

Who Wants to Be a Writer? [The Invented Part]

Following the long, more digressive section about Penelope and the Karmas, we return in this part to The Young Man and Young Woman who are staying outside of Penelope's house (paid for with the diamonds she found when fleeing the Karmas) and making a movie about The Writer. A much more concise, direct section, these 30 pages include a lot of hints about the overall plot of the novel (e.g., allusions what happens to The Writer, another reference to Ishmael Tantor, Penelope's destruction of the house) while continuing to dwell on the nature of being a writer.

Or, to be more specific, The Young Man's burning desire to be *known* as a writer.

The Young Man would sign in blood any microscopic-clause-crammed contract to be worthy of such questions, to be published, to be a “cult writer” or a “writer’s writer” or whatever. But, please, let it be in print, black on white, and let it have a beginning and an end, and later on let him see it on display for a while in bookstores where he’ll reposition it in a prime location and ask the employees—disguising his voice and hiding his face—what they think of it, whether or not they liked it, and walk out worrying that they might have recognized him and are laughing behind his back, but it doesn't matter, hopefully they recognized him and . . .

This is by no means uncommon (I suspect half of the attendees of the AWP Writers Conference would sign anything to be a published author), but will stand in stark contrast to The Writer's relationship to being a writer, which we'll get more info about in the next chapter. But in the meantime, I think it's interesting to see how The Young Man almost fetishizes the *idea* of being a writer, even to the point that, when he finds a video of The Writer praising him (The Young Man) as being one of his all-time favorite writers, The Young Man doesn't outwardly worry about how this is even possible (given that he hasn't written a book), but instead jumps immediately to the idea of how to get this out there into the world, so that everyone can hear The Writer praising him:

I have a lot to do, The Young Man says to himself. Suddenly, ecstatic, he has a map, instructions to follow, an objective in reach, a goal so near. The first thing—with a rapid dance of his fingers across a keypad—will be to upload that video from The Writer’s camera, launch it into the space of the Internet and wait for it to, inevitably, return to that planet of shipwrecked astronauts and spread like a virus and come back to him and to The Young Woman. And The Young Man can almost see The Young Woman’s surprise—her mouth half open, the circle of her lips letting out an: “Oh!”—when she sees and hears his name as one of The Writer’s favorites. Then her love, her adoration for him, will be inevitable, The Young Man says to himself. And then . . .

Again, not uncommon! Along with political tweetstorms and sharing *Game of Thrones* rumors, drawing attention to yourself and your accomplishments—so that friends and fans can heart and retweet—is one of the main reasons Twitter exists.

Even as someone who's not a writer, I can sympathize with this urge to be in print, to see your name on the front of an actual book, to be on a bookshelf, or, even better, to see someone enjoying your creation on the subway, but at the same time, the process of being a writer is all-consuming. It's not a job like any other, which The Young Man does acknowledge:

The Young Man thinks too much. The Young Man wishes he could think less. The Young Man wishes he’d wake up one day and discover that his thing was really the law or industrial design or odontology. Professions that you can disconnect from once you get home—professions that are left far and away, like certain animals mislabeled domestic—and that aren’t pulling at your sleeve all the time, calling your attention and obliging you to imagine what Julien Sorel or Christopher Teitjens or Jay Gatsby would have done (automatically recalling, another symptom of the same troubling affliction, that the real name of the latter was James Gatz) in this or that situation. Much safer and more relaxing

professions that—when people ask what you do—don't generate other questions, uncomfortable ones, like “What are your books about?” or “What's your name?” or “Are you well known?” or “Were any of your books made into a movie?” or ultimate classics with a complicit wink like “I've got a great story . . . want me to tell it so you can use it?” and “Being a writer you must meet a lot of interesting women, huh?”

It's worth noting that the next section of the book—the first in which we get to meet The Writer, fully grown up—is called “A Few Things You Happen to Think About When All You Want Is to Think About Nothing.” I don't want to spoil this section for anyone reading along with the podcast, but this part revolves around the inability of The Writer to shut down, to turn off his creative impulses.

Taken as a whole, *The Invented Part* is about the idea of being a writer, about creativity and where the “invented part” comes from. About the way in which writing, thinking about writing, being a writer, shapes a life, and about what might come next. For most people I know in the book industry—and I'm including publishers, booksellers, writers, translators, agents, etc., in this—books are more of a lifestyle than a profession. You rarely have the chance to turn off, to not be thinking about the book you're reading/about to read/just read/should read, or how that connects to everything else you're doing. It's like [this ad](#) for Major League Baseball: *If you're not writing a book, you're reading a book. Or you're thinking about writing, or reading about writing, or talking about writing, or writing about reading.*

Given the all-consuming nature of writing and books, why would anyone want to be a writer? And what does being a writer do to you?

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The flipside of being a writer is being a character. There's a great story by Felipe Alfau called “Identity” in which a writer's friend begs the writer to make him a character in a

future story. His life has been insignificant, people never pay attention to him—or even notice him, to be honest—he hasn't amounted to much or anything. BUT, if his friend puts him in a story, then he'll be immortalized! A story about the most insignificant person makes that person significant. (Isn't there a paradox about this? That the least interesting fact is interesting simply by being the *least*?)

But not everyone wants to become a character. It's risky for authors to put elements of their friends and lovers into print. See the relationship between the Murphys and F. Scott Fitzgerald post *Tender Is the Night*. Transforming experience into art is all fun and games until someone recognizes unflattering aspects of themselves in your prose.

And that's the last thing I want to include this week—Penelope's desire to get out from under her brother's shadow. When she appears at the end of this section, there are three things that define her: the need to not remember a particular thing to the point that she wants to forget that she's forgetting, her initial desire to be a character like Cathy Earnshaw, and her current desire to escape from her brother's influence and reputation.

Since I love how these bits are woven together, I'll end with this really long quote:

Sure, it's been years since she accepted the fact that she'd never be a combative Cathy Earnshaw. Not even a Jane Eyre. But with every bit of the little strength she has left she refuses to end up like an exotic and foreign Bertha Antoinetta Mason, mad and burning in the attic of Thornfield Hall, throwing herself from the flaming roof, her infidelities and alcoholism and hallucinations forgiven, chalked up to a genetic disorder. Bertha, who sacrifices herself to leave the path free and open for the marriage of the blind Edward Fairfax Rochester and the servant Jane Eyre. Penelope doesn't want to be the lame and boring device of an envious sister—because the merely very talented Charlotte was always intimidated by Emily's rare genius, and didn't hesitate to lovingly sabotage her memory, imposing the survivor's official version—that neatly ties up the plot. And everybody's happy.

But no—that'd be too easy.

To the contrary, the role that Penelope has fallen into is that of the lone survivor. Everything and everyone around her dead or disappeared. And the responsibility of telling the story is hers and hers alone. And, truthfully, she never wanted to be a writer. She just wanted to have and to live a good story. And now she's so tired. So tired that, if she had a rifle, she wouldn't hesitate to empty it into The Young Man's body. To fill him full of lead and defend herself by saying she'd thought he was a burglar. And end up exonerated or in jail. Either way. Anything so long as the small storyline of her life diverges from the atomic and particular saga of her brother, who absorbs everything and rewrites it. Including the only thing that, she assumed, was hers and hers alone and that she—not for revenge but out of desperation—tore out the way you tear the page from a book that, though you never open it, you'll always know is missing a page and that it's that page.