

Dumb novel

Chris Page

From childhood he had entertained only one ambition, which was to write dumb fiction. As an adult he sat up late at night in his cluttered and cosy writer's den when the kids were asleep and worked on his vocation.

In the day, he would send his dumb short stories and dumb novels to agents, publishers and magazines. And they would send them back with form letters or little slips of paper saying 'No thanks'.

In all the years he wrote dumb fiction he had not sold a single thing. He had published precisely nothing. He couldn't give the stuff away.

Tonight, he is as usual sitting at his keyboard, but instead of writing he is reflecting. He is doing this more and more these days. He is reflecting that he is past 40, he has predicated his whole life on being a reasonably successful writer (not even a runaway success) of dumb fiction, and while he had boxes and boxes of the stuff he was feeling a mite dejected. This is how his life is shaping up — sitting up night after night with his cups of cocoa writing stuff that no one wants to read. It is not as if he wanted to be another Marquez or even another Crichton. He just wanted to get by writing fun, unpretentious stories that would raise a smile for the reader and pay enough to keep him and his family in the manner to which they were accustomed. That's why he called it dumb fiction. It was meant to be entertaining. Nothing more. It was the kind of stuff in which someone was sure catch his willy in the zipper of his trousers.

Now in the dead of night with internet radio wafting classical music's greatest hits at him, he fetches from the shelf what he estimates to be about 200 pages of blank paper. These he slips into his printer and prints them all numbered one to 200. He arranges the blank numbered pages in front of him on the desk and wonders whether he ought to give them a title.

*Dumb* might be good.

Or *Wordless*.

How about *Breathless*?

Just *Less*? No, he was stretching now.

What about *Man Dressed Entirely in White in an Empty Art Gallery*? Now there was a title.

But the pile of numbered pages didn't need a title so he went on to the next thing.

He typed and printed a cover page, which was entirely blank save for a note at the bottom:

*A novel by* — and he put his name and address as he usually did.

Now the cover letter.

*Dear Sir or Madam:*

*I have had since I was a child only one ambition, which is to write dumb fiction.*

*Here is my first truly dumb novel.*

*Yours faithfully, etc.*

Next he chose at random the name of an agent from the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook, typed up a big envelope, an SAE and the rest of it, and went to bed.

The next day he took his package to the post office, saw it off and then went on to his office job and forgot about it.

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That evening when the wife and the kids were finally asleep, he was back at his desk writing the dumb fiction that no one would want to publish, as he was the night after that, and the night after that, and for a number of weeks and months after that. And in that time he sent off a whole lot of dumb stories and what have you that no one would want to publish and received back a whole lot of notes that said in different ways 'No thanks'.

Over breakfast each day, he would open the letters of rejection — the letters of dejection, he secretly called them — and returned manuscripts and after breakfast would store the day's pile of negatives in a large cardboard box he kept for the purpose before going off to his office job.

On one particular morning, one of the letters of rejection was a letter of acceptance — or rather a letter inviting him to lunch, which in publishing circles was pretty much the same thing.

The letter said 'we are very much struck by your novel \_\_\_\_\_, which we feel is a powerful and original work.' There was no mention of the name of the novel, just that blank space in the middle of the sentence. He had sent out so much stuff over the

years, looking at the name of the agent didn't help him identify which story they were talking about.

At the risk of being late for work, he ran up the stairs to his writer's den and booted up the computer. He located the cover letter he had written all those months ago and had an hallucinatory moment in which he recalled the pile of blank numbered pages and tried to match it with the lunch invitation.

There must have been some bizarre mistake. It seems that someone in the agency had mistaken the pile of blank pages for a powerful and original work. What a cock up! Sending the pile of blank pages, his dumb novel — no words, *dumb*, geddit? — had been an impulsive act of self satire and a minor gesture of petulance inspired by his huge collection of rejections, his advancing age and the rest of it.

There was only one thing he could do — he accepted the lunch invitation.

On the day of the lunch, he took leave from his office job, dressed smartly and stuffed into a satchel some of his favourite manuscripts — ones with actual words on them. He could show them to the agent once they had cleared up the misunderstanding over the blank novel.

In the event, it turned out there had been no misunderstanding about the blank novel. The agents, there were two of them, a husband and wife team, were very nice and without a trace of irony or mockery said they were very impressed with the pile of blank pages, which they had brought along. The dumb novel lay on the edge of the table next to their extraordinarily tasty lunch, looking very riffled and well thumbed. They used lots of words like 'post modern' and 'courageous' and 'brilliant' and 'concept' and 'art' and there was at least one reference to André Breton.

He was dumfounded. He had no idea whether to explain why he had sent the pile of blank paper, he had no idea whether to bring up the other manuscripts, the ones that had actual words on them, and in the end said nothing much at all.

The three of them agreed to move ahead with talks and agreed to meet again another day at the agents' Bloomsbury office.

He got home in the afternoon a little muzzy with wine and the circumstance of being taken seriously for a little joke, and wondering how he would explain this odd predicament to his wife, who would surely be aghast that after all those years of sacrificing normality and a sensible career to writing, he was getting acknowledged for a completely blank pile of paper. He waited for the kids to go to bed before he said anything. They were sitting cosily on the sofa, the television was off, she listened with great interest to his tale and at the end was very impressed.

‘You clever so and so!’ she said, staring into his eyes and stroking his hair.

‘Don’t you think I should tell them how it came about, why I did it?’

‘Why not? Your Dumb Novel’ — it had now acquired caps in the way they spoke of it — ‘works on so many different levels.’ So he did tell the agents about the novel’s genesis. But before that, he and his wife made love on the sofa, which was something they hadn’t done in a long time.

He told the agents in their office over a copy of the contract, which was lying on the desk between them, and after necking a very stiff whisky they had put in his hand.

After a moment of silent reflection the woman said, ‘Isn’t that a lovely story. You know, your Dumb Novel works on so many different levels.’

‘Absolutely,’ said the man. ‘I think we might be able to make use of that story in the promotion. Cheers!’

And they had another drink and signed the contract.

Yikes! thought the author. Blimey and wow! Golly and gosh! There was now no need to have reservations or feel guilt. Everything was out in the open. Clearly he was being offered real money for a pile of blank pages that he had sent off on a complicated but not very worthy impulse. Fine.

They had yet more drinks and he was introduced to a whole lot of new people who kept popping into office, usually staying for a drink or two before popping out again.

That night he went to bed without doing any writing. He didn’t have to, he joked. That was the kind of writer he was.

In bed he felt like he was glowing in the dark. He was a real writer with a contract and a large advance though he was yet to publish a single word he had written.

But really, was the pile of blank paper so bad? He thought about it at length and felt happy and proud. He liked his pile of blank papers. Everyone did.

He liked the passage that went:

And he also liked this bit:

But his absolute favourite part was:

His dumb novel was published before long. It was the quickest editing and production process the agents had ever been involved in, they told him with some pride.

There was quite a lot of hype about the publication of the book. There was for example a press conference at which he was not permitted to speak. There was book signing at which he sat behind a white screen unseen by the people who came to see him. People were hired to march around the streets with blank white sandwich boards. Completely blank advertisements went up on the busses and all over the tube.

The book itself had, of course, an entirely blank cover with just the words *A novel by* — and then his name.

The broadsheet reviewers loved the book to bits. It sold in droves. The New Yorker requested an extract, and got one, pages 27-35. On his way home from work one evening he saw a woman reading it on the underground. She was turning the pages very slowly and deliberately and running her eyes and fingers over each one before turning to the next. He didn't really know what to make of this but he accepted it as he did the first sales figures and royalty cheques.

His writer's den suddenly filled with light. This was because he was now able to give up his office job to stay home and write all day. It was a dream come true.

He set to writing with a new vigour, and the stuff he wrote was just as dumb as the stuff he wrote before, which is what he had always liked, but which didn't have a very good track record. Something was changing now. When he looked at his dumb fiction it seemed wooden, trite, inauthentic. All his stuff now looked like that. None of it bore any resemblance to the sublime quality of his blank book. They really had nothing in common at all. They could have been written by different people.

Now he felt truly like a failure. Here he was, the writer of the kind of dumb fiction in which the main character would get his penis caught in his trouser zipper, feted as a

post-modern master on the strength of one petulant little joke and quite unable to follow up with anything real.

He screwed up his courage and took some of his manuscripts to see his agents. The husband and wife agents looked over his stories and passed them back and forth between themselves with wooden smiles fixed on their faces, rather in the way an uncle and aunt would regard some detailed portraits of cat poo created by their favourite nephew.

‘Ah!’ exclaimed the woman with sudden insight. ‘Early work!’

‘Early work!’ chimed in the husband with obvious relief.

‘Lovely,’ they both intoned in a sort of syncopation.

‘My, how you’ve grown,’ laughed the woman self-consciously, and handed back his manuscripts.

‘Let’s keep these to ourselves,’ said the husband.

Back home, the creator of these-we-must-keep-to-ourselves got thoroughly drunk. That gave him an idea. He speed wrote a novel while completely inebriated. It was wild, it was ambitious, it was huge, it was sprawling, it was uninhibited. It was like a literary roller coaster and it was rubbish.

He wrote another which was the history of mankind as told by a dwarf who had spent his life locked in a trunk and sealed in a basement in Rumania. It was an instant early work.

He then wrote a novel about the evil that people do in a babble of random foreign words culled from all the languages in the world with the help of online translators. This turned out to be when he showed it to his agents something else to keep between themselves.

One afternoon, in another moment of his ever-more frequent drunken episodes, he collected up approximately 250 pages of blank paper, which he numbered using his printer and sent off to his agents immediately and by express delivery.

He didn’t have a chance to regret this particular impulse because he was woken out of his hangover the next morning by a phone call from his agents exclaiming that he had another hit on his hands.

He went through the rigmarole again of contracts and launch parties and press conferences at which he wore a gag or was draped with a sheet and had to put up with universal adulation.

Surely this new blank novel was a repeat of the last blank novel. Not a bit of it. The critics were very much taken with the fact that it had twenty-five percent more blank pages than the first one, and mentioned this fact as often as they could.

The author spent increasing amounts of time sitting in his cosy, cluttered writing den staring blankly at the keyboard of his computer — and increasing amounts of time in his cups.

His wife worried, his friends fretted, his agents grew anxious that he might not produce another best seller.

Eventually, in the middle of yet another fruitless afternoon, in his torpor and his stupor, he decided that enough was enough. He renounced writing. He gave up on his long-cherished desire to write dumb fiction, or any kind of fiction, come to that. He was going to retire as a writer — no, not even that. He was not a writer, he was a compiler of blank pages, whatever that was. He was quite simply going to go back to his office job, if they would take him back.

They would take him back. Not only would they take him back, but they would take him back into the position he left, which had just become vacant again. He was going to slot right back in where he was before. What a relief it was to put all that pressure and palaver behind him. Maybe he would take up gardening. Or learning Esperanto. Or painting garden gnomes.

He did give up drinking.

On the day he was to start back at his old job he leaped out of bed at 6:30 as was his custom, clear headed, refreshed, and feeling as light and happy as he had felt since all the silliness had started with that first pile of blank pages. He threw open the curtains and then threw them closed again. Summoning his most trepidatious manner he peeked out the curtains again: his front garden and the street outside were full of reporters. Reporters with microphones and dictaphones, reporters with notebooks, reporters with cameras and zoom lenses and aluminium step ladders, reporters with camera crews and vans and satellite dishes. Apparently, he was being doorstepped by the media.

In a panic he booted up his computer and went to the online news services where he found himself looking at the front of his own house through the lenses that were arrayed outside. He saw himself throw open the curtains and then throw them closed again. He saw his cat sitting on the front doorstep waiting to come in for its breakfast.

*Best selling author throws up literary life for humble office job*, said one headline.

*Dumb Novel author seeks the reclusive life*, said another.

*Writer turns back on fame and riches for office desk*, they went on.

The articles speculated that he may be taking an ordinary job to research a new novel or that going back to an ordinary job might be another piece of absurdist performance art, a sort of dumb novel in motion. And they all wanted to know from him what he was up to and deluged him questions the second he opened the front door to let the cat in. As the animal trotted in, tail high and showing its anus to the journos, it gave its master a reproachful look as if to ask what the hell he thought he was doing bringing all those clowns to the house.

Meanwhile, none of the journalists guessed that he was giving up writing because no one was publishing anything he wrote and that he had more self respect than to spend the rest of his life playing a silly game only the agents and critics seemed to understand.

It was this self respect that made him determined that he would not be intimidated from going to work. He dressed and got ready in the usual manner, and ate a sensible if rather hurried breakfast. When he was ready to leave he slipped on a hooded windcheater, a peaked cap and a pair of sunglasses to hide his appearance. Then he hefted his bicycle, which he kept in the front hall, onto his shoulder and phoned an immediate neighbour to whom he apologised and of whom he asked a small favour. Then he took his bike through the house to the back garden where his neighbour helped him climb over the adjoining garden wall. Then it was through his neighbour's house and out the front door as if he lived there. However, the press pack instantly saw through his ruse and were upon him as if he was the last ever news story in history.

Rather than racing down the road as he planned he sort of weaved and wobbled his way through the reporters, ignoring their questions but saying, absurdly, 'Mind out the way! Mind out the way!' That was the only comment the press got from him all day even though they pursued him all the way to his office. 'Mind out the way!'

His boss behaved as there wasn't a braying press pack in his car park, said how glad he was to have his ex-employee back, and just got on with things.

At the end of the day, the ex-author struggled through the press all the way home. He was not inconsiderably miffed about all the unwanted attention when he was just

trying to normalise his life, so, having no better idea, he decided to call his agents — his ex-agents — to complain.

There was no answer from their office, and he eventually tracked down the lady agent on her mobile. She explained tearfully that she was at her husband's bedside at the hospital. He had suffered an accident.

'Oh no! How awful!'

At first she didn't want to say exactly what happened and the ex-writer didn't want to pry, but just as he was about to wind up the call she volunteered the information that was too awful to bear alone. Her husband had caught his penis in the zipper of his trousers.

After a few days when all he did was get on his bicycle, go to work and come home again, the press got bored with hanging around and found something else to do with their time. His agent came out of hospital suffering no permanent disability and life got back to normal. Kind of.

He would go to work every day as he did before all the nonsense about his blank books, but in the evening when the children had gone to bed he would sit in the living room reading something, or listening to music or talking to his wife.

One evening he put down the novel he was reading and stared thoughtfully at the wall. He still couldn't decide whether to take up gardening or Esperanto or painting garden gnomes.

He placed a bookmark in the novel, put it down, went up the stairs to his cosy writing den and booted up his computer. He put his hands to the keyboard and with the enthusiasm of one finding a long lost friend took up writing his dumb fiction right where he had left off.

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Thank you for reading Dumb Novel, a short story by Chris Page

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