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JEAN HANFF KORELITZ

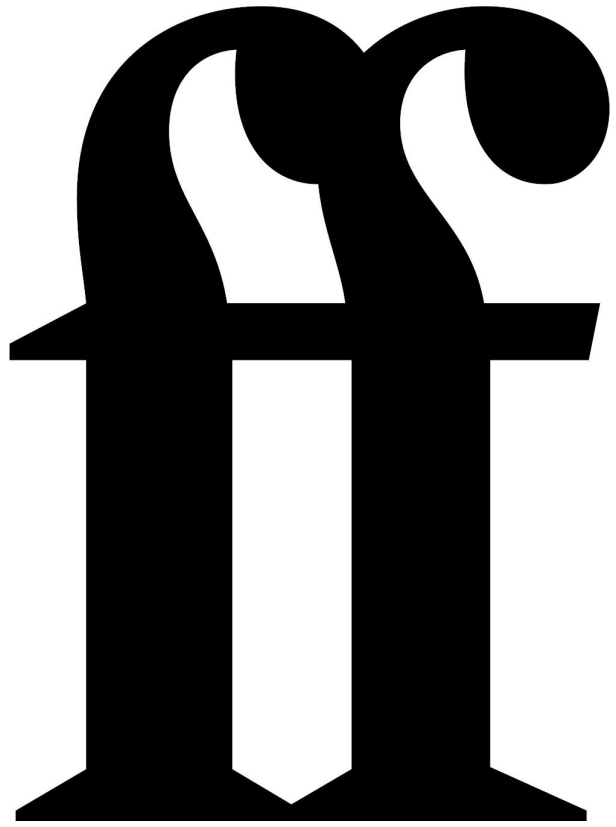
Bestselling author of *THE UNDOING*

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The Plot

Jean Hanff Korelitz

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For Laurie Eustis

Good writers borrow, great writers steal.
—T. S. Eliot (but possibly stolen from Oscar Wilde)

Contents

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

PART ONE

Chapter One: Anybody Can Be a Writer

Chapter Two: The Hero's Welcome

Chapter Three: Evan Parker/Parker Evan

Chapter Four: A Sure Thing

PART TWO

Chapter Five: Exile

Chapter Six: What Terrible Thing

Chapter Seven: Tap, Tap

PART THREE

Chapter Eight: Crib Syndrome

Chapter Nine: Not the Worst

Chapter Ten: Utica

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 3–4

Chapter Eleven: Talented Tom

Chapter Twelve: I'm Nobody. Who Are You?

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 23–25

Chapter Thirteen: Hurl Away

Chapter Fourteen: Something Out of a Novel

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 36–38

Chapter Fifteen: Why Would She Change Her Mind?

Chapter Sixteen: Only the Most Successful Writers

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 43–44

Chapter Seventeen: An Unfortunate Side Effect of Success

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 71–73

Chapter Eighteen: Another Day's Lies

Chapter Nineteen: The Only Place Left to Go

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: page 98

Chapter Twenty: Nobody Comes to Rutland

Chapter Twenty-One: Boo-hoo, So Sad

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 146–47

Chapter Twenty-Two: Hospitality

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 178–80

Chapter Twenty-Three: Sole Survivor

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Breakdown Lane

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 212–13

PART FOUR

Chapter Twenty-Five: Athens, Georgia

Chapter Twenty-Six: Poor Rose

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: pages 245–46

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Foxfire

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The End of the Line

Crib by Jacob Finch Bonner: page 280

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Such a Waste of Energy

Chapter Thirty: That Novelist's Eye for Detail

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Jean Hanff Korelitz

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PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE

Anybody Can Be a Writer

Jacob Finch Bonner, the once promising author of the “New & Noteworthy” (*The New York Times Book Review*) novel *The Invention of Wonder*, let himself into the office he’d been assigned on the second floor of Richard Peng Hall, set his beat-up leather satchel on the barren desk, and looked around in something akin to despair. The office, his fourth home in Richard Peng Hall in as many years, was no great improvement on the earlier three, but at least it overlooked a vaguely collegiate walkway under trees from the window behind the desk, rather than the parking lot of years two and three or the dumpster of year one (when, ironically, he’d been much closer to the height of his literary fame, such as it was, and might conceivably have hoped for something nicer). The only thing in the room that signaled anything of an actual literary nature, that signaled anything of any warmth at all, was the beat-up satchel Jake used to transport his laptop and, on this particular day, the writing samples of his soon-to-arrive students, and this Jake had been carrying around for years. He’d acquired it at a flea market shortly before his first novel’s publication with a certain writerly self-consciousness: *acclaimed young novelist still carries the old leather bag he used throughout his years of struggle!* Any residual hope of becoming that person now was long gone. And even if it wasn’t there was no way to justify the expense of a new bag. Not any longer.

Richard Peng Hall was a 1960s addition to the Ripley campus, an unlovely construction of white cinder block behind the gymnasium and beside some dormitories slapped together for “coeds” when Ripley College began admitting women in the year 1966 (which, to its credit, had been ahead of the curve). Richard Peng had been an engineering student from Hong Kong, and though he probably owed more of his eventual wealth to the school he’d attended *after* Ripley College (namely MIT),

that institution had declined to construct a Richard Peng Hall, at least for the size of donation he'd had in mind. The Ripley building's original purpose had been to accommodate the engineering program, and it still bore the distinct tang of a science building with its windowed lobby nobody ever sat in, its long, barren corridors, and that soul-killing cinder block. But when Ripley got rid of engineering in 2005 (got rid of all its science programs, actually, and all of its social science programs) and dedicated itself, in the words of its frantic board of supervisors, "to the study and practice of the arts and humanities in a world that increasingly undervalues and needs them," Richard Peng Hall was reassigned to the low-residency Master of Fine Arts Program in Fiction, Poetry, and Personal Non-Fiction (Memoir).

Thus had the writers come to Richard Peng Hall, on the campus of Ripley College, in this strange corner of northern Vermont, close enough to the fabled "Northeast Kingdom" to bear some trace of its distinct oddness (the area had been home to a small but hardy Christian cult since the 1970s) but not so far from Burlington and Hanover as to be completely in the back of beyond. Of course creative writing had been taught at the college since the 1950s, but never in any serious, let alone enterprising way. Things got added to the curriculum of every educational institution concerned with survival as the culture changed around it and as the students began, in their eternally student-y way, to *make demands*: women's studies, African-American studies, a computer center that actually acknowledged computers were, you know, *a thing*. But when Ripley underwent its great crisis in the late 1980s, and when the college took a sober, and deeply trepidatious look at what might be required for actual institutional survival, it was—surprise!—the *creative writing* that signaled the most optimistic way forward. And so it had launched its first (and, still, only) graduate program, the Ripley Symposia in Creative Writing, and over the following years the Symposia basically ate up the rest of the college until all that was left was its low-residency program, so much more accommodating for students who couldn't drop everything for a two-year MFA course. And shouldn't be expected to! Writing, according to Ripley's own glossy prospectus and highly enticing website, was not some elitist activity out of bounds to all but the fortunate few. Every single person had a unique voice and a story nobody else could tell. And

anybody—especially with the guidance and support of the Ripley Symposia—could be a writer.

All Jacob Finch Bonner had ever wanted to be was a writer. *Ever, ever, ever*, all the way back to suburban Long Island, which was the last place on earth a serious artist of any kind ought to come from but where he, nonetheless, had been cursed to grow up, the only child of a tax attorney and a high school guidance counselor. Why he'd affixed his star to the forlorn little shelf in his local library marked AUTHORS FROM LONG ISLAND! was anyone's guess, but it did not pass unnoticed in the young writer's home. His father (the tax attorney) had been forceful in his objections (Writers didn't make money! Except Sidney Sheldon. Was Jake claiming he was the next Sidney Sheldon?) and his mother (the guidance counselor) had seen fit to remind him, *constantly*, of his mediocre-at-best PSAT score on the verbal side. (It was greatly embarrassing to Jake that he'd managed to *do better on the math than the verbal*.) These had been grievous challenges to overcome, but what artist was without challenges to overcome? He'd read stubbornly (and, it should be noted, already competitively, and with envy) throughout his childhood, departing the mandatory curriculum, leapfrogging the usual adolescent dross to vet the emerging field of his future rivals. Then off he had gone to Wesleyan to study creative writing, falling in with a tight group of fellow proto-novelists and short story writers who were just as insanely competitive as he was.

Many were the dreams of young Jacob Finch Bonner when it came to the fiction he would one day write. (The "Bonner," in point of fact, wasn't entirely authentic—Jake's paternal great-grandfather had substituted Bonner for Bernstein a solid century before—but neither was the "Finch," which Jake himself had added in high school as an homage to the novel that awakened his love of fiction.) Sometimes, with books he especially loved, he imagined that he had actually written them himself, and was giving interviews about them to critics or reviewers (always humble in his deflection of the interviewer's praise) or reading from them to large, avid audiences in a bookstore or some hall full of occupied seats. He imagined his own photograph on the back jacket flap of a hardcover (taking as his templates the already outdated writer-leaning-over-manual-typewriter or writer-with-pipe) and thought far too often about sitting at a table, signing copies for a long, coiling line of readers. *Thank you*, he would intone

graciously to each woman or man. *That's so kind of you to say. Yes, that's one of my favorites, too.*

It wasn't precisely true that Jake never thought about the actual writing of his future fictions. He understood that books did not write themselves, and that real work—work of imagination, work of tenacity, work of skill—would be required to bring his own eventual books into the world. He also understood that the field was not uncrowded: a lot of young people just like himself felt the way he did about books and wanted to write them one day, and it was even possible that some of these other young people might conceivably have *even more natural talent* than he did, or possibly a more robust imagination, or just a greater will to get the job done. These were not ideas that gave him much pleasure, but, in his favor, he did know his own mind. He knew that he would not be getting certified to teach English in public schools (“if the writing thing doesn't work out”) or taking the LSATs (“why not?”). He knew that he had chosen his lane and begun swimming, and he would not stop swimming until he held his own book in his own hands, at which point the world would surely have learned the thing he himself had known for so many years:

He was a writer.

A great writer.

That had been the intention, anyway.

It was late June and it had been raining all over Vermont for the better part of a week when Jake opened the door to his new office in Richard Peng Hall. As he stepped inside he noticed that he had tracked mud along the corridor and into the room, and he looked down at his sorry running shoes—once white, now brown with damp and dirt, never in fact used for actual running—and felt the pointlessness of taking them off now. He'd spent the long day driving up from the city with two plastic Food Emporium bags of clothes and that elderly leather satchel containing the nearly as elderly laptop on which his current novel—the novel he was theoretically (as opposed to actually) working on—and the folders of submitted work by his assigned students, and it occurred to him that he had brought progressively less with him each time he'd made the trip north to Ripley. The first year? A big suitcase stuffed with most of his clothing (because who knew what might be considered appropriate attire for three weeks in northern Vermont, surrounded by surely fawning students and surely envious fellow teachers?) and every printed-out draft of his second

novel, the deadline for which he'd had a tendency to whine about in public. This year? Only those two plastic bags of tossed-in jeans and shirts and the laptop he now mainly used for ordering dinner and watching YouTube.

If he was still doing this depressing job a year from now, he probably wouldn't even bother with the laptop.

No, Jake was not looking forward to the about-to-begin session of the Ripley Symposia. He was not looking forward to reconvening with his dreary and annoying colleagues, not one of them a writer he genuinely admired, and certainly he was not looking forward to feigning excitement for another battalion of eager students, each and every one of them likely convinced they would one day write—or perhaps had *already written*—the Great American Novel.

Most of all, he was not looking forward to pretending that he himself was still a writer, let alone a great one.

It went without saying that Jake had not done any preparation for the imminent term of the Ripley Symposia. He was utterly unfamiliar with any of the sample pages in those annoyingly thick folders. When he'd begun at Ripley he'd persuaded himself that "great teacher" was a laudable addition to "great writer," and he'd given the writing samples of these folks, who'd put down real money to study with him, some very focused attention. But the folders he was now pulling out of his satchel, folders he ought to have begun reading weeks earlier when they'd arrived from Ruth Steuben (the Symposia's highly acerbic office manager) had traveled from Priority Mail box to leather satchel without ever once suffering the indignity of being opened, let alone subjected to intimate examination. Jake looked at them balefully now, as if they themselves were responsible for his procrastination, and the appalling evening that lay ahead of him, as a result.

Because after all, what was there to know about the people whose inner lives these folders contained, who were even now converging on northern Vermont, and the sterile conference rooms of Richard Peng Hall, and this very office, once the one-on-one conferences began in a few days? These particular students, these ardent apprentices, would be utterly indistinguishable from their earlier Ripley counterparts: mid-career professionals convinced they could churn out Clive Cussler adventures, or moms who blogged about their kids and didn't see why that shouldn't

entitle them to a regular gig on *Good Morning America*, or newly retired people “returning to fiction” (secure in the knowledge that fiction had been waiting for them?). Worst of all were the ones who reminded Jake most of himself: “literary novelists,” utterly serious, burning with resentment toward anyone who’d gotten there first. The Clive Cusslers and mom bloggers might still be persuadable that Jake was a famous, or at least a “highly regarded” young (now “youngish”) novelist, but the would-be David Foster Wallaces and Donna Tartts who were certainly present in the pile of folders? Not so much. This group would be all too aware that Jacob Finch Bonner had fumbled his early shot, failed to produce a good enough second novel or any trace of a third novel, and been sent to the special purgatory for formerly promising writers, from which so few of them ever emerged. (It happened to be untrue that Jake had not produced a third novel, but in this case the untruth was actually preferable to the truth. There had indeed been a third novel, and even a fourth, but those manuscripts, the making of which had together consumed nearly five years of his life, had been rejected by a spectacular array of publishers of declining prestige, from the “legacy” publisher of *The Invention of Wonder* to the respectable university press that had published his second book, *Reverberations*, to the many, many small press publication competitions listed in the back of *Poets & Writers*, which he had spent a small fortune entering, and, needless to say, had failed to win. Given these demoralizing facts, he actually preferred that his students believe he was still struggling to reel in that mythical and stupendous second novel.)

Even without reading the work of his new students, Jake felt he already knew them as intimately as he’d known their earlier counterparts, which was better than he wanted to know them. He knew, for example, that they were far less gifted than they believed they were, or possibly every bit as bad as they secretly feared they were. He knew they wanted things from him that he was utterly unequipped to deliver and had no business pretending he possessed in the first place. He also knew that every one of them was going to fail, and he knew that when he left them behind at the end of the current three-week session they would disappear from his life, never to be thought of again. Which was all he wanted from them, really.

But first, he had to deliver on that Ripley fantasy that they were all, “students” and “teachers” alike, colleagues-in-art, each with a unique

voice and a singular story to tell with it, and each equally deserving of being called that magical thing: *a writer*.

It was just past seven and still raining. By the time he met his new students the following evening at the welcome cookout he would have to be all smiles, all personal encouragement, and full of such scintillating guidance that each new member of the Ripley Symposia Master of Fine Arts Program might believe the “gifted” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*) and “promising” (*Boston Globe*) author of *The Invention of Wonder* was personally prepared to usher them into the Shangri-La of Literary Fame.

Unfortunately, the only path from here to there led through those twelve folders.

He turned on the standard Richard Peng desk lamp and sat down in the standard Richard Peng office chair, which gave a loud squeak as he did, then he spent a long moment tracing a line of grime along the ridges of the cinder blocks on the wall beside his office door, delaying till the last possible moment the long and deeply unpleasant evening that was about to commence.

How many times, looking back at this night, the very last night of a time he would always afterward think of as “before,” would he wish that he hadn’t been so utterly, fatally wrong? How many times, in spite of the astonishing good fortune set in motion by one of those folders, would he wish he’d backed his way out of that sterile office, retraced his own muddy footprints down the corridor, returned to his car, and driven those many hours back to New York and his ordinary, personal failure? Too many, but no matter. It was already too late for that.

CHAPTER TWO

The Hero's Welcome

By the time the welcome cookout commenced the following afternoon Jake was running on fumes, having dragged himself into that morning's faculty meeting after a scant three hours' sleep. It had been a small victory this year that Ruth Steuben was finally shifting the students who self-identified as poets away from him and to other teachers who also self-identified as poets (Jake had nothing of value to teach aspiring poets. In his experience, poets often read fiction, but fiction writers who said they read poetry with any regularity were *liars*), so it could at least be said that the dozen students he'd been assigned were prose writers. But what prose it was! In his through-the-night and fueled-by-Red-Bull read-through, narrative perspective hopped about as if the true narrator was a flea, traipsing from character to character, and the stories (or ... chapters?) were so simultaneously flaccid and frenetic that they signified—at worst, nothing, and at best, not enough. Tenses rolled around within the paragraphs (sometimes within the sentences!) and words were occasionally used in ways that definitely implied the writer was not overly clear on their meanings. Grammatically, the worst of them made Donald Trump look like Stephen Fry and most of the rest were makers of sentences that could only be described as ... utterly ordinary.

Encompassed in those folders had been the shocking discovery of a decaying corpse on a beach (the corpse's breasts had been, incomprehensibly, described as “ripe honeymelons”), a writer's histrionic account of discovering, via DNA test, that he was “part African,” an inert character study of a mother and daughter living together in an old house, and the opening of a novel set in a beaver dam “deep in the forest”). Some of these samples had no particular pretensions to literature, and would be easy enough to deal with—nailing down the plot and red-penciling the prose into basic subservience would be enough to justify his paycheck and

honor his professional responsibilities—but the more self-consciously “literary” writing samples (some of them, ironically, among the worst written) were going to suck his soul. He knew it. It was already happening.

Fortunately, the faculty meeting wasn’t terribly taxing. (It was possible Jake had even dozed, briefly, during Ruth Steuben’s ritual intoning of Ripley’s sexual harassment guidelines.) The returning professors of the Ripley Symposia got on reasonably well, and while Jake couldn’t have said he’d become actual *friends* with any of them, he did have a well-established tradition of a once-per-session beer at The Ripley Inn with Bruce O’Reilly, retired from Colby’s English Department and the author of half a dozen novels published by an independent press in his native Maine. This year there were two newcomers in the Richard Peng lobby-level conference room, a nervous poet called Alice who looked to be about his own age and a man who introduced himself as a “multigenric” writer, who intoned his name, Frank Ricardo, in a way that definitely implied the rest of them recognized it—or at any rate *ought to* recognize it. (Frank Ricardo? It was true that Jake had stopped paying close attention to other writers around the time his own fourth novel began to collect rejections—it had simply been too painful to continue—but he didn’t think he was supposed to have heard of a Frank Ricardo. (Had a Frank Ricardo won a National Book Award or a Pulitzer? Had a Frank Ricardo lobbed an out-of-nowhere first novel onto the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list via viral word of mouth?) After Ruth Steuben finished her recitation and went over the schedule (daily and weekly, evening readings, due dates for written evaluations, and deadlines for judging the Symposia’s end-of-session writing awards) she dismissed them with a smiling but steely reminder that the welcome cookout was not optional for faculty. Jake leapt for the exit before any of his colleagues—familiar or new—could talk to him.

The apartment he rented was a few miles east of Ripley, on a road actually named Poverty Lane. It belonged to a local farmer—more accurately his widow—and featured a view over the road to a falling-down barn that had once housed a dairy herd. Now the widow leased the land to one of Ruth Steuben’s brothers and ran a daycare in the farmhouse. She professed herself to be mystified about the thing Jake did that got made into books, or how it was getting taught over at Ripley, or who might actually pay to learn such a thing, but she had held the apartment for him

since his first year at Ripley—quiet, polite, and responsible with rent were apparently too rare a combination not to. He had made it to bed at about four that morning and slept until ten minutes before the faculty meeting began. It wasn't enough. Now he pulled the curtains and passed out again, waking at five to begin assembling his game face for the official start of the Ripley term.

The barbeque was held on the college green, surrounded by the Ripley's earliest buildings, which—unlike Richard Peng Hall—were reassuringly collegiate and actually very pretty. Jake loaded up a paper plate with chicken and cornbread and reached into one of the coolers to extract a bottle of Heineken, but even as he did a body leaned against him, and a long forearm, thickly covered with blond hair, tipped his own forearm out of its trajectory.

“Sorry, man,” said this unseen person, even as his fingers closed around Jake's intended beer bottle and pulled it from the water.

“Okay,” Jake said automatically.

Such a pathetically small moment. It made him think of those bodybuilding cartoons in the back of old comic books: bully kicks sand in the face of ninety-eight-pound weakling. What's he going to do about it? Become a bulked-up bully himself, of course. The guy—he was middling tall, middling blond, thick through the shoulders—had already turned away, and was popping the bottle cap and lifting it to his mouth. Jake couldn't see the asshole's face.

“Mr. Bonner.”

Jake straightened up. A woman was standing beside him. It was the newcomer, from the faculty meeting that morning. Alice something. The nervous one.

“Hi. Alice, right?”

“Alice Logan. Yeah. I just wanted to say how much I like your work.”

Jake felt, and noted, the physical sensation that generally accompanied this sentence, which he still did hear from time to time. In this context “work” could only mean *The Invention of Wonder*, a quiet novel set in his own native Long Island and featuring a young man named Arthur. Arthur, whose fascination with the life and ideas of Isaac Newton provides a through line for the novel and a stay against chaos when his brother dies suddenly, was not, emphatically *not*, a stand-in for Jake's own younger self. (Jake had no siblings at all, and he'd had to do extensive research to