

JASPER FFORDE

The **WELL** *of* **LOST**
PLOTS

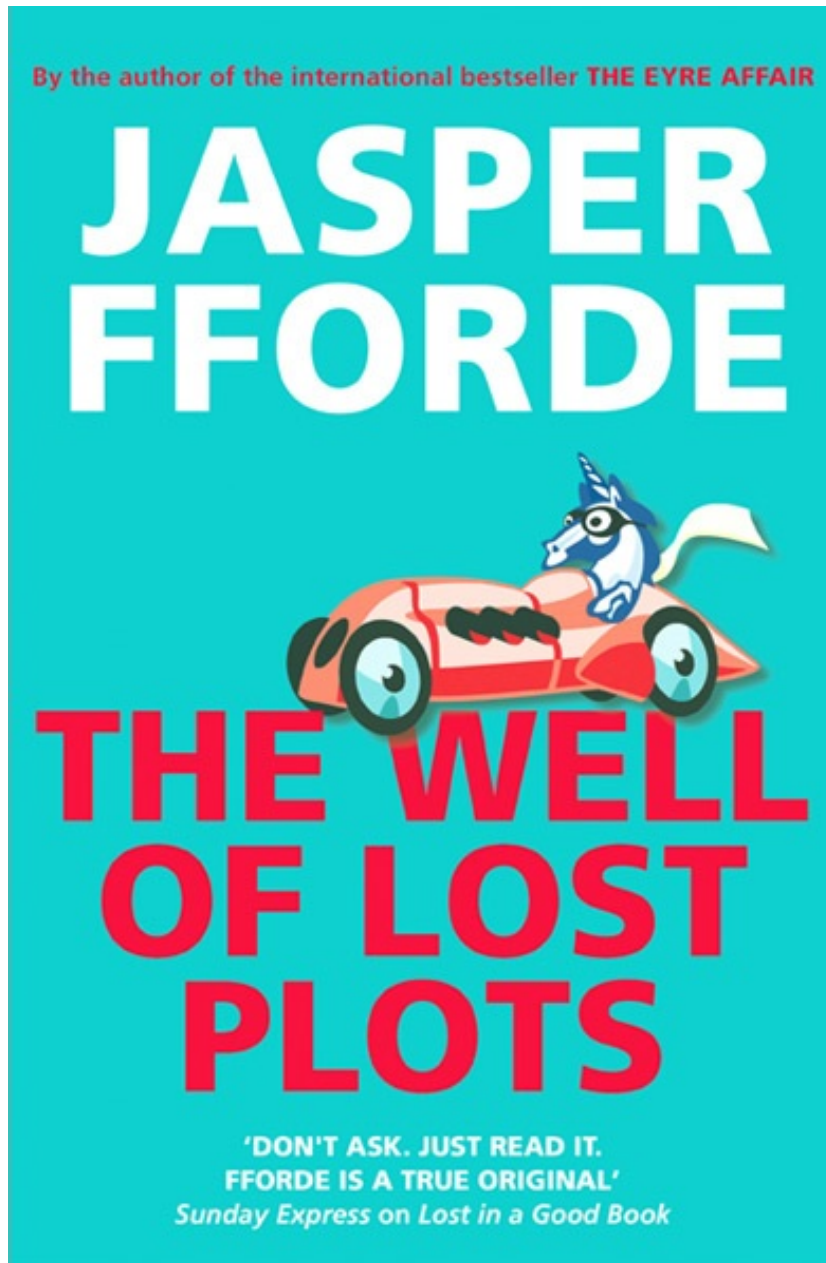


'JASPER FFORDE HAS GONE WHERE NO OTHER FICTIONEER HAS GONE BEFORE. MILLIONS OF READERS NOW FOLLOW.' *Guardian*

Synopsis:

Leaving Swindon behind to hide out in the Well of Lost Plots — the place where all fiction is created — Thursday Next ponders her next move. As a shadow looms over popular fiction, she must keep her wits about her and discover what is going on and who can she trust.

As is usual in Jasper Fforde's novels, there is no chapter thirteen. No one knows the significance for this.



The Well of Lost Plots

By

Jasper Fforde

The third book in the Thursday Next series

Copyright © 2003 by *Jasper Fforde*

Awards: Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for Comic Writing

For Mari
who makes the torches burn brighter

Thursday Next: The Story So Far...

Swindon, Wessex, England, circa 1985. SpecOps is the agency responsible for policing areas considered too specialized to be tackled by the regular force, and Thursday Next is attached to the Literary Detectives at SpecOps-27. Following the successful return of Jane Eyre to the novel of the same name, vanquishing master criminal Acheron Hades and bringing peace to the Crimean peninsula, she finds herself a minor celebrity.

On the trail of the seemingly miraculous discovery of the lost Shakespeare play *Cardenio*, she crosses swords with Yorrick Kaine, escapee from fiction and neofascist politician. She also finds herself blackmailed by the vast multinational known as the Goliath Corporation, who want their operative Jack Schitt out of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," in which he was imprisoned. To achieve this they call on Lavoisier, a corrupt member of the time-traveling SpecOps elite, the ChronoGuard, to kill off Thursday's husband. Traveling back thirty-eight years, Lavoisier engineers a fatal accident for the two-year-old Landen, but leaves Thursday's memories of him intact — she finds herself the only person who knows he once lived.

In an attempt to rescue her eradicated husband, she finds a way to enter fiction itself — and discovers that not only is there a policing agency within the BookWorld known as Jurisdiction, but that she has been apprenticed as a trainee agent to Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*. With her skills at bookjumping growing under Miss Havisham's stern and often unorthodox tuition, Thursday rescues Jack Schitt, only to discover she has been duped. Goliath has no intention of reactualizing her husband and instead wants her to open a door into fiction, something Goliath has decided is a "rich untapped marketplace" for their varied but spectacularly worthless products and services.

Thursday, pregnant with Landen's child and pursued by Goliath and Acheron's little sister, Aornis, an evil genius with a penchant for clothes shopping and memory modification, decides to enter the BookWorld and retire temporarily to the place where all fiction is created: the Well of Lost Plots. Taking refuge in an unpublished book of dubious quality as part of the Character Exchange Program, she *thinks* she will have a quiet time.

Author's Note

To those unfamiliar with the pronunciation of English provincial towns, this is how I pronounce them

Slough rhymes with *wow* and is *never* pronounced *Sluff*.

Reading is pronounced as in *Otis Redding*.

Goring rhymes with *boring*.

Cheltenham is pronounced *Chelt-num*.

Warwickshire is pronounced *war-rick-shy-er*.

Hobble is pronounced *limp*.

Mouse your way to my Web site at www.jasperfforde.com

This book has been bundled with special features including “The Making of” documentary, deleted scenes from all three books, outtakes and much more. To access all these free bonus features, log on www.jasperfforde.com/specialfeatures.html and enter the code word as directed.

1.

The Absence of Breakfast

The Well of Lost Plots. To understand the Well you have to have an idea of the layout of the Great Library. The library is where all published fiction is stored so it can be read by the readers in the Outland; there are twenty-six floors, one for each letter of the alphabet. The library is constructed in the layout of a cross with the four corridors radiating from the center point. On all the walls, end after end, shelf after shelf, are *books*. Hundreds, thousands, millions of books. Hardbacks, paperbacks, leatherbound, everything. But the similarity of all these books to the copies we read back home is no more than the similarity a photograph has to its subject; these books are *alive*.

Beneath the Great Library are twenty-six floors of dingy yet industrious subbasements known as the Well of Lost Plots. This is where books are constructed, honed and polished in readiness for a place in the library above — if they make it that far. The failure rate is high. Unpublished books outnumber published by an estimated eight to one.

THURSDAY NEXT,
The Jurisdiction Chronicles

MAKING ONE'S HOME in an unpublished novel wasn't without its compensations. All the boring day-to-day mundanities that we conduct in the real world get in the way of narrative flow and are thus generally avoided. The car didn't need refueling, there were never any wrong numbers, there was always enough hot water, and vacuum cleaner bags came in only two sizes — upright and pull along. There were other more subtle differences, too. For instance, no one ever needed to repeat themselves in case you didn't hear, no one shared the same name, talked at the same time or had a word annoyingly “on the tip of their tongue.” Best of all, the bad guy was always someone you knew of, and — Chaucer aside — there wasn't much farting. But there were some downsides. The relative absence of breakfast was the first and most notable difference to my daily timetable. Inside books, dinners are often written about and therefore feature frequently, as do lunches and afternoon tea; probably because they offer more opportunities to further the story.

Breakfast wasn't all that was missing. There was a peculiar lack of cinemas, wallpaper, toilets, colorful books, animals, underwear, smells, haircuts, and strangely enough, minor illnesses. If someone was ill in a book, it was either terminal and dramatically unpleasant or a mild head cold — there wasn't much in between.

I was able to take up residence inside fiction by virtue of a scheme entitled the Character Exchange Program. Due to a spate of bored and disgruntled bookpeople escaping from their novels and becoming what we called PageRunners, the authorities set up the scheme to allow characters a change of scenery. In any year there are close to ten thousand exchanges, few of which result in any major plot or dialogue infringements — the reader rarely suspects anything at all. Since I was from the real world and not actually a character at all, the Bellman and Miss Havisham had agreed to let me live inside the BookWorld in exchange for helping out at Jurisfiction — at least as long as my pregnancy would allow.

The choice of book for my self-enforced exile had not been arbitrary; when Miss Havisham asked me in which novel I would care to reside, I had thought long and hard. *Robinson Crusoe* would have been ideal considering the climate, but there was no one female to exchange with. I could have gone to *Pride and Prejudice*, but I wasn't wild about high collars, bonnets, corsets — and delicate manners. No, to avoid any complications and reduce the possibility of having to move, I had decided to make my home in a book of such dubious and uneven quality that publication and my subsequent enforced ejection was unlikely in the extreme. I found just such a book deep within the Well of Lost Plots amongst failed attempts at prose and half-finished epics of such dazzling ineptness that they would never see the light of day. The book was a dreary crime thriller set in Reading entitled *Caversham Heights*. I had planned to stay there for only a year, but it didn't work out that way. Plans with me are like De Floss novels — try as you might, you never know *quite* how they are going to turn out.

I read my way into *Caversham Heights*. The air felt warm after the wintry conditions back home, and I found myself standing on a wooden jetty at the edge of a lake. In front of me there was a large and seemingly derelict flying boat of the sort that still plied the coastal routes back home. I had flown on one myself not six months before on the trail of someone claiming to have found some unpublished Burns poetry. But that was another lifetime ago, when I was SpecOps in Swindon, the world I had temporarily left behind.

The ancient flying boat rocked gently in the breeze, tautening the mooring ropes and creaking gently as the water gently slapped against the hull. As I watched the old aircraft, wondering just how long

something this decrepit could stay afloat, a well-dressed young woman stepped out of an oval-shaped door in the high-sided hull. She was carrying a suitcase. I had read the novel of *Caversham Heights* so I knew Mary well although she didn't know me.

"Hullo!" she shouted, trotting up and offering me a hand. "I'm Mary. You must be Thursday. My goodness! What's that?"

"A dodo. Her name's Pickwick."

Pickwick plocked and stared at Mary suspiciously.

"Really?" she replied, looking at the bird curiously. "I'm no expert of course but — I *thought* dodoes were extinct."

"Where I come from, they're a bit of a pest."

"Oh?" mused Mary. "I'm not sure I've heard of a book with *live* dodoes in it."

"I'm not a bookperson," I told her, "I'm real."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mary, opening her eyes wide. "An *Outlander*."

She touched me inquisitively with a slender index finger as though I might be made of glass.

"I've never seen someone from the other side before," she announced, clearly relieved to find that I wasn't going to shatter into a thousand pieces. "Tell me, is it true you have to cut your hair on a regular basis? I mean, your hair actually *grows*?"

"Yes" — I smiled — "and my fingernails, too."

"Really?" mused Mary. "I've heard rumors about that but I thought it was just one of those Outlandish legends. I suppose you have to eat, too? To stay alive, I mean, not just when the story calls for it?"

"One of the great pleasures of life," I assured her.

I didn't think I'd tell her about real-world downsides such as tooth decay, incontinence, or old age. Mary lived in a three-year window and neither aged, died, married, had children, got sick or changed in any way. Although appearing resolute and strong-minded, she was only like this because she was *written* that way. For all her qualities, Mary was simply a foil to Jack Spratt, the detective in *Caversham Heights*, the loyal sergeant figure to whom Jack explained things so the readers knew what was going on. She was what writers called an *expositional*, but I'd never be as impolite to say so to her face.

"Is this where I'm going to live?" I was pointing at the shabby flying boat.

"I know what you're thinking." Mary smiled proudly. "Isn't she just the most beautiful thing ever? She's a Sunderland; built in 1943 but last flew in '68. I'm midway converting her to a houseboat, but don't feel shy if you want to help out. Just keep the bilges pumped out, and if you can run the number three engine once a month, I'd be very grateful — the start-up checklist is on the flight deck."

"Well — okay," I muttered.

“Good. I’ve left a précis of the story taped to the fridge and a rough idea of what you have to say, but don’t worry about being word perfect, since we’re not published, you can say almost anything you want — within reason, of course.”

“Of course.” I thought for a moment. “I’m new to the Character Exchange Program. When will I be called to do something?”

“Wyatt is the inbook exchange liaison officer; he’ll let you know. Jack might seem gruff to begin with,” continued Mary, “but he has a heart of gold. If he asks you to drive his Austin Allegro, make sure you depress the clutch fully before changing gear. He takes his coffee black and the love interest between myself and DC Baker is *strictly* unrequited, is that clear?”

“Very clear,” I returned, thankful I would not have to do any love scenes.

“Good. Did they supply you with all the necessary paperwork, IDs, that sort of thing?”

I patted my pocket and she handed me a scrap of paper and a bunch of keys.

“Good. This is my footnoterphone number in case of emergencies, these are the keys to the flying boat and my BMW. If a loser named Arnold calls, tell him I hope he rots in hell. Any questions?”

“I don’t think so.”

She smiled as a yellow cab with *TransGenre Taxis* painted on the side materialized in front of us. The cabbie looked bored and Mary opened the passenger door.

“Then we’re done. You’ll like it here. I’ll see you in about a year. So long!”

She turned to the cabbie, muttered, “Get me out of this book,” and she and the car faded out, leaving me alone on the dusty track.

I sat upon a rickety wooden seat next to a tub of long-dead flowers and let Pickwick out of her bag. She ruffled her feathers indignantly and blinked in the sunlight. I looked across the lake at the sailing dinghies that were little more than brightly colored triangles that tacked backwards and forwards in the distance. Nearer to shore a pair of swans beat their wings furiously and pedaled the water in an attempt to take off, landing almost as soon as they were airborne, throwing up a long streak of spray on the calm waters. It seemed a lot of effort to go a few hundred yards.

I turned my attention to the flying boat. The layers of paint that covered and protected the riveted hull had partly peeled off to reveal the colorful livery of long-forgotten airlines beneath. The Perspex windows had clouded with age, and high in the massive wing untidy cables hung lazily from the oil-stained cowlings of the three empty engine bays, their safe inaccessibility now a haven for nesting birds. Goliath, Aornis, and SpecOps seemed a million miles away — but then, so did Landen. *Landen*. Memories of my husband were never far away. I thought of all the times we had spent together that hadn’t actually happened. All the places we hadn’t visited, all the things we hadn’t done. He might have been eradicated at the age of two, but I still had our memories — just no one to share them with.

I was interrupted from my thoughts by the sound of a motorcycle approaching. The rider didn’t have much control of the vehicle; I was glad that he stopped short of the jetty — his erratic riding might well have led him straight into the lake.

“Hullo!” he said cheerfully, removing his helmet to reveal a youngish man with a dark Mediterranean complexion and deep sunken eyes. “My name’s Arnold. I haven’t seen you around here before, have I?”

I got up and shook his hand.

“The name’s Next. Thursday Next. Character Exchange Program.”

“Oh, blast!” he muttered. “Blast and double blast! I suppose that means I’ve missed her?”

I nodded and he shook his head sadly.

“Did she leave a message for me?”

“Y-es,” I said uncertainly. “She said she would, um, see you when she gets back.”

“She did?” replied Arnold, brightening up. “That’s a good sign. Normally she calls me a loser and tells me to go rot in hell.”

“She probably won’t be back for a while,” I added, trying to make up for not passing on Mary’s message properly, “maybe a year — maybe more.”

“I see,” he murmured, sighing deeply and staring off across the lake. He caught sight of Pickwick, who was attempting to outstare a strange aquatic bird with a rounded bill.

“What’s that?” he asked suddenly.

“I think it’s a duck, although I can’t be sure — we don’t have any where I come from.”

“No, the other thing.”

“A dodo.”¹

“What’s the matter?” asked Arnold.

I was getting a footnoterphone signal; in the BookWorld people generally communicated like this.

“A footnoterphone call,” I replied, “but it’s not a message — it’s like the wireless back home.”²

Arnold stared at me. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I’m from the other side of the page. What you call the Outland.”³

He opened his eyes wide. “You mean — you’re *real*?”

“I’m afraid so,” I replied, slightly bemused.

“Goodness! Is it true that Outlanders can’t say ‘red-Buick-blue-Buick’ many times quickly?”

“It’s true. We call it a tongue twister.”

“Fascinating! There’s nothing like that *here*, you know. I can say ‘The sixth sheikh’s sixth sheep’s sick’ over and over as many times as I want!”

And he did, three times.

“Now you try.”

I took a deep breath. “The sixth spleeps sics sleeks... sick.”

Arnold laughed like a drain. I don’t think he’d come across anything quite so funny in his life. I smiled.

“Do it again!”

“No thanks.⁴ How do I stop this footnoterphone blabbering inside my skull?”

“Just think *Off* very strongly.”

I did, and the footnoterphone stopped.

“Better?”

I nodded.

“You’ll get the hang of it.”

He thought for a minute, looked up and down the lake in an overtly innocent manner, then said, “Do you want to buy some verbs? Not any of your rubbish, either. Good, strong, healthy regulars — straight from the Text Sea — I have a friend on a scrawltrawler.”

I smiled. “I don’t think so, Arnold — and I don’t think you should ask me — I’m Jurisdiction.”

“Oh,” said Arnold, looking pale all of a sudden. He bit his lip and gave such an imploring look that I almost laughed.

“Don’t sweat,” I told him, “I won’t report it.”

He sighed a deep sigh of relief, muttered his thanks, remounted his motorbike and drove off in a jerky fashion, narrowly missing the mailboxes at the top of the track.

The interior of the flying boat was lighter and more airy than I had imagined, but it smelt a bit musty. Mary was mistaken; she had not been halfway through the craft’s conversion — it was more like one tenth. The walls were half-paneled with pine tongue-and-groove, and rock-wool insulation stuck out untidily along with unused electrical cables. There was room for two floors within the boat’s cavernous hull, the downstairs a large, open-plan living room with a couple of old sofas pointing towards a television set. I tried to switch it on but it was dead — there was no TV in the BookWorld unless called for in the narrative. Much of what I could see around me were merely props, necessary for the chapter in which Jack Spratt visits the Sunderland to discuss the case. On the mantelpiece above a small wood-burning stove were pictures of Mary from her days at the police training college and another from when she was promoted to detective sergeant.

I opened a door that led into a small kitchenette. Attached to the fridge was the précis of *Caversham Heights*. I flicked through it. The sequence of events was pretty much as I remembered from my first reading in the Well, although it seemed that Mary had overstated her role in some of the puzzle-solving areas. I put the précis down, found a bowl and filled it with water for Pickwick, took her egg

from my bag and laid it on the sofa, where she quickly set about turning it over and tapping it gently with her beak. I went forward and discovered a bedroom where the nose turret would have been and climbed a narrow aluminum ladder to the flight deck directly above. This was the best view in the house, the large greenhouselike Perspex windows affording a vista of the lake. The massive control wheels were set in front of two comfortable chairs, and facing them and ahead of a tangled mass of engine control levers was a complex panel of broken and faded instruments. To my right I could see the one remaining engine, looking forlorn, the propeller blades streaked with bird droppings.

Behind the pilots' seats, where the flight engineer would have sat, there was a desk with reading lamp, footnoterphone and typewriter. On the bookshelf were mainly magazines of a police nature and lots of forensic textbooks. I walked through a narrow doorway and found a pleasant bedroom. The headroom was not overgenerous, but it was cozy and dry and was paneled in pine with a porthole above the double bed. Behind the bedroom was a storeroom, a hot-water boiler, stacks of wood and a spiral staircase. I was just about to go downstairs when I heard someone speak from the living room below.

“What do you think that is?”

The voice had an empty ring to it and was neuter in its inflection — I couldn't tell if it was male or female.

I stopped and instinctively pulled my automatic from my shoulder holster. Mary lived alone — or so it had said in the book. As I moved slowly downstairs, I heard another voice answer the first: “I think it's a bird of some sort.”

The second voice was no more distinctive than the first, and indeed, if the second voice had not been *answering* the first, I might have thought they belonged to the same person.

As I rounded the staircase, I saw two figures standing in the middle of the room staring at Pickwick, who stared back, courageously protecting her egg from behind a sofa.

“Hey!” I said, pointing my gun in their direction. “Hold it right there!”

The two figures looked up and stared at me without expression from features that were as insipid and muted as their voices. Because of their equal blandness it was impossible to tell them apart. Their arms hung limply by their sides, exhibiting no body language. They might have been angry or curious or worried or elated — but I couldn't tell.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“We are nobody,” replied the one on the left.

“Everyone is *someone*,” I replied.

“Not altogether correct,” said the one on the right. “We have a code number but nothing more. I am TSI-1404912-A and this is TSI-1404912-C.”

“What happened to B?”

“Taken by a grammasite last Tuesday.”

I lowered my gun. Miss Havisham had told me about Generics. They were created here in the Well to populate the books that were to be written. At the point of creation they were simply a human canvas without paint — blank like a coin, ready to be stamped with individualism. They had no history, no conflicts, no foibles — nothing that might make them either readable or interesting in any way. It was up to various institutions to teach them to be useful members of fiction. They were graded, too. A to D, one through ten. Any that were D-graded were like worker bees in crowds and busy streets. Small speaking parts were C-grades; B-grades usually made up the bulk of featured but not *leading* characters. These parts usually — but not always — went to the A-grades, handpicked for their skills at character projection and multidimensionality. Huckleberry Finn, Tess and Anna Karenina were all A-grades, but then so were Mr. Hyde, Hannibal Lecter and Professor Moriarty. I looked at the ungraded Generics again. Murderers or heroes? It was impossible to tell how they would turn out. Still, at this stage of their development they would be harmless. I reholstered my automatic.

“You’re Generics, right?”

“Indeed,” they said in unison.

“What are you doing here?”

“You remember the craze for minimalism?” asked the one on the right.

“Yes?” I replied, moving closer to stare at their blank faces curiously. There was a lot about the Well that I was going to have to get used to. They were harmless enough — but decidedly creepy. Pickwick was still hiding behind the sofa.

“It was caused by the 1982 character shortage,” said the one on the left. “Vikram Seth is planning a large book in the next few years and I don’t think the Well wants to be caught out again — we’re being manufactured and then sent to stay in unpublished novels until we are called into service.”

“Sort of stockpiled, you mean?”

“I’d prefer the word *billeted*,” replied the one on the left, the slight indignation indicating that it wouldn’t be without a personality forever.

“How long have you been here?”

“Two months,” replied the one on the right. “We are awaiting placement at St. Tabularasa’s Generic College for basic character training. I live in the spare bedroom in the tail.”

“So do I,” added the one on the left. “Likewise.”

I paused for a moment. “O-kay. Since we all have to live together, I had better give you names. You,” I said, pointing a finger at the one on the right, “are henceforth called *ibb*. You” — I pointed to the other — “are called *obb*.”

I pointed at them again in case they had missed it as neither made any sign of comprehending what I said — or even hearing it.

“*You* are *ibb*, and *you* are *obb*.”

I paused. Something didn’t sound right about their names but I couldn’t place it.

“ibb,” I said to myself, then: “obb. ibb. ibb-obb. Does that sound strange to you?”

“No capitals,” said obb. “We don’t get capitalized until we start school — we didn’t expect a name so soon, either. Can we keep it?”

“It’s a gift from me,” I told them.

“I am ibb,” said ibb, as if to make the point.

“And I am obb,” said obb.

“And I’m Thursday,” I told them, offering my hand. They shook it in turn slowly and without emotion. I could see that this pair weren’t going to be a huge bundle of fun.

“And that’s Pickwick.”

They looked at Pickwick, who plocked quietly, came out from behind the sofa, settled herself on her egg and pretended to go to sleep.

“Well,” I announced, clapping my hands together, “does anyone know how to cook? I’m not very good at it and if you don’t want to eat beans on toast for the next year, you had better start to learn. I’m standing in for Mary, and if you don’t get in my way, I won’t get in yours. I go to bed late and wake up early. I have a husband who doesn’t exist and I’m going to have a baby later this year so I might get a little cranky — and overweight. Any questions?”

“Yes,” said the one on the left. “Which one of us is obb, did you say?”

I unpacked my few things in the small room behind the flight deck. I had sketched a picture of Landen from memory and I placed it on the bedside table, staring at it for a moment. I missed him dreadfully and wondered, for the umpteenth time, whether perhaps I shouldn’t be here hiding, but out *there*, in my own world, trying to get him back. Trouble was, I’d tried that and made a complete pig’s ear of it — if it hadn’t have been for Miss Havisham’s timely rescue, I would still be locked up in a Goliath vault somewhere. With our child growing within me I had decided that flight was not a coward’s option but a sensible one — I would stay here until the baby was born. I could then plan my return, and following that, Landen’s.

I went downstairs and explained to obb the rudiments of cooking, which were as alien to it as having a name. Fortunately I found an old copy of *Mrs. Beeton’s Complete Housekeeper*, which I told obb to study, half-jokingly, as research. Three hours later it had roasted a perfect leg of lamb with all the trimmings. I had discovered one thing about Generics already: dull and uninteresting they may be — but they learn fast.

Inside *Caversham Heights*

Book/YGIO/1204961/: **Title:** *Caversham Heights*. UK, 1976, 90,000 words. **Genre:** Detective fiction. **Book Operating System:** BOOK V7.2. **Grammasite Infestation:** 1 (one) nesting pair of Parenthiums (protected). **Plot:** Routine detective thriller with stereotypical detective Jack Spratt. Set in Reading (England), the plot (such as it is) revolves around a drug czar hoping to muscle in on Reading's seedy underworld. Routine and unremarkable, *Caversham Heights* represents all the worst aspects of amateur writing. Flat characters, unconvincing police work and a pace so slow that snails pass it in the night. **Recommendation:** Unpublishable. Suggest book to be broken up for salvage at soonest available opportunity. **Current Status:** Awaiting Council of Genres Book Inspectorate's report before ordering demolition.

Library Subbasement Gazetteer,
1982, volume CLXI

I DISCUSSED THE RUDIMENTS of breakfast with ibb and obb the following morning. I told them that cereal traditionally came *before* the bacon and eggs, but that toast and coffee had no fixed place within the meal; they had problems with the fact that marmalade was almost exclusively the preserve of breakfast, and I was just trying to explain the technical possibilities of dippy egg fingers when a copy of *The Toad* dropped on the mat. The only news story was about some sort of drug-related gang warfare in Reading. It was part of the plot in *Caversham Heights* and reminded me that sooner or later — and quite possibly sooner — I would be expected to take on the mantle of Mary as part of the Character Exchange Program. I had another careful read of the précis, which gave me a good idea of the plot chapter by chapter, but no precise dialogue or indication as to what I should be doing, or when. I didn't have to wonder very long as a knock at the door revealed an untidy man wearing a hat named Wyatt.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly, apologizing for the misrelated grammatical construction almost immediately, "Wyatt is *my* name, not the hat's."

"I kind of figured that," I replied.

Wooden and worn with use, he was holding a clipboard.

"Oh, bother!" he said in the manner of someone who had just referred to George Eliot as "he" in a room full of English professors. "I've done it again!"

"Really, I don't mind," I repeated. "What can I do for you?"

"You're very kind. As a Character Exchange Program member, I would like to ask you to get yourself into Reading." He stopped and his shoulders sagged. "No, I'm *not* the Character Exchange Program member — you are. And *you* need to get into Reading."

“Sure. Do you have an address for me?”

Dog-eared and grubby, he handed me a note from his clipboard.

“Don’t worry,” I said before he could apologize again, “I understand.”

His condition was almost certainly permanent, and since I didn’t seem to care that much, he regained some confidence.

“Despite the ten-year demolition order hanging over us,” he continued, “you should try and give it your best. The last Character Exchanger didn’t take it seriously at all. Had to send him dusty and covered in asphalt on the road out of here.”

He raised an eyebrow quizzically.

“I won’t let you down,” I assured him.

He thanked me, and small, brown and furry, the man with the hat named Wyatt raised it and vanished.

I took Mary’s car and drove into Reading across the M4, which seemed as busy as it was back home; used the same road myself when traveling between Swindon and London. Only when I was approaching the junction at the top of Burghfield road did I realize there were, at most, only a half dozen or so different vehicles on the roads. The vehicle that first drew my attention to this strange phenomenon was a large, white truck with *Dr. Spongg Footcare Products* painted on the side. I saw three in under a minute, all with an identical driver dressed in a blue boilersuit and flat cap. The next most obvious vehicle was a red VW Beetle driven by a young lady, then a battered blue Morris Marina with an elderly man at the wheel. By the time I had drawn up outside the scene of *Caversham Heights* first murder, I had counted forty-three white trucks, twenty-two red Beetles and sixteen identically battered Morris Marinas, not to mention several green Ford Escorts and a brace of white Chevrolets. was obviously a limitation within the text and nothing more, so I hurriedly parked, read Mary’s notes again to make sure I knew what I had to do, took a deep breath and walked across to the area that had been taped off. A few uniformed police officers were milling around. I showed my pass and ducked under the *Police: Do Not Cross* tape.

The yard was shaped as an oblong, fifteen feet wide and about twenty feet long, surrounded by a high redbrick wall with crumbling mortar. A large, white SOCO tent was over the scene, and a forensic pathologist, dictating notes into a tape recorder, was kneeling next to a well-described corpse.

“Hullo!” said a jovial voice close by. I turned to see a large man in a mackintosh grinning at me.

“Detective Sergeant Mary,” I told him obediently. “Transferred here from Basingstoke.”

“You don’t have to worry about all that *yet*.” He smiled. “The story is with Jack at the moment — he meeting Officer Tibbit on the street outside. My name’s DCI Briggs and I’m your friendly yet long-suffering boss in this little caper. Crusty and prone to outbursts of temper yet secretly supportive, I will have to suspend Jack at least once before the story is over.”

“How do you do?” I spluttered.

“Excellent!” said Briggs, shaking my hand gratefully. “Mary told me you’re with Jurisfiction. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“Any news about when the Council of Genres Book Inspectorate will be in?” asked Briggs. “It would be a help to know. You’ve heard about the demolition order, I take it?”

“Council of Genres?” I echoed, trying not to make my ignorance show. “I’m sorry. I’ve not spent that much time in the BookWorld.”

“An Outlander?” replied Briggs, eyes wide in wonderment. “Here, in *Caversham Heights*?”

“Yes, I’m—”

“Tell me, what do waves look like when they crash on the shore?”

“Who’s an Outlander?” echoed the pathologist, a middle-aged Indian woman who suddenly leapt to her feet and stared at me intently. “You?”

“Y-es,” I admitted.

“I’m Dr. Singh,” explained the pathologist, shaking my hand vigorously. “I’m matter-of-fact, apparently without humor, like cats and people who like cats, don’t suffer fools, yet on occasion I do exhibit a certain warmth. Tell me, do you think I’m anything like a *real* pathologist?”

“Of course,” I answered, trying to think of her brief appearances in the book.

“You see,” she went on with a slightly melancholic air, “I’ve never seen a *real* pathologist and I’m really not sure what I’m meant to do.”

“You’re doing fine,” I assured her.

“What about me?” asked Briggs. “Do you think I need to develop more as a character? Am I like all those *real* people you rub shoulders with, or am I a bit one-dimensional?”

“Well—”

“I knew it!” he cried unhappily. “It’s the hair, isn’t it? Do you think it should be shorter? Longer? What about having a bizarre character trait? I’ve been learning the trombone — that would be unusual, yes?”

“Someone said there was an Outlander in the book!” interrupted a uniformed officer, one of a pair who had just walked into the yard. “I’m Unnamed Police Officer No. 1; this is my colleague, Unnamed Police Officer No. 2. Can I ask a question about the Outland?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the point of alphabet soup?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you sure you’re from the Outland?” he asked suspiciously. “Then tell me this: Why is there no

singular for *scampi*?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re *not* from the Outland,” said Unnamed Police Officer No. 1 sadly. “You should be ashamed of yourself, lying and raising our hopes like that!”

“Very well,” I replied, covering my eyes, “I’ll prove it to you. Speak to me in turn but leave off your speech designators.”

“Okay,” said Unnamed Police Officer No. 1. “Who is this talking?”

“And who is this?” added Dr. Singh.

“I said leave *off* your speech designators. Try again.”

“It’s harder than you think,” sighed Unnamed Police Officer No. 1. “Okay, here goes.”

There was a pause.

“Which one of us is talking now?”

“And who am I?”

“Mrs. Singh first, Unnamed Police Officer No. 1 second. Was I correct?”

“Amazing!” murmured Mrs. Singh. “How do you do that?”

“I can recognize your voices. I have a sense of smell, too.”

“No kidding? Do you know anyone in publishing?”

“None who would help. My husband is, or was, an author, but his contacts wouldn’t know me from Eve at present. I’m a SpecOps officer; I don’t have much to do with contemporary fiction.”

“SpecOps?” queried UPO No. 2. “What’s that?”

“We’re going to be scrapped, you know,” interrupted Briggs, “unless we can get a publisher.”

“We could be broken down into *words*,” added UPO No. 1 in a hushed tone, “cast into the Text Sea; and I have a wife and two kids — or at least, in my backstory I do.”

“I can’t help you,” I told them, “I’m not even—”

“Places, please!” yelled Briggs so suddenly I jumped.

The pathologist and the two unnamed officers both hurried back to their places and awaited Jack, whom I could hear talking to someone in the house.

“Good luck,” murmured Briggs from the side of his mouth as he motioned me to sit on a low wall. “I’ll prompt you if you dry.”

“Thanks.”

DCI Briggs was sitting on a low wall with a plainclothes policewoman who busied herself taking

notes and did not look up. Briggs stood as Jack entered and looked at his watch in an unsubtle way. Jack answered the unasked question in the defensive, which he soon realized was a mistake

“I’m sorry, sir, I came here as quick as I could.”

Briggs grunted and waved a hand in the direction of the corpse.

“It looks like he died from gunshot wounds,” he said grimly. “Discovered dead at eight forty-seven this morning.”

“Anything else I need to know?” asked Spratt.

“A couple of points. First, the deceased is the nephew of crime boss Angel DeFablio, so I wanted someone good with the press in case the media decide to have a bonanza. Second, I’m giving you this job as a favor. You’re not exactly first seed with the seventh floor at the moment. There are some people who want to see you take a fall — and I don’t want that to happen.”

“Is there a third point?”

“No one else is available.”

“I preferred it when there were only two.”

“Listen, Jack,” Briggs went on. “You’re a good officer, if a little sprung-loaded at times, and I want you on my team without any mishaps.”

“Is this where I say thank you?”

“You do. Mop it up nice and neat and give me an initial report as soon as you can. Okay?”

Briggs nodded in the direction of the young lady who had been waiting patiently.

“Jack, I want you to meet Thurs — I mean, DS Mary Jones.”

“Hello,” said Jack.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” said the young woman.

“And you. Who are you working with?”

“Next — I mean *Jones* is your new detective sergeant,” said Briggs, beginning to sweat for some inexplicable reason. “Transferred with an A-one record from Swindon.”

“Basingstoke,” corrected Mary.

“Sorry. *Basingstoke*.”

“No offense to DS Jones, sir, but I was hoping for Butcher, Spooner or—”

“Not possible, Jack,” said Briggs in the tone of voice that made arguing useless. “Well, I’m off. I’ll leave you here with, er—”

“Jones.”

“Yes, Jones, so you can get acquainted. Remember, I need that report as soon as possible. Got it?”

Jack did indeed get it and Briggs departed.

He shivered in the cold and looked at the young DS again.

“Mary Jones, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What have you found out so far?”

She dug in her pocket for a notebook, couldn't find it, so counted the points off on her fingers instead.

“Deceased's name is Sonny DeFablio.”

There was a pause. Jack didn't say anything, so Jones, now slightly startled, continued as though he had.

“Time of death? Too early to tell. Probably three A.M. last night, give or take an hour. We'll know more when we get the corpse. Gun? We'll know when...”

“. . . Jack, are you okay?”

He had sat down wearily and was staring at the ground, head in hands.

I looked around, but both Dr. Singh, her assistants and the unnamed officers were busily getting on with their parts, unwilling, it seemed, to get embroiled — or perhaps they were just embarrassed.

“I can't do this anymore,” muttered Jack.

“Sir,” I persisted, trying to ad-lib, “do you want to see the body or can we remove it?”

“What's the use?” sobbed the crushed protagonist. “No one is reading us; it doesn't matter.”

I placed my hand on his shoulder.

“I've *tried* to make it more interesting,” he sobbed, “but nothing seems to work. My wife won't speak to me, my job's on the line, drugs are flooding into Reading and if I don't make the narrative even remotely readable, then we all get demolished and there's nothing left at all except an empty hole on the bookshelf and the memory of a might-have-been in the head of the author.”

“Your wife only left you because *all* loner, maverick detectives have domestic problems,” I explained. “I'm sure she loves you really.”

“No, no, she doesn't,” he sobbed again. “All is lost. Don't you see? It's customary for detectives to drive unusual cars and I had a wonderful 1924 Delage-Talbot Supersport. The idea was stolen and replaced with that dreadful Austin Allegro. If any *scenes* get deleted, we'll really be stuffed.”

He paused and looked up at me. “What's your name?”

“Thursday Next.”

He perked up suddenly. “Thursday Next the Outlander Jurisdiction agent apprenticed to Miss Havisham Thursday Next?”

I nodded. News travels fast in the Well.

An excited gleam came into his eye. “I read about you in *The Word*. Tell me, would you have any wa of finding out when the Book Inspectorate are due to read our story? I’ve lined up seven three-dimensional B-2 freelancers to come in and give the book a bit of an edge — just for an hour or so. With their help we might be able to hang on to it; all I need to know is the *when*.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Spratt,” I sighed, “I’m new to all this; what exactly *is* the Council of Genres?”

“They look after fictional legislature, dramatic conventions, mainly — a representative from every genre sits on the Council — it is *they* who decide the conventions of storytelling, and it is *they*, through the Book Inspectorate, who decide whether an unpublished book is to be kept — or demolished.”

“Oh,” I replied, realizing that the BookWorld was governed by almost as many rules and regulations as my own, “then I can’t help you.”

“What about Text Grand Central? Do you know anyone there?”

TGC I *had* heard of: amongst other things, they monitored the books in the Great Library and passed any textual problems on to us at Jurisdiction, who were purely a policing agency — but I knew no more than that. I shook my head again.

“Blast!” he muttered, staring at the ground. “I’ve applied to the C of G for a cross-genre makeover, but you might as well try and speak to the Great Panjandrum himself.”

“Why don’t you change the book from *within*?”

“Change without permission?” he replied, shocked at my suggestion. “That would mean rebellion. I want to get the C of G’s attention, but not like that — we’d be crushed in less than a chapter!”

“But if the inspectorate haven’t been round yet,” I said slowly, “then how would they even know anything had changed?”

He thought about this for a moment. “Easier said than done — if I start to fool with the narrative, it might all collapse like a pack of cards!”

“Then start small, change *yourself* first. If that works, you can try to bend the plot slightly.”

“Y-esss,” said Jack slowly, “what did you have in mind?”

“Give up the booze.”

“How did you know about my drink problem?”

“All maverick, loner detectives with domestic strife have drinking problems. Give up the liquor and go home to your wife.”

“That’s not how I’ve been written,” replied Jack slowly. “I just can’t do it — it would be going again

type — the readers — !”

“Jack, there are no readers. And if you don’t at least try what I suggest, there *never* will be any readers — or any Jack Spratt. But if things go well, you might even be in... a sequel.”

“A sequel?” repeated Jack with a sort of dreamy look in his eyes. “You mean — a Jack Spratt *series*?”

“Who knows” — I shrugged — “maybe even one day — a boxed set.”

His eyes gleamed and he stood up. “A boxed set,” he whispered, staring into the middle distance. “It’s up to me, isn’t it?” he said in a slow voice.

“Yes. Change yourself, change the book — and soon, before it’s too late — make the novel into something the Book Inspectorate will *want* to read.”

“Okay,” he said at last, “beginning with the next chapter. Instead of arguing with Briggs about letting a suspect go without charging them, I’ll take my ex-wife out to lunch.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” I affirmed. “Not tomorrow or next chapter or even next page or paragraph — you’re going to change *now*.”

“We can’t! There are at least nine more pages while you and I discuss the state of the body with Dr. Singh and go through all that boring forensic stuff.”

“Leave it to me. We’ll jump back a paragraph or two. Ready?”

He nodded and we moved to the top of the previous page, just as Briggs was leaving.

Jack did indeed get it and Briggs departed.

He shivered in the cold and looked at the young DS again.

“Mary Jones, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What have you found out so far?”

She dug in her pocket for a notebook, couldn’t find it, so counted the points off on her fingers instead.

“Deceased’s name is Sonny DeFablio.”

“What else?”

“Your wife phoned.”

“She... did?”

“Yes. Said it was important.”

“I’ll drop by this evening.”

“She said it was *very* urgent,” stressed Jones.

“Hold the fort for me, would you?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Jack walked from the crime scene leaving Jones with Dr. Singh.

“Right,” said Mary. “What have we got?”

We ran the scene together, Dr. Singh telling me all the information that she was more used to relating to Jack. She went into a huge amount of detail regarding the time of death and a more-than-graphic explanation of how she thought it had happened. Ballistics, trajectory, blood-splatter patterns, you name it. I was really quite glad when she finished and the chapter moved off to Jack’s improvised meeting with his ex-wife.

As soon as we were done, Dr. Singh turned to me and said in an anxious tone, “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Not a clue.”

“Me neither,” replied the quasi pathologist. “You know that long speech I made just now about postmortem bruising, angles of bullet entry and discoloration of body tissues?”

“Yes?”

She leaned closer. “Didn’t understand a word. Eight pages of technical dialogue and haven’t the foggiest what I’m talking about. I only trained at Generic college as a mother figure in domestic potboilers. If I’d known I was to be drafted to *this*, I would have spent a few hours in a Cornwell. Do you have any clues as to what I’m actually meant to do?”

I rummaged in her bag and brought out a large thermometer.

“Try this.”

“What do I do with it?”

I pointed.

“You’re *kidding* me,” replied Dr. Singh, aghast.

3.

Three Witches, Multiple Choice and Sarcasm

Jurisdiction is the name given to the policing agency that works *inside* books. Under a remit from the Council of Genres and working with the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Text Grand Central, the Prose Resource Operatives at Jurisdiction comprise a mixed bag of characters, most drawn from the ranks of fiction but some, like Harris Tweed and myself, from the real world. Problems in fiction are noticed by “spotters” employed at Text Grand Central, and from there relayed to the Bellman, a ten-yearly elected figure who runs Jurisdiction under strict guidelines laid down by the Council of Genres. Jurisdiction has its own code of conduct, technical department, canteen and resident washerwoman.

THURSDAY NEXT,
The Jurisdiction Chronicles

DR. SINGH DIDN'T waste the opportunity, and she gathered together several other trainee pathologists she knew from the Well. They all sat spellbound as I recounted the limited information I possessed. Exhausted, I managed to escape four hours later. It was evening when I finally got home. I opened the door to the flying boat and kicked off my shoes. Pickwick rushed up to greet me and tugged excitedly at my trouser leg. I followed her through to the living room and then had to wait while she remembered where she had left her egg. We finally found it rolled behind the hi-fi and I congratulated her, despite there being no change in its appearance.

I returned to the kitchen. ibb and obb had been studying *Mrs. Beeton's* all day, and ibb was attempting steak Diane with french fries. Landen used to cook that for me and I suddenly felt lonesome and small so far from home I might well be on Pluto. obb was making the final touches to a fully decorated four-tier wedding cake.

“Hello, ibb,” I said, “how's it going?”

“How's what going?” replied the Generic in that annoying literal way that they spoke. “And I'm obb.”

“Sorry — obb.”

“Why are you sorry? Have you done something?”

“Never mind.”

I sat down at the table and opened a package that had arrived. It was from Miss Havisham and contained the Jurisdiction Standard Entrance Exam. I had joined Jurisdiction almost by accident — I had wanted to get Landen out of “The Raven” and getting involved with the agency seemed to be the best way to learn. But Jurisdiction had grown on me and I now felt strongly about maintaining the solidity of the written word. It was the same job I had undertaken at SpecOps, just from the other side. But it struck me that, on this occasion, Miss Havisham was wrong — I was not yet ready for full membership.

The hefty tome consisted of five hundred questions, nearly all of them multiple choice. I noticed that the exam was self-invigilating; as soon as I opened the book a clock in the top left-hand corner started

to count down from two hours. The questions were mostly about literature, which I had no problem with. Jurisdiction law was trickier and I would probably need to consult with Miss Havisham. I made start and ten minutes later was pondering question forty-six: *Which of the following poets never used the outlawed word majestic in their work?* when there was a knock at the door accompanied by a peal of thunder.

I closed the exam book and opened the door. On the jetty were three ugly, old crones dressed in filthy rags. They had bony features, rough and warty skin, and they launched into a well-rehearsed act as soon as the door opened.

“When shall we three meet again?” said the first witch. “In Thurber, Wodehouse, or in Greene?”

“When the hurly-burly’s done,” added the second, “when the story’s thought and spun!”

There was a pause until the second witch nudged the third.

“That will be Eyre the set of sun,” she said quickly.

“Where the place?”

“Within the text.”

“There to meet with MsNext!”

They stopped talking and I stared, unsure of what I was meant to do.

“Thank you very much,” I replied, but the first witch snorted disparagingly and wedged her foot in the door as I tried to close it.

“Prophecies, kind lady?” she asked as the other two cackled hideously.

“I really don’t think so,” I answered, pushing her foot away, “perhaps another time.”

“*All hail, MsNext! Hail to thee, citizen of Swindon!*”

“Really, I’m sorry — and I’m out of change.”

“*All hail, MsNext, hail to thee, full Jurisdiction agent, thou shalt be!*”

“If you don’t go,” I began, starting to get annoyed, “I’ll—”

“*All hail, MsNext, thou shalt be Bellman thereafter!*”

“Sure I will. Go on, clear off, you imperfect speakers — bother someone else with your nonsense!”

“A shilling!” said the first. “And we shall tell you more — or less, as you please.”

I closed the door despite their grumbling and went back to my multiple choice. I’d only answered question forty-nine: *Which of the following is not a gerund?* when there was another knock at the door.

“Blast!” I muttered, getting up and striking my ankle on the table leg. It was the three witches again.

“I thought I told you—”

sample content of The Well of Lost Plots (Thursday Next Series)

- [read The House of Rothschild, Volume 2: The World's Banker: 1849-1999 for free](#)
- [Historia de la filosofÃa II: Edad Moderna. Edad ContemporÃnea online](#)
- [click Correspondence 1925â€“1935](#)
- [On My Own Two Feet: From Losing My Legs to Learning the Dance of Life online](#)
- **[read online Pretense and Pathology: Philosophical Fictionalism and Its Applications](#)**

- <http://dadhoc.com/lib/The-Little-Book-of-Restorative-Justice.pdf>
- <http://korplast.gr/lib/Money--Money--Money--Aint-It-Funny-----How-to-Wire-Your-Brain-for-Wealth.pdf>
- <http://nexson.arzamaszev.com/library/Correspondence-1925---1935.pdf>
- <http://nexson.arzamaszev.com/library/On-My-Own-Two-Feet--From-Losing-My-Legs-to-Learning-the-Dance-of-Life.pdf>
- <http://junkrobots.com/ebooks/Wuthering-Heights.pdf>