

Foreword

My name is Finbar Studge. I am a writer.

Many years ago, I wrote a collection of short stories that achieved modest critical success in America, and even more modest sales. Encouraged by the critical response, I embarked on a novel in which I meditate on the human condition, based loosely on a series of reflections on the death of my father when I was seventeen. As I began, I was much older than my father had ever been, which caused me to see his life in a more sympathetic light. When the novel was finally finished, I called it *Groin Damage*.

In both the short stories and the novel, a character named Christian Leonard Hooker pops up now and again. He is based on a boy I grew up with in Illinois. I last saw him more than forty years ago, but we continued to correspond occasionally through the years, most recently by e-mail.

I was wary as I developed this character, because I knew that once the stories were published, the real Christian Leonard Hooker would read them sooner or later. My concern was that I hadn't painted a very pleasant portrait of my former friend. The word I found myself using most often to describe him was "mean." In private correspondence with readers and publishers, I also referred to my Hooker from time to time as an "asshole."

In a review, *Publisher's Weekly* observed that Christian Hooker had a peculiar "genius for meanness." The reviewer surmised that the essence of his meanness was "not in outright lies, but in the brutal administration of half-truths." Hooker's attitude to truth was described as "one of benign neglect - he rarely tells malicious lies." I re-read my sketches, and had to agree. Yet the reviewer had a grudging fondness for Christian Hooker: "He alone, of all the men in Studge's stories, has not been ambushed."

Much to my surprise, most readers found my anti-hero to be romantic and idealistic, in a rakish sort of way. They liked him and wanted more of him. Through sheer persistence, his

meanness garnered an air of integrity, almost endearing in its familiarity, a pit-stop of certainty on the race-track of life. You could *count* on Hooker to be Hooker. And if a working definition of genius is the ability to hold two completely contradictory concepts in the mind at the same time, with total conviction as to each, Christian Hooker was gifted far beyond meanness.

As I delved into this fictional character, or let him delve into me, I became increasingly attached to him. I hoped that my childhood friend would understand that my Hooker, however brutally portrayed, was cared for by his creator.

I need not have worried. When Chris Hooker read the thinly-disguised accounts of himself, he was ecstatic. He was flattered beyond words that he was the subject of fiction. I seemed to have unleashed in him some primal need for re-creation. And sadly, he began to be lost in the character I had drawn, offloading whatever remnants of normal human feelings he still had, crawling deeper and deeper into the persona of the solipsistic miscreant I had conceived.

By this time, he was living in Australia. "Living in exile," he called it grandly. But by all accounts, a more accurate description was what we used to call "living in sin." Chris progressed through a series of wives with a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and numerous children, some out of wedlock. He became embroiled as the central figure in the longest-running defamation suit in Australian history, and single-handedly brought the government of Victorian Premier Judith Kennan to its knees. I didn't have to take his word for this, because he sent me regular clippings from *The Age*, Melbourne's daily newspaper. Chris was on the front page for weeks, with weird stories about the blood of pet ducks on bicycle seats and seances with a government minister's dead child.

He seemed hell-bent on living up, or down, to the standards I had established for his fictional counterpart. I felt like a prophet, for I had written:

Hooker was a razzle-dazzle guy. He could unanswer more questions in a week than most men in a lifetime. It had become a pattern in his life. Give him a relationship and a couple of

months on his own resources, and Hooker could bring more ruination than whole defoliation programs, whole societal collapses, whole holy wars.

And this was *before* the murder trial. Chris became a suspect in the disappearance and presumed homicide of a well-known Australian model and “television game-show hostess,” as *The Age* quaintly described her. Chris admitted to an affair with her, but denied any knowledge of her disappearance. Eventually her husband was tried for her murder and acquitted. Chris was the prosecution’s chief witness. It was all so sordid.

And then Chris slipped from my radar. For seven years, I heard nothing but rumors from Australia, by way of Chris’s estranged relatives in Illinois. Apparently he had dropped out completely, and was living somewhere near the outback in the charmingly-named Wombat Forest, with a new wife twenty years younger and new-born twins, a boy and a girl. They lived in a twenty-room house made of mud-brick, wood, and tin, built by a back-to-nature religious community who sold it to Chris when they broke up in a fight over a cassette player. Chris bought the house and eighty surrounding acres of eucalypt with the proceeds of his defamation suit. They had no running water, no heat, no electricity. Chris pumped shower water from the Loddon River, collected drinking water from the corrugated roof, chain-sawed huge amounts of wood for cooking and winter fires, hooked up a set of solar panels to the roof, fenced in an organic garden to keep out the kangaroos, hauled human waste into the forest for burial, and grew his hair.

I had very little contact with Chris until the beginning of 2000, when he moved with part of his international entourage back to America, to take a teaching job at Sand River College. One day in late 2003, he e-mailed that he was about to start an “autobiographical novel” of his own, and he wanted me to edit his work.

He just had to get it all down, he said. No one had to read it. It didn't have to be any good. He just had to get it all down. He would never forgive himself if he didn't get it all down. I had no idea what "it" meant. He made it sound like a bodily function. It was in him, and it had to come out.

He proposed to "novelize" certain things that had actually happened on a recent vacation, "just like Kerouac and *The Dharma Bums*," he said. (I refrained from reminding Chris what Truman Capote had said about Kerouac's work: "That's not writing. It's typing.") Chris said he would work in third person limited, "to give it objectivity." He wanted to build on my Hooker sketches, but to "flesh him out" (his words). His working title was *Miraculous Pet Recoveries*. I found all of this alarming.

In the hope of maintaining some measure of control over the situation, and perhaps to encourage Chris to use the writing process as a re-entry to the human race, I reluctantly agreed to his request. I had only one condition: that he *not* send me excerpts as they rolled from his printer in the white heat of creativity. I knew that he would want instant gratification, and I wasn't about to give it. I insisted that I wouldn't edit his work until he had completed the entire novel in draft form. I doubted that he would ever finish.

Chris accepted my terms. He e-mailed that he was establishing a "modus operandi," which he described in great detail. He would write in stolen moments, in a room in his home or in the Café Kopi in downtown Sand River, whenever he got a break of fifteen minutes or more from work and family. Whenever possible, to clear his head, he would warm up at his piano. This way, he said, he could begin writing without words.

No one would ever hear these inspirational sessions at the piano, said Chris, except his wife Kazzie, his step-daughter Kristen, and the twins. There would be no recordings, no sheets of music. The notes would just come together in a disappearing series of fragmentary moments, with

a long silence after each improvisation. He wanted the same for his novel, he said. "Stasis in motion" is how Chris described the whole process, but that didn't make any sense to me.

Much to my surprise, six months to the day after Chris asked me to be his editor, a brown package containing 70,000 words of would-be novel arrived on my doorstep in Florida. He'd changed the title to *Houseboating in the Ozarks*. Obviously he didn't intend for this to be his final version, because he'd scrawled directions in the margins, such as "over" and "put this in later," with long rambling passages of circled handwriting on the backs of the printed pages. He'd penciled in agonizing word-changes with no obvious reason. "Pronounce" became "declare"; "elusive" became "ambiguous," then went back to "elusive" again. There were arrows indicating that entire sentences were to be transported elsewhere in the manuscript.

For the most part Chris's spelling and grammar were very good, especially for a draft. And I wasn't surprised, or even particularly disappointed, to find that he played fast and loose with inconvenient facts from his chosen summer of 2003, probably hoping that no one would notice. Chris had never been one to let the truth get in the way of his story-telling.

The exasperating aspect of Chris's manuscript was that his 70,000 words seemed to add up to nothing. It was about what you'd expect from fifteen-minute snippets in a coffee lounge. A fast-food novel. What was the point? I wondered. What was it he just had to get down? Was this it? Or was this just a failure to communicate, a *Cool Hand Luke* moment?

In keeping with my promise, I made a few comments on these self-indulgent meanderings parading as a novel, sent them back, and waited with something like bemusement. I observed that the Christian Hooker in *Houseboat* wasn't nearly as mean as my Hooker character had become over the years. "Maybe you've mellowed," I wrote, cautiously. Seven years in a eucalypt forest must have had some effect. This new Hooker was still wrapped up in self, but more remote, less intrusive. This change, if true, made the world a better place, but did not result in any perceptible

improvement in the body of Western literature. I had hoped, for starters, that Chris would learn to see through someone else's eyes.

"I have trouble relating to a piece of work that is purely process," I wrote, "that is only a slice off your psyche, where whatever comes out is all right. If this is *only* therapy, I'm against it on principle. If it's photos from your wallet, I might as well fly to Sand River to chat with you over espressos at the Café Kopi."

That was probably too harsh. Privately, I had to admit I found his total self-absorption a bit mesmerizing. Chris had no meaningful external references. And to be honest, I felt some joy as I found myself wondering, every page or so, "Christ, is this guy for real?" I was fascinated with the notion of one of my own characters struggling to be born, or reborn. I felt energized at the border between art and life. I was looking forward to Hooker's next draft.

Feeling somewhat guilty over my initial comments, I e-mailed Chris some constructive criticism. At least I hoped it was constructive:

If you persist with this project, would you please give a little thought to whether you really want to write a *novel* (however you choose to define the term)? If so, why? And which of your chosen requirements remain unmet by this first draft? How do you propose to meet them in your next shot?

A novel tells a story. Maybe you don't want to get it published. You just want to pass it around to a few pals at Sand River College. That doesn't let Christian Hooker off any hooks. If you want to tell a number of people exactly the same thing in exactly the same words, that's enough. There has to be a reason for that thing and those words, over and above the level of a one-way conversation with piano accompaniment, and that's saying quite a lot.

For starters, there has to be significance in the form. You can put that in by what's happening, and that's probably the easiest, or you can put it in by the balance in the words, and that's been done about twice in the history of the world (see James Joyce and Virginia Woolf), and I wouldn't count on it happening again – at least not in *Houseboating in the Ozarks*.

I'm not asking you to write my kind of novel. (I'm suggesting it's a helluva lot easier, which it is.) I'm saying that whatever kind of novel, whatever kind of whatever you write, the odds are immense against its being any good, and you're going to have to be prepared to criticize it harshly. You're the last person in the world who should like it. If you can't see what's wrong with it, you're not doing your job.

My index finger hovered over the send button for several seconds. Once the finger dropped, my comments would be off to Chrisland, no turning back. I started to re-read what I'd written, but after about ten words decided what the hell, and pressed the key. "Your mail has been sent," said my screen, which was fine with me. I pressed OK.

But before I heard back from Chris, before even an acknowledgment that he'd received my words, the sad news came from Illinois that Christian Leonard Hooker had disappeared under what the Sand River police were calling "suspicious circumstances." Wherever he was, he didn't have a single thing with him – no money, no wallet, no car, no passport, not even any clothes from his closet. After six weeks of half-hearted canine patrols and aerial searches, the police declared that Christian Leonard Hooker was presumed dead.

I felt empty for days afterwards, sadder than I ever could have imagined. His vanishing did not change my daily routines, as I hadn't seen him since we were kids. But it messed with my head. Something I hadn't even known was there was suddenly gone, and there was a big hole in the universe.

He was not even sixty years old. There would be no further drafts, no finished Hooker novel. I would never learn whether Chris might have overcome the beginning novelist's curse of autobiography, and moved beyond the immaturity of his first draft.

For some reason, I felt honor-bound to find at least a small audience for his novel. I'd made no promises along these lines, but I felt as if I'd made one. Chris was gone, probably lying in some ditch somewhere, unable to execute his hieroglyphic changes, unable to send e-mails of

future drafts. Although I had long ago abandoned the idea of God and an afterlife, my feelings of obligation were akin to something sacred. I decided to publish Chris's work privately, for distribution to family and acquaintances.

I tried my best to follow the sprawling road-maps from Chris's manuscript. I have not edited his work beyond those changes he had indicated. The reader is invited to speculate as to the final product - what might have been.

Chris's chapters are titled according to nine consecutive days in the summer of 2003. The reader will note that chapter numbers are followed by references to certain "mysteries." Chris did not mean to suggest that anything particularly mysterious happened on any given day, or indeed anywhere in his novel. It was just that he was in the habit of saying the daily rosary, and the rosary is divided into sets of so-called "mysteries" or meditations built around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who plays a small but significant role in Chris's story.

He is gone, and it cannot be undone. And yet, it saddens me to remember my childhood friend sitting in a gently-rocking boat at Patterson Springs, near the old Chautauqua grounds, with his father Leonard. In this snapshot from my memory, Christian Hooker is only twelve years old, and his whole life stretches before him endlessly, for ever and ever. In my remembrance, he smiles as the sun catches the ripples on the water and the lake seems alive with a thousand twilight fireflies. In his high pre-adolescent voice, and higher spirits, he sings with his father, round and round and round:

Row row row your boat
Gently down the stream
Merrily merrily merrily merrily
Life is but a dream.

Finbar Studge, editor