

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: How I Became A Famous Novelist

AUTHOR: Steve Hely

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SUBJECT: Fiction

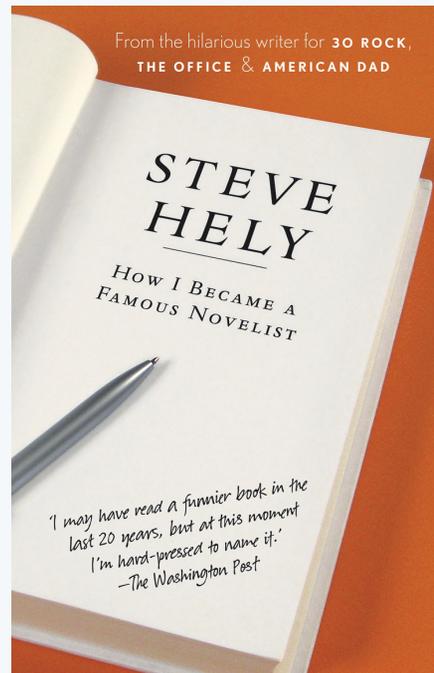
About the Book

Are readers of literary fiction just suckers for wordy ‘spackle’? Are authors of literary fiction con artists who knowingly apply the spackle to distract their readers from the lack of story? Are writers of commercial fiction smart operators who actually understand the power of story and don’t need the spackle in the first place? And are books the poor cousins of film, TV and video games when it comes to stories?

At the heart of this very clever satire are questions about authenticity, morality and the value of storytelling. But humour is to the fore in the story of slacker Pete Tarslaw and his decision to write a bestselling novel to get back at his ex-girlfriend for daring to get married to someone else.

Steve Hely doesn’t just lampoon the kind of literary fiction that Pete decides to write, he has included perfect snippets of imitation crime fiction, action thrillers, bestseller lists, book reviews, and narky blog posts.

Pete creates a list of rules for writing a bestseller, and it turns out he’s got them right. But it isn’t just what the book’s about that turns it into a bestseller, but also a whole random string of events that bring the book to public attention. Pete gets to live out the fantasies of what his author’s life will be, imaginings that he spends as long on as writing the actual novel. And then, of course, Pete’s declaration on national television that the book was written to a formula, based particularly on works of the famous



Preston Brooks, further spurs *The Tornado Ashes Club* up the bestseller lists. And so we are set for the showdown ending between Pete and Preston.

In fact, the showdown isn’t quite at the end. First, we realise that what we are reading is a book designed to cash in on readers’ appetite for memoir, as well as to justify Pete actions. And then we have Pete recognising the value of a powerful story about the human experience. ‘I wish I’d written something that good,’ Pete writes ruefully.

About the Author

Steve Hely is a writer for television. His credits include *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *American Dad*, *30 Rock* and *The Office*. He is also co-author of the comic travelogue *The Ridiculous Race*.

Praise for *How I Became A Famous Novelist*

“A deeply, often painfully funny book... [which] should be read by anyone with a passing interest in the state of modern literature.” – *The Independent*

“I may have read a funnier book in the last 20 years, but at this moment I’m hard-pressed to name it.” – *The Washington Post*

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“Funny as hell” – *The Australian*

“This guy is f---ing brilliant” – *The Age*

“Highly entertaining.” – *The Advertiser*

“A consistently hilarious and unrelentingly brilliant gem of a novel.” – *The Courier Mail*

“Sharp and consistently funny.” – *The Sunday Territorian*

“Laugh-out-loud funny.” – *Sunday Herald Sun*

Questions for discussion

1. Does *How I Became a Famous Novelist* work as a novel? Or just as a satire?
2. Is the book a telling satire of modern life generally as well as of books and publishing? Take for example the reality show that is ‘a sign of the complete post-postmodern collapse of Western civilization’ (p31).
3. Is Pete a typical product of his generation, as Preston Brooks thinks he is?
4. Did you like Pete? Is he a morally corrupt character? Did you want him and his book to succeed?
5. Are Pete’s rules of writing a bestseller generally true? Would *The Tornado Ashes Club* have been a bestseller if it had been a real book?
6. What do you think makes a bestseller? What do you think makes a good book? Are they the same thing? Is there any merit in the ‘free market criticism’ proposed by the fictional academic Michael Mintz, who says that ‘People are the judge of books. Not academics. Not reviewers. People’ (p309)?
7. Lucy is disheartened by the commercialism of her job. Should publishers ignore the commercial imperatives of publishing and just publish ‘good’ books?
8. ‘With literary fiction, on the other hand, you can just cover everything with a coat of wordy spackle’ Pete writes. ‘Those readers are searching for wisdom so they’re easier to trick’ (p94). Discuss.
9. Pete’s failed attempt to write a Nick Boyle-type blockbuster suggests that it is easier to write literary

fiction than commercial fiction. Do you think this is true? Are critics wrong to be dismissive of commercial fiction if writing it is indeed such an art?

10. Did you recognise any real authors in the parodies? Is *The Tornado Ashes Club* a parody of the Great American novel specifically? Or just any brand of literary fiction? Is this a book for literary insiders, or can anyone appreciate its jokes?

11. Is success usually as random as Pete’s? Is there any validity in his theory that Homer is more famous than some other Greek epic writer only because he ‘got there first, or had a better orating voice, or ran a better marketing campaign’ (p153)?

12. What makes you choose a book to buy or read? Are you manipulated by marketing?

13. ‘Books are not as good as TV,’ according to Pete (p12). Is this a serious point from Hely (a TV writer), or is Hely sending up Pete?

14. What do you think of Nick Boyle’s opinion that ‘Prose, frills – people don’t are about that stuff. They want stories, this is why Hollywood’s kicking their arse’ (p177)? Does the novel itself support this view?

15. Book reviewers get a serve from Pete and are brilliantly parodied by Hely. Do you think book reviewers are deserving of such scorn?

16. Is the reader meant to see Preston Brooks as a ‘genius ... the greatest con artist in the world’ (p39)? Or does the ‘showdown’ reveal him as genuine?

17. If Brooks is a con artist, are we meant to disagree with him that ‘readers can tell a liar’ (p35)? What about the ideas about the importance of truth in fiction reflected in the Hemingway and Faulkner quotes (p45)? Why does Pete wonder if he has committed some kind of ‘crime’ (p227) by writing something he didn’t believe in?

18. Does the value of authenticity get challenged or upheld by this novel?

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19. How far can you trust Pete's version of events in this 'memoir'?

20. At the end, Pete starts encountering stories he believes in – watching Oprah and reading Peking. Was this an epiphany for him? If so, was it credible? If not, what are we meant to take from these two experiences of being moved.