



Portrait of the Scholar as a Young Novelist

February 9, 2006

By Jenny White

I knew my life was about to change when a colleague at a recent scholarly conference came up to me at the reception and told me with some bemusement that a fellow academic, whom I did not know, had asked her, “Is Jenny White a lesbian?” After many years of scholarly research, writing and teaching, I had written a novel, a mystery set in 1886 Istanbul that, along with several murders, featured a lesbian relationship. I noted with a bitter smile that no one had (yet) asked, “Is Jenny a murderer?”

Clearly fiction is assumed to be your life, while scholarship operates at a respectable remove. The novel was still two months from publication, but the buzz had already infiltrated my scholarly environment. My colleagues at a recent faculty meeting made lighthearted suggestions that we combine a planned forensic anthropology concentration with a course on mystery writing, and that I endow a chair. Leaving aside the gross overestimation of a novelist’s income, I noted with some anxiety the notoriety and loss of privacy that appears to accompany literary, as opposed to scholarly, production.

Indeed, having spent almost two decades writing grant proposals, doing field research under sometimes difficult conditions in Turkey and Germany, writing

two books and many articles, and developing a reputation as a scholar to be taken seriously, I am disconcerted to find that an (as yet unpublished) novel has overtaken all of that effort in the time it takes for a few words to be whispered in the halls of a conference hotel.

Fellow airplane passengers whose eyes glaze over when I tell them I'm a social anthropologist fall right out of their seats with excitement when I mention I've written a novel. They want to know where they can find it and if I'd sign it. I admit to great pride in my literary creation (and an embarrassing lust for sales). I did, after all, spend a lot of time researching the historical setting and writing and rewriting obsessively.

But I can't help but feel sorry for my poor orphaned scholarly books, beneficiaries of so many more years of work and sacrifice, eclipsed by their glamorous new sibling. This, it turns out, is but one of the dilemmas of my new life as scholar turned novelist.

There is the guilt about money. It seems unseemly to want best-seller status after so many years of meager royalties but scholarly glory. It occurs to me, not for the first time, that academics are some of the few people in our knowledge economy expected to make available the intellectual fruit of decades of labor for a pittance, or for free, to publishers, journalists and others asking you -- indeed, giving you the honor of spending hours or days of your time -- to evaluate manuscripts, give information or travel across the country to give a talk. I regularly remind commercial textbook publishers that their offer of a \$150 "honorarium" for reading a 500 page manuscript and writing an extensive review is inappropriate for a money-making enterprise.

At first, I gloried in the additional income from the novel, crowing the amount to my friends and colleagues, dazzled by the low five-figure sum (which gives you some idea of my basement-level baseline). When the novel rights sold in nine other countries and the publisher commissioned a sequel, I became more circumspect. It seems unscholarly to revel publicly in income, although permissible to complain about it privately. Serious scholars should look like they work hard with little reward or risk being seen as popular pundits, sellouts, those with wide but less than high-brow audiences. (How else would they be earning all that money?) Suddenly, being a private scholar, rather than a public celebrity (the writer herself as a commodity), seems a safer and more comfortable place. Too late.

There is the anxiety about what in academese is called identity politics. Forget about a non-lesbian author writing about lesbians. What about a serious scholar of Muslim societies writing an Orientalist book full of harems and eunuchs? The

fact that I tried to turn the usual expectations on their heads and write a sophisticated book means nothing to publishers who revel in Orientalism as a fantasy that sells.

The American version has a gorgeous harem scene on the cover. I was allowed to work with the artist to get some semblance of historical accuracy (the first sketch reminded me of a woman with a dishcloth on her head sitting in an antique store), but not nix the harem theme. The British publisher sent me a proposed blurb that began “A white woman washes up on the Bosphorus...” The Turks, negotiating to join the European Union, would be very surprised to find they are not “white”. There was also a mention of “colonials” even though Turkey was the colonizer -- the Ottoman Empire. I wielded my red pencil firmly. But my pencil will be defenseless against what I imagine to be serious scholars waiting in the wings to excoriate me for pandering to the hot imaginings of the Orientalist West. To them I suggest a plain brown wrapper.

She doth protest too much, some of you might be thinking. Let me interject here some of the satisfactions of novel writing not to be found in scholarly work. For one thing, you can make stuff up. That is incredibly relaxing. After I wrestled down my scholarly reflexes (everything has to be entirely accurate; you can't legitimately extrapolate culture backwards in time), the floodgates of pure invention opened and I allowed myself the company of increasingly interesting and genial characters. At times, I felt like a human ouija board, channeling their stories. This has taken on a new dimension as early readers of the novel have begun speaking about the characters as if they were real people with real lives.

The first reviews also have come out, prompting my agent to recommend that I “harden” myself, although so far the reviews have been fairly positive. After all these years of grant proposals and journal submissions, I could wallpaper a room with rejections and have developed a rhinoceros hide, yet I still want reviewers to like my characters Kamil and Jaanan and Sybil, and I feel for them when they've been misunderstood.

Another perk of fiction writing is the boutique editing -- an agent and then an editor who go over drafts word for word, numerous times, in addition to proofreaders who minutely comb at least two sets of proofs. This is unimaginable luxury for those of us who publish with university and scholarly presses that more and more do no proofreading at all and sometimes, for good measure, screw up the clean text you send them. It's fun. I admit it.

But then there are the readings. This is quite a change from scholarly talks of which I have given more than I care to remember and which, I've been told, I do

quite well. At a novel reading, you really are supposed to read from the text. The first time I tried this out on a friend in my living room, he fell asleep.

This was not promising. First of all, it is hard to pick a part of the text that is full of action. The most exciting parts are at the end, but reading those means giving away the plot. And what about those different voices? I tried a deep-throated male voice and a trilling female one, but felt like I was on “Sesame Street.” Someone suggested I pitch my voice low, someone else that I vary the tone. It all came out ridiculous. My first reading is in February, so I’ve decided to take the (for me) unusual step of not preparing. My plan, if you can dignify it with that term, is to have a drink beforehand and then ham it up. I think.

I’ve developed an unwholesome, masochistic fascination with the sorts of questions novelists are asked during their readings. “How did you come to write this novel?” I don’t honestly know. It kind of wrote itself. “Why did you write a mystery?” It’s a mystery to me. “How much of this is drawn from your life?” Nothing that I can discern. Everything. I’m not used to being asked questions. I am the ethnographer, and the control over the flow of information has until now been in my hands. I know everything about my “informants” and they know about me only what I’m willing to share. I don’t much like being on the other side. But authors are commodities and their lives are part of the package that sells books. My publicist (yes, the press has assigned someone to sell me) wants me to set up a jennywhite.net Web site. My editor tells me not to worry. “They’re just fans!” I worry about getting even more e-mails than I already have to answer every day. I worry about the invasion of my personal life, my privacy. I just plain worry.

And there is that most important and revealing of questions: What to wear? I had expected some exoticism in the world of novelists, only to find that, while they dress interestingly, it is without the “Sex in the City” flair I had come to expect from watching, well, “Sex in the City.” A perk of the fiction writer’s world is literary events, of which I’ve been to, well, one. But it was in a very posh apartment overlooking the Boston Common. I wore an antique kimono over a black cat-woman outfit that to me conjured up “literary” and “novelist.”

I needn’t have worried. It seems that literary people dress much the way professors do, with perhaps more dresses and fewer beards. And they tend to spend their time gossiping about the trade and about other people, which made me feel right at home. I noticed women wearing 1950s vintage dresses, which look good only on youngsters who don’t remember the 1950s – or even the 1970s. I suppose I could go for the ageless diva look.

I lust for the flair I haven’t had the courage to display at the university, first as an untenured faculty member (given the advice, “keep your head down”), then as a

newly tenured faculty member too busy to think about clothes, much less to shop. Female faculty wear solemn, formal clothing to establish authority in the classroom, something our male colleagues seem able to accomplish with some extra facial hair. Twice this semester, I've caught myself wearing a sweater inside out, not a promising start for my diva metamorphosis, but the sure sign of a serious scholar. My kind or perhaps somnolent students said nothing to me. (I can only imagine what they said to each other after class.)

Lest you think it superficial to dwell with such earnestness on dress, let me reassure you that what comes out of the closet is a serious matter. In graduate school, an earnest fellow student, passing me in the hall while I was in conversation with someone about her new apartment, without missing a stride threw down this gauntlet, "You'll never be an intellectual, if you talk about things like wallpaper." Or clothes. Ever the radical, I practice anti-establishment accessorizing – bright scarves, exotic jewelry, colorful shoes (immediately chewed up by the scholarly brick walkways), turning an otherwise severe outfit into a whisper of defiance.

So as a newly fledged novelist, I have great hopes to break out of my cowardly academic persona, as well as great anxieties. But what should I wear? Why can't I earn a scholarly award with one book and a pair of Manolo Blahnik shoes with the other and still be me? Watch for those Manolos in the classroom next year. Let's hope I put them on the right feet.

© Copyright 2009 Inside Higher Ed

<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2006/02/09/white#Comments>

Jenny White teaches social anthropology at Boston University. Her first novel, The Sultan's Seal, was released in 2006, followed by The Abyssinian Proof. The third book in the Kamil Pasha series, The Winter Thief, will be published in March 2010. <http://jennywhite.net/>