Jobz Are Us: The Ethical Dilemmata of the Humble Scrivener



Toiling away here in the bloggy vineyard, Your Narrator finds himself in near-constant search of gainful, remunerative scribbling. Oh sure, regaling the tens of loyal ***i2b*** followers with insight, pith<fn>Yeth. Pith.</fn>, and *tres bon mots* in return for your undying adulation is all the reward an inky wretch could hope for. But the family has this annoying tendency to, you know, eat, so I expose my tender talents to the cruel world in hopes that someone will toss a few shekls my way.<fn>That Donate button over to the right has not brought the expected riches, needless to say.</fn> <fn>The mere mention of which – the Donate button, that is – is of course, a classic example of shameless whoring, one which allows the reader a choice between casting judgement on Your Narrator or of empathizing with his plight.</fn> <fn>And, also too, this mentioning – re: the judgement v. empathy conflict – potentially instantiates a *frisson* of guilt in the freeloading reader, which pointing out represents a further, and perhaps more pathetic, instance of Narratory whoring.</fn>

So I troll, I dig. I hustle. And occasionally, I am rewarded beyond my wildest dreams when I find an inducement like this:

> *Do you love essential oils? Do you love to write about them and take pictures?*
> *[….] Essential Oil company is looking for someone who is*

> *passionate and knowledgeable about essential oils. We currently have a blog and we are looking to add guest editors/bloggers to our mix. Will will pay per post which will need to include general information about essential oils, DIY projects, recipes or other ideas. Posts must include images.*

The photo at the top accompanies this hustle, which appeared on Craigslist,<fn>Pro tip. Job ads on Craigslist are maximum sketchy.</fn> I love this: in itself, it appears to have been written by a 7-year old ESL student. "Will will pay…" But scoreboard! They realize they need a writer!<fn>A plight more common that most would think, and one that goes unrepaired despite the glut of folks like me who stand at the ready to make your communications shine!</fn> <fn>Too much hard sell? Sorry, got a little over enthused.</fn>

Further, its appeal to the aspirant writer's *passion* for essential oils bears all the earmarks of a near-empty paycheck for the writer's work. Come for the oil! Stay for the love! Plus, photography!!!

Really, Your Narrator chortled heartily at this one, not even needing to get into the 4th grade trick of mis-attaching the modifier in a way that throws shade as to which is truly *essential* in their minds: the oil or the blogger.<fn>Fun fact: if you are picky and priggish about language and its (mis)use, you will never find yourself unamused in our culture. You may also never find yourself invited to parties and the like. Is that trade-off worth it?</fn>

But this is far from the funniest/oddest job description I've ever heard. Travel back through the misty clouds to last fall….

The result of a hot tip, I found myself a-phone with a marketing agency that specializes in providing ghost-bloggers/tweeters for various publishers and their author

list. This allows the tormented author of *belle lettristic* masterpieces (as well as authors of, let us say, non-*bl* titles) to maintain a daily presence on the Internet tubes as a witty, friendly, 'hey-I'm-your-old-pal here sharing recipes and anecdotes and asides as I take frequent (up to ten a day) breaks from my *bl* and/or non-*bl* musings', when in fact, a writer working under deadline, regardless of the relative *bl* and/or non-*bl* merits of the work, definitely does not have surplus time/wit/inclination for such base-level whoring.<fn>That's for guys like me!</fn> Thus does it fall to schlockingly underpaid ghost writers to maintain the illusion of your favorite author as an active and engaged *pal* with her readers, when in fact, she is likely cranking out sub-mid-list potboilers at a rate that would have made Elmore Leonard quail.

And let's go ahead and get out of the way any illusion re: the *bl* and/or non-*bl* divide. The authors/titles are decidedly down the prestige meter here; we're not talking anyone/thing you'd likely read about in the NYRB or NYTBR. In fact, what we had in this case was a stable of ghost-writers churning out mass-pulp fiction under specific trade names, kind of like the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* titles of my youth, but without quite as much class.

So, here I am, spinning myself as the perfect fit for the job of ghost-writing social media *content* for someone who does not exist but is rather being made manifest by a gaggle of scribblers who, like myself, are ghost-writing for some *nom de plume* who does not really exist.<fn>This delightfully meta recursion could go on forever, like one of those Nam June Paik installations with video cameras and monitors replicating into infinity. Could I get so many (imaginary) authors assigned to me that I would have to sub out the daily Intertubes witticisms to yet another level of people pretending to be someone pretending to be a person who does not exist anywhere other than a book catlague?</fn> <fn>Even more challenging:

assuming the level of one's persona-creating prowess – maybe even to the point where you've really devised some seriously recognizable and individuated character traits and proclivities for these authors who do not truly exist – would one also be able to deploy the epic juggling chops one would need to keep each of the various non-extant "people" sorted out in one's daily creation of "witty, friendly, 'hey-I'm-your-old-pal here" dispatches, or would eagle-eyed readers be able to detect your various fabricated personae bleeding one into another, thereby undermining the, not integrity, no, but the structural resilience of the whole facade. Say it with me, people, this thing is getting fraughter by the minute.</fn>

It turned out that this agency had two specific clients. One is a publisher of potboilerish steampunk thrillers, but, said the agency rep, they had plenty of people to keep that social media illusion rolling. The other publisher, said the rep, presented a little more of a challenge, and this is where she hoped I "might be able to help, but, ah, it is, well, a little delicate."

Interest engaged! Do tell, what is this mystery challenge?

> *Please don't be offended…*

Offended? Damn, I'm dying to find out! Tell me, tell me, please!

> *…but how would you feel about ghost blogging for authors of gay male erotic fiction?*

Ya gotta admit: as job-related questions go, this beats out even a gold standard like "Do you love essential oils?" by a country mile.

You would have been proud of Your Narrator. He was silky, unruffled, and decidedly unoffended. This was some kind of challenge. Could I do it? Who knew? So I exuded that reliable

and unearned confidence that served me in good stead all these years.

> *Yeah, I'm pretty sure I could handle that. I love new challenges. But you should know that I'm a 30-year married hetero with two kids.*

There was a relieved sigh at the other end of the line (apparently, the agency rep<fn>Who, as it happened, was breast-feeding her child during our call, a fact that she had shared early on in our telephonic relationship for reasons that were not completely clear. But I don't judge. I was likely in boxers at the time, myself, though there was no human creature attached to me.</fn> had borne the brunt of more than a few churchy/homophobic rants), and she said:

> *That's ok. Most of the authors aren't gay, anyway. In fact, most of them are straight women.*

I allowed that this was a fascinating tidbit. Please, do go on.

> *Yeah, in fact, we did some market research and discovered that 85% of all our sales were to married women between the ages of 40-55. Almost all of the authors fall in that group, too.*

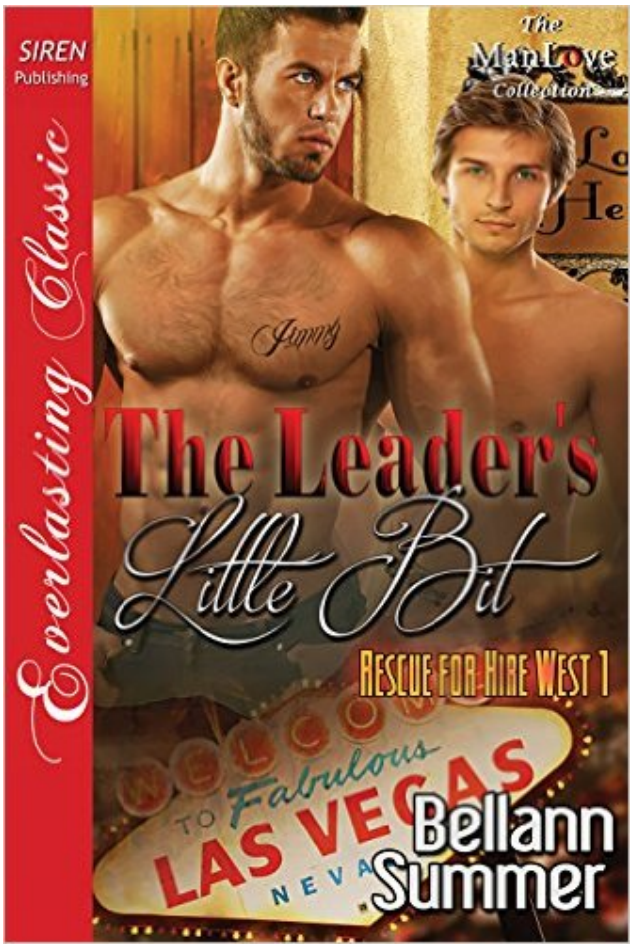
You know what they say (and of course, *they* are always right): You can't make this shit up.

So to re-cap: the job was to provide ghost writing services to authors who were in fact ghost writers themselves, writers pretending to be differently gendered *and* gay; straight women writing pornography (excuse, erotica) about man-on-man/men encounters for other straight women. And my role was to execute the friendly/witty/your-good-pal online personae to provide the so-called authors' fans with a sense of connection

one-to-the-other. I believe this is a situation for which the word *simulacrum* was specifically coined.

I did not get the gig. I guess things were already confused enough without dropping an aging, hetero, patriarchal penis person into the mix.

So next time you are spot a book like this, keep this little tale in mind. It may not be quite what you think. Or, if you are a married woman between the ages of 40-55, it might be exactly what you think.

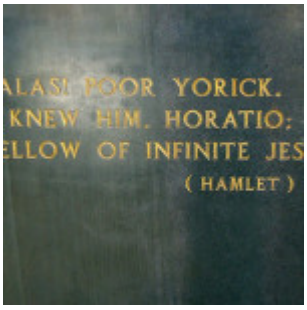


This is not from the publisher in question, but it is pretty representative of the title list I saw.

Who needs a Jade Helm conspiracy when this kind of thing is going on?

My. Favorite. World.

Infinite Quest



Sept 12 – David Foster Wallace died 7 years ago today. Maybe died isn't the right word, though it's at least partly true. He killed himself; took his own life. This fact still makes me sad and angry and scared all at once.

The best way to counter these feelings is to read some of his work.<fn>If for no other reason than that his work is the only part of him that we have any legitimate claim to. Angry at the guy? Shit. I owe *him*.</fn> His essay from the January, 1996, issue of *Harper's*, which became the title piece from his collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, is the single funniest and most "readable"<fn>Readable here connoting 'something not too weird or difficult'. In fact, everything I've read by DFW – which is pretty much everything that's been published plus a glimpse of a few of his notebooks at the Whitney Biennial – is terrifically readable and worth every second it takes to look up unusual words, refer to yet another footnote, or just to re-read certain sentences over and over because they are just too wonderful to take in at once.</fn> piece in his entire output. I've just finished it for the eleventieth time and it's got me hungry for more. "*E Unibus Pluram*: Television and U.S. Fiction" is up next,and it's sort of an essential piece for anyone interested in culture and the challenge of retaining our humanity amidst a dazzling array of shiny objects.

I find it by turns amusing and annoying that DFW is characterized as a fetish object of a hipster crowd way younger than me, that he somehow is the prototypical voice of 'this' generation. This is bullshit: DFW is of my generation. Our lives tracked more or less the same time span, though mine has endured a tad longer. In *Infinite Jest*, he wrote of a future that is more or less now; really, though, he was writing about a *present-then* that was the product of the culture of our childhoods.

It also pisses me royally that *Infinite Jest* is known as *that* book that everybody bought and nobody ever really read, save for a few precious bookish beardos. This tired trope likely arose from critics and other malcontents who felt the need to have/express an opinion but were too lazy to bother reading the actual book – thus inoculating themselves from accusations of laziness, because duuuuude, it's like *Finnegan's Wake*, knowhatimean?<fn>Pass the Bret Easton Ellis and the McInerney. It's easier to chew.</fn> I grant the first 60-80 pages are little disorienting, but after that, it's a roller coaster thrill machine that is every bit as addictive as *The Entertainment* that serves as the book's macguffin. A book about addiction that is thoroughly addicting? Even better, a book that has its characters agonizing over and within their addictions while you, the reader, begin to wonder if maybe you ought to put the book down and eat or shower or go to work or something, but no, screw that, keep reading. That's some badass legerdemain right there, people.

DFW is enjoying something of a mass(ish) cultural *moment* right now. There's that movie with Jason Segal as Wallace, based on an interview transcript from the mid-90s, that has DFW's surviving family suffering their own case of the fantods, suggesting with no small amount of justification that this kind of filmifaction of DFW is exactly the kind of mediated nonsense that he, DFW, would have hated and mocked with relentless passion. But no matter: it is, as the DC

punditocracy like to say about every fabricated scandal, “out there”, and it thus seems to have generated a strange<fn>Strange because he died only 7 years ago, though it feels much longer, likely because he had been mostly silent for so long.</fn> *renaissance* in DFW fandomry and scholarship.<fn>Which, if you’ve read any of the scholarly work to emerge so far, is barely distinguishable from the fandomry, save a certain highly recognizable tone of pedantry apparently essential for academic publication.</fn>

Curiously coincident with the movie was the publication this year of an enormous brick – suitable for a guy who wrote the epically brick-like *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* – called *The David Foster Wallace Reader*, which presents around 1000 pages of essays, articles, short stories, and novel excerpts, and, most importantly, a few hundred pages of previously unreleased and obscurely published early works. My favorite part of the book are the notes and class syllabi he used for teaching. But mostly, I think, the people who bought it were, like me, yearning to place another DFW brick on their shelf, knowing full well that this was the closest we were going to get ever again.

I know there are other writers out there who deserve as much attention as I give Wallace. In fact, there are several who actually do get even more because of the relatively small output Wallace left behind.<fn>Rushdie, Moseley, Delillo to name a few. When do these guys ever sleep?</fn> But there is something about Wallace that drills right into my core.

Years ago, long before his death, someone asked me why I liked DFW’s writing so much. I said it was because reading him was like hearing my own voice inside my head if I had a better vocabulary and were much smarter. We were roughly the same age, grew up with the same general atmosphere of teevee, consumption, weird conformist culture, and tennis. Reading him felt like reading myself.

That was a pretty comforting thing, having someone out there grappling with the same kinds of angsty, middle-class, white boy problems, taking things on from a somewhat nerdly perspective but also bringing that weird Carlinesque outlook to the absurdities that our cossetted upbringing seemed to cultivate like mushrooms. Well, it was comforting right up until the day he killed himself. Then it became fucking terrifying.

Because here was the crux: here's this guy, representing my mutant tribe of people who grew up inside the privilege and the comfort and the sheer whiteness of it all and *knew* that there was something amiss, that this incessant anomie was no accident, was actually not just a product *but was actually a feature of* the environment. And he saw it and got it and reported on it in a way that let us hold our deformity up for inspection and find some kind of strategy for dealing with the back-and-forth of we-have-no-right-to-complain-but-jesuschrist-things-sure-are-a-bundle-of-fuck. And in doing so, he won accolades, received a Guggenheim and a truck full of other awards. Had a fucking endowed Roy Edward Disney Chair in Creative Writing created just for him at Pomona College – dude looked like he had the world on a string.

And so one hears the news and goes, damn, that guy had it going <u>on</u> and I'm barely stringing a decent sentence or two together outside of my little whore gigs where I'm crafting allegedly pithy messages that are making the world a safer place for insurance adjusters or some such. And we're the same age and have to wonder, his voice sounded just like my voice (if I were smarter &c.), and my shit's nowhere near as together as his shit (the imagination at this point has its own engine and power source), but he took a look at it all and decided, nope, too much to bear, and took lights out. How do I measure into this equation?

Add to this that so far in that year two of my friends had taken the same way out, and that less than two months

later *another* friend – all of us around the same damn age, mind you – made the same choice, and I gotta tell you: I was terrified.

We pretty quickly started hearing about how his was the end battle of a long life struggling with clinical depression, and that his family were not all that surprised by the event. I re-read *Infinite Jest* that fall and was struck by how much sadness was there. It was just bone-breakingly sad to read, so I read it again to see if I had been insane to recall the book as so wickedly funny. Turns out it was both – both incredibly funny and horribly sad and filled with almost too much truth about how we try to deal with a world that serves up both sad and funny in such apparently random and heaping servings. And that – crucially – that the only apparent strategy that made any sense was to find some way of connecting, really, with someone else. And then, to accurately describe how fucking hard that can be, to make that connection, not matter how much you know you should.

And so what does he – or at any rate, his thoughts that made it to a page – what do these ideas do for me *now?* I mean, crafty fking christ, if the guy who wrote the way you thought you'd like to write ends it all so gruesomely, what's left?

Well, first I was left confused and scared and, frankly, pretty depressed. <fn>His death was not the cause of my depression, per se, but that this should have come along at a time when life was what h/we would refer to as *fraught* made things even more, well, fraught.</fn> But later – and especially after *The Pale King* came out, unfinished warts and all – I saw something else. Instead of thinking I might write that way if I were a "real" writer – and not just some ho for hire – I started to think about maybe, sort of, maybe actually being a real writer, maybe doing the hard work required to figure out if you have anything to say and the ability to say it.<fn>The jury remains forever out on this question. Ask any writer sitting in front of a blank page.</fn> But then time

passed and nothing came of it and I ignored this kind of insistently annoying Epiphany-like thing that refused to be ignored. Which of course, the trying to ignore that which refuses to be ignored, only engenders more angsty fraughtness, &c.

And then, I endured My Apocalypse, and a couple of weeks after I left hospital, I was lying on the sofa in a dark room when – and I shit you not – when an entire written piece started to appear full-blown on the ceiling.<fn>And yes, there were footnotes on the ceiling, and complete sentences, too.</fn> And I rushed to the computer for like the first time in 4 months and sat down and wrote *The Chronicle* in its entirety and started "publishing" it in pieces on the Facebook machine. And lo, it was rough and sloppy and funny and tender, and my Epiphany-like thing just smiled quietly to itself.<fn>Some of you have read *The Chronicle*. It is under revision, but you got the bloggy first draft blast. You'll tell your grandkids someday.</fn>

And here we sit, faithful denizens of this here bloggy vineyard – which by no coincidence whatsoever takes its title and *raison d'ecrir* from *The Pale King* – the words tumbling down like a poorly constructed simile on a shifting foundation of soft metaphors. And I thank DFW for his words – his Work, for it was truly some audacious labor – and for his ability to stave off his demons for as long as he did. He gave us what he had. I can miss him and wish he were still writing for us, but I can't be angry at him for checking out. Just sad. And, oddly and thankfully, a little inspired.

So today, hot on the heels of National Suicide Prevention Week<fn>Which irony would not be lost on D.</fn>, I'll thank all of you to remember, also, too: shit's never as dark as it may seem. When the imagination creates it's own dark engine and gloomy source of power, reach out. Keep going. The quest, it is infinite.

My Favorite World #24



It’s book week at MFW!

Two great reads under my belt in the past few days – Walter Mosley’s *Debbie Doesn’t Do It Anymore* and Haruki Murakami’s *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*. Coming off a failed attempt at Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, it was a relief to pick up a couple of winners.

I just finished the Murakami this afternoon, and it pushed all my buttons. Deeply felt, beautifully written<fn>If the translator is to be believed.</fn>, and paced like a slow walk in the woods. Tsukuru is a 36 year old man who suffered a terrible sadness at age 20, nearly died (or attempted suicide) as a result, and has lived a dull and hermetic existence ever since. The book is his long-overdue journey to understand (or not) and come to (or not) a sense of acceptance. It seems that Murakami’s lifelong project is to try to make sense of loneliness and alienation, and in this book it’s no longer buried under metaphor; the loneliness is front and center this time.

It’s almost a trademark of Murakami to focus on a disaffected, emotionally frozen protagonist. He’s done it often, and well, but it never feels as if he has settled into formula, from Toru Okada in *Wind Up Bird Chronicles* to Kafka Tamura in *Kafka on the Shore* to Tengo Kawana in *1Q84*. Tsukuru is similar

to these characters, but distinctly his own man, no small irony with the central conceit of the novel asserting that he is inherently bland and colorless.

The ending<fn>Which I loved!</fn> leaves many questions unanswered, and as I approached the end and realized this was to be the (ir)resolution, the sense of warmth and affection I felt for Tsukuru multiplied itself. Some people hate the unresolved ending, but I'm not one of them.<fn>Please refer to the Legal Disclaimer at The Immunity Manifesto for details.</fn> I loved the ending<fn>Yes, loved!</fn>, one of the most satisfying book closings I've enjoyed in years.

Previous Murakami novels include *Kafka on the Shore*, *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle,* and *1Q84*. I loved them all, and there are many more waiting for me. He's hugely popular in Japan; *Colorless Tsukuru* sold over 1 million copies in the first week of release in Japan. He's worthy of the hype.

(btw, my daughter's English class read *Kafka on the Shore* last year. I was pretty excited about this and I re-read it along with her. But at some point in the reading, one of the students told her mother that there was s-e-x in the book. Said mother stormed into the school and demanded that they stop teaching the book. Sadly, the school caved. I remain furious with this meddlesome, bible banging rube. Definitely *not* a contributor to My Favorite World.)

There are some similarities between *Tsukuru* and *The Goldfinch*. The protagonist in each book suffers a traumatic emotional episode as a teenager. Both books explore in great detail the interiority of the main characters, and do so at a slow, nearly glacial pace. Yet *Tsukuru* was so compelling I read the full 400 pages in less than two days; with the *The Goldfinch,* I could not wait to put it down every time I picked it up, and after 200 pages over two weeks, I finally couldn't stand another word of it. I can't put my finger on why, necessarily, other than I experienced Tartt's writing as

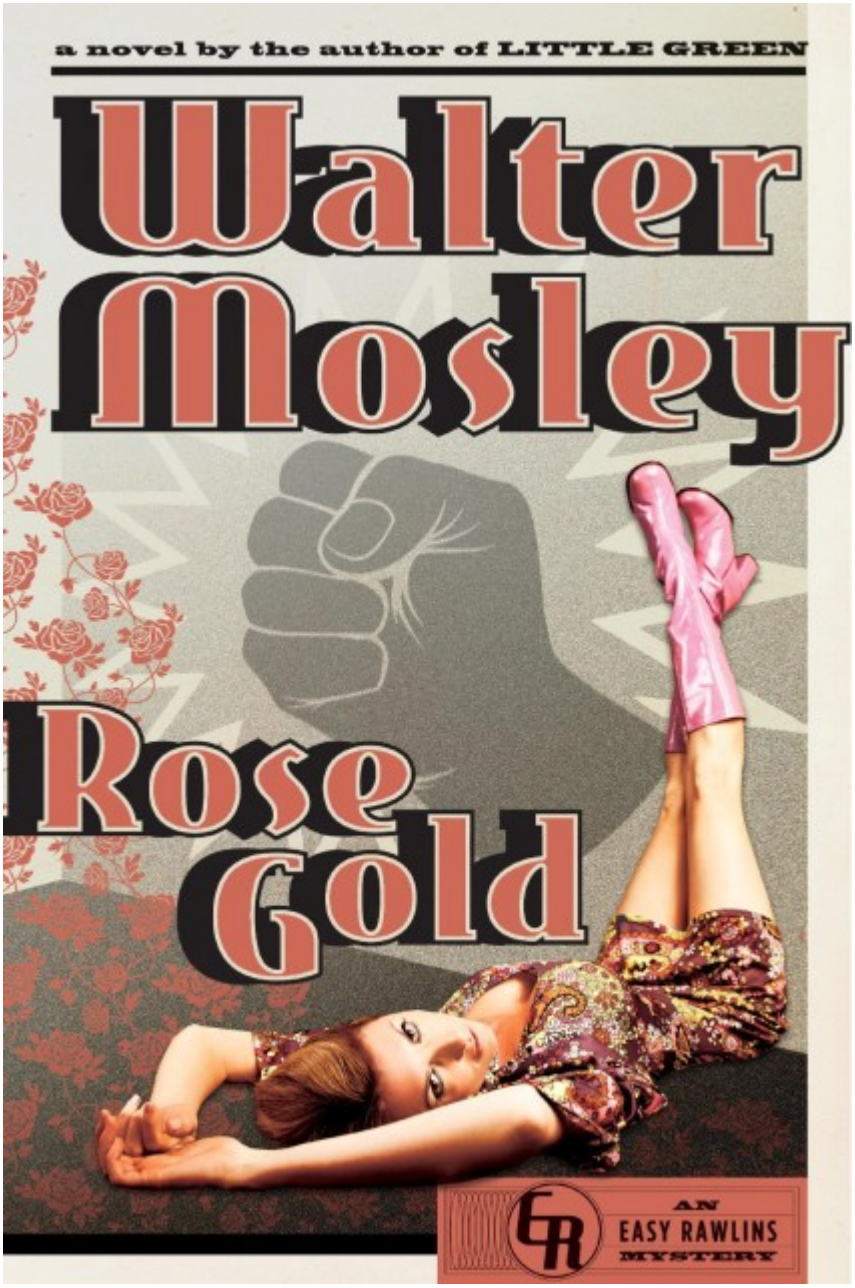
slooow for the sake of being slow, almost like a technical demonstration.<fn>Watch me! Watch me!</fn> With Murakami, the slowness had a forward rhythm to it that gave me the sensation of living inside Tsukuru's insular and measured world; it felt like an organic aspect of the experience rather than a parlor trick.<fn>I realize I'm in the minority on *Goldfinch*, and do not suggest that if you liked it you're wrong or anything like that. I might actually have liked it at another moment in my life. Books are funny that way.</fn> End of crappy comparative lit exposition…read the Murakami. You'll be glad you did.



Walter Mosley continues to amaze. He's written more than 45 books, and I've read around 30 of them. None have made me feel like I wasted my time. *Debbie* is about a porn megastar in L.A. who decides to make a break from the business. Mosley gets deep behind her character's motivations and history; we get a real sense of Debbie as a person, not just, as she puts it, "a set of orifices on the screen". Add to that a suspenseful plot and Mosley's mastery of language and sly sense of humor…well, it's a quick read and a winner. And as always, Mosley uses his characters and plots to examine the dynamics of life as an

African-American.

Sitting at hand is the latest in Mosley’s Easy Rawlins series, number 13. Like most of his fans, Rawlins is where I first got to know Mosley, starting with *Devil in a Blue Dress* in the early 90s. Unfairly, this series about an accidental LA private eye in the post-WW2 era got Mosley pigeon-holed as a mystery/crime writer<fn>A genre I truly love, btw.</fn>, but he is so much more. Rawlins is the author’s eyes and ears, showing and interpreting the post-war experience of African-Americans in Los Angeles.<fn>Think *Chinatown* from the perspective of the black community.</fn> The plots and mysteries are always top notch and keep you on the edge of the seat, but they are in some ways incidental to Mosely’s central project – an exploration of the political and cultural factors that served to define the dimensions of what it means to be Black in White America, and what that means to his primary characters.



So I read the first couple of pages of *Rose Gold* and began to think I should go back and re-read the series before I read this one<fn>I first read *Devil in a Blue Dress* about 25 years ago.</fn>, just binge it like a Netflix series. I have a huge stack of reading on my nightstand, so this feels like a scary commitment, but it might be time to re-visit the origins of Easy and Mouse and Jackson Blue.

By 1995, Denzel Washington used his clout to get *Devil* on the screen. In a sane world, this should have been a long-running franchise, but leave it to Hollywood to fuck up a perfectly good crowbar. Still, the movie remains memorable as the first

time I laid eyes on this guy.<fn>Not entirely true. It turns out I'd been watching him for a few seasons in a better-than-average tv series called *Picket Fences*, but he was so completely transformed in *Devil* that I didn't realize it for a while. One night while watching him play the quiet, dapper DA in the show, it hit me. His great career is no surprise…the guy had chops from the start.</fn>



Don Cheadle as Raymond "Mouse" Alexander

This was Don Cheadle's breakthrough, as Easy's best friend Mouse. A homicidal criminal and true blue friend, Mouse is one of my favorite characters out of any book. Denzel was great as Easy, but Cheadle just nailed this role. You literally can't look away when he's on screen. He is absolutely one of the My Favorite World all-stars.

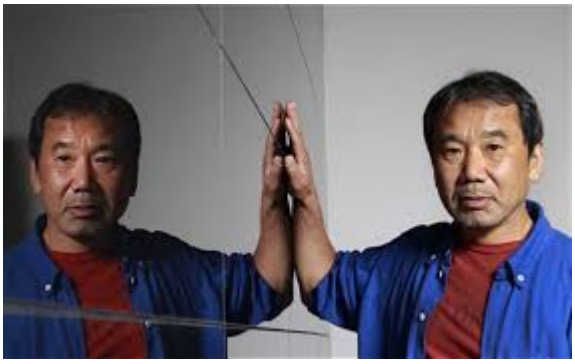
All this leads me to think I should also re-read *The Man in My Basement*, which is my favorite Mosley to date. And that leads to the Socrates Fortlow and Leonid McGill books, and his sci-fi novels and stories, and, and, and. He has demonstrated time and again that he transcends the crime writer straight jacket.<fn>Hell, *Man in my Basement* is way closer to Chekhov

than Chandler.</*fn*>

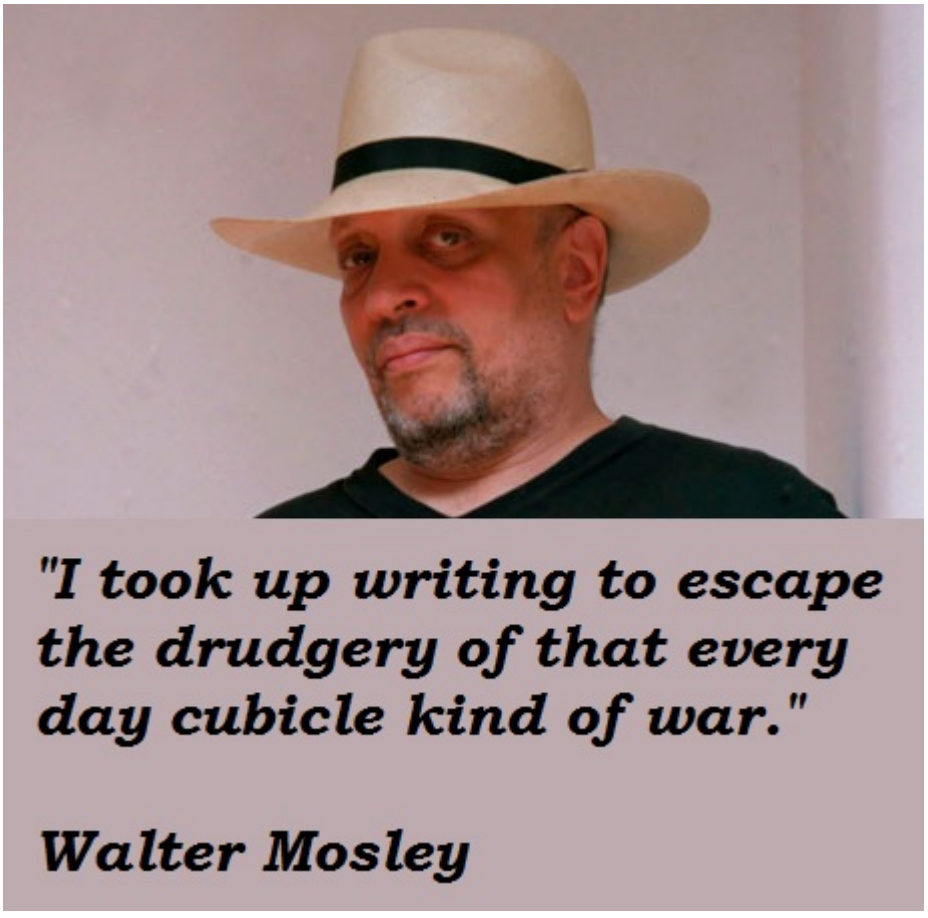
Seriously, 45 books in 25 years. That’s some badassery right there.

So to sum it all up….

Haruki Murakami:



Walter Mosley:



My Favorite World.

My Favorite World #18



When I was a lad, I decided I should go ahead and plan on accomplishing three simple tasks:

1. Read every great book ever written.
2. Listen to every great piece of music ever written.
3. See every great movie ever made.

I'm almost finished.<fn>/rimshot</fn>

Reading is a huge piece of My Favorite World. Much of my recent reading has been non-fiction. It's been pretty heavy slogging.<fn>Including yet another run-in with Daniel Dennett that ended the way the first two did: I'm doing pretty well until, inevitably, somewhere c. page 120-150, I begin to feel I am the stupidest person in the world.</fn> I liked *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* quite a lot, but covering billions of years can sort of feel like it. It was time for some fiction.

Now, because I like to believe I am an enlightened and fair-minded fellow, I stacked up three books written by actual women(!).<fn>To burnish my bona fides as a Friend of Women; my membership renewal is up for review.</fn> Briefly, then, a few notes on these.



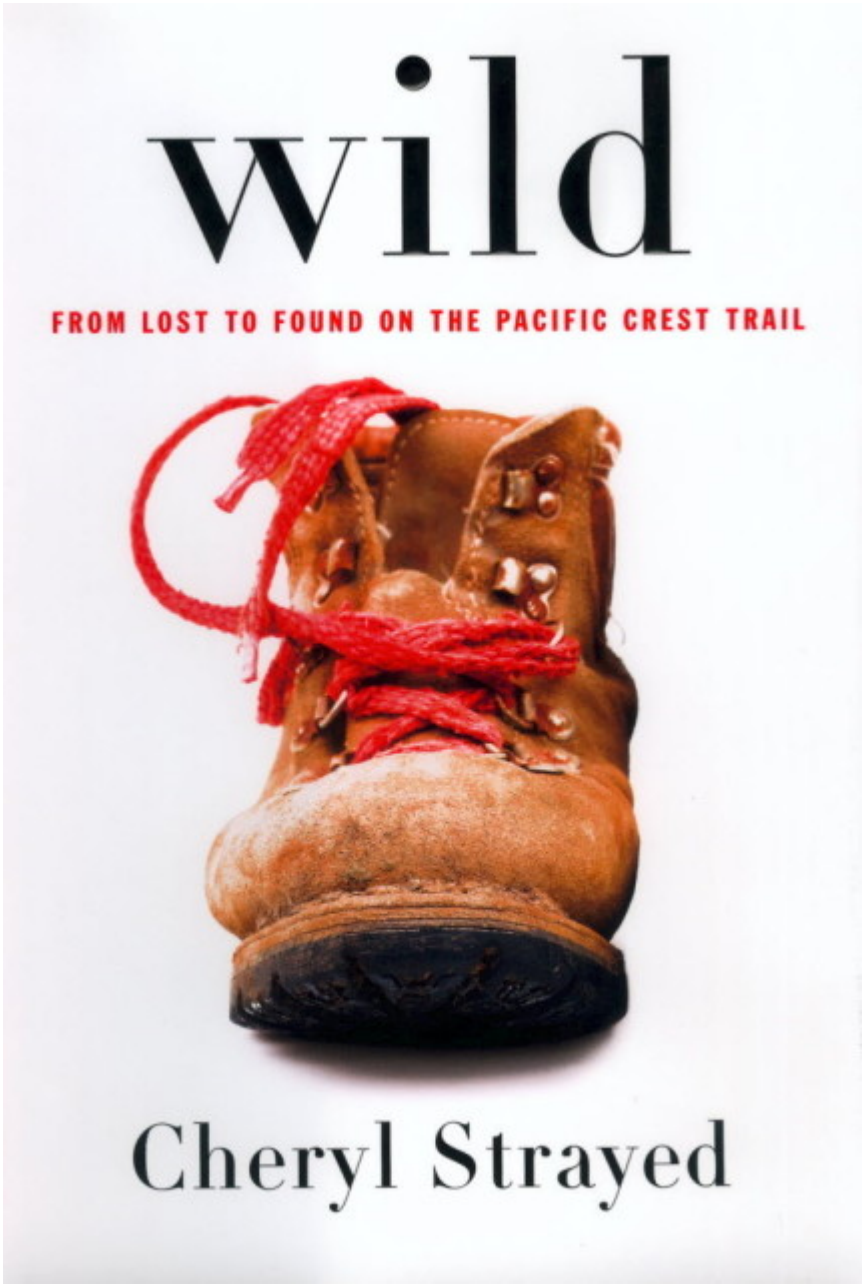
I've seen her movies and read her short stories, and I've even spent some time with Miranda July's web-based work. I really like her; she feels gentle and optimistic, but not a Pollyanna. Still, first novels can be problematic, so I wondered if she could pull it off.

Wonder no more. This strange tale spent the first third making me annoyed-unto-angry with the characters; the second third creeped me right the fk out; and the ending wrapped up this unlikely story with a sweetness and hopefulness that was not forced or cloying, but somehow managed to give some credence to the idea of *First Bad Man* being some kind of feel-good novel.

July's writing is sometimes spare, sometimes florid, but always direct and compelling. Even during the sections that angered me or creeped me, I never considered putting it down. She takes an unfiltered view, but never comes off as cynical or above-it-all ironic.

(Also, too: her book of short stories, *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, is pretty terrific.)

MFW



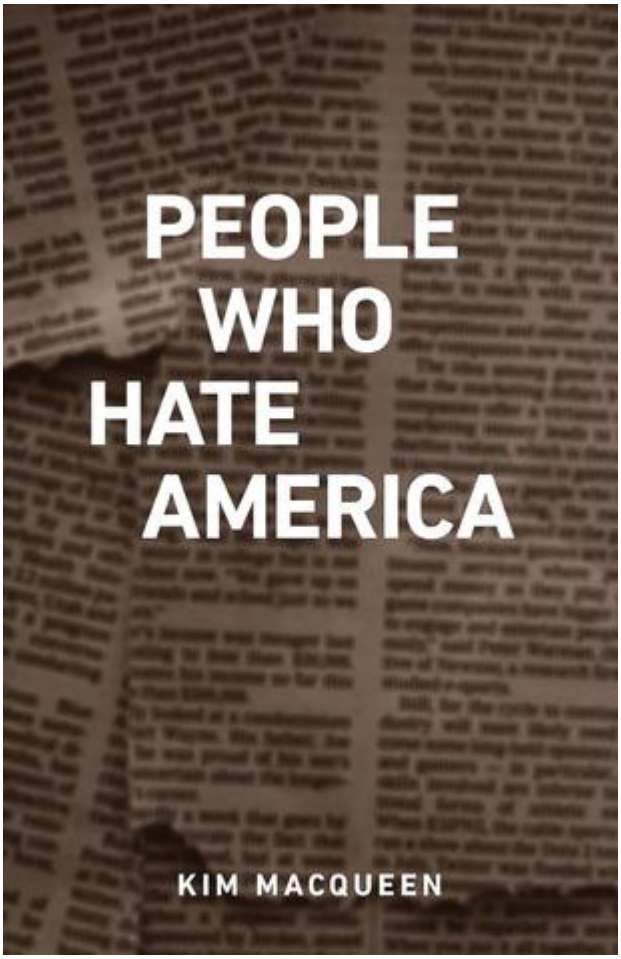
Yeah, it's an Oprah pick, but I ain't ashamed. I'm only about half-done with this book, but it is really pretty great. Strayed is a fantastic writer; the night I started, it kept me up way past pumpkin hour.

I had avoided this one for awhile, despite or because of the hoopla. Add the fact that I kind of hate the *memoir* genre<fn>With some exceptions like Jeanette Walls and Frank McCourt.</fn>, and I let this one slide. I get the sense that Strayed is giving us a pretty straight story<fn>Keeping in mind this blog's fealty to the Unreliable Narrator theory that posits that all writers lie.</fn>, heartbreaking and

terrifying and tragic.

I've been known to hurl *memoirs* wallward in disgust<fn>Augusten Burroughs, I'm calling you out!</fn>, and it could still happen with *Wild*, but I think I'm down for the whole hike.

(I also find Reese Witherspoon pretty adorable and I'm curious to see how she manages this on screen.)



This is the first of the three that I read, and it kicked this whole batch of reading off in high gear.<fn>Full disclosure: Kim and her family are good pals. This blog takes its conflict of interest standards seriously!</fn> The writing is spare, with an incessant rhythm that keeps the pages turning. The central – and several of the secondary – characters are fully realized in a crisp and economical manner. The book is funny, and sad, and tragic in places.

The story is a fictionalized account of the Mayor of Newark leading up to the 1967 riots. It’s familiar in a strange way for any of us who watched *The Sopranos.* We recognize some of the wise guys from our tv screen, and some of the grifts ring bells, too. But it never feels derivative; perhaps that is because the actual Mayor was a relative of the author, but I think it has more to do with the distinctive styling MacQueen brings to the page.

Sure, she’s a pal, and I’m giving her an enthusiastic plug. Take it with a grain. But I’m telling you: this is a really terrific book. And watching a friend develop her talent into something that rings like *People Who Hate America*: that is My Favorite World in spades.