

Whimsy

by [Armando Simón](#) (October 2024)



Brandes at the University (Harald Slott-Møller, 1889)

If I was asked about this line or that one [in my stage play], it was as though I had never heard it before. I was likely to say something like “My goodness—I wonder what I meant by that.” Nor did I seem at all interested in rediscovering why I had said this or that. —Kurt Vonnegut, Dead-Eye Dick

James Fordyce, the famous writer, felt played out. He had been feeling this way for a long, long time, like he was resting on his laurels. He had not written anything longer than he cared to remember and was presently living off the royalties of his many previous novels and short stories.

His earlier writings had sold well, very, very well and his plots and characters had been praised by both critics and the man on the street as extremely original, absorbing and fascinating. And this was true: in a time of endless literary clonings and gravediggers and cannibals, his fiction was highly original, his characterizations unique, yet recognizable. They were masterpieces, pure and simple. But, again, he had written nothing new for a very long time. Some people even thought he was deadeven though he had lot of years ahead of him.

Fordyce got up from his study and told his wife that he was going for a stroll in the nearby woods. He put on his tricornered hat with a cockade that he had designed and made. The hat was his trademark, so to speak, particularly in the neighborhood and he wore it because he genuinely thought tricornered hats were cool—which ought to make a comeback in popularity—and not because by wearing them he would appear “eccentric” and, therefore, a genius. In Britain there is a misconception that if one appears eccentric as to habits and clothes, then that person must also be a genius with the resulting, predictable, next step of persons who want to be thought of as geniuses, but do not have either the brainpower or a unique perspective on things, dress oddly to convince others, and themselves, of their uniqueness. This is similar to the widespread misconception in France that if one is rude, sarcastic, caustic and boorish, then one is also a genius, whereas it only proves that one is simply obnoxious. Although a writer, and highly intelligent, he refused to wear a beard or smoke a pipe. That alone says it all.

Anyway—

Years before, he had gotten occasional inspiration from these peaceful strolls through the woods, not only as to the main idea for a novel, but during successive strolls, as his mind wandered, on finer and finer points within the main plot, in other words, polishing the idea. There were no distractions in these solitary strolls through the woods. Lately, however, the walks only brought back to his mind various thoughts and memories unrelated to his vocation, usually about the day's, or the previous day's, events. It was even so now.

His mind wandered to last night's stimulating conversation with his son, a college student at the nearby university. He was working on a rather ambitious project, the history of Western fictional literature and his enthusiasm was such it came out like a torrent of words. He had traced the beginnings of fiction, beginning with the Greek and Roman theater, then going on to the invention of the short story with Boccaccio, Chaucer and Marguerite de Navarre during the Middle Ages. Then, the birth of the novel after the Renaissance in the form of fictitious "biographies" (*Don Quixote*, *Orlando Furioso*, *Tom Jones*, *Roxana*) and from there, the branching off of styles and themes, from De Quevedo's anti-hero to the stream of consciousness gimmick of Proust and Joyce and then the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez and others.

"Actually, the first biography was the *Satyricon* during Roman times," his father corrected him.

Anyway, one of his theses, and he had it well documented, was that in the twentieth century, an envy of science had taken place in nonscientific fields, including literature. Scientific terminology, for the uninitiated, was incomprehensible, yet fruitful and unquestionably productive. Therefore, art and literature had attempted to emulate this effect.

"That's true," Fordyce agreed. "Art became abstract, with cubism, surrealism, op art, chance painting and Pollock's canvases."

"Literature by writers" his son continued lecturing the father, "began to be incomprehensible, full of symbolism and abstractions and were at times very nearly plotless, to the point that even the symbols in the stories were symbols for other symbols and the task of readers was to decipher the symbolism, hence C. P. Snow's comment on 'the two cultures.' It was an arduous exercise in cryptography, since the symbols for each writer were his own and the breaking of the code, as it were, could not be applied elsewhere to other writers, or even to other stories by the same writer—and once the code was finally broken, what it stood for left the reader asking himself, 'So what?' The more obtuse and incomprehensible the plot and the more neurotic the character, the more Profound the work was judged to be and whole armies of literature professors and students wrote countless dissertations and theses and books and articles and term papers that nobody else ever read opining on the symbolism and/or meaning in a particular short story of two pages in length."

"Another pet peeve of mine regarding poetry is the poem (usually free/prose verse) that's incomprehensible. One has no idea what the hell the person is writing about. Many seem to think that because a poem is hard to fathom it must perforce be good. Which is bullshit, in my view. It only shows that the person doesn't know how to write! If you have something to say, say it! If you read poems from the mid-1960s back, a reader knows what the poem is saying, apart from how it is said (the poetic part). Frost, Thomas Hardy, Longfellow, it's obvious what they are saying—Ezra Pound likewise, IF one has an encyclopedic mind."

"Too many writers were vying to be, or rather to be deemed, Profound, and all of their stories had A Message. To be thought of as an Escapist writer—that is, interesting,

entertaining and read by the public—was the bane of all Serious Writers. The really odd thing was that The Messages in the pantheon of Serious Writers were oftentimes ... identical. And banal. Since these Messages were almost always against the same supposed evil or abuse, the constant conformity was deemed good, appropriate, righteous and was not viewed with the slightest hint of suspicion or cynicism.” His son had also noted that The Message in the stories were often sophomorically simple and could be summarized in a one-liner. It was further interesting that the more banal and simpler The Message—for example, the poor should be protected, rich people bad, the bourgeoisie life is boring—the more circuitously the route to get The Message across. “The quintessential Serious Novel is Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, the story of an aging homosexual visiting that city who starts lusting after a boy, padded by many obtuse symbols and passages. Nobody reads *Death in Venice*, much less likes it, unless they are forced to do so by their college professor.”

“Yet, intellectual eunuchs,” Fordyce had interrupted his son, “consider it a much superior work than, say, *The Three Musketeers*, whose plot is complicated and the characters memorable and is more straightforward and enjoyable—precisely for those very reasons.”

“Yes!” continued his son. “If alive today, Mark Twain, Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe and Miguel de Cervantes would certainly be ignored by the intellectual establishment, no matter how popular their writings—or perhaps because of it—and they would certainly not be awarded the Nobel Prize, which has more and more recently only served to enshrine mediocrities. In particular to the Nobel Prizes, this has been a development in the history of the award, when recipients of the prize were readable and enjoyable. For example, one laureate, Kipling, is nowadays despised by the modern intellectual elite, not only because of his conservative politics, which was in itself unforgivable, but that, in spite of his Nobel Prize, his works

were eagerly read and enjoyed by both children and adults—and has been the case nonstop for over a century!”

Indeed, his son had observed, there seemed to be an inverse correlation between a writer’s works’ popularity and the elite’s acceptance of those works. Yet, there was no law on the books that stated that a work having A Message was incompatible with popularity. G. B. Shaw was a prime example. His works were engrossing and popular and at the same time, he doled out A Message by the bucket.

Fordyce had joked that perhaps that explained why his books were rarely used in college classes, neither in Europe nor in America and they had both laughed over that. He chuckled even now. He had further told his son, “My standard for whether a book is good or not is simply this: a book is good if, after finishing it, I’m sorry that it ended. Or, if an hour or two after finished reading it, I want to pick it up again and reread it. On the other hand, a book is bad if, after having read it, I feel that it was a complete waste of my time and leaves me with a bad taste in my mouth.”

Fordyce came to an abrupt halt.

He was amazed at the idea that had just popped into his head.

What an outrageous notion!

It was preposterous.

He couldn’t do it.

Or, could he, he smirked.

No ... Yeah!

He became excited. He eagerly felt that he had to tell somebody, was certain he would not. He chuckled.

Could he pull it off?

No ... Yeah.

He resumed walking, this time faster. All sorts of ideas were flooding into his brain. He chuckled again. He could do it and several topics intruded into his head, each one demanding his full consideration. With a pen, he jotted down in his palm the various ideas, so that he would not forget them and he could develop each further at a later time. He tried to concentrate on just one, but it was difficult. If anyone had come across him, they would have judged from the look on his face that the man had a screw loose.

He returned to his study, skipping dinner, and set to work right away, feverishly hammering away at his computer. His wife, hearing him work once again, did not disturb him and made sure that no one else disturbed her husband. Fordyce was so excited at the challenge that he could hardly sit still as he developed his idea for a book and did not go to bed until four in the morning.

In only a week, he was finished! It was as boring a novel, full of abstractions, as any by Saul Bellow, or John Fowles, or a play by Samuel Beckett. Plotless, with a neurotic, indecisive character, and using the stream of consciousness gimmick, it was replete with symbolism for its own sake. One chapter had no punctuation whatsoever and was replete with *non sequiturs*. The dialogue often drifted, aimless. There was no happy ending. At the end, the protagonist was crushed by pointless, unrelated circumstances.

What a colossal practical joke!

With barely suppressed, yet compulsive giggling, he sent it off to be published.

And it was accepted! Published!

Once published, the influence on the author by Günther Grass, Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig and Margaret Attwood was clear,

it was proclaimed in literary groups and lectures. "An incisive, radical departure from all of Fordyce's previous works" was noted.

Reviews were initially mixed, then the professional literary elites kicked in and praised it to the sky. With various interpretations being bandied right and left, it was unanimously assumed that since it was boring and incomprehensible, it must be a literary masterpiece. Invitations to lecture began to, once again, pour in.

At first, Fordyce had laughed his head off at all the interpretations proffered rather than the real one, which was that the book was pure gibberish. Then, slowly, very, very slowly, he began to become doubtful of himself. With all the praise and the sudden use in European and American universities of his latest work in literature classes, he began to wonder if perhaps his subconscious had been at work and was responsible for his opus.

Originally, after a certain amount of time had passed, maybe a year, or two at the most, he had planned to reveal his joke, something to the order of, "April Fool's!! Heh, heh, heh!"

Now He wasn't Certain.

Fordyce's former giggling now became nervous laughter, and he avoided his son anytime that the latter strayed away from light family and school topics.

Once, he abruptly switched off a television channel—PBS, of course, not the sex-and-violence channels—that was examining the case of the Piltdown Man.

Of the many fan letters that he received, a letter from an eighteen-year-old complaining that, whereas she had admired his previous works, she felt that the last book was utter garbage, and could he please get back on the right track? sent him on an uncontrollable fit of hysterical laughter, to which

his wife responded by calling in the doctor, who thought it was due to overwork.

Fordyce immediately refunded the money that the girl had spent on the book.

The book sold poorly, not as well as his early ones, and would have done even worse if not for his recognized name from his previous ones. However, the publishers of the German and Dutch translations could not keep up with the demand.

He began work on another book, this time about an author with writer's block that, on a dare, writes a book of gibberish and it becomes an instant bestseller. The joke is on him. One-part existentialist, one part Faustian and another part Frankensteinian, Fordyce had not concluded it when it was announced in October that, in a surprise move, the Nobel Prize committee had awarded that year's Nobel Prize in Literature to James Fordyce.

In its announcement, his latest book was the primary focus of attention.

Fordyce locked himself in his study and adamantly refused to talk to anyone for days, especially the swarm of mindless journalists who flocked to his home at the announcement of the award, battering his door and windows for interviews.

Unshaven, he would come out only briefly to eat, sleep and use the bathroom.

He replied to his wife and son in monosyllables and scowled throughout.

Eventually, he emerged and resumed his normal daily routine in a calm, collected manner. Although his family was bursting with pride, he rigidly and autocratically forbade discussion regarding the prize, his latest work, or anything related.

His wife and son conformed to his wishes in awe of the Modesty

of Genius.

When it came to deliver the required lecture in the North Pole, in frigid Stockholm, he took along with him two completely different speeches. One was on a topic near and dear to his heart, from a professional standpoint. The other was a detailed account of his literary life, including a candid admission of the origin and composition and purpose of the last novel. His hands shook throughout his stay in Sweden and his wife interpreted the shaking as being due to the bitter cold, while his son worried about Parkinson's Disease.

The big day came.

The applause died down after the introduction.

All eyes were on him.

Fordyce took out one of his two prepared speeches and began to read it out loud to the assembled audience.

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