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a short story by
Linda McMullen

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Natasha Deen INTERVIEW

'A Tiger's Tale'

a short story by Patricia Farrell

Real Story Locales Without a Trip

We've asked bestselling authors

'Rock Star at La Scala'

a short story by
DC Diamondopoulos

Starting & Ending

a guide by
Jill Hedgecock

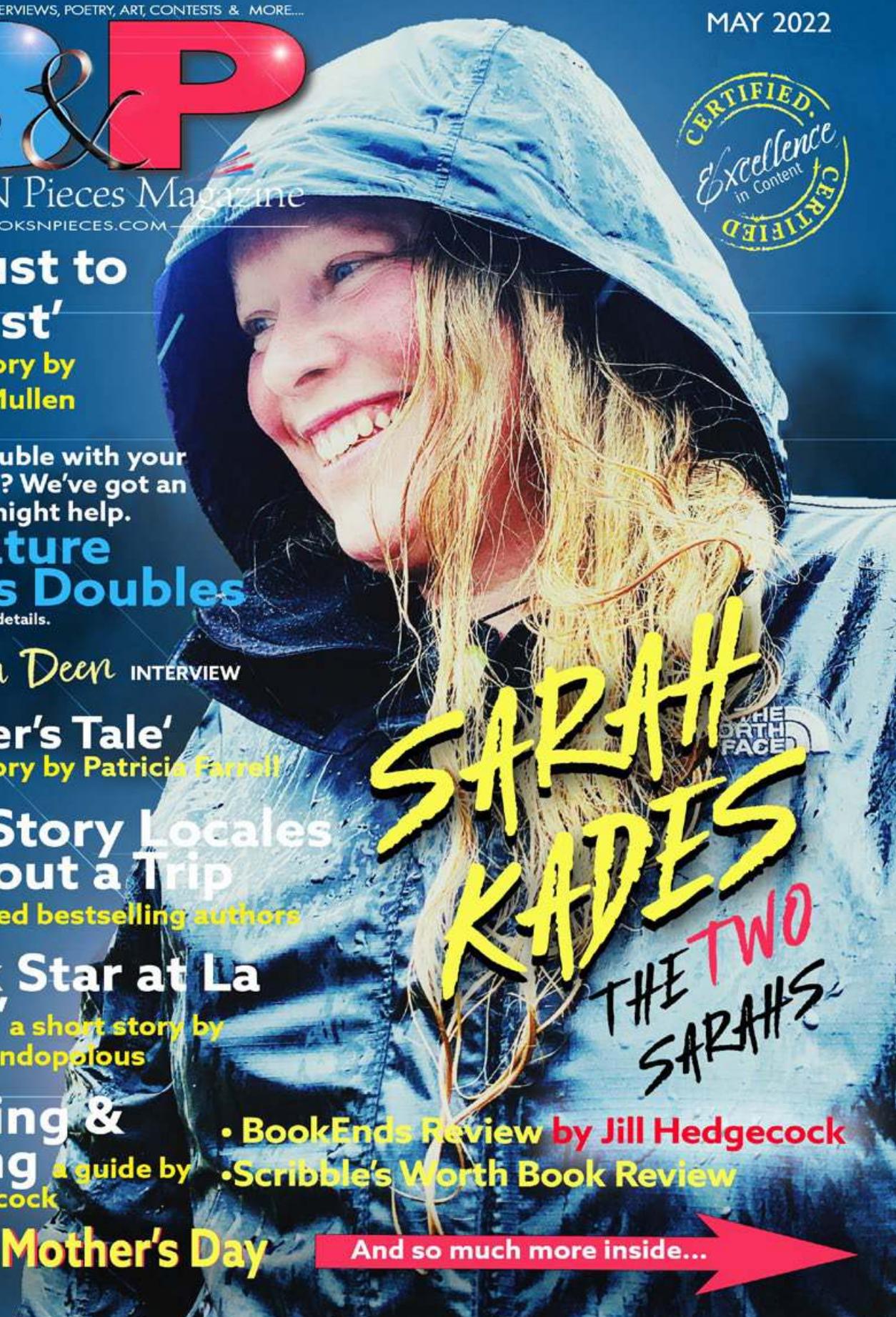
- BookEnds Review by **Jill Hedgecock**
- Scribble's Worth Book Review

Happy Mother's Day

And so much more inside...



SARAH KADES
THE TWO SARAHS



May 2022

“The bad news is time flies. The good news is you’re the pilot.” - Michael Altshuler

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Did You Know Rejections Are Good For You?

For the average writer, one of the things to get used to is the rejection process. There's no escaping it—everyone gets rejected, both in writing and in life. And no one says you have to like it.

That said, writers are a sensitive lot, people who spend a lot of time alone, churning emotional plots into cohesive scenes, an exhausting trial of writing, revising, editing, doubting, adjusting, correcting, self-flagellating, working up the courage to submit this testament to a period of time you will never recover, to a perfect stranger to judge its worthiness for their publication.

And you wait. And you wait—well you should be writing the next thing, not waiting—and then it comes to your inbox, something short, concise.

“Thank you for sending us your story. Unfortunately, it is not what we are looking for at this time.”

Perhaps it will help you to know the company you keep. Everyone suffers rejections. These have been gleaned from a variety of sources.

John Grisham's first novel was rejected 25 times.

Frank Herbert's 'Dune' was

rejected 20 times before being published.

Stephen King received dozens of rejections for 'Carrie' before it was published.

James Patterson had his first novel rejected 31 times.

William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies' was rejected 20 times.

Madeline L'Engle's 'A Wrinkle in Time' was rejected 26 times.

J.K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter' was rejected 12 times.

Joseph Heller's 'Catch-22' was rejected 22 times.

Agatha Christie was rejected for 5 years.

Louis L'Amour was rejected 200 times.

'The Da Vinci Code' was rejected as "badly written."

'Anne of Green Gables' was rejected by 5 publishers.

'The Tale of Peter Rabbit' by Beatrix Potter was rejected so many times she decided to self-publish it.

Margaret Mitchell's 'Gone With the Wind' was rejected 38 times.

Stephenie Meyers' 'Twilight' was rejected 14 times.

'The Princess Diaries' was rejected for 3 years.

'The Time Traveler's Wife' was rejected 25 times.

'Life of Pi' was rejected by 5 publishers.

'The Notebook' by Nicholas Sparks was rejected 24 times.

Alex Haley received 200 rejections for 'Roots'.

Natasha Deen over 400 rejections. *See our interview in this issue.*

I hope you have reached the same conclusion: You're not worth anything if you haven't experienced a rejection.

Also, just because a publisher rejects you does not mean your work is not worthy of publication.

A lesson to learn is to not be setback by the rejection. Have a list of markets and publishers you will submit to in the order of importance to you. As soon as the material is rejected, waste no time mourning your loss; send it to the next one on the list.

Having a thick skin and being determined are two traits that will help you get published, as well as marketing your book after it sells. But we'll talk about that another time.

Meantime, Spring is here, take a deep breath and get back to work.

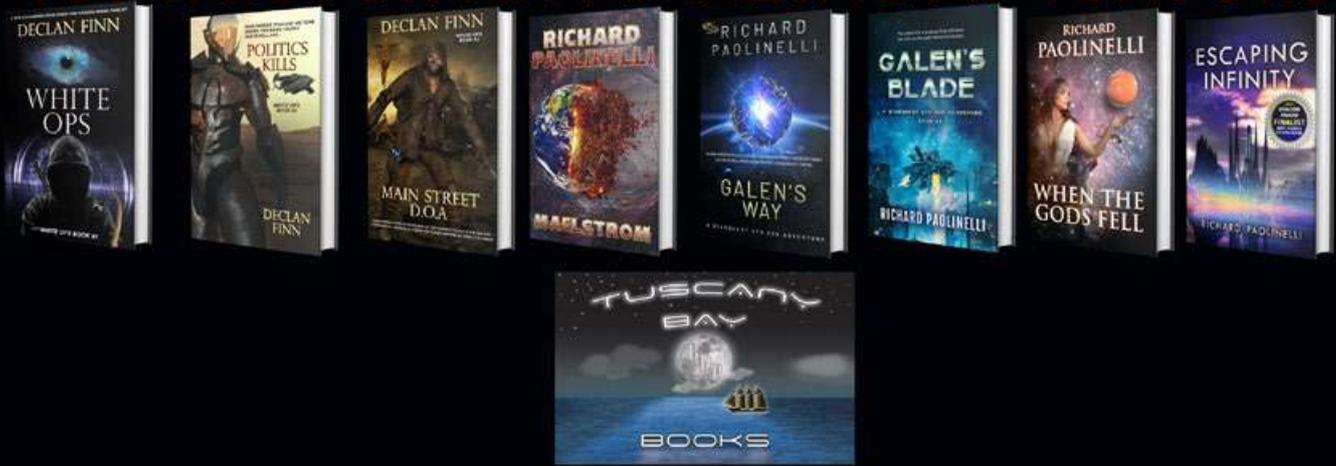
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Cheers!


William Gensburger

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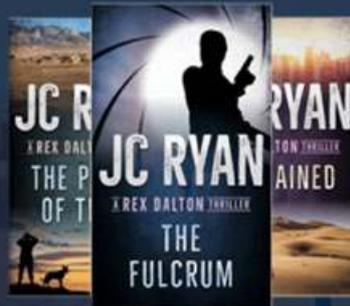
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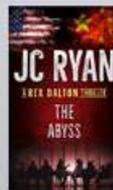
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AUGUST by Linda McMullen

WHEN YOU ARE UNWILLING TO COMMIT TO A LOVE YOU RUN A GREAT RISK.

AUGUST, 1994

Jane's horse soared as Lance's descended: she was perched atop a decorous gray with a blue saddle and a spray of pink roses cupping the horn, while he sat astride a fading black with a faintly ferocious expression. Her hair was loose and bounced against her narrow shoulder blades as the horse raced through the circling sunset. He almost changed his mind.

"Jane –"

He hadn't meant to sound like that – a puckish Errol Flynn alighting on Olivia de Havilland's windowsill – but there it was, hovering in the air between them.

She flashed a smile. "Do you remember the first time we came here?"

Lance fumbled for the obligatory yes. State Fair, seven years ago, when Jane was still in braces and he had just gotten his license. But their merry-go-round spun on.

"I remember," she said. She hummed the first few bars of "In the Air Tonight" – she was a little flat – but that Phil Collins moment was one for the ages:

The swirling fair lights –

The back of his neck sweating –

The Agnes in David-Copperfield-serenity in her eyes.

His gamboling-puppy clumsiness: "Do you want to... um...go steady?" Even at the time, the expression

was twenty-five years out of date; a fragment of his teenaged ego had fizzled, hissed, dissolved.

"I mean, do you want to – make it official?"

Worse.

Finally: "Will you be my

girlfriend?"

Jane, channeling her namesake Miss Austen, had said, archly, "I'd be honored."

Lance had been skinny and sardonic – but redeemed himself with a runner's physique and a lyrical tenor, and a passion for the English language that bordered on the obscene. He had gotten several invitations to successive Sadie Hawkins dances, and had

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played spin-the-bottle at a number of cast parties, without feeling any particularized desire. He auditioned for the fall musical his senior year (despite its being the new theatre director's ill-conceived musicalization of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), single and happily so. Then the choreographer's pragmatism introduced him to Jane: she, a diminutive sophomore, light enough for him to lift.

The carousel slowed, and Lance dissimulated. Maybe...no, he'd visualized their discussion ad nauseam, and whatever the details, it ended only one way.

Jane turned to him. "Maybe we can get something to eat? I'm sure there's something deep fried on a stick –"

"Ah...no." Robin Hood had gone, replaced by an unsettling combination of Willy Loman and Holden Caulfield. "Let's take a walk."

Jane's face altered.

He had seen the same expression the moment they had met – while auditioning for *A Midsummer Night's Swing*.

"This show going to be a travesty," Jane had said.

"I'm glad someone else said that out loud," Lance had answered.

She brightened slightly. "I'm Jane."

"Lance. From what I hear, Mr. Templeton wrote it himself. I'm

not clear how he thought he could make it work."

"It's a toothpaste-and-orange-juice scenario," Jane sighed.

"Honestly, what can we expect? Did he change the words to make it a *Midsummer's Night and Day*?"

"Maybe they'll have the rustics dancing to "In the Mood" right before the wedding," countered Lance.

Jane's mouth puckered. "Or maybe Mr. Templeton already lowered himself to writing *Boogie Woogie Bottom Boy*?"

Lance snorted before he could catch himself. "So why are you here?"

"Mom said I needed to find something non-academic to round out my future college applications." She looked up at him. "How about you?"

"I live for the applause."

"Oh!" she said, partly surprised, partly acerbic. "You like this."

"Well, not this," he said, gesturing to the ambient pandemonium. "But singing, followed by clapping – yeah."

She shrugged. "To each his own, I guess." She glanced toward Mrs. Lehmann, the choreographer, suddenly looming over them like Banquo's ghost. "I apologize in advance for what I'm about to do to your shoulder."

They passed the temporary radio

station – Live at the Lakefront! Broadcasting from State Fair, the banner read – and heard a trio of mezzo sopranos croon the station identification: "Double-You Mid-west Faaaaaaaaaalls..." Nearby, Salem's mayor, William "Wild Bill" Vitus, stood with his wife Roxanne, shaking hands with a group of impeccably groomed Young Republicans. They walked by booths selling fried cheese curds and souvenirs and sunglasses. Jane still had his copy of *Welcome to the Monkey House*, he remembered suddenly. And he had her copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. He didn't begrudge her a master's program abroad; he understood the time- and cost-savings, the desire for adventure... but...

She stopped in front of the Midwest Express booth, planted her feet. This was their third attempt, after all; they had played this scene before. "I love you," she snapped.

"Yes –" Wrong, entirely wrong. "Jane, I love you too. And that's why –"

"We've done distance before."

"We've never been separated by four thousand miles of ocean before." If only Richard Marx were here, he mused. But he wasn't sure he would be right here waiting for her. "I'm not equipped to...do this."

She tensed like an enraged lily – then forced herself to relax. “OK,” she said, with the righteous self-command of a wounded Regency heroine. Her eyes were the color of faded denim, but the midway lights transformed them into blazing aquamarine. “The course of true love never did run smooth,” she said; it was true, and a reproach.

He had no answer.

“So it goes,” she said. “I hope you...find some happiness, Lance,” she concluded, and walked away.

Lance remembered when he had asked Jane to Homecoming. His mother Elaine, failing to curb her enthusiasm, had said, “So...is Jane in the play with you?”

He had assented.

“What’s she like?”

“Though she be but little, she is fierce,” he had answered.

SEPTEMBER, 1994

Lance was fine.

He hadn’t tried to call Jane; he hadn’t gone to see her off at the airport; he hadn’t locked himself in his room or refused food. And he still felt no particular need to curse God, or fate, or British Airways, for taking her away from him. He slept normally, and, as ever, attended church sporadically. He auditioned for a

community theatre production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. He went to orientation and discovered that he had probably made a huge and life-shattering mistake in applying to a Ph.D. program, but that was neither here nor there. Admittedly, he immediately imagined calling Jane, and only later remembered that she was in England.

Had his Aunt Vivian been in town, he might have called her; she was the only relative he had no qualms about meeting in a bar. But she was in Vietnam, cruising through Ha Long Bay – her sixtieth birthday present to herself. A year earlier he might have called Greg, but his lovely wife Felicia had cured him of impromptu binge drinking, smoking, and seeing friends he had known before meeting her. So he lit a cigarette and sighed gracelessly. He’d spent bad evenings at Bar None before, and the scarlet sign said *Disco Night*. But there were also five dollar cocktails for the next hour.

Five Negronis later, he was in Funky Town, misappropriating steps from a long-ago production of *West Side Story*...dancing with a dazzling raven-haired blur who might have been named Jessica. She was pressed up against him in a way that was definitely anachronistic, but he didn’t have the heart, or sobriety, to tell her so.

“Do you want to go somewhere we can talk?” she shouted, over *The Hustle*.

“Lance,” he said, responding to the question he’d thought she’d ask. “Sorry. Yes.”

He oozed onto a barstool next to her. Her voice filled the musical gaps like a patchy FM station –

Y-M-C-A...

“...senior at UMWF...”

Y-M-C-A...

“...majoring in marketing, but I really want to model...”

He forced himself to focus on her red mouth.

Y-M-C-A...

He might have produced a sentence about his doctoral program; it was hard to say.

“Do you want to get coffee sometime?”

He was starting to feel funny, unsure if it was the noise or incipient nausea or something else. “I, ah, just got out of a relationship.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll take it easy on you.” She smiled. “At first.”

She wrote down her number on a napkin, pressed it into his hand.

OCTOBER, 1994

He pedaled furiously through the orange leaves, past miles of Salem’s neat little rectangles. He barely glanced at the imperial entrance to the Salem Heights (a

neighborhood so posh it merited a definite article) and finally reached the theatre. The Salem Playhouse was a 19th century structure erected by a rags-to-riches brewer seeking the validation of his new caste, now lovingly maintained through elite fundraisers.

“You’re late,” said Kent, as an opener. He sat in the front row, exhorting the cast to show him some emotion, and wearing a beret. He looked like a directorial parody.

“Sorry,” said Lance. He wasn’t. He had been attached to Jessica’s lips. And even reaching them had taken an undue amount of time. Lance marveled at how easy she was to talk to. She had been amusingly recounting her ambivalent congratulations to her friend/epic rival Blair, who had gotten an audition for a soap opera. Then she had finally touched her lips to his. Then he had decided to stop at home and pick up a windbreaker, at which point he found a letter from Jane in his mail slot, a pale blue envelope with unusually-sized stamps.

Kent gave a sigh for the ages and reminded Lance that Gary (the next constable in the line) was very capable of singing Lance’s part.

“It won’t happen again,” said Lance.

Kent put an elegant, dubious

hand to his temple.

Lance tore into his letter at the break.

*Dear Lance,
At the risk of sounding sappy,
thanks for your last letter. I didn’t
like the way we left things and I’m
glad that...anyway, I’ve decided I
prefer to be in touch.*

*Jessica sounds lovely.
Near-disaster on my first
assignment; the professor marked
my translations of ‘sécher un cours’
wrong because I put ‘playing hooky’
instead of ‘skiving off’. There’s
something to that old line about
being two peoples divided by a
common language. I made my case.
I gained one point.*

*I’ve made a friendly acquaintance
(saying ‘friend’ is a bridge too
far); her name is Anne, and she’s
Canadian; she’s here doing a history
degree. She is perfectly polite and
has no discernible interests; she also
called the Brontës “melodramatic”.
To which: Yes, that’s the point. It
beats dinner alone. Narrowly.*

*But off to London this weekend!
I’m staying in a hostel and I’m
going to try to get cheap tickets to
whichever earnest musical is on.
(Probably Cats. I don’t care.)*

*Take care,
Jane*

He decided his course reading could wait. The earnest grade-

grubbers and narcissistic poets that filled his courses would eviscerate Thornton Wilder’s semi-divine Peruvians with postmodern analyses – but their pretensions would also keep the professor from calling on him.

He knew how his next letter would start:

*Dear Jane,
The last scrap of joy left in the
Western canon was obliterated after
centuries of celebrated life. It was
murdered in cold blood last week,
when Trevor sighed that while
‘the intellectually stupefied’ would
take The Great Gatsby’s implied
capitalist critique at face value, an
objectivist read would indicate...*

[Then he quoted Ayn Rand, pretending to be some fountainhead of knowledge, and I fantasized about chucking copies of Atlas Shrugged at his Roman nose]...

“Lance,” Kent sniffed, and Lance rose, unready to bare his steel.

Her next letter mentioned a Chris about to conclude a Ph.D. in history.

Of course.

NOVEMBER, 1994

“You were awesome!” cried Jessica, flinging her arms around Lance. “You are so, so talented!”

“Yeah. Awesome,” smirked Aunt

Vivian. "Get a room."

"Lance! Beautiful!" His mother's friend Minnie Bauer swooped in out of nowhere like a nosy bat, kissed his cheek, and blew out the door.

Lance reddened, then straightened, like the police constable he had been portraying. Over Jessica's shoulder, he spotted a familiar face amidst the theatergoers. "Hey, Zita."

"Lance," she replied, behind her sharp bob, and walked on.

"Don't I know that girl?" asked Aunt Vivian.

"Yes...she's Jane's best fr—"

Jessica announced, "I'm starving. We're going to Alice's, right?"

"You two go on," said Aunt Vivian, bussing Lance's cheek and handing him a twenty. "I'll buy the first round. Have a good night."

Lance followed Jessica to her Saturn. The restaurant half was full, so they went to the bar. "I'm not drinking, actually," said Jessica, beaming. "I've got an interview tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Jennifer's Talent... They provide models for Kohl's."

"Hey, congratulations," Lance said. He ordered Sprecher's and Jessica ordered a glass of water; they toasted. "To Jessica Lazenby, future hawker of reasonably-priced fashions."

She half-smiled.

He saw it. "Seriously, that's great." He sipped the beer. "I'm just jealous that you're out there chasing your dreams when I don't even have the wherewithal to figure out what mine are."

"I thought you were going to be a professor."

"Yeah, so did I."

"OK, getting a little dark there," she smiled.

"Right. Sorry," he said, and he was rewarded with her kiss. Then her purse rang; Lance experienced surprise, every time, that she had a mobile phone. "Hello? Oh, hi, Blair. What? Really?" Her luscious mouth inverted itself. "Wow. Well, congratulations."

Lance could hear the joy and *schadenfreude* emanating from the other end of the line. "That's — really great, for you. Listen, gotta go — I'm on a date." She hung up.

"She got the part, huh?"

Jessica's dark brows swooped downward, hawks in pursuit of feckless prey. "Yep." The word dripped from her lips.

DECEMBER, 1994

"Hey," Lance said, relieved.

Aunt Vivian pulled him into a bear hug. "You smell sober," she said, suspiciously.

"Drinking and driving is still illegal, even in the upper Midwest." His parents' annual Christmas party was equal parts delight and

agony. He hoped Greg would turn up. He and Felicia had sent a Christmas card; Greg had included a hand-written message: Let's get together soon.

"You should have been here an hour ago, drunk and suspicious like the rest of us. Minnie just walked in on cousin Kendra with Bill Vitus."

Lance groaned.

"Exactly," said Aunt Vivian. "It should have been you."

"What? Why?"

"You know why."

Minnie Bauer was Twitter before there was Twitter.

Lance finally remembered to ask, "Does Roxanne know?"

"She was the first to hear." Lance groaned again. "Your mother's with her now; they're in the kitchen, and Bill's out by the fire pit with your father. I sent Kendra home. What are you drinking?"

"Negroni?"

"Are you that pretentious, or do you actually like them?"

"White Russian?"

"Can do." As she tipped in the kahlúa, she said, "There's your girl."

He was about to say, Jessica will be late, but he turned, and it was Jane — Jane in a surprisingly stylish Burgundy crushed-velvet dress, a choker...lipstick? But those were still Jane's eyes. Do we hug or not hug?

They didn't. "Hi, Lance."

"Hey, welcome back. I didn't know you were –"

"I finished...early."

There had been too many letters to need to catch up, and not enough for small talk.

"I haven't had a chance to say hi to your folks yet."

"Yeah, Mom's..." He gestured, temporarily grateful to Kendra.

They looked away. "I – this is for you," said Jane, proffering a package. "Don't open it now. It's nothing much."

"Thanks," he said. "I...sent your gift to England."

"Of course," she smiled.

There was another lull, then the front door slammed, then Whitesnake came on and it was as though they'd been bitten. "Do you...want to dance?" came out of his mouth, inexplicably.

"There you are!" cried Jessica, melting snow bedewing her hair. Her lips collided with Lance's cheek, then she turned, pointedly.

"Jessica, this is Jane."

"What a lovely dress," said Jane, as Jessica removed her parka to reveal a silvery satin slip-dress.

"Thanks," she said, handing her coat to Lance's father. "Oooh, this is a good one," she said, tugging Lance's hand, pulling him out onto the dance floor for "It Don't Mean a Thing if It Ain't Got That Swing".

Lance saw Jane when he turned

back; she gave him a quick nod, and fell into conversation with his father.

Lance and Jane exchanged a few cursory words when she came to say goodbye. She said, "You look happy," and he said, "I'm glad we got a chance to catch up," and he realized that it was a stupid thing to have said and her face looked shadowed, somehow.

The party broke up after two. Jessica stayed until the end, and helped Lance's parents collect red Solo cups while Vivian piled plates with one hand and poured a drink with the other. His parents nodded approvingly. Lance put her in a cab, then joined Vivian in a nightcap.

"What's with you?"

"Nothing. It's the most wonderful time of the year," said Lance.

He opened Jane's gift, laughed, shook his head, and set it on his bedside table. He spent Christmas Eve night tucked into flannel sheets in his childhood bedroom.

He awoke to baby Jacob caterwauling his Merry Christmases. Vivian appeared at his door in a bathrobe, with two steaming mugs.

"Irish coffee."

"God bless you."

They opened entertaining gifts for the baby and practical gifts

for everyone else, when Elaine, beaming, went into the kitchen and produced one last box, which lurched in her hands. She gave it to Lance, who handled it according to standard unexploded ordnance protocols.

"Mom, I –"

"They were going to put him down."

"But –"

"His name is Hamlet."

Lance pulled the cat onto his lap. Hamlet promptly snagged a claw in his corduroys, spun in several circles, settled on Lance's lap, and began to purr.

"You see," said Elaine.

Aunt Vivian topped off his coffee. "Didn't Jane get you something?"

"Oh, yeah. Fates Worse Than Death."

"What?" cried Elaine, scandalized.

"Mom, it's Vonnegut."

Aunt Vivian smirked.

JANUARY, 1995

After the holidays it was supposed to be back to school. And he just...couldn't. He spoke to his advisor about 'taking a break' and formally withdrew from his courses during the refund period. Then he returned to his apartment and dangled strings in front of his atavistic cat. He went out with Jessica as her schedule allowed, but

between school and her modeling jobs, time was hard to come by. He auditioned for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but failed to get a part.

Three weeks of ennui later, his mother called.

“I didn’t see you at church.”

“Hi, Mom. It’s good to talk to you too.”

“How are you paying your rent?”

“I can cover February.”

Her frustration with him seemed almost animate. “Do you remember Mr. Janus?”

“Vividly.” Mr. Janus had been best known for stepping outside at 4:20 p.m., often in mixed company (provided everyone was over eighteen and paid cash).

“Well, exactly. He resigned.”

“What finally got him?”

“All Minnie would say was that he was encouraged to leave after a karaoke incident.”

Maybe not all of the company was eighteen. He decided he didn’t want to know. “Great.”

“Lancelot.”

His mother’s Arthurian foibles had saddled him with one of the most freighted names in the entire English canon, although most days he was just glad that she hadn’t called him Ishmael. “Mom...”

“You’ve got to do something.”

Thoughts of Jessica. He was confident that was not what his mother meant. “OK, OK, I’ll

apply.”

“Great. You’ve got an interview at eleven tomorrow.”

“Mom.” His mother was on the school board. It was times like these when he wondered how a suburb of fifty thousand people could feel so small.

“You’ve still got to show up, answer their questions, and pretend to care.” Then she piped, “Good luck!” and hung up.

It would just be a few months, he thought. And Salem North couldn’t be that desperate.

At 12:07 p.m. the following day, Principal St. Clair called and asked, “So, when can you start?”

Aunt Vivian called later that evening. “Welcome back, Kotter.”

FEBRUARY, 1995

Lance took Jessica to Wild Lotus for Valentine’s Day – he paid, anyway; she drove. She wore a red dress the size of a candy wrapper and he refused to credit his eyes. She complimented the food, and the wine. Lance was gratified, because each of their entrées was the equivalent of one day of substitute teaching. Afterward, they went back to his apartment, snuggling in front of *When Harry Met Sally*. Jessica’s manicured fingers undid his shirt buttons. He pulled her into a kiss, and they were suddenly down to their

underwear; Sally declared that Harry was the angel of death; and Lance hesitated.

“Everything...OK?” she said, eyeing his suddenly immodest boxers, with a smile.

“Yes...”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not a v—”

“No.” His first engagements with his college girlfriend had been more enthusiastic than masterful; she had trained him, then dropped him for a slick-talking senior. “I just...we haven’t talked about this.”

“You do an awful lot of talking,” she said, pressing her mouth to his and pulling down his boxers. Her bra came off...and then her panties...and...

Afterward, she said, “We’ll have lots more opportunities,” and kissed him playfully on the nose. She couldn’t stay; she had an early class; Lance walked her to her car, and gave her a proper kiss goodnight.

He was considering whether to finish the movie when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Lance, it’s Jane.”

“Oh – hi. Wait – what time is it there?”

“It’s – I don’t know. Three? It doesn’t matter.”

“Wait – is everything OK?”

“Yeah, I – sorry. Yes. Everything’s

fine.” He heard a deep breath. “I... still care about you.”

Lance sat down.

“Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m – sorry...what’s brought this on?”

“Well, that gives me my answer,” she said, wryly.

“Jane, please, you know we...”

“I know. Chris...he’s...we’re getting a bit serious, but –”

“Oh my God, you slept with him.”

“No! I – it came up. But no.”

“He proposed?”

“No,” she said, but slowly.

“All but?”

“Lance – I’d rather –”

In a telescoping moment he saw their future, bright and clear: complementary sarcasm, a little bungalow in Salem, Hamlet curled up on Jane’s lap, and the vision seesawed before him...

A beat.

“He sounds like a great guy,” said Lance.

“He is,” said Jane, and her tone oddly wistful. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you. I – thanks – bye.”

MARCH, 1995

“The Great Gatsby,” began Lance. “Greatest American novel, or seriously overrated?”

“It’s the best,” said Jodie.

“Who gives a crap?” said Shawn.

“Is there a third option?” asked Megan.

Lance took a deep breath.

He retreated to the teachers’ lounge for a cup of coffee. He contemplated whether the sludge would be better or worse after the microwave, when Mr. Kowalski slammed a copy of ‘Wuthering Heights’ down on the table.

“I didn’t think it was that bad,” said Lance. “Also, you could just stop reading it.”

“It’s not mine,” he growled. “I confiscated it.”

“I’m sorry,” said Lance, with the utmost politeness, “but are you saying you took it away from someone?”

“Melanie Martin. She was reading it under her desk.”

“Considering the norm around here, shouldn’t we be celebrating?”

Mr. Kowalski glared at him and stalked out.

Lance pocketed the book and went to the main office. He asked Mrs. O’Brien, Principal St. Clair’s secretary, for the location of Melanie’s locker, and a sticky note.

He left the book, and a message:

Jane Eyre is still better, but I hope you enjoy it. A friend.

Principal St. Clair approached him toward the end of the month. “I hear things are going well.”

“I started that rumor,” said Lance.

The principal smiled indulgently. “So well, that I’d like to keep you

on.”

“I’m not certified –” began Lance.

“I’ve spoken with the superintendent. He said that if you start taking classes, he’ll...overlook it.”

Lance, who regarded his employment as an entertaining but poorly paying accident, said, “I’ll think about it.”

“Do. Let me know in the next week or so.” He smiled again. “We need help for summer school, too.”

“Thanks,” said Lance.

After school he pedaled to the Salem Playhouse and had what he considered a “competent” audition for You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown, then went home in search of something to eat. The phone was ringing as he unlocked the door.

“Lance!” cried Jessica.

“What?”

“I’m late!”

APRIL, 1995

Dr. Porter confirmed what they already knew, what they had spent several days not discussing. Jessica’s scarlet lips were white. She only nodded at Dr. Porter, who looked at Lance askance, then exited. When he had gone, Jessica lit into Lance.

“Stupid!” she exclaimed, burst into tears, and buried her face in his shoulder.

Lance was too stupefied to feel much beyond relief that she couldn't see his face. But he held her tight, and patted her back. And some long-dormant strain in him awoke. "I'll marry you," he said.

She lifted her exquisite, tear-streaked face. "Are you crazy? You don't even have a job!"

He chose kindness. "Principal St. Clair offered me a permanent position."

"You didn't even say!"

"I – right. Sorry."

"And what kind of proposal is that? Some cheap offer at the doctor's office? You didn't even say you loved me!"

There was a knock, and the nurse poked her head in. "I'm so sorry, but we really do need the room."

They walked out to the car; Jessica said, "I don't want to talk about any of that right now."

They went to MacArthur Park, where the shy buds were just appearing, and sat on a damp bench. Jessica said, "I can't model if I'm going to get fat."

"Does that mean you don't want to keep it?" Lance asked quietly.

"No! I'm just – ugh!" Jessica cried. "How can you say a thing like that?"

"Well, that wouldn't be my preference, but it's not my body, either," said Lance.

"You are so insensitive."

That stung. "I'm trying to help. I want to know what you want."

"I want this all to be a bad dream," she said, her lower lip sticking out.

"OK," he said, and put an arm around her. She nestled against him, and they watched a sparrow hopping across the ground.

The next morning, Lance accepted the position, and enrolled in a teaching certification course.

On Sunday, he went to St. Jude's. He didn't sit in the pew that he and Jane used to use.

"Lance!" exclaimed Father Lawrence, at the coffee-and-doughnuts fellowship after mass. "What a pleasure!"

"Is that a nice way of saying 'What a surprise?'" asked Lance. The priest was one of the few people Lance admitted to his private club of sensitive souls. After converting to Catholicism, Father Lawrence had shed his previous identity and had chosen the name of the saint who (legend said) had died laughing.

"I make it a point to not chide people when they've come back," said Father Lawrence. "Just enjoying the service, or is something on your mind?"

"Do you have a few minutes?" Lance mumbled. "I don't want to bother you, if you're busy."

"Let's step into my office," Father

Lawrence said.

Lance told him everything.

Father Lawrence, to Lance's relief, did not roll his eyes, sigh, or shake his head. But –

"You're disappointed in me," said Lance.

"I think you're disappointed in you."

"Well, that doesn't matter," he said. "I've made my bed, and I'm going to...make the best of it." He attempted a smile. "For the little one's sake."

Father Lawrence offered his hand, and Lance took it.

On Monday, Kent called. "Congratulations, Linus!"

MAY, 1995

Jessica's commencement took place on a fine clear Saturday; her father presented her with a brand-new Nokia cell phone ("Just released last month, princess") and her mother gave her a pair of diamond earrings. Lance gave her a soft wrap cardigan that tied around the waist. She thanked him, but her eyes were hard.

"Let's just get through graduation and then we'll deal with our parents," she said.

Lance went to lunch with Jessica's parents (WASP-y but nice, he thought) and they discussed her upcoming temp job in marketing in downtown Midwest Falls, and

Lance's plan to teach remedial freshman English. Then they dropped him off at rehearsal. He knew this would be his last production for some time. He wondered if any of the mall stores were hiring and if he'd even be able to find something, considering that every teen in Salem would also be looking for a summer job.

He sang along with Gary (playing Charlie Brown) and Jennifer (a very convincing Lucy) and the rest, but he wished he could bury his face in his – Linus's – blanket.

"Lance!" cried Kent. "Again, the song is called 'Happiness,' not 'Misery.' Are we clear?"

"I'm sorry," said Lance.
"Are you?" replied Kent, acidly.

He and Jessica didn't go out to dinner – "We've got to start saving," Lance explained, when Jessica frowned – but he had gotten pirogies from the Polish market downtown. Jessica looked revolted. "The smell," she said. "I can't keep anything down right now."

"Sorry," said Lance, and quickly stowed them in the fridge.

They were watching Seinfeld season six finale, and saw Elaine wandering around in the rain. Lance was wondering whether the writers had ever read Cat's Cradle

when Jessica turned to him and said, "I don't feel right."

Lance hadn't driven in years, but he did well enough as he sped them toward the hospital. They sat in the waiting room, speaking little. There had been an unsuccessful kegger at Waldorf College, resulting in a dozen cases of severe alcohol poisoning; Lance heard distinctly, "Code Blue". After what seemed like hours they were finally admitted. Jessica looked small in the bed, and Lance clasped her hand in his.

The doctor came in and examined her – and, very correctly, expressed his condolences.

The image shows the book cover for 'Texas Dead' by William Gensburger. The cover features a red and white color scheme with a yellow 'POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS' tape at the bottom. Text on the cover includes: 'MAXIE'S A CLASSY DETECTIVE THAT WILL KEEP YOU BEGGING FOR MORE!', 'WILLIAM GENSBURGER', 'AN EPIC CRIME NOVEL FILLED WITH SUSPENSE AND MURDER AND A TENDER, UNEXPECTED LOVE STORY' ~ ONLINE BOOK CLUB, 'TEXAS DEAD', 'A MACKENZIE MICHAELS MYSTERY Book One', and 'POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS'. To the right of the cover is promotional text: 'CINEMATIC' (5 stars) ~ALEX LEWCZUK, SIREN RADIO (UK); 'I WAS TOTALLY HOOKED' ~JANE BLOMSTRAND, AUTHOR 'MEET THE PRINCIPAL'; 'FAST-PACED AND WELL CONDENSED' ~GRADY HARP, AMAZON TOP 100 REVIEWER; and a yellow starburst containing 'A FUNNY, SHOCKING, AND ENGAGING THRILLER' ~ANTHONY AVINA, TOP BLOGGER & REVIEWER. The website 'WWW.MISTERWRITER.COM' is also listed.

Jessica turned toward the wall.
Lance said a prayer.

JUNE, 1995

Lance felt tears curling in his eyes during the final song of the last Sunday matinée: a profound meditation on the nature of joy, masquerading as a dialogue among six-year-olds. He clutched his blanket and sang out.

Afterward he crept into Kent's office and dialed Jessica. "Hey, do you want to come over? Or do you want me to come over?"

"Sure," she said, her voice steadier than it had been.

"I'll come to you," he said.

He biked to the grocery store and bought a bouquet before going to Jessica's apartment. She accepted the flowers, and they curled up on the sofa. Lance didn't really want to watch *Ghost*, but it was her turn to pick. He helped himself to a Coke from her fridge as she rewound the tape.

"Mom's invited us around for a family dinner next Saturday," he said. "Well, you know, Dad too. But really Mom."

"Yeah, that sounds nice," she said.

"So...did you have a good day?"

"Yeah," she said, sitting up; Lance saw a healthy rose creeping into her cheeks. "Jennifer's Talent called again – they've got another job for me."

"That's great!"

"And they're killing off Blair's character on *Days*."

Lance led Jessica through the house and into the back yard; it was unseasonably warm. Elaine greeted the young people with kiwi-strawberry margaritas. Minnie pulled them both into a too-close hug, nearly spilling both the drinks. "So glad to see you both. You keep me young!"

Lance spotted his father over Minnie's shoulder. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey, Lance." Joseph Rhodes extracted his son from Minnie's grasp and handed him a lighter.

"I'm trying to quit again," said Lance. "But I appreciate the thought."

"Welcome back to our Crazy for the Eighties summer countdown," said a strangely familiar voice on the radio. "After a quick break, we'll be back with Taco's 'Puttin' on the Ritz.'" Then, as always, the old standby: Double-You Mid-west Faaaaaaaaalls...

"Mom," said Lance, oddly melancholy, "that's wasn't Greg... was it?"

"It sure sounded like him," said Elaine. "When was the last time you saw him?" The doorbell rang. "That'll be – Vivian!" she called. "Just come on through the – that's it," she resumed, in a normal tone.

Vivian, after fending off Elaine

and Minnie, approached Lance, gave him a meaningful look, and silently touched her glass to his.

Arthur pulled gorgeous kebabs off the grill. They sat down at a groaning folding table set up specially for the occasion. "Souvlaki," announced Elaine proudly. "The Vituses just got back from a trip to Greece for their twenty-fifth. Roxanne was telling me –"

"No pita bread for me," Minnie put in. "I'm trying out this great thing – have you heard of The Zone Diet? I bought the book in hardcover – so worth it. It's –"

Vivian leaned over to Lance. "Having a good time?"

"This is exactly how I wanted to spend my life," said Lance, overhearing Jessica and Minnie exchanging views on carbs. "But family first, right?"

"Any more margaritas?" asked Vivian.

"Oh darn! We're out," said Elaine. "But I've got a bottle of wine chilling. Lance, could you please go grab it and bring back some glasses? Oh, and the bottle opener. I probably set it down on the desk when I was on the phone with Roxanne."

He did as his mother asked, not undelighted to temporarily escape the loving embrace of family and friends. He reached for the bottle opener, which lay atop a pale blue

envelope, and his stomach turned over before he could think why. And then he realized the writing was Jane's. The envelope was open. He deposited the sweating bottle and the clanking glasses on the desk and pulled out the card.

*Together with their parents
Mary Jane Klein
and Christopher John Samson
Request the pleasure of your
company at the celebration of
their union, Saturday, August 26,
1995, at ten o'clock in the morning,
MacArthur Park, northwest corner*

He stuffed it back into the envelope

"Lance, honey, is everything OK? Did you find the opener?"

"I found it, Mom."

He found his own envelope when he returned to his apartment and belatedly checked his mailbox.

JULY, 1995

The phone rang.

"Lance?"

"Jane?"

"Yeah, hi. I've been meaning to call you since I got back, it's just been – how are you?"

They exchanged a few polite volleys, then Lance said, "I got the invitation."

"That's great. I hope you'll be able to make it."

"I plan to," he said.

"That's great. Hey, I was wondering if you wanted to get together. I was planning to go see Clueless and Chris said he wasn't interested...and I thought you might be."

"Yeah...I am, actually. I had some tentative plans with Jessica, so let me call her first, and I'll give you a call back."

"Great."

Jessica picked up on the fourth ring.

After he had explained, she said, "I told you that Blair and I were going out tonight."

"So do you mind if I go see Clueless with Jane?"

"You're not still hung up on her, are you?"

"No--we're old friends. And it's a running joke—I introduced her to Vonnegut, and then she introduced me to –"

"Don't care," Jessica said.

"Right. Have a good time with Blair."

Lance biked and Jane caught the bus from her parents' house; they met up in front of the mall's new sixteen-screen multiplex. He spotted her from a distance, standing in front of the theatre, looking just as she ever had. No, that wasn't right: she looked... more like Agnes.

Why did I think that? It doesn't

even make any sense.

"Lance!" she cried, having spotted him; she hugged him with the friendly enthusiasm that an engagement permitted. He had not been prepared for it.

They stood in line for tickets.

"So," Jane began, "how does one inculcate a love for *The Catcher in the Rye* in hormonal kids who would rather be outside?"

"Most people just ask how work's going," said Lance. "But the real answer is that I'm hoping this summer is taking years off my time in purgatory."

"I imagine you must take some comfort in the irony of teaching an angsty American coming-of-age novel to indifferent teenagers."

He turned to her rather quickly.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm...not offended," said Lance. He wasn't. Happily he was spared the trouble of saying anything further, because they had reached the front of the ticket line.

Afterward they stood outside the theatre, comparing the amusingly modernized Emma with the horrible Shakespearean update Mr. Templeton had created all those years ago. Then Lance glanced down at his shoes, and Jane looked away.

"Well," said Jane, "it's been great to see you again."

"You too," said Lance. A pause.

“Do you want –”

“I, ah, should get going,” she said. “Chris and I are supposed to meet up with Zita and Blaise for drinks.”

“Oh. OK,” said Lance.

He called Jessica when he got home. She and Blair had apparently gotten into a spectacular fight and Jessica had left her at the restaurant.

“Weren’t you driving?”

“Yes. But she also said she’d rather claw her eyes out than go anywhere with me, so it’s probably OK.” She sighed. “How was the movie?”

“It was a really good adaptation. And funny,” he said. “Have you read Emma?”

“No. Why?”

AUGUST, 1995

Lance put on a grey suit and a blue shirt and tie, and combed his hair. It was cloudy but bright, warm but not hot; uncertain weather for a late August afternoon. He had gotten Jane and Chris a toaster because it wouldn’t be difficult to wrap. He set it in the backseat of the new-to-him, but very used, Honda Accord, and drove to Jessica’s house. She wasn’t ready when he arrived; he waited. She made her regal descent in a bright orange dress and frowned when she saw him. “We clash.”

“I can stop home and change.”

“There isn’t time.”

He glanced at his watch. That was true enough. They got into the car; her lips were arranged in a prize pout. He set the invitation on the dashboard, switched on the radio. WMWF was conducting its annual summer ritual of giving fresh life to eighties power ballads. They held out for a hero, couldn’t fight that feeling anymore, and learned that every rose had its thorn – Jessica leaned over and snapped, “How can you listen to this schmaltz?” Then the familiar sound of Phil Collins’ piano jingled through the speakers and she huffed against her seat. “Case in point.”

Lance was familiar with the song—he’d rented ‘Against All Odds’ from Blockbuster because he had seen all the Dashiell Hammett-inspired titles and had heard the film described as ‘neo-noir’. But he’d never caught the words before. He turned them over, knowing they were overwrought, sensibility without the sense – but suddenly he understood that Jane coming back to him was....

The back of his neck was sweating, and as he scrambled to collect the broken pieces and reassemble them, he miscalculated, and touched the bumper of a parked Ford Taurus.

“What is wrong with you?” cried

Jessica.

“That’s exactly the question,” said Lance.

“OK, I wasn’t looking for some pseudo-intellectual bullshit answer.”

“I apologize for interrupting, but I’ve realized that we’re not right for each other.”

Jessica’s face contorted with fury. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I’m a slow learner.”

“You ?” The chorus swelled, and she stopped, assembled the disparate pieces of the scene to find the one answer that created a complete picture. Then she laughed. “Of course.”

“I’d better leave a note,” said Lance, hurrying out of the car. He penned a brief apology and explanation for the owner of the car, including his address and phone number and insurance information, and tucked it beneath the windshield wiper – then felt the car surging toward him. He leapt onto the grass – and saw Jessica’s face behind the wheel of his car, reversing, then lurching inevitably forward.

“What the hell?” he screamed, as his car rammed the Taurus a third time, crumpling the left rear wheel well. She had locked the doors. He could only watch as she extracted her mobile phone from her purse. “Hello? Is this the police?” she smiled. “I’m calling to report –”

He wondered briefly if fleeing the scene of an accident was a misdemeanor or a felony, and decided it didn't matter. The park



wasn't much more than a mile and a half away. And he would turn himself in afterward.

He turned away, and started running.

He stripped off his jacket off by the end of the block; his dress shoes were lacerating his feet by the second stop sign, and he suddenly remembered that he hadn't run since college – but on he went.

MacArthur Park had—deliberately, obstreperously—quadrupled in size since his last visit. And of course the gazebo was in the far corner. His dress shirt clung to him in odd patches. He felt a blister burst—his lungs burned—and there, there she was...

...recessing down the brief aisle between the rented folding chairs, hand-in-hand with her exuberant new husband.

"Lance?" she inquired; he was doubled over, despairing of his ability to stand. "Are you – all right?"

"I..." Wrong, entirely wrong.

He straightened, painfully. "Congratulations, Jane."

Those Agnes eyes again. "I want to hear the full story sometime," she said, and pressed his hand.

Then the twittering cloud enveloped her, 'Oh Jane, best wishes, you make such a beautiful bride, I'm so happy for you.'

When he was out of sight, he eased off his now-fragrant shoes, and hobbled back to his car, suddenly aware of the rest of his life yawning ahead. His car, its fender a drooping mustache, was on the Tonka-yellow tow truck. Jessica was talking with the officer, but broke off mid-sentence when she spotted him.

The officer turned to Lance. "You'd better have a good story."

Lance waived his right to remain silent.

"Tough break. But I'm going to have to take you in anyway," the officer said, pulling out a pair of handcuffs.

"I know. I'm ready." •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda McMullen is a wife, mother, daughter, diplomat, and homesick Wisconsinite. Her short stories and the occasional poem have appeared in over one hundred fifty literary magazines.

Find her at:

@LindaCMcMullen - Twitter
@lindacmcmullen81 - instagram
Linda Silverman McMullen | Facebook

**HAPPY
MOTHER'S
DAY**

May 8, 2022

*Wishing all the mothers of
our writers and readers a
very special day!*



NOTE: ALL BOOK COVERS ARE HYPERLINKED. CLICK THEM!



Sarah Kades writes action adventure romantic eco-thrillers. Her alternate pen name, Sarah Graham writes non-fiction largely.

For twenty years her day job had been as an archaeologist and Indigenous Knowledge studies and engagement facilitator until 2020 when she received her first literary arts grant and became a two-time Energy Futures Lab Banff Summit storyteller. In 2019, she was presented at the British Society of Criminology conference on the effectiveness of using arts-based

approaches.

Q: Why split your name into two pen names? Would audiences not accept you writing fiction and non-fiction? And is that a decision you are pleased with or wish you had not done?

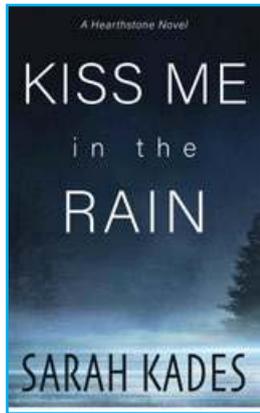
I was strongly encouraged by industry reps to keep my fiction and nonfiction separate—pen names, websites, social media, everything—to maintain reader expectations. I'm cool with pen

names for different fiction and nonfiction, though I now have a single website and my social media covers both so I can focus my time on writing.

Q: You were an archaeologist by day. Could you share some of the archaeology activities you do and how that ties into your writing. What drew you to that profession?

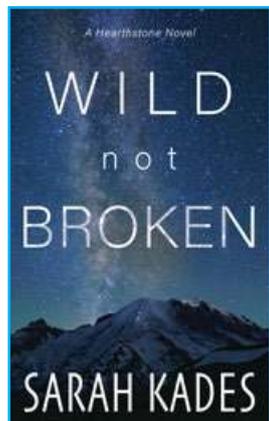
My career as an archaeologist has given me a lot of adventures,

and maybe a few near misses, over two decades of working outside, in a lot of different landscapes, with a lot of different people. The land, and our stories, matters. Writing gives me a chance to share that with readers. That geography professor in Wisconsin that first suggested I take archaeology field schooling in Canada, turned out to be right. And the rest is history.



Q: What do you consider is the key to a great story and how do you find your way there?

For me, the key to a great story is unpacking fascinating characters—what makes them tick, what are their motivations, what are their fears, what is happening that cracks the shell(s) they’ve build around themselves?



I feel all of us, at some level, have a shell or two that could use some cracking. My characters seem to know this,

because they lead me on a merry adventure as they lay out their stories and character arcs. I also let myself feel when I’m writing. If I’m feeling it, chances are the reader will, too.

Q: What is an eco-thriller?

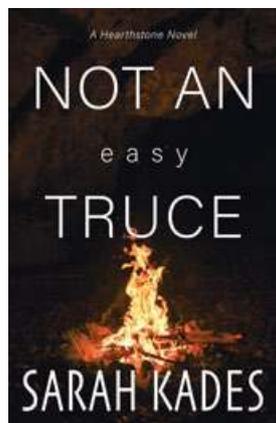
An eco-thriller is a novel that is a thriller with strong environmental themes. Much of the eco-fiction I’ve heard about has been described as apocalyptic (i.e. we’re all going to die on the planet we’ve made uninhabitable).

My jam leans to auspicious (i.e. we collectively turned the climate crisis around and live harmoniously with this incredible planet).

Q: In 2020 you were the Literary Arts Grant two-time Energy Futures Lab Banff Summit Storyteller. That’s quite a mouthful. Could you share what that was about and why it was important to you?

I received a Calgary Arts Development Literary Arts grant to write *Not an Easy Truce*—I can’t overstate how life-changing

that community support was. A completely different—but also awesome experience was being a two-time Energy Futures Lab Banff Summit Storyteller where I was commissioned to write scenario-specific short stories to help Canadians conceptualize different energy futures. The arts can help make information accessible, and get us into a head space that facilitates being able to conceptualize new ideas. Both are crucial to moving forward. *Yay art!*



Q: You’ve also presented at the British Society of Criminology Conference on the effectiveness of art-based approaches to solving crimes. Could you elaborate on that? Crime thrillers seem to be as popular as ever.

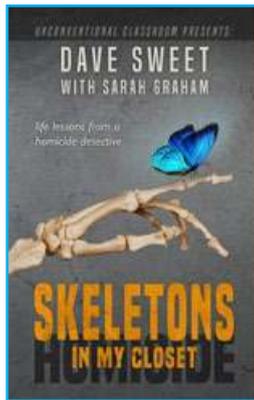
I presented at the British Society of Criminology conference on the effectiveness of using arts-based approaches to bridge the gap between the public and the police. For some readers, the narrative nonfiction book I co-wrote with an active duty homicide detective has helped bridge that gap.

I love the literary arts as an effective and engaging medium to gently open dialogues, unpack different perspectives, and help make information more accessible.

And by the way, Lincoln, England was awesome!

Q: What are your long term plans? What would you like to do that has not happened to date?

I was recently asked to write a TV pilot. Screenwriting has been on my radar for awhile, but I always figured I would explore that



medium later. Later might be sooner than I expected.

You can find Sarah at the following social media links:

Web: sarahkadesgraham.com
•[Instagram.com/sarahkadesgraham](https://www.instagram.com/sarahkadesgraham)
•[Linkedin.com/in/sarah-graham-206799171/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/sarah-graham-206799171/)
•[Goodreads.com/author/show/3080646.Sarah_Kades](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/3080646.Sarah_Kades)

SARAH KADES' CHOCOLATE AVOCADO MOUSSE

This is a super chill recipe. Texture and sweetness is super flexible. It is a "raw foods" recipe.

4-5 Avocados (chunked)
2 C Medjool Dates (pitted, chopped and soak in water)
1/2 C Water
1/4 C Cocoa powder
2 T Maple syrup or Agave

nectar

Pit, chop and soak dates for ~30 mins, then blend in a food processor.

Add avocado chunks. Blend, adding water and scraping sides of processor as needed.

Add cocoa powder and maple syrup (+/- to taste).

[If there is any left, refrigerate in an airtight container. I am not sure how long it keeps, we've never had any left.]



Calendar of Events

MAY 2022

•**Idaho Writers Conference 2022** Fri, May 20, 8:00 AM – Sat, May 21, 5:30 PM <http://IdahoWritersGuild.com>

JUNE 2022

•**New York Pitch Conference:**

June 2 - 5, 2022 (Zoom Online)

June 16 - 19, 2022 (Live in NYC)

New York Pitch Conference Professionals are Looking for Marketable Commercial and Literary Stories and Novels in the Genre Categories of Serious and Light Women's Fiction, Suspense Women's Fiction, Mystery, Crime, Thrillers, Futuristic Thrillers, YA and Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy, Horror, Suspense, Historical, Narrative Non-Fiction, General Fiction, and Upmarket. Select Professionals are Also Scouting for Potential TV and Film projects. <https://newyorkpitchconference.com/>

•**National Writing Day 2022** June 23

<https://literacytrust.org.uk/about-us/national-writing-day/>

•**ALA-The American Library Association Annual Conference & Exhibition:** June 23–28, 2022 <https://2022.alaannual.org>

JULY 2022

•**Sun Valley Writer's Conference** July 16-July 18.

<https://svwc.com>

•**18th annual San Francisco Writers Conference:** July 21–24, 2022 <https://www.sfwriters.org/2022-conference/>

•**Writer's Digest Annual Conference:** July 28-31, 2022

<https://writersdigestconference.com>

SEPTEMBER 2022

•**The Library of Congress National Book Festival,** Washington D.C. September 3–4, 2022 <https://www.loc.gov/events/2021-national-book-festival/festival-information/>

If you have calendar events you would like to submit, please email them to william@booksnpieces.com by the 15th of the month preceding the event.

SHORT STORY

ROCK STAR AT LA SCALA

by DC Diamondopolous

AN AGING ROCK LEGEND FLAMBOYANTLY ENDS HER CAREER AT A GRAND OPERA HOUSE.

Paparazzi elbowed their way past CNN talking heads as media from around the world made camp on the plaza. Fans, young and old, T-shirt vendors, street singers, mime artists, and pickpockets crowded La Scala Square, and the Piazza del Duomo. Helicopters circled, the chop-chop mixed with the thumping rock of the jumbo-screen speakers mounted in the courtyard. Pigeons lined the roof of the Galleria. Others landed on statues and lampposts.

By late afternoon, as a cool summer mist shrouded the square, all of Milan had turned out to witness the unthinkable. Opera aficionados called it sacrilegious. For the first time since the house opened in 1778, a rock artist was to perform on the hallowed stage of La Scala.

Tonight's performance would be my greatest moment, a rock show for the ages and a disappearing act. My life as Bel Shannon would end. A new journey awaited me. It would begin with a red-eye flight

out of Rome.

Jasper Owen, my manager, sat beside me in the limousine. Across the aisle, Mavis, my assistant, watched Jasper with her lips pursed. Next to Mavis, Soner, my personal bodyguard, hunched forward scrolling on his phone.

Jasper's cologne and Mavis's perfume collided, an extension over who held the most power, who could outdo the other. The sweet, musky smell was as suffocating as their need to be irreplaceable — to me, the rock star, the illusionist.

Through the tinted window of the limo, I saw myself on the jumbo-screen. It was a replay of the HBO special at the Royal Albert Hall. Above the Jumbovision, on the rooftops of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Italian soldiers scanned the plaza. Tens of thousands of people had turned out to see me.

A fan broke through the barricade and threw herself on the hood of the car. She pressed her face to the windshield and yelled,

"I love you, Bel." Police yanked the girl away.

"Jesus. Here we go," Jasper said.

"You have my kicks?" I asked Mavis.

"Here girl," she said, handing me the tennis shoes, "You're gonna need them."

"I don't like it," Jasper said.

"Sweeping the front of the theatre for bombs. I'm sure it's been cleared. They just want a spectacle with you running across the courtyard."

"Darlin,' since when don't you like a spectacle?" I said, tying the Gucci sneakers and wishing my manager had stayed home.

It was a perfect prelude to what would follow. After all, I was a rock diva, a magician. Risk was my calling, and this was La Scala.

"I'm scared of those opera nuts, protesting like you're something evil." Mavis clicked her tongue and stuck the boots in a bag. "They're worse than the fans."

Continued on page 32

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BOOKENDS by Jill Hedgecock

AUTHOR: 'Between Shadow's Eyes' and 'Rhino in the Room'
www.jillhedgecock.com

'AMERICAN DIRT' by Jeanine Cummins

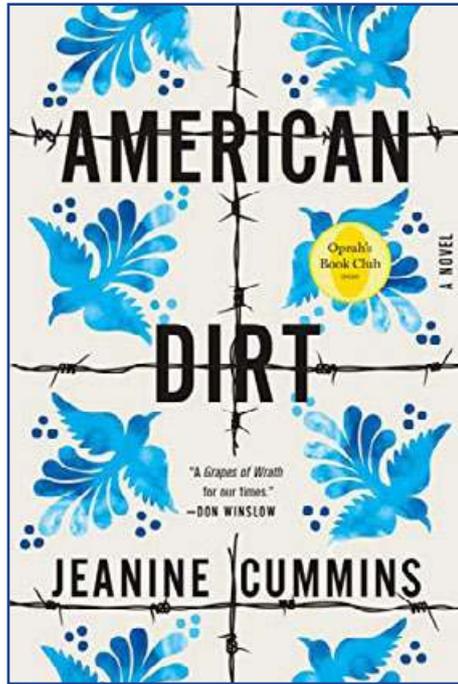
American Dirt (Flatiron Books, 2020, 387 pages, hardcover, \$16.75) by Jeanine Cummins is the story of a middle-class Mexican woman, Lydia, and her 8-year-old son, Luca, whose lives are torn apart during a quinceañera party. Lydia's husband, Sebastian, a newspaper reporter, had angered a cartel kingpin with an exposé story he wrote.

The novel opens with the murder of 16 members of Lydia's family, including her husband, forcing Lydia and Luca to run for their lives. Lydia manages to escape Acapulco using cash and the bus system, but when she tries to board a plane and can't produce a birth certificate for her son, Lydia and Luca join a slew of undocumented immigrants hitchhiking on top of La Bestia (the train) to get to the United States (El Norte).

What makes this novel even more compelling is that Lydia had developed a strong friendship with the drug kingpin before she understood Javier's role in

extortion and killing sprees.

The novel takes readers on a journey as the pair travels across Mexico. Readers experience



knuckle-whitening jumps onto railcars from bridges and treks across a heat-stroke-inducing desert prone to unexpected rain and flash floods. As Lydia races to the border, she lives in constant fear that Javier's army of gang members will hunt her, and her son, down to finish the job of executing Sebastian's entire family. When a young man, Lorenzo, who

wears the characteristic tattoo of a sickle dripping blood which signifies he is part of Javier's gang, joins Lydia's train car, she worries that Javier has ordered him to follow her even though Lorenzo assures them he is trying to escape from Javier's gang just like she is.

Lydia's strength is admirable as she tackles hurdle after hurdle. Her son's charm is a necessary reprieve to offset the violent scenes in the novel. Luca's adeptness at geography even helps save him and his mother from an uncertain fate.

Other characters include Rebeca and Soledad, two sisters from Honduras, and Beto, an asthmatic boy who is trying to escape the only life he's known living on a garbage dump. The gripping plot will keep readers turning the pages to find out if Lydia and Luca will escape Javier's men.

American Dirt is a #1 New York Times Bestseller, an Amazon Best Book of January 2020, and an Oprah's Book Club Pick.

While lauded by many celebrities including Stephen King, the book has created controversy.

For the most part, the outcry centers on the lack of diversity in the publishing industry and the opinion that the book is meant for white audiences.

Readers who want a more authentic recounting of an immigrant's experience might prefer to read *Unaccompanied* by Javier Zamora. However, I wouldn't avoid *American Dirt*. The novel is gripping as it reveals the plight of migrants and the myriad of reasons they are willing to risk everything to cross the border and face the hardships of traveling illegally into the United States.

Jeanine Cummins' other books include the bestselling memoir, *A Rip in Heaven*, *The Outside Boy*, and *The Crooked Branch*. She lives in New York with her husband and two children. Setting the emotionally-charged issue of immigration and controversy of Cummin's racial and cultural background aside, this is a very well-written novel filled with brutal realities, endearing love of family, kindness of strangers, and most of all, hope.

You can buy the book on Amazon [HERE](https://amzn.to/3EswMTk). [<https://amzn.to/3EswMTk>]

Jill Hedgecock is the Program Coordinator, Mount Diablo branch of the California Writers Club and also the author of *From Shadow's Perspective*. Find her at www.jillhedgecock.com

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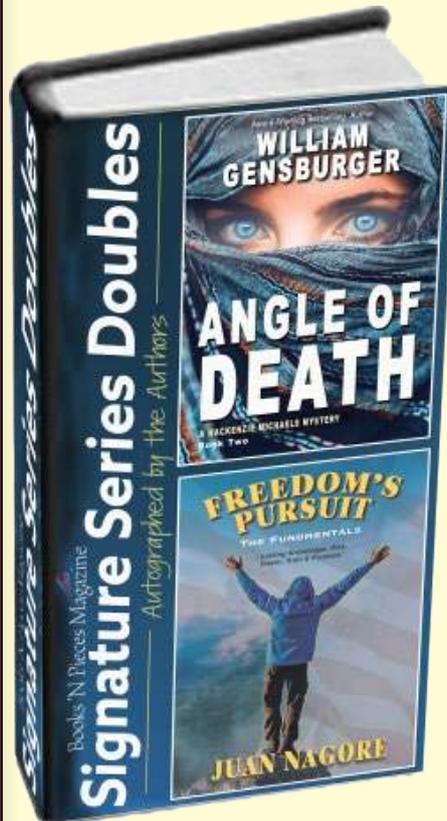
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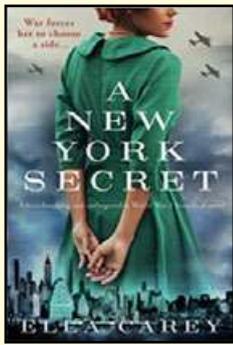
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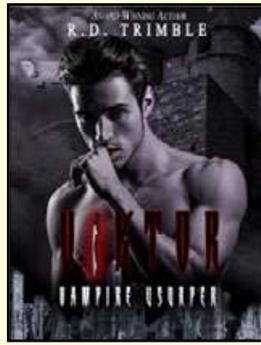
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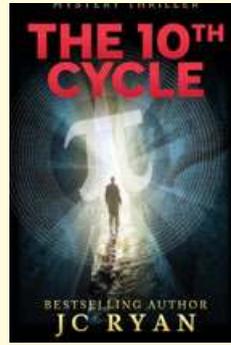
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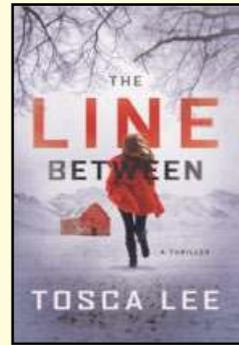
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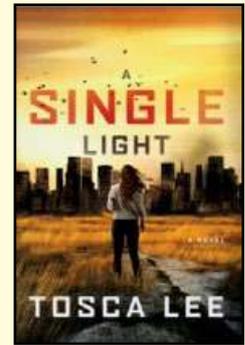
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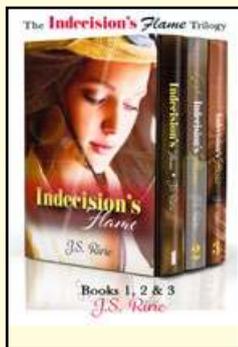
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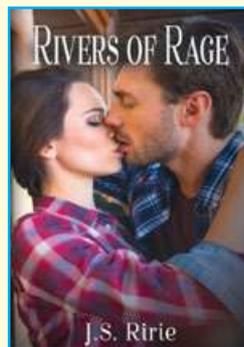
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Brylee Hawkins was going home to confront her father so she could marry the man of her dreams. But the Australian Outback wasn't the place she remembered. [Click HERE.](#)



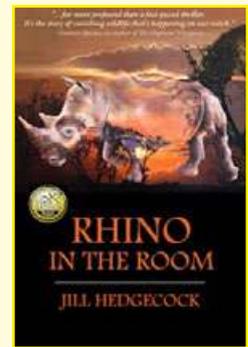
Her parents had dropped her off at a stranger's house with no intention of returning. But left with the will to survive, she embraces a new life. [Click HERE.](#)



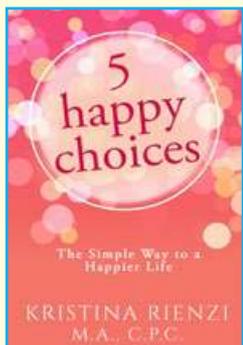
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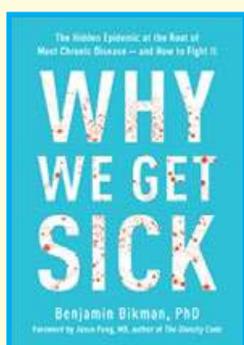
It was meant to be a harmless stag-night prank. But a few hours later, the groom has disappeared and his friends are dead. Roy Grace is contacted to learn the truth. [Click HERE.](#)



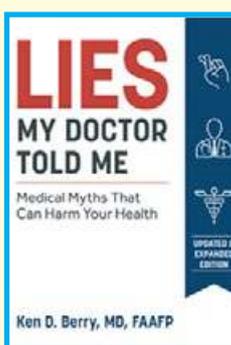
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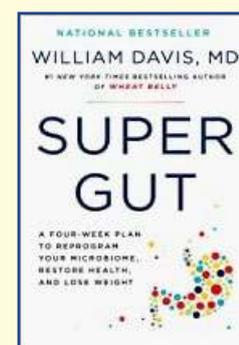
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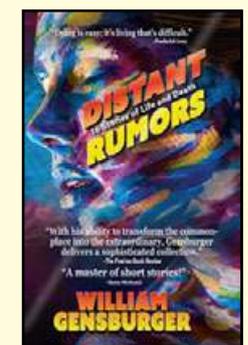
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INTERVIEW

Tea & Laughter

An Interview with award-winning author

Natasha Deen



Guyanese-Canadian author **NATASHA DEEN** has published over thirty works for kids, teens, and adults, in a variety of genres and for a variety of readerships.

Her works include the Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection *Thicker than Water*, *Guardian* which was a Sunburst Award nominee, and the Alberta Readers Choice nominated *Gatekeeper*. Her YA novel, *In the Key of Nira Ghani*, won the 2020 Amy Mathers Teen Book Award. When she's not writing, she teaches with the University of Toronto SCS

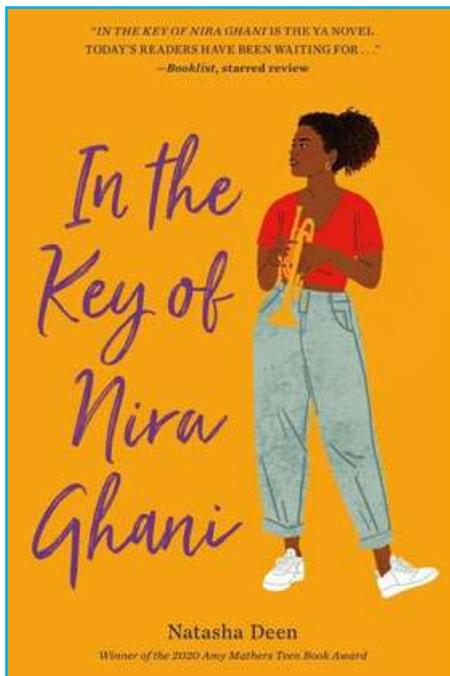
Q: Your family moved from Guyana to Canada because of racial and political violence. How was that transition and what were some of the more notable points (positive or negative) and how did that affect you?

The transition was bumpy, but one of my favorite memories was my dad coming into the room my sister and I shared and waking us up. "Come downstairs," he told us. "It's snowing."

It was our first winter and I'd never seen snow. I raced down the stairs, across the living room floor, climbed on the couch, and pulled open the curtains. And there it

was.
Snow.

It had been falling for a while, so everything was covered in this glittering, sparkling white blanket. It was the kind of snow that fell in thick, lazy flakes, and turned the sky a pink-magenta color. There was just enough wind that the snow swirled around the lampposts and caught the light. At the time, I thought it was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen... I still think it's one of the most beautiful moments in my life.



Q: You focus mostly on writing for teens/young adults? What drew you to that age bracket and why?

Writing for kids/teens is FUN!
As a writer, you can go into so

many creative places and inhabit unique, imaginative worlds. Plus, you're writing for folks who are learning the mechanisms of communication and story—the chance to be part of the team that helps light up someone's love of stories is such a wonderful job to have.

Q: How did your writing first get noticed and then published, and was it a frustrating experience trying to get exposure?

Well, you're talking to someone who has over four-hundred rejections, so yes, breaking into the industry can be frustrating!

What it really came down to (and continues to be) is perseverance. As a writer, our job is to write, submit, keep writing, and hope/wait for the industry to take notice. I think of it as head down (keep working), chin up (don't lose hope).

Q: Music plays a large part of your character's (Nira Ghani's) life and your own, both from your childhood, to the present. What are some of your favorites? Music with words or without when writing?

Ohhhh, I'm a SUCKER for 80s music! And yes to playlists when

I'm writing!—I create playlists for each of my books and I have a morning playlist to start my day.

Q: We live in a multi-cultural age where the richness of differing cultures often play a large part in the flavor, or setting of many stories that emerge. Do you find that the audience reached is wider as a result, and if so why do you believe that?

I don't have enough information to speak to the audience reach of a book that's diverse versus one that isn't, but I will say there is an openness, curiosity, and hunger for stories that are rich with culture.

It's my experience, from chats with readers/reviewers/teachers, etc., that people love learning about communities, cultures, and experiences that are different to theirs. (We also know from research that books teach empathy, connection, and inclusion. So books that showcase different ways of being, not only serve as great story-telling, but they do a lot of heavy lifting in helping to make the world a better place).

Q: Describe your typical writing time? Setting? Pros, cons, frustrations, solutions?

I don't have a typical writing time. Each day is different. So, I

wake up each morning, take a look at the obligations and tasks for the day, then schedule accordingly



(and try to stay open that my schedule can shift and change in a moment).

Q: I understand that you drink a lot of tea—what's your favorite kinds?

Hahahaha, I do! I'm partial to black tea, made the Guyanese way (lots of sugar and milk!). You can find the brewing instructions here. <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/9780762465453-Activity-Sheet.pdf> (see below)

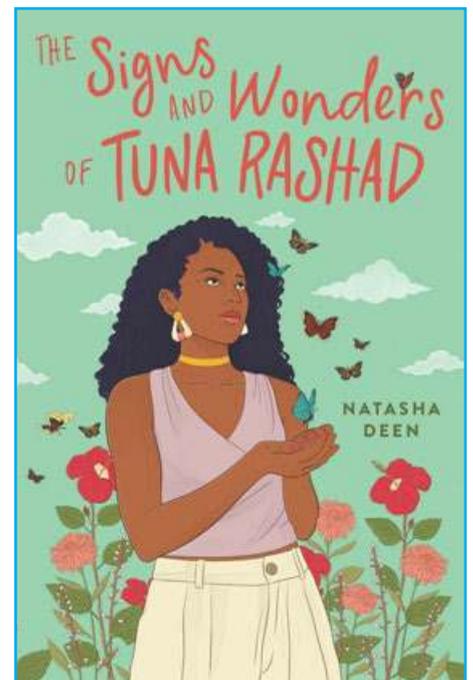
Q: You said (in a different

interview) you get a lot of feedback from readers about how much they enjoy the humor in your books. What makes you laugh?

I guess I just love things that delight me! Turns of phrases, puns, social commentary that makes me see the world in a new way. I'm not a fan of mean humor or jokes that punch down, but anything that helps me understand the world and share a connection with someone, yes please!

Q: Tell us about your latest book?

Thank you for asking. I'm so excited about *The Signs and Wonders of Tuna Rashad* for many reasons—the chance to



tell a funny story, to have a novel that deals with grief and love and crushes, and the chance to celebrate one of my culture's tenets that I grew up with: our belief that our ancestors watch over us.

Here is the blurb:

Let's be clear. No matter what her older brother, Robby, says, aspiring screenwriter Tuna Rashad is not "stupidstitious." She is, however, cool with her Caribbean heritage, which means she is always on the lookout for messages from loved ones who have passed on. But ever since Robby became a widower, all he does is hang out at the house, mock Tuna for following in their ancestors' traditions, and meddle in her life.

Tuna needs to break free from her brother's loving but over-bearing ways and get him a life (or at least, get him out of hers!). Based on the signs, her ancestors are on board. They also seem to be on board with helping Tuna win over her crush, Tristan Dangerfield. The only hiccup? She has to do it before leaving for college in the fall. A ticking clock, a grief-stricken brother, and a crush who doesn't believe in signs. What could possibly go wrong?

Find Natasha Deen at:

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"Ah, they're harmless." I laughed, sounding relaxed, keeping the stress out of my voice.

We were once lovers. Mavis would be the hardest to leave.

I didn't want to be cruel, to abandon her and Jasper, my band and back-up singers, assistants and crew members, bodyguards.

"It's not funny," Jasper said.

"Lighten up, Darlin'. Nothing's going to happen. Right, Soner?" I winked at the six-foot eight giant, an ex-basketball player from Turkey.

"You know it, Bel," he said, and tucked his phone inside his coat pocket. "They're here."

Behind us was the SUV with my bodyguards and behind them a fleet of vehicles with my entourage.

For more than forty years, the media never let up. Hunted, chased for sport, the hounds snarling at my high-heeled boots, I once loved the adulation, until I forgot who I was and morphed into what others expected, running inside a sphere of my own making.

I pulled the brim of the fedora down over the wig. The hat brushed the rim of my Ray Bans. Strategically-placed tape held taut the skin at my temples and jawline.

The black knee-length cape worn for dramatic effect kept me warm on this damp, cool day.

"Ready, Soner."

"Time to rock and roll," he said into his head-mic.

Soner opened the passenger door. Fans rushed the barricades. Police smacked them back. People screamed in Italian and English. Cheers and some boos went up around the piazza. Trumpets blared.

Stepping out of the car, I saw the opera devotees protesting with banners. Go home! You don't belong here! I had paid ten million euros to coerce La Scala's Board of Directors into letting me perform. I belonged here.

The bodyguards surrounded me. Ex-basketball players recruited by Soner, all were over six-feet-four. They wore dark suits and had a "don't mess with me" look. I paid the best in the business, knew the names of their wives and children, and trusted these men with my life.

A roar went up from the square as I waved to the fans. People shouted, "Eccola, eccola Bel, ti amo!" On the jumbo-screen, I saw myself waving. The theatre held just over three thousand. I'd asked for the JumboTron in my contract so I could share the event with those who couldn't buy tickets.

Surrounded by the Turks, I set

the pace. The guards watched the people, with me peering between their shoulders, caged, viewing life within bars.

A boy held out a pen and a photo. "Wait." I walked over, scrawled my signature on the 8 x 10 glossy, and let the teenager take a selfie with me.

I moved back into the shelter of my guards. They protected me as TV cameramen jostled for position and shoved microphones at me. I'd had nothing to do with the press since the turn of the century when they called me "embarrassingly old to be singing Let's Funk All Night."

Around that time tabloids plastered my haggard face below huge red block letters that screamed "Bel Shannon's Death Imminent!"

We followed a path cordoned off by police and hurried along the Milan Cathedral. Fog drifted between the towering gothic arches and spires.

To perform at La Scala, I would make my grandmother's dream come true. It was an offering to the woman who saved me from Saint Mary's Home for Girls and gave me the gift of music. My grandmother had performed at all the great opera houses. She told me La Scala was her favorite.

The ballyhoo was panoramic. Photographers, news anchors, fanatics, and demonstrators ran

alongside us. They shoved to get near while we raced across the courtyard. Confetti fell on my cape. It sprinkled on the heads and shoulders of the men shielding me. I knew how magic and illusion hypnotized a crowd. The belief that a superstar in a cloak, able to levitate, scale skyscrapers, and sail through the air with an electric guitar, was somehow greater than themselves. But I knew better. A woman who waited on tables and cared for her children was the real heroine.

People reached out their hands as if touching me would change their lives. “Bel, ti amo!” Who were they? Through the years, I wanted to talk with them, not at receptions before or after a concert, but in marketplaces, or on the street without the veil of celebrity.

Jasper wheezed, running beside me. He’d have a heart attack trying to control me. What would his life be like without Bel Shannon? I hoped he’d find happiness.

Mavis trailed Jasper. She’d become smothering, jealous of anyone who got near me. Their hatred of one another was like a snake, slinking and squeezing itself around my intestines while I tried to be fair to both.

We zigzagged around barriers and crossed the street to the entrance. The door opened.

A tall, light-haired man with a

long face greeted us. “This way Madame.” I rushed in with my bodyguards. The vestibule, lined with marble pillars and statues, was elegant, its ceiling lofty, dripping with chandeliers. From this moment on, until my last bow, La Scala was home.

“I’m Mr. Ponti, the house manager. To the dressing room, Madam Shannon?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“We at La Scala hope you enjoy your stay.”

“I’m sure I will.”

A year and a half prior, when meeting with the Board of Directors, I devised a scheme. Passing a floor plan of the building, I took out my phone and snapped a picture. I studied it. Most important were the exits.

The manager escorted me to the dressing rooms.

“Have a wonderful show, Madam,” he said with a slight bow, and opened the door. “If you need anything, call.” He gestured to a phone mounted on the wall below a CCTV monitor.

The cozy room had a vanity with a mirror. My trunk stood next to the clothes rack. In the center of the makeup table stood a bouquet of red roses. “The roses are beautiful. Thank the Board of Directors. But please take them. I’ll need the space.”

He handed me his card, picked

up the flowers, and left.

When petitioning the Board, I told them about my grandmother, Naomi Shannon, who appeared at La Scala in the 1920s. Anyone familiar with classical music knew of her, the great concert pianist who broke through the ranks held by men. I told the Board it was my grandmother’s wish for me to perform here. The chairman met my petition with raised eyebrows and a half smile and said, “You’re not a classical musician, a ballerina, nor do you sing opera.” They refused my request.

Then when I offered them ten million euros, they decided to make an exception. I could have put on a circus act if I wanted.

Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi had been in this room. So had my grandmother, long before those divas. Now I, too, would be part of La Scala’s history.

“It’s batshit out there,” Jasper said, rushing into the room. “Let me get a picture of you, Bel.” He took out his phone. When I smiled, the tape holding back my skin at the jawlines went slack. The wig felt like a small dog on my head, the shades heavy on the bridge of my nose.

Mavis came in, wheezing, with my boots in a bag slung over her shoulder. “Next time I’m gonna get me a golf cart. You guys can run, but I’m in heels.” She kissed me on

the cheek and whispered, “Baby, we made it to La Scala.”

Our love affair was long over, but Mavis still tried — pressing her huge breasts into my shoulder. She whispered, tickling my ear, “Girl, let me get a picture with you.”

I changed into my boots.

Soner watched from outside the door. “You want one too?” I held out my arm, the cape spread like a bat wing. “Darlin’, I want to see you smile for once.” He took a selfie of us.

“Give me a few minutes, Soner, and I’ll check out the theatre.”

With everyone gone, I went to the trunk, dialed the combination on the lock, and opened it. Styrofoam mannequin head, short dark wig, industrial tape, makeup kit, bobby pins for the wig cap, all as I had packed. The mini flashlight I stuck in my pants pocket. I closed the trunk and spun the dial.

In the corner of the room, I saw my reflection in the full-length mirror.

At the turn of the century, my career nosedived. Empty concert seats stuck out their cushioned tongues. Programmed to look young and sexy, I taped back my face, put on wigs, wore makeup and shades even indoors. And went into seclusion. How could I make fans love me again?

Rolling Stone Magazine called me a has-been. Suicide was an

option. Then inspiration struck.

I studied with the brilliant illusionist, Igor Santini, and mastered the art of deception. My spell-binding performances packed stadiums. I became a resurrected sensation and the richest self-made woman in the world. But my music morphed into an accessory.

No matter how wealthy or renowned, I was still that child at Saint Mary’s Home for Girls, standing in line, waiting to be adopted but always passed over for the youngest and prettiest.

In the dressing room, I removed the sunglasses and examined my face in the mirror. The loose tape on the left side gave me a lopsided, abstract look. Plastic surgery had been too iffy. Too dangerous. Industrial tape achieved miraculous results. My face was a façade hiding the real Bel Shannon. Clothed, my body appeared the same as my twenty-year-old self, easy to deceive with posture and movement.

“Nana,” I whispered to the mirror. “Tonight is for you. You saved me from the despair of Saint Mary’s.”

Mother Superior had called me to her office. My six-year-old body trembled with fear. Was I going to be whipped? Did they find out about Ruthie and me?

Ruthie sang all the time. I wanted to know how she made those

sounds come out of her mouth. One night, I had sneaked out of bed, tiptoed down the hall, and crossed into the colored girls’ quarters. “I want to sing like you,” I told her. We pulled the sheets over us and in whispers she taught me how to harmonize. In soft voices we sang *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider*. Singing was my first taste of happiness.

Sister Marie led me through the halls.

“I’m a good girl.”

“Hush, Isabel,” the nun said, pinching my arm.

She led me into a sanctuary where an older woman with lace gloves raised the veil on her hat. “Hello Darlin’, I’m your grandma. Call me Nana.” She winked. “It doesn’t sound so stuffy.”

What’s a grandmama, I wondered? When we rode away together in the back seat of a big car, Nana said, “My daughter was your mother. I’m sorry it took so long to find you.” That was the last time she mentioned the word mother.

Nana took me home to a mansion, but it was the music room where I lived and thrived.

On Sunday afternoons, Nana held concerts in the music hall where she and others played Grieg, Debussy, Gershwin, Ellington.

When I first heard rock and roll, I learned the guitar and wrote my own songs.

But so many years later, veering far from my music, magic and illusion robbed me of my voice. To rot was one thing. To continue to rot after I realized it was quite another.

I inspected the clothes rack and ran my fingers over the soft material of the gypsy blouse. My trademark the velvet purple cape would fall to the middle of my calves in elegant straight lines. My performance boots shone.

With all my belongings in place, I went into the hall.

“Ready?” Soner asked.

I whirled around, my black cape flaring as I vanished down the corridor.

After the band’s soundcheck, I walked center stage and gazed around the empty theatre. I breathed in the centuries of performances, hundreds of years of furs and fragrances, the stale smell of powerful rich men, and the sweat from the poor in the loggione.

Closing my eyes, I belted out two bars from *It’s All About You*. Too bad we had to use microphones, the acoustics were marvelous.

Soner and the bodyguards watched from the wings. Mavis sat in the front row, looking at her phone. In the back of the theatre, Jasper talked to Mr. Ponti. Along the aisles, my assistants, musicians, and back-up singers took pictures and wandered around the historic

building.

I moved upstage to the escape hatch. Soner hurried over. “Stay here and don’t let anyone down,” I said, sliding back the door. “I’ll do this alone tonight.”

“But Bel? What if someone’s down there?”

“You serious? With all the security?”

I climbed down several steps and closed the trapdoor. The dank air caught in my throat. Coughing, I crouched on the stairs, removed my sunglasses, and tucked them under the fedora.

A string dangled. I tugged it. Light illuminated layers of grime that covered pipes running along the brick walls.

Nana’s steamer trunk stood by the steps, covered with travel stickers from The Grand Hotel in Stockholm, the Hotel Ambassador in Vienna, and other locations from around the world. Like an old friend, the trunk had traveled with me throughout my career. It was part of my grandmother, and it made my heart heavy to leave it behind.

I dialed the combination on the lock and opened the chest. On one side was the springboard and rocket booster. In another compartment, an identical shirt to the one hanging in the dressing room along with tissue, make-up remover, a mirror, street clothes, and a

large tote bag. I unzipped the bag and checked inside.

Perfect. I shut the trunk, spun the dial, and yanked the light string.

Having memorized the floor plan, I knew the passageway. La Scala had one of the deepest stages in Italy. The first door I would pass would be the one that led offstage to the right wing. The second door opened to the back of the theatre where crews built sets and painted backdrops. My exit would take me to the rear of the opera house and a door that would open onto a narrow street.

My flashlight pierced the dark. In slow motion, I skimmed the light across the floor and ceiling, then side to side. The cellar was used as a storage space for dismantled sets, abandoned furniture, and props. Moisture trickled down walls, cobwebs as thick as angel hair hung between rafters.

My timing was crucial for me to arrive at Milano Centrale to catch the train to Rome. I’d practiced my change, over and over, and clocked it to thirty seconds. Adding that to the watch, I pressed the button and did a dry run.

As I advanced into the bowels of La Scala, rats scampered from under large hulking outlines covered in tarp. I hurried on, passing the second door on my left. The next would lead out the back of the

building.

Just ahead of me were the stairs, with a shaving of light shimmering under the door at the top. I pressed the button on the watch—two minutes and seven seconds total—put the flashlight in my pocket, removed my hat, put on the shades, placed the fedora at a rakish angle, and climbed the steps.

No need to pick the lock, it had a deadbolt. When I turned the knob, the door swung wide from the outside causing me to stumble.

“Jasper.”

“Bel! What the hell are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

“You went down the hatch alone.”

A light drizzle was falling. At both ends of the street, police patrolled, and barricades blocked the road. Jasper turned up the collar of his overcoat. The tremor in his right hand shook more than usual.

“Come stand in the doorway,” I said. “You’re getting wet.”

“Why’d you come out here?”

“I wanted fresh air.”

“Bel,” he said, shaking his head. “Don’t do anything foolish.”

“Why would I? You’re too uptight.”

“I’ll tell Ponti to put guards at every door.”

“The street’s already blocked.”

“Anyone going in or coming out will be checked. This building will

be on lockdown while you’re in it.”

My future happiness depended on this door.

“Let me book you at the Olympia. Three million euros for one performance. Not even Vegas pays that. Come on, Bel. You could make back almost a third of your give-away here.”

“Let it go.”

“It was beneath you to pay them. You should have had me negotiate.”

“You didn’t see the contempt on their faces. It was the only way to get the gig.”

La Scala was the first time a contract had been signed without him. I no longer needed Jasper. My plan to disappear had been resolved as I scrawled my signature across the contract.

“But I should have been there.”

He stepped out from under the doorway. “The French want an answer.”

“I’ll give you one by the end of the night.”

“Why not now?”

“Two or three hours won’t matter. You never told me why you were here.”

“Soner wouldn’t let me go into the basement. What are you really up to?”

“Relax Jasper. It’s been a long time since you’ve been on the road.”

The clouds hung low on the

horizon. “Hope people on the piazza remembered umbrellas.” I stepped back inside. “See you onstage.” And I slammed the door shut.

Jasper sat on a Victorian loveseat in La Scala’s lobby, staring at the marble floor. The crystal chandeliers illuminated the busts of Verdi and Puccini. The vestibule, awash in golden light, didn’t brighten his mood. He glanced at his watch. Bel’s refusal to book concerts gave him panic attacks. What was she up to?

Her transformation began several years back, in Amsterdam, then a trip to India. When she came back, she closed her Facebook and Twitter accounts. Except for her phone and website, she shut down all electronics.

His agony over losing her made him leave his home in Palm Beach and fly to Milan. He tagged along like part of her entourage.

Why did she really go out the back door—“wanted fresh air”—a lie, like others.

She’d been his ticket to the high rollers, star-fuckers, anything he wanted. Decades passed, but not his obsession to control her. His persona was linked to Bel. Now he felt himself clutching the hem of her fame.

Information about her came from social media and the tab-

loids. Photos of Bel arriving at the San Francisco Airport in her private jet dominated the Internet. No one knew why she was there, or how she dodged the media. What was her destination? Her mystery whipped up a mania, and the paparazzi preyed on her. If she blinked, Bel Shannon made headlines.

Without him she'd still be singing in blues joints. After her grandmother died, Bel ran away. She was seventeen and afraid she'd be taken back to St. Mary's. He found her in Harrisburg, at the King Bees Juke Dive, pounding on a piano a righteous rendition of Rock Island Line.

"Hey, kid," he had called her. "You're good. Good enough to record."

"Become rich and famous?" Bel had asked.

She was slender, taller than average, a striking beauty with eyes as dark as Pine Creek Gorge. But there were lots of good-looking girl singers. It was her voice, its husky quality, and the way she played the piano — he hadn't heard anything like it since Memphis Slim. A cat handed her a guitar, and by god, she played that too — and the harp!

Jasper swiped the tassel on his Ferragamo moccasin. Like others, he had fallen in love with her. Her magnetism attracted both men

and women. He protected her when lovers tried to blackmail her.

In the 1980s, she had big hair and padded shoulders. MTV played her videos 24/7. Her success advanced to the big screen with several hit movies.

All the while, it was he who made it happen. Not once had he thought of taking on another client, not even when she became a has-been. When she added magic to her shows, he made sure she had the best teachers and assistants. He'd sacrificed his whole damn life to Bel.

He had watched her do daredevil stunts, levitating over the Hollywood Bowl while playing a guitar, hanging upside down like a bat, then walking across the ceiling inside Carnegie Hall. God knows how many bones she'd broken. He rubbed his knees.

Humiliating as it was, he needed an ally. Jasper took out his phone and texted Mavis. "We need to talk. Meet me in the canteen."

Mavis texted back, "I'm here. Eating a fine dish of pasta." Of course, Mavis lived to eat. Twice divorced with three sons and several grandchildren, she'd been with Bel for over ten years. They'd been lovers and that really galled him.

With his hand on the railing, he lumbered up the stairs and walked inside the canteen.

Bel's musicians, back-up sing-

ers, magic assistants, and techies clustered in groups, snacking and talking.

Mavis sat alone with a big plate of spaghetti and a glass of red wine. Attractive in her blue pantsuit with a low-cut top showing off her enormous cleavage — probably for Bel — was the woman Jasper loathed.

He grabbed a chair and sat down.

"It's Bel."

Mavis stabbed a meatball with her fork and continued to eat.

"She went down the escape hatch alone. Insisted on it, Soner said. I caught her going out the back door of the basement."

Silverware and dishes clattered into bins.

"Told me some lie about wanting fresh air."

Mavis twirled spaghetti on her fork and continued to eat.

Irritated by her cheeky attitude, Jasper asked, "Has she been talking to you?"

"This concert's a big deal," Mavis said, taking a sip of wine. "She's nervous. So am I. All this bomb stuff would make anyone nuts."

"I want to book her at the Olympia. Says she'll think about it. She's put me off for days. Has she said anything to you?"

Mavis pushed aside her plate.

"Never mentioned it."

He glanced at the gray walls and

tables. The canteen's drab atmosphere added to his gloom.

"No upcoming tours. Nothing," Jasper said. "She sold her home on the Rialto. The manor in St John's Wood, and her favorite, the villa on Mykonos, are for sale too."

"You talking tabloid trash or you know something for real?"

He hunched forward. "I saw the listings on the Internet."

He watched the rise and fall of her chest, the grim set of her mouth. She didn't fool him. Mavis was scared.

"That girl's been a mystery for some time," Mavis said.

"It's like she's tidying up loose ends." Jasper scratched his goatee. "Tonight could be final."

"As in?"

"Her last show. You know."

He hesitated, letting Mavis visualize the ultimate showstopper.

"You're talking nonsense. That's too far over the top even for Bel." Mavis grimaced and looked sideways at him. "She's not depressed. It's all that mediating and chanting. It's turned her into a stranger."

"She's auctioned off her Warhols and Lichtensteins."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"It's around."

"Rumors, hmph." Mavis opened her handbag and took out her lipstick, then tossed it back. "I know that girl's planning something. I have eyes too, you know. But

not suicide. So you just shut your mouth about that. Why would she go out the back door if she wants to kill herself? Maybe she did need fresh air."

Jasper noted the uneaten food, the furrowed brow, her unpainted lips.

"I know how you feel about her," Jasper said.

"You don't know shit. I know Bel better than anyone. I've seen that girl go through so many phases. You and I both know when it comes to her image and being on top, nothing stands in her way. Not those protesters, or bomb threats, nothing."

"You know she's up to something," Jasper said. "Something big."

"What do you want from me?"

"Your help."

"That bad, huh?"

"Instead of being in the audience, let's watch her from the wings. We'll make sure she leaves the building with us."

"She's been acting funny," Mavis said. "Faraway like."

Jasper stood and said, "We have to watch Soner, too."

Alone in the dressing room, I flung off my cape. Damn Jasper. Damn the bombers. It would have been perfect going out the back door. Even with the street blocked off no one would have bothered

me. But not now with a guard posted.

There was shock in Jasper's eyes when he swung open the door. Good thing for the shades, or he would have seen the horror in mine.

I threw my hat on the counter and took off the sunglasses.

Plan B? It would be the magic trick of a lifetime, more frightening than scaling the Shanghai Tower. It wasn't just Jasper and Mavis, it would be my whole entourage, people I'd been close to. Could I be invisible to them? If I failed, not only would it be humiliating, I'd never be free. But the boldness of it, the daring, thrilled me.

From the open trunk, I took out the make-up remover, pulled off the tape, and cleaned my face. Staring at myself in the mirror without cosmetics and adhesive, I wondered — could I get away with it?

Without the Bel Shannon disguise, I had bought my farmhouse in the California mountains and shopped at the village market. The locals welcomed me as Jennifer Miller, offering tips on where to hike and the best places to go kayaking, and there was Denise.

The thought of being with Denise gave me courage. She loved me without knowing Bel Shannon, not like Marta, who broke my

spirit.

My transformation began with Marta in Amsterdam. I had been playing a boogie-woogie on the harmonica when I saw her from the stage. The lovely woman sitting in the VIP section smiled up at me. I boogied down to the apron and blew the harp as cartoon notes circled around her head. She laughed and grabbed at the illusions. I was smitten. At the intermission, I asked Soner to give her a backstage pass to the reception.

At the gathering, I shook hands, chatted with royalty, politicians, and celebrities. I'd glance at the door, then greet the next person. I nibbled at the banquet table that was lush with fresh fruit, cheeses, and wine.

"How do you levitate?"

Startled, I turned to my guest, put my heart back in its place, and said, "It's a secret."

She answered in low voice, "I'll keep it."

"Even so."

"Thank you for the pass." She poured a glass of champagne, then swept her blonde hair off her shoulder.

"What's your name?"

"Marta. Marta van der Berg."

Within the hour, I brought Marta to my suite at the De L'Europe Amsterdam where we became lovers.

Marta was always on her phone,

scrolling, texting, tweeting.

"Who?" I had asked. "Facebook, and friends," she said.

We took midnight walks in Vondelpark and drove to Bruges. I felt myself sliding, a helpless feeling, overwhelmed by the audacity of falling in love.

After ten days together, the limo driver took me — along with Soner and the bodyguards — to Rotterdam and my favorite antique store. While there, I bought Marta an Art Nouveau necklace made of emeralds and diamonds and planned to ask her to join me on tour.

That night, in the hotel room, I gave her the wrapped box.

Naked, Marta strode over, reached for the present, and opened it. "It's gorgeous." She turned. "Clasp it. Then make love to me."

I pleased Marta, running my hunger over her breasts; the curve of her belly.

I glanced up and saw her texting on her phone. Stunned, I grabbed it, read, "You'll never guess who I've been fucking." Devastated by the betrayal, I smashed the phone against the nightstand and marched to the French doors, opened them, and threw the phone into the Amstel River.

"You told me you loved me."

Marta unclasped the necklace.

"Keep it," I hissed. "Take your

clothes and get the hell out."

Alone, in the middle of the room, I sobbed until laughter drew me to the balcony. A boat cruised along the Amstel with men and women eating, drinking, making toasts. The simplicity of everyday life, a boat ride with friends, I hated them. Hated their happiness. Appalled by my jealousy and overcome with shame, I wandered into the suite pondering where I had gone wrong.

When Marta shut the door, it was more than a closing. It was an awakening. What happened in Amsterdam forced me to look within.

Nana would have been pleased with my La Scala scheme. My happiest memories had been when we picnicked along the Susquehanna River. Nature and its integrity. That's the life to live, far away from illusions. My sophisticated grandmother, who behind closed doors smoked thin cigars, swore, and taught me to play poker, would have said, "Darlin', it's about time."

I applied clear industrial tape along both sides of my jawline and pulled the loose skin back under my earlobes. With small pieces of tape on my temples, I dragged back the wrinkles around my eyes. Pancake make-up smoothed, and powdered hid the strips. My face painted, I fastened the dark wig

with bobby pins then sang the scales.

Dressed in my performance clothes, I slipped on my royal purple cape and clasped it at the neck. For almost twenty years, the cape had made me feel dramatic and powerful, but it too was an illusion.

Flanked by Soner and the guards, I strode down the hall toward Mr. Ponti, who waited at the elevator. It descended to stage level and opened to a flurry of assistants. The theater's security personnel scanned the seats and aisles.

Claire, my magic assistant, hurried over. "The 3D projector, ropes, risers, pyrotechnics," she said, checking the list and adjusting her glasses. "It's all ready. What about the rocket booster?" she asked, taking off my cape.

"I can handle it."

Roadies jostled the grand piano onto the stage then set up the instruments. The band members and backup singers tested the microphones.

"Nervous, Bel?" Alvin, the bass player, asked.

"Yeah, darlin', but you better not be."

"Shaking in my boots. This is some kinda history you're making."

"Snap that baby with a whole lotta funk and you'll be making your own."

Mr. Ponti hurried down the aisle. "We open the doors in five minutes, Madam Shannon."

The stage manager ordered the proscenium and backdrop curtains lowered.

Soner and the bodyguards followed me past the set of Carmen. I dragged a stool into a corner, where I was surrounded by tall baroque chairs and secluded from people. The guards watched me from several feet away.

I closed my eyes. Worry and blame interfered with my concentration. Upon my decision to escape the world of rock and magic, I considered all it would affect — my band, assistants, the crew that toured with me, Jasper, and Mavis. All would feel deserted and betrayed. I had set up a trust fund for all my employees, hoping the money would assuage their anger, and my guilt for leaving.

I controlled my mind, transcended thought, and listened. Mavis will find her way, as will Jasper and everyone else. Be here now. Spontaneity is the brush of artistry.

I stood upstage behind the grand drape. I whirled the satin cloak like a lariat and let it slip to the floor in a majestic purple splash.

Everyone took their positions.

The band played a blistering intro to "Scare City." The back-up

singers wailed into the microphone, "Scare City, Scare City, scarcity no more."

The house exploded in a frenzy, "Bel! Bel!"

I stood on the third stair of the trapdoor and attached the wireless mic and in-ear monitor. Claire handed me the Gibson.

The curtain rose to a screaming thunderclap. Lightning streaked across the house, the spotlight aimed on the purple pond lying on the stage.

The cape came alive with me underneath. Always more gentleman than lady, I took a deep Casanova bow. My love affair with the audience began.

I swung the guitar in front of me and let rip the riff from Addicted to Drama. Each string shot streaks of red, blue, yellow, green, orange, and purple.

The crowd stood in a unanimous roar.

Crossing to the apron, I accepted the adoration, with a smile and wet eyes. My open hands emitted green, white, and red streamers that mutated into small Italian flags. Applause and bravos went up in the house.

I smiled at the VIPs in the orchestra section, those beyond in the platea, the prima galleria, the seconda galleria, up to the leggi-one.

I concluded Addicted to Drama

as my image faded in and out, then disappeared. The guitar, suspended in air, continued to play. People shouted in Italian and English, “Bel, come back!”

Beneath the stage, I removed my cape and took out the rocket booster while the band played the refrain to *Watch Out Or You’ll End Up Where You’re Headed*.

No one except Santini knew how to do the next feat. He’d taught me, warned me about precision, schooled me in the art of landing. I’d practiced Rocket Body for months, a risky act at any age but for my advanced years, illusionists called me insane.

The band stopped playing, then a drumroll. I slid open the trapdoor, moved away from the stairs, and stepped into the air-foot compressors with my arms pinned to my sides for a clean shot.

The soles of my boots were seared from the blast of propulsion. My body shot through the air, left a smoke trail, where I landed feet-first on the third tier. The audience gasped, went wild with applause. I sat on the cushioned rail, my boots dangling over the ledge—and my heart skipped, thankful I’d never perform Rocket Body again.

Clouds of smoke and gases lingered on stage. It hid my assistant as she closed the trapdoor.

In an aisle seat, a man in the

fourth row interrupted my concentration. He groped under his chair and the one in front. Perhaps he’d lost his program. But then a patch of light made me wary. His phone.

I dismissed him as being rude and levitated above the heads of the patrons and landed back on stage at the grand piano. Striking the keys, I played, *There Is Nothing To Worry About*.

When the back-up singers wailed the refrain, Ever again, the rude man with dark, slicked-backed hair, a dead ringer for a Corleone hitman, stared up at the first tier and gave someone the thumbs up.

Did anyone else notice him? Jasper, Mavis, and Soner were watching from the wings. Perhaps it was nothing.

Alvin slapped a funky bass and sauntered over. We flirted while he strummed a steady groove.

I knocked over the bench, legs spread, back arched, and shouted the lyrics as my fingers ran the keys.

Charmed by the captivated audience, I hovered several feet above the piano while the keys continued to play.

Screams circled the hall. Panties, a pair of boxer shorts, and a bra landed on stage—I saw the price tags on them and laughed.

Distracted by a patch of light

from the audience, I looked over. It was the man with the phone. He stared at it, then glanced over his shoulder. Was he an opera fanatic and about to set off a bomb?

I strolled to the proscenium and at the end of the chorus ad-libbed a scream so loud that he finally looked up.

In sync with my improv, the band stopped playing.

“You! Yes, you,” I said into the head-mic, gesturing to the possible terrorist. “Come up here.”

He slouched in his seat shaking his head.

“Darlin’ I’m not going to hurt you.”

The audience clapped.

“I’ll come up,” someone shouted. “*Grazie*. But I want him.”

Wolf calls looped the hall.

The man put his phone in his back pocket and walked to the stairs. We shook hands.

I included the audience as I said, “What’s your name?”

“Lu, er,” he stammered. “Luciano Fognini.”

“Is my performance boring you?”

He shook his head. “No,” he said.

“Then why the obsession with your phone?”

The crowd laughed. His face reddened.

“This is the age of electronic addictions,” I said and held out my hand. “May I?”

“Cosa, er?”

“Your cellular.”

He reached in his back pocket. Not finding it, he searched all his pockets.

Triumphant, I held up his phone with a flourish for the audience. There was a shared intake of breath, laughter, then applause.

Luciano reached for it.

I snapped it away. “Play on.” The band and singers launched into a medley of my hits.

Luciano’s hand in mine, we walked over to Soner.

“Check it out. He has an accomplice in the balcony.” Two of my bodyguards stood on either side of Luciano. Mavis looked on. “Be careful. It could be programmed.”

“Uh, what?” Luciano asked.

Soner scanned the text messages, then took off the back of the phone and looked inside.

“Hey, cazzo. Fuck, mi dia, mio cell.”

Soner put it back together. “He’s in love. Wants to marry his girl. She’s sitting in the balcony.”

Embarrassed, feeling the blush on my face, I took the phone from Soner and said, “Make reservations for two at the Casa Lodi.” I held Luciano’s hand and brought him on stage.

“Our friend is in love. Go ahead, ask her.”

“Now?”

“Why not?”

“Di fronte, er, everyone,” he said.

“She’ll love it.”

“Sposami. Marry me, Tina,” Luciano shouted.

The audience cheered.

“Marry him,” a man bellowed, “so we can get on with the show.”

A young woman with long black hair rose from her seat. Tears ran down her face.

“Si, Luciano. I’ll marry you.”

Luciano blew her a kiss.

“Here. Keep it off during the performance,” I whispered and handed him his phone. “Dinner on me at Casa Lodi. And congratulations.”

Soaked in sweat, I disappeared into the basement.

From the top of the trunk, I grabbed the flashlight, opened the case, changed into the fresh gypsy blouse, and put on my cape.

Back on stage the band joined me.

“We’ll skip *Cookin’ In My Casket*. We’ll add it to the encore. If they want one.”

“Ah c’mon Bel, they’ll wanna to stay till it’s daylight,” Alvin said.

“Don’t assume. This has been a weird night. Now I’d like a few minutes alone.”

Mavis watched Bel meditate backstage. Her girl was planning something.

Over the years, she’d lost her

sway with the rock legend. Their first big argument happened because of that damn tape she used on her face. Bel preferred giving pleasure, but when Mavis responded—eager and aroused—and tried to strip away the tape and peel off the wig, Bel jumped up and refused to have sex with her. Weeks passed before Mavis seduced her into bed.

Something happened in Amsterdam. Bel was back in her arms, but the pillow talk faded. Soon after, Bel left for India. She sent Mavis letters, writing about her devotion to mysticism and transcendental meditation, things that at first seemed like a phase. But when she came home filled with talk of the material world being a shadowy reflection of the spiritual, that God had both male and female aspects—Mavis balked. She clung to her Baptist beliefs and avoided religious conversations with Bel.

When the illusionist finished her meditation and opened her black-rimmed eyes, they glowed, her pale skin luminous. Mavis thought her a goddess.

“Baby, what’s going on? You’re putting nothing over on me.” She saw the flush beneath Bel’s rouge. Mavis drew close. “You’re not booking concerts. What’s this about selling your homes? And your art collections?” Frightened when Bel didn’t answer, Mavis

said, “Jasper’s talking crazy. Like you killing yourself onstage.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“Course not. But you acting funny makes me nervous.”

“I’m surprised Jasper could influence you.”

“He’s doing no such thing. I have eyes of my own.” Mavis wanted to touch her, awaken what once was so erotic and thrilling that sex sizzled between them. No one ever possessed that kind of spell over her and for so long. “I deserve the truth, after all we’ve been through. Don’t I mean anything to you?”

“You always have,” Bel said and walked on stage.

People threw roses and bouquets onto the stage. An assistant handed me my acoustic guitar.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is a night I’ve dreamed of, in so many ways.”

“We love you Bel,” a man yelled from the gallery.

“I love you too,” I said and sat on a barstool. “My grandmother, Naomi Shannon, was a concert pianist and performed here in 1927. Her wish was for me to appear at La Scala. This is for you, Nana.”

I imagined my grandmother in the front row, beaming up at me. She’d be dressed in black slacks, a long string of pearls around a soft blue cardigan, and smoking a thin cigar.

“This song is called, *You Can’t Get What You Already Have.*” I fingerpicked the strings, singing about how we have it all, of freeing ourselves from worry and guilt, of transcending our fears, and our need to fit in.

The audience, band, back-up singers, assistants, everyone in the house listened as if my words and music were greater than illusions and magic.

When I plucked the last note of the song, from out of sound box flew ten handkerchiefs that fluttered into doves. They circled around the theatre, then came back to land on my shoulders and arms.

The audience rose, applauded, and shouted, “*Bel, ti vogliamo bene. Bravo!*”

Claire adjusted my cape. Assistants arranged a circle of fire wicks, pyrotechnics, and a 3D projection set on a gantry. A few of La Scala’s scenery artists and maintenance crews gathered offstage.

I gave the thumbs-up to the stage manager.

The curtain rose to a burst of shrieks, stomping feet, clapping hands. The spotlight blinded me. Alvin thumped a steady beat.

“The magic you’re about to see has never been performed before. The song is called, *The Past is Gone.*”

The stage lights dimmed. Around me, a ring of flames ignited and blazed. A detonation boomed. Four other Bels joined me, two on either side.

My Bels and I broke into a rollicking song and can-can kick.

“The past is gone the future not here.

Why live in the mind? Why live in fear?

Embrace the moment that is the key.

There is no time but now so be free.”

We kicked our legs high in the air, to the right—to the left—while repeating the song.

The audience leaped to their feet. They clapped, whistled, and hooted.

We Bels flung off our capes. A circle of fire engulfed the apparitions, spewing faux balls of flames into the rafters and enveloping the stage in a thick vapor.

I hurried down the trap door and pulled the string.

Taking off my mic and ear-piece, I opened the trunk, unstuck the wig, peeled off the tape, and cleaned my face. Heart drumming, I changed my clothes.

Feet scuffled above along with muffled voices. “Encore! Encore!”

The escape hatch opened. “C’mon Bel.” Claire said.

I stuffed everything, including my boots, into the tote bag and locked the trunk. Pulse beating between my ears, I put on my black-framed glasses and cotton jacket, then grabbed the flashlight.

“Bel? You’ve milked it long enough. C’mon,” Claire said.

“You all right?” Soner asked.

“Go down and get her,” Jasper shouted as the crowd chanted, “Encore, encore.”

I pulled the light string and raced through the basement.

“Bel, where are you?” Soner yelled.

The tote bag slapped against my hip as I rushed deep into the darkened basement.

I came to the second door on my left and climbed the stairs. I stuck the flashlight in my pocket and opened the door to the set design area.

Several scenic artists in paint splattered smocks worked on a massive canvas spread on the floor. Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* played softly from a boombox. From out front my band repeated the intro to *You Are Never Alone*.

Stooped, I carried the tote bag. My shoulder-length white hair was falling around my considerably seasoned face. I walked to a custodial cart with cleaning fluids and brushes on the top shelf. On the bottom rack was a basket of dirty

linen and clean rags. I moved the rags aside and hid the tote bag.

“*Non dimenticare la biancheria sporca*,” an artist said. He pointed his brush at a pile of dirty smocks.

I pushed the cart to the heap of clothes.

Bent over, hair fallen to the sides of my black-framed glasses, I put the smocks into the basket.

The door opened. “Have you seen Bel Shannon?” Soner asked.

“Why would she be here?” the man said in English.

I shoved the wagon forward, away from the set decorators who couldn’t care less about Bel Shannon.

I moved the cart, avoiding the backdrop. Vapor lingered in wisps, floated, then evaporated as it hit the side curtains. The band stopped playing. The house lights came on.

I thrust the cart to the right toward the hallway where a stairwell led down into the audience.

Claire. She carried my cape in her arms—as if it were the remains of someone she loved. I glanced away. If only I could explain to her, tell her.

Perspiration caused the glasses to slide down my nose. I pushed them up. My heart thumped like Alvin’s bass.

From the far right of the stage, I peered at the audience and saw people leaving their seats. Some

booed. A woman shouted, “Rip-off!”

Fans stood in the orchestra pit, gawking at the stage as if I would reappear. The band and back-up singers wandered around dazed. My assistants, mystified and confused, looked behind curtains and screens.

“She’s not down there. No one’s seen her.” Soner climbed out the trap door. “The guard on the street told me no one came out.”

“She’s inside,” Jasper said. “Keep looking.” Jasper’s voice gave me goose bumps. Seeing him no more than ten feet away, I turned my face and willed myself small and insignificant.

“Hey, you with the cart,” Jasper shouted.

I stopped breathing.

“Have you seen Bel Shannon?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head.

“You dropped something,” Jasper gestured to a rag on the floor.

I picked up the cloth and gulped air as I jostled the cart into the hall.

“Bel. She’s here. I know you are,” Mavis cried. The hurt in her voice made me ache.

I rummaged under the rags, grabbed my tote bag by the straps, and slouched toward the stairs.

La Scala’s security jammed the stairwell. Two of my bodyguards climbed the steps. In character, I visualized myself as tiny and frag-

ile. I said, “*Scusa, scusa,*” and labored down the steps as I brushed past men I had employed for years.

Seized in the chagrin of the crowd, I became one of them.

I held the tote bag against my thigh and limped to a young woman. In an English accent I said, “Signorina, my legs are weak. Can I take your arm?”

“Of course.” She held out her elbow.

“*Grazie.*”

I lowered my eyes. My long white mane was falling over rounded shoulders—hope was kept alive as we approached the lobby.

I glimpsed Mavis and Mr. Ponti through the doors that led to the foyer. I hesitated.

“Are you all right?” the young woman asked.

“Just tired.” The two of us entered the packed lobby. La Scala’s security scrutinized the crowd.

Through the windowpanes, I saw reporters poised with microphones. Paparazzi held cameras. Limousines lined up out front. There were blue and white cars with flashing lights. I gazed one last time at La Scala’s high ceilings and chandeliers, the statues and paintings, and the stairs to the balcony—and said a silent good-bye to Nana.

Jasper joined La Scala’s security. I wanted to bolt.

I tucked my arm in the safety of the young woman’s. “Did you enjoy the concert?” I said, hoping to engage the girl, and leaned in as if hard of hearing.

“Yes, until Bel Shannon disappeared.”

Soner rushed to Jasper and whispered something in his ear. Mavis and Mr. Ponti joined them.

I turned away, afraid Jasper might recognize me as the cleaning woman from back stage. I wanted to look at him. The temptation was powerful. But I didn’t dare make eye contact. Absolutely not!

Media hounds waited outside. I lowered my head as I shuffled toward the final exit.

“You’ve been very kind.”

“You remind me of my grandmother.”

A few more steps and I’d be out the door.

Once outside, I turned my head away from photographers. I glanced sideways to see if anyone followed, but people jammed the front of La Scala.

“*Grazie, signorina. Buonanotte.*”

“*Ciao,*” the girl said.

On the crowded piazza, I continued to hunch over. White strands of hair fluttered across my face. Fog wreathed around lamplights. A throng of people gathered near the Galleria in front of the jum-

bo-screen.

Ahead was a group of middle-aged women. I joined in, close enough to be one of them.

We walked around the gothic cathedral and crossed the courtyard. The women stopped and watched the JumboTron. It showed chaos inside La Scala. BBC news anchors commented on my mysterious disappearance. The news ticker scrolled, Breaking News! Bel Shannon Missing!

Safe inside the throng of people, I watched along with everyone else as Nana’s steamer trunk was lifted out of the trapdoor. Jasper and Soner looked on. Did they think I was hiding in the trunk? Mavis stood by, crying, as if it were my coffin. Bel Shannon’s final resting place.

Fingers secured around the straps of the tote bag, I ambled away, hearing my name as people passed by.

“What do you think happened to Bel Shannon?”

“She’ll probably show up in Las Vegas, like Elvis.”

They laughed.

So did I.

I walked toward a taxi.

“Bet she’s still in the theatre.”

“A phantom of the opera.”

“Hope she’s okay.”

“Sure she is. It’s all smoke and mirrors.”

It sure was, all smoke and mir-

rors.

A light rain fell. I raised my naked face to bathe in the cool evening drizzle. With gratitude, I closed my eyes and breathed into my heart.

The curtain on my life opened as I vanished in front of the world. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story, and flash fiction writer with over 300 stories published internationally in print and Online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies.

DC's stories have appeared in: Penmen Review, Progenitor, 34th Parallel, So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, Lunch Ticket, and others.

DC was nominated twice in 2020 for the Pushcart Prize and in 2020 and 2017 for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net. DC's short story collection *Stepping Up* is published by Impspired. She lives on the California central coast.

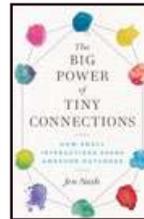
Find her at <https://www.dcdiamondopolous.com>

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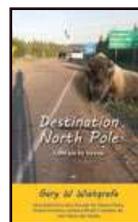
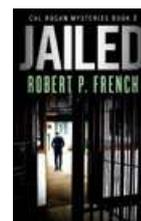
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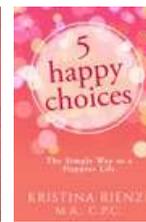
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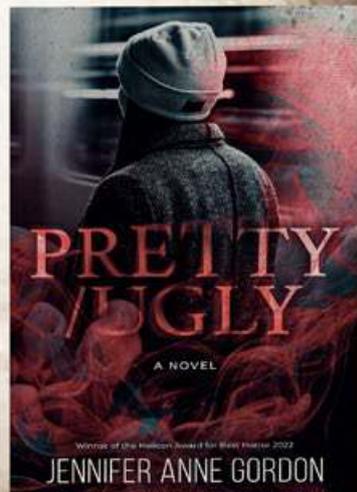
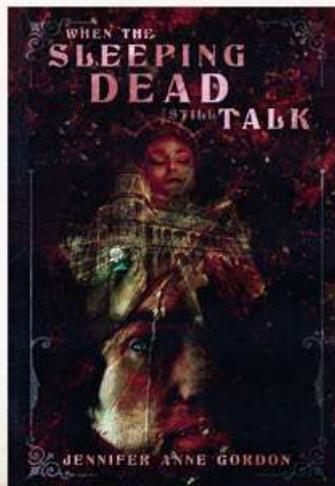
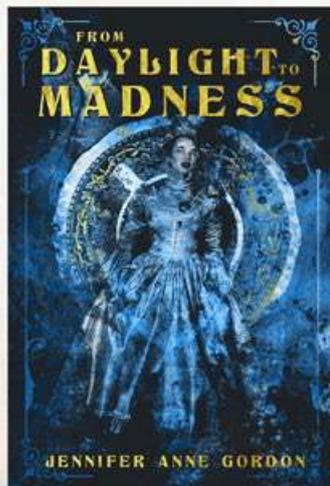
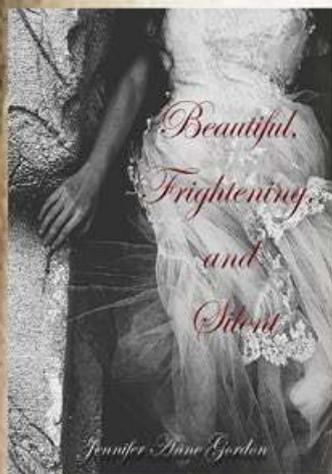
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How to Make **Authentic** Story Locations When You Haven't Been There

THE POWER OF REALISTIC FICTION:

MY DINNER AT THE HOTEL & RESTAURANT MONTEGRINO, TIVAT, MONTENEGRO.

by William Gensburger

As a writer I believe it is my job to convey as much reality as possible in the settings and characters of what I write. Often, however, I may have no experience of the setting in which I am writing. With the technology of the age is it possible to create a real and vivid setting, so real that locals could authenticate it? To answer that question I asked writers I know how they deal with reality if they have not been to a location. Here are some responses:

“Google is usually my first and main stop. I try to search as specific a term or name as possible, which, if one exists, will produce an official website. If it’s a town or city, I search for the chamber of commerce and tour companies (for larger cities), then for any

blogs focusing on the location. If it’s a business, I most always find a website that gives me what I need.” Anna J Stewart, www.authorannastewart.com

“I do web searches, local tourist information sites are often useful. TripAdvisor and other similar sites can sometimes have useful tidbits. Finally, Google Earth or other On-line mapping/streetview type sites, are very useful for seeing buildings and getting an impression of places close up. Realtor sites can also be good sources for specific buildings.” David M Kelly davidmkelly.com

“Google is usually my first stop. Then after I have exhausted all the links generated from that venue, I will check and see if anyone I

know is from that particular area and ask them a few questions to get a better feel for the place. Given my travels around the U.S. there are very few place I haven’t personally been to so I can also draw on my own memories of the place and the people who live there.” Richard Paolinelli www.scifiscribe.com

“It depends on if I have personal experience of the place I am writing about or not. If not I try to use local sites of the town/city and follow up with Internet searches for clarification on locations, streets, stores etc. When I can physically visit that is the best option.”

Mandy Barnett
www.mandyevebarnett.com

Google seems an obvious choice,

but like David M. Kelly, there are many more options to use such as [TripAdvisor](#) which offers reviews from tourists, [Google Street](#) that allows you to walk where you have never been. Realtor sites offer a look at properties and pricing. Anna J. Stewart's suggestion of the Chamber of Commerce is also good as it allows more information, although geared to visitors rather than residents. Blogs are excellent because so many people like to publish all manner of personal information about their lives, including video.

I want to know as much about a location (and even a profession) as I can before I write. I want to write from a place of knowledge and insight, not just facts, but as many sensory details as I can inject. As a writer it helps me to believe what I am writing. This in turn adds a level of reality to the characters. And sometimes it has interesting side effects, such as when a character realizes a limitation caused by the very reality I have added.

For this example of this article, I have utilized Google, Google Streets ([Google Earth](#)), TripAdvisor, YouTube, Local newspapers translated, blogs where possible, and as many images as I could get.

I have decided to dine at the charismatic [Hotel & Restaurant Montegrino](#), in the town of Tivat, Montenegro on the banks of the Bay of Kotor in the Mediterranean, an historic town encircled by Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and, across the Adriatic Sea, Italy.

I have never been to Montenegro. I got this much from a Google search and a [Wikipedia](#) article. I

attach imagery and source links at the end of this article.

The hotel, a 3 story building with green canopy above the street level and a hard to ignore neon sign, 'Hotel' in bright neon green, 'Restaurant' in fireman red, although rich with character as one of many buildings crammed along narrow streets. That came from Google Street View that allows you to travel in any road direction. You've likely seen the Google car with its periscope camera driving slowly through your own neighborhood.

While not the ritziest of hotels in the area, this one had a certain charm, subdued lighting, Tuscan yellow/orange colored walls and lots of red reflecting off it from painted tables and chairs, to the colorful artwork adorning the walls. The restaurant inside seats 30, tables with sage cotton tablecloths, sparkling wine glasses, and small tea lamps throwing splinters of lights off anything close by.

At one end is the bar, with two walls angled ninety degrees, and wrapping around one side, four rows high glass shelves and every alcohol bottle you can imagine. The area is densely packed, yet interesting to study. The counter below is cramped with varying objects from a dark wood Macanudo humidor, showing off the cigars within, a standing wine cooler, another cooler filled with ice and seafood, fresh for the day.

The wait staff are all smiles, well-groomed men and women, some speaking Russian and English—the menus are also in English and Russian, and the clientele a wide

range of ethnicity, all charmed together, chattering with the flamboyant hand gestures common to the region.

I order blue mussels, an Adriatic squid, grilled, along with a catfish that is dressed with thin shavings of green onion. I ask for a bottle of local wine, a red from the massive wine shelves on the other wall. Should I have ordered the national fish soup everyone raves about, the Chorbu, I ask the waiter. His name is Alexandre, or Alex as he tells me and he is in his early twenties, short sandy brown hair slicked back, tanned face and chiseled jaw reminiscent of a young James Bond. Alex smiles and tells me in perfect English that all the food is excellent and I can always return for a future meal.

On the subject of James Bond, the film 'Casino Royale' was filmed in Montenegro back in 2006, although in the town of Budva using the Hotel Splendies. The Casino exterior was actually the local spa building, its style suiting the image of the grand casino. So much for reality.

The food arrives, spaced neatly on the table and the presentation is simple yet appealing. The mussels are a medium size, the sauce lapping at the shells like the tide slowly ebbing inwards. I open the shell and remove the flesh with the small fork, immediately tasting it, the salty flavor mixed with the rich butter sauce. Fresh. I take the wine glass holding it up, looking for marks or fingerprints, all too common in American restaurants, but the glass is flawless and clear. I swirl the red wine a few times,

sniff at it pretentiously, then take a large sip, allowing the flavor of berries and a peaty woody flavor to linger before swallowing. I see Alex watching from a table away and nod my approval.

The squid, my favorite, is lightly seared with a white wine sauce and slivers of portobello mushrooms on the side. It is not chewy at all, a wonderful combination of texture and flavor. And finally I taste the catfish, also lightly grilled and covered with thin slices of fresh green onions, all atop a garlic-butter sauce. The fish falls apart as I try to lift it, the pieces I manage to get in my mouth melting.

The food is served on larger platters, enamel blue, but these are slightly chipped, a complaint that I had read on TravelAdvisor, a good source of reviews from people who have eaten here and, in fact have eaten the very meal I am writing about. From their words I have taken and added other elements of reality, the soft Italian music playing in the background, the occasional honking of the truck horns as they attempt to get the tourists on the street outside to move off the road.

This meal will cost me 75 Euros which considering the quantity of food and the bottle of wine is a steal. At least that's the general consensus of the tourists for whom I am playing avatar. Like them, I will have Alex call me a cab to take me to the airport when I am done.

Did I mention that Anna and Alex (a different Alex) were married here in May of 2021. She's Russian and he's from Mexico. The wedding cost 800 Euros. Their

website, where I discovered them, offered some details.

ARE YOU HUNGRY YET?

I hope that this shows the depth of reality that can be injected into a scene to bring it to life. As a writer I believe it is my job to convince you of that reality, to validate the rest of the story and the characters so that you can escape here, even if you are stuck at home, on your couch in an American suburb, glass of Cabernet in hand, devour-



ing the novel.

YouTube is filled with user submitted videos covering almost every topic in every locale. With video you can hear and see things that may not be shown on adver-



tising or website sources.

One other element that I have also found to be useful. Generate your characters into real people using an AI facial generator. You can find one at <https://generated.photos/faces>. There is something about seeing your characters alive.

I hope you found this article useful and fun. I also hope you are not now hungry, or wishing to hop on a plane for a visit, but if you are, take solace in the fact that I, too, am compelled.

My thanks to the authors who replied to my question at the start of this article, and also to Mickey Mikkelson, Publicist at [Creative Edge Publicity](#) for his assistance.





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The tastiest restaurant in Montenegro!

Review of Lazure Hotel & Marina

Review: June 4, 2019 via mobile

5.0

We came to this restaurant to celebrate the birthday of my husband, and we were shocked, as everything was just perfect. Such service I have never met in Montenegro. Menu is unique, and each dish, that we tried was delicious! Especially try homemade icecream from mussels. Food was delivered quickly and beautiful served. Such food selection is not typical for Montenegro, I know it. I live here 5 years!

Especially big thank for guest relation agent Danica. She will answer on all your questions, and for sure she knows about each inch of this place!

I highly recommend this place! More.

Date of stay: June 2019

Trip type: Traveled as a couple

Ask Anastasia D about Lazure Hotel & Marina

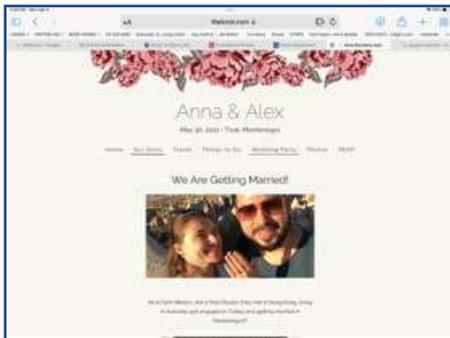
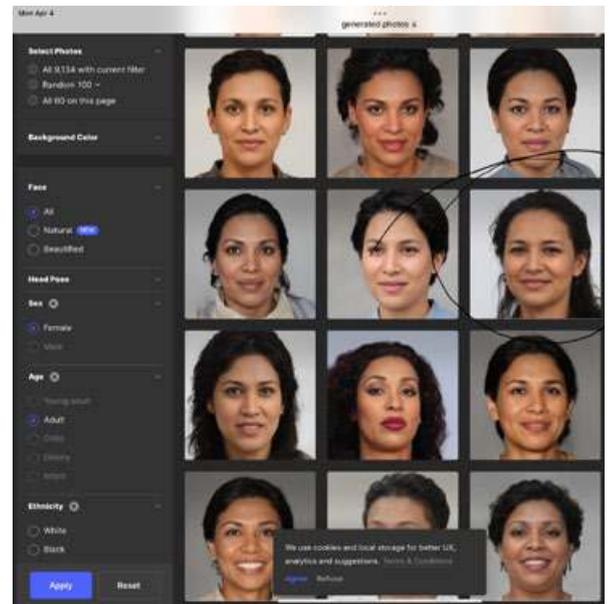
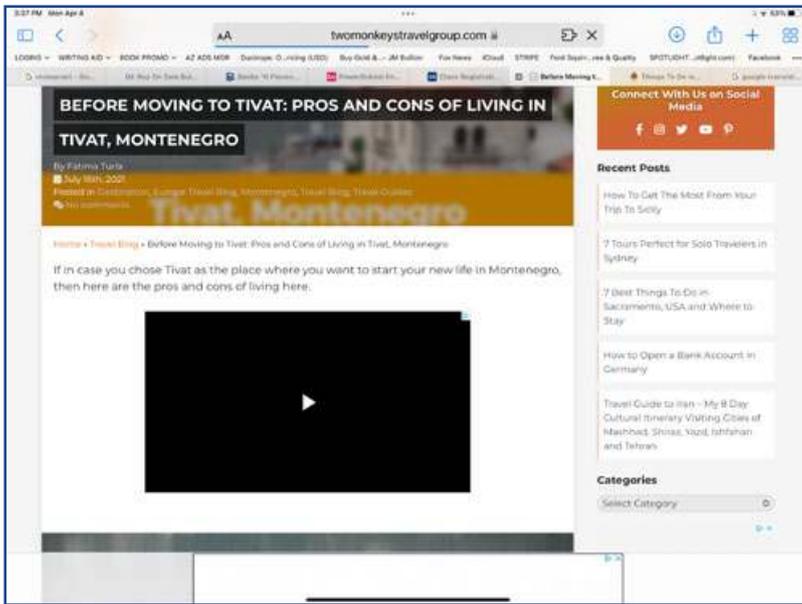
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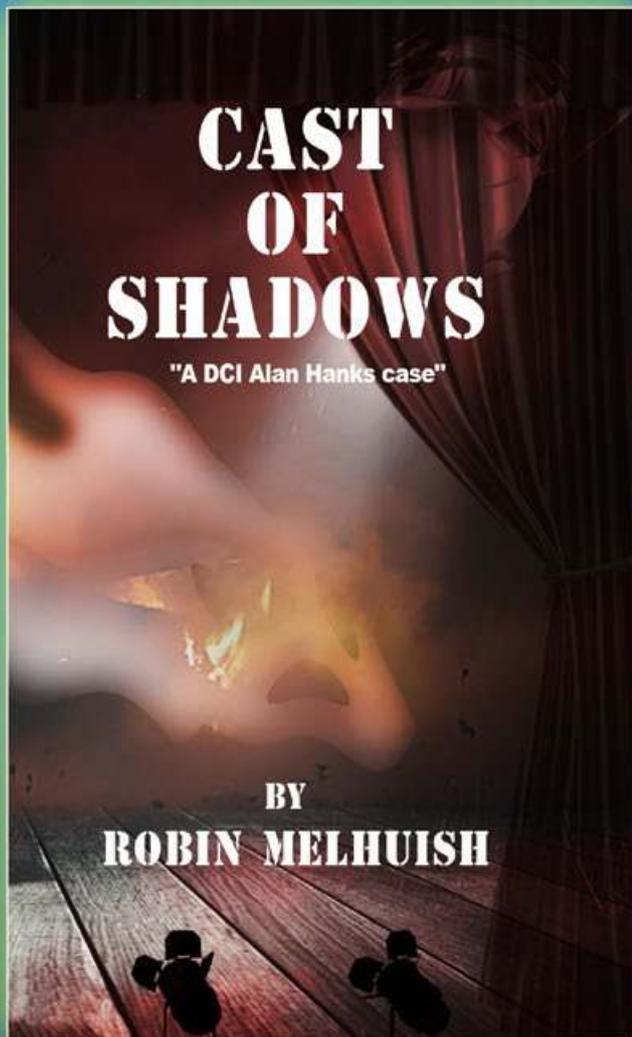
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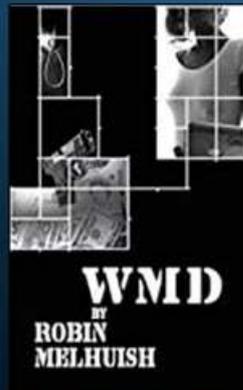
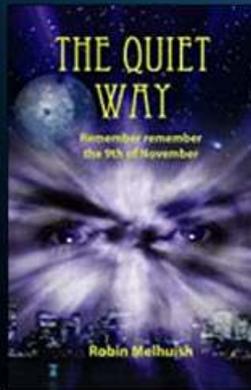
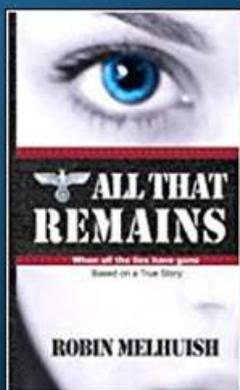
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How to Write Chapter Endings That Make Your Readers Turn the Page and a Book Ending that Leaves Your Readers Satisfied

by Jill Hedgecock

Whether it's the last few sentences of a chapter or the grand finale of a book, endings are crucial. I have been in a book club for 26 years and have learned a lot from our book discussions. Readers will forgive slow pacing, lackluster characters, and boring descriptions, and they will tolerate pompous prose and melodrama (to a point), BUT their patience will evaporate if, when they turn the final page, the author fails to deliver a gratifying ending. It doesn't have to be happy or expected. The ending doesn't even need to match one that they envisioned. But it must resonate.

For a writer, crafting endings can result in a great deal of angst. The stakes are high, particularly for chapters at the outset of a book. The endings of a first chapter can determine an agent's interest in representing an author or a publisher's decision to acquire the manuscript. Nailing the last sentences of a novel is just as critical. A stellar ending can motivate readers to tell their friends about your book and spur sales.

Writers have many choices about how to wrap up a scene or a book, and while there can be similarities in how writers should tackle book and chapter endings, there are several differences. Techniques to develop solid

chapter endings differ from novel endings because the goal of the last sentences of a chapter is to wrap up the scene and to keep readers turning the page, whereas the end of the novel should conclude the story as a whole.

SIX TIPS FOR WRITING SOLID CHAPTER ENDINGS

While finding strong endings may seem daunting, the following six techniques for writers can be used as a guide to break down the process. Successful chapter endings can easily fall into multiple categories. A chapter that ends with a question can also be a cliffhanger; a philosophical ending can reveal a change in character.

1. Leave the sense that more is to come. This ending is a great way to leave your protagonist unsettled. Maybe a character has a nagging feeling that there's something off about their situation. Perhaps a niece finds an old letter in the attic. Don't have her open the letter yet, save revealing the contents for the next chapter. What if a son discovers an area of newly turned soil in the back pasture and his dad's been missing for six days? The "more to come" ending might have him heading for the barn to find a shovel.

2. Cliffhangers. Similar to #1, cliffhangers are effective devices to keep readers engaged, but they are more sudden. Often there's mortal danger involved or a shocking revelation. A bank robber feeling a cold, steel gun barrel pressed to his head as he's about to escape is a classic example of a cliffhanger.

3. Questions. Endings using a question can be an internal thought or dialogue. Imagine a scenario where a single woman who comes home from working the graveyard shift finds her back door wide open, but no evidence of forced entry. She could have inner turmoil about how she'd been stupid again and forgot to lock it just like last week, but her concluding thought could be: "But this morning, I remember chipping my fingernail polish when I pulled the door close. Or was that yesterday?" Her uncertainty amps up the tension. The same scenario can also be wrapped up using dialogue. Our narrator can step inside and say, "Hello?"

4. Change in the Character. In this ending, the character may shift their understanding of who they are. A protagonist may decide to let go of a grudge. They may have been agnostic and decide to step into a church

for the first time. A character could choose a path they never thought they'd take.

5. Change in Setting or Circumstance. In this option, a pivotal change in the character's experience of the world occurs. A woman on vacation collides with her love interest from her hometown. A pastor inadvertently walks into a strip club. A terrorist leaves a bomb at a sports stadium and falls down the stairs.

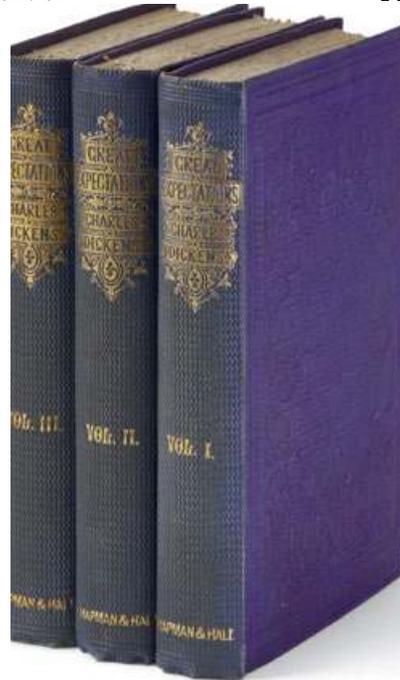
6. Philosophical. Nuggets of wisdom about life or the human condition are great ways to finish a chapter. For example, a ne'er-do-well character can recognize the futility of good intentions. A workaholic on the cusp of divorce can recognize that all the money in the world isn't worth losing his wife over. Be careful to avoid using clichés when using this technique.

It's best to mix and match the different approaches to chapter endings. Readers can grow weary of chapters that repeatedly end in questions or cliff-hangers. Chapters filled with excitement don't have to end with a bang. If you end a chapter filled with flowery prose with the protagonist falling asleep, your reader may grow bored with your book. Whatever angle you take, just make sure to end the chapter with a line that will keep readers turning the page.

CRAFTING A SATISFYING BOOK ENDING

Finding the perfecting ending to a book is hard. Hemingway wrote 40 different endings to decide on a fitting finale for *A Farewell to Arms*. Readers are more likely to take issue with a novel's conclusion than any other part of the story. They have invested hours of their time and they want the time spent to be worthwhile.

A reader's journey can be likened to the ascent of Mount Everest—they anticipate the exhilaration of cresting the summit as they turn to the final page. If the ending delivers, fans will stare at the view and sing their praises about the brilliance of the novel. But if they take that last step and the words have them backsliding down the mountain, readers will lament that they didn't reach their destination. All their hard work to get to that final page was all for naught. But not all reader's expectations are the same. Some readers don't mind if their ascent results in a hazy view and are content to allow the author to leave the conclusion open-ended. Others are interested



only in the author's version of events and feel cheated if a character's fate isn't revealed.

Dickens learned first-hand how failure to deliver a suitable ending can incite outrage. Because of public outcry, Dickens reworked the ending of *Great Expectations*. To this day, most readers only know the second ending. Dickens wrote of the revised ending: "I have put in as pretty a little piece of writing as I could, and I have no doubt the story will be more acceptable through the alteration." Even with the rewrite, the controversy continued, though. George Bernard Shaw said of Dicken's chosen ending for *Great Expectations*: The novel "is too serious a book to be a trivially happy one. Its beginning is unhappy; its middle is unhappy; and the conventional happy ending is an outrage on it."

While there can be exceptions, there are general dos and don'ts, a writer should consider when drafting the conclusion of a chapter. These rules can affect other parts of the book, so it's best to have a solid sense of a novel ending at the outset, but a writer shouldn't be afraid to shift directions as the storyline develops. A writer should also be aware about expectation specific to their genre. For example, romance novels must end with a happily ever after or happy for now scenario. A humorous novel can end with the punchline to a joke, but that approach would most likely be an inappropriate concluding

line in the murder mystery genre, especially if the narrator is a somber detective.

DO:

- ✓ Tie up loose ends and resolve the main conflict
- ✓ Keep description to a minimum
- ✓ Show how characters have changed or not changed.
- ✓ Include trivial details early that will play a role in the finale
- ✓ Continue the story after the climax

DON'T:

- ✗ Introduce a new character or subplot in the last 50 pages
- ✗ Create an Improbable Ending (don't leave the reader with an eye roll)
- ✗ End with "It was all a dream."

SIX WAYS TO END A NOVEL

1. Full Circle. In general, all beginnings in novels should to link to the ending. But in this type of ending, the opening and closing similarities can be literal. 'The Outsiders' by S.E. Hinton opens and closes with the exact same sentence.

Hemingway used the same setting to employ a circular technique in 'For Whom the Bell Tolls':

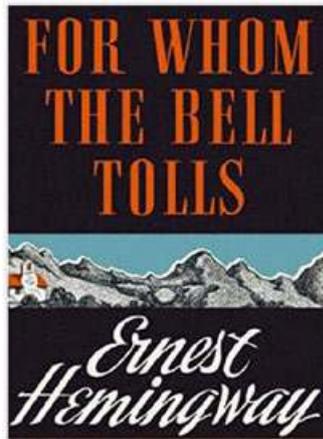


Beginning

Line: "He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead

the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees."

Ending: "He was waiting until the officer reached the sunlit place where the first trees of the pine forest joined the green slope of the meadow. He could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest."

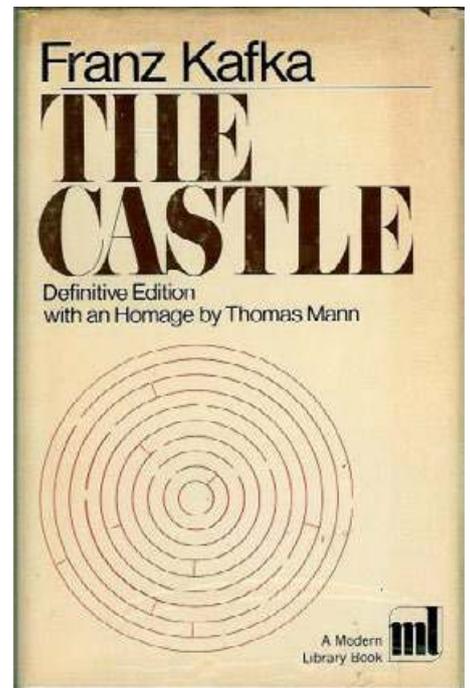


Mitch Albom's 'Tuesdays with Morrie' comes close to a nearly verbatim conclusion:

Beginning Line "The last class of my old professor's life took place once a week in his house, by a window in the study where he could watch a small hibiscus plant shed its pink leaves."

Ending: (in the Conclusion) "The last class of my old professor's life took place once a week in his house, by a window in the study where he could watch a small hibiscus plant shed its pink leaves. The class met on Tuesdays. No books were required. The subject was the meaning of life. It was taught from experience. The teaching goes on."

2. Open-Ended. Vague endings are often used in series to allow for stories



to continue or in standalone novels to allow readers to fill in the blanks. This approach is also a frequently utilized in literary novels. The extreme version of this option, the cliffhanger, isn't usually advisable because readers hate cliff-hanger endings, especially in a series where they feel manipulated into having to purchase the next book.

Some novelists have taken this approach so far as to conclude their books with an incomplete last sentence. 'The Castle' by Kafka ends mid-sentence. However, this wasn't the author's intention—Kafka died of tuberculosis in 1922 before the book was finished. But there are other books, where the unfinished sentence is intentional, such as in Jonathan Safran Foer's 'Everything Is Illuminated,' where the ending suggests the grandfather composing a letter to his grandsons has died before he com-

SHORT STORY *A Tiger's Tale*

by P.A. Farrell

ADVOCATES CAN BECOME BLIND TO THEIR MISSION BUT A LITTLE CHILD MAY PROVE TO BE THE ONE TO OPEN THEIR EYES.

The dull pain in her thigh was a reminder. It would always be so, and the memory of that grilling at the hospital would never leave the child's memory portion of her brain. Today, the hospital memory came back for another go-round of trauma and an adult understanding of those who eagerly look for things that aren't there.

In the hospital emergency room, a woman stands over her. The air smells of familiar antiseptics that assail the little girl's nostrils. Looking too large for any human head, the woman's face, surrounded by a rough halo of curly hair, comes within inches of her nose. Anger and authority are written all over her face. The social worker wants to have her way and the evidence she seeks.

It doesn't matter that the surgeon is waiting to perform emergency surgery; she will have her admission of guilt. They're about to wheel the gurney to the operating

room elevator, and she needs to get her evidence now. The social worker requires an entry of responsibility in her notes, and time is short.

"Tell me," she insists in a breath smelling of cigarettes and coffee. The noxious odors are unpleasant and alien to the little girl.

The light hurts the girl's eyes as the lamp flashes behind the woman's moving head. The green-tiled room is hot, and her leg is throbbing with pain. Her parents are outside, her father holding back the tears he so wants to free.

"They hurt you, didn't they," the woman continues with an increased intensity bordering on a command as the medical staff rushes to prepare for the emergency surgery.

"They burned you, and that's how you got that wound! Didn't your parents burn you?" The grilling continues in blatant disregard of the surgical sheets, the pole

for the IV, and the scurrying staff rushing to hold the elevator.

"Tell me what they did to you!" It was a command, almost a scream, in a tone the girl had never heard. But the woman fails to recognize the six-year-old's absence of fear of anyone or anything.

A child, a frail young tiger in a family of stoics, who challenges herself in feats other children avoid, knows she is right. The thought strengthens her resolve to respond to this agitated woman. And the words of her sister come to her.

Her older sister had said, "You remember when mommy and daddy were making believe they were fighting? Only three years old, and you picked up a coat hanger and ran at daddy yelling, 'You stop! You can't hurt my mommy.'"

Now, she would stand up again, but this time she is three years older, and the young tiger is more robust than before.

"They didn't hurt me! They did what the doctor told them to do, and they took me home. They didn't hurt me!" She screws up her face in defiance. Small for her age, she nevertheless feels suited to the task.

Frustrated, the woman turns to the staff in the room. "I know they hurt her. I know she's a victim of child abuse, but she won't admit it because she's afraid." The comment implores others to pitch in on her interrogation, but all stare at her in poorly contained disbelief, casting their eyes downward. The only notice is shuffling of feet and turning away as though busy with tasks.

A surgeon speaks in whispers to the girl's parents in one corner. "We don't know if we can save the leg. The decision to amputate, high up near the hip, won't be made until we get in there and see what we can do. It's a chance, but I wanted to prepare you in case we have to amputate."

The father stares off at his daughter who is talking to an overwrought, red-faced woman. Pulling her handkerchief from her pocket, the mother permits herself one low sob. Stoicism has always been her escape, and it has permeated her other children, but not this one, the last and smallest of her brood. The child she never wanted and tried to abort faces a life of disability. Was this the

mother's punishment?

The charity clinic obstetricians told her she would have twins, unthinkable in a family already in dire need of money to survive. "Do you want to keep this pregnancy," he asked with some hesitation. How could she tell him she didn't want this child?

Unable to say the words, a slow head movement indicated she didn't want the pregnancy to continue. The physician provides an injection to cause a miscarriage. Her husband would never know, and it would appear natural. But this one baby tiger refuses, hangs on to life and is born.

Good health didn't follow. The child had already managed to survive two episodes of pneumonia, one two years ago. She was the sickly child in the family. Would she survive this?

"If you have to amputate," the mother asks as she finds her voice. "Will she have an artificial leg?"

"No," the surgeon responds with a note of resignation. "It will be too high up for that."

"How will she get around?" Even the thought brought an involuntary shiver to her spine.

Looking at the mother as he shoves his hands into his pocket, his answer is anything but reassuring. "She'll always have to use crutches and a wheelchair."

The staff is whirling around the

room now, seeming to rush, and there's the faint clinking sounds of metal-on-metal as trays clash. In the distance, an elevator hums and jars to a stop as the massive door slides open widely. There are two main stops for this service elevator with a door in front and back; the operating room and the morgue.

Out of the corner of her eye, the mother sees the nurses in white outfits standing, changing their weight from one foot to the other. An air of impatience pervades the room.

The vision of her little girl and her nearly impossible task of mounting the house front steps of the house and then the flight of stairs to the second-floor cold-water flat is almost too much, but the mother maintains her calm appearance. She doesn't want to frighten her daughter, who might have a disability. Crippled. The word is unthinkable. It sounds like a pebble in a tin can in her mind as she hears it.

The surgical team propels the gurney with sheets flying toward the waiting elevator giving little regard for the children's services woman. Somehow, they know she wishes to file a criminal complaint against the little girl's parents.

The child knows where she is going, her prior illness has acquainted her with hospital procedures. But she doesn't know they might

have to amputate her leg, the reason her father has tears running down his rugged face now.

A nurse moves the parents quickly to a waiting room where one window affords a view of the elevator, and they watch as the table disappears into the elevator car and the door shuts abruptly with a thud. It is a sound that carries with it a sense of something ominous.

“Promise you’ll wake me when it’s over,” the girl asks a nurse.

“We will,” the woman responds. How does she even know to ask that question?

In the emergency room, the social worker seethes with anger. An elderly physician, who knows the family and has reviewed the girl’s chart, approaches the woman. The deep lines in his forehead appear deeper as he prepares to speak to her.

“Your zeal is admirable,” he begins, “but the intern who saw them initially told them to go home and apply hot compresses, as hot as she could bear. She only had a sizable puffy swelling on her leg. He didn’t know she had a torn vein in her leg.

“They followed his instructions and applied the hot compresses until the swelling continued to grow into something that frightened them. Then they brought their daughter back to the hospital. There was no child abuse. They

love that little girl, and you wanted to brand them, abusers? I think you need to go home and think that over.”

The physician turns and walks away, sighing, leaving the woman looking around as the rest of the staff drifts off.

Years later, there would be charges against the social worker from the emergency room of filing false complaints of child abuse. She would be found guilty of abuse of her authority and leave her job. No one knew where she went, but there was a rumor of suicide.

The little girl’s protests in support of her parents would be vindicated, but she would never know as she closed the buckles on her new pair of skates. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



P. A. Farrell is a freelance writer/psychologist, author of self-help books, writes for multiple Medium publications, has a Substack (<https://drfarrell22.substack.com/>), a website (drfarrell.net), a Twitter account (@[drpatfarrell](https://twitter.com/drpatfarrell)) and has been an associate editor for trade journals (PW) and a newspaper syndicate. Previously, she has had extensive experience in the field of mental health, working in psychiatric research, community mental health, psychiatric inpatient units, and has taught at the doctoral level at two universities. She also served as a psychiatric consultant for Disability determinations and has worked as proctor for medical students at NJ Rutgers Medical School.

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Call the Bluff by O. E. Tearmann

And after reading the first book, 'The Hands We're Given,' in this series 'Aces High Jokers Wild,' we begged (internally) to read the other books, and the authors heard our silent prayers!

How good was the first book? Well, let us just say that "The Hands We're Given" is one of the best books ever reviewed on Scribble's Worth. Are we reading the series of the year? We'll see, so onwards with the review!

Humor, and an explosion, greet us to start the second book of this series, "Call the Bluff," and after reading the Table of Contents, we realize we will surely have lots of trouble.

"Adrenaline was treating his guts like its personal skate park and taking some extra turns around his heart. But that wasn't his biggest problem right now. Hell, it didn't make top ten on his list."

As readers of the first book, we get the feeling of being home as soon as Janice starts cursing and grabbing collars, and we realize how much we missed this story, even if we read the first book not long ago. And... TWEAK!

Okay, we know, we know that Tweak isn't everybody's favorite char-

acter, but she made a bad ass appearance in this second book.

The hopeful, romantic, soft, understanding and cozy narrative that made us fall in love with the book didn't change at all with this second part of the series and felt like a perfect continuation of the story

"Go to bed," Aidan muttered into the kiss. "You're being weird again." "The word you're looking for is eloquent." Kevin rejoined with one of his sidelong smirks.

Okay. Heads up. Although there is romance, sex, and the heart-warming family bonds, the authors didn't forget that this is a Cyberpunk book and there is high-tension at every corner with dangerous missions. The plot this time isn't just about getting a team together, and running things as smoothly as Aidan can, but there is a massive mission going on that is "too big to drop," and by the way, the fierce commander Magnum explains it, it's scary as hell, and it will be almost impossible to do it. They have one chance, and one chance only, and if they fail... Everybody dies.

The question that sets this series, and this book as good or bad is: "How

the authors are going to pull off this gigantic stunt while also being believable in the process?"

If they just tell us, or imply, that Tweak pulled this off after 2 weeks of intense programming and coding alone, we won't believe it, at all. This is just too big, even for her. We want details, and we want them to be good. Will we get them?

In the midst of the chaos, the fear and the demands of such a dangerous mission, we also get the hint, the idea that the High Commanders of the rebellion, have some massive contacts inside the corporations that they are trying to fight. Now, this raises several questions—and increases the possibility of treason or set-up by at least a hundred-fold— "Are they all being played by the higher government they are trying to bring down?" We will have to discover, and there is only one way for that.

Oh, as a side note... you want to avoid eating before you read the first chapter of the book. Believe me. It, will, be, shocking!

How could they do that, and above all, can it be true? Given that many things that happen in this book are

based on reality, we ask ourselves: is this true? Will we degrade ourselves so much that we reach THAT level of wickedness and insensitivity? The sad reality is: we already see this type of behavior everywhere nowadays.

One thing about this book that I loved is that the author incorporated the theme of climate change and the attitudes of the American government and people, to the forefront of the book without making it pushy while passing on the urgency of it by making it a central issue in this same mission.

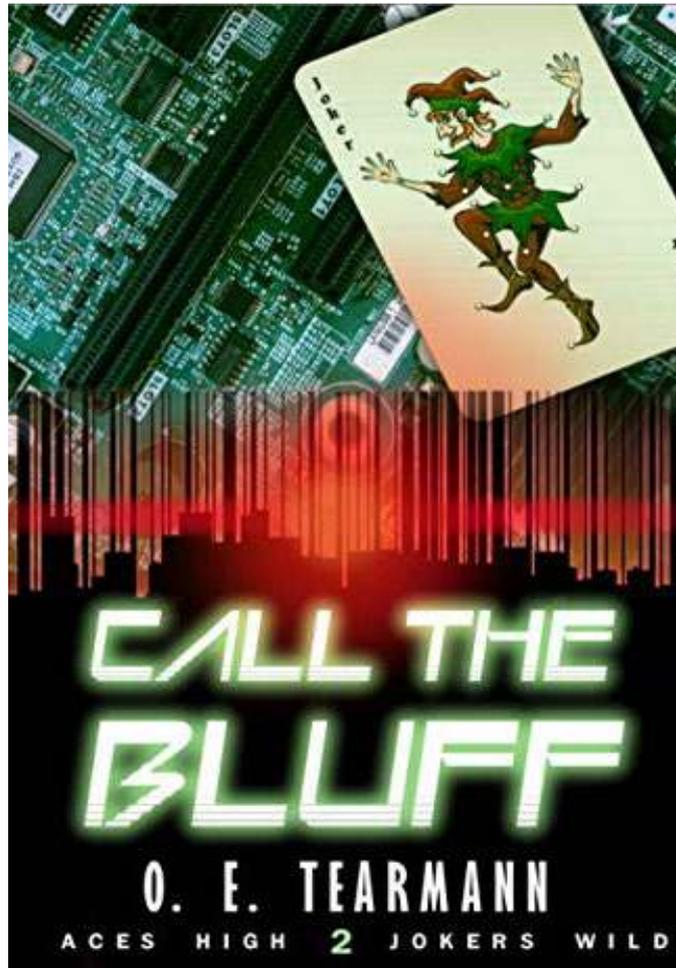
On a more positive note, Janice has some of the most creative curses ever. *“Holy Christ fuck me sideways on Sunday.”* and *“Oh sweet Jesus screwing the donkey he rode in on.”*

It’s lovely how the book, the story, the characters, the narrator, and the authors never give a “sure deal”. You can never know if they are going to succeed, and above all, the characters, no matter how skilled they are (except Tweak) never boast of a yet-to-be success. They know they can and most probably will fail, but they never stop trying. They try. They actually try. Let me try to explain it to you, dear reader, this way:

Have you ever read a book that the characters “tried”, but it felt like they were just trying because they “were the ones supposed to win?”, because they “knew” they were the heroes

and all they had to do was to fill their roles? Yeah? Well, the characters in this book aren’t like that.

You don’t feel this “pretentious attempt” from any of them—even Commander Magnum was DESPERATE! MAGNUM! The man of



steel, that is calm while the upcoming tornado is an inch from his face, was, desperate! (To his defense, he kept his cool. But still...) The man knew that this mission is the last bullet on his pistol (pun intended) and he has to make some good aim at this ephemeral, impenetrable foe if he wants to make a dent on it, and he has to hope, that the hit gives him enough seconds to run for cover from retaliation he is

going to get. Talk about tension, ugh?

When they roll into the first mission to the grid, the amount of information given in the previous book about the workings of the Grid, the rules of not being detected, replay in our minds, and we almost jump out of our skins when crew members make gestures and react in ways that will get them detected. By this point, we are so into the book that the authors don’t even have to remind us for us to react to the ads!

This book (and series), is not for the faint of heart, and it feels like a slap in the face to the ignorant, the righteous, and those who think that they are above their own human condition in some way.

Many times it slams down and steps upon the claims of religion, ego, narcissism, and immunity. It shows the choices we can make and how much taking the choice of cowardice costs, not only for one, but for all, inciting people to rebel, and speak up.

“But when perfect became a possibility, imperfect became criminal.”

“Cavanaugh’s corporate policies were a sick stew of hubris, exceptionalism and marketing, using people’s fear of being seen as less than worthy to sell them endless prescriptions and procedures. Any deviation was a reason to write people off and throw them away.”

“The stuff Ag plastered across its branding and its walls was a warped travesty of the religion. It didn’t encour-

age anything but blind obedience, fear of whoever was speaking on behalf of God and hatred of anything unusual.”

A book that makes you question, think profound thoughts, and realize subtle realities muted by the noise of today’s world.

“Why a language as beautiful and complex as English had to be so barren of words worth using for intimate relations he’d never understand.”

“How do you get a sense of human nature without literature? That’s why it’s part of an education.”

“The night crawled by like something injured.”

How can the Authors make satire, of satire? Brilliant!

A curious thing. Since the first day that Tweak entered the scene, she had bandaged arms, and we never asked ourselves why. Well, in this book, Tweak’s big secret is revealed to us, and things finally start to click.

Talking about things that click, it hit us why the authors chose the theme of cards (aside from the call handles and their names), and it’s ingenious! Here’s our theory: Given that this is a war against the corps, the rebellion has very limited resources, that are seen as cards, and they have to play them carefully and with the maximum impact. If we see cards as the bases they have, then we will see that the “Wildcards” makes sense, and here’s the kicker: “Aces High Jokers Wild”, so we get to see that the Joker is the bottom of the stack. And “wild-cards” are the ones that nobody gives much importance, which fits perfectly to the Wildcards crew.

Why is this so ingenious and funny through irony? Because... the best bet

they have against the Corps is using the cards that no-one wants. And as Janice would say: “Jesus on a cruise missile” that’s impressive!

The mental processes and coping mechanism that the characters go through in the story, the good, and the bad, specially stressed and anxiety are, for many readers, relatable. There is a part where one of the characters starts doing self-harm as a coping mechanism, and readers may want to mind that.

I think it was excellent that it was put in the book, specially the way it was. It wasn’t out of the blue; the authors put the practice, yes, but it grew organically as a state of hyper stress and under dire conditions after days of tense situations on a character that already has problems in the area.

It was an enlightening perspective, an enlightening approach to it, to the point that people who never understood how can others start to cut themselves get an idea of how it may start and at the same time, not incentivizing the practice!

You better have a seatbelt for your tears because they will crash to the ground reading this fast-paced emotional adventure of a novel. You have been warned.

To finish this off, we will answer a few questions you might have.

“Is this second book better than the first?” Oh, yes.

“Does it connect to the previous one and gives a great continuation?” Oh yes, it’s perfect.

“Is the story telling and narrative and characters as good as the first?” Much, much better!

“Is this a series worth reading?”

You are wasting time by not reading it. Grab the first book, this one and the rest of the series because this is a MASTERPIECE!!!!

PROS:

EXCELLENT plot

EXCELLENT narration

EXCELLENT character construction, dynamics, depth (oh they are DEEP), interaction, mental processes, reactions, they are true to their base and are SOLID!!!!!!• EXCELLENT emotional construction of characters. Simply AMAZING

EXCELLENT atmosphere, both of the different scenes that tend to crawl under our skins with tension and softness

EXCELLENT descriptions

EXCELLENT experience of reading

EXCELLENT romance

EXCELLENT sex scenes

EXCELLENT illustrations of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. Just AWESOME!

CONS:

Not even one.

FAVORITE CHARACTER: Janice!

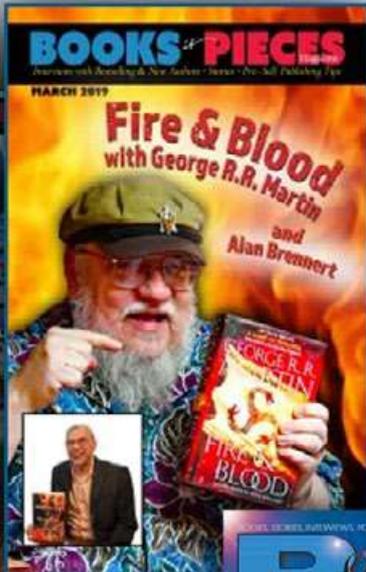
LESSON OF THE BOOK: “Don’t touch Tweak.”

Cover score: 9.4/10

Book Score: 9.5/10

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- An Indie Next Pick!
- One of Publishers Weekly's "Most Anticipated Books of Spring 2020"
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Lambda Literary Award-winning author TJ Klune's bestselling, breakout contemporary fantasy that's "1984 meets The Umbrella Academy with a pinch of Douglas Adams thrown in." (Gail Carriger)

A magical island. A dangerous task. A burning secret.

Linus Baker leads a quiet, solitary life. At forty, he lives in a tiny house with a devious cat and his old records. As a Case Worker at the Department in Charge Of Magical Youth, he spends his days overseeing the well-being of children in government-sanctioned orphanages.

When Linus is unexpectedly summoned by Extremely Upper Management he's given a curious and highly classified assignment: travel to Marsyas Island Orphanage, where six dangerous children reside: a gnome, a sprite, a wyvern, an unidentifiable green blob, a were-Pomeranian, and the Antichrist. Linus must set aside his fears and determine whether or not they're likely to bring about the end of days.

But the children aren't the only secret the island keeps. Their caretaker is the charming and enigmatic Arthur Parnassus, who will do anything to keep his wards safe. As Arthur and Linus grow closer, long-held secrets are exposed, and Linus must make a choice: destroy a home or watch the world burn.

An enchanting story, masterfully told, *The House in the Cerulean Sea* is about the profound experience of discovering an unlikely family in an unexpected places and realizing that family is yours.

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