

[SYNOPSIS]

First there was *Being John Malkovich*, with John Malkovich as John Malkovich.

Then there was *Adaptation*, with Nicholas Cage as Charlie Kaufman and Donald Kaufman.

Then there was *A Cock and Bull Story*, with Steve Coogan as Steve Coogan, Tristram Shandy and Walter Shandy.

Then there was

## YOUR NAME HERE

with Ilya Gridneff as Ilya Gridneff, Alyosha Popovitch Pechorin, Alexander Chatsky, Dmitri Pesarev, Misha Kropotkin and Kaplan Thornhill

by Helen DeWitt

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YOUR NAME HERE is the heartwarming story of two writers who wanted to save the world.

The FBI has 12,000 agents. Of the 33 with some knowledge of Arabic, 6 are fluent. In a nicer world, the shortcomings of the Federal Bureau of Investigation would be the problem of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

بانا banana

تويوتا Toyota

In the world as we know it, the fact that you can now read more Arabic than 11,967 FBI agents is worrying.

But wait! Wait! Wait! Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* to provide a setting of loss, war and exile for languages he invented as a hobby; by 2003 100 million copies of the books had been sold!!!! If an alter-Tolkien had done for the languages of the Middle East what Tolkien did for the languages of the elves and the dwarves, we couldn't have the unholy mess we have now!!!!!!

Gridneff: So the point is to get the *message* across, without saying in so many *words*: You stupid fucking *morons*, you're learning fucking *elf* languages!

DeWitt: Exactly. Exactly. it's about building bridges. It's about getting people to see that Arabic is something everyone can enjoy, it's not just for specialists, it's something that can appeal to a character they can identify with [i.e. a manipulative, calculating, promiscuous drink and drug fiend, an engaging potential serial killer].

DeWitt's first novel, *The Last Samurai*, sold 100,000 copies in English. Look at it this way if YOUR NAME HERE sells 100,000 copies, an estimated 99,938 readers new to Arabic will be able to read

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if inadvertently kidnapped, which is more than you can say of the average airport novel. The estimated 62 readers who already know it all can feel good about knowing it all. It's more than the FBI (or, indeed, CIA) has managed to achieve. The book is the ideal gift for that FBI (or, indeed, CIA) agent who has everything.

Once upon a time there was a book, YOUR NAME HERE, which had a plot as well as a mission. Rachel Zozanian is morose, misanthropic, workaholic, your typical depressive suicidal comic writer. Daughter of a simple businessman. A carpet salesman. The type of guy, this is the type of guy who does not need to scoff if asked about connections with the Cali Cartel, because who would be stupid enough to ask the question? She goes to Oxford, can't pay, turns out everyone's a hustler: phone sex, Forex, porn hard and soft, drug deals, tabloid squeals, this is the ivory tower of the 21st century. She turns tricks to buy the degree, but there's always the novel, ha ha ha ha ha ha, there's always the novel, ha ha, writes *Lotteryland*, a dystopian satire on Big Brother Blair's Britain, Adrian Mole meets Orwell meets Terry Gilliam, hits the jackpot. Fast forward, meets stranger in a bar, fast forward, New York, attempts suicide, fast forward, carted off to Niagara Falls psychiatric facility, press furore, the tragic irony of it all --- the stranger in a bar was a tabloidista, she could have sent him an exclusive, cashed in....

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Yep. This is a book that gives new meaning to the word "gratuitous".

The stranger in a bar was Alyosha Popovitch Pechorin, a hero of our time, alias Alexander Chatsky, the Russian Hamlet of our time, alias Dmitri Pesarev, an anarchist of our time, alias Misha Kropotkin, the anarchist's anarchist, alias Kaplan Thornhill, Hitchcockian anti-zero of our time. While Rachel was going insane in New York Alyosha was chasing Britney and Angelina and Posh, trading insults with Young British Artists, reading Deleuze and DeLillo and Miller and Mailer, trying to raise money to see the world. Ended up in Baghdad: "Where's the suicide bomber?" "You're standing in him." Travelled around Iran with a dodgy phrasebook: "Give me pharmaceuticals, the strongest you have." Like Rachel, he's a hustler, trying to get a break. Trying to be a serious journalist. Writing stories no one will buy. There's no room in the world today for a Hunter Thompson. A series of insane, obscene, anarchic e-mails take us back to the epistolary novels which launched English fiction, seduction, betrayal, manipulation played out in letters which are themselves the mechanism for playing with a brutal, chance-driven world.

Rachel goes to Berlin. The stranger turns up in Berlin. Perhaps that extraordinary voice can be packaged and sold, the next Hunter Thompson; perhaps the voice can save her from the wheelers and dealers who chase her. Or perhaps there is ash cash to be made. Oh that clinking clanking sound. Think of the money Woolf and Plath made for other people. Is there really no way to cash in on a hat trick?

This was the excellent plot. Sadly, there were a few gnats in the Piz Buin. Mr Gridneff: What's going *on*? What's it *about*? What do you want me to *do*? I outline the direction of this excellent plot, which draws heavily on *Vertigo* and *Body Heat* -- films in which the faked death of the heroine plays a crucial role. Plath, after all, is everywoman's Madeleine, the glamorous doomed blonde -- she died a boring Judy brunette, but it's as Madeleine that she's sold and loved. Wouldn't it be LUVVERLY if Plath had left a clone on the kitchen floor? If she'd said *Fuck* Lady Lazarus, faked death, scored blood money, lived out her days a retro blonde on a South Pacific beach? Mr Gridneff can't make head or tail of it. There is friction, there is gêne, But Mr Gridneff is living hand to mouth, faking illnesses for German doctors keen to practice their English; one little book deal and all will be well.

In a last-ditch effort to appease my star, I send 100 pages to an agent. Agent: Helen, the book has your characteristic wit and inventiveness, but I couldn't make head or tail of it.



This is a reader who *loved* the idea of doing for Arabic what Tolkien did for the languages of the elves and dwarves; Arabic was not (since you ask) the problem. The problem was that the

reader also loved *Lotteryland*, Rachel's book-within-a-book, with its down-and-out luck-obsessed anti-hero, its Lubavitch jokes, its junk mail jokes, but had not spotted the fact that it was a book-within-a-book. If a book is hard to follow, it's important to make it easier to follow.

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Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* has a second-person narrator who reads the first chapter of 11 books-within-the-book. Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* has an insane number of first-person narrators, including a murdered man, a drawing of a horse, Satan, the colour red. Why not combine the two and have an insane number of second-person narrators reading the book-within-a book -- a reader who thinks he's a robot, a hot shot director, a homicidal hungover karaoke addict, a sniper in the Israeli army, a Jewish defender of Uyghur rights in deepest Xinjiang? Not to mention an Australian journalist of Russian descent who met a stranger in a bar and is now the star of the book?

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Look at it this way. Once the brilliant Calvino-Pamuk hybrid narrators were in place, it was *definitely* clear that the book-within-a-book was a book-within-a-book. But look at it this way. Adding a second-person narrator who thinks he's a robot does not *necessarily* make a book easier to follow.

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The Israeli sniper writes: Dear Helen, Please explain to me about Arabic. Do you think learning Arabic will make people stop killing each other? This is wrong, for sure.

But everyone else thinks there should be much *more* Arabic. Professor Levene: Could there be more Arabic grammar? The Uyghur rights activist: Could there be some real Arabic texts? Mr Gridneff: maybe the 100 most common words in arabic? also something like bernard lewis, political language of islam, something about the politics, the culture, so it's not just the writing? maybe get angelina in there in arabic mention how she is playing daniel pearls wife in the new hollywood film about pakistan killing?

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is just not enough. This will not necessarily make the book easier to follow, but times have changed. Lives are at stake. It's important to get the word out to that FBI/CIA/MI5/MI6/hush hush hush naming no names brigade, to the agent who has the Rolex Oyster and the Aston

Martin but comes adrift when asked the difference between Shiites and Sunnites.  
September 11 changed *everything*.

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dewitt, all good here despite the on going ridiculous. read the end and like it, and i dont need to have the final (s)word. though with all these other characters does it take away some of my limelight, i mean it was or is about me, and despite a 50 50 kontrakt i was under the impression i was the star, so - what exactly brings these other people into the ending, this is the serious question, this is no ego but serious narrative-critique. ilya

frau dewitt

i wasn't sure with the star analogies, let them associate the greatness not us tell them. will send bishkek and was thinking of some additional email pursuit of money- maybe add to the banker with fake tits email - 'i am in beirut, can you send me a lazy 1000 i want to go to iraq; see it as a high risk investment. (bank details below or perhaps western union? there is a similar email where she replies - get fucked)  
ilya

dewitt

yes tuff tug o warped moniker making. what is in the na-I-me? Perhaps steve coogan as steve coogan/tristram shandy/walter shandy rather than malkovich/"malkovich" is my true progenitor in this fact/fiction, a fictional name & false beard or shandean wig & high-heeled shoes required to assist the reader ?  
ilya

dewitt

great. maybe even if you write some of 'my' writings this adds another layer of intrigue or mist-ery. perhaps its all a sham and i never existed  
ilya

dewitt

well on other thoughts was thinking again, this is flittery, perhaps i could finish your name here.  
also anais, henry will need you to pop into western union at some point of your violition.  
das vedanya  
ilya

YOUR NAME HERE

by Helen DeWitt and Ilya Gridneff

(coming soon to an FBI agent near you)