

## “THE METAMORPHOSIS OF GRAHAM GREENE”

Friends and skeptics (and skeptical friends) often ask why I narrated my novel *The Wonder That Was Ours* with a collective of cockroaches. The most straightforward answer involves an encounter with a Graham Greene story at the Writers Studio in 2010. At the time, I had just resigned from a tenure-track position teaching History and believed my experience writing grants and conference papers had prepared me to write a meaningful and moving novel. I was wrong. Embarrassingly wrong. I had graduated from a doctoral program that rewarded lively (vicious?) intellectual sparring and polemical writing, and I wrote fiction as if I were having an argument with someone, anyone, including that guy over there. If I had once provided three examples to support every assertion, I now provided three descriptive phrases to illustrate every gesture. I gave megaphones to my narrators and over-explained everything to untrustworthy readers. Mercifully, my critique group staged an intervention. The phrase “tough love” comes to mind whenever I recall one member’s comment that my stories read “like footnotes in the *Journal of American Dentistry*.”

With the mortification of someone entering rehab, I accepted I had a problem and signed up for a Writers Studio class in Tucson. A graduate of 28<sup>th</sup> grade, I bristled, I admit, at the thought of taking an introductory course. I didn’t realize I was about to experience an intellectual fluorescence, and through a series of creative experiments, meet my future novel’s narrator. At the Writers Studio, I encountered the concept of a persona narrator, the idea that fiction writers, by fashioning narrators unlike themselves—by putting on masks and role-playing—can loosen their grip on personal baggage, gain authorial distance from fraught material, and represent experiences, not as they actually happened, necessarily, but in ways that privilege artistry. I hung up my academic regalia and experimented with narrators who didn’t need to be right or so damn reliable all the time. I had fun.

Encouraged, I started drafting a novel about a Caribbean taxi driver—a bookish eccentric given to lecturing the cockroaches infesting his cab—who courts disaster when he picks up two Americans just kicked off a cruise ship. Overwhelmed, I lapsed into bad habits and over-explained everything. I provided truckloads of backstory and historical context, assuming no reader would grasp the complexity of a novel featuring a cruise ship without a deep knowledge of maritime transport in the modern era. My characters—and not just those ejected from the cruise ship—became stranded. I panicked and did what many people do to avoid writing. I attended a literary conference.

The conference nearly sank my ship. At one talk, a literary agent listed ten ways writers should NEVER open a novel. RULE ONE, the “talking in cars” rule, prohibited presenting characters in conversation before any action has occurred. The worst, most cliché opening this agent had ever seen (arguably, he needed to get out more) featured two people parked near a dock, talking about a ship’s impending arrival. As it was, I had just written an opening scene featuring my main character Wynston sitting in his taxi, talking to a friend...in front of a cruise ship terminal. I left the conference despairing of my talents. I cried on the way home.

Three weeks later, my Writers Studio class discussed “Two Gentle People,” a Graham Greene story that opens with two middle-aged strangers sharing a park bench. I suddenly had a model for what I had been trying (and failing) to do. Greene’s omniscient third-person narrator, by providing loaded descriptions of a man and woman characterized by “modesty and disillusion,” infuses an otherwise quiet scene with dramatic tension. Greene’s narrator uses bold strokes to paint a picture of a melancholy woman “reluctant to obey the command of her watch” and a cautious man who carries umbrellas at the slightest hint of rain. The characters’ emotional reserve and physical proximity, taken together, generate subtle tension. “There would be no ugly surprises when he spoke,” the narrator observes, implying that the characters will, in fact, engage with one another. Readers develop an expectation of drama, and Greene delivers.

That week, our homework assignment was to write about a first encounter, using an opinionated third-person narrator who establishes characters and dramatic tension through slanted descriptions. The handout included the simple injunction: “Experiment!” With a re-opened mind, I returned to Wynston’s taxi and scrapped almost everything I had written. Murdering my darlings, however appalling the carnage, didn’t bother me. I felt reckless in the way of someone who has just fallen in love. I had fallen in love with Greene’s narrator.

Given my academic training, I felt comfortable using an authoritative narrator to make general observations and opine about characters. My challenge was to evoke and rather than explicate Wynston’s anxiety about his own frailties and his wariness of potentially disruptive passengers. Just before he sees the two Americans who will upend his life, he leans forward “to release the beads of perspiration pooling in the small of his back” and looks into his rearview mirror, “at the black and grey hairs competing for dominance at his temples.” He then recoils at the sight of Helen, “a woman sitting on a suitcase, staring into the valley formed by her knees and the sagging fabric of her sundress.” Helen’s ragged green sweater, the narrator notes, suggests the “sickness following an extended debauch, and some wretched attempt at concealment.” When Helen splays her fingers across the taxi’s window for support, its “ghostly imprint” fills Wynston with distaste. Their encounter, one suspects, is not going to end happily.

I had found my voice, I thought, but as it turned out, Greene was only the missing link in the evolution of my narrator...into a collective of cockroaches. When I shared my first chapters, members of my critique group began to ask who, exactly, my unspecified but hyper-opinionated narrator was. Perhaps I had outdone Graham Greene by giving too much latitude to an authoritative narrator with extreme opinions that begged explanation. Perhaps omniscient narrators have simply gone out of fashion. Whatever the case, I decided to overhaul the novel again and started casting about for a new narrator. The cockroaches infesting Wynston’s taxi presented themselves. The roaches, I realized, could be omniscient. Graced with hyper-sensitive antennae attuned to the subtlest gestures of humans armed with the insecticide *Roach Out* and rolled-up newspapers, they would know my characters’ very thoughts and feelings; their survival would depend on it. With access to air ducts, sewers and drain pipes, the roaches could witness anything taking place anywhere on my fictional island.

The novel became a more compassionate exploration of human foibles and failures once I put the cockroach collective to work as a first-person plural narrator. It became a reflection—grounded in the perspective of Earth’s most reviled creatures—on humans’ propensity for violence and the need for compassion in a hostile world. After Wynston imagines needle marks beneath Helen’s bunched sleeves and recoils in her presence, the roaches offer their own insights. With medical disinfectants stinging their antennae, they observe Helen shedding her sweater in a hotel room and learn, from her bandages, that she has been discharged from a cruise ship infirmary following a suicide attempt. “There was nothing sordid about Helen,” they insist, “except the damage she’d done to herself in remarkably human fashion.” They sense that Helen, as Wynston and almost every other character, desperately craves love.

When I talk about my collective cockroach narrator, I still get odd looks. Others’ skepticism no longer bothers me. At The Writers Studio, through a close reading of Graham Greene and a series of experiments, I found the right narrator for my novel. Dzanc Books will release *The Wonder That Was Ours* on September 4, 2018, and Graham Greene’s metamorphosis will continue. I am now drafting a novel that opens with the inventor of *Roach Out* sitting on a park bench, observing bees. Call me crazy, but the ship is still afloat.

**Author’s Note:** *Many thanks to René Bibby, the head of the Tucson chapter of the Writers Studio. A talented writer in her own right, she has worked tirelessly to support her students and friends. Thanks to her efforts, aspiring writers will someday grapple with the question: "MFA, NYC, or TUC?"*