



DEAR AUTHOR

Martin H Bott

I'm writing to tell you a story about your story. You'll forgive me, I hope, if I – an unpractised, artless chronicler compared to you – come straight to the point. Namely, that I sliced open my finger on page 43 of your latest novel.

There: I've stuffed more action into one paragraph than you saw fit to season your five opening chapters with. Forty-three pages it takes you just to describe Sheila dropping off her children at school!

What happened to me was that, just as Sheila was driving off and looking into her rear-view mirror (you'll be gratified to note that I didn't miss that deft little touch – she is looking back, of course, in more way than one; remembering her own schooldays), the edge of the paper opened up the ball of my thumb right from the tip to the knuckle.

It was sore in that vicious, mouth-puckering way, and there was a lot of blood – more than I would have thought possible, in fact. As a result, the bottom thirds of pages 43 and 44 are virtually illegible, and 42 and 45 are pretty messy too. When I rushed off to hold my gory paw over the sink I must have slammed the book shut.

Later I discovered that said pages were all stuck together and the blood had gone brown and tacky.

I can't claim I wasn't warned. 'Cutting-edge fiction,' says the blurb on the cover. Good one, eh?

Seriously though, has it ever occurred to you that once your story becomes a solid, so to speak – once you've typed out all the stuff floating around in your head and somebody else has printed it onto paper and bound it and sent it out into the world – it is actually quite a dangerous object?

My father once whacked our dog over the head with volume seven of the Everyman's Encyclopaedia, and he – the dog, I mean – was never quite the same again. He used to be rather bright, for a mutt – you know, fetching his lead when he wanted to go for a walk and so forth. After his encounter with 'Infallibility – Lobachevsky' he even forgot his house-training.

And isn't it striking how often a book from the library turns out to be a graveyard of invertebrate life forms? The victims aren't by any means just common or garden flies. Some of the poor little blighters look quite exotic, even in their one-dimensional final resting places. The clientele of the Aylesbury branch of the Buckinghamshire County Library Service must travel more widely with their borrowed reading matter than you might suppose.

They're a drab-looking bunch on the whole, the people you see perusing the shelves, shuffling along as though the static from the carpet were sucking at their shoes. But then you should, of course, never judge books by their covers, ha ha.

There was a most improbably spindly mantis or something splatted just inside the front cover of a Hammond Innes I read for a little light relief last year – it looked as though it must have lived and died in the kind of place where people cultivate coca and fight the government. And only the other day I found a truly pulchritudinous lepidopteran in – you guessed it –

the Shorter Oxford. How such a creature came to end up in the Reference Only section defies my imagination.

Which brings us back to you, dear Author, for you are the one who has been touched by the muse, the one with the gift of fantasy. Where do you imagine this letter of mine is going to go next? The idea of lethal literature is a potent one, don't you think? I could get political, or I could get existential. Or, come to think of it, I could get litigious. Plenty of writers have been sued for grievous defamation of character – why not for grievous bodily harm?

Don't worry. It's not in my nature. And, by the way, this is not a poison-pen letter – although the revelation that my words were literally toxic would have made a rather nice line to sign off on, don't you think? Not really your kind of denouement, of course – a bit too flashy, a bit too sensational – but nice nevertheless.

No more guesses? Then read on, dear Author.

I, on the other hand, have done no so such thing for once. I haven't unstuck your novel, I haven't read on and – perhaps this, after all, is the real point of my letter at last – I'm not going to. Have I hurt your feelings? Well, your novel hurt my thumb. Quid pro quo.

You see, I – as a mere mortal, as an Aylesbury shuffler – would maintain that my damaged digit matters quite as much as your wounded sensibility. And what about the insects – aren't they entitled to feel a little aggrieved? After all, plenty of writers indulge in anthropomorphism (in fact I note from the sidelines that it seems to be right back in vogue) – why shouldn't we readers?

Or are you a member of the death-of-the-author brigade? Do you just wash your hands of your stories and send them out to do their worst? Don't worry, I've got my redbrick BA, I know about the intentional fallacy; yes, I can just about follow you clever types all the way up your own arses. But this time, dear Author, I don't choose to do so.

I'm stopping on page 43 and putting the rest of your bloody book out

with the newspapers for recycling. (If you think about it, incidentally, this is rather good news for you, as I'll have to buy the library a replacement copy. Hardback, too.)

It's not really that I'm peeved about my little accident. I accept it was my own fault. Perhaps you'd like to think your tale was such a page-turner that I got over-excited and allowed my thumb to start groping for page 44 while I was still engrossed in 43 – but it was not so.

Truth be told, the Hammond Innes was the last thing I read which really had me hurrying like that. At least it had a proper turning point – a moment of truth, a twist in the tale. At least it actually had a plot.

No, I'm giving up on your story because – because I am going to finish it myself. Be honest, now: you didn't see that coming, did you? I, however, could see exactly where you were going in your narrative: round and round and round in familiar circles. Don't be offended – you're a jolly good writer by every generally accepted measure; it's just that I happen to be a jolly good reader. Too good for my own good, as it were. It's not much fun always knowing where you lot, you authors, are heading.

I keep up to date, you see. I've generally digested the Booker shortlist long before it's announced. I sit here in my armchair, reading everything that gets a half-decent review, and it's like watching the traffic from an aeroplane high above the city: you can see the trends, you can see that all the little cars beetling in from the provinces are going to end up nose to tail (if you know what I mean) on the London orbital.

As if that wasn't bad enough, along comes your book and actually adds injury to insult. While I was standing there at the sink, watching the blood seep out of my maimed thumb into the rushing column of water from the cold tap, I had a little moment of inspiration. I decided to act. I decided to see if I could surprise myself. I haven't determined how your story – Sheila's story – is going to conclude: that would defeat the purpose of the exercise.

But I can tell you this, dear Author: Sheila isn't going to go on drifting

in and out of flashbacks to her childhood and gradually realising that her hunt for a single, authoritative perspective on her life is a lost cause. No, she's going to pick up the fucking ball and run with it: somewhere, anywhere.

Truth be told, I sat down now at the computer intending to explain about my finger and then finish off the story for you in one sitting, just to prove how much it is possible to tell in how few words. I let myself get distracted, though – all that stuff about Hammond Innes and insects and what have you. In my finicky way, I took time off to look up Lobachevsky (who turned out to be a Russian mathematician, a pioneer of the modern non-Euclidian geometries (of which I'm hot on the trail)).

Moreover, I'm handicapped: thanks to you I've only got nine fingers at my disposal. While they tap merrily away, my stiff, white, bandaged thumb waves disparagingly back towards me. I haven't even started on Sheila yet, and already it's time for me to go and pick up the kids. Soon after we get back, Paul'll walk through the door and I'll have to get supper on the table.

Before I know it, it'll be bedtime. Nightnight Sarah nightnight Jane; bit of telly then: night Paulove oh I forgot to say your mother called no I'm not going to read for long and anyway if you're that tired the light won't bother you. Good night.

Life's not easy for a reader with ideas above her station.

So – if you want further details of Sheila's ever after, please apply to the undersigned in, say, a month or two from now. Or maybe a little longer.

Yours sincerely,

a Reader.

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