

BOOK OF OURS

by Adam Houchens

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A vastly intelligent, ferociously literate dystopic speculation about the wiles of staying human while in the clutches of a tyrannical technology. Characters emerge from the densely packed narrative as essences and the crystalline prose sharpens their struggle for lasting self-expression. There is a sense of blind entrapment at work and we feel the presence of an invisible oppression. The last sentence, which lives on many levels, is beyond beautiful.*
Quote: 'Legend says despondency turned to speculation as the apple sickened.' And, 'It's a common mood-swing. Some call it a commitment complex, others the latest manifestation of a self-loathing that goes back to Cain'. And God said, "THIS is writing!"

Our Book was born in the middle of a polar vortex on a campus known for agricultural science. Details are fuzzy and few, but we know there was an apple bong, a bottle of watermelon schnapps and four English students huddled around IBM's latest *Boswell*, mocking the mad-lib narratives served in seconds but secretly comparing the pages buried in their lonely corners of the cloud. Thoroughly discouraged they closed the program and cursed the course of fiction—hopelessly commercial for a century, sure, but so much more than the binary fantasies they'd been reading—structurally interesting—moving, even—but so unbearably *fake*.

If the *Boswell* has taught me anything it's that every story—even yours—was air-brushed long before you were born.

Legend says despondency turned to speculation as the apple sickened. Someone said, at least there's poetry. Another added, that's literature. That's soul. You can't program soul. Then

someone said, every soul's a poem scribbled on a closet door. We just don't know how to read them, a thought that supposedly struck them dumb until the cold sun rose.

A poem? A twenty minute walk carves thirty pages in my spine. Surface, some would say—the Essential still eludes you. *One* Essential? Is anyone that simple?

Decades of suit and counter-suit in the state courts and courts of public opinion (another tell-all was released last week) have failed to clear up who came up with the site where everyone could pin themselves to the web in ONE unspecified (though preferably versified) expression, but the only people who care are paid to care. For the rest of us *Our Book* is ours, and the so-called Founders are just letters on the home page with all the authority of a no-smoking sign on Bourbon Street. They live on in the rules, I guess, the most important of which is NO REVISIONS—what's posted is posted, profile locked to READ-ONLY. Length is open, though it's known that anything longer than a page will only get a glance from patient friends and relatives. Scrolling through the posts is like strolling through slow and steady snow—a variable onslaught.

Sonnets, dithyrambs and haikus. Tragedies, comedies, manifestoes and novellas. There are confessions—a thirty year-old cold case was cracked when the perpetrator (dead by overdose at fifty-seven) admitted to the crimes in a disturbing villanelle called, “Columbus Day.” There are parodies—half-assed swipes that barely graze the earnestness despised. Some posts only last a word: *Love*, *Help*, a dying child's, *Fart*. One's the length of a high school library's entire stock, the author—obsessive, obviously—adding to his posthumous draft until the heart attack predicted early in the “opus.”

Everyone keeps a posthumous draft—who could live knowing death would silence them for good? Most refrain from posting until they're sure death's inevitable, recalling all the famous

cases of regret—the briefest recognition, the towering mass of time to pass. The trick is to drop your post early enough to gauge reaction but late enough to avoid any serious second-thoughts. There’s a shelf of books about the “Balance”—I wouldn’t waste your time.

So death is carried daily with the draft, endings edited as fate clarifies its aims, eventually accepted as indifferently as anything else. But until indifference—dread, that irrational fear of club-foot syllables and words misused, a semi-colon that should have been a comma. How many midnights have I almost pulled the trigger to kill the strain? My posthumous draft awaits my passing with the rest, adjusted back and forth until I love it, knowing I’m bound to wake up hating it again. It’s a common mood-swing. Some call it a commitment complex, others the latest manifestation of a self-loathing that goes back to Cain. My friend says it’s just the pain of apes who think they know the future but don’t.

When I throw my tablet down the stairs in despair—no, *disgust*—I am an ape in pain.

Our Book developed slowly. Initial posts were what people had come to expect from the Internet—poorly edited, hardly considered, often off-color or embarrassingly personal. It wasn’t until Seymour Stein’s essay in the *New Yorker* (“Read Me”—nineteen pages of death and possibility) and posthumous post (“Once More—From the Top”) and the celebrity dogpile that ensued that the site started getting the serious attention it deserved. Suddenly subway conversations were full of rhyme and meter, ghostwriters multiplied, dead poets were resurrected as everyone struggled to find a voice—any voice—that wouldn’t shame them in the grave.

This was not a uniform reaction. Around the world the critics rose against the latest plague to pock their pristine Culture. This was different, they insisted. This was the death of Literature—the standards passed from hand to hand like torches through perpetual eclipse. Conferences were organized, articles expanded, tenures secured. A generation of doctoral

candidates signed petitions against posting, and while some relented most stood firm. Later they'd say it was the thrill of their accomplished lives.

But no stand lasts forever. Traitors emerged and tore the front to squabble. It was interesting, they insisted. Another species to devour. Suddenly the universities were full of dissertations cataloguing differences between East and West, North and South, class and desperate class. Mine was one ("We are I: Personal Pronouns in South Milwaukee Posts") and like the others I grew into an adjunct assigning classics interspersed with pages carefully selected from a sea of faces begging for attention, presenting evolutions of Me and You to colleagues waiting for their turn to speak.

On dark days I feel like a statistician charting infant death, but when they pass I feel like an astrologer tracing palm-lines in the sky.

Locking my office door is like waking from a dream or slipping into one. Either way my senses change and everything is something else—the sky above the setting sun the pale inner-lining of a Clementine rind, streetlights neurons flickering against the insurmountable. My route varies, but I always seem to see the same homeless crowded on the corners carrying cardboard covered with posts in motion like *I was torn from a dead girl, sold to a lost war that stole my legs and testicles. Now I'm prophet of a dead God's world. Feed me.* I swear I've loved them in another life...I drop a dollar in an empty bucket and move on to the beach.

There, under moonlight or starlight or clouds soaked with city light, waves of peace and expectation rise and fall. Looking at the lake that, were I less entangled, could be Pacific I can feel it coming—the Essential, that final link between I and It that only comes in words. Phrases rise and fall, some so lovely I have to stop and catch my breath, but the Essential doesn't come, and gradually the phrases dissipate against the weight of the Pacific and I turn away.

If *Our Book* has taught me anything it's that genius is a question of perspective, a particular presence meeting its moment like a key worn from countless unobling doors that finally—mercifully—clicks.

But even broken keys can cool the palm in summer. Steps lighter, phrases resurfacing with a sizzle-pop, walking through the city is three and a half miles of smile, streetlights brighter, steadier, faces less invasive, noises more in tune with whatever music's tickling my ribs. And I know that I made the same mistakes yesterday and that I'll make the same mistakes tomorrow but I don't care because I know that my Essential is growing ripe around my spine even if there's no one there to read it.

When the evening's wander finally drops me home to lift you from your crib with kisses I want to tell you that it isn't finding what's right but sifting through what's wrong that really molds the maker, but I know that even if your ears were grown you wouldn't understand. So when I set you down with one last kiss I can only hope you live to miss your target with a zig-zag half as wonderful as mine.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story came about after reading an article on one of Twitter's founders—he regrets, fears and hopes for the future. I started asking myself what value personal expression has in the information storm and how this might affect the development of literary expression. From there the story expanded at its own volition. I've always loved interrogators—Emily Dickinson, William Gibson, Kafka and Joan Didion to name a few—and always will.*

BIO: Adam Houchens has been published in *Blue Canary*, *Foliate Oak literary Magazine* and The Art Night Books' collection, *Revolution and Reclamation*. He lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.