onto a table on a morning show, and...I had to recalibrate.

I like food a lot. But I'm not particular. Or maybe the better word is "fussy." I'm not fussy about the kind of food I like.

With food, there's a place for fancy schmancy, and there's a place for the churro, the hot dog, whatever fever dream flavor can be (just barely) legally put into a Doritos bag.

And the man who brings us those wilder foods, sometimes by dumping them out of AN ACTUAL GARBAGE CAN, is Guy Fieri.

What are the hot dogs, the churros, the flavor-dusted chips of books?

And who will step up, frost his tips, and bring those books to us?

What We've Got Plenty Of

We've got book critics, book pushers, and authors who also talk books—we've got tons of those folks who take the world of books extremely seriously. They fill your reading list with thoughtful, heartfelt books that feel like an entire meal.

A fancy meal, that is. One with a huge bill, and one where you feel like you have to mind your manners. From the moment you sit at the table with these folks, you feel out of place. What the fuck do you need all these different forks for?

Nobody feels out of place, nobody feels lesser-than, when the food comes in a garbage can.

Books need a Guy Fieri because books need to spend some time outside The Times. Someone needs to showcase that while fancy is great, books can be fun, too.

I must become...Guy. Guy Literari

But how?

Be Unflappable

Here's Kristen Stewart talking about her wedding plans on Howard Stern:

...we did hear that Guy Fieri from the Food Network officiates a lot of gay weddings... And so the idea of that man—that sweet, sweet spiky-headed man—coming to our wedding and officiating, it just makes me laugh so much.

And you know what? Guy is in. He's said so much. He's just waiting for the invite.

Guy surely knows that Kristen is making fun of him, at least a little. And his response is to plow forward, unbothered, take the invite at face value, and promise everyone a good time.

Plus, you know the food at that wedding would be fun as fuck.

To be the Guy Fieri of books, I must be unflappable. I must take the criticisms of my books with not just a grain of salt, but with a fucking fistful, pounded into a side of beef, which is then covered in Donkey Sauce. I must be relentlessly positive whenever I review a book.

People will make fun of me. They'll mock my energy. They'll hate my always-5-stars reviewing style. So what? Once I'm Guy, I'll be having too good a time to notice.

The Beer Question

Every Presidential election, we eventually get to THE question: Which candidate do you want to have a beer with?

Now, look, this probably hasn't resulted in our greatest Presidential outcomes. And it's a little dishonest because your choices are always two old weirdos who think it's a good idea to try and be President.

The Beer Question is a stupid way to pick a President, but it's a great way to think about an entertainer. "Who do you want to spend a half hour with, possibly while a little drunk?" How else do people pick a TV show to watch?

Guy Fieri is the celebrity chef you want to have a beer with, for sure. Who else is even an option? Gordon Ramsey? Too intense. Anthony Bourdain? Too dead. Paula Deen? Things are going to get awkward when she gets tipsy and starts whispering about "the help."

Guy is the celebrity chef you want to have a beer with.

To become Guy, I need to be the writer you want to have a beer with.

Because reading someone's book is a lot like having a beer with them. In both scenarios, you're spending some one-on-one time with someone, and if things go right, they'll tell you a decent story.

Readers have to look at me and my work and feel confident that I'm a good time.

Fun Is Job One

Preparing food is one of life's great joys, but a lot of times, parents ask their kids if they want to cook with them and then tell them to go peel a bag of potatoes. That's not cooking — that's working!

Guy gets it. He drives around to fun spots, eats fun food, has high-energy chats with the chefs.

Let's put it like this: You have to take over one Food Network show for the rest of your life. Which one do you pick?

The one where you're overly serious about food, where you're in constant competition? Or the one where you roll up in your convertible and chow down on some of the best barbecue you've ever laid face on?

To become Guy, I must embrace fun. If I'm having fun, my readers will have fun. I need to approach book reviewing with the idea of making other readers jealous that they aren't reading what I'm reading.

To become Guy, I need to have fun.

The Fit

I'm a five-seasons griller. I don't care what the weather is like. My hair is impervious to any kind of dampness, so I don't have too much to worry about.

If you described how Guy is dressed on TV (bowling shirt with flames on the bottom, lots of jewelry, expensive sunglasses on the back of his head), you'd think he was a Blink-182 fan who's just hung onto the same look since 1999. Only difference, these days when he sings along to "What's My Age Again?" he adds a good 30 years onto the lyric "Nobody like you when you're 23."

It's a look, it's a commitment. And it sets him apart.

Guy looks right for his sector of the food world. That's the guy you expect to roll up to your diner and tell you he drove 14 hours to get there because he heard you have really good biscuits and gravy.

To become Guy, I need the fit.

Crocs. With Croc Nuts.



The hair.



The shirt (yes, this is customizable with two faces, and yes, those faces will be me and Cormac McCarthy. Driving a convertible together in a Hawaiian sunset scene).



And, of course, these bad boys:



Boom. I'm ready.

Check in with me soon. Once all this shit arrives, and I really did get all of it, I'm set to transform. To enter a Cool-Ranch-dusted chrysalis and emerge a loud-ass butterfly you can't help but love.

Invite me to your reading if you doubt me. I'll bring the audience to Flavortown.

Join Me

Guy Fieri can do it alone.

Guy Literari, I'm not so sure.

Join me. Have some fun with books. Talk and write about books that are fun here and there.

Write unabashedly silly shit that gives everyone a laugh.

We've all tried it the way things are now where we give long, serious answers to interview questions, where we obsess on the tortures that bring about our art.

I've got the top down on my convertible. I've got my tips frosted as fuck. I've got a garbage can full of nachos, waiting to be dumped onto an unsuspecting reader's table.

You can stand off to the side and make sardonic quips about how goofy this whole thing is.

Or you can hoist the garbage can with me. Together, we can tip a much larger, much tastier garbage heap onto readers' plates.

And you know what? Even if you'd rather just watch me, you're still invited to sample my garbage can full of trashy, empty literary calories.

Because I'm Guy Literari, and everyone is invited to my particular back alley of Flavortown.

My Plan To Shape Up A 700-Page Manuscript In Less Than a Year



It's a great and terrible thing to finish a 700-page manuscript draft.

Great because, hey, you did it. Pop some champagne. Or a tallboy. I'm told that France says it's cool, beer in a tallboy can can be officially designated as "champagne."

A 700-page draft is also terrible because, holy shit, you've got 700 pages of gobble-de-book with maybe 200 pages of usable novel hidden inside. If you're lucky.

I suspect I'm not alone here. Lots of novelists out there, and would-be novelists, will find themselves in this spot: You've got a HUGE monster of a manuscript that needs turning into a decent book.

Let's work on a plan together.

1. Mo' Pages, Mo' Problems

Have you ever spilled a whole sack of flour down a flight of carpeted stairs?

That's what a super long manuscript is like. You don't even know how to start the cleanup. You go for the vacuum, but you track more flour across the floor. You clog up the vacuum filter and then sort of blow flour all into the air.

Everything you do creates a new problem, and it gets worse before it gets better.

Long, long manuscripts are like that.

Let's accept it together as step one: this is about to get ugly.

2. Inventory Readthrough

Step two is a full-on readthrough.

This thing is bound to be full of all kinds of shit that Pete from 7 years ago tossed in there, stuff that makes Pete from today question that old Pete's grasp of writing and plotting and basic narrative, probably even rudimentary punctuation.

I need a full readthrough, like an inventory, just to see what I've got on my hands.

The commitment on this readthrough is to only do two things:

1. Circle things that you need to check back in with later.
2. Sectioning the manuscript off into different scenes.

That's it. No rewrites, no gussying up any lines. This is just a breeze-through, one that moves fast to push us to the next step.

One of the mistakes writers make with a long manuscript, they start line edits on word one, readthrough one.

You'll never make it through if you start at the very beginning. A very good place to start, indeed...

Let's read this thing, then we can edit it. Let's listen to what the pages have to say, uninterrupted.

3. Is It A Book?

Step three is a Yes or No decision: Is this even a book?

Yeah, it's a stack of pages, a collection of words and ideas. But is this something I can and should try and make into a book?

I hope the answer is yes. But I need to be open to the possibility that the answer is no. It could be a pile of shit.

An hour in front of paper will at least give the day a different texture.

If the first readthrough, that breezy, simple glide over the pages is a slog, a labor of Hercules, probably most like the one where he had to clean out a super shitty stable, if there's just nothing that lights me up on that readthrough, it might just plain suck, and my time might be better placed elsewhere.

4. Section Work

As a joke, Tom Spanbauer, after being asked repeatedly, said the perfect length for a short story is 7 pages. Really, there's no perfect length, but you can only hear the same question so many times from so many beginning writers before you just say fuck it and come up with an answer.

With my book broken into sections from my readthrough, I'll put a name and one-sentence description of each section on a notecard, and then look through what I've got, what I need, what I don't, what could move around, and so on.

5. Story Style

Now that I've got my tidy sections, I'll print out all the sections and mash each one down into a tight, 7-10 page story that mostly, almost, stands alone and has its own reason for existing.

The edits will look at each section as its own thing, give each its own attention.

This lets me bring a section with me in my pocket. Print it out, carry it around. Do the work in small packets.

It breaks the work down into manageable chunks. I don't have to run at this huge pile every day, just a few pages here, a few there.

On the reader end, which will still be far, far away, I hope this will help me avoid a common writer's trap where books sag in the middle because we all go over the beginning dozens of times, the end about the same, and the middle suffers neglect.



6. Connective Tissue

Once I've got my short stories worked out, I'll put them back together, start at the beginning, and add in any necessary connective tissue that's missing between the stories.

I'll shoot for too little connective tissue rather than too much. It's the easiest shit to add back in if I really need it.

7. Out Loud

I'll read the whole thing out loud. That's no big deal, something you've all heard before.

Then I'll record myself reading through it and listen back, like an audiobook.

Once you claw deep into editing, it's hard to hear your book like a reader again, like it's the first time. You're like a contractor who walks through a building they worked on from start to finish. You still see the scaffolding, still see what's behind the walls.

With audio only, no page in front of me, maybe I'll be able to pick out those pieces that don't work, nail down voice problems, and see where I'm just plain bored.

A Couple Other Tricks

These aren't steps, they're things I'll do along the way to help me chug through:

The Alley

I used to live in a house on an alley, and it was THE place to leave crap people didn't know how to get rid of. Old TVs were big, couches, and even once the door to a semi. Driver's side, if you're in the market for one.

The Alley in my manuscript is a huge blank space at the end where I paste sections that don't make the cut, but maybe I'm hesitant to throw them out. That way, I can shut up the stupid part of my brain that thinks I'll REALLY want those lines later.

Printing Out

I've printed out this first draft, and I'll print out another once I've got it chopped into stories.

I'm a believer in the paper draft just because it's easy to carry around. It's easy to edit. And I spend enough time in front of a computer. An hour in front of paper will at least give the day a different texture.

Breakdown

If I do 20 pages a day on the first readthrough, that's 35 days of work.

I'll have something like 70 sections of 10 pages each. If I get through two per week, that'll have me at 35 weeks or 320 days. Too long. 3 per week is 163 days. That's better.

Next readthrough, 5 days.

Audio reading, another 5 days.

Listening through, let's call that 5 days.

Cleaning it up, another 10 days.

That'd put me 223 days out with a manuscript that's in some kind of decent shape.

February 21st, 2023.

I'll be there with some sort of manuscript.

Will you be there with yours?

Why I Put a Book On A Gameboy Cartridge



I did it. I put a book on a Gameboy cartridge.

That's right, anyone with a Gameboy, 4 AA batteries, bird of prey eyesight, and a desire to read one of my books can finally achieve their very specific dream.

But this isn't about a victory lap, although it IS an achievement for me—I am NOT smart.

This is about why.

Why would I make the effort to do something so pointless and silly?

The Conversation

I really suck at author interactions. Even with people I know from before they were famous published authors, which is only a couple people, but still, it doesn't seem to matter. I suck at talking to someone across a signing table.

I don't think I'd do a whole lot better propped up on the other side of the table. I'd probably end up on one of those Twitter threads where people talk about bad celebrity interactions. Just for extra sting, the posts about me would start with, "He's not really a celebrity, but..."

I need to improve my authorial, chatting-with-people game before I even consider selling at a table, and the game cart gives me a conversation piece. A launchpad, if you will.



It gives me something to talk to readers AND authors about. Because even though I'll be the worst writer on any convention floor, guaranteed, I'll probably be the only one selling a book on a Gameboy cartridge. That's something, at least.

It Does Say Something About Me As A Writer

I don't take myself all that seriously. I'm here to entertain. Most of what I write is silly, and I'm looking for readers who are ready for that.

There's only so many ways I can say that in prose. The mere existence of a book on a Gameboy cartridge is another way for me to get the message across.

Only a goofball would put a book onto a platform that's mostly inaccessible, and even if you've got it, it's not a good reading experience.

I'm the goofball who'd do it, and I'm looking for my fellow goofballs who'd appreciate it.

It's Memorable

When I look at the books I've got on the shelf, for a lot of them, I remember where I was when I finished them better than I remember what happened in the story. When I see *The Road*, I remember turning the last page while laid out on this sectional couch in my old apartment, a couch someone was throwing out. I remember reading *I Loved You More* in the bathtub a little drunk on expired beer.

Seems to me beer doesn't really expire. Not to where it won't do what's intended.

Meeting me is not going to be an experience for anyone. I hate to let you down, but if you were anticipating meeting me in person for some reason, it's probably better you find out now. At least spare me having to witness the disappointment in real time.

Coming by a table and picking up a Gameboy with a book on it, that's an experience. Okay, it's not like having sex on the hood of a car while fireworks blast up above you, but as far as meeting a stranger at a folding table in a hotel event space, it's not bad.

I think that's the job. Maybe not of writing, but of selling books. Give someone an experience. Something they hadn't considered before.

Some people provide an experience by writing something insightful or thoughtful or clever. I provide that experience via a goofy gimmick.

Gimmick

This whole thing is a gimmick, but it's not a trick.

The difference between a gimmick and a trick is that with a trick, I'm making you believe something that's not real.

A gimmick doesn't hurt anyone. It delivers what's promised. I'm no different from the first person to

make a pop-up book, or a Bible where everything Jesus says is in a different color.

Well, maybe that last example is going a little far. I'm different from whoever did that. For many reasons.

It's not okay to trick someone into buying one of your books. But a gimmick that makes someone look twice? Seems fine.

Knowing My Place

My books won't be sold in the airport, ever. I will never be asked to be on Oprah. Your mom probably won't read anything I've written. Not on purpose, anyway.

I've started marketing my books as good for converting into booksafes, because in order to check for cash inside one of them, the thief would actually have to touch one. Based on my sales, the odds that a thief would decline seem to be in your favor.

I'm not going to become rich by selling my books as wonderful reads.

Which is fine.

The thing is, I read about this dude, Roland the Farter. Guy was a jester for King Henry II.

Legend says Roland, one time, entertained the king by performing one jump, one whistle, and one fart, all at the same time.

For his services, Roland got a manor with 30 acres of land.

Some people got their land by fighting for it, some kept their land by fighting for it. Some worked hard to buy a house. Roland cut a fart. A special fart, but still.

I am not a Cormac McCarthy or a Jonathan Franzen or a Louise Erdrich. I am a Roland. I will fart a book out onto an outdated format.

Maybe it'll get me a manor, maybe not. But it's the only way I know.

How It's Done

Maybe you want to give it a whirl, rip off my one shot at being a hero and steal my thunder.

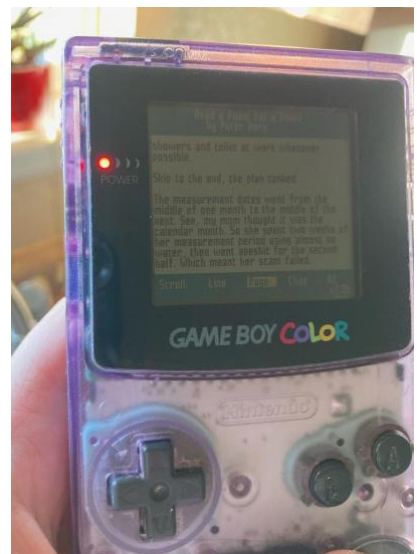
Fine. You know what? Fine.

Step 1: GameBoy Book reader

This software (<https://www.mqp.com/fun/>) converts your book file into a .GB file. Follow the directions, this part is easy.

Step 2: BennVenn

You can use any cart dumper/flasher/reader/writer you like. I



recommend this one because it works, but also because it's got a really great help Discord that set me on the right path when I couldn't get things working. For a few days.

Step 3: Carts

Buy some carts. They're usually cheap, although right now they might be pricier than normal. My advice is to A) make your book file first and see how large it is so you can get large enough carts, and B) get carts that are known to work well with whatever cart dumper you select. This will save you a lot of headaches.

Step 4: Label

I mean, you HAVE to make a sweet label. Here's a template.

Step 5: Get Rich

Just don't forget your ol' pal Pete.

Writing Advice for Non-Writers



You're not a writer, but you have to write something.

HUGE fucking nightmare, right?

You're a best man, you've got to say a few words at a funeral, you've been asked to write something up to promote your business or to say a few kind words about someone.

Let's not panic.

I've got a few quick tips that'll guarantee you won't embarrass yourself.

What Do I Write About?

Okay, so you've got your assignment. What do you say?

Here's the best advice I ever got. I'm giving it to you up top, just in case you're not inclined to read this whole column:

Imagine you're meeting up with a good friend, the kind of friend you only see every couple of years, but as soon as you see each other, it's like old times.

You have a beer, then start in on a second beer, and about mid-way through that second beer, your friend asks you about something. In this case, your friend asks you about whatever it is you need to write about. That speech you're giving, that short column you're writing.

What do you say to your friend, and how do you say it?

That's what you write.

Try it out if you have to. Have a couple beers, and pretend you're talking, out loud, to a friend.

There's your outline.

The Magic of One Incident

Don't write your best man speech with general shit: "He's a good guy, he's always there for me."

Instead, replace the general with one specific incident: "Here's what happened the time my car broke down and Jeff came to my rescue."

It sounds weird, but it's easier to explain the whole of something or someone through one small, specific instance. It gives you more places to go in the piece. It gives the thing a beginning, middle and end.

This is the difference between writing a story ("So there we are, stuck on the side of the road...") and writing about ongoing action ("Jeff is the kind of guy who likes to help out").

Don't tell me about a general vibe. Tell me a story.

Knock Out The Rough

If I tell you not to procrastinate, I'll waste your time and mine, so instead I'll tell you to go ahead and procrastinate, just do it LATER.

Don't wait until the day before your piece is set to run to get started. Instead, bang out a complete rough version, fast as you can, early as you can, then let it sit.

This gives the piece time to roll around in your brain, same way a rock tumbler polishes a stone.

For all you non-dorks out there who got real presents instead of nerd presents, a rock tumbler takes a rough-edged rock, rolls it around in sand for a few days, and out pops a polished thing of beauty.

Your brain will do the same thing. If you can push out that rough rock of a draft, your brain will tumble it around while you're in the shower, when you take a walk, while you sit at a stoplight.

But if you don't get a rough version out there, your brain's got nothing to tumble.

Get that rough material down, then let your tumbler do the rest. It makes the process a lot less painful. Hurts less than sitting in front of a blank page two hours before the damn thing is due.

Two Lies About Punch-Up

The First Lie: Lots of folks who don't write much try and write each and every sentence perfectly as they go. I get it, the idea is "If I do this right the first time, I'll only have to do it once."

Don't fall for that. It never works.

Instead, get that rough version, then punch it up. Get the basics down on paper, almost like an outline, then refine it, make it funnier at the funny parts, sadder at the sad parts, cut out the boring parts, and clear up anything that doesn't make sense.

The Second Lie: Non-writers (and some writers who don't know what they're talking about) are sometimes convinced that doing too much revision and drafting will somehow take the soul out of the thing, like a piece that's been worked will lose its rough edges, which make it special.

Trust me, "overworking" a piece is not writerly wisdom, it's an excuse to half-ass the thing. The rough parts aren't what make your piece raw and unique.

Draft number five will be better than draft number one, always, every time, forever and ever amen.

What To Look For

How do you edit something? How do you punch it up?

Read it out loud. Like, REALLY loud, like you're in a big room with a bunch of drunk people and the microphone doesn't work.

If something doesn't sound like you, then it needs to change.

Try and take out any verbs that end in "-ing." Yes, I'm being picky, but trust me, it works.

Look for things that aren't clear. Make them clear.

Cut for length. Unless there's a length requirement, shorter is always better.

Always In Your Pocket

Print your latest draft, double spaced, one-sided, and carry it with you, always.

Great writing gets done while you wait in a line, between sets at the gym, while you wait for your food, when you show up early and have to kill some time.

That time you'd normally kill on your phone? Kill it with your piece. Just for a few weeks.

And really, print it out. You can have it on your phone, but your phone also has all this other great stuff that'll be WAY more enticing than your piece.

WID: OTB

The second-best piece of writing advice I ever got: when in doubt, go on the body.

What this means is, when you get stuck, give me a physical sensation. Heat, smell, touch. Touch is huge.

Lots of folks will go to something else when they get stuck. Dialog, scenery, all that shit. None of that captures someone's attention like a physical sensation.

If you're stuck, write your way out with something physical, close, and intimate. Your body will never steer you wrong.

Anything But

Instead of the old saw about "show, don't tell," I'm going to give you a specific directive:

When it's time to wrap up, end with anything but "And what I learned is..."

That phrase is the sign that you're telling me something that you should've shown. Or that you're not trusting the audience to pick up on your point.

By the end, I should know how you feel about someone or something, or I should have a pretty good idea why you're writing the piece without hearing a thesis statement.

End on a physical gesture. End on another small, specific thing. End with an on-the-body sensation. Anything but a "and the moral of the story is..." or "in conclusion..." or "I learned that..."

Leave me with something that sticks.

Smell the sawdust in your grandma's workshop one last time. Bite into your uncle's famous homemade pizza.

Hell, squeeze my balls, with love or with anger. Either way.

Alan Moore's Incredibly Underrated Writing



Writing Down The Bones, Bird By Bird, The Elements of Style, and On Writing: the Mount Rushmore of "How to write books."

Alan Moore's *Writing For Comics* isn't up there. Why? Is it because he's English?

Writing For Comics belongs up there with the greats. It's thoughtful, it's a quick read, and holy shit, it'll save you a ton of time and heartache as a beginning writer. The advice is practical and it's easy to apply yourself.

Oh, and here's the big one: It's not just for writers of comics. It's for storytellers of any kind.

Let's do a few highlights below, see if we can't convince a couple of you to read it for yourself.

Plots and Ideas

The idea is what the story is about; not the plot of the story, or the unfolding of events within that story, but what the story is essentially about.

Lots of writers, especially starting out, don't know the difference between the idea and the plot, and they usually forget one or the other.

I'll make it super brief:

If I ask you to tell me about the movie *Prey*, and you tell me about a series of events, usually with the phrase "and then, and then..." then you've probably told me the plot, the forward-moving events. If you told me, "*Prey* is about how someone who is physically outmatched can use other skills to overcome a problem," you've told me what it's about.

Good stories need both, a thing they're about and a plot that spools it out.

Transitions

If a transition is handled incorrectly, what it does is bring the reader up short against the fact that he or she is reading a story.

There's an entire section in *Writing For Comics* on transitions that's packed with concrete advice, all of it backed on this premise: when you do a sucky job writing your story, people are aware they're reading a story, and that defeats the point.

A lot of us blow it in the transitions. Alan Moore can help you fix that.

Worldbuilding

The most obvious way to do this is to explain the rudiments of your world to your readers by way of caption boxes or expository dialogue, but this is also to my mind the most unnatural method and in many ways the least effective. It just happens to be the easiest, which is why it's used so often.

Please, damn, if you're building a world, build it and then tease it out for us. Don't just shit it out onto one page in an exposition dump or in an awkward explanation between two characters that makes no sense.

Simple Ideas

If I want a realistic-sounding name for an ordinary citizen of Louisiana I look in my Houma telephone directory until I come across one which strikes me as having a nice ring to it: Hattie Duplantis is a nice name. So is Jody Hebert.

Kids, you probably won't have access to a phone book, but that's okay, I have an alternative:

Use findagrave.com. Plug in the location of your story, plug in a good date of birth for your character, and pick out some names.

Names are always hard, but they don't have to be.

I'm telling you, this book is packed with little tidbits that'll change your work for the better.

Method Acting

When Moore was writing a story that featured Etrigan, The Demon, he looked at the artwork for the character and did an act-out:

I imagined the immense weight of my body, which was now much smaller, and saw that this would give the movements of the body a sort of terrible momentum. In keeping with the feral nature suggested by the front teeth I tried out the sensation of

hunching myself up like Quasimodo and squatting slightly as I walked...I tried the voice, thrusting my upper teeth out and curling my upper lip until it became difficult to talk clearly. Making any sort of sense at all seemed to necessitate talking very slowly, which suggested a sort of slowed-down gramophone quality to the voice, very deep and guttural.

Doing something like this with your characters will help you get into their mind, and more importantly, their bodies.

Deep description of a character is better when you don't just tell me the character has an overbite. Tell me how it's hard for him to eat certain foods. Tell me about words your character avoids because he has a hard time saying them. Put yourself in the body of your character, and you'll be able to put the reader there, too.

On Challenging Yourself

Attempt things that you are not sure you can accomplish: if you're certain that you can do a thing, this means that there is little to no point in actually doing it. The reason you're sure you can do it is that you or someone else has done it already.

I always have a place on my to-read list for an interesting failure. A boring, paint-by-numbers plot that we've seen a dozen times already, done competently? Pass.

Rep

Reputation is a trap that will turn you into a lifeless marble bust of yourself before you're even dead.

How is this not quoted everywhere, all the time?

Parting Words

Finally, if you want to be a truly great writer, it is perhaps worth remembering that even in this, it is more important to be a good human being than it is to be a good writer.

Truth is, I know why *Writing For Comics* doesn't make the Mount Rushmore of great how-to-write books. It's that "comics" word. Most people see that, and say, "I don't want to write comics."

But I'm telling you, this is some of the best, most compact, cleanest and clearest writing advice I've ever read, and almost all of it applies to any kind of storytelling.

It WILL make you a better storyteller.

How Creatives Can Get Along With Business Types



When you write for you, you can write whatever the fuck you want, however the fuck you want, and whenever the fuck you want.

When you publish, or when you apply to an MFA program, you apply for a residency, or you take on a writing gig for hire, or you work to adapt a book for the screen—with all that stuff, you have to do your thing, and you have to get along with business types while you do it.

It doesn't have to be a horrible, painful experience, though. It can be rewarding, and it can work out to everyone's benefit.

Why You Need To Get Along

They've got the money. They've got the distribution channels. They can turn your manuscript into an ebook that's polished and doesn't have those weird spaces between words and paragraphs, those ghosts in the code that haunt every self-pub author.

That stuff's obvious, right? If you get along with the business types, they'll help you out today, and they'll be more inclined to help you out again in the future.

What's less obvious is that if you can get along with these folks, it opens opportunities for other creatives later on.

If a business type has a terrible experience with, say, a muralist, how likely is it they'll hire another muralist in the future? If that same business person walks away from a mural project happy, maybe

they give someone else a shot.

Keep that in mind: Getting along with business types isn't just about your future as a writer, it's about the future of other writers as well.

Business Standards

Business types may have expectations of timeliness, the way you're dressed when you come into the office or connect over Zoom. You might swear casually, and that might not go over so great with a board of directors. You might check email twice a week, and that might not meet expectations.

They might feel that part of what they're paying you to do is to conform to their standards at certain times.

If you don't know the behavior norms and standards, ask what they expect of you.

By the way, I'm not talking about a stupid standard of professionalism that wouldn't allow for natural hair or for women to wear pants.

What's "reasonable" is up to you, just ask what the standards are, negotiate where needed, and factor all of that in when you decide to take the job (or not).

Procrastination Makes Them Nervous

If your business types never hear from you, they get itchy, and that itchiness manifests in annoying ways. You get weird emails, micromanage-y messages, and other bullshit that wastes everyone's time.

Show them something along the way, a portion of a draft, a set of edits, a sketch, hell, a stock photo of a bunch of Post-Its on a whiteboard that MIGHT be a plot. Anything, really.

It's good if you can show them something. Even a word count update will help them feel like it's all okay.

Find Your Ally

If you're lucky, someone involved really wanted this project to work, and they selected you to do it because they believe in you.

If you're slightly less lucky, you were selected to do this job, and it fell to someone to monitor you, check in, manage you, basically.

Either way, someone has a stake in your success, and that's the person you need to talk to. Ask what

You might need to explain that working on a shared document that all the board members can view and edit is not conducive to writing something good.

you can do to make their life easier. Ask how they see all of this going. Find that person who stands to gain or lose the most, and you'll find your best ally.

They Might Make Terrible Suggestions

Your business types might not know about drafts and how those work, and you might need to suggest that reading your first draft will make them unnecessarily nervous about the final product.

You might need to explain that working on a shared document that all the board members can view and edit is not conducive to writing something good.

Part of your job is to guide them through a creative process, which might be somewhat new to them.

And treat the people asking dumb questions as though they are smart, just inexperienced in this realm.

So You Think Your Benefactor Is An Asshole...

I know, I get it, wealth is inherently evil. Etc.

Look, we can debate this forever and convince absolutely no one. Let's cut the shit.

I'm not here to debate the ethics of wealth. I'm here to tell you that if you feel insurmountable disdain for your benefactor, get out. It's not worth it. You'll be miserable, they'll be miserable. No good will come of it.

If you can't talk to your business contact without grinding your teeth, just get out.

Even if you produce an awesome book, you'll seethe whenever you see it on the shelf. No partnership is worth that.

When It Goes Wrong

When shit goes wrong, and it will, here's what I want you to remember:

You're a creative person, and being a creative person means you can always create something else. That's your gift, that's your talent you've cultivated, that's why you've worked so hard up to now. It wasn't all for the sake of making one thing, it's because you want to make a lot of things.

The Penguin Merger: Court Is Now In Session



If you're anything like me, you heard about Penguin Random House buying Simon & Schuster for a million billion dollars, shrugged, and went back to deciding whether your book sales for the entire last quarter could buy you one of those stupid margaritas with a beer upside down in it.

Here's the thing, though: while all the business types are talking about the merger, and while they all make it sound like the only people who really need to worry about it are rich bastards with their rich bastard book advances, this merger might have a much bigger impact on you small-time writers and readers.

Order In The Court!

The best way to spool all this out is courtroom style. I've always wanted to write a courtroom scene.

Order! Bailiff, arrest that man! [judge hammer sounds]

In the list of celebrity judges, qualifications-wise, I fall somewhere between Judge Judy, Judge Dredd, and Gary Busey: Pet Judge. Which brought us a case about a remote controlled car made out of a dead raccoon.

What. Even.

Discovery

Let's make this short:

Penguin Random House wants to buy Simon & Schuster, which would bring The Big 5 Publishers

down to The Big 4, or maybe it'd be The Big 3 and Enormous 1 (I don't know, what am I, a mathematician?).

The U.S. Government is looking at whether this move would damage the book industry in a terrible, unfair way.

Penguin Random House's Argument: *This merger would help us pay better advances and negotiate for retail placement in a field that's very uncertain these days.*

Everyone Who Isn't Them: *This merger would give one entity so much power that the rest of us can't compete.*

A Little Bit Longer Now

What makes this a little complicated is that the Department of Justice isn't claiming that this is an issue of monopoly, it's one of monopsony, a word I'd never heard before researching this column, but let me reassure you, it would make for a board game at least as tedious and awful as Monopoly.

In a monopoly, there is only one seller of a product, and the concern is that consumers are harmed by lack of choice in what they buy.

In a monopsony, there is only one buyer for a product, and the concern is that sellers are harmed by decreased competition when they go to sell their work.

So, the DOJ is claiming this merger harms workers (writers and agents) selling products (manuscripts) as opposed to consumers of those products (readers) having only one purchase option.

Why Isn't The Government Mentioning Consumers?

I've heard two credible theories:

1. The government would find it very difficult to prove the "quality" of books increases or decreases based on the number of publishers, difficult to prove by any sort of objective measure, so it would be exceedingly difficult to say that this merger is definitively "bad" for consumers.
2. This may be the government using the book industry to test out the monopsony laws, and if they get a win here, it could mean they can make other labor-focused laws that would dismantle some big businesses in ways that favor workers. So, like a YouTube star using the book world as a cash-in, the government is riding the book world, only to abandon it after its payday.

That Damn River

Most folks assume that part of the reason for the merge is that Penguin Random House (PRH) wants to have some leverage in dealing with Amazon.

Oh, you poor, deluded fools.

PRH CEO Markus Dohle said early on that this isn't about fighting Amazon, it's about becoming an

"exceptional partner" with Amazon.

It gets worse.

PRH put out about 28% of the books published in 2021, and Simon & Schuster was somewhere around 10%. Which means a combined total of 40% of books would come from one publisher. It would easily be the largest and most powerful publisher of books.

PRH made \$4 billion in 2021, it's all-time best sales year.

Let's not mistake PRH and Amazon as David and Goliath. If Amazon is Goliath, PRH is not David. PRH is seeking out an "exceptional partnership" with Goliath. Which I assume consists of selling Goliath t-shirts at fight nights.

Author Advances

A big issue I have, and you should, too, is the focus on large author advances.

PRH says the ability to pay larger advances will improve the book industry. The DOJ doesn't necessarily agree.

As neither of those entities, here's what Stephen King had to say:

When I started in this business, there were literally hundreds of imprints, and some of them were run by people with extremely idiosyncratic tastes, one might say...Those businesses were either subsumed one by one or they ran out of business. I think it becomes tougher and tougher for writers to find enough money to live on.

If PRH wanted to sell the world on this idea as a good thing for books and reading, they should go with "more author advances," not "better author advances." Because, really, who is out there demanding the Stephen Kings or Jodi Picoult's of the world get better advances (not even Stephen King believes in this shit, and he'd be one of the few beneficiaries!)?

Readers and writers, I'm certain, would prefer a larger number of modest advances paid to a whole bunch of authors to paying already-high-earning authors a little more. Paying Jeff Strand an advance good enough that he could lease a 3 year-old Camry is much better for the world of books than bumping up an already-huge advance.

In my imaginary court, I also represent Jeff Strand against a ridiculous lawsuit from the Chiodo brothers, who claim *Clowns V. Spiders* rips off *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*. I rule in favor of Strand, accuse the Chiodos of not actually reading the book, and then we all have donuts. My court is much more fun than real court.

Penguin Kind of Sucked

Penguin, back in the day, made ebook licensing really difficult for libraries.

Penguin only wanted to lend out their ebooks if they'd be subject to a process that involved downloading the book to your computer, then kicking it over to an ereader through Adobe Digital

Editions. Let's not get into this process other than to say it sucks, and all it does is punish readers who are just trying to read a damn book, meanwhile it does absolutely nothing to prevent book piracy.

Library folks get jaded. Salty. Minerals are used to describe us once we've been in the business a while, and because of our mineral properties, we don't forget.

I haven't forgotten that Penguin had the silliness to go against library lending as opposed to plugging other holes in the system that permit digital piracy.

This may just be stupidity, not evil, but the effect was still the same: barriers between readers (who were trying to do the right thing) and books, proposed and implemented by Penguin.

Penguin Fooled Us Once

Penguin's acquisition of Random House is what brought The Big 6 down to The Big 5.

In Penguin's acquisition of Random House, Penguin said the Random House imprint would remain mostly intact, and the editors who worked there and so on would still have jobs and print books. There would still be a competitive market for books.

According to industry insiders, this is total bullshit, and most of those Random House folks are gone.

With this new merger, PRH is saying that Simon & Schuster will still be in competition with PRH.

We've been down this road once before, we were told this same lie, by this same company. Are we going to believe it twice?

Matt Damon Eats Hot Wings

Wait, what?

Okay, on an episode of *Hot Ones*, Matt Damon pretty quickly explained why "they don't make movies like they used to."

Making a movie has always been a financial gamble, but in recent years, the only shot you've got to make your money back is during a movie's run in theaters. With the rise of streaming and the disappearance of the DVD market, movies can't make much money once their theater run is through.

What this means is that studios can't really survive by making 10 movies per year, each of which is expected to turn a modest profit. They can't make money from movies that don't succeed in theaters, but find an audience later on.

The only way to survive is to put out absolute juggernauts and sweep the box office for weeks on end.

So kiss your thoughtful dramas and your romcoms and your other shit goodbye, we are in the age where only cinematic spectacle that "has to be seen in theaters" will see major release. Only those movies that people see multiple times in the theaters will have a place. Which means: I hope you

REALLY like *Star Wars* and superheroes.

My suspicion is that the PRH merger will bring the problems of the film industry to books: only those authors that can return the investment of a very large advance 10 times over will have a place on bookshelves, theirs will be the only books that are sent out for review, and they will be the only ones who go on book tours.

All your favorite mid-tier authors. Poof. Gone.

PRH is digging a tunnel straight to the same hell movies are in now, and it's whistling with each shovelful of dirt.

Diversity

Let's not belabor this one:

76% of what PRH published from 2019 to 2021 was written by a White person.

I fail to see how having a smaller number of people publishing a larger percentage of books can result in anything other than homogenization.

Judgment Day

[cue *Terminator 2* theme]

You ever read those Supreme Court decisions? Herman Melville would be like "Christ, maybe you went overboard on the details."

This is my decision, and I'll keep it briefer and much simpler than those dipshits.

I'm an American. I have apparel with the American flag on it, should I need to prove my patriotism.

Therefore, I believe in the free market.

However, I also believe in a fair wage for work provided.

Right now, it's goddamn difficult to make it as a full-time writer out there. Near impossible.

And yet, there's an entire industry that exists only because of the work of writers, and, sure, a steady stream of celebrities cashing in by lowering themselves to working in the medium of print.

I believe in a competitive market, and in the book world, that's made up of of a large number of editors and agents, some of whom are total weirdos with bizarre taste. Because some readers are also weirdos with bizarre taste.

**Working 5
hours to buy
a new release
that's gutless
and heartless
as a dead
dog on the
side of the
road in bear
country, that's
unforgivable.**

I believe in artistic markets, and those can't always be based on what's mathematically likely to provide the highest return, playing moneyball with books and big data.

I also believe in the rights of the American worker who doesn't write, and who deserves to spend their hard-earned money on books with some fucking balls.

If you're in one of the 20 states where minimum wage is \$7.25, working 5 hours to afford a new release sucks, but working 5 hours to buy a new release that's gutless and heartless as a dead dog on the side of the road in bear country, that's unforgivable.

I rule in favor of the American people, nay, the readers and writers of the entire world.

Sorry, Penguin Random House.

And sorry, also, to future me. When you go to send a manuscript to PRH, and it gets rejected...it's your own damn fault.

Use Your Library to Save Your Library



Once your library closes, once it loses a big vote, once a book comes off the shelf due to public pressure, it's done. It's over. The dream is dead.

There is one way and only one way to keep your library from getting fucked up: use it.

You Hate These Assholes Removing Books From Libraries?

Me too, bro. And you know what's the best way to make sure that doesn't happen?

Use your library.

Check out those controversial books BEFORE someone decides they're evil.

It's a hell of a lot easier to keep a book on the shelf when the library can say, "I understand you're upset, however this book has checked out 25 times in the last year, which is a strong indicator that the community is using it."

Read the same books a bunch of times. Check them out in print, audio, electronically. Check out all three copies, dump two right back in the checkin on your way out.

If you buy a book and read it, check it out from your library anyway.

By the way, I know a couple people right now are like: Um, excuse me, that messes up library statistics.

Calm down, dipshit. If this was about statistics, you could look up the number of kids who have been "turned gay" by a book, see it's hovering around zero, and we wouldn't be in this situation to begin

with.

Make Requests

When someone is like, "What the hell are you doing, buying this awful stuff?!" the best thing the library can pull out of their files is a request, from someone in the community, for the exact materials in question.

When someone wants a book removed, the library often has to defend the abstract idea of the community, hypothetically, wanting this material.

When someone wants a book removed, and that book was specifically requested by a community member, the library gets to defend that reader/requestor/community member's right to read, which supersedes the imaginary right to walk through life unoffended.

Request your library buy stuff. Gay stuff, transgressive stuff, political stuff, furry stuff, all kinds of good stuff. Send those requests in!

Just limit yourself to things you actually want to read, okay? Let's not start trolling the library by seeing what they'll buy.

Use Services

Damn near every library I've checked has a version of a service where you tell them about books you've liked, and they give you a list of books they think you might like.

This service is always free.

And the people who run it are just about the best people for the job.

The thing that makes these folks so good is that when they read, they read for themselves, and they also read for people like you. They read stuff they don't personally like for the sake of saying, "You know, someone who reads James Patterson would fucking love this."

Have a librarian make you a booklist for your book club. The hidden bonus: If a book on the list sucks, nobody in the book club has to feel bad about recommending it. You can collectively blame that stupid librarian.

Have a librarian make a booklist that helps you buy a book for someone's birthday or a holiday.

When services are in demand, it helps libraries keep things rolling.

Make It Personal

Tell your friends and family how happy you are to take your kid to storytime, or that the library has your books on the shelf, or that your library provides something that you would hate to lose.

Caveat: This only works if you're not a total asshole.

Use the library, and tell everyone about how you use it.

That way, when the community votes on the library's continued existence, all those folks in your life, who might not use the library, will flash back to, "Oh, yeah, Steve told me all about how he took his kids there...geez, I don't want to vote to close that. I like Steve."

For some people, their buddy Steve is a more powerful incentive than the generalized idea of "the community."

Caveat: This only works if you're not a total asshole.

How Libraries Die

You know how cats die.

One day, they're fine. The next, they won't move. You go to pick them up, and for the first time you can remember, the cat takes a swipe at you.

You manage to get the cat loaded up and into the vet's office. And once you're there, you find out the cat's already too far gone. Probably suffering for days, maybe even weeks.

Libraries die like that, too. Slowly, for a long time, in silence.

By the time that big, public blow happens, the library is so weakened that it can't put up a fight.

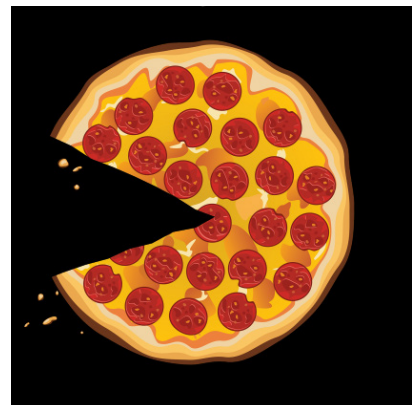
That's why you need to use your library now.

If something happens to your library, you can tweet about it, you can write to the Board, you can do all these things, but none of it is as effective (or as easy) as using your library every couple of weeks, now, BEFORE there's a problem.

Simplicity

Look, this is very simple. It's like you're asking how you can make sure your favorite pizza place stays open, and I'm telling you: Eat there every couple weeks.

Except it's like I'm telling you, "Eat there every couple weeks, the pizza's free, and believe me, there is someone, somewhere in your community who will shut it down if you don't."



Selling the Story of Your Story



Kevin Smith racked up huge credit card debt to make his passion project, *Clerks*, shot inside a convenience store, where he actually worked, late at night.

To promote *The Lottery*, Shirley Jackson told stories (probably at the urging of her publisher) about being a witch and casting a spell on Alfred A. Knopf that caused him to break his leg while skiing.

Bon Iver and Thoreau, to greater and lesser degrees, sequestered themselves in cabins to complete their works.

Stories that succeed and stick around have something in common: there's a story outside the story, a non-fiction narrative that wraps around the story's creation.

To help your story get a foothold in the world, write a good one, and then develop the story of the story.

The Basic Appeal of the Small Story

Imagine you host a late night chat show, and you bring out your guest: John Carpenter.

Carpenter could run through the plot of *Halloween*, but that'd be pretty boring: a guy escapes a mental institution and starts killing people until one of the people kind of kills him back, the end.

But what if, instead he told little story about how the famous mask was purchased for two bucks before it was altered to look less like Captain Kirk, or maybe a tale of how they had use and reuse the same bag of leaves to make California May look like midwest fall?

And in that little story, you'd get an idea of John Carpenter as a person, as a filmmaker, and, most

importantly, a storyteller.

The Story of The Story is Relatable

We can relate to someone patching together a Halloween atmosphere in a movie filmed in May. We can relate to someone who has to take a huge financial risk to try and get their story out there. We can relate to someone who's devastated by a tragedy, takes that pain and writes a book.

The story of your story makes you into a real person instead of a name on the cover of your book. You're no longer a stranger to your potential reader.

The Story of the Story Deepens The Story

When I hear the story behind Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke*, it breaks my heart every time.

The story is something like this:

Palahniuk was on the road. He was at a low point. And he got the urge to pull over and lay down in the road. It was the middle of the day, he was dressed nicely, and eventually, someone would come to his aid.

And when they did, they would have to touch him. And that would be human contact. That's how desperate he was to be held, to be told "Everything is going to be okay."

When you hear the story of the real-life person who would go to such lengths for human contact, you read their book in a different way. The book, as outrageous as it is, probably holds back a little. It's not as heartbreaking as the truth behind it.

The story of the story gives a glimpse into your book without sacrificing a single word for the sake of marketing.

The Story of the Story Sells

The wraparound, non-fiction story doesn't require the late night host, the interviewer, the podcaster, or whoever you might talk to—the small story doesn't force them to actually read your entire book.

The story of your story turns you into a much easier interview, a much easier person to write about. It gives people a foothold or a starting place for a conversation with you. During which you can sell your book.

The Story of the Story Bring the Reader In

It's like a behind-the-scenes documentary, a quick peek into how the sausage is made. It gives the reader something that feels like VIP access to you and your book.

The Story of the Story Preserves the Story

What's beautiful is you can tell a complete beginning-middle-and-end type of story ABOUT your story without spoiling anything IN your story.

Your story, which is for sale, is still intact, all of its surprises and delights and sorrows still preserved for the reader.

The story of the story gives a glimpse into your book without sacrificing a single word for the sake of marketing.

How To Develop The Story of the Story

SOMETHING must have inspired your story. SOMETHING must have happened that changed the course of the story or broke the block when you wrote a certain scene. SOMETHING must have happened in your life during the writing process, and you must have done SOMETHING to either maintain the integrity of your work or change the work to fit your new outlook.

SOMETHING must have happened when you were selling your story. Maybe you did something special with rejection emails, like printing them out and putting them on the fridge. Maybe you decided to submit your story 100 times before giving up. Maybe you trolled one of those shitty publishers that ask you to pay a ton of money for, basically, nothing. Maybe you designed a new cover for your book every week, and you can show everyone your graphic design progress (or lack thereof).

Maybe you did SOMETHING after you published. Made a giant poster with your worst review. Built a one-book bookshelf that's perfectly-suited to hold one copy of your book.

Identify that SOMETHING. If you can't think of anything, then DO SOMETHING.

Tell the story a few times. Hone it. It doesn't have to be perfect, identical every time. Just make sure to get the laughs in there, the heartbreak, and make it a story you can tell in just a few minutes.

The Story Of the Story Is The Story

When you tell a good story about your story, it's a demo, a bite of the whole meal.

It shows you care a lot about this story. It shows that the story is worth your time, your money, your sweat.

And that might just convince someone else that it's worth their time, money, and sweat, too.

Time's Chainsaw: Why You Should Set Your Horror In A Specific Time Period



Urban Legend isn't exactly in the pantheon of horror movies that embody the late 90s. It wasn't as self-aware as *Scream*, wasn't as intense as *Final Destination*, and it didn't fly under the radar as hard as *The Faculty*.

But the one thing *Urban Legend* does better than the rest: It screams, bleeds, and oozes 1998.

At this point, almost 25 years later, the 1998-ness of *Urban Legend* is by far its best quality, and that's not a slam. Because even though it's not a top 5 from the era, it's a decent watch, and it's so 1998 that it has a slight edge over some of its competitors.

Still, plenty of writers will try to remove signifiers of time from their horror stories in order to make them feel timeless.

I'm here today to encourage you to do the opposite, make your horror stories SO [insert year here].

Time Is Unavoidable

Most of us figure that if we take out technology, fashion, and brands, we'll move a story out of time and into timelessness.

Like my stomach, this approach has a two-fold problem:

Fold One: the signifiers of a specific time aren't really known until that time has passed.

If you wrote a horror novel in the 60s, and you wanted it to feel timeless, you'd probably avoid references to contemporary music. And then someone would smoke indoors. Because you'd have no idea that'd be a weird thing in 40 years.

Fold Two: the ways we try to make something "timeless" end up highlighting their era.

We've been through a couple different periods where making your movie black and white was an artsy, timeless thing. But it's less timeless, more 1994/2016.

The ways we attempt to give an air of timelessness are, themselves, signifiers of time.

You can't avoid time.

So how can you take advantage of it?

The Universal is Specific

Back in the day, if your family wasn't rich, you wore Sears Toughskins instead of Levis.

A decade later, Toughskins were replaced by Wranglers as the less wealthy family's jean of choice.

When you explain that your character wears Toughskins instead of the more desirable Levis, I know what that means, even if that's not my era.

When you lean into your era, it helps the reader see your experience as their experience. I know, it's counterintuitive, but what's universal is growing up broke, not the specific names on the label of the jeans you can't afford.

Setting your characters in a specific time makes them more relatable, and when a relatable character gets stabbed in the face, readers give a shit.

Time Engages

There's an appeal to a non-fiction element, even in a highly fictionalized story. For some people, a shred of non-fiction helps them to relax and enjoy a fictional tale. They feel like they're learning something, and learning something equals being productive, and being productive lets them read fiction without feeling like they're wasting time.

Grounding your story in an era gives you a tiny, subtle, subconscious non-fiction element that can help pull those people in. If they feel like they're seeing a portrait of a time, it'll keep them engaged on a non-fiction level.

In horror, it's super important to keep someone on the line as long as you can. A portrayal of a time period isn't the fish hook, but it can be the barb on the end of the hook that seals the deal.

Time Gives People A Laugh

I don't like stories that take place in the past and make little jokes about it. I didn't enjoy the parts of

Mad Men where the joke was, "Isn't it wild that this sort of thing was normal in the 50s!?"

And I am wrong about this, because most people seem to enjoy this sort of joke quite a bit.

I say go for it. Make a joke about the time. Have a panicked concert promoter say, "What the fuck are we going to do now? Tupac's dead. It's not like there's some sort of holographic Tupac out there."

This sort of laugh can be good because it's not a HUGE laugh, it doesn't totally break the tension. It can provide a little bump, a change in texture, that makes the next bit of horror that much worse.

Set it Up, Knock it Down

The opening of *Dawn of the Dead* feels like 1978 so fucking hard with the newsroom and the haircuts and all that shit. It's not trying to be 1978, it just IS.

But within about 15 minutes, the chaos of the dead rising causes us to be unanchored from time. We're torn out of a time and shoved into a new world where time has no meaning.

A specific time can be a comfort, a curiosity, and pulling it away adds to the horror.

Don't deny your reader the horror of that movement. Set us in time, give us that bit of comfort, then tear it away.

Contemporary Settings Refresh Old Fears

Joe Hill's *Heart-Shaped Box* is about a dude who buys a dead man's suit on eBay. It's great. And it's nothing new, really.

The idea of being saddled with a cursed or haunted object certainly isn't a first. But the idea of old fear clashing with new technology this way brings a feeling of inescapability to the story. A feeling that, even though things have changed, our worst fears can still reach us.

Why This Matters In Horror

Stories that are intended to be timeless end up feeling generic.

Characters with traits that are removed from time are generic.

I think we've had enough generic horror. Too much.

Generic teens getting slashed, generic houses full of generic evils. Faceless zombies, walking dead metaphors for the generic nature of so many zombie stories.

If your story feels plain, lean into the time. It'll give you something else to work with, angles on your characters.

And, please, if nothing else: Stop confusing generic with timeless.

Because if you want to write a timeless story, you have to write something readers will remember.

Let's Replace Canonical Horror



The idea of sitting down to replace iconic horror novels with newer, updated versions is, well, incredibly stupid.

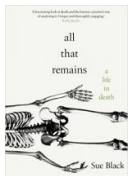
And because "incredibly stupid" is essentially my Bat Signal, here I am.

And because "ill-advised listicles" is your catnip, here you are.

Here we are, together, for this.

If there's one idea that can unite us all, let it be that I, Pete, am wrong and have terrible taste.

Happy Halloween!



Replace "Frankenstein" by Mary Shelley with "All That Remains" by Sue Black

The whole "science is bad, we shouldn't play god" idea is a little overdone in horror. How many stories of scientists "mad with power" and messing in shit they shouldn't do we need? And how much am I supposed to hate science when I'm reading about it on an electronic tablet that pulls books out of the goddamn air? Pretty convenient, if you ask me. Thanks, science!

If Mary Shelley had written something about the pluses of science, would I be able to get some freakin' stem cells injected into me already? Papa's got creaky joints.

I think it's time to abandon Mary Shelley's fearful vision of medical science as she imagined it might be 200 years later in favor of a book that gives us science as it is.

Which is why we're replacing *Frankenstein* with *All That Remains: A Life in Death* by Sue Black.

Sue Black uses somewhat macabre science, described in a detailed way, to figure out what happened during mass death events, murders, accidents, and so on, and she uses science to uncover things about humanity, in general. Which is the biggie here and why it's a great *Frankenstein* substitute.



Replace "Dracula" by Bram Stoker with "Where They Burn Books, They Also Burn People" by Marco Antonio Hernandez

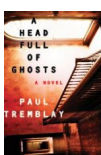
Did you know the original ending of *Dracula* was WAY more *Castlevania*, with Dracula's castle exploding and shit?

Because he decided to forgo that ending, Bram Stoker is on my "Call me when you grow some balls" list.

The most charming thing about *Dracula* is that it's written in letters and documents as opposed to being a straight-up narrative.

Which is why I'm replacing it with *Where They Burn Books, They Also Burn People* by Marcos Antonio Hernandez.

Two parallel fictions, one taking place in the past, one in the present, intertwine and combine to show us different sides of the same story, which is also horrifying and has one of those great slow-burn descents into terror. You know how they say a book can be like a mirror, you hold it up and see a reflection? This one's structure makes it a house of mirrors, different angles all visible at the same time.



Replace "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James with "A Head Full of Ghosts" by Paul Tremblay

I'm so jealous of how easy it was for old-timey writers. In 1898, you could just write a book that probably had a ghost in it, and people were shitting themselves.

I'm going to suggest we need a tad more these days. I don't want this to turn into a Crumbling of Society thing, just, you know, maybe it's okay to have more scares in your books than, "I'm 90% sure I saw a ghost one time."

A Head Full of Ghosts is an update on the classic ghost story. WAY more with the times. And it has something to say about reality TV, stardom, all that shit. It's genuinely creepy, and you'll get through it without the incentive of needing to in order to pass a class.

Replace "The Phantom of the Opera" by Gaston Leroux with a 15-second clip from The Simpsons of Martin Prince killing it on an electric organ



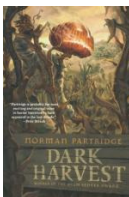
Replace "The Invisible Man" by H.G. Wells with "The Visible Man" by Chuck Klosterman

Credit where it's due, H.G. Wells came up with a great idea. What if someone could be invisible? It was fucking 1897. I'm betting calling the book "The Invisible Man" wasn't even a spoiler.

But at this point, c'mon, invisible men don't really light up the imagination anymore.

The Visible Man is a modern tale told from the perspective of a therapist. Her client, Y-, claims he's invented technology that renders him invisible. He uses it to observe average people doing average things, mostly while they're at home, alone.

The Visible Man is creepier, colder. And it doesn't make you wait for "the big reveal" that a dude is invisible, which you would know if you read all three words in the original book's title and/or have any sort of plugin to any sort of pop culture.



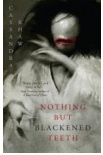
Replace "The Halloween Tree" by Ray Bradbury with "Dark Harvest" by Norman Partridge

Anyone who says they know what the fuck is going on in *The Halloween Tree* is a liar.

Ray Bradbury can write a story that makes sense, and some of his short stories are super awesome. But this is NOT one of his greatest hits, and I'm totally convinced it's popular just because it's Halloween-themed. Sort of like how "Monster Mash" is on every Halloween playlist. Even though that song sucks Frankenstein bolts.

I bring you *Dark Harvest*: it takes place during Halloween, it's much simpler, it's short, and it might be a tad intense for the younger, more sensitive readers, but for all I know *The Halloween Tree* is gory as hell. It's impossible to say because I don't know if I'm reading a story about time-traveling kids fed into a meat grinder or, basically, a slightly-scarier Great

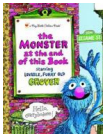
Pumpkin.



Replace "The Haunting of Hill House" by Shirley Jackson with "Nothing But Blackened Teeth" by Cassandra Khaw

Why does every haunted house have to be a Victorian manor? Didn't anyone who lived in a condo turn into a ghost? Hasn't there, just once, been a real estate showing that was like, "This is where Steve from the AT&T store lived...he died when a panicked rush of fools trampled him to get a new iphone that has more megapixels or something...?"

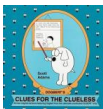
Finally, *Nothing But Blackened Teeth* gives us a haunted house story in NOT a Victorian manor, Christ almighty.



Replace "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman with "The Monster at the End of this Book" by Jon Stone

The Monster. More compelling, crisper writing, delivers a genuine twist, won't create a pointless discussion over what it really means. 10/10.

The Yellow Wallpaper can take a walk.



Replace The Works of H.P. Lovecraft with Dilbert by Scott Adams

Ugh, I'm tired of the problematic legacy of Lovecraft. I get it. Can't we move on and talk about someone and something else? I mean, *Re-Animator* is awesome, the guy is definitely anti-semitic. What else is there to say?

Plus, cosmic horror is out, and the horror of office drudgery in IN. You can buy a stuffed Cthulhu on Amazon. Ain't nobody buying a stuffed standing desk.

I like the idea of a newspaper cartoonist being a problematic genius. That's much funnier.



Replace "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark" by Alvin Schwartz with "Unreal!" by Paul Jennings

SSTTID is missing a key element: defecation.

After reading *Unreal!*, which contains a favorite of mine, "The Skeleton On The Dunny," I learned that skeletons take shits. Argue the science of it all you like, skeletons shouldn't even be able to walk, okay? There's no scientific reason they can walk and can't take shits.

Alright, the drawings in *Unreal!* aren't as good. Nothing is. Stephen Gammell is god.

But the stories in this book are better. Everyone remembers the drawings in *Scary Stories*, but the writing is, well, less awesome.

And it can't be overstated: very few farts.



Replace "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe with "Anybody Home?" by Michael J. Seidlinger

A bird flew into your house. Whoa. Holy shit. Call the Ghostbusters.

I know it's a raven and they're supposed to be smart and everything, but c'mon, a broom, and some fortitude solves this problem pretty fast.

How has Poe ridden on this story so long? Everyone with a chimney or a wood-burning stove has experienced this.

How about some humans come into your house? Some real bastards? NOW we're talking. So much scarier.

It's atmospheric. It's modern. It's actually scary. Too much "life of the mind" with that raven. Let's cut that mind open.

Stephen King Lightning Round:

Replace "IT" with "Little Heaven" by Nick Cutter

Cosmic horror, but not space turtle cosmic, no child sewer orgies.

Replace "On Writing" with "The Writing Life" by Jeff Strand

I don't recall any tales of a kid getting kicked in the balls by a llama in *On Writing*. Or maybe it was an alpaca. Whatever, kid getting rocked in the nuts, and this relates to being a writer.

Replace "The Shining" with "The Elementals" by Michael McDowell

Read *The Elementals* right after reading a David Sedaris book where he talks about his beach house. Thank me later.

Replace "Pet Sematary" with "The Walking Cat" by Tomo Kitaoka

Because the cat doesn't get hit by a truck. Plus, many hilarious pictures of the cat's lil' balls.

Replace "The Long Walk" with nothing

Because this is the one unassailable horror classic that needs to live on forever, and any horror canon that doesn't include this is instantly invalidated.

Now, aren't you glad you stuck with me? Now that you've got this FAR more interesting Halloween reading list? Impress your friends, horrify your teachers, and please, I beg of you, have some fun with your scary reads this year. We've got all year to read boring nonsense that's old as hell. Let's take just this one time and do something fun.

Why We'll Never Stop Talking About Frankenstein



Because I'm a very cool guy with lots on my social calendar, I was browsing a free database of dissertations the other day.

I tried REALLY hard to come up with a way to intro this column that made me sound badass, and that was the best I could do. Yes, there were several, far worse versions of that intro.

What surprised me about that database is how many dissertations, theses (heh), and academic papers are still coming out today about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Being a writer who would love to write something lasting and impactful, not to mention something that would make him so much money that he'd spin out of control and buy enough cocaine to sink Jeff Bezos' superyacht, I looked into it.

Why are so many people still talking about Mary Shelley's Frankenstein? And why will they always be talking about it?

Because it's the sport of my people

Barring the invention of time travel, just about anything new we might learn about Mary Shelley or the making of *Frankenstein* is going to be a matter of some speculation, a little bit of an intellectual sport combining research and creative thinking.

This is the sport of my people, the book nerds. You football people are like, "Tom Brady DIVORCED!?" Meanwhile, me and my crew are like, "Cormac McCarthy designed a rollercoaster that decapitated some kid!?"

Okay, that never happened. I'll admit, our scandals are way less juicy than a kid losing his head to a

poorly-placed I-beam. Figuratively less juicy, anyway.

But you can't blame us for making a sport of speculation, combining light research with creative thinking. It's all we've got.

Because "Frankenstein" is readable

Here's a fart joke from *The Canterbury Tales*:

This Nicholas anon leet flee a fart, As greet as it had been a thonder-dent, That with the strook he was almost y-blent; And he was redy with his iren hoot, And Nicholas amide the ers he smoot.

The fuck? I'm a fart joke expert, a sommelier of the odors of fart jokes, and even I have no idea what the hell Geoff Chaucer is talking about.

Meanwhile, *Frankenstein* is all:

If I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear!

Which is the best proclamation to make right before you blast one out the backside.

You can read *Frankenstein* and understand it without an advanced degree, and that's a pretty underrated factor in literature. It's a big part of what keeps *Frankenstein* alive in the culture.

Because it's old enough to feel like an original

When I looked at theses and dissertations, I found comparisons to *ReAnimator*, *Never Let Me Go*. The term "Frankenstein Myths" is used as a way to describe a TYPE of story.

Now people are talking about big tech being like a Frankensteinian monster.

Hell, it's not even a stretch to say the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie *Junior* connects to *Frankenstein* and the idea of men creating life. A QUALITY comparison is a stretch, but the "An Attempt Was Made" possibilities are strong.

While the novel is not the absolute, dead-on first version of the general idea of a man-made life (certainly the golem, which has been in written history at least 300 years prior, is older), it's old enough for our fast-moving culture to recognize it as a starting point.

As long as people keep making new myths about creating life, we'll get ties back to *Frankenstein*.

Because it's ghost story with an origin that's its own ghost story

Frankenstein was written in 1816, The Year Without A Summer. How spooky does THAT sound?

It was mostly just a summer where the weather sucked, so instead of tanning and going to the beach,

and, I don't know, I guess you could try and take a selfie on paper coated in silver chloride—instead of doing summer stuff, a bunch of folks got together and wrote ghost stories.

Frankenstein's got a great origin story, and a good lesson for writers out there: Ignore Hot Girl Summer, Sit Your Ass At Your Desk Summer is where it's at.

And nothing sells a story like the story of its creation.

Because Mary Shelley was a marginalized figure

Let's not get into the unproductive Marginalization Olympics here, because Mary Shelley wouldn't even win one of the piddly events nobody gives a shit about. Pole Vault? Yeah, let's go with pole vault.

People who do pole vault aren't going to come kill me for saying that, right? Ram that giant pole right into my guts and then vault over my bleeding out, stupid ass?

While not holding the MOST marginalized identity of all time, Shelley was marginalized in her time.

There's an instinct to try and right the wrongs of the past, and one way to try and give Shelley her due will be reminding people she deserved more credit than she got in her time.

Unfortunately, this doesn't really work, an artist can't be SO recognized after death that it rights the wrong of being neglected in life.

But that doesn't seem to stop anyone and everyone from trying!

Because each generation fears the scientific progress of the generation that follows

When you're pulling the levers, it's progress. When the next generation is doing it, it's a slap in the face of god. This has ALWAYS been the way. Never has a generation halted and reversed the progress of science, and never has an older generation been totally okay with the way science and technology are adopted and used by younger generations.

You hear that, TikTok? It's not my fault that I fear you. It's me respecting my role in history.

Because we are still just as superstitious as people were in Shelley's day

For all our progress, we are still just as superstitious as the first readers of *Frankenstein*.

We still fear donating our organs and what might happen to our bodies after we're dead. Only about half of Americans are signed up to donate organs. The UK is worse! I mean, sure, us Americans probably cannot donate our Wendy's-clogged organs anyway, but hey, at least we're generous with our fatty organs. What's important here is that I found something we're better at than Europeans. I'm not letting that just pass by.

Frankenstein touches on our fears of dead bodies, of what will happen to our bodies after we die, and, of course, of death itself. Turns out we're still pissing ourselves over all of that.

Because we all do pretty much what Frankenstein did

I mean, we accuse Doc Frankenstein of playing god, but how different is what he did from getting knocked up and shooting out a baby, aka "Trad Human Publishing?"

Okay, it's more disgusting. I mean, the "natural birth" thing is more disgusting. You know why it's worse? Smell. You can't smell those delivery room pics, but if you could, you'd BEG to sniff a corpse instead.

I'm sure plenty of folks who've had traditional-style babies don't wanna hear it, but let's face it, how is having a baby and creating life NOT playing god? Because god gave you the hardware to make a baby? Sounds like some "manifest destiny" bullshit to me.



Because Frankenstein is the Dad Who Went out for Cigarettes

Frankenstein basically gives birth to a creature, then fucks off for awhile, and when he returns, the creature is gone.

This story is extremely relatable to anyone with an absentee dad, which is at least a quarter of us. And it's relatable to absentee dads who are like, "Bro, I made a mistake, and now I gotta pay for it my entire life?"

Because "Frankenstein is the doctor, not the monster" is like the only thing people know about classic books

The pendulum swings on this one. First, it was something the learned correct the unwashed masses about. Then it became something everybody knows. Then it was laid like a trap in literary circles, people who KNOW the monster isn't Frankenstein throwing it out there to see who will bite.

Even though it's officially okay to call the creature Frankenstein.

When you're looking for a stock image of The Creature, what's the word you put in that search box?

And can you picture a Starbucks barista saying, "I have a PSL for The Creature?"

C'mon.

I can do you one better in Frankenstein corrections: In the book, Frankenstein ain't even a doctor.

Stick that in your stupid, stuffy literary friends' pipes and let 'em smoke it.

Anthropodermic Bibliopegy: Books Bound In Human Skin



Why Bind A Book In Human Skin?

The history of books bound in human skin is pretty fascinating, in a macabre sort of way.

What? When it's Halloween, you put skeletons on your front lawn, pose in front of your coffin bookshelves, but a book bound in human skin is too far?

The surviving books bound in human skin seem to be mostly books that were bound by doctors and surgeons, somewhere between the 1500s and the late 1800s.

Why doctors and surgeons? Well, they had easy access to human skin, printed books in need of covering, and the cash to pay a bookbinder for the custom job.

The books, content-wise, are all over the place, some being medical texts (fitting, if bizarre), poems by Phillis Wheatley (fairly inexplicable), and a memoir bound in the skin of its author, according to his wishes (perhaps the most appropriate, if the word "appropriate" has any place in this discussion whatsoever).

The motive for looking at a corpse and thinking the skin might make a good covering for a book is a little more difficult to figure.

Defining Something By What It's Not

It seems, for the most part, that books were not bound in human skin as...let's call them "human

trophies." Human trophy taking seems differently motivated. Most human trophies are a lot simpler and easier to manage on a battlefield or in other situations. Guessing most soldiers don't carry around bookbinding supplies...

The general sense I got from *Dark Archives* by Megan Rosenbloom is that these books weren't usually a "fuck you" to the skin's original owner. It wasn't like you used the skin of a fallen enemy, or, in a more personal version that'd make a good movie, a spouse who demanded you cook a meal every damn night, so you bound *Joy of Cooking* in their skin.

In one of the few cases where we know the motive, the book *The Highwayman: Narrative of the Life of James Allen alias George Walton* was commissioned by Allen himself. After he died, two copies of his book were bound in his skin, one given to his doctor, the other to a man he tried to rob, who Allen respected for his bravery.

And because this is where this sort of thing always has to go: No Nazis claimed to bind books in human skin, and nobody from the concentration camps claimed this was a practice. Lampshades are another story...

In fact, it'd seem that, other than binding books in human skin, the people who engaged in this practice were fairly normal.

Yes, that's a big "other than," but the important bit to get across here is that these folks were not total weirdos you'd identify immediately as such. They weren't murderers, they weren't evil dictators. They were...fairly average.

The best I can do for you is to say that the motives for binding books in human skin were as odd and varied as the books themselves.

The Realest

I guess this is the time to tell you that books bound in human skin don't look like the Necronomicon from *Evil Dead 2*. By looking at them, you'd never be able to tell the difference between a book bound in cow, pig, goat, horse, or your BFF.

Up until fairly recently, most human skin books were identified through a combination of claims and provenance, or through a process of follicle pattern recognition, which turned out to be total bullshit.

Lots of the books that were suspected as being bound in human skin have epigraphs or book plates in them, sometimes notes tucked into the pages, that make the claim:

Hic liber femineo corio convestitus est ("This book has been bound with the skin of a woman").

Apparently the front matter in books used to be a lot more exciting. Fuck, "any resemblance to real people..." It's more like, "If this book's cover looks like your Aunt Fran, it could be!"

Provenance is basically the ownership record, the history of the book that might be traced back to confirm it's bound in human skin. "My grandfather got this book from my great-grandfather, who claimed this was bound in human skin, and based on where he was and the time he was there, it's

entirely possible..."

The big problem with these two techniques is that they're based entirely in either oral or written history, a game of telephone that's been ongoing for hundreds of years. It's really easy for this to get fucked up accidentally or for someone to fake it on purpose.

Now, however, we've got a much better technique: Peptide Mass Fingerprinting. This is the gold standard for identifying a book's cover as being human flesh or that of a more, uh, traditional leather.

By The Numbers

The Anthropodermic Book Project has identified 50 books that may be bound in human skin.

Of those, they've tested 31.

Of those tested, 18 were real, 13 were fakes.

Which puts us at about 60/40, real/fake.

Why Libraries Have Them

Let's get to the library part.

A lot of libraries, fancy schmancy libraries at universities and attached to museums and so on, ended up with these human skin books because most of these books were owned by fancy schmancy people who donated their (at the time, very valuable) personal libraries to universities and other cultural institutions.

If you're a community college who wants to one-up Harvard, you could do worse than pointing out that your library doesn't have human skin books because the sorts of people who go to your school don't do that shit.

Libraries get stuck with stuff all the time. Sometimes it's VHS tapes of old episodes of Major Dad that've been sitting in someone's garage for 30 years. And sometimes it's a book bound in human skin.

Again, I want to remind everyone that a book bound in human skin could've easily been donated to the library as part of a large collection, and said book would appear exactly like a book bound in cow's leather. The libraries may have had no idea, and/or, at the time the book was donated, would have felt that preserving the item was the best practice, even if it wasn't something the librarians personally loved doing.

And, no, there's no chance you're going to check out something from your local public library bound in human skin. Unless you go to some kind of interdimensional horror library that's only open at night and all the books you check out are in Latin. In which case I can only assume human skin books are

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no big deal for you.

The Big Arguments for Keeping These Items

What I'm presenting from here forward is some discussion about reasons we might preserve these books rather than burning or burying them.

These are the two sides of this debate, boiled down:

Preserve them, because we're libraries, that's what we do.

Lay them to rest, because, as librarian Paul Needham put it:

There are times when the "good" of preservation must be weighed against other compelling responsibilities.

I just want to be clear: I think the case for laying them to rest is pretty simple and easy, and I don't necessarily think it's wrong. Paul Needham's letter did a great job outlining it.

That said, these things exist, and I think it's worth considering whether "laying them to rest" may not be the right thing to do.

It's an uncomfortable conversation, and I'll admit, taking the "let's not bury these things" side of the debate feels icky.

But neglecting to fully talk something out because it's uncomfortable is a terrible idea. It's kind of what got us here in the first place.

It's worth asking whether these books, the remains of these people, could serve a greater good by remaining aboveground and intact.

"Greater" is the key word. It'd be a plus/minus situation, not without moral issue.

The minuses are obvious. Let's talk pluses.

Disclaimer: I will refer to the items using "it" pronouns because my personal beliefs are that patches of human skin are not people. I mean no disrespect.

Evolving Tech

New scientific and technological processes might help us confirm things about these books, and it might be worth waiting to see whether these technologies are developed.

For example, it's possible that new scientific methods combined with better genealogical technologies might make it possible to figure out who, exactly, the skin belonged to. Which would, in turn, vastly increase our ability to do what we can to make things right.

Another way of looking at this, if all institutions had laid their anthropodermic books to rest 30 years ago, we wouldn't know that about half of alleged human skin books are fakes because Peptide Mass

Fingerprinting wasn't developed until the early 90s. We wouldn't know that humanity only sucked about 60% as hard as we thought.

Belief that there's nothing further, nothing important, to learn from these books and the people they're wrapped in, requires believing that we have reached the pinnacle of scientific, technologic, and genealogic practices. I don't hold that belief.

Discomfort

Less than half of people are organ donors, WAY less than half have planned for their deaths, and the funeral industry has made dying a larger out-of-pocket expense than being born.

Did you know that human corpses pose no threat to living people?

Did you know that it's a common practice in embalming to place spiked caps under your eyelids to hold your eyes shut? Because that looks "natural"?

We are so opposed to talking about and dealing with death that we think mimicking life in a corpse is "natural." When we go to a funeral and the corpse looks asleep as opposed to dead, we say the person looks "natural."

The message: Life is natural. Death is not.

It's possible that "laying these items to rest" will be seen by future generations as a form of barbaric superstition and/or moral imperialism based on our current ideas about death, which are informed by fear and discomfort.

This is us applying our current morality and concepts of human dignity to these people and their bodies in a way that isn't respectful of their wishes (which we wouldn't know in most cases), but instead grafts our wishes onto them.

Some individual deciding what was acceptable use of human remains is what got us in this situation in the first place, and I think it'd be wise to be open to the possibility that doing it again will put us in another mess.

I have to ask whether our ideas about burial and human remains are about the dignity of the dead or about the comfort of the living.

Which brings us to...

Ulterior Motives

At a school in Denver, a book allegedly bound in the skin of a Lenape man was on display in the library for several years. However, in the 70s, protests over the item resulted in a meeting between school representatives and a group of Indigenous representatives.

The result was that the skin was allegedly given to some Arapaho men, who allegedly buried it at an undisclosed location.

All this is alleged because everyone involved had to sign an NDA, so the actual fate of the skin is uncertain.

This finally came up again, almost 50 years later, because the school kept the coverless book. The school is working with Lenape representatives to repair the damage done by displaying this book in the past.

(Just as a brief aside: the skin was buried long before the PMF test was available to confirm the book's binding was human, so it will never be known for sure.)

Here's the thing: I'm more than a little suspicious that the skin was laid to rest the way it was, with the NDA and all, not to do what's right, but to cover the entire situation up. And it worked, for 50 years or so.

The problem of the book was foisted on the library, not created by it. But the choice to display the item? That's on the library, and burying the skin doesn't really "solve the problem."

I wonder if disposing of these items mostly serves to make us feel like we can dust our hands off and feel pretty good about ourselves when I'd argue that the display of human remains as artifacts might be the larger issue that those human remains themselves. Or, perhaps not larger, but the one we're most responsible for, and therefore more responsible for repairing.

I am concerned that burying or burning the skin is seen as a resolution. It's not.

"They" Are "Us"

These books weren't made by mad scientists in underground sewer lairs. They were made by doctors, surgeons, respectable, "normal" people, often working in medical facilities.

The bookbinders who bound these books were not Renfields carrying out the wishes of supernatural masters with a sickening devotion.

The people who decided to collect these books don't have tentacles.

The people who decided to put these books on display were librarians, museum curators.

What these people have in common is that they were more like you and me than they were like cackling supervillains. I know you don't want to hear that. I know it's a lot easier to distance yourself from someone who did something horrific if you can see them as monstrous, inhuman, and completely backwards. But that's just not reality.

People like you and me made the decision to harvest human skin. People like you and me bound books in that skin, they collected these books, and they put them on display.

Now, people like you and me agree that the right thing to do is to lay them to rest.

It's worth considering that the continued preservation of the macabre forces us to consider that this couldn't have happened without the participation of seemingly "normal" people. It's not just about the dictators, serial killers, and true monsters. It's about what everyone is doing, how everyone

creates a situation where this is possible.

People like you and me have made the wrong decision before, and we will again. We've built a world where making the wrong decision is possible, and there's no reason to think that's over.

Empathy

I toured a concentration camp once.

I can see the debate, some people want them to go away, some people think they should remain. One pro-preservation group's stated goal is to "preserve authenticity."

What I felt there was different than what I would feel reading a book or watching a documentary.

I...this is hard to admit: I have a harder time understanding how fucked-up some stuff is until I'm standing in the midst of it, and I think other people are like me in this way.

It's worth considering that empathy, in some people, in me, is more direct and immediate when I can see the real thing. Stand before it.

And it's worth considering that this sort of close contact with real things helps make history immediate. It makes it hard to deny.

I do hear the argument already, that someone's consent shouldn't be violated further for the sake of my amusement or further education.

The continued presence of concentration camps has hurt people, no doubt. And it's helped people.

The continued presence of books bound in human skin hurts people. And it's worth asking whether they might help people, too.

I'd propose that for average people, seeing these books bound in human flesh can be humanizing. Humanizing for the victims, for the people who carried out such a heinous act, and for the people who visit them.

It CAN BE humanizing, but it isn't going to just be that way on its own.

The challenge for museum curators and librarians is to create ways of honoring these materials and spreading this information that are humanizing.

I don't know what that looks like, exactly, or whether it's even possible.

I just propose that it's worth considering.

**It CAN BE
humanizing,
but it isn't
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own.**

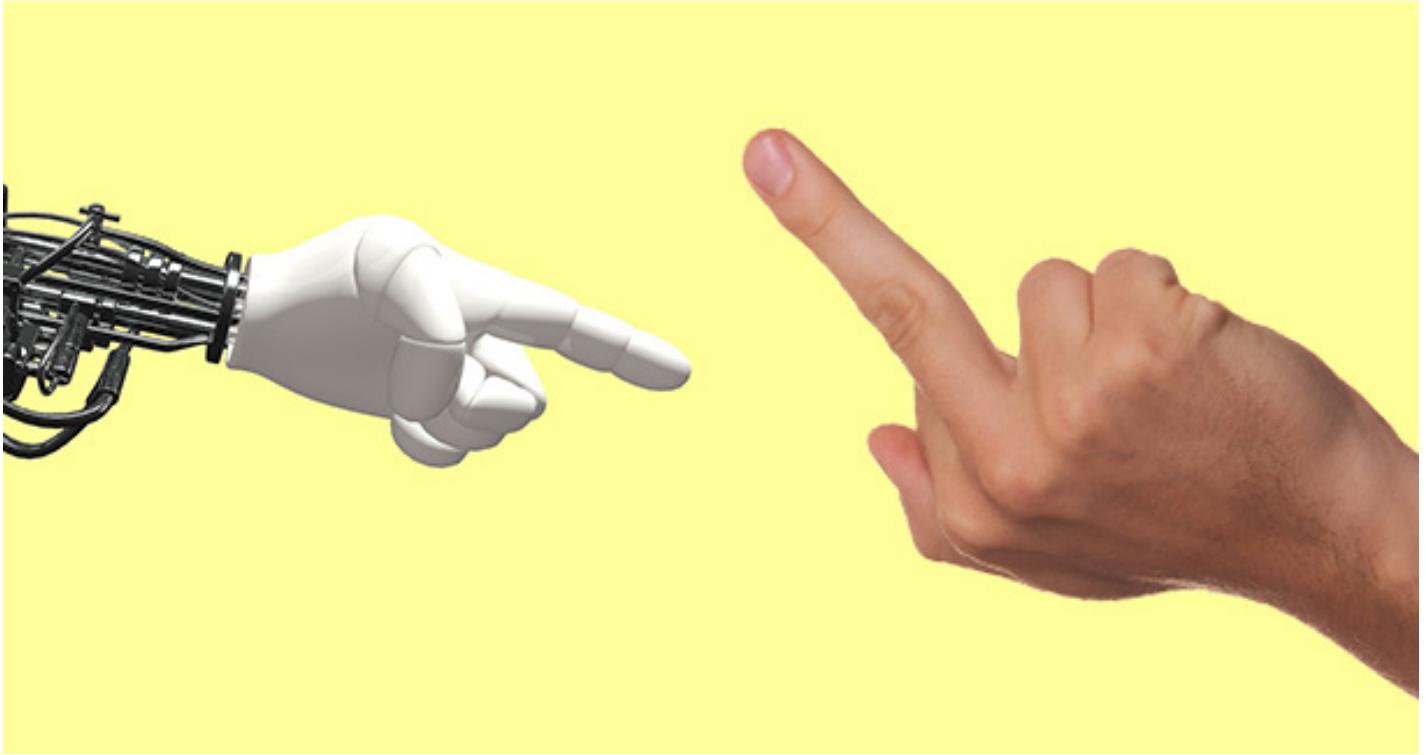
What I Walk Away With

I'm just a simple man with an interest in the weird who has spent several hours on a column about books bound in human skin.

All of this has left me with an opinion. Here's what I think:

1. The first and most important step in all of this should be confirming which books are bound in human skin and which aren't. That allows us to focus on the books that matter and the books that don't. Libraries and museums who have been displaying fakes can deal with that bad history on their own. Finding out a book is fake doesn't undo all the damage, but it's certainly relevant.
2. Along with this, laws should be created that makes the sale and purchase of these items to/by private individuals illegal, however individuals who currently have these items should be able to receive amnesty if they turn the items over to an appropriate institution. This might encourage more people to bring any items in private libraries to light.
3. Efforts should be made to determine the possible identity of the skin's original owner/inhabitant.
4. If an owner/inhabitant can be identified, the most reasonable thing to do is to identify a relative and to discuss with them what their wishes are for the person's remains. The ownership should be given to the relative, however, the institution should offer options such as putting the item on display in a way that tells the story and is respectful in the opinion of the new owner, keeping the item archived and not on public display in order to facilitate future research, or turning the item over to the new owner, at which point they can choose what to do with it.
5. If an owner/inhabitant cannot be identified as an individual, however can be identified as belonging to a fairly specific culture or group, a panel of people representing that group should be brought in to stand in for the relative in the above setup.
6. If there is little to no identification possible, the item should be retained and periodically reevaluated for new types of testing and fresh attempts at identification. In these cases, the institution holding the items can make a decision about archiving or displaying in ways that attempt to humanize the victims.

The AI Novel Is Pointless



Compared to Judgment Day, during which intelligent machines will bomb humanity down to a pile of charred skeletons, I guess an AI writing a novel seems like a pretty benign thing.

I mean, what if I have an ugly skeleton? I have no idea what my skeleton looks like, and maybe it looks all weird and all the surviving robots will make fun of it.

Unlike Judgment Day, the AI-written novel is coming. Much like the intro to this column, the AI novel will be confusing, silly, and utterly without purpose.

What AI Isn't

AI, as we're discussing it here, is not Johnny 5. It's not Wall-E. It's not even Arnold in *Terminator 2*, capable of being a better father than any human man in John Connor's very specific circumstances (a harsh indictment on fatherhood that went mostly unnoticed, probably because that movie also has a liquid metal robot police officer).

The AI that would write a novel is a collection of data processed in a specific way. There is no consciousness there. It's no more aware than a sifter, a machine with a series of vibrating trays that sorts bolts by size. It's doing a more complicated task, but it's got no desires, no agency.

The AI novelist is not the hero we were promised by movies. It's a passionless, thoughtless machine.

And reading the AI novel is not connecting us to a single human soul, which is one of the rare pleasures of books. It's not someone letting us into their head, just for a little while.

Is it too early in this column to talk about souls?

Let's talk about something more practical.

Why Are We Turning Over the Fun Part of Being Alive?

Say you manage a rapidly-expanding business, and you hire help.

Do you hire someone to go home to your family, eat your meals, watch your Netflix queue, and live your life?

You know, the fun stuff?

Hell, no. You hire that person to answer emails, manage your company's social media, and probably do some nonsense with spreadsheets.

Why are we creating AI that can write novels instead of creating AI that can answer our emails? Who is more excited about the AI writing a novel than the AI that can drive a car?

Give me the AI spreadsheet that can build and fill itself. The crap work. The boring stuff. The stuff we do in order to make just enough money that we have time to write.

But, What If These AI Novels Are Good?

Let me ask you something: Have you run out of good books to read? I don't know why I even asked that, because of course you haven't.

We enjoy better access to a larger number of books than any humans in history, not to mention TV and movies and podcasts. We are so far from The Great Narrative Shortage right now, a shortage that will never occur unless humanity has collapsed completely, in which case we'll have much bigger problems than finding a cozy mystery.

There is no dearth of shit to read. This is not a task we need to turn over to machines for the sake of production.

AI Novels Won't Be Weird

The weird thing about an AI novel will be its existence, not its contents.

Because the goal of an AI novel is to "pass" as being written by humans, the AI novel will most likely be...pretty boring. If it ended up super strange, people would point to that as proof it's not written by a human, and it would fail in its attempt to be mistaken for a manmade story.

I think we are more in need of weird shit. And AI is not going to give us weird shit. It's going to give us calculated, passable fiction.

Which, again, we've got plenty of already.

The weird thing about an AI novel will be its existence, not its contents.

They're Inherently Manipulative

Twitter AI has given us what we want: conflict.

And we have, in turn, given the Twitter AI what it wants: more of us using Twitter more often.

Let's not get into the ways social media AI is designed to push our buttons, release chemicals in our brains, all that shit. Let's not discuss the evil of marketing, which sees your dreams as their next frontier. Let's instead consider that the AI novel will remove books as a possible refuge from that sort of AI interference.

The AI novel isn't a story, it's a manipulation. It's a calculated attempt to create in humans certain feelings, not for the sake of experiencing the range of human emotion, but for the sake of selling more books. Or Pepsi. Or whatever.

What is the point of removing our oasis of books? Of purposely tearing down one of the few media spaces where we can relax and enjoy in peace?

River of Books

I know there's very little love out here for the big A of online commerce.

Let me ask you, if an AI can write a novel, who is going to own it? Some artist collective, or will it be Amazon?

Amazon, the company with more data on readers and reading than any other? The company that knows everything about everyone's reading habits, including which page they quit on, how quickly they read through certain books, and which books they buy and never actually get around to?

Is there anything Amazon would love more than the ability to generate novels automatically, sell them on Kindle, and completely cut out the need to share any profits?

Is there anything desirable about this Amazon-centric outcome?

Is there any prayer of avoiding it?

Magic

Alright, I wasn't going to get all cosmic on you. But let's get cosmic.

There's a theory of magic that says magic used to exist, but what happened is that as people discovered it and codified it, tested and figured and then wrote down the rules of magic, magic faded away. Because magic defies definition, and when you define it, it'll change or move away from your definition.

I think writing is like that.

By creating AI novels, we're creating rules for commercially successful writing through the use of big data.

From a magical standpoint, AI novels are a destructive process. Yes, the AI brings forth a novel. But it has to tear down a whole lot of magic to do it.

Loving Comic Books, But Not Comic Book Movies



Let's say a genie showed up.

Hey, you rubbed a lamp, what did you expect? You can't just go around rubbing on lamps and expect nothing to happen.

This genie kind of sucks at his job, or maybe he misunderstood the training, so instead of wishes, he gives you a choice:

"You can have one of these two things for the rest of your life, and the other will go away forever: comic books or comic book movies. Now CHOOSE!"

I guess the genie got the part of the training where you say "Now CHOOSE!" in a scary voice, probably a key element of genie-ing.

I'd pick comic books over comic book movies. Easy. I wouldn't even have to think that hard about it.

Because, for me, comic books are just a lot better than comic book movies. In fact...while I would say comic books are my favorite thing to read, comic book movies are pretty far down on the list of my favorite things to watch, down there among the Scandinavian detective shows that I only watch half an episode of, and while the sweaters are admirable, I just don't care.

Comics are just plain better entertainment than comic book movies.

Why?

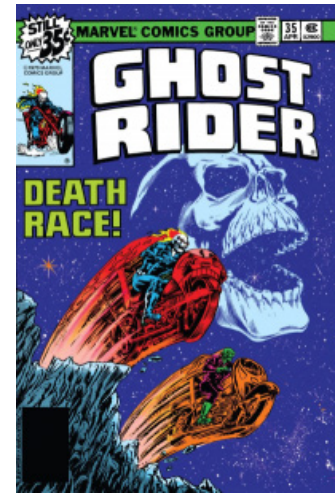
Hidden Gems

Comic books give you the thrill of finding hidden treasures in those piles and piles of funnybooks.

You might read a couple years of *Ghost Rider* issues and find very little beyond the character's cool look, but then you hit issue 35 and Ghost Rider has a three-stage motorcycle race with DEATH for three different prizes, three different souls. It's great.

With the movies, there's no joy of tripping over something great. There's no chance you're going to watch one of these and have your expectations absolutely blown away. There's no gamble. The risk/reward ratio is always the same (unless you watch *Elektra*. Wowzers).

With comic books, it's always possible, even after decades of reading comics, that you'll fall into something incredible.



Wilder

In *Punisher: Intruder*, Frank Castle is captured, and they torture him, slip a plastic bag over his head.

A plastic bag full of pee.

Say what you will about Multiverses of Madness blowing your mind, none of those many multiverses have anything as out there as drowning a guy, on dry land, in a bag full of pee.

Reading comics gives you wilder experiences than movies are willing to. The books can be repellent. They can go too far.

And in being able to go too far, they're able to walk the line and, sometimes, go just far enough.

I'm not saying filmmakers have to put a bag of pee on some guy's head—

Wait, yes, I AM saying that. Put a pee bag on someone's head, you cowards! (one of) The people demand it!

Monoculture and Subculture

Comic book movies are part of the monoculture. These are the top-grossing movies of all time, there's nothing to argue about here, right?

Comic books are subculture.

Because of the movies, you can walk into Target and buy a Spider-Man t-shirt, a Spider-Man action figure, Spider-Man fruit snacks, all right there on the shelf, but you can't buy the latest issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*.

Being part of the monoculture is inescapable. You've got no choice, and my advice is to just enjoy the

ride. See a Marvel movie. Why not? They're fun.

Being part of a subculture is an opportunity that only comes around here and there, and it's an opportunity you have to grab. Comic books are one of those rare opportunities. Read Chip Zdarsky's *Spectacular Spider-Man 310*. Trust me, you don't need to know anything about Spider-Man other than what you already know, it's heartfelt, it's fun, and it's the perfect passageway from the monoculture and into the subculture.

Their History is More Interesting

Why are there so many apes in the DC Comics universe?

Here's former editor Julius Schwartz:

I edited a comic called Strange Adventures, which normally sold pretty well, and then one day the editorial director (Irwin Donenfeld) came in and asked "What happened to Strange Adventures?" "Why?" I inquired. "Why? Because it had a tremendous sale, that's why!" So we decided to look at the cover for a clue to it's success... Well, it must have been that this idea — a gorilla who was once a man, pleading with his girlfriend to help him out of this horrendous situation — appealed to our readers. They wanted to know how such a thing could possibly happen and what could be done about it. We decided that the magazine sold well because a gorilla was acting like a human being. So we decided to try it again... and every time we tried it, it sold fantastically well, with sales shooting sky high!

There are countless little stories like this in the history of comic books. The Spider-Mobile. Stan Lee's version of Burt Reynolds' nude photo spread.

With movies, you get a little story here and there, but it mostly looks like press junket boredom, actors pre-loaded with cute anecdotes to share 35 times in 2 hours until their heads are about set to explode.

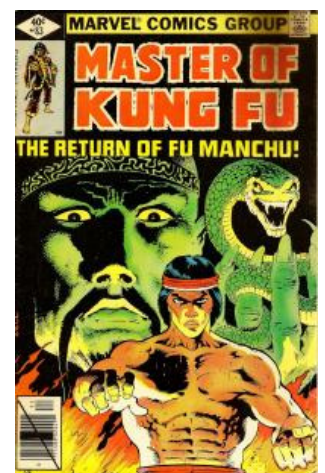
The history of comic books is long, it's varied, and it's all over the place. The history of comic book movies is relatively short, relatively boring, and it's got a lot of catching up to do.

Comic Books Can Be Complicated To Love

When the Shang-Chi movie came out, you could read all about the comic book's racist origins, especially with the character's father, Fu Manchu, and the ways those things would be scrubbed from the movie (which was the right choice).

The book has racist nonsense, and it has some interesting stuff, too. Shang-Chi is more like James Bond than he is like Bruce Lee. He has complicated romantic relationships. Shang-Chi has to choose a path that pits him against his own father, who he was raised to believe would save the world.

Looking at troubling things and deciding whether or not you can love them despite their flaws is...complicated. And I think, for media savvy adults,



looking at complicated things is good.

It's good exercise. You can see how these things make you feel before being confronted by them in real life.

It teaches you to look at fiction in a more complex way than a simple "this is bad/this is good" binary.

You ask yourself questions like, "Does this do enough good to justify the bad? Is that possible?"

And this isn't an experience you can really have with a comic book movie.

Comic Books Teach You to Get Over It

Spider-Man 3 is considered a famously bad comic book movie, and that's probably a little unfair, but people are still, to this day, bashing on *Spidey 3*. And *Batman & Robin*. And, to a lesser extent, *Daredevil*.

With comics, you sort of expect bad stories to crop up. Captain America was a werewolf. "Clone Saga" still sets my Spidey Sense a tinglin'. The Hulk was grey and smart and worked at a casino. Punisher came back from the dead as a Frankenstein? An angel? I don't know, as a thing, occasionally with a very manga art style.

And, sure, when you read these storylines, you start googling to see which comic book writers have since admitted to using a lot of psychedelics in their heyday.

The difference between the bad movies and the bad comics is that you get over the bad comics pretty quickly. Because there's another one just down the road. It's not a multi-hundred-million-dollar affair that'll involve a huge undertaking. It's another 20-some pages and 30 days away.

Sometimes, shitty things get made. That's life.

The faster we can get over it and move on, the better. Comics teach us how to do that.

Movies let us revel in the bad, beat the dead horse into pulp and powder.

So, if you hated this column, my advice is to grab a couple comics that are worse, read those, and get over it. I might recommend...*Marvel's Secret Wars*. Partially because it stinks, but partially because, not-so-secretly, I love it.

How to Be Really Bad at Gifting Books



If you're on LitReactor, you're probably a book lover. In fact, that's probably an understatement on the level of, "If you're on PornHub right now, you're probably mildly interested in visual sex acts, categorized to a level of professionalism that would make most libraries proud."

And, my fellow book lovers, I'm here to tell you that we, as a whole, have fucked up the holidays in the past.

Because we love books so much and love certain books so deeply, we've let ourselves fall into some book-gifting traps that might be making the world of books...a little less appealing, overall.

Let me flag the minefield of giving books as gifts.

Giving Books to Non-Readers

I get it, you're a book pusher, and you love the idea of giving a book to someone who doesn't read. The movie in your mind has you handing off a book, maybe wrapped in a tasteful ribbon, the recipient taking it, and then returning to you days later, swooning over your book selection.

That's not what's going to happen. Unless the gifted book happens to be a very complimentary biography written about the recipient, and that recipient somehow did not know this biography existed. Outside of this very narrow possibility, don't give a book to a non-reader.

Giving a non-reader a book comes off more as a lifestyle suggestion than a gift: "You should read." This is ESPECIALLY true if it's a book you've read, which piles on the implication, "I read, am therefore slightly better than you, and here's concrete proof."

A lifestyle suggestion with a one-up is not a gift.

Giving Project Books

Giving someone a self-improvement book that they didn't ask for is like giving someone who didn't ask for it a treadmill: It's received as a critique.

You're not wrong to think your friends and family can use some improvement. I've seen your friends and family. Assholes, dweebs, and people who seem okay, but then you find their woefully untidy homes an absolute assault on the senses.

Nevertheless, unsolicited constructive criticism isn't a gift, even if it's in the form of *The Orgasmic Ecstasy of Cleaning Up Once In A While* or whatever that shit is called.

Giving A Book That's "Well-Written"

Before you give someone a book because it's "very well-written," do me a favor and give an imaginary book report on it. And the crux of the book report is that you have to unpack what "well-written" means.

Here, I'll save you the effort: "Well-written" is a way of saying "I liked it" that sounds more thoughtful, makes it seem that your enjoyment is more about an objective quality than a vibe, but all it really means is that you liked the book.

Which is great. I'm happy you found a book that you like.

And that's the worst way to gift a book: make it about what YOU like instead of considering what the recipient likes.

Blasting someone with your personal taste isn't a good way to give a gift.

Blasting someone with your personal taste isn't a good way to give a gift.

Ignoring Format Preference

If someone specifies they want an ebook, get the fucking ebook.

Like most people around my age, I rent, and the housing market fills me with far more despair than anything Cormac McCarthy could nightmare out onto the page. When I eventually have to move, which is never too far from the mind for a renter, I'd rather not carry more books with me.

A dense block of reconstituted wood is not a gift when you'll have to haul it around.

Likewise, and this comes from years of experience helping people with eReaders in a library setting, when you give someone who is not tech savvy a Kindle, it doesn't make them happy. They read to enjoy books, and messing with technology is not reading books. It's not relaxing to them. They feel like, at any moment, they're going to touch something that messes up the whole system. Then they leave the Kindle in a drawer and feel guilty because they know you spent some money on it.

A piece of technology is not a book gift.

Underestimating the Bookstore Gift Card

The gift card's gotten a bad rap over the years. It's kind of like giving cash, it's kind of impersonal.

Fuck all that shit.

Bookstore gift cards are great. You can support a bookstore of your choice, and you give someone the chance to spend money on something fun. For the kind of person who doesn't spend on themselves much, that can be a wonderful thing.

Not Making It An Event

You could hand over a book

Or, you could do it like this:

"We're going out. I'll get dressed up. We'll eat some dinner, and then we'll wander the bookstore, and I'll get you whatever book you want. Take your time, pick something out. Forget your lists and your to-read stuff, just pick something that calls out to you."

That lets you give a book AND an experience. It makes the book a better gift because the object itself is a souvenir of the time you spent together.

This Is Your Permission To Write Offensive Things



Hi. I'm a White, cis, male writer. And I'm here to give everyone permission to write horribly offensive things.

And, no, I'm not planning to do that by purchasing an entire social media platform. That's SO last month.

Let me tell you why I can give you permission to write offensive things and how taking it will change your writing for the better.

The Big Idea

An idea for a story, an essay, a novel, a series of children's books about a bunch of creepy kids who take up residence in a boxcar, probably so they can commit murders and never be caught, what with their identities being totally off the grid—

Whatever your idea, the thing you need to know is that a story idea cannot be offensive, and it can't be inoffensive.

Because an idea can't be categorized like that.

An idea is shapeless. Intangible. It exists only as images or words or ephemeral streams of interacting chemicals in your mind (however you think—maybe it's in musical tones or a series of Simpsons quotes, whatever, you do you).

Your job as a writer is to make ideas real. Mash that untouchable magic into ink.

Then, and only then, once the idea is a real thing that can be examined and experienced, you (and other people) can decide whether it's offensive.

Spider-Man's Death Wish

I want to give you an example of what I'm talking about, that an idea is neither offensive nor inoffensive until it's solidified.

Here's a story idea:

Person with ability to fight crime is victimized by a crime, and that person begins fighting crime, motivated by what happened.

Spider-Man works this way.

And so does the movie *Death Wish*.

Death Wish (1974) is a movie that depicts the rape of a woman in graphic detail, and that rape causes the woman's father, Paul Kersey, to go on a brutal vigilante rampage.

The tastelessness of the rape's depiction, and the ways many saw *Death Wish* as a glorification of vigilantism, offends a lot of viewers. In fact, Brian Garfield, who wrote the novel *Death Wish* was based on, found the movie offensive. He wrote a follow-up, *Death Sentence*, that he called "penance" for his involvement with *Death Wish*.

Spider-Man and *Death Wish* have the same basic setup, the same concept of a person taking the law into their own hands, both motivated by a crime that harms a loved one.

But the way the material is handled is completely different. Spider-Man trading punches with a guy who dresses like a utility company mascot really doesn't feel the same as Charles Bronson shooting a guy in the back for the crime of stealing his camera (a camera Bronson purposely shows off in hopes someone will take it).

The idea of someone motivated by crime to fight crime isn't where the offense comes in. The execution is.

Better you learn these lessons on the page than in public.

Why Is It Good To Write Something That Turns Out Bad?

You need the experience. You need to go too far sometimes. You need to start a story, recognize that you're not ready to write that story, and put it away until you are.

You need to work out what "too far" means for you, and you need to learn how to recognize when you're deep in "too far" territory.

You won't learn any of these things if you stop before you've even begun, if you don't give the idea shape.

Writing Is A Good Way To Learn About Offense

Better you learn these lessons on the page than in public, than on Twitter, than in some other way that's far more visible to the average person.

Better you offend some people in a writer's workshop, where you hopefully have relationships with the other writers and can talk out your problems, where you've got a group-approved method of handling this sort of thing.

Writing and Publishing Are Two Very Different Things

Writing something offensive isn't a problem.

Publishing is where you have to be more careful.

When something is published, it comes with the request that others read it. You push your work into the larger world and insist that it has a place on the shelves next to other books.

Which isn't me saying that you should not publish offensive things. I have nothing to say about publication at the moment.

I'm just talking about writing.

I'm just giving you permission to write something offensive. As far as publishing something offensive, you'll have to work that out for yourself.

There's Your Permission

Think about writing like exploring. If you don't take a single step into the wild for fear of taking the wrong step, you won't get a whole lot of exploring done. There IS a time for that sort of caution, and that time is when you invite others to join you on the trail.

Writing is the same way. If you can't write a line for fear of causing offense, you won't get a lot of writing done. And the time to be more careful is the time when you're inviting others into your story.

You should tell your stories. Write them out. Feel them out. Take them from ideas to words.

It's okay to explore.

Phantom of the Hip-Hopera: An Improv Novel-



They tell you to start your column with your best line, so I'll start by telling you this is a story about a new way to write fiction.

And now I can get to the extremely boring second line: I do a podcast.

If I was good at promoting myself, I would link it here. But I'm not.* Besides, it's the worst kind of podcast: just some dope talking about whatever, no format, all nonsense.

Every October, I do something called Podoween (that was the best name I could come up with. See, you don't want to listen), which is 31 days, 31 podcasts.

Usually these are short, spooky, Halloween-y episodes about real life horrors. This year, however, I tried something different: A semi-improvised, fictional tale in 31 parts that I call: *Phantom of the Hip Hopera*.

And what it turned into was an experiment in writing a novella through improv.

Here's how it worked.

Part 1: Concept

I had this idea a bit back: wouldn't it be funny to put together a story about someone in the 90s trying to write a "hip, for the kids" version of a classic novel?

Like, imagine someone tasked with writing an updated *Frankenstein* where Frankenstein is a drummer in a ska band.

I hit on *Phantom of the Opera* for my particular story because, well, the *Phantom* is possibly the pettiest of the literary monsters. He's hilarious.

I had my classic picked out, I had the era it'd be revived in, but there was a problem: I didn't know how to make this work.

Part 2: Format

How do you write something that makes fun of something else without rewriting the entire thing? Or, how do you write *Phantom of the Hip-Hopera* so that people who haven't read *Phantom of the Opera* 100 times will still enjoy it? How do you explain what you're doing while also doing what you're doing? How do you mash together the two layers: the original *Phantom* and the Hip-Hopera version?

Part 3: Falling Together

I needed something, a structure to bring out the story, a format, a character to guide everyone in. I needed to produce a new kind of thing, and to do it, I needed to write in a new way.

My character is Werther Delight Johnson, the pen name for an MFA-holder who's found himself in the world of novelizations, especially the *Critters* series and *Killer Klowns From Outer Space*. He's being tasked with writing *Phantom of the Hip-Hopera*, and as someone unfamiliar with the original *Phantom*, Werther takes the listener through the original, the key changes, and the process. For better AND worse.

And he's keeping an audio diary so that once he's famous, which he surely will be after writing this thing, he'll be able to put together a memoir.

Boom, done.

Part 4: Outline

I set up a basic outline for all 31 chapters, and I'd talk them out, one chapter per podcast episode.

I'm not usually an outliner, but I took an approach I'd heard about from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: the improvised parts happen with the actors knowing where the scene is starting, where it needs to end, and the rest is magic.

"Magic" is more than a little bit of an oversell in my case, but it's more descriptive than "and the rest is stuff."

Part 5: Improv

I'm not an improv guy. I'm more "Wait, what?" than "Yes, and!"

Even after I recorded a couple episodes, I wasn't sure about the whole thing. What if people hated

**Falling from
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it? What if I fell flat on my face doing something that's pretty embarrassing on the WHOLE DAMN INTERNET!?

But then I remembered the advantage of having an unpopular podcast and a not-illustrious writing career: You can do whatever you want.

Seriously, if it sucks, who is going to be mad? It's not like I've got investors I'm answering to, millions of dollars in budget, unsold action figures rotting on the shelves at Target.

The one advantage of being extremely unpopular is that you aren't beholden to anyone, you can afford to fail.

Falling from grace is impossible when you live in the basement full-time.

And with that rosy attitude, I managed to record all 31 episodes.

Part 6: Transcribing

Now comes the worst part. And the fun part: transcribing everything I'd said.

Transcribing speech is the most boring activity in writing. How do we talk so fast and write so slow? It's a miracle we ever made anything remotely resembling journalism. If I'd been in charge of journalism, I would've just been like, "Fuck writing this all down, let's just all promise to tell like 5 people, and they can all promise to tell 5 people. It'll work out."

Transcribing sucks. But in this case, it's also the fun part. Because with *Phantom of the Hip-Hopera*, it wasn't just a word-for-word transcription, I was adding things, moving things around, normal rewrite stuff, but it felt different. I kind of got to write this story again for the first time.

It was...actually a lot of fun. And it was a fast way to get to a polished second draft.

Why You Should Give It A Whirl

It might be a little easier to talk in a character's voice than it is to write in one. It might be easier to let the story take you places when you start out loud. On the second pass, it's very easy to let go of what sucks because, well, it was just sort of tossed out there, not something you labored over for hours. The cracks, the places that need extra attention, are more obvious when you start out loud and then put it in writing.

You have to commit to the bit. You have to really talk it out, like you're doing a character on a stage. You have to try and make it feel real, just to you anyway.

It feels silly, but it's worth it. I got a manuscript out of it, it went fast, and it was, honestly, kind of fun.

Try it. What do you have to lose?

Besides, yours won't be worse than mine, guaranteed. Mine is called *Phantom of the Hip-Hopera*. I've set a very low bar for all of you to leap over.

Typos: The Final Word



Typos are like bedbugs: they're manageable, but they're impossible to eradicate. Nobody likes them, but everybody encounters them at some point.

And both bedbugs and typos appear in books more often than we'd like to admit.

I vote we have this one, last discussion about typos, then we stop talking about them. They're boring, they don't hold the meaning so many of us think they do, and, like, who gives a shit?

The History of the Typo

The first typos were often "scribal errors." Scribal errors go back to the days when books were copied by hand. Some guy looking at a book on his left and copying it by hand into a blank book on his right is, of course, going to do things like repeat words, omit words, misread something, or accidentally skip an entire line here and there.

If you don't believe me, try it: copy this column, by hand. It'll teach you a lot about what a terrible writer I am in addition to showing you how easy it is to screw this up.

Then we got the printing press and movable type, which didn't eliminate typos but DID mean we could make them a lot faster and more efficiently.

If you were a printer back in the day, what you'd do is take a whole shitload of letters, line them up in a wooden tray, and then use the tray of letters like a giant stamp, printing out the text on paper.



Did I mention that because this is a stamping process, all the metal letter stamps had to go in the tray backwards, so the letters are backwards AND the lines are backwards, moving right to left?

Not easy. You can see how there were still fuck-ups aplenty.

Digital word processing made correcting errors simpler, but catching them wasn't any easier until the first spellchecker was introduced in 1971. However, digital spelling and grammar checks are still imperfect, and there's no shortage of people who feel that reliance on machines to check for errors has resulted in more problems than fixes.

Some Subspecies of Typos

When we talk about typos, we're not always talking about the same thing.

There's the fat-finger typo, which is exactly what it sounds like: when keys are close together on a keyboard, it's easy to hit a few extras. These are typos we should expect to INCREASE as more things are being written on smaller keyboards, yet our fingers are still the same unattractive, sausage-y shape. And sweaty. Yours are sweaty, too, right?

There's the atomic typo, which happens when you put in the wrong word, but the wrong word is ALSO a word. Spellcheck won't always catch these, especially if there's a noun, like "can" that makes sense in the same context as "van." "I got in the can" and "I got in the van" probably won't be caught by a spelling and grammar check.

Autocorrect also does a number on your words if you're not careful. If you use odd words, or maybe have a friend with an unusual name, you know all about this shit. My prediction is that these typos will increase for a time, but at some point machine learning will get better.

Why Typos Are Hard to Catch

Yr brn s vry smrt. It can fill in a lot of text.

Most moderate-to-advanced readers don't actually see each letter and figure out the word they're looking at, define it, then move to the next word. Instead, their brains use context clues to fill in the gap, and as long as the words flowing are within the realm of expected words, you keep on truckin'!

Reading is like walking up a set of stairs. Next time you go up the stairs, pay attention. You probably look 4 or 5 steps ahead as opposed to straight down at the step you're on. You walk up in a smooth, fluid motion, treating the stairs as a set, a unit, as opposed to treating each individual stair as its own task to complete.

Reading is the same. You're looking a little bit ahead, in a way, as opposed to treating each word as its own thing.

Normally this is good. It lets you read faster, and it makes books more immersive.

When you're editing, a well-trained reading brain works against you. It fills in gaps for you, even if the gaps are what you're trying to catch. And, unfortunately, people who write and edit tend to also read quite a bit and have pretty strong reading brains.

The Typo That Should Make Us All Feel Better

Imagine a book with a typo so horrendous that the book comes to be known only for that typo.

That's the case with the so-called "Wicked" Bible.

Due to a typo in the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery," the "not" was omitted. Which means a typo caused a Bible to be printed that said you not only CAN sleep around, THOU SHALT.

I'm lounging in a glass house in glass underpants that barely conceal my shame when it comes to typos, but God telling everyone to go ahead and sleep around with married folks is like Mitch Albom writing a book that accidentally endorses doing whippets as a way of coping with the bittersweet feeling that comes with the end of human life.

Things That Aren't Typos

Alright, let's get into the meat of the way that typos have been misread and given too much meaning, starting with some things that reviewers will call typos that really aren't typos.

If an author uses the incorrect form of "our/are" in a book ONCE, that's a typo. But if an author continually uses the incorrect form, that's a usage error, a piece of information the author does not know.

If an author continually misspells words, words that should be caught by autocorrect, that is not a typo, that's failure to use available tools.

Writing like, "I should of gone to the store," is not an example of a typo, it's incorrect grammar/usage.

Incorrect punctuation is generally not a typo, although I'll count forgetting to use a question mark for a question as a typo.

A repeated problem is usually not a typo.

One-off issues ARE often typos, even if there are a lot of them, so long as the issues are different each time.

So, if you're fixing to write a review that says a book has "a lot of typos," make sure YOU'RE correct. If the book has multiple different one-off errors, that book could be said to have a lot of typos. If the book has a mistake or type of mistake repeated, (and this is usually what people complain about) that's not really a typo.

How Common Are Typos In Big Publishing?

Numbers on this vary quite a bit, but the short answer is that MOST, if not all, published books will have a typo or two when they go to print.

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Which is meaningful because big publishing represents the maximum effort, combining humans and machines, that we've ever spent on ensuring a book has no fuckups. The best tools are being used, the largest number of people are seeing books, and still, they're imperfect.

How Common Are Typos In Self Publishing?

More common than in Big Publishing, obviously.

The manuscript a self-published author sets as "finished" may be as good, or better, than the "finished" manuscript submitted to a major publisher by a well-known author. The problem is, a self-published author is done with the book at that stage, where a book that goes through a major publisher will have several subsequent readings, professional layout folks who often notice errors, and often have a run of Advanced Reader Copies, which provide another chance to hear about typos.

Why Don't Self-Published Writers Just Hire Editors?

I'll throw back the curtain: I've got 24 self-published titles available. I will make just under \$100 on them this year, and this is probably my best earnings year.

A copy editor will cost you in the neighborhood of \$1,000 for one book-length work. That person will not give you story edits or anything like that, they'll purely check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors—and remember, there's no guarantee that your manuscript will be perfect when they're done.

I don't have \$24,000 dollars. Even if I wanted to spend the money, even if I had a prayer of earning a significant portion of it back, I don't have the cash up front.

All this, like a candle shoved in a brined cucumber, illuminates the pickle: Maybe that \$1,000 is an investment. Maybe if I invested in copy editing, I'd sell more copies. But...I kinda doubt I'd sell enough copies to break even.

While I don't think I deserve to make a boatload of money in self-publishing a book about, oh, I don't know, a group of people who try to do a bikini car wash to save an arcade from evil condo developers, suggesting I spend \$1,000 on an editor is a pretty big ask on your part.

How Typos Are Used To Bash Self-Published Books Incorrectly

I never, EVER hear about typos in books that come out of big publishers. And this is not because those typos don't exist, they absolutely do.

It's because typos are one of the things reviewers and readers like to highlight in self-published books.

It's totally backwards. Shouldn't big publishing be held to a higher standard of quality than self-

publishing?

And, wait a minute, flawless self-pub books are never given an extra star on Goodreads for being error-free. "This book was boring and dumb, but there were zero errors, so 3 stars!"

It's like...did you ever have a college professor who made you write long-ass papers, like 10 pages, and then when you had a single comma splice, your otherwise perfect paper, carefully considered, thousands of words, earned you a 93/100? Didn't that seem cosmically unfair, that your one punctuation problem was viewed as 7% of the work that went into the paper?

If You Can't Handle Typos

Let's take a hard right turn and talk about the difference between eating at your mom's house and eating at a fancy restaurant.

The fancy restaurant should make pretty damn good food. You're paying a lot for it, they have the knowledge and resources. If they bring you an overcooked steak, it's okay to send it back. What you're paying for is the quality.

Your mom doesn't have an entire fridge full of filets. And your mom isn't getting paid for dinner. In fact, she put out the money for the food in the first place. This is a money-losing proposition for her.

If you can't eat at your mom's house unless the steak is perfectly cooked, then you can't eat at your mom's house. Take your mom out to the nice restaurant instead. My god, the woman deserves a nice meal now and then.

If you can't read self-published books without harping on typos, then you can't read self-published books. Unless you can learn to be a better, more generous reader.

Being a generous reader means you should read self-pub books a little more like you would review your mom's cooking: it's a labor of love, the resources are far less, and holding your mom to professional kitchen standards is setting yourself up for disappointment. And, let's face it, it's you being kind of an asshole.

Why Is The Existence of Typos a Good Thing?

It's only a matter of time until AI or Big-Data-powered programs can completely eliminate typos, but I don't think this is a good thing.

LitReactor was all over this shit back in 2017, and the tl;dr version is that programs like MS Word have great tools for something like a resume, a cover letter, something where flawless execution is more important than voice or story or big ideas or passion or general vibes. But when it comes to creativity, Microsoft's suggestions hammer all the voice-y-ness out of any piece.

It's not always one or the other, have something perfectly-executed or have something interesting, but it seems more likely than not that a decade of this developing technology will result in more homogenized stories, more voices sounding the same. We'll lose authentic voices in favor of things that are more "correct."

We should embrace the typo. It's a sign of humanity.

We should embrace the typo. It's a sign of humanity. It's a sign that we're still individuals. It's a demonstration that making art and storytelling aren't just about producing shiny product, they're about people expressing something.

The typo is the little flaw in the finish on the bookcase your grandpa made for you. It's the one slightly crooked tooth in your partner's smile. It's the small, burnt way of saying something that tells me this book was written by someone, a real human. It's the speed bump that reminds me that this book in my hands is a look into someone else's world, something that was created on purpose and mashed down into a reasonable shape for my enjoyment.

It's humanness on the page.

Maybe We Could Stop Deconstructing Books?



Deconstruction is the hottest trend in literary criticism since, well, forever, and even if you don't know what it is, you're probably doing it.

And I come to you today with a simple request: Stop.

What Is Literary Deconstruction?

The first problem here is talking about what deconstruction is, in terms of books.

This is a problem because "deconstruction" is a term used by lots of fancy people in fancy ways. French dudes made it up, a sure sign of fanciness.

The super quick version of what those French dudes were saying: Any story can be broken down into its component parts, and doing so proves that nothing has inherent meaning.

But that's a version from 1967. And while that's not a MEGA long time ago in years, it's a VERY long time culturally.

Today, deconstruction has a different meaning that I'll define like this:

Deconstruction, in literature, is the idea of dismantling a text or taking it apart, breaking it down into smaller elements, to pose different theories about what a text "really means." This is almost always about pointing out things that are wrong with the text or explaining that the point of view evident in the text is flawed.

When you see something like "*Fight Club* is really a manual for perpetuating toxic masculinity," you're

seeing a literary deconstruction.

When you see something like, "*Fight Club* is the direct commentary of a gay man on masculinity," you're seeing a literary deconstruction.

What Isn't Deconstruction?

If the theory is based in the assumption that the author achieved an intended effect, then it's not necessarily deconstruction.

For example, "In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden is the 'real' character, and the Narrator is the creation of Tyler Durden's mind," would be a theory that works within the text without breaking the text down into its components.

It's not deconstructive. It plays by the rules established in the book and assumes those rules are good and correct, that what the author highlights as important is important, and any subterfuge or hidden meanings were laid in by the author on purpose, not subconsciously.

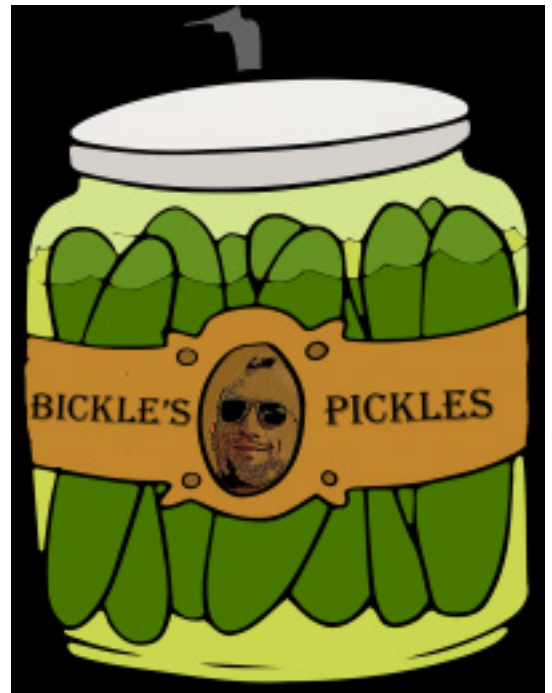
When Deconstruction Is Applicable

The way Star Wars properties operate today certainly has a lot to do with forces outside the narratives. With a Star Wars product, if you're baffled by something you see happening on screen, there's a good chance the answer has something to do with economic and/or cultural forces outside the narrative.

Which means deconstruction is useful. Looking at the filmmakers and studios involved, the box office take for different entries in the series, does give quite a bit of insight into some of the decisions.

When a character from your movie is going to sell oranges, it'll limit the things that character can do. There's a reason BB-8 sells oranges, but you don't see Travis Bickle on a pickle jar. Even though the rhyme is RIGHT THERE!

When the elements outside the story played a big role in the story's initial shaping, it's useful to take the story apart, see how it ticks.



Problem 1: This Gets Out of Hand

If you take your car into a mechanic and say, "I bet you can't find anything that's worth fixing on this car right now, but if you do, I'll pay you double," my suspicion is that mechanic will be able to find SOMETHING to fix on your car. Whether it's a screw on the rearview mirror, a bulb that was "just about to go out," or something actually serious, they'll find something.

Deconstruction looks at books with the assumption that something is wrong. It's reading with an eye

towards figuring out the ways in which an author attempting to convey a message or an idea has done so imperfectly.

When you go into a book ASSUMING something is wrong, and therefore the text needs to be pulled apart, you will, just like that mechanic, find something.

Problem 2: Proving Something's Bad

Ready Player One CAN be deconstructed, and the typical way of doing so is to break it down into something like the book being a "Straight, White male power fantasy with one-dimensional female characters, kind of a incel thing."

The issue I take with this breakdown is that it's designed to prove something super simple: *Ready Player One* bad.

Deconstructing a book you didn't enjoy in order to prove there's something objectively wrong with it, something in the book's DNA that is flawed, is a silly exercise.

It's a way to simplify the complicated job of talking about a book you didn't enjoy. If you can prove it's radioactive at its core, you don't have to discuss the pros and cons or matters of taste. It simply MUST be avoided.

You're ending a discussion instead of starting one.

Problem 3: Identity Is The Easy Tool

Far too many deconstructionist theories and ideas rely heavily on the identity facets or demographics of authors.

This is based on the Fellini idea:

All art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster's autobiography.

Identity is always a fine thing to look at, but more and more, identity becomes both the start and end of most deconstructions.

Woodworkers know that there's a danger in falling in love with one kind of joint: you see it as the answer for everything. You reach for it first, every time. You end up using your favorite joint in the wrong context simply because you don't push beyond or even really consider others. Before long, you're fucking up your pieces because of your devotion to dovetails.

Deconstruction can be about a lot of things, but modern deconstruction tends to stick to identity as the key that will unlock meaning. It becomes the only tool lots of folks reach for, and the result is that they don't explore other tools, don't spend time considering that other avenues of deconstruction might provide better results sometimes.

Problem 4: The Deconstruction Is Often Less Interesting Than The Original Thing

I'd rather read *Slaughterhouse-Five* than read a deconstruction of it.

Because it's a great book. It's interesting. It's funny, it's tragic. It's weird.

And a deconstruction of it is usually not very funny, not tragic, not weird, and not interesting.

If your deconstruction of the thing is way less interesting than the thing, eh, skip it.

Problem 5: It's Arrogant AF

I reserve a special cut of beef for deconstructionists who pose their theories in order to piggyback off something great and to make themselves look smarter than the author: "Look, maybe I didn't write *Confederacy of Dunces*, but if I can tell you about how it's secretly capitalist, can then demonstrate capitalism is evil, I can demonstrate how the text is evil, I've outsmarted the text, and I am morally superior to it."

That's the keyword: outsmarted. Deconstruction is about outsmarting the text, not listening to it.

It's a one-way argument with an often-dead writer. Doing that for your own personal gain just feels...a little gross.

Alternatives

What if you considered a narrative as a whole composed of parts that can't be broken down, prizing the end result over the smaller parts? Consider a narrative a soul instead of thinking about it like a body?

What if you read books and thought about them like friends and family? We don't expect our friends to be perfect, and it's okay for them to have imperfections and parts you don't like. We love them even though they're imperfect because perfection is not achievable. And learning to love them is about learning to dwell on their good qualities.

What if you started examining literature the way we examine music? You can look at the album as a whole, you can look at individual songs, but I think it's pretty rare that we go so far as to break down each instrument on an album. The combination of things is what makes music work, right? And we don't expect each instrument to work as a whole on its own.

What if you used an optimist's approach? Go into a book assuming it's going to be good, and really focus on the ways in which your assumptions are confirmed?

Building Back Up

Notice that the above alternatives to deconstruction are all about enjoying and loving books. Notice that the opposite of deconstruction is enjoyment.

Do yourself a favor: start building books up instead of tearing them down. It'll change the way you read. It'll change the way you live.

Dialog Journals and Writing Good Dialog



Here's a quick quote from an interview with Jason Isbell. Isbell is talking about seeing Garth Brooks live right before Garth got huge:

I remember in 90, 91, I saw Garth at the state fair for a dollar right before the potbellied pig races, and I think "Friends in Low Places" came out like a week later. So it was—He probably never played in daylight again after that.

"He probably never played in daylight again after that."

That's a phrase I'd never heard before, but you instantly know what it means, right? It describes fame in a specific, interesting way. Much better than, "I saw Garth Brooks right before he was famous. Maybe a week later, he was huge."

Phrases like "never played in daylight again" motivated me to start up what I call a dialog journal, and I'd like to encourage other writers out there to do the same.

How It Works

It can be a notebook, a fresh index card you take off a pile every day and slip into your pocket. The point is to write down snippets of things people say, anything spoken aloud that's worth writing down.

How It's Different

The idea isn't to build a bank of phrases that you can rob whenever you need something cute. You're not necessarily writing these things down so that you can return to them later. You're writing them

down to get a feel for the way people speak, for translating real talk into written words.

It's not about the finished journal, the final product. It's about the act of producing that product so you can create realistic dialog that's worth reading whenever you need to.

You're practicing your listening, building an ear for the way people really talk.

You're practicing writing dialog, turning speech into words.

Habits

If you've got a blank notecard in your pocket every day, you'll get in the habit of finding something to fill it with.

You'll listen to the way people talk, you'll listen to the people behind the desk at the dentist's office, even if they're chatting with each other about ordering more salted caramel flavored tooth polish (this is a thing, it's weird).

Saying It Wrong

Take special note of people saying things wrong, and get used to the fact that people say things wrong all the time.

You know that "I COULDN'T care less," is the correct way to say it, but would your character be more likely to say, "I COULD care less?"

Instead of correcting someone who says something wrong, write it down. Celebrate it. Get used to the way it feels. DON'T correct it as you write it down. Write it down exactly as it was spoken.

Because if nobody in your book says things wrong, that book better be taking place in the staff area of Harvard's English Department or some such shit. Good luck making that an electrifying read...

Mission: Smalltalk

Dialog journaling does two impossible things: it eases social situations for the nervous, and it makes smalltalk interesting.

When I go to a party where I don't know anyone, I try to go in with a writerly mission. I want to get someone to tell me an interesting story. Something about themselves or a relative, SOMETHING beyond "So, what do you do for a living?"

A good mission, especially if you're not comfortable in social situations, is to grab a piece of dialog for your journal. Because even if the content of the evening's chatter is pretty dull, SOMEONE is going to say SOMETHING in a way that'll light you up.

Instead of breathing personality into your characters by telling me their age in years, their eye color, or the kind of job they have, give me one piece of memorable dialog.

What Counts As Dialog

Anything spoken that's not planned out and not part of a performance.

What Doesn't Count As Dialog

Anything written. This includes speeches and the like, even if the speech seems fairly natural. If there are bullet points, it's not really dialog, it's writing.

Anything transcribed. This is always a little sanded down, not quite original.

Anything performed, even if it's off the cuff. Performance has a purpose outside of just saying something, and that purpose taints the dialog.

Audiobooks definitely don't count. Podcasts...I would say if the dialog is casual, not in the mode of an edited narrative, not meant to elicit a laugh, it can count.

Some pre-written dialog can be really good, but it's like birdwatching at the zoo: there's faux naturalism, and it'll never hit quite the same.

A Last Plea

A specific phrase, saying something wrong, just the way it trips you up when someone says, "The driveway needs shoveled," can give us a lot more character than telling me how tall someone is.

Instead of breathing personality into your characters by telling me their age in years, their eye color, or the kind of job they have, give me one piece of memorable dialog. One phrase they always say wrong. Give me that they grew up saying "snerbert" instead of "sherbert."

Smash or Pass: Monster Porn Edition



It's love month. And monsters need love, too.

Let's take a quick tour of some monster porn titles and play a game of Smash or Pass.



"Fisted by a Fairy" (Lesbian Fisting Erotica) by Cara Layton

Well, I was all in up to the parenthesis. I'll have to pass on this one, simply because I feel like bringing my male, straight (sexual orientation-wise, not totally in the biological sense, WOW, we got into too much personal info REAL quick) schlong to a lesbian fisting erotica is a classless move. I would be the monster.



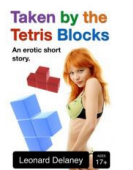
"Filled by the Clowns" by Fannie Tucker

...smash. I don't share this clown phobia the rest of you seem to have. I mean, clowns aren't my first choice, exactly, I'm not going to be like, "Whoa, whoa, honey...leave the makeup on," when Clown Girlfriend comes home from a hard night at the circus or a hard night at the haunted cave where she drags children to Hell. But if a little clowning is the worst thing a girlfriend of yours has been into, you've led a blessed life.



"Groped by the Grinch" by Melanie Nyx

Pass. Nothing against the *Grinch*, but this basically looks like *Beauty and the Beast* except...eh, it's 100% B&TB. Which would put me in the "Beauty" role, and that's very much an oversell of my looks. Plus, the way that Grinch treats his dog, Max, I just can't reward that sort of behavior with a night of passion.



"Taken by the Tetris Blocks: An Erotic Short Story" (Digital Desires #1) by Leonard Delaney

Square: Pass.

L-shape: Pass.

S-shape: Pass.

T-Shape: Pass.

Long straight rod: Smash. Not gonna lie, that's the only Tetris piece that does it for me. When I'm in need and I see that bad boy hovering in the "Next Piece" box, it's party time.



"The Orc from the Office" by Kate Prior

I'm gonna pass. I am not at the socioeconomic strata where I've acquired furniture that can manage an Orc of this hunksness.



"UniPorn" by Matt Shaw

At least they didn't call him Dickhead.

Pass. I've seen that Mr. Hands documentary. I know where this one goes. Specifically, it goes through a hole punctured in my colon. I need my colon. It's the only body part I've got with punctuation named after it.



"Violated By Monsters: The Toy Room" by Hannah Wilde

You know how there were a bunch of cheap-ass horror movies made in the 80s that are now being re-released on Blu-Ray? And in those movies, there were a bunch of young ladies who were topless because they were probably like, "Nobody is ever going to see this piece of shit, whatever"? And now there's a whole subset of women in their 50s who pore over the Vinegar Syndrome new releases to see if the movie they bared all for is getting a 4K re-release?

Is the modern version of that the monster porn cover? Will models who posed for stock images be like, "Holy shit, I never thought I'd be used for THIS!"?



"Sex Bear: The Choad Warrior" by Monsieur Loads

Smash. Because this is the second book in the series, but the first is called: *Sex Bear: The Legend Continues*.

Continues? What the fuck? Why is the first one the continuation?

That's MY kind of nonsense.

Plus, I have to give points for using "choad" in the title. There is only one other book with "choad" in the title on Goodreads, one author who goes by Choad P. Squick, and the fact that there are only three choads in all of literature seems like an atrocity.

Frog and Choad are Friends. Jackoff Kerouac: On The Choad. C'mon, this is easy.



"BigBoobenstein" by Jeff O'Brien

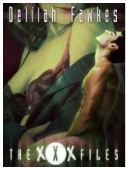
Smash. What? Hey, Laura Roberts, author of *Naked Montreal*, calls this book "oddly feminist." And that's why I'm interested in it. I think oddly feminist characters are sexy. Because of their brains. And their giant, perfectly rounded, glistening, bouncy, barely-covered-by-a-bikini commitment to feminism.



"Monsters from the Closet Inc." by Jenna Powers

In this ripoff of *Monsters, Inc.*, monsters power their city on screams of ecstasy instead of screams of terror.

Smash. If you can get the audiobook read by John Goodman, voice of Sully? Smash and a half.



"The XXX-Files" by Delilah Fawkes

The X-Files was ALREADY an erotic thriller for a young Pete based solely on the presence of Gillian Anderson, so this is a definite, but redundant, smash. Try as they might, those *X-Files* wardrobe folks learned that there wasn't enough tweed on Earth to make Gillian Anderson frumpy.



"Morning Glory Milking Farm" by C.M. Nascosta

According to the book's description, this book features a young lady getting full-time work, with great salary and benefits, jerking off minotaurs.

Yeah, smash. Just the idea of having a pension does it for me. Big time. I don't care if I'm jerking off minotaurs, spanking The Jersey Devil, or going down on Bloody Mary, if you've got a retirement package for me, I've got a package in return for YOU!



"I Slept with Slender Man" by Emma Steele

Pass. Call me when you write an erotic adventure with Thiccman.



"Tomb Pillager vs The Slime" by Tiffany Bell

I do have in-unit laundry, meaning that I can handle the increased laundry I have to assume comes with doing...sex? Something sexual? Whatever a slime does for sex, seems like you'd have to commit to washing sheets with a frequency that wouldn't have been possible for Laundromat Pete.



"Werewolf Gynecologist: Hard Packed" by Aria Cuming

I mean, most gynecological appointments are during the day, so being a werewolf gynecologist isn't actually a problem, right? Unless you're going to one of those midnight gynecologists I've seen advertised in the back of some very questionable pamphlets they have at Goodwill.

I'm too forgetful for a werewolf-based relationship. It's a year, tops, before I forget it's a full moon and get ripped to shreds and then those shreds get shredded to rips. Have to pass.



"I've Fallen and there's a Tentacle in my Butt" by Edward Naughty

Okay, this one has sequels:

I've Fallen and there's a Tentacle in my Butt, Again!!!

I've Fallen and There's a Tentacle in My Butt, and it's Even Bigger Than Before

Guaranteed, the FIRST time you come into the ER with this nonsense, Werewolf Proctologist is rolling his eyes. By the third time, he sees you waddling in, and he's busting out the butthole tentacle forceps before you've even reached for your insurance card.

Get The Most Out Of A Small Book Promo Budget



Let's say you've got a book coming out, and let's say you've set aside a modest promo budget of \$250 dollars.

Yes, I know, calling \$250 bucks "modest" makes me sound like The Monopoly Man. But when it comes to book promo, you'll eat through \$250 pretty fast.

If you're looking at a budget like that, let me give you some hard-won advice on some good and bad ways to spend it.

Bad: Goodreads Giveaways

Goodreads giveaways sound tempting. They're easy, just connect your Amazon account to Goodreads, shell out some cash, and the system does the rest, giving out copies of your book to hungry readers.

Why does it suck?

Goodreads users who enter giveaways enter ALL THE GIVEAWAYS without really even looking at what they might get. Meaning your splatterpunk book goes out to people who like cozy mysteries, gentle romances, and the occasional book about some Scandinavian way of life that'll supposedly fix your problems (just buy a cable knit sweater and drink booze, trust me, you're better off). If that person reads your book and gets to the part where someone chainsaws a man into giblets, they'll hate it.

Good promo isn't just about shoving your books into as many hands as possible, it's about giving your book to people who will probably enjoy it.

Analogy time: if your goal is to create positive buzz about Beyond Burgers, should you give away free Beyond Burgers at McDonald's or set up a grill outside Whole Foods?

Yes, McDonald's is synonymous with burgers, but Whole Foods is where you'll find someone looking for a vegan option, someone who has a little more money to spend, and someone who is inclined to give Beyond Burgers a fair shake.

Giving your books away is a good idea, just be smart about it.

Good: Targeted Author Copies

\$250 bucks should easily buy you 50 copies of your book, plus all the shit you need to ship those copies out.

Get copies, ask people if they want 'em, and send 'em out for free to people who ACTUALLY WANT THEM.

Use Goodreads and similar sites to find people who've enjoyed your other stuff or stuff a lot like what you're offering, and message those people to ask if they'd like a free copy.

Bad: Social Media Spending

What's tempting about social media advertising is that you can really drill down and target an audience. You can target people who've listed an interest in books, topics that your book covers, you can filter to a likely age demographic, all sorts of stuff.

And while this guarantees your ad will be seen by people who are more likely to be interested, the problem is the context in which they're seeing it.

On a social media site, EVERYTHING is competing for someone's attention. There are thousands of more enticing things happening all around your book. You can post nudes on Twitter. Your book cannot compete with nudes, even if your book is a book OF nudes.

And there's another issue: Twitter is designed to make you stay ON TWITTER. Everything about the interactions, scrolling, all that shit, it's meant to keep you from leaving Twitter, even if you're leaving Twitter to buy a book.

When the advertising venue is pulling in one direction and your marketing is pulling the other, and when that venue is one of the wealthiest, most powerful things in existence, you're paying to enter a tug-of-war you can't win.

Good: Social Media Scheduling Software

I'm conspiratorial, and I do believe (based on a lot of experience) that scheduled posts see less action than "live" posts.

And yet, I still recommend scheduling. Why?

Because it's super difficult to get on Instagram, plug your book, and get out. You can jump onto a scheduling software, crank out a month's worth of posts in one shot, and get the fuck out without scrolling through nonsense.

Scheduling software separates the business of social media from the timesuck, the work from the play.

Consider using a good scheduler, one that might cost a few bucks. Consider whether a paid account might let you post to platforms you haven't had the time for. If you're using a scheduling software already, consider whether you might upgrade to a paid tier and get more out of it.

Bad: Bookmarks That Promote The Books They're Inside Of

Why are you stuffing a bookmark inside of the book it's promoting? It's a thinner, lesser, non-readable version of the damn book.

Make a bookmark that links someone to a short story you offer for free, only available via the bookmark. To an essay, to a comedy piece, to your website. And make the bookmark something people enjoy, visually or with something quick written on it.

Hell, make a limited number of bookmarks, and use them to link to free copies of the book. Let the promotion go for a limited time, then shut it down. It's a lot cheaper than sending out actual copies.

Or, if the bookmarks promote your latest, put the bookmarks somewhere other than between the pages of the book they promote. Ask your library if they'll let you put them out. Ask a local bookstore. If they say no, fuck it, stick those bookmarks in some books anyway. Find something like your book and go to town.

**If you take
nothing else
away from
this, please
remember: if
you're in the
sewer, nothing
is a candy bar.**

Good: Websites and URLs

"My book is available! Just head on over to PeterDerkAuthorWriterPodcaster.blogspot.blogger.blog.wix/newestbook.shit."

Yeah, no.

Build a simple, usable website, a one-pager of a site that lets people click straight through to any and all platforms that sell your book.

And make sure it looks great on a phone, because easily half your visitors will see it that way.

If your book is only available one place, like Amazon, you might not even need a website, just a good URL that redirects people to your book's page.

What's a good URL? It's short, it's easy to understand when typed or said aloud. So don't have a number in it, that's confusing when you say it out loud. Don't have repeated letters (Biggapinggreatbooks.com) because people mess those up. If your name isn't easy to spell or has

multiple spellings, don't use your name. If your URL has a slash in it, it's not good enough.

Good: Buy Back Your Own Time

Organizing a blog tour takes time. Creating attractive social media images takes time. Building a following via a newsletter takes time. Connecting with local bookstores takes time.

Consider using that \$250 to pay yourself to take a couple days off work to get your promo stuff in order. Focus exclusively on that for two days, and you'll get a lot done.

Good: Get Some Good Author Photos

Pay someone a little money to take pictures from a distance further than the length of your arm.

Take a few different shots. Bring a few different sets of clothes, try a few different backgrounds. Make sure some are portrait and some are landscape. That way, for interviews, freelance stuff you might pick up, whatever, you can provide more than one high-quality photo option.

Good: Get a Decent USB/Smartphone Microphone

You're more bookable on podcasts if you don't sound like total shit.

Pro tip: say, "Hey, I can record the audio on my end, then I can send you the file so my parts are from my mic and your parts are from yours, if you'd prefer." Figure out how to do that, and your interview over Zoom might actually sound decent.

Good: Design Tools

A few months of Adobe Suite ain't cheap, but if you can use it to crank out a year's worth of promo images that look nice, videos that aren't painful to look at, and audio that is passable, well, you could make worse investments.

Good: Upgrade What You've Already Got

Spending the cash to upgrade your existing marketing options means you can improve what you're already doing without needing to learn something brand new. And spending on things you use already is a good investment. You know it won't go to waste.

Are you putting out a newsletter? Can you upgrade and get more out of it?

Social media scheduler? "Link in bio" services? Do you have a website that'd really benefit from a few hours of a web designer's attention?

Bad: A Generic Book Marketing Service

Don't do this. Just don't.

Book marketing services sound great, and the reason they sound great is because you're desperate. It's a glimmer of hope in the vast sewers of book promotion, the turd floating along that might be a turd, but might, just maybe, be a candy bar.

If you take nothing else away from this, please remember: if you're in the sewer, nothing is a candy bar. Nothing.

The David Sedaris Publication Path



David Sedaris never submitted pieces to lit mags.

David Sedaris never tried to find an agent.

David Sedaris got published by reading out loud at events. He started with small events, was asked to slightly larger events because he killed, and those invites led to more, even larger events, until eventually he read at large enough events that he was discovered, was invited to read on NPR, and, well, we know the rest.

Why does this matter?

The Lit Mag Is Dead

The traditional publication path used to start with submission to lit mags. You sent something in to *Glimmer Train* (real name), or *Tin House* (also real), or *Pete's Lit Hole* (may be made-up, but who knows?), and eventually you got picked up by one of them, and you were off on your big publishing journey.

The Believer, *Glimmer Train*, *Tin House*, and a buttload of university-based lit mags are gone. Mostly because lit mags don't make any money.

Hey, I'm all for an artistic pursuit that doesn't make money. I'm even in for artistic pursuits that LOSE money. I made die-cast, rodeo-style belt buckles to celebrate the 500th episode of a podcast nobody cares about. I can't GIVE them away (seriously, if you want one, and you live in the U.S., I will send you one, free of charge. Message me).

But a lit mag is a TON of work, and it's a lot to ask someone to do for free, or perhaps even at a loss,

for the decades needed to give a lit mag status, to make it a force that publishers pay attention to.

David Sedaris' publication path matters because the *Glimmer Train* has derailed. *The Believer* Stopped Believin', despite Journey's impassioned advice.

You need a different path.

The Loss Of Meaning to Small Press Success

Another popular road to bigtime publication: put out a book through a small press, and use that to demonstrate your marketability to an agent.

With the means to start a small press so easily available, having a book come out from a small press doesn't mean what it used to.

David Sedaris' path to publication matters because it doesn't rely on small presses.

The Key to Sedaris' Publication

What's missing from current publication paths? What needs to be replicated in a new one?

Why was David Sedaris' way ALWAYS better?

Because Sedaris brought something to the table that was a lot better than a manuscript: An audience of book buyers.

When Sedaris made roomfuls of people laugh, he showed publishers and agents that he was a good, safe investment.

And that's the key: If you can make everyone a little money, you make it pretty easy for a publisher or an agent to say "Yes."

How It Might Look Today

Unless you live in New York or L.A., chances are you won't have a lot of opportunities to hit open mics and read stories in front of people who will hear them. And I have my doubts as to whether publishers are hitting a lot of these sorts of events...

But that's okay, the 2023 version of this publication path is different.

It's probably guest blogging. It's probably reading your stories on podcasts and doing interviews. It's probably building your own audience through self-publishing and small press publishing and newsletters and getting your work out there.

Get your work out there. Demonstrate there's an audience for what you do.

**If you can
make everyone
a little money,
you make it
pretty easy for
a publisher or
an agent to say
"Yes."**

Why It Might Be Good For You: You Have to Work Hard

Every time Sedaris read, he turned it into another, slightly larger, gig. And for every gig he did, he wrote something new. By the time he was “discovered,” he already had a book’s worth of short stories that he’d put together, performed, edited, and polished to a high shine.

The Sedaris path isn’t for the person who writes one killer short story and tries to ride it for the next 4 years.

Why it Might Be Good For You: Bigtime Deadlines

Fuck a deadline that someone wants to see a draft, now you're in a world where you've got an event in two weeks, and whatever pages you have finished are the pages you'll read out loud in front of a group of people.

THAT, my friends, is a deadline you will only screw up once before you never screw it up again.

Why It Might Be Good For You: Skip the Inbox

When your manuscript is waiting in someone’s inbox, it’s dead. It’s not getting you more work, it’s not making you any money, it’s impressing no one.

When your manuscript is making the rounds being read aloud or appearing online, it’s alive. It’s doing its job.

I say skip the lit mag and big press inbox, put your manuscript to work.

Yes, I Read The 111-Page Moms For Liberty Book Ban Document



Book bans are pretty much the worst, and when it comes to the worst of the worst, the 111-page Moms for Liberty BOOK of BOOKS document, which claims to provide parental guidance for controversial children's books, is beneath the barrel's bottom, somewhere deep in the sewer, under a layer of crust formed by many, many flushed turds.

If I can rewind for a moment, which might be impossible after going the turd crust route: I consider myself a pretty fair and even handed person. I dislike progressive AND conservative book bans, and when it comes to getting a fair shake, you'll get it from me. I'm not out to hate Moms for Liberty just because their politics and mine disagree.

So this is probably the fairest, most reasonable look you'll get at this particular document, which lots of book bans and parent groups are using as a resource to help them remove books from school libraries.

And this reasonable take starts with "turd crust."

Moms for Liberty

Wait, who are the Moms for Liberty who wrote this document? To get Seinfeldian about it: What's their deal?

I visited the MFL website, and the first thing I saw was some text that was unreadable thanks to bad design decisions. But I squinted hard and thought of Jesus, and then I saw that it read, "Joyful Warriors."

If scripty font that says something confusing and threatening, like "Joyful Warriors" tingles your Spidey Sense, just you wait.

The next thing I came across was a video from the MFL convention from last year.

Highlights? Highlights!

At first you see things like a woman saying, "We continue to fund systems and buildings, but not students. We need to fund students." Well...alright, that sounds cool. Maybe these moms aren't so bad.

Then I saw the large projection of the phrase "Florida leads," as a background for a speaker, which, unless it was followed by a slide that said something like, "the country in book bans and other nonsense," seems a little alarming.

The speaker most heavily profiled was none other than Ron "anti-abortion, anti-gun-control, ban-sanctuary-cities, fund-the-police, I got married at Disney World," DeSantis.

There was also a Foxy Babe who said a bunch of vague things about MFL being "her people." Oh, sorry, don't be offended when I say, "Foxy Babe." What I mean by that is, you know that specific sort of blonde, attractive young lady who you'll see pop up on Fox News? She's cute, she's got her glasses on so you take her seriously, and then she casually starts talking about how she carries her handgun with her to spin class, just in case someone tries to force her to get a vaccine?

Possibly my favorite quote: "Our rights don't come from the government, they come from God."

Hoo boy.

Let's call this what it is: a group of right-wing weirdos pretending like their wacky politics are just good, no-nonsense parenting.

Opening Salvo

Back to the document, the opening of which is delicious:

What started as a fight statewide to get our children out of masks and back into school has turned into so much more.

Hey kids, if your mom is a Mom For Liberty, she thinks you're too stupid to finish high school if you can't see the mouth part of your teacher's face, AND she thinks you're too stupid to select your own reading material.

Parents should have a say in what is available to our children within the school library and classrooms. We work hard to provide our children with specific morals and values, and feel strongly that they should come home from school with those morals and values intact.

I guess that's the most succinct, if disingenuous, vision of MFL. Sure, if a kid is raised Christian or

Muslim or Wiccan, they shouldn't then go to school and have those values denied them. Who am I to step in between parents and children by saying that Jesus was all about kindness and acceptance of all people?

Our group has been labeled "Book Banners," which is patently false. We do not want to burn books or take them out of circulation. If a parent believes their child should have access to these materials, they can check them out at a public library or purchase it.

You know, they're not totally wrong on this, but they're doing the thing I hate, saying that because their form of ban isn't a huge bonfire in the middle of the town square, it's not REALLY a book ban.

Take note, progressive folks: This is what you sound like when you talk about removing a book from one bookstore not being a ban, or when you talk about pressuring a publisher to not put out a book because you fear its contents and how that's "just creating friction."

All of these things still count as book bans, okay? To bastardize our friends Mobb Deep, when it comes to bans, there ain't no such thing as halfway (banned) books.

Let's sum up the intro in a couple lines:

We don't want to ban books, we believe in liberty. Now please enjoy the next 110 pages of us telling you which books should be banned and which liberties you should give up.

The Rating System

MFL rates books on a 0-5 system.

A zero is...I don't know, I don't think any examples were given, but I would be extremely curious to know which book would be a zero. Probably just a single-pager with a picture of a bald eagle.

Some of the criteria that pushes books up to 2's and 3's and beyond is about what you'd expect: Sex, violence, drug and alcohol use.

But there are some other criteria that are new ones for me. "Hate," which seems to be anything that mentions the existence of race or gender, and "Gender Ideology," which can be explicit or non-explicit, and basically means, "modern-ish ideas about gender."

As with any ratings system, it's when you get to the filthy end that things get more fun.

A 3, in this system, is deemed inappropriate for anyone under 18 without parental guidance. A 4 is something that shouldn't be viewed by anyone under 18, at all. Level 4 books contain Explicit Sexual Nudity: depictions of sexual organs in a state of arousal.

Good to know: A soft penis is a 3, and a hard-on is a 4. Well, I guess if we're talking inches...

And by now you're asking, "What could possibly be a 5?"

"Explicit references to aberrant sexual activity, including sexual assault/battery, bestiality, or sexual abuse."

Let's...let's get back to that one momentarily.

First Things First

The game Moms for Liberty is playing is one where kids and teens are the same.

There's a world of difference between having a book like *Gender Queer* in an elementary school library and having a book like *Gender Queer* in a high school library.

I agree that *Gender Queer* might not be appropriate for an elementary school library. But I'm not agreeing with Moms for Liberty, I'm agreeing with *Gender Queer's* author Maia Kobabe:

It was always planned to come out from the older-reader imprint of my publisher, aimed for either adults or high teens, like 16-plus.

I'm also agreeing with the Alex Awards Committee, who selected *Gender Queer* as an Alex winner (Alex Awards are given to adult books that have appeal to teens).

I do agree that a depiction of someone giving oral sex to a strap-on indicates that *Gender Queer* is not intended for kids, and if you're looking for a gentle introduction to concepts of gender, *It Feels Good To Be Yourself* by Teresa Thorn is a MUCH better choice.

But what MFL does throughout the document is collapse "kids" and "teens" into the same group by using the term "our children" to describe both.

You may think of your teenage daughter as your "child," but in terms of how they navigate the world, what is reasonably expected of them, and how much protection they should receive when compared to how much freedom they need, the discussion can't be the same for a kid who's 8 and a teen who's 18. Both are your children, but one is a child, and one is not.

And, for the most part, it looks like Iowa schools (the schools profiled in the report), DO make an effort to present material to the intended audience, not just by making good choices about what goes on the shelves, but even going so far as to divide the library catalogs for different schools.

When I searched the Linn Mar High School library catalog, sure enough, we've got *Gender Queer*, and it's listed as having an "Adult Interest Level!"

When I searched in the catalog for the Excelsior Middle School Library (awesome name, Stan Lee would be proud), part of the same school system as Linn Mar, *Gender Queer* doesn't come up at all.

Which tells me this: the library staffs in these schools have created separate catalogs, and these schools aren't offering *Gender Queer* to kids.

It's your 111-page document that makes you look stupid. The Toni Morrison parts just highlight the depth of the stupidity.

It's not schools and school libraries who are confusing what's appropriate for kids and what's appropriate for teens. It's Moms for Liberty.

Let's Run Down Some of the Profiled Books

Push by Sapphire:

This one is a 5, meaning anyone under 18 shouldn't even touch it. I DO give Moms a little credit, they counted "puta" as a swear, so I guess they won't be pushing for an English-only curriculum(?)

Ellen Hopkins (various titles):

Ellen Hopkins is the number one edgelord for teen girls, change my mind.

Of course her books contain drug use. But they depict drug use as shitty, ruinous, and VERY unglamorous. If Ellen Hopkins created *Breaking Bad*, the story would center on Jesse blowing half the population of New Mexico to bankroll his meth habit. Nobody walks away from a Hopkins thinking drugs sound fun.

Rupi Kaur (various titles):

These aren't really my jam. I always felt like these books...let me put it this way: thanks to Rupi Kaur, there must be a billion pieces of shabby chic reclaimed pallet wood with "fall in love with your solitude" painted on them.

Frankly, I think poetry is inappropriate for teens all around. BORING. Too boring.

Is there a parent group out there that's trying to ban boring-ass books from schools? Because that's a group I could get behind. Enough Shakespeare, for fuck's sake! I want my kids to be bored, but I want them to be bored the way I think is appropriate.

Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture edited by Roxane Gay:

Here's a cited passage in the MFL document:

When I was twelve years old, I was gang-raped in the woods behind my neighborhood by a group of boys with the dangerous intentions of bad men....Allowing myself to believe that being gang-raped wasn't "that bad" allowed me to break down my trauma into something more manageable, into something I could carry with me instead of allowing the magnitude of it to destroy me.

One of MFL's sneaky, stupid ideas is right in the ratings system, where sexual content is all intermingled. Real accounts of sexual assault are a 5. As are stories of bestiality.

If I wrote a story about a farmer and his late-night relations with a lubed-up ewe and how awesome it was, it would be banned by Moms For Liberty FOR THE SAME REASONS that an essay about sexual assault, which is frank but nowhere near salacious, BY ROXANE GAY would be banned.

Just as an aside, how many accounts of bestiality show up in school libraries? Is there an *Animorphs* book that takes a dark turn (arguably darker than the turn they took when they time traveled and killed Hitler)?

Assassination Classroom by Yusei Matsui:

Hey, if you're anti-school-shooting, I'm with you, mom-bros!

But if you've voted against gun control, which I'm guessing most MFL did, fuck off, eh?

Based on all of their other politics, I'm guessing Moms for Liberty would prefer kids have access to a copy of Assassination Classroom that was hollowed out with a gun placed inside it than a copy of the same book with the story intact.

So...Weak...

Let's look at some of the super weak "problematic" examples MFL highlights:

from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*:

He was also crying pretty bad, and he decided if anyone asked him, he would say his eyes were red from smoking pot.

This is categorized as drug use. Alright...sure.

From *The Hate U Give*:

I swear, I don't understand white people...

This is categorized as hate by MFL. Which, holy shit, aren't you the same people always complaining about "snowflakes"?

From *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*:

During one week when I was little, Dad got stopped three times for DWI: Driving While Indian.

This is a tangled ball of yarn. Is the problem in the dad character thinking he's being pulled over for racial reasons? Is that him being racist? Or is it the cops pulling the dad over? Is the problem that racism exists in the book? Is the problem in mentioning a racism happened? I'm so confused.

from *Flamer*:

Usually his bark is worse than his bite, but one time he was so mad at my little brother, he went to hit him...but mom stepped in between them.

That's violence. Violence that was prevented completely.

Enough bad examples, let me give you a tip, Moms: There's PLENTY of stuff that, taken out of

context, put in front of an average parent, would help your case. "I don't understand white people" doesn't make the grade.

Stop wasting everyone's time with this nonsense.

"The Bluest Eye" and the Curriculum Conundrum

MFL, while I'm giving you advice, I'll advise you to not run up against Toni Morrison.

Morrison is almost universally considered one of the all-time great American authors.

You can try and oust Rupi Kaur because, eh, she's an Instagram poet, she's only like 30 years old, whatever. You can try to scrub Ellen Hopkins because, eh, that sort of edgy, look-how-far-we-can-take-it writing for teens is past its prime. You could probably get rid of Sherman Alexie if you went the route of, "He's been implicated in some sexual misconduct, I don't think he needs to be in the school library." You might even get some progressive people to go with you on that one.

**I see which
teens have
good parents
and which
teens don't.**

But Toni Morrison is just a dumb swipe to take. Pulitzer, Nobel, National Humanities Medal, Presidential Medal of Freedom—It makes you look stupid.

Well, that's not entirely true. It's your 111-page document that makes you look stupid. The Toni Morrison parts just highlight the depth of the stupidity.

Belief in Books

MFL has a weird, mystical belief in the power of books, which is kind of cool, it's something they share with LeVar Burton.

What's not so cool is that MFL sees the power of books as a threat. That part is very NOT LeVar Burton, and I'm sorry I invoked your name, Mr. Burton.

MFL fails to ever, at any point, weigh the good potential outcomes of reading a book against their objections. In other words, sure, a book may have some material that's not for everyone, but does the book, on the whole, present possible benefits? And do those benefits outweigh the potential harm you see?

Someone might read *All Boys Aren't Blue*, and while being mildly uncomfortable with the sex scenes, might enjoy the book overall.

Someone might read *All Boys Aren't Blue*, and while not directly identifying with the narrator's gender or sexuality, might recognize themselves in the broader idea of feeling like it's hard to fit in.

Someone might read *All Boys Aren't Blue*, and while not seeing themselves reflected, might recognize a struggle in someone else and become a better friend to that person.

I mean, for "Joyful Warriors," you are spending an awful lot of time talking about the worst possible outcomes of reading a goddamn book. Maybe you could find some joy in considering the positive?

And Here, Fuck It, I Tell You How To Raise Your Kids

I was going to say that I didn't want to tell you how to raise your kids, but let's just skip that part, because I do, and I will.

I don't have kids. And maybe that's allowed me to see something you can't.

Maybe, as a librarian who worked with teens, ran book clubs for them, supervised teen workers and volunteers—maybe what I've seen of your children and what you see of your children is different.

I've seen how they act when their parents aren't around.

I see them forced to make decisions. I see them trying to fit in. I see them working out the complex social hell that is high school.

I've seen them in situations where they have a little freedom. Some LIBERTY, if you will.

And I see which teens have good parents and which teens don't.

The teens that have good parents can be honest with their parents. They don't have to hide who they are. They don't feel like their parents are going to freak the fuck out if they come home with a book.

The ones who have good parents, they act the way they do because they think it's right, not because they're afraid of what will happen if they do something wrong.

Raising your kids, and especially your teens, to value liberty, is not about walking ten steps ahead, clearing any roadblocks and making their decisions for them. Sometimes, it's about teaching your kid to make their own decisions. Giving them the tools to pick up a book when you're not around, decide it's not for them, and set it back down.

I mean...isn't that what liberty is?

Let's Really End This

I really wanted to end on that line about liberty, but there's one last thing to say.

I don't care for your document, Moms For Liberty. I don't care for your merch store, where you sell shirts that claim you don't co-parent with the government, even though you DO ask the government to enforce your rules, sort of the way in a traditional co-parenting situation you might have one setter of rules and one enforcer.

I don't even like your name. Did you know that the difference between "liberty" and "freedom" is that freedom is about doing whatever you would like to, if you're able, and liberty is about being able to live without "arbitrary restraints"? "Arbitrary Restraints" might actually be a better name for you all.

Despite all my feelings, I'm going to give you a piece of advice that comes from a genuine place of

love.

If you continue to participate in this nonsense, you are going to put up a wall between you and your kids.

It won't happen when they're 10, but as they get a little older, as they see more of the world and meet the people in it, they're going to feel differently about you.

Your kid is going to live a full life, and you're not going to be a part of it. Because your kid is going to know that they can't tell you about their gender queer roommate. Your kid is not going to be able to talk to you about it if they're sexually assaulted, because that shit is taboo, it's like bestiality, remember? Your kid won't be able to come to you for help if they end up hooked on pills, even prescribed pills, like so many folks we all know.

But I don't want to scare you, I don't want to present the world as a threatening place, a place your child needs protecting from. That's really more what you're about.

What I want to say is that your kid is going to grow up good and wonderful, and they're going to avoid you while they do it.

You're going to miss out.

Movie Novelizations Are Back!



With *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*, Jeff Strand is putting out a novelization of a movie that's more than 40 years old. The new trilogy of *Halloween* movies had novelizations. Vinegar Syndrome just announced that they're set to start novelizing some of their properties (*Sidekicks? The Incredible Melting Man? Invisible Maniac?*).

What is going on with novelizations? Are they back? Did they ever leave? Anyone got a copy of *Demolition Man: The Novel* I can borrow?

What's a Novelization?

This might be my old man moment: I think I might have to explain what a movie novelization is.

Let me just fetch up my suspenders printed to look like rulers, even though elastic rulers are about the most useless thing ever conceived...

A movie novelization is not to be confused with a book that was turned into a movie. It's also not a tie-in, which is a novel that takes place in the same fictional world as a movie, but tells a different story.

A movie novelization is a full-length novel, usually released as a mass market paperback, that follows (mostly, basically) the plot of a movie. It's usually written by someone (Alan Dean Foster about 65% of the time) who gets a copy of the script, fills in some dialogue, character motivations, other business, and then the novel hits bookstore shelves JUST before the movie comes out.

All so you can READ the movies!

Wait...why the hell would anyone want to do that?

Grandpa Strikes Back

Let's say you went to see *Empire Strikes Back* in 1980, thought it was fucking awesome, and you wanted to see it again.

Well, tough shit. Because VCRs were still a ways off from being common, and even if you could get one, it'd run you the 1980 equivalent of \$500 bucks.

And do you know when *Empire* came out on VHS? If you guessed November 1984, FOUR LONG YEARS after it was released in theaters, you're either a great guesser or a Star Wars dork that I can respect.

Novelizations used to be a way to have a sort of, kind of, rerun of the movie. They were cheaper, they was easier to sell (no device was required to "play" it), and you could pick them up at the grocery store.

The Empire Strikes Back: The Novel, came out about a week before the movie, and when it was all over with, it sold 3 million copies. It stayed on the New York Times' Bestseller List for 6 months.

What can I say, our options were limited, and 80s kids were used to doing a lot more with a lot less. Ask anyone who puberty-ed pre-internet about the sorts of things they masturbated to, you'll hear some creative stuff. Disturbing at times, but damn resourceful.

So Why Did Novelizations Die?

These days, a month is a long time between a movie showing up in theaters and showing up for rental at home. You don't have that long wait pushing people into the desperate act of reading in order to get their movie fix.

Damn near everyone has some sort of device that can play a movie. This is no longer a luxury item.

And now there are so many other ways to engage with movies that you love. You can watch people talk about them online, read articles, read reviews. You can buy t-shirts at Target. You can touch the story again without getting down in the mud with [shudder] books.

Did Novelizations Die All The Way?

No, not all the way.

Big franchise shit, like *Independence Day* movies, kept getting novelizations. *Aliens* movies got consistent novelizations.

My guess? It's mostly a matter of "Why not?"

Because novelizations are cheap to make, they don't have to sell all that many copies to make a modest profit. You might not be able to fill an entire bath tub with hundos after your novelization

profits roll in, but if it buys your production company coffee for a few months, why not?

And one of the bigger expenses with movies (and with any entertainment product) is the marketing. For novelizations? The same marketing that sells the movie sells the book. You get a second use out of the already-spent movie marketing dollars. Again, why not?

What Started Bringing Novelizations Back?

Okay, so we got to the place where novelizations couldn't stand in for movies. What was the next move?

Some novelizations told the stories of movies that were never made. Or, at least, not exactly made.

The Star Wars, based on George Lucas' original script, was released as a comic. Nerds could see what *Star Wars* might have been with Ol' George having carte blanche. Yikes, by the way. Yikes. I don't know who talked George out of that one, but that person deserves an EGOT. Just give them all the awards.

Other novelizations addressed Hollywood's fuck-ups.

Hellraiser Bloodline got the novelization treatment decades after its release, and the book showed fans what could have been. It's a 4 out of 5 on Goodreads, where the movie is a 2.4 out of 5 on Letterboxd.

A William Gibson script for *Alien 3*, which was never used, was turned into a movie novelization.

Making movies is hard. It's expensive. You have to convince the right people. And nobody's going to take another run at *Alien 3*.

With novelizations, we can look into alternate Earths where these movies didn't suck. Or, where they REALLY sucked.

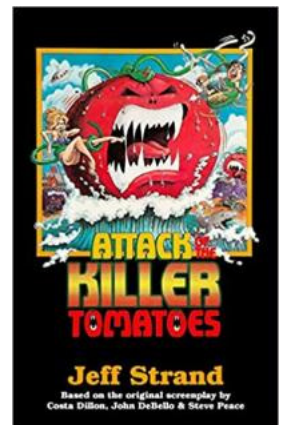
"Attack of the Killer Tomatoes" And Vinegar Syndrome

When Jeff Strand announced his novelization of *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* was up for preorder, I damn near broke my phone smashing the Add To Cart button so hard. My apologies to Encyclopocalypse Press, if your shopping cart system broke, that was me, I rocked it too hard.

Attack of the Killer Tomatoes is a whole 'nother beast. It takes the basic plot of the movie and uses it as a scaffolding to hang all new jokes. It's beautiful, it's hilarious. I'm declaring it the best book of the year. It's March, and I'm throwing out all the other books I was set to read this year because fuck it, nothing else is going to be that much fun.

Attack of the Killer Tomatoes breathes new life into something from the past, and this might be the new path for novelizations.

Vinegar Syndrome, makers of incredible HD transfers and gorgeous artwork for movies that, er, have a wildly varying relationship with ideas of quality, have



announced they're opening a publishing wing, and they plan to bring out novelizations of some of their properties.

Vinegar Syndrome owns a ton of licenses for things that might not have worked out on film, but they often have a core to them, a germ of an idea that could really sing with the right person at the wheel.

Vinegar Syndrome, if you're reading this, will you please, PLEASE get DuVay Knox to do novelization of *Petey Wheatstraw*?

Novelizations Are Legit

Walk away from this column with this: Movie novelizations are legit.

They're seen as a lesser version of the movies they re-create, but...why? Just because they're the second version? That's silly. We don't treat other remakes that way.

Alan Dean Foster:

It's always amusing to me, you take a book, say, To Kill a Mockingbird, throw away three quarters of it and win an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay...But if you take a screenplay and add three quarters of original material to it--which is a much, much more difficult piece of writing--well, that's by definition 'hackwork.' And it's much harder, having done both, to take a screenplay and make a book out of it than [to] take a terrific book and make a screenplay out of it.

Vinegar Syndrome Publishing, for real, I'd be happy to write novelizations of whatever you're willing to give me. *Alien Private Eye*, *Hell Comes to Frogtown*, *XTRO*! Or maybe you need someone to handle your smut. *Summer Camp Girls*. *Taxi Girls*. *Sorority Sweethearts*. I am willing to do the research. CALL ME!

What Digital Comics Readers Really Want



The good thing about reading average-type books is that you can get your hands on them without too much trouble. As long as you don't care about collectability, you can lay hands on just about anything put to paper.

Comics have been a little tougher.

For readers who don't care so much about collecting and cataloging, who just want to see those webs spun and those ups upped and away-ed, digital comics seemed like the answer. Collector nerds can keep collecting physical copies, reader nerds can read without paying a ridiculous price just to get the whole story, everyone wins.

But digital comics haven't quite worked out for digital readers.

Let's talk about how we can fix that.

We Want The D

By which I mean, "The dimensions appropriate for tablets."

A standard comic book is about 6.5" by 10", and some of the larger iPads and Galaxy tablets are pretty great for comics...until you get to a two-page spread. When that happens, you turn the tablet sideways, and you get an image that's about a third the size of what you'd get in a physical, 2-page spread.

Goddamn does saying "2-page spread" this much feel dirty.

2-page spreads are gorgeous in print, they're incredible, and I'll never forget some of those Death of

Superman spreads, those George Perez masterpieces, that moment when the Avengers assembled in medieval garb, which was a nerd highpoint on so many levels.

I'm not saying they should go away entirely, but if they don't work for a good chunk of your audience, maybe doing them too often is a bad idea. Or, maybe you should only do them for big pieces of art, not for layouts with dozens of dialog balloons for me to struggle through at 1/3 size.

Maybe we should consider...

Digital-First Comics

Why not make comics for the digital environment?

Comics meant to be read panel-by-panel as opposed to full-page layouts work WAY better on a tablet, even a phone.

Watch the way someone scrolls on almost every app. Up and down, right? Can't comics be designed for panel-by-panel, vertical scrolling?

Why not consider comics that are designed with small screens in mind? It closes some storytelling doors, but it opens others. Gone is the need to pad out a page so the reveal doesn't come until someone flips to the next page. If it's one panel at a time, you can spring a surprise at any moment.

Bonus Features

You've trotted out *Amazing Fantasy 15* many times, many ways. Why not give us something extra? Creator commentary? Pop-up comics history that explains who the hell Irving Forbush is?

I'd happily read a version of an old, and let's face it, sometimes-boring comic if there was some commentary from a writer who can talk about how the issue inspired future comics, or an inker who highlights some of the technique at play.

Why not insert a couple pages? Have a Joe Bob Briggs type of character (or, hell, just have Joe Bob Briggs!) tell us a little bit about what we just saw and what he thinks about it. Get Dave Wyndorf from *Monster Magnet* to do a couple issues, or Sebastian Bach.

What is it with heavy metal music and comic books?

Selectable Scans

Do I want an original scan with some creases, faded colors, stuff that looks the way the issue does today? Do I want a scan that's converted to look like it would have on the newsstand in 1965? How about the remaster that touches things up and makes them super crisp?

The answer is: Yes. I'll take all 3.

What is it with heavy metal music and comic books?

Anything At A Price

I don't shop at a brick and mortar store that ONLY sells DC or ONLY sells Marvel or ONLY sells Dark Horse. Why would anyone want this on a digital platform?

Can you all get your shit together long enough to build an online comics store? Not a DC Digital Platform, Not a Disney+++SuperComicsStravaganza, just a damn website where I can get comics of all kinds?

Can it be not Amazon?

Ownership

The problem with subscription platforms is that things come and go, some things are on tier A, then they move to Tier B. It's a clusterfuck. And it doesn't help that The Mouse owns Marvel, meaning the decisions about silly series from the 90s are being made by people who care more about how those books reflect on Disney than they do about whether or not those books are interesting.

I want options that let me own digital files for my purchases.

Ownership lets me build a collection. Ownership lets me read when I don't have an internet connection. Ownership lets me occasionally print something out and handbind it, which is something I do because I am a true maniac.

I don't need to own EVERYTHING, but, look, I know I'm gonna read Dark Knight Returns again before I die. Unless I drop dead in the next year or so. But I ate KALE today, DC Comics. Kale. That's how committed I am to reading comics over and over until I die, and the least you could do in recognition of my sacrifice is to give me some reasonable purchase options.

Put Together Good Runs

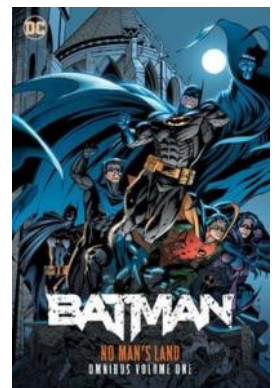
My god, try and find a chronology of Batman comics from the last ten years, it's a complete mishmash hodgepodge of "Read this trade paperback, but then stop two issues in, switch to another trade, then back to the first one, but when you hit the third panel of issue 3, you'll want to switch to—" alright, enough!

I want to read some Batman comics, not to actually become the World's Greatest Detective to figure out what the fuck order I'm supposed to go in.

Post-Crisis to No Man's Land. There you go, that's a great Batman run to put all together, in the right order, one digital package.

You've done this in print with omnibus editions. Why not go even further in digital versions, which don't have limitations like gravity and binding integrity (and, seriously, weight. I nearly tore a bicep holding one of those damn things)?

Make it easy on me. I'm happy to pay for an organized, fat stack of comics.



Foolkiller: The Strange, Forgotten Marvel Anti-Hero



When you tell people you like 90s comics, they assume it's because of the grittiness, the way anti-heroes were cool before TSwift, the belts with endless pouches, the belt pouches even occasionally strapped to a character's thigh, just in case there weren't enough pouches.

They make fun of Rob Liefeld's drawing style, especially the feet he drew. All of a sudden, everyone's a foot fetishist.

But we're here to talk today about a forgotten 90s character with a reasonable number of pouches and an absolutely unreasonable crimefighting method: Foolkiller.

Origins

There were a few Foolkillers before the 90s Foolkiller, and I wasn't going to mention them because, eh, who's got the time?

But there's a nugget for each that makes a quick rundown worthwhile.

Ross G. Everbest

The original Foolkiller, he used a "purification gun" to zap people into piles of ashes. How he got this gun is unknown, doesn't really matter, there must be all sorts of ray guns and super suits and weird vehicles and shit all over the Marvel universe. Look around enough, you're bound to find some kind of gizmo.

Everbest was a little different from your typical hero: he targeted people he deemed "fools," a pretty loosely defined category with very elastic rules.

The most interesting bit: he was inspired by a preacher to do good. THEN Everbest found the preacher at an orgy, so he killed the preacher, preserved his body in a tank, and was eventually killed by getting stabbed by a piece of glass from the preacher's dead body tank.

It's true poetry.

Greg Salinger

Salinger took up the mantle, including the purification gun and incongruous pirate costume, and he went on a killing spree of his own.

Salinger defined fools as people who were materialistic, consumerist, capitalistic, things like that. He was very in the Rorschach/Azrael/Venom,/bonkers anti-hero mindset.

He was eventually bested by Spider-Man. At one point, they're fist-fighting in an alley, another typical sight in the Marvel U, and a homeless guy who happened to be on the scene said that only a fool would fight Spider-Man. Salinger was like, "Holy shit, he's right!" and attempted to turn his purification gun on himself.

Salinger was captured and locked up in an asylum, where eventually, some nutbag (kind of a 90s Alex Jones) decides to put him on TV, where he inspires...

Kurt Gerhardt

Kurt is the subject of today's column. It's with Kurt Gerhardt that things get interesting.

Kurt is separated from his wife, he loses his job at a fancy corporate bank and works at Burger Clown, his father is killed in a mugging over six bucks, and his life is in shambles when he channel surfs smack into former Foolkiller Greg Salinger on the aforementioned talk show.

Kurt sends Salinger a letter, and they eventually start corresponding through an internet chat board. There was a window in time when this was a totally do-able way to correspond with someone about doing shit like vaporizing people with a ray gun as there were only a couple hundred nerds in any city who had any idea how to use those chat boards in the early 90s.

Salinger passes Kurt his costume and purification gun, and on his way home with the costume and gun in a box, Kurt stumbles onto a savage beating in progress. The two guys doing most of the punching are skinheads with actual Nazi armbands, so it's no big loss when Kurt turns both into piles of ash with the purification gun.

If something written in 1991, depicting the problems of 1991, feels prescient, it's not because it did a good job predicting the future. It's because 1991 and 2023 aren't all that different in the ways that really matter.

From Fool To Foolkiller

Suddenly he's downwind again. Smelling the burnt air and flesh. Hearing the truncated screams. Two days. Five dead. It sickens.

Kurt's first outings as Foolkiller are, um, productive?

He vaporizes a handful of people, and most of them seem pretty clearly in the wrong: a drug dealer, some guys trying to mug someone on the subway, and a dude threatening a woman with a knife.

I know, perhaps drug dealers don't deserve to be turned into piles of ash. We'll get to it...

This last fool, a guy threatening a woman with a knife, is shot by the purification gun, and he's depicted as a mostly fleshless skeleton, his skin and muscle blasted off his body in a full-page, gruesome image.

Then, Kurt goes home and pukes.

The Weirdest Training Montage of All Time

If he intends to go on, he'll have to make himself stronger. Much. Some, anyway. Never was athletically inclined. Exercise till doomsday—Rambo's not in the genes.

Kurt decides he needs to make himself tougher, and what follows is one of the weirdest training montages in history.

Kurt brings home bags of garbage from Burger Clown, dumps them out all over the floor, and works out in them. Eventually, he sleeps in garbage, too.

He plunges his hands in icy water and takes scalding showers.

I can now punch myself in the face 20 times without flinching.

For the final preparation, Kurt needs to see if he's ready to kill again. He climbs mostly naked into the sewer, picks up a giant rat, and headbutts it to death.

It's strange, and it's a little wacky, a little fun.

Which makes the coming tonal shift even stranger.

Comics Code Authority

At this point, you might, like me, be a little surprised about the Comics Code Authority seal that's appeared on every issue of *Foolkiller* so far.

For people who don't know, in the early 90s, most comics came with this little Comics Code Authority stamp in the upper corner of the cover, which indicated that the comic was appropriate for kids. Or, at least, not SUPER inappropriate.

When I was reading Foolkiller, I was like, Damn, Comics Code Authority, are you sure about this?

Issue 5 was the last issue that bore the seal. Whether it should've gone away sooner is uncertain, but after reading issue 5, I could see why issue 6 looked hastily redesigned, the Comics Code Authority stamp whited out, and on issues 7-10, even the box that once held the seal is gone.



Turning Point

What happens in issue 5 that would have the Comics Code Authority pump the brakes?

A series of brutal beatings in Central Park turn out to be the work of a bunch of kids, probably 13-15 years old, who live in a housing project in the city.

Kurt figures out who they are and what they're doing, and he follows them home.

On page 2 of issue 5, Kurt blasts one of the teens, his flesh flying from his body. Also on page 2, Kurt blasts a second teen, who falls from a roof, and his burning corpse hits the street below, the impact popping one of his eyes out of his skull.

Kurt vaporizes at least 5 more kids before the kids' mothers emerge, try and fight off Kurt, and he blasts one of them as well.

One of the last kids is trying to attack Kurt from above on a fire escape. Kurt spins, fires, and the blast cuts the kid in half. His two halves bounce down the side of the building, his head and torso fall in a dumpster, and his legs crash into bags of garbage.

Later in the same issue, Kurt sees a guy toss a dog out of a moving car. He follows the guy, finds him beating his wife, so Kurt blasts him away.

Perhaps the ugliest scene of the entire series comes in issue 6, when Foolkiller, killing his way through a crackhouse, finds a young boy who's already hooked on drugs. The boy manages to stab Foolkiller, throwing his aim off, so Foolkiller shoots the boy once, severing his arm from his body. Foolkiller takes a second shot, which vaporizes the boy below the waist, but his one-armed torso is still very much alive for the time it takes Foolkiller to finally end the ordeal with a third shot.

Which is why issue 7 opens with Kurt putting the purification gun in his own mouth.

But he's not ready to die. Not yet.

Which is why issue 7 opens with Kurt putting the purification gun in his own mouth.

The Wheels Come Off

At this point, Kurt becomes more erratic.

He talks to himself, screams in the night.

He kills a "fool" who's leading a bonfire where parents are asked to burn toys that encourage violence (he's a fool because he's protesting toys instead of doing something more substantive).

He kills a "fool" who won't sell a small American flag to a child for less than \$5 dollars (the child being at a rally for the troops in Gulf War I).

He kills both the leader of an anti-Gulf-War protest and the leader of the counter, pro-war protest, in the same breath.

He kills the Alex Jones figure who introduced him to the original Foolkiller in the first place.

He kills the dean of a college for expelling a student who told a politically incorrect joke.

He kills an obvious stand-in for Al Sharpton, and then kills a couple cops, partially to escape, partially because they call the Sharpton character the N-word.

Ahead Of Its Time?

Okay, that's probably enough plot summary. You get the idea. Guy gets special gizmo, probably shouldn't have, goes off the deep end.

Let's talk about the world outside the panels.

Foolkiller has probably been read by others as a "prescient look at modern society and its ills, an extremely timely story!" Or maybe it's something about toxic masculinity, or maybe something about the political divide. Maybe it's a "shrewd prediction of the incel movement, showing the way vulnerable people are recruited into terrible things."

I'm not sure about any of that, but what I AM sure about is that *Foolkiller* isn't ahead of its time.

It didn't predict 2023, it depicted 1991.

If something written in 1991, depicting the problems of 1991, feels prescient, it's not because it did a good job predicting a future. It's because 1991 and 2023 aren't all that different in the ways that really matter.

Why "Foolkiller"?

These Kurt Gerhardt issues have never been reprinted digitally or collected into a trade paperback (with the exception of issue 1). Which definitely feels like a choice as opposed to an oversight. TONS of 90s stuff is available in paperback, or digitally, these days. You can hardly throw a backing board in a comics shop without hitting some collection of an X-book you were never interested in before, but, eh, why not give it a whirl?

It's pretty clear why: These *Foolkiller* books are more than a little fucked-up, and they haven't aged perfectly. If you think people are upset about Bruce Wayne being Batman instead of being a responsible billionaire, imagine the feelings about a guy blasting a pre-teen drug user into ash because he's hooked on heroin.

But I like *Foolkiller*, the book, not the man, for the same reasons most people would find it revolting.

I like *Foolkiller* because it tells a type of story that's in short supply, and I think they're hard to find because we are really, really bad at reading them.

We are still really, really bad at reading stories where the main character is not a good person.

We are still really, really bad at understanding the difference between depicting something and endorsing it.

We are still really, really bad with stories that don't come with a clear, concrete, "And the moral of the story is..."

I know how I feel about *Foolkiller*. I think Steve Gerber was very, very good at writing stories that asked moral questions without answering them. I think Gerber was a unique writer in his ability to balance the ridiculous and the real (he was the driving force behind *Howard The Duck*, after all). I think *Foolkiller* is not for everyone, it's not a stone cold comics classic, but for some readers, it presents something strange, something difficult, something that sticks with you.

Before I said that *Foolkiller* wasn't ahead of its time, and I stand by that.

Foolkiller is a story we're not ready for. And we'll never be ready for it. I don't think we'll ever really embrace stories that don't give us good guys on one side, bad guys on another, and a crystal clear writer's statement about how the reader should feel when they walk away.

Foolkiller isn't ahead of its time.

Because, for better or worse, *Foolkiller's* time doesn't exist.

We are still really, really bad at reading texts where the main character is not a good person.

How To Read Bad Reviews of Your Book Without Ruining Your Life



Yeah, I know, you're not supposed to read reviews of your own book.

You know what else you're not supposed to do? Eat pizza until you fall asleep on the floor because the pepperoni bloat makes the trip to the bed impossible.

You're not supposed to ride motorcycles in flip-flops.

Turns out, you're not really supposed to drink booze. Like, at all!

There's a huge list of stuff you're not supposed to do that you're going to do anyway, so instead of telling you not to read reviews, let's assume you're going to do it, and let's talk about how you can make it slightly less horrible.

We All Do It

It's totally natural, totally normal, and people who claim they don't do it, whatever, they're weirdos and liars.

Reading reviews, I mean. I guess the above also applies to jerking off. Spiritually, onanism and reading your own reviews share certain qualities...

Everyone does it, it's really nobody else's business, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. So stop beating yourself up over reading reviews. Trust me, the reviewers will give you a beating that's plenty good.

Just Don't Look

I'm sure some folks who haven't written a book don't understand why it's hard to ignore reviews.

Here, let me create an analogy for you:

Let's say you discovered that every person you've ever dated contributed to a blog. In varying levels of detail, your romantic relationships were all chronicled from the point of view of the other person.

How would you NOT look at it?

Okay, maybe some of you have great self-control, but dig this: What if the homepage on your browser was set to this blog, so you had no choice but to brush by it every so often?

Because that's kind of what happens when you write a book. You HAVE to get on Goodreads or Amazon or wherever periodically to update stuff, or you have to hit social media to do promo, and that forces you to march right past previous reviews.

Let's stop talking about this like it's about an author's lack of self-control.

Don't Read Old Reviews

There's no point in re-reading the same review you've read every quarter starting 4 years ago. It hasn't changed.

Sort your reviews by date, and only read new ones.

We All Remember the Bad, Not the Good

You can read 25 glowing reviews in a row, and it's that one asshole who savages your book that you'll remember. It's just the way of things.

There's evolutionary theory about this: back in the cave days, people who paid close attention to the negative were more likely to survive. This quirk of human behavior was very useful in making sure you learned from mistakes like, say, trying to pet anything that looked like a kitty but walked around on four murder mittens.

If a close call taught you a strong lesson, you'd live another day, have another shot at making babies, and as a result, most of us living today are the great-great-great-great grandchildren of people who obsessed over their mistakes.

Unfortunately, this passed-down trait means that, today, when someone doesn't like the book you wrote, there's a part of your brain that reads this as, "Holy shit, I nearly did something that ended my life, now I must never forget a single word of this utterly brutal critique!"

**People
who say,
"Whatever,
just ignore it,"
don't know
what the fuck
they're talking
about.**

I can't stop you from focusing on the negative, nobody can, but what I CAN do is reassure you that every person on Earth feels this way, it's very normal, and being unable to focus on the positive is just further proof that you're human.

And I can tell you that people who say, "Whatever, just ignore it," don't know what the fuck they're talking about.

The Rubber Band Trick

This is a trick I learned from an actual therapist. I think. I don't know, I saw him as a therapist, and then his office mysteriously vanished, I'm not even kidding. I went back there one time, and it was just gone.

This possibly-a-hallucination therapist told me that I seem to be really good at beating myself up. Accurate. I did appreciate him recognizing my skills. I'm like the Muhammad Ali of beating myself up. The greatest. People familiar with this aspect of my personality casually refer to me as "Champ."

This therapist's suggestion was to wear a rubber band around my wrist, and when I found myself cycling through the same bad thoughts over and over, to go ahead and pull that rubber band back and snap it on my wrist. Not hard, the idea isn't to cause pain. The idea is to give yourself a very definitive, precise point to say, "I've thought about this enough, and from this moment forward, I can be done thinking about it."

Give yourself that moment, that time when you put an end to the same cycling thoughts that aren't doing you any good.

Dig Deeper

Most people will tell you not to click on a reviewer and see other things they've reviewed, their other opinions, their latest Tweets, and so on.

I say the opposite: click.

Most times, it makes me feel better. Someone gives me a bad review, and the other books they've reviewed poorly put me in good company. Or, their favorite books are bullshit, so we were not destined to get along.

Once in a while, it backfires. Once in a while, Ellen Datlow says something mean about a LitReactor column you wrote:



Ellen Datlow 
@EllenDatlow



Replying to @LairdBarron @LitReactor and 2 others

A really stupid opinion piece that misconstrues relatability for something he refers to as "faith."

11:05 AM · Dec 28, 2020

Ouch, Ellen. Dat? Dat low!

But you know what...?

Put it in Context

If, on December 27th, 2020, you'd told me, "Tomorrow, Ellen Datlow is going to call you stupid," I would've Googled Ellen Datlow to figure out how much I should care.

The fact that I'd have to Google the critic to know whether I should have hurt feelings tells you that, no, I shouldn't.

That's not a slam on Ellen Datlow, by the way. Me being unfamiliar with her has nothing to do with her level of fame or prestige or ability, and it has everything to do with me being dopey.

This is a slam on Ellen Datlow: I'm impressed that you punched down on me yourself instead of putting out a call for an anthology of punch-down-on-Pete tweets.

I'm sorry, "Stupid" I would've accepted, but "really stupid?" If you think that's "really stupid," I have such sights to show you (and I'll make you an offer of 10% off any of my titles, you're welcome).

If someone's opinion isn't one you cared about yesterday, if they, as a person, weren't someone you were seeking to impress yesterday, then it's not a problem if you let them down today.

Don't Read Reviews By Accident

When it's time to read reviews, jump on the platform, read the reviews, get in, get out.

Don't just casually wander over and scroll through.

Do it with purpose, give yourself a time limit, and then be done with it.

Decide What You Want Your Books To Do Before You Read Reviews

If you built a submarine and sold it to the public, some moron would talk about how it was disappointing that the sub didn't have much functionality outside of an aquatic environment.

Before you go to check out your reviews, ask yourself: "What are the top 3 things I wanted my book to do?"

If "showing character development" wasn't on the list, then when someone says your book lacks character development, that's probably true, and that's fine.

If "uplifting people" wasn't on your list, and a critic says your book left them feeling depressed, that tracks.

Your book doesn't need to do everything. Stop torturing yourself when your book isn't all things to all

people.

Make Sport of Bad Reviews

We've all heard about that time Sandra Bullock won the Oscar and the Razzie the same year, but did you hear about how Bullock accepted the Razzie, in detail?

Bullock appeared from backstage accompanied by three people wearing black "Team Bullock" t-shirts and pulling a bright red wagon full of All About Steve DVDs. She'd brought one for everyone in the audience who, she guessed, hadn't really even watched Steve. "This is the deal we are going to make," she said. "You promise to watch the movie and really consider whether it was really and truly the worst performance. If you are willing to watch it, I will come back next year and give back the Razzie."

Legend.

Don't reply to reviews on the same platform, but if you wanted to screenshot a bad review and make it into a promotional "Read" sticker...



If you wanted to start a newsletter where you wrote critiques of your reviewers' reviews, I think that'd be pretty fun.

If someone really hated your book and wrote a devastating review, and you offered them one of your other books 10% off as consolation, I think that'd be pretty funny.

Some uppity dipsticks will get all touchy about authors even acknowledging reviews, and that's fine. They're uppity dipsticks, this is what they do.

First Thing, Last Thing

Mornings are for coffee and cute cat videos.

Evenings are for booze and cute cat videos.

Do not look at reviews first thing in the morning or last thing before you go to bed. That'll just fuck up your life.

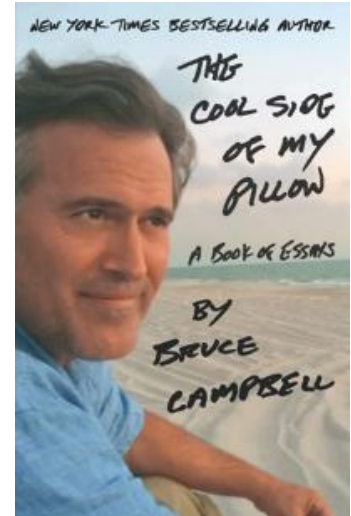
If you write a fast-paced book where the plot is the centerpiece, you might not need much character development. If the guy I'm reading about spends a good chunk of the story under a hail of gunfire, I don't need a chapter where he thinks back on his relationship with his mother and how he could've done things differently.

Hey, if you want a plodding brick of a book that everyone thinks is super clever, but the President is named "Johnny Gentle," sure, give yourself time between tennis sets to develop those characters (seriously, how did NOBODY tell me the President in *Infinite Jest* is named Johnny Gentle?).

Stories Can Push Characters Around

The humor that carries through *Evil Dead*, *Evil Dead 2*, *Army of Darkness*, and *Ash Vs. Evil Dead* is based on the fact that Ash Williams never changes, and he's not that deep. He's always a buffoon, he always thinks he's WAY cooler than he is. Even in the most extreme circumstances, fighting an undead clone of himself, battling his way through a bunch of skeletons pulling 3 Stooges gags, or even having himself crammed up the ass of a reanimated corpse—Ash refuses to learn anything, ever.

Sometimes, a character shouldn't change. Sometimes, the character is the anchor, the unchanging center, and that gives us a consistent measure of how bonkers, how dangerous, or how difficult things really are.



Development Implies Improvement

Bones are not stronger at the places where they break.

Scar tissue is not stronger than normal skin.

That which kills us might make us stronger in some sense, but it might also put us into a wheelchair.

When people talk about a lack of character development, it's very often about a character's failure to become a better person.

Life events don't put everyone in a better place.

It's not how I operate.

In *Kurt Vonnegut: Unstuck in Time*, we get a very unvarnished look at Vonnegut. He was a literary sensation, he worked really hard, he had a dark sense of humor...and he left his very supportive, loving wife for another woman, he had some peaks and valleys in his career, and his kids would probably rate him as a C+ father.

We learn more about Vonnegut from the movie, but it's not all good.

Before you complain about a lack of character development, check and see whether the character DID develop, just not in the way you would have preferred.

Or, maybe the deepening of the character revealed them to be worse, and you're not used to reading

that as development.

OR, maybe there's a non-linear development going on, two steps forward, one step back.

And Then I Learned

I had a writing mentor who told me that essays, stories, whatever, they should never end with "And what I learned was this:..." He said that's death for a personal essay.

Lots of storytellers handle character development that way: And then he learned.

That shit's for children's books.

Oh, the Sneetches all realized that the stars don't matter!

Look at them, all developed!

Signposted, heavy-handed character development in service of making a point kills your story.

Look, if you want me to learn something, just tell me the thing. Don't march me through 300 pages of metaphor.

And if you didn't like a book because it didn't hang a banner on the lesson to be learned, that's cool, but just say that. Stop hiding behind this high-falutin literary nonsense.

Batman, BatGod, Batinstitution: How and Why Batman Changes



If we take care of ourselves, get our steps in, maybe eat the occasional vegetable, we might live to see Batman's 100th birthday in a decade or so.

The Batman we celebrate in 2039 might not look anything like the Batman we know today, though. Because the Batman we know today isn't a whole lot like the Batman of 1939.

You knew that already, but what you might not know is that today's Batman is REALLY different from the Batman of the 80s, who is different from the Batman of the 90s, who is different from the Batman of the 2000s.

How does Batman change? And, better question: Why does Batman change?

You Might Be Saying...

Of course Batman changes with the times! Any character will change over enough time!

This is true, but Batman is special.

Captain America went from flag-waving WWII hero cheeseball to an unfrozen cheeseball out of time. Cap's whole thing is that the world has changed around him while he's stayed the same.

Spider-Man has been comics' lovable loser since the 1960s. Every time Peter Parker gets out of high school, he's dragged back in what I can only describe as an endless, hellish, cyclical nightmare.

Wonder Woman is still screwing around with ancient mythology.

Superman has died, come back, gotten weird electric powers, and even been gritted-up quite a bit for the DC cinematic universe. Superman is elastic, though. He changes, but he always bounces back to form (or, wait, am I thinking of Plastic Man?).

Batman, though, Batman changes.

Pre-Crisis

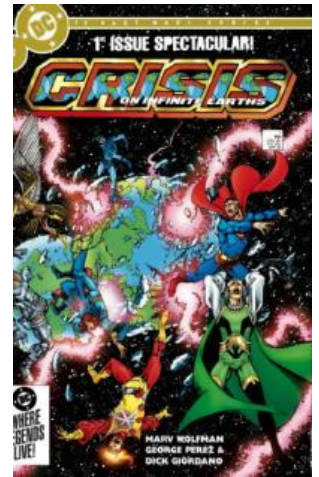
In 1985, DC Comics ran its *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series, which cleaned up a lot of DC continuity.

Look, I don't really fuck with pre-Crisis Batman comics, and you shouldn't either.

I know, lots of folks want to start an analysis from the beginning. Trust me, and trust Marv Wolfman: the whole point of Crisis was to spare you that slog.

Hey, it's my personal bias, and I'm writing the column, so here you go: Up to the mid-80s, Batman doesn't really function as a mirror held up to the world.

Besides, what little meat might be on that bone has been picked clean. Let's move on.



Post-Crisis and Finding a Footing

Post-Crisis Batman is a Batman that I HATED when I was 17, and he's a Batman I LOVE as a middle-aged guy.

In one issue, you'd get a cartoon-y, smiley Batman calling Robin "old chum," and in another issue, a noir detective story with junkies and pimps.

Sometimes, these two aesthetics were in the same comic, and the push/pull of it is oddly satisfying to read.

This is a time when Joker was a legitimate threat, occasionally offing people, but also had a secret hideout with a Joker-themed fireplace, Joker-face desk, and a rocket car with a Joker face on the front.

Batman is a dark avenger of the night, but he's also interacting with Ronald Regan as though they're old friends.

It's like the characters were these new, more frightening people, but they were plopped into the world of the 1960s Batman TV series.

Comic book shops really hit their stride around this same time. Before the mid-80s, you'd usually go to a newsstand or hobby shop for comics. Now, you could find a ton of shops that sold exclusively comics. This was a HUGE step in the creation of the comics subculture.

The audience for comics, instead of being a bunch of kids, was a mix. It was becoming a lot more common for readers hooked in the 60s to keep reading and collecting into adulthood.

All of this meant comics fandom and Batman were both going through this weird adolescence, like that person who goes to college and tries to construct a new identity, but really all he came up with was an alternate version of his name (shorter or longer, depending on the original name), and maybe a pair of boots.

That kind of adolescence isn't enjoyable for the teenager going through it. But as an adult looking back at it, those teenage years are pretty hilarious.

BatMAN

Dark Knight Returns, Year One, The Cult, A Death in the Family, Tim Burton's Batman.

The late 80s saw Batman take a turn for the dark, and these books took away Batman's youth, his experience, his sidekick, his sanity, and just about any bright spots in Bruce Wayne's life.

This is probably the era of Batman people think of when they picture him skulking in alleys, beating up homeless dudes for information.

This is the era of grittiness, of stories that seemed to be trying to out-dark each other. Batman's smile was wiped right off his face. But there's something more interesting going on here under the grime.

Batman was very human for this period, and the big Batman stories from the era were all about Batman going through human experiences.

In *Year One*, we saw Batman as an amateur. We can relate to a guy starting a new job, bumbling his way through.

In *A Death in the Family*, we saw Batman lose a loved one and vow to never make himself vulnerable by loving again, something the unfortunate among us understand completely.

In *Dark Knight Returns*, we saw an aging Batman, living in a world he no longer recognized or understood.

Batman books leaned hard into the thing that separated Batman from every other hero: He's human.

And, like any savvy creator would, the writers turned Batman's weakness into a strength, and they ran with it.

JLA and Bat-God

In Grant Morrison's *JLA*, a group of new superheroes shows up on the scene, and they start

Batman's smile was wiped right off his face. But there's something more interesting going on here under the grime.

methodically taking out The League.

Batman was left for last because he was completely underestimated by these villains-in-disguise. They figured they could just sweep him up when they got around to it, and that mistake was their undoing.

In one of Batman's greatest moments, the villain group comes upon one of their own, beaten, tied up, with a note pinned to him with a Batarang that says, "I know your secret."

One of the bad guys: "I thought you said Batman had no super powers."

This was the beginning of BatGod.

There was also a story that was popularized, if not originated, in Morrison's *JLA* run: The idea that Batman has created elaborate plans to kill every member of the Justice League. Just in case.

Over the intervening 30 years, this idea has been used so often that I have to roll my eyes when Green Lantern is like, "Wait, Batman had plans to exterminate us if need-be?" Yeah, duh.

This Batman is very much a product of the 90s.

The 90s were a good time for a lot of people in a lot of ways. Crime fell at a HUGE rate in the 90s. The economy was pretty good. America didn't spend a whole lot of time at war in the 90s.

We didn't need a Batman to solve street-level problems, it seemed like we were managing that okay.

We needed a Batman beating up Martians, taking on Darkseid, and fighting a dude who could put fighting styles into his body via a CD-ROM player in his head (I TOLD you, it was the 90s).

The Batman from *Year One* couldn't do any of those things. But a BatGod could. And did.

Batman Steps Back

I would say that the late 90s/early 2000s was another period where Batman was mostly lost in his own books.

Or, maybe he wasn't lost. Maybe he was being pushed out of the spotlight.

In *The Long Halloween*, there's a lot of emphasis on characters other than Batman, and the opening of *No Man's Land* is mostly about Batman's absence.

Gotham Central (2005) really cemented this as a book from the perspective of Gotham P.D., who work in a city that has its share of crime, plus you might show up to a robbery in progress and discover the robber has a freeze ray or some shit.

My theory on this trend is that it had a lot to do with the Christopher Nolan movies hitting the scene.

Blockbuster movies make it difficult to do a lot with a character. You don't want everyone who loves *Dark Knight* to show up at a comics shop and find out Batman is in the midst of some years-long

interdimensional team-up with Zatanna, Etrigan, and...how about Detective Chimp?

Pushing Batman back and focusing on side characters is a creative way to solve the problem. You can still tell engaging, interesting stories under the Batman label, and you can do it with the same, sometimes stale, Batman.

Batman was a little stagnant, but it was okay because this moment was all about side characters.

Time Travel Batman and Batdad

Batman dies, kind of, he becomes a dad, he time travels, he's maybe some kind of ancient totemic figure or something, he's one of a few survivors of an apocalypse, he fights weird "metal" versions of himself. There's...a lot.

The best I can give this era: they needed to do something with Batman, and going abstract, while not my jam, opens up some new territory.

But it's just not my thing. When comic book threats and enemies are very ethereal and ill-defined, the solutions tend to be EVEN MORE out-there, so you end up reading a book that makes less sense the more you read. That doesn't make for a great reading experience.

This is a Batman who is confronted with often strange worlds that make no sense, and he adapts. I think this is a familiar feeling for a lot of us, and I will say this is a rare, optimistic Batman who overcomes threats of a type that might shake most characters to pieces.

A character like Batman has to be pushed just beyond the logical limit before he can be reigned in and made whole again. This era was a hard shove off the cliff.

Fluid Batman

Recently, Batman has been very hard to nail down. Tom King's Batman, Chip Zdarsky's Batman, Brian Azzarello's Batman, James Tynion IV's Batman, Sean Murphy's Batman, and Tom Taylor's Batman all feel pretty different.

I do think that the variety of superhero movies and shows has gotten people used to the idea that you can read two different Bat books and experience two different Batmen. I mean, it's only in the last couple of years that the term "multiverse" is one you can kind of assume most people understand, at least in a comic book context.

Instead of stories serving to build up the character of Batman, the character of Batman is now flexing a bit to fit the stories creators want to tell. And it works. Chip Zdarsky's *Batman* is wonderful. *DC Vs. Vampires* is so much better than it has any business being.

This newer, less static idea of Batman-ness opens up the opportunities for new stories, different nuances, and turns comics into the playground for ideas they always should be.

And we need new stories. Readers are in the mood for comics that take some risks that wouldn't be reasonable for a big budget movie.

A more fluid Batman makes that possible. You won't ruin all of Batman's continuity if you show him in a bad light in *White Knight*. Hell, you couldn't even tarnish his reputation by showing his crank in *Batman Damned* (let's see that Dick, and I don't mean Grayson).

Batman might be more scattered as a character than he's ever been. It's good for comics readers, and it's good for Batman.

Internet Archive Is NOT Like Your Library



Because internet people get all hot about this and then go into a rage where they make terrible points, usually using the wrong form of "its," let's start this column at the end, then go back and fill in the rest.

Usually, after a rambling column lambasting Internet Archive's attempt to impersonate your local library, I'd give those folks a little credit, a little something more pleasant to go out on.

Here's that little something: I do support Internet Archive in the gray areas of books.

The gray areas of books include books that are out of print, books that are mega expensive for no real reason, and books where the publisher is just sitting on the rights (usually with no real intentions of driving up pricing, just because they, well, have them).

When Internet Archive is collecting, preserving, and making available things that are otherwise difficult or impossible to come by, I don't take any issue. When it's acting like an "archive," we're good.

However

That's the end of the good stuff I have to say.

I have a problem with Internet Archive checking out a digital copy of *The Martian* by Andy Weir. This is not rare, out of print, or difficult to find cheap or even free.

Internet Archive has *American Psycho*.

Internet Archive has *John Dies At The End*.

Internet Archive has A TON of stuff that's readily available, and that's stuff I have a problem with.

But what really chafes my inner thigh is...well, that'd be my other inner thigh, but what chafes me in a LESS LITERAL sense is Internet Archive pretending it's a library.

Because it's not.

The Story Thus Far

Internet Archive was sued by a group of publishers for "mass copyright infringement" because they were purchasing single copies of books, scanning them, and distributing them online.

Internet Archive disagreed that this was copyright infringement.

Unfortunately for Internet Archive, the ruling was not in their favor:

At bottom, IA's fair use defense rests on the notion that lawfully acquiring a copyrighted print book entitles the recipient to make an unauthorized copy and distribute it in place of the print book, so long as it does not simultaneously lend the print book...But no case or legal principle supports that notion. Every authority points the other direction.

Internet Archive plans to appeal this decision, and after the decision came down, they had A LOT to say about being a library:

Libraries are more than the customer service departments for corporate database products...For democracy to thrive at global scale, libraries must be able to sustain their historic role in society—owning, preserving, and lending books.

And here's the crux, in Internet Archive's own words:

Today's lower court decision in Hachette v. Internet Archive is a blow to all libraries and the communities we serve. This decision impacts libraries across the US who rely on controlled digital lending to connect their patrons with books online. It hurts authors by saying that unfair licensing models are the only way their books can be read online. And it holds back access to information in the digital age, harming all readers, everywhere.

And now, a disassembly.

Let's Rewind

The library wing of Internet Archive started with good goals, with the right spirit: The idea was to get books, scan them, and make them available, especially to people with disabilities.

I very much support that, and I'm actually pretty certain this part of what they do is not illegal.

See, back in the 1930s, a bunch of laws got passed because people with blindness were fed up with

the bullshit. The Pratt-Smoot Act of 1931 (not to be confused with the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of the same year, this Smoot dude was busy) led to some key exceptions to copyright law: libraries were authorized to make accessible copies of printed books, usually in audio or Braille formats, for use by people who can't read them due to any sort of disability.

In 2010 (time jump, but you're smart, you can handle it), Internet Archive was all about book accessibility. And to some extent, today, they still are.

You might've looked up a book on Internet Archive and seen it available in the DAISY format. This is an audiobook format that's available only to those who have a disability. You basically fill out a form, get approved, and then you're able to decrypt DAISY files.

But here's the thing: The National Library Service already provides this to people with disabilities. Folks can get items by mail or via download 100% free of charge.

Internet Archive argued that the decision against them was a blow to all libraries, but I'm not sure this is so. I think libraries that are working within the law are...fine?

“Unfair Licensing Models”

Internet Archive gets the bulk of its books from Better World Books, which explains why so many of the books they have include library stickers, barcodes, stamps, and other markings.

See, lots of libraries donate their books to Better World Books when they are weeded from the collection.

Better World Books or Internet Archive scan the books, and they become part of the collection.

Your local library does not offer eBooks by scanning physical books. Your library licenses them, for a fee, and those fees vary depending on the type of license (some are lifetime licenses, some are for a limited number of checkouts, some are for a limited timeframe).

What this means is, publishers get to negotiate with libraries (sometimes through a digital vendor like Overdrive or Hoopla) and come to a fair agreement on what a digital copy is worth. Each copy of a book is paid for (or, each checkout on a service like Hoopla triggers a charge). And, libraries agree to provide certain restrictions so that their users are the ones accessing books, not the entire world.

The way libraries manage digital materials, creators and publishers have a seat at the table. Neither side sets the entirety of the rules.

Internet Archive doesn't want to work with publishers and creators. Internet Archive wants to dictate all the terms.

That doesn't strike me as fair at all.

Somebody Think of the Authors!

Internet Archive claims the library's digital licensing system, "... hurts authors by saying that unfair licensing models are the only way their books can be read online."

But I'm not sure which authors they're talking about. The Authors Guild said they were "thrilled" by the decision against Internet Archive:

...scanning & lending books w/out permission or compensation is NOT fair use—it is theft & it devalues authors' works.

And in fact, the Authors Guild claims they offered to sit down with Internet Archive and look at alternative ways digital books might be licensed:

We approached IA years ago to create a license for books used on Open Library but IA refused to engage with us.

If you want to throw *Satan Burger* on Internet Archive, I think Carlton Mellick III should have a say in that (it's on there, and I'm guessing nobody asked Carlton). I think he should have the option to negotiate what he thinks is fair. I think Internet Archive could've chosen to approach him with an offer.

Jeff Strand should be able to choose what he thinks *Pressure* is worth on Internet Archive. It's there, and I'm betting nobody asked Jeff what he thought about it.

You'll notice no authors have a problem with local libraries. This is because local libraries don't expect authors to work for free. Libraries treat authors like real people whose labor has value.

Art Should Be Free!

Okay, really quickly for the dipshits:

The reasonable version of this point of view is, "Artists should always have the option of free distribution."

If the artist wants their stuff to be given for free, if they feel like that's what's right, more power to them, and that should always be an option.

But the proposal that all art should be free, taken to its end, would mean that if you created something, The Man should have the right to bust into your house, take it, and distribute it.

It's not really yours, it belongs to everyone, right?

Information Should Be Free!

I'm a little more open to this one, but I don't consider *The Martian* "information."

Internet Archive of the Future

I think Internet Archive can survive, and I think it can be something good. But it needs to change. Even if it wins its appeal, I think it should change.

If Internet Archive wants to call itself a library, it needs to start acting like a library.

If Internet Archive was more careful with its collection, if they lived in the gray a little bit, I think things would be better. If they made available only those books that are not currently in production and are currently not widely available, it'd change the way a lot of folks feel about it.

If Internet Archive had anything remotely resembling a vetting process, making books available to people with disabilities, people who have little or no library service, or maybe people whose libraries are being destroyed by Moms For Liberty, that'd hit different.

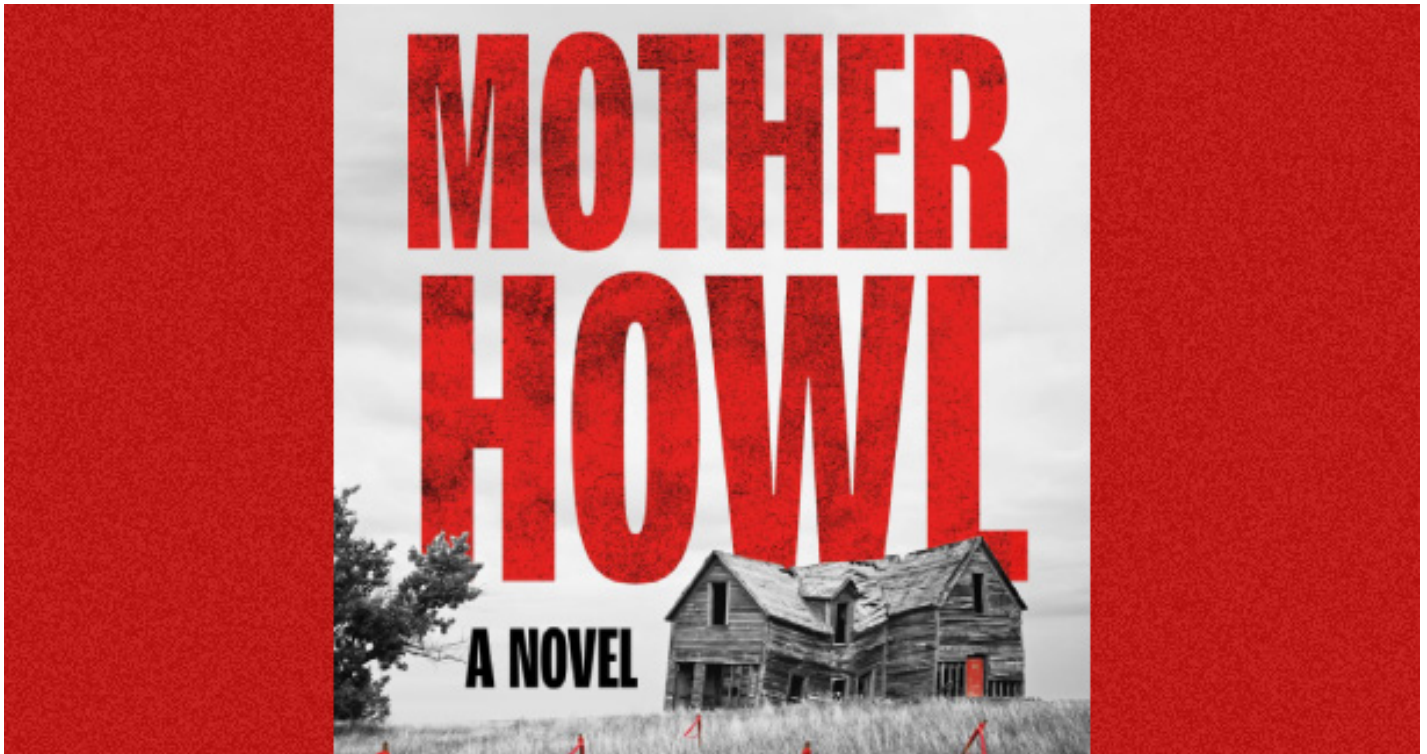
But the game Internet Archive plays today is a distasteful one. They're grabbing and scanning everything, and they're claiming the moral high ground, talking democracy and fairness and then hiding behind the idea of library service.

You can't talk about democracy when you remove a creator's choice in whether or not they get paid for their work.

You can't talk about fairness when you're unwilling to bend even slightly to accommodate reasonable requests from rights holders.

And, please, public libraries are dealing with enough right now. How about not using them as a legal shield?

My Body is Ready for Craig Clevenger's "Mother Howl"



Let me take you back to the mid-2000's, and instead of giving you some cultural references to the time, I just want to say I was SO hot back then. Like, really, I peaked early. If you take nothing else away from this: Peter Dinklage was a catch in the mid 2000's, and you missed out.

Fight Club was out on DVD, which meant I could pause the movie during the end credits, when it said, "Based on the novel by Chuck Palwhalichauiniuuuk." [spelled here as I remember reading it in the theater]

After some internetting (before the days when Google was like, "You're in your early 20s, just saw a movie, and are typing Chuck Pal- into a search box, I think I know where this is headed") I got ahold of some of Chuck Palahniuk's books.

Me and my friends passed them around. Some of the dopier ones decided to burn their hands with lye. Some of the meatheads decided to try out punching each other.

I kept looking for more books that felt a little like *Fight Club*.

And I found them.

Then to Now

The kind of writing I wanted traces back to some writers who'd been around for a bit and hadn't gotten their due: Amy Hempel, Tom Spanbauer, Raymond Carver, and a handful of other folks, most of whom studied under Gordon Lish.

I read them all, loved them all, but it wasn't quite what I wanted.

There was a sort of literary brat pack, people often recommended alongside Palahniuk. Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, Irvine Welsh, Tama Janowitz, Jill Eisenstadt. They were photographed eating fancy dinners, attending movie premieres, hanging out with Andy Warhol. They made more money writing short essays for fancy magazines than I made in a year—they were that cool.

There was another crowd that felt more literary in a classic way. Larry Brown, Thom Jones, Katherine Dunn, Lydia Davis, Deborah Eisenberg, Robert Olmstead. Now we're getting warmer.

Then, I found what I was looking for: Will Christopher Baer, Dennis Cooper, Douglas Coupland, Stephen Graham Jones, and Craig Clevenger.

And I'd distill that down to the three biggies, for me: Chuck, Will, and Craig.

Looking back, without knowing WHAT to call this group, I'd still call this the biggest literary movement of my lifetime. And Craig Clevenger might be its greatest practitioner.

"The Contortionist's Handbook"

Analyses of Clevenger's books will talk about minimalism and transgression and so on, and all of that is true, all of that holds.

But I don't think those are the qualities that made his books really, truly excellent.

Let's talk about *The Contortionist's Handbook* and what makes it work. I just re-read it to get ready for *Mother Howl*, and let me tell you, it holds up. It's always a bit of a dice roll to revisit a book you adored in your 20s, but this one works.

In very brief: *The Contortionist's Handbook* follows a character named John. Or maybe Steven. Maybe Daniel. Or Eric.

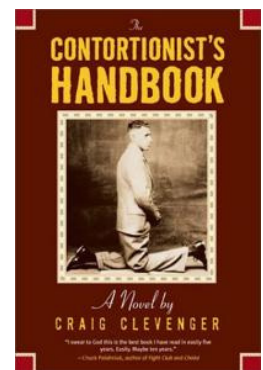
It's tricky. We'll call him John.

John is trapped. He overdosed, for complicated reasons, woke up in a hospital, and now he's being evaluated so that the county can figure out whether he's a danger to himself or others, or whether the overdose was truly an accident and he can go free.

John is an expert at hiding things, like the extra ring finger on his left hand, which is good, because if he wants to remain a free man, he's got a lot to hide in the course of this interview. If he can stay a few steps ahead of the person doing the interview, he might just get away. If he can't, if he slips up in the slightest, his life, all of his many carefully constructed lives, tumble down.

The Contortionist's Handbook is dark and slimy, but it's also energetic. It's scary and shocking in ways, but in ways that keep you hooked rather than repelling you.

**I'd call this
the biggest
literary
movement of
my lifetime.**



It feels like the walls are closing in on your character, but he's not giving up. He's not in a Hubert Selby Jr. novel where it feels right for characters to lay down and die. He's not in a Cormac McCarthy book where he feels anachronistic, like a person who could never really exist.

The book pulls off the perfect sleight-of-hand trick: it's deep and thoughtful, but the energy is that of a manic thriller that won't stop to let you catch a breath.

"Dermaphoria"

2005's *Dermaphoria*, Clevenger's second novel, is the next book I read to prep for *Mother Howl*. It's fantastic. I didn't appreciate it as much as *The Contortionist's Handbook* at the time, but, hey, I also didn't watch NBC's *The Office* when it aired for the first time that same year, so there's no accounting for (my own) taste.

It's a little bit of a tough book to talk about without spoiling, but the basic premise: this dude, Eric, comes to his senses in the middle of being interrogated by police. He doesn't know what happened or why he's there, doesn't even really remember who he is.

Through bouts of using a new street drug, Eric regains his memories piece by piece, but can he remember enough before it's too late and he's stuck in prison, or before his tolerance for the drug gets so high that it'll take a lethal dose to regain any more memories?

Dermaphoria is an incredible feat, and the best part is that the writing is descriptive and tight while also telling an actual story.

This was an era when a lot of folks wrote literary things that didn't give you much of a story. There was ennui, there was midlife crisis all over the place. But there wasn't a whole lot of ticking clock, there wasn't a whole lot of plot.

Craig Clevenger gives us something with depth, and he's not afraid to mash down the gas pedal for the duration.

Why "Mother Howl" Is So Exciting

Mother Howl is on the list of books that I DESPERATELY wanted to see come out for almost a decade now.

In 2017, I wrote a column chronicling Paul Neilan's unpublished story about soiling a pair of underwear and mailing them home to his parents (long story), and I mentioned two other books that I hoped would see print: Will Christopher Baer's *Godspeed* and Craig Clevenger's *Mother Howl*.

The other two never seemed as close to hitting the shelves as *Mother Howl*.

In 2011, Clevenger was 90% finished with *Mother Howl*.

In 2013, we got a tweet that showed a stack of printed pages, labeled "Mother Howl," with the simple caption: Finished.

In 2018, we saw a signed contract with a French publisher for *Mother Howl*. I don't want to say it's for sure America's most shameful day, but it just had to be the French, didn't it?

And now, it's finally happening. It's coming. There's a cover, there are links to buy it. This is real life.

Why Clevenger Hasn't Gotten His Due

It's hard to say for sure. We can play the "lesser writers with more notoriety" game all day long. There aren't many writers who DON'T fit that label when it comes to Clevenger.

To a certain extent, it's about luck. The right book gets to the right people, gets made into the right movie, boom, you're off.

But with Clevenger, I think there's something else going on.

The most criminally underrated type of book is the book that is easy to read because the writer put in an ass-busting amount of work.

I've often come to the defense of authors like Patrick DeWitt or Kevin Wilson on this front. They both write novels that feel breezy, and that causes people to dismiss them as fluff.

If you ask me (and anyone who knows what the fuck they're talking about) it's easy to write a novel that feels big and important. What's harder is writing a great book that's easy to read.

Clevenger's books are amazingly easy to read, and I think that's part of why he doesn't get his due. A book that's easy to read and understand in a moment-to-moment action sense, seems uncomplicated to people, gives a reviewer fewer places to go. And people who write overly long book reviews in places like *The New York Times* love overly complicated books. 1076 pages of David Foster Wallace gives a person an awful lot to write about. A Clevenger book is more of a challenge. You'd have to read it, then go back over it again. You have to look into how it was made, dissect it a bit, think it over while you wash dishes or take the dog out.

Craig's books make me feel the way I feel when I hold a beautiful, functional piece of technology in my hand: I have to take a little time to appreciate just how perfectly dialed-in the whole thing is, how every little detail is thoughtful and designed just right. The buttons feel right, the sounds are perfect. Everything does what it's supposed to, and does it much better than it needs to.

But because Clevenger's books feel so natural, so right, you might not even notice how wonderful they are.

Just Buy It Already

The work Clevenger puts into his books is underappreciated, and my one, huge hope is that *Mother Howl* is what wakes people the fuck up to just how great all of Clevenger's books are.

The most criminally underrated type of book is the book that is easy to read because the writer put in an ass-busting amount of work.

Do everyone a favor: Buy *Mother Howl* right now.

Preorders count as week one sales, and the best chance for an author to hit bestseller lists and make a splash is going to be in that first week.

Plus, if a bookstore or outlet is getting a lot of preorders for something, it's algorithm is more likely to recommend that same book to more people.

I know it's kind of weird to put in preorders, it feels like you're making a choice for the far future, and, like, I want to read something now!

With Clevenger, it's not a preorder, it's an investment in your reading future. One that'll pay off, for sure.

Horror Mechanics: What Are They, How Do They Terrify, and Where They Go Wrong



How do the scary things work in your horror story?

That's what we're here to talk about today: how to pay attention to the mechanic in your story, how to write it so it makes sense, and how to make sure you don't overwrite it.

What Do I Mean When I Say "Mechanic"?

A mechanic is a term borrowed from gaming that describes how something functions in a game.

Here's a super simple example, horror-adjacent:

You know how the ghosts in Super Mario games cover their eyes and stay still when you look at them? And then, when you turn your back, they come for you? That's a mechanic, a way the player and the game interact within a certain set of rules.

The shy ghost mechanic is pretty simple, the player figures it out fast, and then the game messes with it a little. Sometimes you're in a situation where, if you keep looking at the ghosts, they block your path, so you have to turn away and let them chase you in order to clear the way.

The mechanics of a horror story work the same way: they describe how something works, and they may also force characters or readers to interact with the threat in a certain way.

For Example

The “mechanic” of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is that Freddy visits you in your dreams, where he can do anything, be anything, and is unstoppable. Another aspect of this mechanic is that he can be pulled into the real world, but we’ll get to that later.

This is not to be confused with Freddy’s motive, that he was killed by a group of parents, and now he’s taking revenge on those parents by killing their kids.

This is also not to be confused with the plot, the “This happens, then this happens...” part of the story.

The mechanic can be considered the “how it works” portion of the story, or maybe “how the audience interacts with the story.”

Does Your Story Need a Mechanic?

The original *Halloween* does not have a mechanic, although a mechanic is killed...

Michael Myers doesn’t have any supernatural powers or abilities, there’s no question of “How is he doing this?”

That’s why the entirety of the explanation is Dr. Loomis saying Michael Myers is “Really, super evil and shit,” or something like that, I’m paraphrasing.

Halloween III, on the other hand, needs a mechanic. If we just showed kids having their heads turned into bugs, we’d be confused. Still aroused by 1982 Tom Atkins, but confused about the bugs.

If your audience is going to ask how the horror element functions, you need to consider the mechanic. BUT, if your audience is not going to have questions about your mechanic because it’s not that complicated, then PLEASE leave it out.

The Mechanic Isn’t Always Supernatural Or Complicated

Hush is a movie about a woman who is trying to keep herself from getting killed by some dude in a mask.

The mechanic that makes *Hush* unique is that our hero lost her hearing as a young girl.

I call this a mechanic because it’s not just a setup, a thing that brings the man and the woman together. Instead, it affects the way viewers receive the story, and it changes the typical slasher/final girl dynamic. It allows the storyteller to do things like having the killer walk up behind the woman, and while the viewer sees and hears this, the woman does not.

If your mechanic has to be explained in words rather than demonstrated, it might be too complicated. Or too confusing. It might be more mechanic than you need.

It plays with the audience's sense of sight, but also their sense of hearing.

It means the audience and the characters are having different experiences, and the unfolding story works on the audience differently than it does on the main character.

Again, we don't need a ton of explanation on this. We need to know the main character doesn't hear, and we need the slasher to know this as well, and that's it. We don't need the slasher to have noticed this woman coming out of a medical exam, and he happens to notice she can't hear. We don't need a slasher who is targeting only people who cannot hear. The bare bones we need are there, and the bare bones are all we need.

Violating The Mechanic

This is a good time to talk about violation of the mechanic.

If the movie *Hush* was resolved by the protagonist suddenly regaining her hearing, that'd be a destruction of the mechanic, not an ending to a story, and it'd wreck the entire thing.

When the hero in *Hush* manages to turn the tables and use the antagonist's own hearing against him, the mechanic is flipped without being violated.

And that should be the goal: how can your story press on the mechanic, push it to its extreme, and figure out a solution that works within the mechanic?

Show and Tell

There's a TON of writing advice out there about showing and telling, and let me tell you, mechanics are a time when you REALLY need to show and not tell.

Many a story trots out a character to explain the entirety of the mechanic to our heroes, who have almost lost hope. Usually this is some old person with some kind of air of mysticism about them. "Oh, many years ago, I remember Old Billy Jimmins was playing around with a demon summoning spell..."

The most blatant of these I've ever seen is in the movie *Jeepers Creepers*: this lady comes out of nowhere, explains that she is a psychic who sees the future in her dreams, and then basically tells us nothing about the baddie that we don't already know.

When it comes to mechanics, telling isn't just about bad form.

If your mechanic has to be explained in words rather than demonstrated, it might be too complicated. Or too confusing.

It might be more mechanic than you need.

To go back to *Jeepers Creepers*, if the psychic never showed up, if we never knew that this baddie was a demon, and instead we just saw him eating some dude, all crouched down with leathery wings and shit, I think we'd get it. Because "monster eating people" is not that complicated.

If you're not sure the audience is going to get it, instead of explaining it in an exposition dump, look for ways to simplify it.

Deeper Workings

Let's circle back to Elm Street.

Freddy is very easy to shrug off when you're a kid at a sleepover, when you and your little buddies are eating pizza and chugging Mountain Dew, laughing at a burned-up criminal calling everyone "Bitch."

But when it's lights out and you're the only one awake in a weird house you've never slept in before, it's not so simple.

See, it's easy to not be scared of Freddy when you're awake. He poses no threat when you're awake.

But when you sleep, you're alone. You're vulnerable. You might know you're in a dream, and you might not.

Freddy's mechanic works in the movie, and it continues to work outside the movie as well.

When the scariest part of your story thrives outside your story, that's a mechanic doing the work for you.

MyHouse.wad: Doom, House of Leaves, and the Pinnacle of Ergodic Lit



There's a lot to cover here, kind of an endless staircase that leads down, always getting darker, always more frightening.

And because there's so much, I can only waste three lines on an intro.

Today, we're talking MyHouse.wad, a *Doom* mod that slams a fresh, new, Hell On Earth style of storytelling down on the table.

Doom

You only need to know a tiny bit about *Doom* in order to understand everything else in this column, and you can skip this section (and the next) if you're familiar with *Doom* and modding.

In fact, you Doomguys had probably better skip it. If you're hardcore into this stuff, my explanations will probably put you in a berserker-style correction mode that'll help no one.

For the noobs:

Doom is a first-person shooter (if you play the game as a character, and you're looking through their eyes as you pull the trigger, it's a first-person shooter). More than that, *Doom* is THE first-person shooter.

Doom was released in 1993, and while it wasn't the first game of its kind, it so defined the first-person shooter that, for a long time, other FPS games were called "Doom clones."

In *Doom*, you play as a space marine often called "Doomguy" who walks through facilities and hallways infested with monsters from hell.

There's something about hell encroaching on a Phobos base or something, and really, that's not important. As *Doom* co-creator John Carmack says, video game stories are a little like stories in porn: people expect them to be there, but that's not why they show up.

Doom: Walk around, blast monsters, find keys, open doors, exit levels, repeat.

Doom Modding

One thing that made *Doom* fairly unique, and something that contributed to its longevity, was that it was released with modding in mind.

Johns Romero and Carmack, two of the leads behind *Doom*, made sure that the level-building tools and the engine that made the game run were separate, meaning people could create levels without needing to recode or remake the entire *Doom* engine.

This is a bit technical, but think of it like a car: you could change out the appearance of the car, the layout of the interior, and customize a lot of it without ever touching the engine or drivetrain. The car would still run with just about any aesthetic changes made.

Doom worked the same way: people could design their own levels, their own arenas, and these would be playable almost immediately.

Lots of these mods were posted online or sold on 3.5" floppy. These are often known as "wads." Others were even officially packaged and sold by id Software, makers of *Doom*.

Doom mods ran the gamut. Many were *Doom* levels, indistinguishable from a normal *Doom* level (although satisfaction will vary).

Then there were folks who did a little more tinkering with *Doom* to do things like change the character sprites, sound effects, and some of the visuals to create something that behaved like *Doom*, but instead of looking like *Doom*, took on the world of Batman, or, famously, creating a *Doom*-like game where a...Chex man blasted weird aliens in order to promote Chex cereal somehow?



We'll get back to more mods shortly, but in order to preserve some surprise, let's get into My House.

MyHouse.wad

A post-er on the *Doom* forums released My House in March of 2023 with the following message:

Excited to finally release this tribute map. Last August I lost a good childhood friend of mine and took it pretty hard. When I was visiting my hometown for his funeral, I connected with his parents who shared with me some of his old belongings. Among them was a copy of an old map of his backed up on a 3.5" floppy from high school. Thomas and I were into amateur Doom mapping in the early 00s but I had never seen this map of his prior to uncovering it on one of the old floppy discs. As a way of paying tribute to him and all the great memories we had together, I took the plunge and installed Doom Builder in order to polish up his map and add a few modern amenities just for convenience sake...1 map: Not much of a challenge and roughly 10 minutes of play time...Making maps of your house was all the rage back-in-the-day, but I feel like this is a pretty adorable and detailed tribute to my friend and a great way to share something of him with a community we loved. Miss you, Tom.

Spoiler Stop

Now, at this point, if you are someone familiar with *Doom* who enjoys unusual narratives, and if you have NOT heard, read, or seen anything about this wad, I encourage you to go and play it for yourself. It's available for free.

The optimal player experience here is to read the above text, load up My House, and go for it without any further Googling.

Play it at night. Alone.

For those who aren't going to play, let's rip and tear into this one.

Playing My House

My House starts like exactly what it claims to be: a fairly typical suburban house, created in *Doom*.



The play style is typical *Doom*. You enter the house, fight some of the familiar roster of monsters using the familiar weapons of *Doom*, grab a couple keys, you get the idea.

If you were to play through this and quit because while My House is interesting, it didn't seem all that deep, that'd be understandable.

But if you did this, you'd miss everything.

Because the more you do in the house, the weirder this starts to get.

Where Being A DoomGuy Comes In Handy

I watched John Romero, co-creator of *Doom*, play My House, which is a cool experience.



Because Romero knows *Doom* inside and out, he quickly picks up on some of the very minute changes to *Doom's* structure and aesthetics, which show up pretty early in My House.

An inexperienced player wouldn't notice that, at some point, doors in My House swing open instead of shooting up into an overhead pocket, the way they do in *Doom*.

John Romero almost instantly noticed that the normal *Doom* music changes. Not drastically, but subtly. It gets a little more manic.

Maybe a big one: the engine for *Doom* does not allow one floor to be above another. So, if you made a house in *Doom*, you'd have to cheat it, put the lower floor off to the side.

In My House, the layout is a house with multiple floors on top of each other, which should be impossible.

Because you aren't John Romero, you might even miss that the house grows new enemies not present on the first runthrough, and you might not notice that the keycards have changed to the skullkey type of key.

There are a lot of little things you might miss, and this is the hump to get over in My House: If you're not a big *Doom*-er and don't know this stuff, give the wad a little extra time to get weird. It's worth the wait.

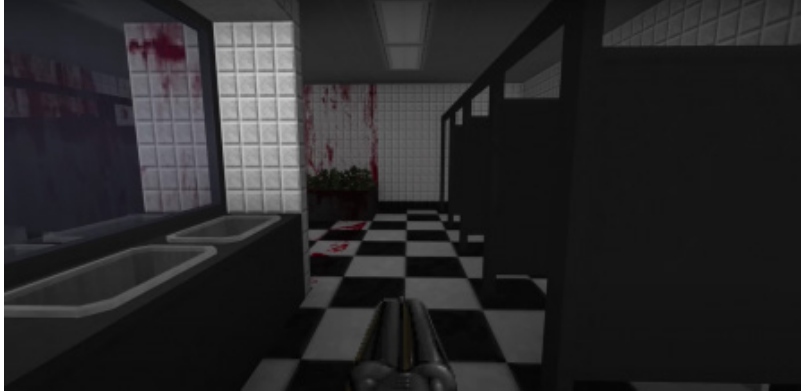
If you loaded *Doom* onto an old PC using 4 floppy disks, you'll appreciate My House's slow, ominous descent into madness almost right away.

And the beauty of it all is that everything is intentional. Each detail is carefully crafted to lure you into an experience within *Doom* you'd never have thought possible.

And Then...

I don't want to describe everything in My House, it can't be done justice in print.

But let me give you some ideas.



You'll enter alternate versions of the same house. Maybe it's been burned down, or its overgrown with plant life, or it has a new, modern aesthetic.



You'll enter impossible spaces, rooms that seem to exist in the same physical space at the same time, overlapping each other.

You'll find yourself in an underwater labyrinth, struggling to escape before your air runs out.

You'll find yourself in an airport and aboard a plane.

You'll find yourself in fabled creepypasta backrooms and liminal spaces.

You'll enter doors that lead to uncanny areas, a world of open sky or a huge, pulsating box.

You'll slide into a ball pit.



Each door you open, each path you take, makes everything stranger.



What appears on the surface to be an unfinished *Doom* map, compiled by a friend of the deceased original creator, is a surreal experience, a monumental technical achievement that plays with what we know *Doom* wads, and videogames in general, to be.

And it's a masterclass in storytelling. The tension ratchets up just a tiny bit at a time. It tricks you into thinking you're innocently playing a Doom mod, when what you're really doing is assembling a story.

Unusual Mods

There are other mods/wads that are pretty unusual, and My House can trace its DNA back to some of these.

I'm not talking about the wads that change all the characters into Simpsons characters (although this is pretty great) or something like that.

I'm talking about:

The Sky May Be: A wad that's just...odd. Strange textures, ill-fitting sound effects, the whole thing feels like an accident, except it can't be, because someone had to program this to happen.

ARCHIE: *ARCHIE is a high-surrealism modern doom wad with an equally high system requirement. It tells a story about hipsters using technology to create a singularity timesink from which they can never escape, on purpose, and how they affect those around them with something that isn't real.*

The Harris Levels: Not so much notorious for their contents, but for their creator: Eric Harris, one of the two shooters at Columbine High School (this played no small part in *Doom's* reputation for harming the children).

These wads do something different. They force the player and the game to interact on a new level. These types of wads force the player to consider the wad's maker, as does My House with its backstory (above) as well as some additional information included in the download.

House of My House

We're not going to cover the entirety of *House of Leaves* here because that book has been out forever, it's wonderful, you're probably aware of it.

The big takeaway for *House of Leaves* is this: I'm a reader who has a limited tolerance for bullshit novelty in books. I'm totally good with weird formats and oddity provided there's also a story in the text.

Maybe another way to look at this: if a book's unusual structure is an enhancement, a perfect side dish, while still having a good story as the star of the meal, I'm in.

House of Leaves is well worth the effort.

My House and *House of Leaves* share some surface level similarities that are clear to fans of both.

In front of the titular house in My House, a real estate sign for Navidson Real Estate, a reference to Will Navidson from *House of Leaves*.

Like in the book *House of Leaves*, text files that accompany My House have the word "house" highlighted in blue.

An endless staircase is a clear nod as well.

But these are just references. The way both My House and *House of Leaves* work is where things get interesting.

House of Leaves

I once saw *House of Leaves* author Mark Z. Danielewski give a talk while on tour for *Only Revolutions*, and he described the reading experience in his books as being like climbing a mountain. There's usually more than one way to get to the top, some are probably easier than others, some more linear, some with switchbacks, and all the different routes are better or worse depending on what you bring to the table as a climber.

And that's how My House works as well. It's a story, it's finite, and you can complete or conquer it. But your experience and mine will be totally different because of what we bring to it and because of the choices we make along the way.

Both are participatory in that way. Both put a sense of guilt into the person experiencing them.

You, as reader or as player, are complicit in assembling these events.

Uncanny

House of Leaves takes a collection of objects, letters, diary entries, various documents, compiles them into the familiar form of a book, and then, by using them in such an unusual way, builds a sense of the uncanny: something that feels familiar also feels, well, wrong.

The house in *House of Leaves* works this way as well. One of the earlier discoveries about the house is that it is, somehow, slightly larger INSIDE than it is OUTSIDE.

By making home, a solid thing made of real materials, into something impossible, the book plays on

the fear of things that are inexplicable, that we are living in a world that is still not really understood.

In *My House*, everything familiar about *Doom* becomes unfamiliar in a way that's eerie, a way that's uncomfortable. It can't be overstated how bizarre it feels to engage in a surreal narrative while also seeing the familiar Doomguy heads-up display, Doomguy's wandering eyes, and a pistol or shotgun out in front of you with that familiar *Doom* walk cycle.



At some point in *My House*, thinking about things like armor or how many rockets you have reminds you of just how deep into a rabbit hole you've tumbled.

Both *My House* and *House of Leaves* show us the horror in using the language of something we think we understand, and then twisting it in a way that leaves us on unsteady ground.

The places we thought were safe retreats, books and video games, are not.

Ergodic Houses

The fancy term people use for *House of Leaves* is "ergodic literature." This is a term for books that:

- Require a special effort on the part of readers to assemble a narrative
- Have, built in, some way that demonstrates the difference between a successful and unsuccessful reader

House of Leaves is a book that certainly requires special effort on the part of the reader as one cannot just go from top to bottom, left to right.

House of Leaves doesn't have a great way of gauging the success of the reader.

And this is why I think *My House* may be an even more successful version of ergodic storytelling than *House of Leaves*, which I'd previously considered the absolute peak.

Because *My House* is a game, and because the player must take certain actions, in a certain order, to put the narrative together, it easily fulfills the first condition of ergodic lit.

But even in the context of gaming, where a player has to make effort to complete the narrative, *My House* is a more obtuse, non-linear experience than you'll find in most games. It's not even clear that a narrative exists at the outset, and it requires the player to do things that are very unusual in the *Doom* environment (one YouTube commenter observed that seasoned *Doom* players seem to have trouble with *My House* because their seasoning in the fires of *Doom's* hells teach them to expect the game to work a certain way).

And because the game's different endings can provide a sense of either peace or (heh) doom, players are able to interpret these endings and see whether or not they were successful in assembling the

narrative. The “final page” of the story doesn't only hit differently, it actually IS different depending on what the player manages to do.

Both *My House* and *House of Leaves* are stories within unusual structures within hyper-normal structures. Both function as puzzles, and the reward for solving the puzzles is narrative.

But I have to say, *My House* is better at telling me whether or not I made it to the top of the mountain.

My House of Leaves

I'm overjoyed that *My House* exists. Because it brings *House of Leaves* back into the conversation, and because it is, itself, a wonderful storytelling achievement.

It's dark, it's harrowing, it's a game AND a story.

The narrative, both within and outside of the actual gameplay, is fascinating.

It probably sounds weird to say that a *Doom* wad is the next evolution of storytelling. I mean, how can a game from the early 90s be on the cutting edge?

But *House of Leaves* changed storytelling by messing with books, and those were by no means new technology in 2000.

And *My House's* presentation within such a ubiquitous, iconic game gives it something extra, brings out fear and curiosity.

I don't often feel a lot of fear or tension when I watch movies or play games.

I felt a sense of dread in *My House*. A creeping, confining fear I haven't felt since I sat, reading *House of Leaves*, sweating while I turned the pages.

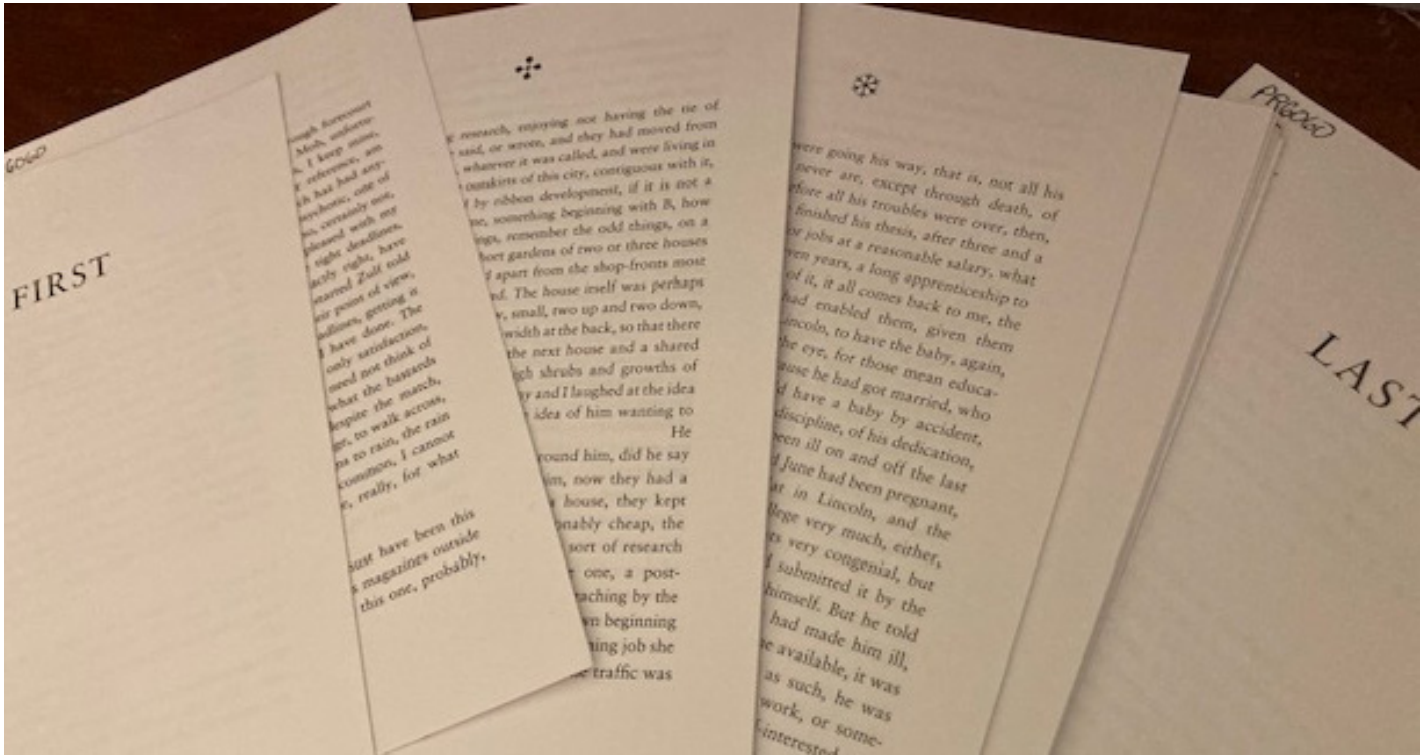
Experience My House

If you are not a *Doom*-er and want to see *My House* for yourself, I highly recommend watching a video by Power Pak on YouTube, which will walk you through the wad (the screenshots I've used here were from his video, with permission, and he seems like a very nice person). It's about 2 hours long, so pop some popcorn, watch it like a movie. You'll love it. You don't have to know anything about *Doom* to get a lot out of it.

If you'd like to see *My House* played by an experienced gamer, the video uploaded by John Romero is pretty interesting as well. He has a lot of insight into where the game does and does not violate the normal function of *Doom* in service of storytelling, plus an appreciation for interesting use of textures and details down to door swing sound effects.

If you're a gamer ready and willing to play *My House* yourself, here you go: <https://www.doomworld.com/forum/topic/134292-myhousewad/>

B.S. Johnson Deserves Better Than Being Forgotten



When this column started, it was mostly about the unusual formats B.S. Johnson used to tell stories: cut-outs mid-story, shuffled chapters, and other oddities.

This was an idea I pitched before I knew Johnson died by suicide.

Whenever you look into a writer who died by suicide, when you know how the writer's story ended, you look at his work through his ghost, a barely-there image that hovers over each page.

For now, let's stick with the books. Because they are unusual, interesting, and unique in ways worth talking about.

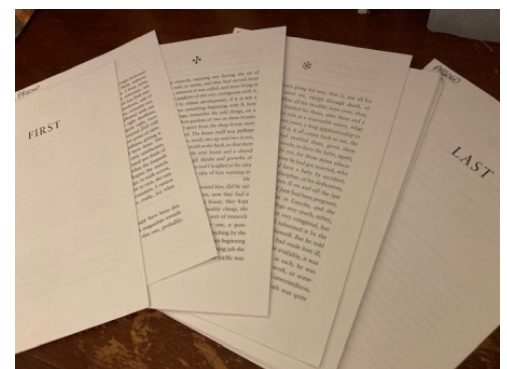
Then we can get back to Johnson.

"The Unfortunates"

If you buy a copy of *The Unfortunates*, you'll get a book-sized box, which holds 28 separate pamphlets.

One pamphlet is an introduction to the book by Jonathan Coe, one pamphlet is labeled First, and another is labeled Last.

The other 25 are stapled pamphlets, ranging from a single page to something like 15 pages at the longest. The pamphlets don't indicate any order, and instead each has a symbol on the top of



the first page. Each pamphlet starts with page 1.

You're meant to read the pamphlets in any order with the exception of the first and the last. In fact, the order you read them in and the order someone else reads them in are meant to be different.

The story contained within and between the pamphlets is about a guy who is headed to a town to cover a football match. When he arrives, he realizes that the town he's traveled to is one he visited a few times to see a friend who was dying of cancer.

It's a sad, hard-grip story that focuses somewhat on the friend, but also the narrator, his memories, his trivial thoughts, his lunch, the loves of his life.

The idea behind the book's construction is that this is what it's like to remember, to walk through a town where a friend died a slow, painful death. The book is meant to replicate the way memories and emotions come in flashes.

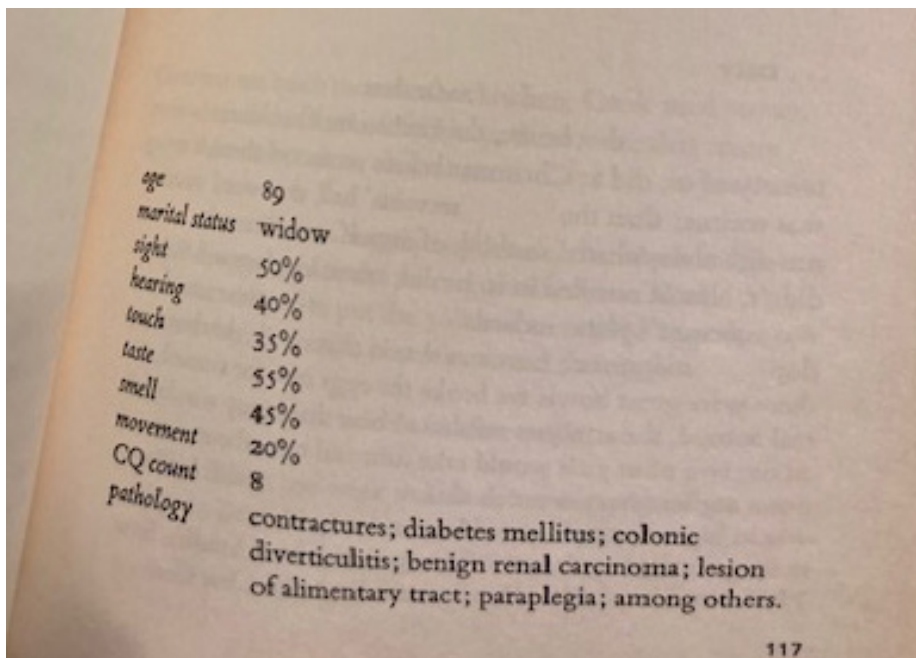
It's not linear because memory is not linear.

Part of B.S. Johnson's aesthetic was that he felt novels shouldn't tell goofy little fictions, and instead should be used to tell true stories. And *The Unfortunates* does that. By re-creating memory this way, *The Unfortunates* cuts through the bullshit that comes with a writer recalling things and putting them in a tidy order, as though that's the way they think all the time, from A to B.

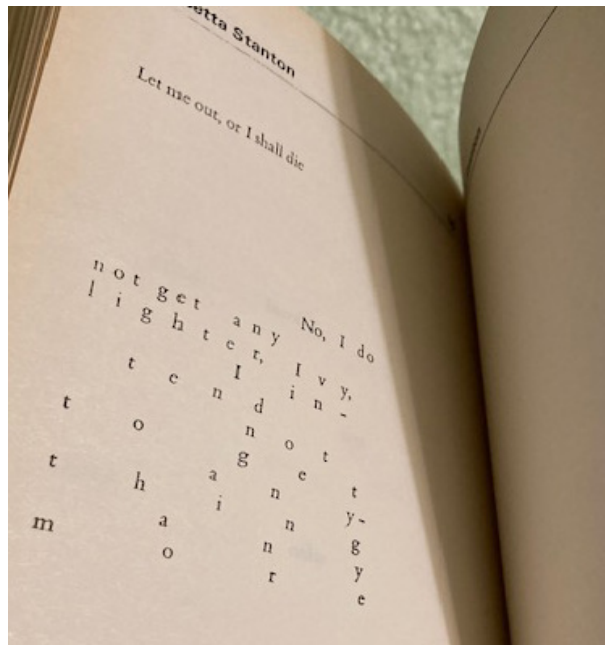
"House Mother Normal"

House Mother Normal is the story of events in a nursing home. The same events are described by several different residents. As you go through the book, you get the same story again, but from another angle.

You're introduced to each narrator by a set of stats that relate each resident's sensory abilities, cognition, and other potential issues, sort of like what'd be on the back of nursing home baseball cards:



The narrators are ordered by, basically, ability to relate the story. The most coherent story is first, and as you go through the book, the narrators become more and more difficult to follow:



Instead of a linear narrative, A to B, Johnson creates a layered narrative that goes from A to B, then lays another A to B on top of that one, and so on.

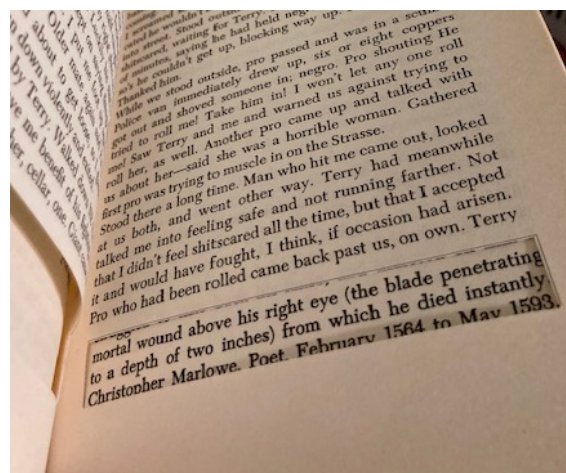
The reader sees something confirmed a number of times, and the reader then assumes those things really happened. Other things are not confirmed, and seem to possibly be made up, or the products of confused elderly folks, or perhaps some events are unconfirmed because only one person noticed.

It's a little like reading a mystery where you're trying to piece together what really happened, and all you have is the very imperfect, inconsistent memories of a group of humans.

"Albert Angelo"

Albert Angelo is a teacher, and the book is sometimes in first person, sometimes third, sometimes filled in with essays by Angelo's students, which give us an idea of their opinion of Angelo.

There are also cutouts in a few pages of *Albert Angelo*, which let the reader see into "the future" of the book. Or maybe take apart the idea of linear narrative.



Albert Angelo ends with a coda where Johnson sort of explains why he wrote the book, and it contains what is probably his most famous quote: Telling stories is telling lies.

We'll get back to stories and lies.

Albert Angelo feels, to me, like it's giving us a window into what's about to happen because, as the writer, Johnson knew everything that was set to happen, so why shouldn't the reader?

Why The Gimmicks?

I think what B.S. Johnson's books have in common is that their gimmicks make them less like reading experiences, more like writing experiences.

You're more in Johnson's head than your own at times.

In other words, they replicate what it's like to be B.S. Johnson, as opposed to creating a narrative for the reader.

These are books where the author is very present, very much in the room with the reader.

When I read these books, I read stories where a writer is desperate to be understood.

Where I Toe The Line

From Wikipedia:

Johnson became depressed by his failure to succeed commercially and by mounting family problems. On 13 November 1973, aged 40, he took his own life by slitting his wrists.

Sometimes I overexplain things. This is something my partner has pointed out to me, that it can feel, talking to me, like I'm treating the person listening like a dolt, making analogies that aren't necessary.

I do this because it's important that I feel understood. Not just on a surface level, but more deeply. I want to try and make sure that I'm being heard, completely.

Most of us don't have to go through life with an objective proof, numerical evidence, that most people are indifferent to us, our lives, and everything that's important to us.

I just want the person I'm talking with to understand everything in my head.

Reading B.S. Johnson, I feel a kindred spirit at work. Someone who wants to be understood, someone who goes to unusual lengths in the attempt, is someone I can relate to.

And I wonder about B.S. Johnson. I wonder if his commitment to truth, his move away from fiction that told fanciful stories, put him in a box.

It's not always hard to write from the heart, but it's hard to sell from the heart.

It's hard when you try and sell something deeply personal and then watch readers clamor for goofy

vampire romances or contrived thrillers.

I do not hate vampire romances or thrillers, by the way. It's just...It's a perilous thing to put your real self into the world and then see, in such an objective way, the public indifference to you and your stories.

I wonder if the box B.S. Johnson put himself in was one where he wrote books to be understood. And when those books didn't sell very well, it meant that very few people understood him.

Most of us don't have to go through life with an objective proof, numerical evidence, that most people are indifferent to us, our lives, and everything that's important to us.

B.S. Johnson lived that reality.

Why Johnson Is Worth Reading

I enjoyed the novelties of Johnson's books, and those are what brought me to his work. But I was affected by the stories.

The feelings weren't always, or usually, pleasant, but they were vivid, striking, clear.

B.S. Johnson's books bring most of what we want from a reading experience. They bring something new to the table. They go out into uncharted territory. And they tell a good story that hits the reader hard.

B.S. Johnson wouldn't be my first choice to read on an airplane or while commuting. The narratives are a little messy and ask your full attention.

But when it comes to sitting down to read a book, you could do a lot worse than Mr. Johnson.

In a recalled conversation with his dying friend, Tony, in *The Unfortunates*, the narrator relates this:

...I said, it was all I had, what else could I do, I said, I'll get it all down, mate. It'll be very little, he said, after a while, slowly... That's all anyone has done, very little, I said.

That's all most of us who write are looking for. Maybe one or two small, but good, stories out of an entire life.

B.S. Johnson might have died feeling like he'd done very little.

But the very little he did is well worth your time.

How and Why I Built a Bookselling Monster



Writing books is fun.

Selling them, THAT SUCKS.

For the littler authors among us, it's pathetic. It feels like you're pushing copies on friends and family too nice to say no, maybe a handful of other writers, and when it comes to reaching a wide audience of people who don't write themselves and don't have a biological connection to you, it's hard to escape the gross feeling of asking someone to spend their hard-earned money on your book about a paranormal investigator who's terrible at his job.

It's like being in some multi-level marketing thing where you host parties, get your friends together, they throw you a couple bucks out of pity, you scramble to break even, then rest a bit before jumping into a new multi-level marketing scheme.

Selling books sucks. There has to be a better way...

Mild-Mannered

You know what makes selling books hard?

Every writer I've met has been very nice, pretty normal, kind, looks like they do in their author photo, has...averaglkdhgslkz...

Whoops, fell asleep on my keyboard there.

I'm a pretty average guy, a bit boring. Looks: 6 out of 10 (feeling generous today). I pay my bills on time. I drive a Corolla.

Someone asked me what kind of candy I like, if someone were to bring in a treat to work, and I sat there for like half a minute before I said, "You know, I guess I don't eat much candy."

How fucking boring is that? You can't even come up with a CANDY BAR!? You can't just say, I don't know, Zagnut!?

I'm boring. This is partially why I write fiction.

Boring is the worst thing you can be when you've got a book to sell.

How can I be not boring?

The Story of Most Fiction is Boring

I'm a BIG advocate of making sure, when you try to sell something, that you add a story to the story.

Simple example: When people ask Kevin Smith about *Clerks*, they often talk about how he shot it in the convenience store where he worked, how he sold off his comic collection, and how he got his buddies to play multiple parts.

What works about this is that it gives Smith something to talk about besides the plot of the movie. There's a story about the story.

Sometimes there's a good idea behind a novel, but the process?

"How did this come to be?"

"Well, Queen Latifah [in this fantasy, I'm on the short-lived Queen Latifah daytime talkshow, I feel like she deserved a longer run], I had this idea, then I sat down and wrote it, and I kept sitting down to write it for like two years, here and there. Then I attached it as a file, I think a PDF, and sent it out to..."

NO! That's so fucking boring! I mean, it's unvarnished truth, but goddamn is it boring. Nobody wants to hear that. Why are you bothering Queen Latifah with such a thing?

How can I add a story to the story?

Enter: Theatrical Rock

KISS. Alice Cooper. Ghost. GWAR.

Rock cracked the code: if you're not ACTUALLY a demon from hell who is good at shredding on guitar, or some kind of dead skeleton pope who's revived nightly to rip on a saxophone, fuck it, just make a character for yourself to play on stage.

I mean, really, any person in a band is a character on stage. They're ON A STAGE. This is in no way a natural thing.

Same thing applies to writers: When one of us is behind a podium, we're not really being our normal

selves. This is not a normal activity.

And that was it, the moment of eureka.

If I don't like selling my books, maybe I don't have to. Maybe someone else, someone more theatrical, more interesting, more visually compelling can do it for me...

Archivos

The backstory came to me pretty easily:

What if Pete: Author, was dead, and on his deathbed, he cursed someone to sell the remaining copies of his books?

And what if this someone was bound to Pete's books, his flesh turning into the very books he was trying to sell?

Now you've got a vision of horror who is motivated to sell some books.

With that backstory, I set out to make a costume, film a little something, and, well, here we are.

Talking About Books

Being Archivos lets me talk about my books in a different way.

I write a lot of goofy shit. And talking about that goofy shit as an outsider with low patience for nonsense is...actually very fun.

Besides, what is an author supposed to say about their own work? There's a reason most books have a blurb on the cover from SOMEONE ELSE. (Although, noted, I'm doing my own blurb for my next one. I mean, fuck it? Who can stop me?)

I can say the books are great if I want to, I can say they're terrible. I can balance critique and praise in a realistic way.

I can talk about my own books as a seller, not as their writer.

And, because part of the Archivos lore is that he MUST sell these books, it gives me a pass to be super pathetic, really pushing books in a way that'd make Pete uncomfortable.

Events

I'm not the kind of writer who gets invited to events, readings, that sort of thing.

But when I am, Archivos is going, not Pete. This is both a promise and a threat.

Archivos is fun. Archivos looks good on a sticker or a bookmark. Archivos might work at a table where you have to recite a rhyme in order to awaken him. People



will take pictures with Archivos, even though they have no idea who Pete is.

Pete would be just another pathetic author at a table.

Archivos is a spectacle.

Why Haven't Writers Done This Before?

We take ourselves WAY too fucking seriously. If there's one good quality I have as a writer, it's that I am immune to the problems of needing to be taken seriously.

I do understand, it's hard to make it, and when you do, you don't want everyone to attribute it to "Archivos the Cursed." You want everyone to know that Pete made it. By god, that dumbass did it!

And I get it, too, for some people, writing is something they do to be taken seriously. Maybe they aren't taken seriously anywhere in life, and this is their shot.

And you know what? If that's you, cool. I'm not here to tell you that you can't be that person.

But I'm JUST SAYING, if I go to a con or a reading or something, and the next person I see puts on a full theatrical production instead of just wearing a blazer and reading out loud from a book I ALREADY READ, I'm in.

Fun

Ultimately, I did this because I think it's fun.

Fun isn't easy to add into the writing process. That's why it's called the "writing process" instead of being called the "writing joyride" or "writing borderline orgasmic experience."

Archivos adds some fun for me.

If I can be so bold as to talk about my legacy: if my legacy ended up being one that encouraged other writers to do more weird, fun, unusual shit, I'd be good with that.

More than good with that.

For me, that'd be everything.

Authors Slap ChatGPT With A Lawsuit: What Happens Next?



Celebrities are walking out of premieres, writers are striking all up and down the streets, and now real writers, book writers (take that, Hollywood!) are getting in on the anti-AI action.

Writers Paul Tremblay and Mona Awad have filed a lawsuit against OpenAI, makers of ChatGPT.

Let's start with the basics.

The Suit

The core of authors' complaint is that ChatGPT has ingested their books, along with hundreds of thousands of others, without consent or payment, and this unauthorized use of their work is a violation of copyright.

Tremblay and Awad say it's evident that ChatGPT ingested their books because it can create, on request, very good, detailed summaries of their books.

Does ChatGPT Train on Copyrighted Books?

Let's say you wanted an AI to be able to write a novel. You'd go about it almost the same way you'd teach a person to write a novel: you'd have them ingest/read some how-to books, and you'd have them read a ton of novels.

The difference between a guy named Steve, who wants to learn how to write, and an AI named \$t3ve, is you'd have \$t3ve ingest hundreds of thousands of books. Oh, and it'd take \$t3ve no time at all.

OpenAI hasn't been super forthcoming with the materials used to train ChatGPT, however, according to OpenAI, ChatGPT has been trained on a library of over 300,000 books, a number that suggests there are at least SOME copyrighted books in the mix.

They also seem to have used the Smashwords database to feed their beast. And although lots of books on Smashwords are free to read, their writers do still retain copyright (let's make this simple: you can read a Smashwords book cost free, but that doesn't mean you could take the text, slap it between covers, and sell it).

Last, the term "shadow libraries" is getting thrown around a lot. We can just go ahead and call them by their Christian name: "Torrents and shit."

Usually I'm only a betting man when it comes to YouTube marble races and Grandparents Derbies, but if I were forced to bet on the question of whether copyrighted novels were used to train ChatGPT, I'd lay down an amount of money I can't afford to lose.

The real question here: Is AI ingesting a novel a violation of copyright?

The Best Argument for the Defense: Fair Use

According to Lilian Edwards, professor of law, innovation and society at Newcastle University, this will probably end up being a Fair Use case, which means it'll be complicated.

Fair Use is a law in the United States that allows people to use portions, or even the entirety, of copyrighted materials, without pay or permission from copyright holders, under certain circumstances.

But there are A LOT of misconceptions around Fair Use.

Let's do a Top 3:

1. It's Fair Use If You're Not Profiting: Nope. Profits are a factor in Fair Use, but you can do something without making a penny and still be in violation of copyright. You can also make a shitload of money and still be covered by Fair Use.
2. If You Only Use A Certain Amount Of Something, It's Fair Use: Nope. You can use a tiny amount of something and still be in violation of copyright. You can also use almost the entirety of a material and be covered by Fair Use.
3. If You Do X, It's Fair Use: Nope. Kind of buried the lead here, but Fair Use is SUPER complicated, and there's really no document or procedure that guarantees Fair Use. It's case-by-case.

The Bigger Problem With Fair Use

It's an American law, and it doesn't apply to other countries.

With the internet being a global concern, even if OpenAI lost the suit, a company in another country could just jump right in and do the same thing, depending on their laws.

In fact, the government in the UK was very interested in creating copyright exceptions for the

purposes of training AIs. This was roundly shouted down by the community of creatives, but when it comes to government versus artists...there's reason to be concerned for the longterm outcomes.

Let's Get Suspicious

Here's where I get speculative.

I think this lawsuit is really about AI using authors' works to imitate authors and write books of their own, but that's not something the authors can win.

You know how Capone got busted for tax fraud instead of all the other shit?

This is that.

Let's Get Weird

There's a weirder aspect of this: we're kind of asking whether an AI is like a real person.

Remember Steve? And \$t3ve?

One One Hand:

Steve probably read a bunch of books, including Paul Tremblay's, to learn how to write.

And when Steve sits down and cranks out his own novel, it'd be pretty tough to distinguish between a book that was "inspired by" Paul Tremblay and a book that was a copyright violation of Paul Tremblay's. Even if a book was a straight-up Paul Tremblay knockoff, it'd be a tough call.

And maybe what \$t3ve is doing is pretty much the same. If \$t3ve absorbs Paul Tremblay's books and creates new ones based on that style...is that different?

On The Other Hand:

Maybe what \$t3ve is doing is closer to photocopying a Paul Tremblay novel than it is to learning from and imitating it.

Maybe the exactness of \$t3ve's copying is a problem. Maybe \$t3ve's speed and precision in imitation DO mean there's an ability to mimic a real person to a degree that wasn't possible before.

Maybe copyright laws are built with human abilities in mind. Maybe their application to a machine doesn't work.

\$t3ve is still a machine. \$t3ve isn't a person, as evidenced by the weird-ass spelling of his name.

Maybe treating \$t3ve like a real person is what we really need to talk about.

If Authors Win

I suspect that this would potentially create laws that more closely regulate the materials available for an AI to train on, which could be a very important step in regulating AI. AI is...kind of in a wild west period at the moment. And not the good wild west of being drunk and playing poker. The bad wild west. You think dying of syphilis is a rootin' tootin' adventure?

It might also mean some regulation in terms of what AI is permitted to create. For example, a hyper-accurate, Awad-esque piece of writing might be something AIs are no longer permitted to create.

The author win would help future authors. Future human authors, anyway.

If OpenAI Wins

Ugh, this would not be good, methinks.

If OpenAI wins, it might open the door for AI to train on any copyrighted work and close the door to OpenAI being transparent about the materials AI trains on.

I've seen like 2/3 of the Terminator movies, and this usually ends with charred skeletons covering playgrounds all over the world.

I'm not a gigantic fan of tech companies regulating themselves. They suck at it.

My Personal Opinion

I'm very torn.

As a writer and a reader, fuck that AI shit.

As an everything else...

I read recently about AI being used to analyze photos of peoples' skin to find skin cancer, and that it was learning fast, becoming pretty effective.

I can see the benefits of AI and Big Data coming together to diagnose people, potentially saving lives.

I read about AI chefs who were able to re-create dishes with a level of exactness that human chefs can't match (although I anticipate a John-Henry-esque Robochef versus Gordon Ramsay thing not too far in the future).

I think cooking is boring. I don't want to do it anymore. I would happily turn my cooking duties over to an AI.

And that's how a lot of people feel about writing.

For some people, robo writers feel like...if someone asked me whether it was a good idea to create robots who clean out portable toilets, I'd say it absolutely was.

And there are people who would probably rather hose down a shitter than write a novel.

This whole AI thing is fucked up, and at the very least, I'm glad that a couple of authors are forcing the conversation about AI's future.

Not military, not Senators, not truckers, not lawyers, not ethicists. Writers.

Writers didn't cause this problem. But goddamn it, at least they're forcing everyone to talk about it.

The Don'ts And Definitely Don'ts of Writing Stupid-Funny Books



Most of my writing advice is questionable, but if you want advice on writing incredibly stupid, incredibly fun books, I'm your Dingleberry. Or Huckleberry. Whatever berry you like, I'm that.

Off to a stupid start already. Let's keep this rolling.

Quick Definition

A stupid-fun book is a book that's meant to be fun, funny, and when people call it "stupid," you have to agree, it's pretty stupid.

TV is filled with examples of stupid-fun: *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *Bob's Burgers*, you get it.

By the way, if you want to argue about how incisive these shows are and how I'M THE STUPID ONE for offering those examples, feel free to DM me on Twitter. Or Threads. Or any of the many social media platforms I no longer use as receptacles for messages about how stupid I am.

Don't Write With Your Ego

If you write to be respected or to make your English teacher proud or to show your parents that you're a real adult, you're going to have a tough time down in the gutter with those of us who write stupid-fun books.

Because trying to demonstrate that you're smart within the context of a stupid-fun book makes your job harder and makes the book crappier.

Besides, it won't work. Your dad will never respect you.

Don't Target Something You Genuinely Disdain

When you mock something you love, the reader will feel the background emotions of love and affection instead of hate and anger.

Shaun of the Dead works because you can tell Edgar Wright really respects *Dawn of the Dead*. *Hot Fuzz* works because Edgar Wright likes *Tango and Cash*. If he hated those sorts of movies, his movies might be funny in a cutting, biting kind of way, but they'd be a lot less fun.

Write something stupid-funny that addresses something you love instead of taking down something you hate. It's so much easier. And more enjoyable.

Definitely Don't Do Anything Unfunny

EVERY decision in your stupid-funny book is about what makes it funnier.

Should the character get married or break up with her fiancé? Well, which one's funnier?

Should I put the accent on the word fiancé or not? Well, is it funnier for your character to get all fancy and French or to be vehemently opposed to accents on words?

Should I use quotation marks or not? Well, which one makes the jokes easier to read and understand?

Everything in service of the funny.

Don't Write Characters Who Aren't Trying

Wile E. Coyote is funny because he tries REALLY hard. Walter Sobchak from *The Big Lebowski* is funny because his intensity level is always a 10. Ash from *Evil Dead* is funny because his best effort is really pathetic.

It'll always be funnier if your character, given every tool they need to make the right choice, provided every advantage, still does something really stupid.

Don't Forget to Make Your Characters Optimists

How much easier is it to get your character into trouble if he's always overestimating his abilities? How much funnier is it to watch a character who's up for anything get into something he REALLY shouldn't be involved with?

As a bonus: This is an endearing quality a very stupid character can possess while still being stupid. If you're writing a slightly more substantive stupid-fun book and want to have a touching moment (I advise against it, but you do you), a stupid character can be a very fun, loyal friend without needing to suddenly become suddenly, briefly smart and self-aware in order to have an emotional moment.

Don't Wait to Decide How Wacky The World Is

Seinfeld's characters inhabit a pretty realistic world, so their odd encounters and eccentric behaviors make comedy out of contrast.

The Simpsons is wackier. Most Simpsons characters would be too unrealistic for *Seinfeld*.

Rick and Morty's world is very unrealistic. This is how we get multiverse jokes where sentient chairs are sitting on humans, using slices of pizza as phones to order phones for dinner.

Different levels can all work, but you're going to want to keep it fairly consistent.

At the very least, make the world elastic: It can stretch to be wackier at times, but it always returns to its established, baseline level.

Has ANYONE complained that a stupid-funny movie is a little light in the lessons learned department?

Definitely Don't Write A Smart Character In A Stupid World

Don't write *Idiocracy*.

This rarely works, and usually the smart character comes off as smarmy, turning their nose up at everyone else. And we don't want to spend our time with the one smart character who's having the least fun. It's like going to a party and a bunch of people jump in the pool with their clothes on, and then there's the one guy in the corner, scoffing at how stupid they are. Who wants to hang out with that dud?

In the battle of Snobs Versus Slobs, you don't want to be on the wrong side of history.

Definitely Don't Teach Me A Lesson

The WORST part of any comedy is the part where someone, somewhere, decided we should have a serious life lesson embedded in all this wackiness.

I get it, movie studios think they have to do this shit. But has ANYONE complained that a stupid-funny movie is a little light in the lessons learned department?

Don't Overstay Your Welcome

Do me a favor: finish this column, then go to The Onion. Read it for 40 minutes.

Somewhere between minute 10 and minute 40, you'll get bored.

Stupid books can easily overstay their welcome by either pitching a consistent level of stupid and becoming boring or by trying to get stupider with each page and becoming exhausting.

Which is why 100 pages is more than good.

Write something that people can read in one sitting. Write something that they only have to be in the mood for once.

Leave them wanting to buy another one of your books, not feeling like they've heard all of your jokes and then some.

Really, Definitely, Seriously, Really Don't Read Reviews

I promise you, if you write a stupid-funny book, the unfunniest person on the planet will write this exact review:

I have a great sense of humor, and I did not get one laugh out of this book.

Book reviews of stupid-fun books are not for you, the author.

People will ascribe your character's mannerisms to you.

People will zero in on one joke out of a thousand and base their feelings on it.

People will insist that farts aren't funny, as though that's a truth we've all agreed upon.

Tell you what: Read funny books, read sincere books, and when you're 100% through all the good books ever written, then go ahead and read reviews of yours.

10 Years Ago, Librarians Predicted What Today's Library Would Look Like



In 2010, a group of library professionals got together and wrote essays that answered the question: What will the library be like in 2020?

Before you get too excited, no, nobody predicted a global pandemic would kill a bunch of people. Also, nobody predicted that a subset of doofuses would attribute the ravages of this virus to the introduction of faster wireless network speeds.

Which is a lesson to anyone putting out an anthology: Save space for one essay that makes wildly unlikely, bold claims. If the writer is wrong, eh, nobody will remember. But if they just so happen to nail it, and centaurs from another dimension do, in fact, raid Earth for our stockpiles of candy corn, you'll look like a goddamn genius.

What did library folks think the library of 2020 would look like? What was right on, what missed the mark, and what am I predicting for 2030?

Print Books Out, eBooks In

The books will be the first to go, because they're already going...That trend is only going to continue because everyone likes eBooks. (p.3)

Why do libraries still have print on the shelves? Isn't this the future!?

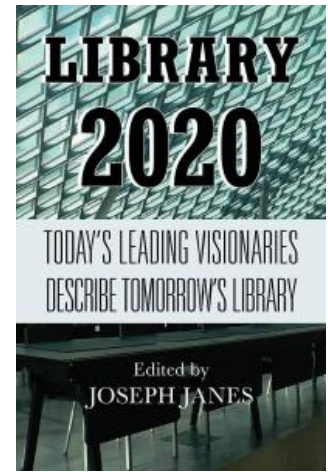
The easy answer is price.

But here's a less boring answer:

eReaders make the book acquisition process easier, and they let you pack a dozen books in a bag when you go on vacation, but they make the reading experience worse because they have to be charged, connected to wifi, and they pull shit like updating when all you want to do is read.

While the eReader was awesome for book shopping and collection toting, it's not very fun to read on.

My prediction for 2030 is that the eBook world will stay pretty stagnant. But I'm totally willing to be proven wrong by some genius who makes a totally awesome eReader that's super affordable and actually fun to use.



Diversity Bad?

Collections are getting larger and less volatile...they are getting more diverse and distinctive from one library to the next. (p.28)

Mostly accurate, a library in Indiana probably looks less like a library in Wisconsin than it used to.

And now I make the (potentially foolish) argument that this isn't necessarily a good thing.

Let's bring Taylor Swift and the Eras Tour into the chat.

This (cruel) summer made it pretty clear that people have a deep, gnawing hunger to feel connected through mutual experience. Not just to one or two other people on a subreddit, but a whole shitload of people in real life.

Unprecedented access to variety is a good thing, but the downside of variety is that the chances that you and I will ever read the same book get worse and worse every day. The chances of connecting over a shared reading experience with more than one or two people on a subreddit are just about zero.

In the library of the future, I think librarians will work to provide access to broad, deep, diverse collections while also finding ways to bring large groups of people together with common books at the center.

Care

A future brand for librarians could be: "Convenient, free, anytime/anywhere access to information experts who care." (p.60)

Librarians aren't necessarily "better" than Google, but I do think a librarian gives a shit, and in some ways, that's "better."

Take book recommendations.

An online buying platform does not give one fuck if you like the book you bought. If you bought it, it's mission accomplished.

Librarians care A LOT about getting you books you enjoy. They're invested from start to finish. Success isn't just about you taking a book home, it's about you enjoying what you get.

And if they fuck it up, they want to try again and get it right.

POD (no, not the Christian band)

...print-on-demand stations will be available extensively so requests for materials that are not housed on-site or readily available electronically can be easily provided. (p.102)

Ah, yes, the print-on-demand system.

Let's say you came into the library, wanted to read a John Swartzwelder book, but we didn't carry any. Well, what if we could download the file, a machine could slap it between two covers, spit it out, and boom, you check out a brand new, legit copy, all in about 15 minutes?

It's actually a pretty cool idea, but it fizzled around 2015.

I'd venture the main reason is that getting publishers to license their books for this is impossible because getting publishers to license anything for anything is impossible.

But print-on-demand was an attempt to answer the right question: how can we get a request for a book and turn it around quickly?

The library of 2030 will have to figure out ways to drastically cut down the turnaround time for materials requests. Because when I can get it from Amazon in 2 days or the library in 6 weeks...

Me Me Me Me Me Me

My library of the future is a place where one can find security and acclamation. It will also be a challenging place that affords discovery and transformation of oneself. It will support one's worldview. (p.120)

This is probably an unfair reading of what this writer was trying to say, but fuck it, you all need to hear this. Because libraries today are having a BIG problem with this shit.

A library can support your worldview and reflect you, but you HAVE TO remember that it won't reflect ONLY you.

You should be able to find things in your library that reflect you and support your ideas. And you should also be able to find things that go against your worldview.

If you try to flush things that don't conform to your worldview and save only those things that comfort you, and if transformation and change are all about other people becoming more like you, we're fucked.

I HOPE the library of the future is able to support a whole lot of people and their worldviews, but that's going to rely on you being tolerant of stuff and people you don't care for much.

Weird as it may be to say, I hope the library of the future has lots of shit I like and lots of shit I don't.

Jonathan Safran Foer's "Tree of Codes": Gimmick or Great Read?



Let's take a moment to talk carnivals. I promise that this relates to *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer.

When you walk through the aisles of food stands, the section of a carnival for people like me, people with taste, you might come across walking tacos. This is the name given to a dish where you basically put a taco, minus tortilla, into a bag of Doritos, smash it all up, and then eat it with a fork.

If you've never eaten this, I highly recommend it.

After your walking taco, you have a fried Oreo, or fried Coke, or fried butter. All of them basically taste like fried, which means they all taste great.

Then you come across a sideshow, and in this sideshow, Oddities From The Book World.

If someone took the time to put together Oddities from the Book World, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* would surely be on display.

What Is It?

Tree of Codes is a book that's made from another book, *Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz.

What Jonathan Safran Foer did is chop 90% of the words contained in *Street of Crocodiles* in order to create a new story with what remains.



You can think of it a little like the blackout poetry thing, but the difference is in the presentation. Instead of words marked out with black, or simply omitted entirely, *Tree of Codes* is a book created by actually, literally cutting words out of *Street of Crocodiles*.

Each page is more hole than it is words.

The words that remain tell their own tale, completely separate from the story in *Street of Crocodiles*.

You know how a sculptor might say they didn't carve a statue, they just took a block of stone and removed the parts that weren't the statue? That's kind of what's going on here, except the *Tree of Codes* statue is carved from the larger *Street of Crocodiles* statue. Foer just removed the parts of *Street of Crocodiles* that weren't *Tree of Codes*.

How Do You Read It?

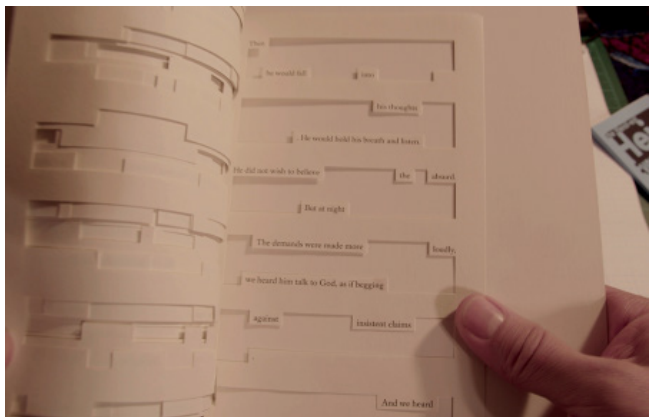
When I got this book, I couldn't tell if you read through the little windows or what, but it turns out you read it pretty much like a normal book, one page at a time.

Some people do this by putting a sheet of blank paper between the pages as they go. I didn't find this necessary, but there's a helpful hint for you.

I was kind of disappointed at first because I thought this was a more intricate, complicated design. But it worked out once I got into the book itself.

What's the Story Contained in Tree of Codes?

I'm not sure I could say exactly, it's more lyrical than it is a hardboiled mystery or something, but it seems to



be a story of a family, loss, you know, stuff that's in classic novels.

If I can be artsy and obnoxious and also take a shot at using vocabulary more comfortable in the mouth of a younger person than I am, it's more of a vibe than it is a tightly plotted A to B kind of thing.

Bullshitty Gimmick Or Good Book?

Yes, both.

Let's start with this: I enjoyed the book. I did feel feelings while reading it, feelings other than frustration or annoyance. It was effective on that level.

It's a reading experience I would recommend.

Now, the details.

Brief

Tree of Codes is maybe a 30-minute read, depending on how much trouble you have fumbling around with the book itself.

Foer got this right: No gimmick is so good that it'll create infinite patience in the reader.

Tree of Codes gets an invite to the reading party at my house because of its unusual format. And *Tree of Codes* is aware of that, and it doesn't overstay its welcome.

Artsy Fartsy Part 1

I tend read fast, I end up skimming too much, and this book kind of refuses to let that happen.

And I think the gimmick is what slows you down. You need two hands to read this book, it demands your attention in a physical way that most books don't.

It's a non-narrative, physical world way to slow the reader down, and for me, it worked.

Artsy Fartsy Part 2

There's something to the idea of stories within stories and seeing a favorite novel as a whole world, something that contains lots of stories.

If it was Foer's goal to demonstrate how there are always stories within stories, to the extent that you can remove 90% of an original story and come out with a mostly-formed, entirely new story, his demonstration works.

Survival Mechanism

One thing I like about digital books is that they are pushing people to try new things in print. "Okay, digital books are super convenient and portable. What's a new kind of print book I could make?"

I'm into it. I'm for it.

It's kind of weird that books have been around as long as they have, and we have so few alternative formats to the straightforward, top to bottom novel.

Which means I'm forgiving of unusual books in ways I might not be of more typically-formatted stuff.

The Sideshow

Now we come back to that carnival nonsense from the intro above. This is the part of the column known as THE PRESTIGE! Or maybe THE ILLUSIONIST. I can never remember which of those movies I saw. Whatever, this is where the magic happens.

One complaint levied at walking tacos is that they are not authentic tacos.

By the standards of taco authenticity, walking tacos are questionable. The beef is usually underseasoned and wouldn't pass muster, I think a tortilla of some kind is a pretty key component of what makes a taco a taco, and that's missing.

But the walking taco IS authentic carnival food. It checks the boxes: It's a little weird, it's intriguing, it's probably not all that good for you, and you're at the carnival, trying to have a carnival experience as opposed to having an authentic dining experience.

And that's the question we're really asking here: Is *Tree of Codes* an authentic experience, not by the standards of typical books, but in the world of books as sideshow?

It is.

It's strange, it's intriguing, and even though it's not 100% successful, like if you broke down its elements, wrote this out as a normal book, it probably wouldn't satisfy, it works.

Tree of Codes works as sideshow, its intended context.

Should You Go Out And Buy "Tree of Codes"?

Unless "go out" means "hop in your time machine," which would allow you to buy it for the original cover price, I'd say no.

Because it's fairly pricey on eBay.

Is *Tree of Codes* an authentic experience, not by the standards of typical books, but in the world of books as sideshow?

That said, don't pass on checking it out because it's expensive. Instead, get *Tree of Codes* on interlibrary loan from your library. These services are usually free or VERY low cost.

Read *Tree of Codes*, experience it, and then decide whether you want to own it.

I think it's more important to experience this book than it is to acquire it.

And for your own sake, if you've never dumped the contents of a taco into a Doritos bag, do that, too.

Chuck Palahniuk's "Not Forever, But For Now": It's Both



Before you read *Not Forever, But For Now*, know that you're doing it wrong.

Because for years now, so many readers have read Palahniuk's books all wrong.

Let me explain:

Chuck Palahniuk has said, more than once, that he takes a certain pleasure in being wrong.

At a party, he'll talk about how Sylvia Plath wrote *The Bell Curve*.

Now, Chuck is well aware that Sylvia Plath wrote *The Bell Jar*, but saying it wrong is a little troll, a little fun. And it's a little something else.

Because when someone gets to correct him, they feel good about themselves. They carry that good feeling with them.

Chuck Palahniuk doesn't mind being wrong to make someone else feel good.

There's another version of this, another Palahniuk technique, this one in writing: You write a character who is wrong. Dreadfully, utterly wrong.

Palahniuk will cite Scarlett from *Gone With The Wind* to make this point. Scarlett, in the movie's opening, says, "Fiddle-dee-dee! War, war, war; this war talk's spoiling all the fun at every party this spring. I get so bored I could scream. Besides... there isn't going to be any war."

In case you're not a history buff, *Gone With The Wind* takes place, as the first line of Wikipedia's plot summary puts it, "on the eve of the American Civil War."

There is absolutely going to be a war, and it's a doozy.

Palahniuk's idea here is that the reader/viewer knows more than Scarlett, knows that she's mistaken in a horrible way, to a horrible degree. And because we know what's coming, we're a little superior. And we feel a little bad for her.

And because we know what she doesn't, we have to carry her pain until it's time to hand it off to her.

Chuck Palahniuk's biggest trick is that his books will always make the readers feel something, whether it's the feeling from outside the book, a feeling of being smart, or a feeling from inside the book, a feeling the reader carries for the characters.

And sometimes, at Palahniuk's best, the reader gets both.

Not Forever, But For Now, is a "both" kind of book.

Readers will feel smart because the reader always knows something the characters don't: The reader always knows they're holding a Chuck Palahniuk book.

The reader knows there's more than they're seeing right off. The reader knows that Palahniuk isn't wasting their time with a book where everything is exactly as it seems.

And yet the characters never, ever know they're in a Palahniuk novel.

Readers will also carry feelings from this book. Sometimes uncomfortable feelings, feelings that you don't want to hold onto any longer than you have to. But you can do it. It's worth it.

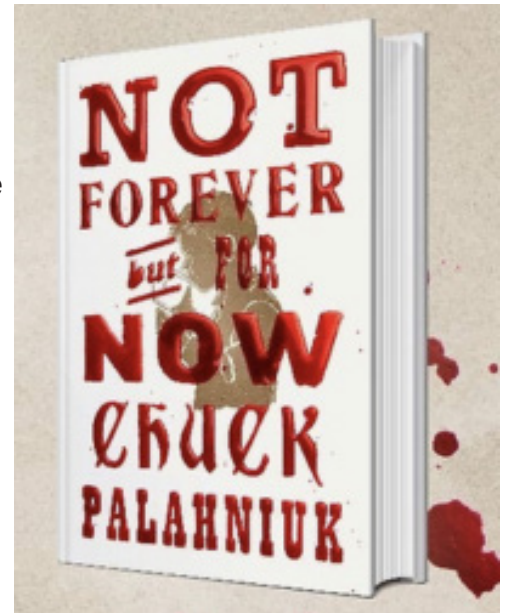
When I say you might be about to read *Not Forever, But For Now* wrong, I'm speaking to you if you haven't enjoyed Chuck's books in the past.

If you haven't enjoyed them as feelings-type experiences, read *Not Forever, But For Now* as a puzzle. Try and guess Chuck's next move. Pick up the clues. And remember, nothing is arbitrary in his books. Nothing is an accident.

If you haven't enjoyed Chuck's books as puzzles, let go. Let go of your need to predict, to figure out what's going on, to prove to yourself how smart you are. Drop the clues and the hints and just carry the feelings.

Because this one really is both. And if you switch your focus, go from puzzling to feelings, the puzzle will get a chance to sneak up on you. If you're a feelings person, give this one a shot as a puzzle, and the feelings will still shine through.

If you pay attention to the part you usually ignore, you'll have a great time.



There is one thing I hope Chuck is legitimately wrong about, though. It's what he announced in his newsletter:

This is likely the last tour with big off-site events. If you're coming to one you'll see the end of a wonderful experiment. I'd no idea the tickets would cost so much, and I can't condone anyone paying upwards of \$50 for a \$25 book. Even if you catch a kangaroo and get nailed with a bag of candy.

Is Chuck Palahniuk playing Scarlett, saying there isn't going to be any book tour renaissance? Or is he 100% correct?

It could go either way.

But if I were you, and if I lived somewhere a big event was happening, I wouldn't take the chance.

Why Progressive Kid's Books Suck



While I was browsing the library a bit back, I came across a little book: *Feminist Baby*.

I hated it.

Not because I hate the politics of the book or feminism or hate women or have strong opinions on trans athletes in women's sports or hate babies.

Not because I hate the politics of the book or feminism or hate women or have strong opinions on trans athletes in women's sports or hate babies.

I'll spare you a third, bolded AND underlined, repeat of that sentence if you promise to read at least one of the previous copies and really remember it for the next 10 minutes.

I hated *Feminist Baby* not for what it represents, but for what it is: a book for kids that would bore the crap out of kids.

I read other progressive picture books like *Feminist Baby*, and they were all kind of terrible.

Not because they have bad politics or bad messages.

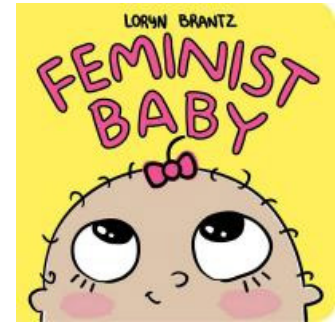
Because they're bad as books.

What I'm Talking About

I'm not talking about any book that has a character of color or that presents a character with two mommies. A book having modern sensibilities does not damn a book to the hell of bad progressive picture books.

I'm talking specifically about books that address politics and have titles like *Anti-Capitalist Toddler*, *Armando is an Activist*, *Mariam Tries To Walk The Line Between Cultural Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation When Shopping on Etsy*.

These, my friends, are the problem.



The Message Is The Whole

What I found in books about feminist babies, books about anti-racist babies, books about who should touch someone else's hair (spoiler: nobody), books about people with disabilities, books about gender for little kids—what I found in all of these was a series of wholesome messages.

And that's it.

They were well-illustrated pamphlets that outline, in too many, too-complex words, stances or philosophies.

Why does that suck?

Because Where's The Story?

These books read as a series of disconnected statements, things like, "I am just a baby, and I haven't got gender figured out yet, so leave me alone about it."

Where's the narrative? Where's the action? Where is the memorable A to B to C?

Even a book as simple as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* has SOME narrative. Things that happen before other things. There's some cause and effect. There's STUFF.

Information without story is boring. And worse, it's forgettable.

Because Where Are The Characters?

I'm pretty sure *Feminist Baby's* main character's name is...Feminist Baby.

And by the end of the book, Feminist Baby has two traits, both of which are contained in the title/baby's name.

These books don't have characters, they're just ideas with human outlines drawn around them.

They're B-O-R-I-N-G. They're forgettable.

Why These Books Are A Problem For Adults

If the books are boring and forgettable, their messages will be forgotten as well.

If the message is all there is, and if that's forgotten, what's left?

Why It's A Problem For Kids

Kids in picture books can be princesses, they can be knights, they can drive race cars, they can have wacky adventures. They can fuck up and learn something from it.

But in these progressive picture books, kids are relegated to spending the few pages they get expressing their identity, and that's it. Nobody in these books is getting in a time machine or going to the Moon with their cat. Nobody is making friends with a ghost. Nobody is unraveling a mystery.

This tells kids that books with progressive ideas are learning books, lecture books, not adventures.

On a subtler level, it's a problem because these progressive books tend to dominate the market for "diverse" books. Displays, listicles, and libraries are packed with this brand of story-less, progressive, diverse picture book, and what THAT means is that when you see a book with a Black kid or a gender-non-conforming kid on the cover, there's a better-than-average chance you're looking at a progressive book.

All this means that kids are being sent a subtle, terrible message: books that feature diversity are boring.

That's not correct. And it's not cool.

The Reason These Proliferate

My cynical side says these books are an easy cash-in for authors, and parents get to feel like they're doing the right thing by buying them. But I don't think it's all that diabolical.

When you're stocking a bookstore or a library, or even selecting some books for a kid, you want to have a diverse mix. Totally makes sense, great thing to do.

When you can find books specifically ABOUT diversity, it's easy to see that you're putting a good mix of books on the shelves or into your kid's head.

There's a desire to do good here, and we see Ibram X. Kendi's name on a children's book, and we're like, "Okay, that dude knows what he's talking about, race-wise. Let's get that."



Moving Forward: Author Side

By all means, center a character with progressive values in your book. Make them a detective! Make them a dragonslayer! Give them something to do! Kids want to be on their side, rooting for them. Kids want to be amazed by their adventures. Kids want to laugh at their jokes.

Your characters can have their identity, nobody is asking for an erasure here.

Just give them a little something to do!

Moving Forward: Reader Side

See if your library has access to Novelist. They probably do, and if they don't, they probably have something similar.

Novelist is an awesome database of books, and what's super cool is that it has search options you won't find everywhere.

You can search by "Author's Cultural Identity," including things like "Ability diverse," "Black Canadian," "Indigenous," "LGBTQIA," and tons of others.

You can search by the author's gender, which gives the options for Male, Female, Non-Binary, and Trans.

You can search by the author's nationality.

And here's what's really awesome: You can put in keywords like "Comedy." Or "Scary." Or "Science."

You can find stories, memorable characters, and all sorts of different books by all sorts of different people.

To offer your kids a diverse array of authors who hold progressive ideas, you don't have to forgo story.

What you'll find, it's almost like any kind of person can write a great picture book.

Imagine that.

Robert Kirkman's Non-Walking-Dead Comics



Robert Kirkman is in a weird spot.

Because *The Walking Dead* was such a cultural phenomenon, it's what he'll be known for forever, the first line in his obituary, FOR SURE.

And it's a little tragic. "A little" because the dude is probably getting paid, making great comics, and calling his work life "tragic" is a slap in the face of people with jobs like Professional Slapboxer, people whose life work of being the target of face slaps probably won't stand the test of time.

But it IS a little tragic because Kirkman is a lot more than *The Walking Dead*.

If Kirkman did all the comics he's done BESIDES *Walking Dead*, he'd probably be a bit less rich and famous, but he'd definitely be a comics legend.

Allow me to explain:



"Invincible"

If you know TWO Kirkman books, the second one you know is *Invincible*.

Invincible is like a cross between Spider-Man and Superman in that it's about the son of an alien with general superpowers (Superman), and it's good (Spider-Man).

One of the issues (hah!) with superhero comics is that the characters can be pretty static. The bigger publishers don't want to change a character TOO much and run the risk of turning fans off, so they either stay the same or change and quickly rubberband back.

With *Invincible* being a limited series, characters do change. Relationships change. Heads get mooshed into mush.

If I have to make one complaint about the book, it does play with some game pieces pretty familiar to people who've read a lot of comics. But while it's some pre-trod territory, Kirkman does it better than anybody, and this is a book I especially recommend to folks who haven't read a lot of comics but want to give it a go.

Plus, the candy-coated art of Ryan Ottley clashes with the ultraviolence in a beautiful way.



"Oblivion Song"

This is the book that inspired this column. Because it's great.

A guy invents a thing that lets people travel to a parallel Earth, and this causes some HUGE problems. We've got some monsters, there's a science man in need of redemption, all your classic stuff.

The book does what Kirkman does best: you have a setup, it doesn't have to be all that complex or difficult to explain, and then dynamic, interesting characters take you down a twisty road.

It's like a great 12-episode miniseries that has the best of a Mike Flanagan terror mixed with an *Independence Day* level of action. Which absolutely should not work and absolutely does.



"Thief of Thieves"

Who doesn't love a heist?

How about a series of heists?

My guess is this is Kirkman's love letter to the Parker books, and it's a letter that'd score him at least one awkward date with those books, for sure.

Normally, I really don't care for James Bond-y, smarmy characters who have it all figured out, but *Thief of Thieves* pulls it off.



"Outcast"

For me, this one is a tad slow, but it's the kind of slow you get in movies from the 70s. Like *2001: A Space Odyssey*. That shit begins with 15 seconds of NOTHING!

Outcast isn't THAT slow, it's more like *The Exorcist* slow. Which fits because this starts out as your classic wave of demonic possessions rampaging through a small town kind of story.

It's kind of anti-modern in its pacing. The reader knows almost nothing beyond what the characters know, unlike *Midsommer* where you, the viewer, are aware you're watching an Ari Aster film and wait like 2 fucking hours for a cult to do some cult-y shit, which they then go ahead and do, surprising no one.

What a piece of shit.

Did I waste this space not reviewing *Outcast*, possibly maligning a movie you love? Maybe. But if that's your opinion, write your own column, dweeb. Start with one about how cathartic the experience of *Midsommer* was and how it was a great metaphor for something in Ari Aster's relationship with his mother. I predict your column will be a giant hit, what with being so original.*



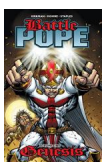
"The Astounding Wolf Man"

Werewolf superheroes, vampire mentors, and just when you think you've got a handle on this one, the rug gets pulled out from under you.

It's a great ride, and not since I read *Twilight: Eclipse* did I get so much vampire/werewolf action in one book.

Now, granted, *Eclipse* was only like a year before *The Astounding Wolf-Man*. Same with *Underworld: Evolution*.

What was in the water in the 2000s that had us all so invested in werewolves and vampires mixing it up?



"Battle Pope"

Battle Pope probably suffers a bit from being "edgy" when it came out like 25 years ago.

Look, don't read it to "discover" how offensive it is. If a reader "discovers" that *Battle Pope* is offensive, they haven't discovered anything. It's like this show I watched where these guys went in the jungle and got stung and bitten by various bugs and ranked the pain levels. Did these guys "discover" that bullet ant bites are painful? Of course not.

What they really discovered was their love for each other.

Wait, that didn't happen. That's what I kept hoping would happen. There had to be SOME narrative to that show, right?

Nope. Just episode after episode of dudes getting bitten by bugs and being surprised how much it hurts.

If you're offended by stuff that was edgy and maybe a little juvenile in 2000, skip this book. You won't enjoy it, there's no reason to march through something you won't like. Nobody is impressed.

If you tend to have fun with stuff like that? Give it a whirl.



"Die!Die!Die!"

If you were expecting a wild ride with massive gun and sword and knife fights and blood pouring out of every panel, well, you're in luck because your expectations align perfectly with the aptly titled *Die!Die!Die!*

The most relevant criticism that can be leveled against this book is that it's stupid.

The best praise that can be heaped on it is that it's stupid.

We're at the perfect intersection of Stupid Street and Awesome Avenue here.



"Marvel Zombies"

Kirkman has lots of other great books: *Fire Power*, *The Haunt*, *Tech Jacket*.

But I figured we could wrap around to *Marvel Zombies*.

Because when I picked this up, I was pre-rolling my eyes. Oh, *Walking Dead* guy is doing a zombie book with Spider-Man. DO YOU THINK THE REAL MONSTERS IS US!?!?!?

But ignore that dashing handsome but ignorant version of me, *Marvel Zombies* is a shitload of fun.

It's kind of a big joke while also being a book that totally works at the same time. I can't vouch for all the sequels, but the first volume is...come on, you've got one zombie pun in you, Pete...come on...

It's good.

What can I say, I'm no Robert Kirkman.

It's not a complete list of everything Kirkman has done. I mean, who has time to read *Jubilee*? I do, but I choose to use that time to complain about *Midsommer* online instead. You guys seen that shit? Man, let me tell you, what a lousy...

**I am so tempted to cut this, because I love Midsommar. —Editor*

Beowulf Is The Greatest Classic Book, And I Will Not Be Taking Any Questions At This Time



There's always someone out there trying to prove that one book or another is the all-time, stone-cold-est, greatest classic book of all time.

And they're all fools, because unlike me, they didn't pose *Beowulf*, which is absolutely, 100% the greatest classic book.

It's Simple

Monster kills people, badass from another land kills monster, monster's mom gets mad, badass kills mom, cut to many years later, elderly badass fights dragon, the end.

Beowulf doesn't saddle you with 50 characters to keep track of (*The Iliad*). It's way more about physical action we get to witness than it is about thoughts and feelings we have to be told about (*Pride and Prejudice*). Its straightforward nature makes people way less likely to concoct wild interpretations that have no real relevance to the story (Shakespeare). You don't need a complete history lesson of its era to understand it (Chaucer). And it's not *The Yellow Wallpaper*, so points there.

Reading *Beowulf* is kind of like watching a martial arts movie made in a language you don't speak: Even though you don't understand every word of dialog, and even though there's some cultural context that's lost on you, the ass-kicking action and clear through lines make it a great experience.

It's Complicated in the Right Way

I would venture there's one complex aspect of *Beowulf*: We see a warrior descend into old age. He's not able to do the things he could do before.

It's *The Dark Knight Returns* from before Frank Miller was a twinkle in a twinkle in a twinkle...

It's *Rocky Balboa* from many, many years before Stallone could get screwed out of his rightfully-deserved Oscars.

This one, simple, universal complication of aging and giving things up punches a reader in the gut. Because it's not a story we're used to, something where we watch the hero go from absolute legend to doddering fool.

**Calling a
"spear" a
"slaughter-
pole?" That's
fucking metal.**

There's Action

To put it in simple terms: STUFF HAPPENS.

Which doesn't seem like a big deal, but when we're talking classics, THINGS HAPPENING is a pretty big bonus.

Movie Effort, Classic Novel Credit

It'll probably cost you 3 hours to read *Beowulf*, give or take.

It's got to be one of the fastest, easiest to comprehend classic books.

And yet you get all the intellectual credit of reading any of those old-timey books with their antiquated language and boring social situations.

Kennings Are Dope And Underused

A kenning is kind of a compound of two words that's used in place of a single word, and they're all over the place in *Beowulf*.

For example, calling a "spear" a "slaughter-pole." That's fucking metal.

"Raven-harvest" instead of "corpses."

"Battle-sweat" instead of "blood."

Why aren't more people using this shit!?

It's Its Own Best Self

I don't hate the 2007 Zemeckis movie and its "Uncanny Valley As Aesthetic" vibe the way some

people do, but even still, you'd be hard pressed to find a stronger case for "The book was better."

The monsters work better as horrid, unknowable beasts, hidden in darkness. They're much scarier in your imagination, much more threatening before they're given shape on the screen.

And Beowulf works better in a book, a character who is larger than life in a non-literal way. When he's flesh and blood and basically looks like a Sean Bean mannequin, it kills this idea of an unreal dude with forearms like tree limbs, a torso like a tree trunk, and an ass like...like a beautiful ass that just formed on a tree somehow. Nature finds a way.

With Shakespeare, a performance is the best version. With lots of other classics, their movie adaptations are pretty damn good.

Beowulf's best version is the book.

It Meets Realistic Expectations for Readers

After working as a librarian for over a decade, I have a harsh truth for you.

We should stop trying to turn non-readers into readers.

We're always at this one, making a book-hater into a reader overnight. It's impossible.

Instead, the move is to connect them to single "Well, except for..." books:

"Books suck. Well, except for *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*."

"I hate reading. Well, except for Percy Jackson."

"Everything we read for school is stupid. Well, except *Long Way Down*."

"Books are boring. Well, except for Lee Child."

"Classics are trash. Well, except for *Beowulf*."

I think *Beowulf* can be that "Well, except for..." book for a lot of people.

Try it sometime. Instead of trying to change someone's entire mind about books and reading, just try and find one book that can fit through the holes in someone's armor.

If they hate mysteries, don't make them a mystery reader. Just find them a mystery that forces them to say, "Okay, that was pretty cool!"

Somebody who hates comics, hand them a comic book that is so good they say, "I still don't really like comics, but that one was worth it."

Classics are the toughest nut to crack. And Beowulf has the grip strength to do it, no problem.

And for the love of god, don't then fuck it up by trying to get them straight to Charles Dickens from

there. You've got a good thing going. Don't blow it.