

Hate Mail

by [Douglas W. Texter](#) (July 2024)



Returning from a Bad Market, British (English) School

Have you ever been, unknowingly, the object of someone's obsessional hatred for a quarter of a century?

I didn't know it until last year, but one of my former students from the very beginning of both the twenty-first century and my academic career has despised me for over two decades.

I know this fact because last summer, this student—I'll call

him George here, although that's not his real name—tracked me down on Facebook and sent a message outlining his contempt for me and detailing the way in which I apparently altered his destiny.

In July of 2023, on a sultry Kansas City night, while I was watching the Steve McQueen movie *Bullitt*, I realized, after receiving a Facebook notification, that I had become the great white whale chased around perdition's horn. I had metamorphosed into Jean Valjean, relentlessly pursued by an avenging inspector. I was the captain of the *HMS Surprise* stalked across all the world's oceans by the French warship *Acheron*.

The irony is that, despite George's obvious hatred for me, I barely remember who he is.

The story begins in the cold and dark and snow of January 2000, near Boston, in what I can only think of as another life. Y2K had come and gone. The World Trade Center still stood in New York. Bill Clinton occupied the White House despite his hanky-panky with Monica Lewinski. My phone was still attached to the wall, and I dialed up to get an internet connection.

I lived in a tiny walk-up apartment in Malden with a girlfriend just returned from teaching English in Taiwan. A town of clapboard houses and dark red brick apartment buildings from the industrial era, Malden sits at the northern end of Boston's Orange Line. In the summer of 1998, when *Saving Private Ryan* premiered, I had moved to Boston to attend the Radcliffe Publishing Course at Harvard and work as an editor. I had liked the work—developing college textbooks—but not the boss. To be honest, while I had enjoyed working with authors, I wanted to develop my own ideas. Thus, at the beginning of the millennium, I had departed publishing and was applying to PhD programs in English.

In order to support myself while sending out applications to graduate school, I taught classes at a small junior college south of the city in Quincy. Having already earned an MA at Villanova University about three years earlier, I taught Composition I, Composition II, and American literature, if I remember correctly.

And that's just the point. I'm not sure I correctly remember much from my time at Quincy College.

When I had worked at the publishing company in Boston, I had taught a 7 am class at Quincy and then gone back into the city to work my day job so, when I needed more classes, the dean had willingly provided them. The Orange Line would deliver me to downtown Boston, and I would hop on the Red Line to Quincy. The winter of 1999-2000 was very cold. I remember that in the mornings, I would disembark from the train and get hot coffee at the Dunkin' Donuts right outside the station.

From the vantage point of the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the Quincy College of 2000 seems quaint and a throwback to the middle of the 1950s or 1960s. Rooms were old fashioned: blackboards and chalk, single student desks. Papers were written on, well, paper. The internet existed, but online classrooms were still in their infancy. The multi-screened learning studios, complete with laptop carts that I teach in now, were decades away.

My students were a collection of mostly working-class Bostonians with their "My Gawd" accents. Some came from Southy. I remember there were more than a few Russian immigrants and many refugees from the wars in the Balkans. Some of the refugees had seen and experienced absolutely horrific things. My students—unlike those in the American Midwest that I teach today in the age of Smartphone-generated introversion—were talky, openly aggressive, and pretty quirky.

I remember that I asked students to keep journals. Each week,

I would collect them and briefly leaf through the pages, checking to see that students had produced the required number of words. Once, I opened the journal of the most innocent looking student in the course, and my mouth dropped when I read the beginning of her entry: "As the desk sergeant finished booking me..." I didn't have students keep journals after that. Another wild-eyed, female student asked me to look at her poetry. The first poem was entitled "The Handcuffs of Love." The manacles concerned were not of the emotional variety; rather, they were the pink, furry kind. After that, I told students that I really didn't understand poetry. A third student in an American literature class had to do a report on Allen Ginsberg. The student had been unaware of Ginsberg's membership in NMBLA and went ballistic during the report. In general, my students were a hardworking and slightly wild bunch, representative of the late 1990s, when anything went in the world at large and in people's personal lives.

In one of my composition classes, I taught *1984* and *Brave New World* and barely remember one student named George. I think he was an MMA fighter. I think I remember that he told me that his family ran some smoke shops in the suburban Boston area. Although I don't remember much about him, I didn't think he was the best of students.

I taught that spring and into the summer at Quincy. In late July, I left the Northeast Corridor and, except for visits, I've never been back. While Philly and Boston were adventure grounds for me in my teens, twenties, and early thirties, I had grown tired of the endless aggression. I have always thought of my time teaching in Boston fondly, to the extent I thought about it at all.

Fast forward 23 years. I completed a PhD at the University of Minnesota. I turned my admiration of Orwell and Huxley into a dissertation and journal articles. I had presented at the Society for Utopian Studies annual conference several times.

Having defended my dissertation in 2007, I had barely survived the Great Recession and spent about ten years traipsing across the country in search of ever-better academic jobs. I had gone through two disastrous breakups, both at least partially related to the fact that for me the next better job was almost always several hundred miles away.

Since 2000, I have lived in Minneapolis, Madison, State College, Orlando, Pittsburgh, Roswell, and Overland Park, KS, where I now reside. I've buried both parents and seen the son of a former partner hang himself. And I also witnessed one of my best friends from my early days in Philadelphia die of a heroin overdose. When I ask myself Emerson's question of where we find ourselves, I think the answer for me is in a far more grounded but slightly less optimistic place.

These days, I chair my department's assessment committee, mentor adjunct instructors, develop new courses, and write and teach.

It's trite to say that I'm not the same person that I was in 2000, but it is true that I've covered half a lifetime of territory—emotional, spiritual, economic, personal, and professional since I last departed Quincy College on the Red Line in 2000 and headed out to the Midwest on I90.

Some of my former students I remember. Some I liked. Some I didn't. Some liked me, and some didn't. After three or four years, I usually don't remember the names, and after five years, I forget the faces. After twenty-three years, I forget almost everything. I assume that students do the same.

Thus, in July of 2023, in the humid summer of Kansas, I was dumbfounded when I received the following message:

"You probably don't recall failing me in my English Comp Class 20 years ago. I wrote a 10-page paper comparing and contrasting the book *1984* to current times. That was over 20 years ago, Douglas. You failed me because I didn't give a

sources-sited [sic] list because there wasn't any. It was all my own. I still have my paper."

I think I tensed a bit when I started reading George's message. I wondered for a moment whether George might not be standing on my balcony, knife or shotgun in hand. His grievance seemed fresh after two and a half decades. All of a sudden, the enormity of his anger washed over me like a wave.

George continued by telling me how I had destroyed his academic career: "I dropped out because my mother wasn't gonna to continue to pay for it because she thought I was fucking off. I busted my ass the whole semester." There it was: the usual complaint. I worked so hard. Never mind that this was a research paper class. Never mind that the work was probably drivel. Failing one of my classes is a real accomplishment, just as getting an A in one is. The hard-work bit is about one step away from a sign of narcissism. It's equivalent to saying, "I put in so much time." How much time one devotes to something isn't really important. I've driven truckloads of time into projects that have gone nowhere. On the flipside, I've put practically no time at all into other projects and gotten rave reviews.

George said, "I wrote all the papers, both drafts. Look at what's going on today. I was the smartest person you've ever met, and you didn't even know it."

The first statement is typical of students today. I turned in everything. I should get an A. The second statement gave me pause. Had I missed something? Had George in fact been the smartest person I had ever met? Well, whom had I met since George and I had crossed paths in New England all those years ago? In no particular order, here are some of the people I've run into. I studied for a week with Orson Scott Card. At a science fiction convention in Minnesota, I met both Swamp Thing creator Len Wein and science fiction bad boy Harlan Ellison. I've met several university presidents since those

days. At an Amnesty International meeting in New Mexico, I met Terri Rockefeller, who sat on the board of directors and who created the PBS show *Nova*. On my dissertation committee sat Tom Moylan, who had founded the Centre for Utopian Studies in Ireland and who, when George and I met, was busy writing his seminal work of criticism: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. So, after thinking the matter over, I concluded that George was not, in fact, the smartest person I had ever met.

After George informed me of his brilliance, he turned to a kind of rags-to-riches tale. It seems that despite what he has long viewed as my best efforts to destroy him, he persevered and became wildly successful: "No worries, Doug. I went back to work for my mother anyway. I built her business up, and now I'm very successful." His career in the smoke shop industry, dare I say it, caught fire after our encounter.

Then George attempted to give karmic significance to his terrible paper. "Everything happens for a reason," he said. And George is, of course, right. Things do happen for reasons. But, unlike George, I don't assign cosmic significance to his demise in my class. Rather, I see the state of affairs as much more directly cause and effect or transactional in nature. George wrote a research paper without doing any research. I duly failed him and moved to the Midwest. There it is.

George seemed to be looking for a wider meaning, an ontological significance, perhaps even psychological import, where I don't think there really is any. He also seemed to see me as some kind of agent in the working out of his personal destiny.

At a remove of a quarter of a century, I still don't see any wider significance to George's failure to perform research on the subject of George Orwell's *1984*. If he had done a good job on the paper and cited sources, I would have been pleased to have given him an A. Because he chose not to do so, I assigned a failing mark. When I grade students' work, I function as a

mirror. There's nothing very Orwellian about my grading policies: no Room 101 or thought police.

I'm not O'Brien. Most days.

On the other hand, I felt as though perhaps George were playing the role of O'Brien in this affair: he would find me in Kansas and drag me off to "the place where there is no darkness." George continued his rant, now switching to the theme of closure: "I'm letting you go, Douglas. You can't have any more negative effects on me. I am setting you and your pompous ass free. Good luck, and I hope I never lay my eyes on you again."

I'm genuinely glad George is letting me go, especially because I never knew he had me. I'm not sure what negative effects I've had on him.

As for George's not wanting to lay eyes on me, I welcome that state of affairs. If he did in fact cast his eyes on me, such an outcome would imply that he had tracked me down across half a continent. I haven't been back to Boston since 2004. Two decades. If I did go back to Bean Town, I don't smoke, so it would be unlikely that I would encounter him in his professional capacity.

You might be wondering. Did I respond?

I did.

I told him that he was being abusive and that I didn't want to hear from him again. I also indulged myself by saying that even though I didn't remember him very clearly, I am quite certain that he was not the smartest person I had ever met. I blocked him on Facebook, and then the next morning, after I thought about it, I contacted Quincy College and told them the weird story of what had happened and forwarded his message.

George's reappearance occurred about a year ago, and over the

last several months, I've had visions of running a dog sled across the arctic tundra. My breath fogs in front of me as we glide over the weird landscape. I look over my shoulder and see George chasing me in a snowcat while yelling, "You failed me, you bastard." I spur the dogs on toward the mountains in the distance.

I hope I can make it before the snowcat closes on me.

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