

A Cloud of Inattention

Homer, my friend who promised to write the story of my life, has died. A great loss! Not only to me and his other friends, but also to the world of letters. Why? Because Homer's words about me (he was a very famous author) would have invariably reached a very large, and extremely discriminating, audience. I would have become, if not famous, at least noticed. But now, forced to finish what Homer started and to tell my own story, I'm certainly doomed to remain what I have always been: the least important character in fiction. A cloud of inattention, which has always surrounded me, is bound to become even thicker.

I am the exact opposite of what I wanted to be. I came into the world with the firm purpose of being known and I have failed completely. I have developed into a totally obscure character. It's not that I haven't tried being noticed. I have. But everyone, authors and other characters alike, ignore me. The other day I was in this café where authors go to find characters for their fiction and I met a famous author. I bought him a coffee and a Danish and, in order to make him remember me, I stared hard into his face, shook his hand violently and yelled at him, "It's great to finally meet you! You're my favorite author!" Then I slipped my name and address into his hand. What happened next was completely contrary to what I wanted. He turned away from me and started talking with another famous author about how hard it is nowadays to find suitable fictional characters. He had become totally oblivious of me!

The next day I was back in the café and tried, with another famous author, a different kind of introduction. Instead of approaching him from a standing position, I remained seated. And, instead of adopting a bold, forward, manner I put on an air of indifference and what might be called an extreme Byronic pose. My demeanor and handshake were totally consistent with that of the celebrated poet: languid, retreating, leaving in their wake the atmospheric suggestion of a mysterious past. The reaction of the famous author? After looking blankly through me, he turned and walked over to talk with a character who had appeared in his recent bestseller.

So, on the advice of a friend, another obscure character, I started frequenting a café for bad writers. Perhaps,

I told myself, this café was just what I needed to become known. Here writers came to find some good secondhand bargains and also some good, cheap, new material. And, since literary fashion always changes with the times (and economic fluctuations) writers had a reasonable hope of meeting characters who had once been famous but now were unemployed. The first day I was in the café I remembered meeting characters who had worked for Nobel Prize winners. But now, out of work for some time, they were hungry and in need of rent money.

On this particular day, I was sitting in the café with a second, or third, rate (I forget which) writer discussing character-identity and fiction writing.

“Why not make me a character in your next book?” I asked.

“So what are your qualifications for being a character in my kind of book?”

“I have a totally blank personality. No one ever notices me. Dogs never bark at me. Beggars look right through me. I’m perfect for contemporary fiction.” I could see, through the heavy cigarette smoke, that he might be beginning to take interest in me. But then a surprise!

“You might do, if the price is right. I’m not sure. Right now I’m thinking about renting a cheap, second-hand character for my next big book.”

I, of course, knew about agencies that rent out characters. Several discount agencies I had approached about employment had rejected my job application. All of them gave me the same story—with words of dismissal like “too two dimensional,” “totally lacking in personal qualities”; or, the most cutting of all, “After several in-house discussions about your application, we have concluded that you don’t exist.”

“My book is very much mainstream. It’s about anonymity and evil in the big city. So the character has to be just right,” the writer added.

“I’m your guy,” I said. “Anonymity...a piece of cake.”

“Well,” he replied, “send me your resume. I’ll take a look at it.”

Days, weeks and months passed. Spring turned into summer, summer into fall and then winter came. Nothing. Not a word from the second (or third?) rate author. So here I’m in another café, one patronized by fictional stereotypes. I’m

Gene Washington

talking with a type who escapes from things, prison, Devil's Island, chains, walled enclosures, etc.

"So what's your secret? How did you become known?" I ask.

"By committing suicide."

"Really?"

"Not a real suicide, an official one."

He then went on to describe how he had left his coat on a bridge with a suicide note pinned to it; how the police declared him dead and how the newspapers had played up his death. He was finally known and the job offers from bad writers started pouring in. So, following his example, I went to a bridge over the deepest river in town; I wrote a suicide note, "My name is...and I have killed myself by jumping off this bridge." I removed my coat, pinned the note to it, left it on the bridge and walked away.

And...

Note from the editor: The story you have just read seems to have been ghostwritten by several persons. But nothing is known of them.