

## CHAPTER TWELVE: THE READERS' GROUP

I hated to admit it, but David was fast becoming my confessor. I only hoped that there would be something to show for all my effort. However, I was forced to admit that I had been pretty stubborn about my novel. It took a while before I was ready to give in on any of his suggestions. But I made the best of the situation. More than that, I was learning things about myself. I wasn't sure if this was simply a concession that I had made to the overall process.

It was difficult to recognize that I was becoming dependent on someone else, but David had done more than anyone else to give me the sense that I could stand on my own two feet. That seemed like a contradiction in itself. But I thought that we worked well as a team.

He felt somewhat intimidated by the professional relationship. Even if he had a great deal to do with my achievement, he would never get the credit that he deserved. More than that, he felt that my story was now his story. He saw himself as better suited to the role, and he was disappointed that people would always associate me with the novel.

If only I was as self-confident as I wished, then there would be little problem with letting go of my work. But it was truly mine because it remained an inner struggle for me. It wasn't as if I would ever be satisfied. David had taken advantage of my insecurities. Now they were permanent. At the same time, he had also nursed every turn of the phrase until it almost rolled off his tongue. I was simply the vessel for his more assertive vision.

I began to sense a split in my own personality. And he seemed to prolong this rift as his source of power. I hardly wanted to admit that I looked up to David. In fact, there were moments when I almost forgot that he was there. Instead, I had become devoted to a method. Over time, I came to a frightening realization about my writing. No matter how disruptive my experiences were to my sense of well-being, I could pull it all together in the morning with a spurt of fast and furious prose. I carried on the illusion that there was no single event that could ever take me out of myself so that I could discover a deeper realization about my personal identity. At the same time, I also became convinced that I was mining the inner reaches of the psyche, and, in so doing, I was learning about the structure of the larger universe.

David's questions about my personality had created a feeling of deep unease on my part. He reminded me that I was on a downward spiral, and I needed to end the descent before I broke down completely. If I could somehow change my immediate circumstances, what bothered me about myself would go away.

I was prostrate before my helplessness. I asked the cosmos to dispel my feelings of shame. I was finally ready to own up to my own shortcomings. Ultimately, I didn't need someone else to catch me at my game. I could turn myself in.

"Imagine that there is this emotion that we are too afraid to feel. A sense of immense hollowness."

It all sounded so melodramatic. But it appeared to give me a core purpose for my existence. I loved this feeling of personal engagement. I had a mission! I still wondered if I was in the midst of a more profound encounter that was about to tear me asunder. It became almost impossible to get rid of my abject nothingness. This was hardly a condition that I had become accustomed to. I always viewed myself as self-confident. I had come through such crises before, and I had remained devoted to my writing. Now, I was at a crossroad. I was too advanced in the

ordeal to give up now. I needed to get it together. I became resolved to press on. I would ignore my own doubts.

I learned the lessons of my characters. I had been resilient in the midst of my extreme self-loathing. Why had my misgivings not destroyed me? Greater souls might have been crushed by the search. But I had not buckled under the pressure. I reconciled myself to my probation. I was free again.

Once my book was published, I began to feel liberated from my deeper self-doubt. I greeted my modest success with a feeling of relief. I could get on with the business of living. David kept me preoccupied with a series of promotional events. It was a demanding schedule, but I welcomed the activity. It got my mind off my own troubles.

The Readers' Group brought together about twenty committed readers of the novel. They had been among the first to get copies of the book. And they had all connected with each other through the internet. Some people already knew each other from class. They met twice a week to compare notes on their individual readings. The group contacted David with the hope that I would come out and meet them. This seemed a little unusual for me. I knew all about signing sessions. And there were the usual press interviews. But this seemed even more personally involving.

I looked over the room. We met at a college student union. I was seated at the head of the table. Stephanie had taken upon her self the role of moderator. She welcomed me to group. This was not going to be a question and answer session. Instead, the students would participate in a more thorough discussion of the novel. There was a gap of a minute or two while we all became accustomed to each other.

James jumped in with the first intervention, "You relate this one incident about your mother. She has you working on a crossword puzzle, and you come across the word *empathy*. It appears to be some kind of watershed in your personal development."

I try to make my response sound very authoritative, "In the novel, I make an effort to distinguish between private and public experiences. I think that this was one of the first points that I gave credibility to my own inner monologue. At the same time, I strived to connect my thoughts and feelings to my place in the world. I felt some kind of concern for the human condition."

"So that is a real incident in your life.?"

"I developed it from things that actually happened."

He pressed me, "There really was a cross word puzzle incident."

"I think that this has been all part of my learning process as a writer. I have created a fictional identity for myself. I have catalogued memories that I have had. But I have also used my creativity to reconstruct experience over which I had only a vague recollection."

"Like the crossword puzzle?"

"For all that I know, there may have never been a crossword puzzle incident. But since I have written on the experience, it seems just as vivid for me as anything in my own life. There is something analogous that has happened with regards to the other characters."

James had received the answer that he wanted. But this was only the beginning of his questions. Everyone else allowed him to continue. This was to be the format. At times, I felt that I was being inquisitioned.

“Do you ever if any of your memories are actually yours?”

“All the time. I think that I started writing with the idea that I could somehow make sense of this phenomenon. I remember another story about breaking a vase in the living room. And I actually asked my mother about this story. But she never had a vase in the living room. On the other hand, the story seems as graphic as any of my experiences. How could I be mistaken?”

“You write about that event in the book. The broken glass and the flowers are also part of a critical juncture for the character’s psychological development.”

“It’s all part of the process of character creation. The character is this blank slate. And the more that I fill his brain with memories, the more he becomes entangled in the world.”

“As a writer, you seem to be going through the opposite experience.”

“Memories that I have cherished, thoughts that I think are completely mine now seem to be total fabrications. The more that I explore myself, the more that I recognize these glaring inconsistencies. All these memories do not add up to the reality of one person. Where do all these ideas come from? Not from me.”

He maintained his focus, “You really entertain these doubts.

“Don’t you feel the same way as a reader?”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Then is my fiction a failure for you?”

He would let go of the seriousness of tone, “I wouldn’t say that. I simply don’t read the way that you describe.”

“Maybe my role is to create memories for you.”

“That would seem to be a formidable task.”

I challenged him, “But you seem so involved with the crossword puzzle incident. It could touch a raw nerve in your own life.”

“I don’t think that we’re all like you. I feel pretty secure with my personality.”

“So you read a book such as mine and the events don’t start to blend together. They don’t bleed through to your dreams. There isn’t that vague inkling that follows you around all the time and tells you that something is going on.”

I was enjoying this!

Gwen was working on a Psychology-English Literature double major. She wanted to explore the idea of self awareness in the novel.

“Mr. Fisher, what do you think about *stream of consciousness*?”

“My works are a little too planned. I have charts and diagrams and vocabulary lists that all help me compose my work. But I do sort of like the idea of *stream of unconsciousness*, whatever that could mean. Does that satisfy you, Gwen.”

She looked away. She didn’t make eye contact. “I’m doing research on the idea of the inner dialogue that develops between the reader and the writer. How does this process relate to our sense of personal identity?”

“I’m not trying to set myself up as a psychologist. So there is really nothing scientific about what I am doing.”

She was persistent, “That’s not really what I’m doing. I want to know if this inner voice that we all have is affected by the novel.”

“I think that’s part of the issue for readers. A lot of times you just surrender yourself to your reading pleasure. It not as if you’re really making any distinction between what the author is saying and what you are saying.”

“That’s my whole point. You become part of the novel.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s almost like a form of telepathy. You feel that the writer knows something so personal about you. Like your innermost thoughts. Your deepest secrets.”

“You feel this?”

She became a little more guarded, “Sometimes. But I think that I’m more of a trained reader.”

“You’re afraid to take the risk.”

“Perhaps, I’m taking more of a risk.”

“But you keep speaking generally. Are you afraid to put yourself on the line.”

“How would I do that?”

“By admitting how the novel was actually getting under your skin.”

“Aren’t those your words, Mr. Fisher?”

“So be it. But if they convey the experience.”

“It’s not as if I read about someone having sex, and I feel all sexual.”

“Desire doesn’t influence you. You don’t let yourself become personally involved.”

“Isn’t that part of your game? You’re trying to seduce your readers.”

“I wish that I could feel that kind of intimacy.”

“What if I admitted to those feelings?”

“Are you admitting them to me or to yourself?”

She seemed momentarily frustrated.

“Why are you being so difficult?”

“I write for the people that I know. It’s not as if I imagine an ideal reader. I just stumble on this connection.”

Her question became more pointed, “Are you stumbling now?”

“I’m not talking about something that’s too sensitive subject.”

“I’m not embarrassed.”

“I don’t think that was my hope.”

“But you do want me to be more open as a reader.”

“That is your prerogative.”

Dawn seemed eager to jump into our discussion.

“Don’t you see what you’re doing with the poor girl.”

I stood up with a more defined posture.

“It’s not as if I’m trying to patronize Gwen. She can handle the questions.”

“That’s not the point. Steven, do you really like women?”

I wasn’t sure where her question was coming from, “Go on.”

“Take your portrayal of Sara Gordon. In the middle of the dinner, she’s ready to spread her legs for you. You short-circuit any actual character development with this male fantasy. It’s all pretty degrading.”

“It may have been a real experience for all I know.”

“But here she is finally reaching a point where she really can criticize your attitude. And you have her propositioning you.”

“That wasn’t the point. And you are confusing the character with me personally?”

“But you said that there could have been a real incident that prompted her graphic language.”

“That really doesn’t make a lot of difference. At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself if my portrayal is honest.”

“Honest for whom. The novel is full of these kind of portrayals. You can see an overall intent from Rebecca to Angela to create this reductive portrayal of women.”

“I think that you are focusing on a single personality trait and claiming to see it in a number of my female characters.”

“Steven, it’s more than that. We talked about that idea of consciousness looking for a body. But that just seems like such a male concept. Like you’re looking for the ideal body that you can inhabit so that you can prey on these impressionable young women. All the while, you’re trying to craft this ideal woman.”

I needed her to clarify what she was saying, “I don’t think that is what I have in mind.”

“Think about it. You see this woman in a pool hall in short shorts. She’s the catalyst for a sexual fantasy. And you build all this philosophy around her based on her knowledge of pool playing.”

“So there’s a lot more going on than just a sexual fantasy.”

She wasn’t buying my explanation, “Not at all. The philosophy is all yours, not hers. And you’re just looking for that perfect female body. She just happens to fit your bill. At least for the time being. But she hardly sees the way that you see her. She just can’t migrate from one body to another. She has to live in the body that she was given. This is what being female is about in our society.”

“What does that have to do with migrating souls?”

“I’m developing *your* idea. You only see women from the outside. There can’t possibly be any inner voice if you are simply ignoring what the inner voice is saying.”

“I think that I did a good job with Rebecca.”

“All you saw were thing that gratified your male ego.”

“I was reporting on what I saw, what she wanted me to see.”

“You didn’t even talk to her.”

“I had a brief conversation with her.”

“That seems entirely contrived.”

“So my novel really did get you involved? It provoked a lot of emotions on your part.”

She didn’t like where I headed, “That’s not what I’m saying. Gwen brought up this idea of the inner monologue. But that voice is only your voice. And if you can’t capture what a woman actually thinks, there is no way that you can set up any affinity with your reader. You throw in sex to make up for your own inadequacies as a man and as a writer.”

“I’m not sure what I can say back to that.”

“I’m not going to give you a free pass.”

Ariel joined the controversy, “I don’t want to be quite as judgmental as Dawn. But you really do make Sara Gordon vulnerable? That’s a little unfair. She really has little recourse.”

“Sara is supposed to be resistant to change in her life.”

“But you simply make her resistant to you. Then she betrays her lover by coming on to you.”

“That’s her way of dealing with the conflict in her life.”

“Says who?”

“What do you think, Ariel?”

“Mr. Fisher, that’s your problem. You try to get women involved on a sexual level. You don’t really give credibility to the rest of our experience.”

“That’s not really my intent.”

I had spent so much time trying to be meticulous in my portrait. My readers were picking away at my creation. I wanted to do what I could to save my work.

“If Sara or Rebecca are caught up in a cycle of repetitive behavior, it could have its roots in how they see sex. Sure, they have an independence of their own. At the same time, they have to live with men. Sara is totally dependent on this guy. And Rebecca feels that she is too vulnerable so that only makes her want to be tough.”

Ariel replied, “But whatever way you cut it, these women end up yielding to the same model.”

Dawn jumped in again, “Ariel is being too nice. What about these children that you push into adulthood? This is entirely predatory on your part.”

“I needed to make sense of Rebecca or Monroe. I needed to see what could be the roots of their behavior.”

“But your interest is completely prurient.”

“Maybe this isn’t the novel for you.”

“That’s your excuse for being a pervert.”

“I have desires. I’m a guy. But it’s not as if I act on every desire that I have”

Dawn was almost livid, “No, you write about these fantasies in a book. If this stuff was based on actual photographs, you’d be arrested.”

Gwen came to my rescue, “We’re reading fiction. If you don’t give the writer the ability to explore the roots of our behaviors, you condemn us to acting irrationally.”

“I’m not pretending that I am doing a psychological study for a learned journal. Gwen probably knows a lot more about that than I do. But I do have a story to tell. And I’m ready to tell it.”

Gwen interjected, “But you let this guy thing interfere.”

“That’s the whole point. The guy thing is interfering whether I write about it or not. It could very well be at the roots of psychic phenomenon.”

Ariel asked, “What does that mean?”

“That the supernatural self may be more primal. And in socialization, we lose this power. Particularly, woman are vulnerable to the dominant influences of males. So fiction provides a way to free our supernatural abilities.”

Ariel mused, “You really see yourself as a feminist?”

Dawn interrupted, “Aren’t you more of a collector? Going from woman to woman because none of them really measures up to your ideal. So you can use all them equally.”

Gwen added, “So we are meant to take your word for it?”

“I don’t know. You’re my readers.”

Peter joined in, “I want to change the subject somewhat. I would like to explore the nexus of coincidences in your novels. You keep going back to these places hoping to reignite the same experience that occurred there previously. But there’s even less of a concurrence of events.”

“I admit that there’s psychological disparity between what you’re conditioned to expect and what you really see. In simple terms, you just don’t get what you need. So my characters have that element of desperation. They’re hoping for something permanent in their lives, but all they have is part-time”

He wondered, “That’s what happened in your life?”

“I saw what it was like doing this part-time job. Everyone else around me was moving forward. Getting nice cars and houses. Developing a career. I could have let it bring me down. But I had my writing. It was a constant for me.”

“What about people who aren’t writers? Are there lives hopeless?”

“This book is all about extraordinary experiences which help sustain people. It’s how they ultimately feel a sense of hope.”

“It sounds like magic.”

“It’s belief. Quite a lot of it. But people need some kind of sign that it’s not all in vain. I write about those signs.”

“Even if they’re delusional.”

“Even delusion has its own form of truth.”

“That sounds like a contradiction.”

“But it’s unresolvable. Like going to the horse races. There are going to be winners. And if you just get it right once in a while, you feel like you have a system.”

He questioned my analogy, “Even if you get cleaned out the rest of the time.”

“No matter what. It’s the rush that follows your bet. The simple realization that everything is on the line. And if you come up on top, you have made it all matt.”

“And that makes up for the million other times that you lose it all.”

“That’s why you play.”

He dismissed my point, “It doesn’t sound mystical, just crazy.”

“So be it. It makes for a good read.”

“Only for wayward souls.”

“How are you any different?”

“I think that I’m smarter.”

I admitted, “I tend to think the same way. But look how Dawn took me to the cleaners.”

“She can’t be right.”

“In her own way, she is.”

Peter added, “If you even thought a little like her, I don’t think that you could be a writer.”

“I actually think quite a bit like her. That’s why I am a writer.”

I started to explain my idea of *decisive action*.

“It’s not like I write adventure novels. But there is a point in the story where the characters become aware of what is wrong in their own situation. And they realize that the only

way to overcome the obstacles in their way is with some kind of decisive action.”

Phil blurted out, “Like hurting someone.”

“I’m not going to endorse that kind of thing. But that may be the very thing that propels them to the next stage.”

Naomi wondered, “Do they have to progress?”

“Writing is all about developing a psychological agility to get beyond your own problems. Great writers have to progress past autobiography. You have to write for all your characters.”

Naomi wanted again to examine the characteristics of the female writer, “She learns to love herself, the image that she sees not the image that is expected for her. She creates a loveable image of herself. This seems so different from your novel.”

“That isn’t to say that I don’t try to do that.”

“What is the source of your shortcomings. Isn’t autobiography getting in the way.”

“Maybe. But that is why I wrote such a big book. I felt that the more that I worked on the narrative, the more that it would escape all the elements of my personal story.”

“Your characters are all absorbed by their self-love. Even the notion of the personal search is part of this same kind of obsessiveness. People who only want to seem an image of themselves in the world.”

“It’s difficult to penetrate the self. That is the writer’s vocation.”

“I don’t want to sound crass, but your characters seem to be fucking themselves in the mirror.”

“Even though I may seem shallow. I am aware of my characters’ flaws. This is all part of my own quest where I recognize what is stimulating on a purely physical level. Without this outlook, the characters only live in their heads.”

“Then there is nothing to this mysticism. Only a desire to dominate the universe.”

“It’s a physical thing.”

“But your notion of the body is tied up with your thoughts on empire. Men dominating the world.”

“I think of myself as a revolutionary. I want to overthrow the empire.”

She offered me her conclusion, “Then you can’t still be the emperor. You can never attain universal knowledge.”

Sharon wondered, “Everyone wants to ask you about the early parts of the novel. I really think that they are missing the point. In the section in the garden, why does revelation occur as a prelude to spiritual collapse? Are you resigned to the possibilities of salvation?”

“Sharon, your question seems very similar to Naomi’s. Both are about the collapse of authority. Modernism presented this dichotomy. But it was very much an attempt to restore the discredited empire. Despite its professed intent, post-modernism is no more willing to abandon the totalizing gesture. The writer passes his time by archiving all these undigested bits of the culture, the artefacts of the fallen empire.”

“Are you any different?”

“The garden overruns its boundaries.”

“You are a romantic.”

After the meeting, Sharon approached me, “I think a lot of the girls in the group bent over backwards to give you a rough time. But it’s mostly wishful thinking. They’re with guys who



they can't wrap around their little finger and they're pissed about it."

"How is that?"

"It's big book. They're not going to take the time to read it all if they don't get something out of it."

"So why take it out on me?"

"So they don't have to admit that they like your characters. They can blame you for their own unfortunate dilemma."

"It's that simple."

"It's probably a lot worse than that?"

"How is that?"

"Down deep, they have a crush on you."

I felt a little forward, "Do you have some time? Do you want to grab some dinner?"

She gave me a flirtatious smile "Are you trying to turn me into one of your characters?"

"I'm not writing now."

"Only making notes for some future book."

She agreed to continue our discussion.

"I know that we supposed to be relaxing, but I still have a lot of questions to ask you."

"I don't mind. On the other hand, you may have other things that you'd like to talk about."

"How does it feel to have your book get away from you like that? People were asking you all kind of crazy questions in there. It made you sound like a serial killer."

"As I told Peter, these are questions that I've already asked myself. I'd have to if I was going to be a good writer."

"But a lot of the women didn't feel satisfied by that answer."

"You said so yourself. You have to look at the book as a whole."

"I know that's my whole point. You talked about escaping autobiography. But this still feels like a long drawn-out struggle."

"It is."

"I don't want to sound like Dawn, but things get a lot worse before they get any better. Like the Eve section. It's about complete male domination."

"But she does her best to turn the table on him."

"It may be too late."

"I want that hope."

"You use that confidence to explore depravity."

"That's not my goal. Eve works to escape her oppressor."

"But the damage is inside."

"I know. That is the premise of the novel."

"Don't you think that you are giving Brian a position of priority in his ability to affect her behavior?"

"But she overcomes his conditioning."

"What about Marn Angel. She embraces that kind of degradation."

"Marn Angle shares that mix of sex appeal and self-destructiveness."

"Is that your fantasy?"

"Not at all. She's like Rebecca. She has knowledge. But she isn't able to act completely

on her understanding. It's more of a strategy so that she can play the game."

"But Marn Angel really is on a mystical quest. Is that your quest?"

"Marn is trapped. But she does push out into the cosmos."

"Sort of a sexual cosmos."

"That's her ether. The medium that she uses for her travels. What links together the universe."

"Without that, is the universe empty?"

"That is my question to you."

"You want me to answer it."

"You don't have to answer it. But it is one of the questions that the book asks the reader."

"That's how you get into the reader's psyche."

"If she is willing. Are you willing?"

She stared into my eyes. I looked away.

"You are hypnotic. I think that you know that."

"The novel is all about creating an identity for its readers."

"Hence the marketing approach."

I nodded in agreement.

When I got back to Atlanta, David had me meet him in his office.

"How did it go?"

"It was fun."

"A lot of cute girls. Did you hook up?"

"It wasn't about that."

"I know that it wasn't. But you're a handsome dude. And all these girls feel like you're the spiritual leader. Easy pickings."

"I didn't go there to meet women. It's important that I don't confuse my personal and my professional life."

"I agree. Have a professional hook up when you're on the road, and when you come back live your personal life."

"David, I didn't appoint you to be my libido."

"That could be the heart of the problem."

What was I supposed to say to him?

He asked, "Have I cured you?"

"Of what?"

"Your coincidence bug."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're still not hanging around that grocery store down by the private high school in the hope of running into girls in the check out lane."

I really had no idea what he was talking about.

"You write about that kind of thing all the time."

"I make up stories. If I did half the things that I write about, I'd have my own wing in the penitentiary."

"Do you give tours?"

I sneered at him.

“Steven, you still believe that you should get some kind of reward for finishing your book.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You shouldn’t even try. You’re just as fucked up as you ever were.”

David let his frustrations slip into his assessments of me. I was cutting too close to the bone.

“Admit it. Nothing has changed.”

I replied, “People exaggerate the notion of change. It’s not like our personalities really change. We just develop more understanding what’s really going on. So it makes it easier to adjust.”

I guess that I was resisting his efforts to mold me into his image and likeness. Since I had finally finished the book, I wondered if the same ghosts would continue to haunt me. My conversation at the University of North Carolina had seemed very challenging. Would I have approached things in the same way if I had been writing about the Readers’ Group? Each reader had been active in her own way in analyzing my foibles. I didn’t crack in face of the pressure. But their responses seemed more active than those of my characters. What was I missing? I almost want to pull my book from the shelves. I could take it through a needed revision and put it back in place.

Was this my cosmic punishment for screwing up?