

No Contest by Nick Cody

Space had become a problem. There simply wasn't enough room for all the entries piling up, the stream of shitty stories pouring in, flat in manila envelopes, or folded by idiots who had either ignored or failed to read the guidelines, the very clear guidelines for the 36th Annual Lowe Short Story Contest, hosted and judged by one Halford P. Goodreads.

Stacks of unread stories leaned Pisa-wise on the floor. Other piles grew in corrugated formations along the bookshelves and on his office desk. In the weeks leading up to the deadline elaborate columns of A4 paper, in Times New Roman, 12 point font, double spaced or DOA, curled around his desktop monitor, nearly encircling it. He cast a cold eye on these heaps. To him their layered forms resembled the erratic patterns of wind erosion on desert rock.

Tomorrow he planned to seize at random a couple of these encroaching stacks and throw the lot into a cardboard box and then mail it off to a colleague and fellow contest judge in upstate New York. That would be Jude Heade, Associate Professor of English Literature at Stonybrook. Once he'd been recruited, Goodreads liked to call him Judge Jude. First, a word on why he was recruited in the first place, and then how Goodreads went about doing it.

Aside from being a tenured professor of contemporary American fiction, this Jude Heade ran a website called "Headspace", which was subtitled as follows: "Denying the relevance of political discourse to literary appreciation since 1995."

Impressive, thought Goodreads, ten years being the equivalent of an ice age in the blogosphere. And right on the money. He'd scanned through the most recent posting, a scalding review of an acclaimed writer's swan song novel, *Brought Low*, 1999, in which an aging actor loses his talent. He highlighted a passage (below) and clicked "Copy", then pasted it in an email:

"It is hard to imagine a work by a major author that is more lifeless and lackluster. It would be fraudulent to refer to it as a novel at all, so without merit is this knobby little turd of a book.

The author mentions a rifle in the house and later calls it a shotgun. If only his characters were as dynamic as that shape-shifting gun.

We are told the protagonist is or had been a great actor but the claim is purely unbelievable. The author has done none of the work to convince us that it could possibly be true.

Worst of all, *Brought Low* is heavy with the scent of that deadliest of poisons for any writer, especially an aging one: self-pity. The real pity would be if Nathan Z. closes out his career with this limp dick piece of crap."

As he drafted his email he ran through a mental checklist confirming to himself the qualities that made Heade an ideal candidate to judge the short story contest. Number One: a literary taste unpolluted by ANY kind of politics. On "Headspace" he reamed Ayn Rand, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and Burroughs, which pretty much covers the spectrum. Number Two: he had solid academic credentials. Lastly, Number Three: going by his prolific blogging, he was a workhorse to boot!

All in all, he would bring what the contest needed more than anything: an aura of legitimacy. So he larded his email with praise, dropped some names that were sure to appeal to Heade (Nabokov, Pynchon, Bloom), and mentioned offhand that he'd be honored if he would join him in judging a fine fiction contest. He closed with a reference to Nietzsche, whose name always worked wonders at winning over intellectuals, putting it this way:

"I bought *Brought Low* after reading your white-hot review figuring that it couldn't possibly be that bad. I was wrong. You nailed it — it's a big pity party. Major authors should be FORCED to write their swan songs under Nietzsche's late titles (*Why I Write Such Good Books*, etc), don't you think?"

Heade replied promptly but was noncommittal. Classes, research, editing papers, writing, department meetings... Variations of hemming-and-hawing. But he left the door open by suggesting a face-to-face meeting at the upcoming MLA conference in Phoenix.

* * *

A huge hotel, tastelessly decorated. Portraits of politicians everywhere. Phoenix. Goodreads tapped the shoulder of a small, round man with thick curly hair. This head of thick curly hair is brown and bent over a long registration table outside the 2nd floor conference hall. Heade turned to squint and smile and extend his hand in greeting. The taller, well-built man thinks, "His face is blank; the wheels are turning, but he has no clue who I am."

"Hal Goodreads."

Niceties ensue. Heade a bit flustered. "Ah yes, you emailed me several weeks ago, and wow! That's quite a handshake. Yes, I remember, Goodreads. Bet that's not all you're good at!"

And then he winked and slapped Hal on his black leather jacket. He gave the leather and underlying shoulder a few squeezes and asked, "So you teach in Maryland?"

By the semi-confused look on his face Goodreads could tell that Heade meant another question, "Why aren't you wearing a suit?"

Goodreads said yes, Montgomery College, in adjunct hell. "God save me from freshman comp!"

On route to their seats, their conversation went like this:

G: Too bad we had to meet under such deplorable conditions.

H: Academia (shrug), we've got to stay abreast of the latest trends.

G: Truth has no trends.

H: Touché! Shall we sit?

Goodreads pondered the meaning of the shoulder squeeze and the witticism over his name. He'd prepared for others (*I've heard of your website!*) but not one so blatantly flirtatious.

They sat near the back. An extremely stout woman with messy hair of some dishwater hue thanked the speaker for her kind introduction, leaned toward the microphone, and then launched into her paper. The title, "Girth and Mirth: Body Image and Beer Bellies in the Victorian Novel".

Heade tilted to his left and whispered, "Body image, a big thrust in theory nowadays." He rolled his eyes ever so slightly. It conveyed tolerance over some trifle that wasn't exactly his cup of tea. Goodreads took it as an invitation.

Under his breath to Heade, “THE Victorian novel? Which one? She’s going to talk about them all?”

Heade replied with a chuckle, “No, she’ll get to that.”

“So she’s going to selectively pull from that era some novels which have male characters with big guts and talk about that?”

Heade said, “Listen and see, you might learn something.”

Goodreads wouldn’t have it. “But what could possibly be gained from highlighting something arbitrary, like sports cars in post-war American lit...”

Grumbling and muttering from suits nearby cut him off. He remained quiet for a few minutes, holding the program like it was the Wine List at an overpriced French bistro.

Heade again leaned over, “She lectures at Yale, won a Guggenheim several years back.”

Goodreads leaned in as well, “Can you imagine this beastly cow having sex?”

A spurt of laughter from Heade, followed by a fit of wheezing that sounded like someone stepping on an inflated ball with a leak in it.

Hal looked away and started writing in the margins of his conference program. “And for that matter, can you imagine the Guggenheims doing it?”

The other man jiggled like a bowl of jelly. His wheezing stopped, or becoming otherwise inaudible, he sat with his eyes closed tight as if his laughter could only be contained by keeping his lids shut.

Seeing his fit subside, Goodreads decided to prime the pump. “Hey Jude, what can you tell me about this topic?”

And he pointed to his writing in the margin. It read, “Devil Through the Backdoor: Anal Allusions in the *Screwtape Letters*.”

Heade started quivering again. He fanned in Hal’s direction, a half-hearted attempt to swat away an annoying fly. His lips were pursed, his cheeks were puffed.

“That gonna be published by Routledge, ya think?”

At this point Hal realized that the fire had taken hold and wouldn’t be put out too soon. He recognized in the laughing man a humor that he hadn’t seen since his high school days. But it is something that anyone who’s had a funny buddy has experienced. It just required the right setting and another key ingredient: the prohibition against comic outbursts.

It was one of those paradoxes wherein the effort to suppress laughter somehow amplifies the urge to let it out. The need to keep a lid on it granted it volcanic power.

Hal turned the program sideways and started penning something in the right margin. He said, “We gotta stick around for the keynote speaker.” And he tapped at his handwritten title, drawing Heade’s squinting eye to it, “Sound and Vision: Spoken Word in Des Moines’ Inner-city Struggles, by David Bovine”.

Heade hunched over, his chest cavity wracked with spasms. He finally sat up and glanced once at his tormentor, his eyes imploring and pooled with tears.

Hal said, “Ok buddy. I can see you’re not in the mood. This is neither the time nor place for it.” And with that Goodreads let out a sigh and looked over the program some more.

Ultra deadpan, he mutters, “Oh Christ, the next speaker is presenting a paper on Philip Roth: ‘Anti-Semitism in the Igloo: Roth Among the Inuit, A Critical Reception’.”

Heade finally erupted and Hal knew it was high time to slouch through the www.drugstorebooks.com

aisles toward the exit. He turned to see Heade on his hands and knees, crawling with his back arched, midriff heaving, looking like a dog about to spew up something hideous.

Goodreads' plan was simple, retreat to the bar and take maximum advantage of happy hour. But he could not leave a man behind. Neither could he advance to administer first aid to the fallen for the mob had begun to turn against them. So, as a patient parent beckoning to a toddler, he waited at the door for his squealing, crawling, get-up-and-falling companion to finally come.

Surprisingly, as he glanced over the crowd, he approximated that a solid third of the audience was still focused on the speaker. He couldn't even begin to explain that.

* * *

They walked in and sat at the bar. Goodreads spoke first. "You know what I hate?" (It was always a good conversation starter in a bar.) "I hate it when, in a movie — and I'm telling you this happens all the time in movies, if you're aware enough to notice it — anyway a guy walks into a bar and says, 'I'll have a beer.'" (Pause) "Or if he's with a friend, 'We'll take two beers.'"

Heade listened and waited as if for a punch line. He gave Hal a quizzical look.

Goodreads continued, "Look around you. There's thirty kinds of beer in here! In every bar! Twelve kinds on tap and the rest in bottles. Lagers, pilsners, pale ales, brown ales, stouts, Jesus fucking Christ! Don't you just wanna stop the camera, jump through the screen into the set and line up the actor, the director, and the screenwriter, especially the screenwriter, and do one of those serial Three Stooges slaps on them? Remember Blue Velvet, PBR or Heineken? Big difference!"

Heade caught on. "Yea, I watched a horrible one the other day, Mel Gibson in something, and someone ordered a 'scotch on the rocks'. And I thought, could you narrow it down a bit buddy? You want a single malt or should I just pick one of these dozen bottles at random?"

Goodreads nodded. "Mixed drinks, I understand it. You don't gotta be specific. But no one in the past 50 years has walked into an American bar and said, 'Never mind what kind, I'll just take ANY beer... And a scotch for my pet monkey.'"

"You know what I hate?" Heade took his turn. "By the way, I'm such a hypocrite because I just did it. I hate it when people refer to a movie by the lead actor. They say, 'I just saw the latest Tom Cruise movie.' And I want to say, No you didn't. It wasn't a Tom Cruise movie. Did he write the script? Did he decide on the camera angles, the lighting, and where the other actors would stand? I rest my case."

A clink of glasses. "Cheers to that! Personally, I won't go to a movie if I know the actors but not the director. And lately I won't even see a movie by a director if he didn't at least co-write the screenplay." (He took a sip.) "Nope, ain't going."

Heade said, "Give me a Christopher Nolan any day. *Memento*, are you kidding me? How good was that! And I'll even see a fucking *Batman* flick as long as he directs it."

"*The Prestige*," Goodreads said. "See that one?"

"Brilliant! The magicians, yeah, all about rivalry and the struggle for

originality.”

Goodreads: “That’s lit writ large, right? To Harold Bloom!”

Heade: “Amen, to Bloom.”

“And Bowie was perfect in that by the way.”

Heade nodded as he took a sip.

After a lull in the conversation, Hal leaned towards Heade and said conspiratorially, “How would you like to make twenty-five hundred bucks?”

Heade, “My, my, you ARE nasty, aren’t you?” (Sees Hal is serious.) “Oh, you’re referring to that short story contest thing? Refresh my memory.”

Wherein Goodreads narrates his abbreviated history of the Lowe Short Story Contest.

* * *

F.L. Lowe founded the contest when the trajectory of his career was on the downward slope. Two-time winner of the National Book of the Year award, and numerous lesser prizes, Lowe hoped to parlay his previous successes into a new venture, one that would ease his boredom, allow him to contribute to the advancement of inferior writers, and increase his cash flow when freelance work dried up. His tenure with it was cut short however after a scandal broke out when one story contestant claimed Lowe had stolen his idea. In fact, he accused Lowe of publishing large tracts of the story VERBATIM under his own name in *The New Yorker*! Lowe apologized for any misunderstanding, retracted his authorship of the story, and reached an agreement to settle out of court. After that, he skipped out on the legal proceedings, changed his name and moved to Asia, where he is presumed to be living as a woman in Papong, Thailand.

From there the contest moved into the hands of Professor Richard Swanson. His connection to Lowe is not clear, so we will decline to stoop to shoddy guesswork. This Professor Swanson, a lonely old queer, quite chaste, was living out his years in woolen sweaters with the *Complete Works* of Edmund Spenser in his lap.

He remained the contest’s sole guardian and custodian for many years, often taking the time to write thoughtful letters to contestants, letters filled with constructive criticism, consolation, and praise whenever he felt it warranted. In the annual newsletter he made for the contestants he, “regretted not being able to write everyone who submitted a story, and hoped it wouldn’t deter them from entering the contest again.”

And so with much care his adopted baby grew gradually over time, fatter and larger each year, until it came to be one of the largest and longest running fiction contests in the country.

At which point it passed on to me when I was an Adjunct at Amherst. Swanson had supervised my graduate studies at a university in Ithaca, in an institution I refuse to name. My dissertation, by the way, was to be titled, “Defenders of the Faith: The Transvaluation of Literary Value in Sidney, Shelley, and D.H. Lawrence.” The executor of his will transferred the contest to me four years ago along with a handwritten note from Swanson telling me to, “Keep It Real.”

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Heade listened throughout and then said, “F.L. Lowe... I vaguely remember www.drugstorebooks.com © Nick Cody 2013

reading him, but never reread him. That's the best test, you know? If it keeps you coming back for more. By the way, what does the F stand for?"

"Floyd. Swanson told me, 'Like that British rock singer.'"

They laughed. "And the L?"

"Lacy."

Hal rolled his eyes and Heade shrugged.

"Hal, I don't really need the money. And I certainly don't need some rinky-dink contest-judge on my CV. But you know what? I'll do it for you. Of course I'm taking the \$2500 too, don't get me wrong! Ok, so how many stories do I gotta read?"

Goodreads clapped him on the back and got down to brass tacks. A quarter of the entries would go to each judge. Hal would take the remainder. He told Heade the contest averaged about 1,000 entries a year, so he should expect about 250 stories or so.

"Winnow it down to five finalists from your pool, photocopy them, and then send those five originals back to me. I'll take the other judge's finalists and then consult with you a few weeks before it's time for me to place the winners. First prize is \$2,000, second is \$1,000, third, fourth and fifth..."

Heade had heard enough. "Fine, whatever, you know what? I'm not gonna want to so much as LOOK at a short story after this, but I'll do it."

They sealed the deal with a handshake at the bar and some firm fellatio up in Hal's penthouse suite. Out the high-rise window, while in the reflection Jude was bobbing for apples, Goodreads saw the desert stretch on endlessly.

* * *

To those readers who feel that the maximum number of queers allowed in a story has been exceeded, let me set the record straight. Jude Heade is straight-leaning on the sexual spectrum with a wife and two children who look, from the photos he showed me, more or less normal. Lowe, despite his penchant for fabulous dresses and stiletto pumps, only succumbs to the wiles of masculine women. And finally, Professor Swanson, when I knew him, was hardly sexual at all. He repelled my advances on one occasion and then told me he'd given up "that life" for higher pursuits. "You will understand someday," he said.

* * *

The other judge. What Goodreads failed to mention at his recruitment session with Heade was that there was no other judge. The one whom he'd lined up quit. Jose Gonzalez, fellow visiting professor at Montgomery College, recently notified To Whom It May Concern that he was quitting his position, quitting the contest, and quitting Hal to run off with a quote, "Senator's son who had coke and bookoo bucks." End quote.

What really hurts is that he'd felt Jose was The One. After they met last year, he was ready to give up the scene and the trips to Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines. He felt genuinely ready to give the whole monogamy thing a try and goddamn it he wanted to be REWARDED for being so commitment-minded!

His only consolation came from the fact that Jose wouldn't be getting a cut of the contest money:

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2,000 entries x \$15 per = \$30,000.
Minus \$2,500 to Judge Jude.
Minus \$2,000 for First Place.
Minus \$1,000 for Second Place.
Minus \$500 each for 3rd, 4th, 5th.
So Goodreads looked to pull about \$22,000 from it. Suck on that, Jose.

* * *

The deadline came, the summer passed, and fall semester started. He sat at his desk trying to figure out a way to streamline next year's entries. How would one encourage email submissions while still securing entry fees in a no-headache manner? Paper submissions took up space, it's true, but they made for easy payment reception, even if personal checks and money orders were becoming more and more obsolete.

And along these lines he wondered, 'Could he drop the lower consolation prizes without anyone noticing too much, or god forbid, complaining? He dared not raise the entry fee, but what about having two contests in a calendar year? A summer laurels AND winter crown kind of thing? Endless possibilities...'

* * *

A knock at his office door brought him out of his stupor. A meek freshman, slight build, pretty blue eyes, giving his name and asking, "Did you get my story?"

In a huff, Goodreads replied, "Well was your check cashed? If it was, then I can assure you we've received it."

His face had the sickened smile of a shy, smaller being in the presence of an older and more powerful man.

"Sorry to bother you. I just wanted to know if it was good, I mean, if you thought it was good." Then he tried a bit of what Hal took as flattery, saying the university forums online had posts from students saying Goodreads knew his stuff and was serious about literature.

It worked. Grumbling, Goodreads took down his name and info, Bradley M., and then reminded him, "You know that if I give you any feedback now it will disqualify you from the competition."

He nodded, thanked me, and left.

With a few shoves Goodreads had moved most of the stories to one side of the bookshelves labeled READ and then lined up a smaller stack on the opposite side under the other label, UNREAD. Seventeen hundred stories took up a lot of space. He hadn't, and wouldn't, read any of them. That was the plan. But now he had to dig and find a needle in the haystack because he reminded himself that he was a decent guy and it was the right thing to do.

The student never came back. Goodreads threw away the contact information but kept the story just in case. If the blonde freshman showed up again asking about the story, he would show him the lash marks on his manuscript and bully him with the blunt, rock-hard edge of the Canon.

He read the first page or so — highly metaphorical trash with a kingdom, villages, and a pixie — and tossed it in a drawer amongst his other things. Each year he slid south along the eastern seaboard, further and further from the ivy leagues, with every new position received as a demotion.

* * *

Several years pass. He is living in Key West. He has written a letter but doesn't know how it can reach you.

Dear Chelsea, I'm so, so very sorry.
You came to my office and I wasn't kind
at all; then I read and reread your story:
you have a huge heart and a fine, sharp mind.
I witnessed your trial and it reminds
me of your tale: the pixie's the gentlest
one in that wicked, cruel land of the blind.
Better than all of mine, Lowe's, all the rest:
True as truth, your story's soul, the winner, no contest.