

Eric Seiley

Big Words, Small Essays

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1, 679 Words

What Inscription is This Before Me?

I love a good book dedication. That singular white page at the beginning of a book most readers bypass on their way to chapter one. Unfortunate. Because even the most simple dedication, as in *"To Gwen"* (or whomever), holds aspirational stories readers shouldn't miss out on. Take Alice Munro's dedication to her short story collection Too Much Happiness -- *"To Billy Connelly."* Now we don't necessarily know who Billy is, but we do know a book dedication is meant to express gratitude to someone who has been helpful to the author during the writing process. So wouldn't it be nice to believe Ms. Munro's book tells us the reason. And that Billy was a wonderful person who brought Ms. Munro "too much happiness." How Billy did so could even make for a compelling story itself.

Dedications can also honor someone through expressions of artistic reverence and deeper appreciation. As in Kurt Vonnegut's Slapstick -- *"Dedicated to the memory of Arthur Stanley Jefferson and Norvell Hardy, two angels of my time,"* along with a pen and ink drawing of "Laurel and Hardy" on the insert page. The inference being Laurel and Hardy's humor not only inspired Vonnegut from a young age, but gave shape to the novel we, his dear readers, are about to read. Which is interesting since Laurel and Hardy's craft was a visual medium and Vonnegut's was, well, not. How curious.

But by far, the best dedications offer not just a message of authorial recognition, but a world of insight. And, on rare occasion, can nearly eclipse the written narrative. John Steinbeck's dedication to East of Eden editor Pascal Covici is the finest example of this I have ever come across.

"Dear Pat," the dedication begins, "You came upon me carving some kind of little figure out of wood and you said, 'Why don't you make something for me?'

'I asked you what you wanted, and you said, 'A box.'

'What for?'

'To put things in.'

'What things?'

'Whatever you have,' you said.

Well, here's your box. Nearly everything I have is in it, and it is not full. Pain and excitement are in it and feeling good or bad and evil thoughts and good thoughts ~ the pleasure of design and some despair and the indescribable joy of creation. And on top of these are all the gratitude and the love I have for you. '

And still the box is not full.

JOHN"

Amazing. Truly and completely astonishing how Steinbeck, with only twelve short lines, offers greater insight into books and authors than most Harvard professors do over the course of an entire semester.

2.

If dedications are an author's formal expression of gratitude within the framework of a book or novel, inscriptions would be the personal flip side to the same coin. Similarly

written within the first few pages of a book, and used as a Hallmark card of sorts, inscriptions contain an entire world of story unto themselves. An ancillary post-script of connective tissue between reader and book and friend (or acquaintance or guest or family member or whomever) with each part, when combined, encompassing a completely different story.

I grew up in the brick and mortar era of the late 20th Century where the best place to find books meant travelling to the nearest library or bookstore. Where every effort of acquisition was an achievement adding value to the reading material gathered. Sadly this is an experience relatively unknown to most bibliophiles today who prefer the immediate gratification of never-leave-home, internet electronica literature. Pity. Because books and paperbacks, once upon a time, were amply stocked in just about every shop and market, along every city corner, within just about every city block. And used bookstores, best of all, flourished with purpose and character in bright spots around the town. You could browse for hours, filling an entire Saturday tramping from one antiquarian book shop to the next, hunting first edition copies of favored authors, chatting up fellow bibliophiles, or just purchasing a book to take home and read. Or give away as a present.

Used bookstores of yesteryear were great. Not just for their reduced cover prices or the discovery of a hidden gem, but because investing time browsing felt admirable. A worthy endeavor even if you didn't always come away with a purchase.

Which wasn't how my fiancé at the time saw it. Unbeknownst to me, she'd decided bookstores were boring. And the pursuit of browsing long hours in a bookstore an inefficient use to one's daily pursuits. Best to get in, get what you wanted, and get out. So, what was covertly tolerated during our courtship quickly ended once marriage was secured. When, after matrimony, she simply refused to join me any further. And reduced my passion to a "your hobby, not mine" mentality of deceit. And though I

tried to understand her linear, concrete intellect – the kind that preferred direct messaging to any open exploration of romantic, bibliographic possibilities – I seldom could. Because book browsing was lustrous in the face of modern scrolling.

What my eventual ex-wife never quite grasped was the romantic possibilities behind browsing. How walking among dust-lined shelves deep in the back of a used bookstore, pulling old books from the shelf and reading out the dedication and/or inscription, could literally “wrinkle the brain” and touch the heart thinking about the stories behind said dedication and/or inscription. By example, I discovered one of my favorite inscriptions inside the cover of The Literary Guide to the Bible, written in flowing cursive with black ink, at a used bookstore in Saratoga, California in October 2012.

“For Will and Loraine, something to ballast your steamer-trunk on your return home. Much fondness, Bob. Berkley, November 1987.”

Now, normally, most readers would just skim past the inscription believing it didn’t have anything to do with them personally. But, in a universal way, it does. Take “Bob’s” inscription. That “*something to ballast your steamer-trunk*” caught my attention -- a nicely turned little phrase. Very pithy. But, I was pretty sure Bob didn’t intend it literally. Not in 1987 when nautical journeys were fairly rare. And nowhere close to the necessity they once were during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

“Steamer trunk,” in my opinion, more likely referred to a great distance Will and Lorraine would be traversing after leaving America and the land of “Berkley.” And “Bob” was just demonstrating a bit of nostalgic flourish to communicate a worthy distance to be travelled after an expanse of time shared together.

Inscriptions make great time capsules. Especially for discerning readers who not only take time to deduce the relationship between gift giver and receiver, but seek to understand why that specific book and inscription reflect the gift giver’s intent, purpose

and value. Even when, as is the case of my pedantic ex-wife, the book serves no other purpose than being an undervalued gift to someone who “likes books.”

Bob’s inscription tells a story in no less than twenty words. But what is he really saying? How is his selection of religious text significant? And what do his comments reveal about his relationship to Will and Lorraine? I don’t know. Not entirely in any literal sense since I never met Bob or Will or Lorraine. But I do believe Bob’s inscription offers a few clues.

Here is what I imagined their story was.

Bob was a head pastor or deacon to a Christian church who hosted Missionaries Will and Lorraine during their visit to California in the month of October. October being the traditional month missionaries arrive in the U.S. from around the globe to visit local churches, offer up “state of the union” addresses of love and need, and solicit funds so they may continue their missionary work to Katmandu or Machu Picchu or Casablanca or wherever. Bob’s “much fondness” speaks to a certain affability on Will and Lorraine’s part, as well as success in partnering with Bob’s church. And, to some degree, a fatherly affection regarding their mission. “November,” naturally, indicates their return date. And the place, “Berkley,” and year, “1987,” a marker to remind Will and Lorraine of their connection in time and place to Bob and the generosity of his church. Since it would be unlikely they would see each other again for some time to follow. If ever.

What do you think? Does that tell the story of Bob’s inscription? Or if not, how about a few alternatives. If Will and Lorraine weren’t missionaries, maybe they were graduate students setting off on a “Peace Corps” type mission to another country from which Bob, their one-time advising professor, felt a gifted book was in order to offer his best wishes and appreciation as they departed. Or maybe Bob was just some professional

colleague to Will and Lorraine's international counterpart, who over-reached and should've just written, "It was nice knowing you. Have a safe journey home."

What do you think?

3.

Inscriptions and dedications tell the stories of our lives, of a specific place and time long gone. Like a literary photograph captured in words. They speak to our generational aspirations of past, present, and future. And work best when you touch and smell and see them, ideally, while browsing through a dusty old book store. Something quickly being lost to the modern digitized world.

I love the romantic ideal of a book. How its multitude of parts hold a myriad of magical stories – from its Galleys to Dedication to Forward to Narrative itself. Not to mention, Inscriptions of gift giving salutation. Nothing touches the heart, excites the mind, or engenders warmth than the connection between author and reader and gift receiver.

So if you think of yourself as an explorer, who fancies digging into all facets of the book you hold in your hand, get ready for a deeply meaningful experience. Because you may just find a compelling story of your own in the dedication and inscription.

In the meantime, I dedicate this essay to the books I love.

With fondness and joy,

Eric.

November 2025.