

DAVID J. HORN'S

HARD LABOR



HORN PUBLISHING

Hard Labor © Horn Publishing 2012

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters herein to actual persons, either living or dead, is wholly coincidental.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.

Published in the United States by Horn Publishing.

ISBN: 978-0-9847502-0-7

Front cover art is from the film *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) © Warner Bros.

For all the working stiffs
who can't stand working.

HARD LABOR

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BEFORE WE BEGIN...

THE JOB INTERVIEW

WALKING WALTER

THE FIRST TIME

BARBECUED

OOPS INC.

BLOODY BOOTS BURIED IN THE SAND

THE UNEMPLOYABLES

THIS TIME THE WORLD REALLY IS ENDING
AGAIN

BLOODY BOOTS BURIED IN THE SAND

It is Wednesday, 5:30 in the afternoon and not a soul has stepped foot into the Old Strandedburg, the restaurant where 19 year old Jamie Dropping works as a waiter.

It is a typical Wednesday afternoon. The cook and dishwasher occupy the kitchen. The cook swats at flies and reads the sports section of yesterday's newspaper. The dishwasher is picking dirt from underneath his fingernails with a fork listening to the oldies on the radio. The song playing: *See You In September* by the Happenings.

Jamie Dropping is seated at the bar reading Professor Thurme Swinecraft's *The Embedded Persona*.

Professor Swinecraft, a controversial philosopher and literary critic, had developed the astonishing theory of *the embedded persona* one day while he was mowing the

lawn. As he pushed and pulled the mower around some hedges and bushes, and as his genius philosophically contemplated whether the bushes were real or a figment of his imagination, he was struck by a revelation: *All of reality is text. We are embedded within it.* Thus was born one of the most controversial theories in the history of philosophy.

According to the theory of the Embedded Persona, readers should embed themselves into the books they read. They should not be passive participants of the text, but they should *celebrate* the text by making themselves a part of it. In his seminal work, *The Luke Experiment*, Professor Swinecraft put his theory into practice. He embedded himself into the Gospel of Luke as Christ's thirteenth apostle, a jew of "Gaulish origin", named Pierre.

One day Jesus called the one named Pierre to follow him. He was a seller of footwear especially favored by Roman soldiers. Pierre left his footwear stall in the market and followed Jesus. He gave a party much like the one that Mathew gave Jesus, because Mathew was a braggart and had said that none of the other disciples could ever throw such a wonderful party. Jesus, of course, was the guest of honor.

Pierre had organized a splendid buffet, and for entertainment he had rented gladiators from his Roman friends. To the amazement of the crowd, the gladiators juggled midgets and other small objects. The disciple named Simon, who Jesus would later name Peter, was not

happy about the party. "Master, how can you stand this party? This place is filled with Romans?" Mathew who was a bit jealous about being outdone by Pierre even added, "I don't think he is a good choice. Even the Pharisees seem to like him." But Jesus heard none of this. He rebuked them both and told them, "Pierre will be the feet that will deliver my message."

(*The Luke Experiment*, p.122)

And of course, *The Luke Experiment* ended with perhaps the most astonishing claims in the history of modern philosophy. Professor Swinecraft had argued rather eloquently that this experiment was not some sort of "literary vandalism" as his lifelong antagonist Dr. Clive Polygoat had claimed, but it had convinced him of the truth of Christ's resurrection. Professor Swinecraft had stated, "With the Luke Experiment, I witnessed the resurrection of Christ. Pierre saw it with his own eyes, thus I saw it with my own eyes."

The embedded persona claimed that by writing yourself into a text you are able to experience what the characters actually experience. The theory promised that if you were reading a book and you wanted to know what someone looked like, if you wanted to solve a mystery or if you wanted to know what was true and what was false, you just needed to write yourself into the book and discover the answers for yourself.

Dr. Clive Polygoat considered the theory phenomenally problematic, but most of his criticisms were simply grotesque *ad hominem*s. He had proclaimed after

reading the *The Luke Experiment*, "Any muddleheaded moron can write himself into the Bible and claim whatever lunacy he wants but it doesn't make it true. I can write myself into the book of Jonah as another whale and swallow Jonah after the other whale spits him out. Professor Swinecraft would like us to believe that I actually know what Jonah tastes like?!? Utter nonsense. Professor Swinecraft's *Luke Experiment* did convince me of something: he is a complete ass."

Little does Jamie Dropping know, but in ten paragraphs time, a customer will arrive. The only customer of the day. Will he be a big tipper? No, but he will be wearing a short sleeved suit coat.

The door opened and in bounded an old man. The man wore a short sleeved suit coat - beige with a stain just above the right pocket. But even more striking than his strange sense of fashion were his testicles, which were enormous. It looked as if the old man had a cantaloupe stuffed down the front of his pants. Because of the size of his balls, he didn't walk or shuffle but he bounded from leg to leg, slowly bouncing his way into the Old Strandedburg restaurant.

Jamie put down his book and walked over to the table where the man sat and poured him a glass of water.

The old man took a tentative sip. "The water tastes a little funny."

"We put fresh mint in the water."

"Hmmm. No, it's not mint. It's more like the

molecular decay of plastic. That pitcher is most likely very old and the plastic molecules have probably come loose and are mixing with the water. I have very sensitive taste buds."

"Are you sure it's not the mint?"

"Positive."

Jamie handed the old man a menu. The man took two napkins and used them to avoid touching the it with his bare hands. The man could sense Jamie's speculation. "I don't like touching things that have been soiled by a myriad of others." He studied the menu briefly. "I'll take the cheeseburger, but hold the cheese."

"I'm sorry, sir, you said a cheeseburger with no cheese?"

"That is correct young man."

"So, you want a hamburger."

"No, I want a cheeseburger with no cheese. It is a little known fact, but cheeseburgers are both tastier and more tender then hamburgers."

"We can cook the hamburger medium rare..."

"Oh no, please, no blood."

"Cheeseburger no cheese. Would you like anything to drink?"

"Just water, but from a glass pitcher that has been manufactured in this decade, please."

Jamie took the menu, and the old man also gave him the napkins he had used to handle the menu.

In the kitchen, Jamie announced to the cook. "We've got this real pain in the ass customer. He wants a

cheeseburger with no cheese."

"So, the asshole wants a hamburger," yawned the cook.

"No he wants a cheeseburger with no cheese. He says he can also taste plastic molecules in the water."

"What?"

"Yeah, well we'll give that bastard a cheeseburger with no cheese," muttered the dishwasher.

"Have you guys ever seen a short sleeved suit coat before?"

No one responded.

Jamie went back to his book.

It is at this point in our story that Jamie Dropping encountered two terms that Professor Swinecraft had invented to help explain his theory: the fictive-real and the real-fictive. A great deal of confusion still surrounds these terms even to this day because these terms are mirror images of each other. They are like identical twins - impossible to discern the one from the other. There are those that have dedicated their academic careers to the theory of the embedded persona and they still wonder at times, "Am I thinking about the real-fictive or the fictive-real?"

Professor Swinecraft had explained these terms thusly:

The real-fictive is the text and the fictive-real is the text about the text. These terms are the heartbeat of the theory of the embedded persona. Without them the theory

would not be able to live. Indeed it is the meeting of these two terms that probably caused the initial explosion of the universe. You and I, all of creation, participate in the grand celebration of text. We are embedded personas in the real-fictive which is expressed in the fictive-real.

(*The Embedded Persona*, p.12)

Jamie flips this paragraph over in his mind the same way that the cook flips the hamburger. He turns it this way and he and he turns it that way. But he can't cook the concept. Even as the flames leap from his mind, the the fictive-real and the real-fictive remain raw.

He stops and begins to skim through the rest of *The Embedded Persona*. It is a thick book, slightly thicker than a standard dictionary, and he has a long way to go. His heart sinks. He turns to the last page. There is a picture of Thurme Swinecraft at the age of 38. The Professor looks particularly dapper. Jamie takes a closer look at the photo, and he sees something strange. He then looks at the old man who has just ordered a cheeseburger without cheese. They resemble each other greatly. They are both wearing a short sleeved suit coat.

Ding. The cook rang a bell and pushed a plate with a hamburger onto the counter.

Jamie walked to the the kitchen, but he didn't take his eyes off the old man. It was him. He was certain of it. He then rushed the burger to him.

"Here you are sir, your cheeseburger with no cheese."

The man pushed the bun off the burger and examined the meat patty by putting his face close to the burger and taking a deep breath.

"Sir, I know this may sound strange, but I was wondering if you are in fact Professor Thurme Swinecraft?"

The man glared at him. "Have you been sent by Dr. Polygoat?"

Jamie took this as a yes. "No. I just happen to be studying your theory of the Embedded Persona for my literary criticism class. I was actually thinking of using the theory to interpret the Gerald Monkley's novel *Bloody Boots Buried in the Sand*."

"Bloody Boots Buried where?" Professor Swinecraft found the title appalling.

"*Bloody Boots Buried in the Sand*. Are you familiar with it?"

Cowboy Slim Whitback moseyed into Harvey Dickslop's Saloon. The place was dark and filled with flies. It stank terribly of horseshit. The drunken cowhands of Harvey Dickslop were lurking in the shadows, drinking heavily. The sun stood somewhere between 10 o'clock and high noon. Slim spit on the dirt floor, removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead leaving behind a streak of brown dirt.

"I'm looking for a man named Harvey Dickslop."

"What makes you think that yer gonna find Harvey Disckslop in this here Saloon?" asked the bartender

cleaning a whiskey glass with his apron.

"The sign says this place belongs to Harvey Dickslop."

"Well, this place happens to be named Harvey Dickslop's Saloon, but that's jus a name. Before this place was called Harvey Dickslop's saloon it was called Peggy's Cathouse. Now, would you go lookin in a place called Peggy's Cathouse for some guy named Harvey Dickslop."

Slim sucked his teeth and tried to unravel the riddle of the bartender, but Slim Whitback wasn't born to philosophize about the names of places. No, he was born and raised to move cattle and shoot people who deserved to be shot. "I probably wouldn't mister."

Someone belched horribly.

"So then, why would you figger that a man named Harvey Discklop is here? Just because his name is hoisted above the front door?"

Slim scratched his head. "So, I guess he ain't here, then." No one answered. He could feel the lear of the cowhands that were still sober enough to lear and he added, "If you do see this Harvey Dickslop, then you tell him that Slim Whitback wants a word with him."

(Bloody Boots Buried in the Sand, p. 140)

"It's a story about this cowboy named Slim Whitback who is tracking down a missing woman of ill repute named Aphrodite Blossom. Slim fell in love with Aphrodite at first sight. Anyway, I was thinking of embedding myself in the story as Slim Whitback's Native American sidekick,

Slowpoke Joe. Pretty good name, huh? Slim finds Aphrodite's bloody boots, but he never finds her. I am convinced that the bartender is actually Harvey Dickslop and of course Harvey Dickslop had something to do with Aphrodite's disappearance."

The idea of using the theory of the embedded persona on a silly book about cowboys and cowgirls didn't sit well with Professor Swinecraft. His theory was developed with works of literature in mind: *The Grapes of Wrath*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Moby Dick*...

"Hmm. Sounds like a truly dreadful book."

"It's sold ten million copies world wide. It's been translated into over 37 languages."

"Book sales and literature, have a negative correlational value. You are aware of that, aren't you? The more a book sells the more likely it is an artifact produced for mass consumption. Literature, my young friend, is something altogether different. Did you know that Mr. William Faulkner sold 200 copies of *The Sound and the Fury* during his life? Of course, Mr. William Faulkner went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. I doubt that Gerald Monkley will share the same fate."

"But you've never read *Bloody Boots Buried in the Sand*."

Slowpoke Joe arrived to help Slim Whitback find Aphrodite Blossom. He rode into Slim's camp near a river.

"Hello, Slowpoke Joe."

"How, Slim."

"Whacha doin out this way?"

"I come to help you find missing white woman."

The mere allusion to Aphrodite Blossom sent Slim into a revelry. "Aphrodite was a woman of fine upbringing. She had some of the most well formed legs a man has ever seen. Her toes were perfectly even. All the same length, or at least it seemed that way."

Slowpoke Joe kept quiet.

Slim continued, "She had strong legs too. But her feet were so purty. So dainty..."

Slowpoke Joe changed the subject, "We talk to bartender when sun rises."

"I already talked to the bartender and he's a purty smart fella. He's so smart I couldn't understand a damn word he said."

"He Harvey Disklop. He know where woman is."

"How do you know that Joe?"

"I have dream. Bloody Boots in sand. Apron flapping in wind. White woman screaming."

"Well, I'll be."

(Jamie Dropping embeds himself as Slowpoke Joe (Bloody Boots Buried in the Sand, p.145))

"Would you mind if I asked you a few questions, professor? I am having some trouble with the real-fictive and the fictive-real..."

"Let me warn you, this theory is not for the mentally incontinent. It is not an easy theory to grasp. You must

be tenacious."

"I think that I am up for the challenge. But tell me, the real-fictive you define as the 'the text.' The fictive-real is 'text about the text.' But you also say that the world is text. So, what I understand is this: the world and all of our experiences of the world is the real-fictive. All text about the world: newspapers, movies, books, news reports, even what I am saying right now are the fictive-real?"

"Ah, you have made a classic mistake. The same mistake that Clive Polygoat made all those damned years ago. Polygoat was weak minded. He had an innate stupidity that blurred his vision of the theory. My young man, the fictive-real and the real-fictive are the yin and the yang. They are mutually exclusive: two sides of the same coin."

Jamie was even more confused. But he didn't want to seem weak minded or mentally incontinent, so he nodded earnestly. "The yin and the yang."

The professor continued, "Think of it like this. You and I are embedded personas in the text of this restaurant. Do you think this table is real?"

"Yes?" Jamie knew well that all was dubitable as far as philosophy was concerned.

"No. It is a mere collection of text. Scientists encourage us to believe that it's made of molecules, but what are molecules? They are descriptions of phenomena. They are text."

"So, the table isn't real. Does that mean that

everything is fictive-real? Everything is text."

"Have you ever heard of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle?"

"No."

"Well according to this theory you can not accurately know both the velocity and the position of a subatomic particle at the same time. That is exactly the same as the fictive-real and the real-fictive."

Jamie found Professor Swinecraft's knowledge impressive. "Very interesting. So, we might be participating in the real-fictive or the fictive-real. We aren't really sure."

"Yes and no. You and I could be characters in a text written by an invisible hand."

"Like God?"

"I prefer the more neutral term Prime Author."

"But doesn't this mean that everything is predetermined? That freedom is an illusion?"

"I believe that the Prime Author isn't always busy writing. Most writer's are lazy by nature. Did you know that Earnest Hemingway couldn't have been bothered to change his underwear. It is said that he actually wore the same pair for 15 years. It is also a well established fact that Mr. Hemingway was not an illustrious, if you know what I mean. Can you imagine the stench? That, young man, is pure sloth."

"So, when the Prime Author isn't writing we are free to do what we want?"

"Exactly. When he isn't writing we are very much

participating in the real-fictive. When he is writing then it is the fictive-real."

Jamie felt dizzy and had trouble keeping the fictive-real and real-fictive straight.

"We just don't know when the Prime Author is writing and when he isn't."

"Ah, most people don't, but I have discovered a way to know."

Slowpoke Joe and Slim Whitback returned to the Harvey Dickslop Salloon. The sun was setting and the sky was orange with a touch of red. They went inside the bar and found the same filthy cowhands drunkenly dealing cards for a game of black jack.

"Do you 'member me?" asked Slim.

"Nope," said the bartender pretending that he didn't remember Slim from the day before.

"You're sure you don 'member me? I was here yesterday."

The bartender looked Slim Whitback up and down. "No, I can't say I do."

"I'm the guy lookin for Harvey Dickslop."

"Ah, now I member. This time you brought a friend. An injun friend," said the bartender.

"That's right, mister," said Slim.

Slowpoke Joe put his hand on his six shooter and said, "We look for missing white woman."

The cowhands all sneered and snickered.

"Well, I've seen a whole lot of white women. Maybe

you can describe this here woman you're lookin for?"

Slim wasn't the type of cowboy that wasted time, "Well she's got these really purty and dainty feet. All her toes are exactly the same damn size. I ain't never seen nothin like it."

One of the cowhands volunteered, "I once seen a woman with real big feet and her middle toe was bigger than all her other toes."

Another offered, "And I seen a woman with really big fat toes but she ain't got no toe nails."

"Well, I can't say I'm a connoisseur of women's feet," said the bartender. "In my business, I don't see many feet anyhow. Most women I know wear some sort a boots or shoes."

"Unless you get real cozy with a woman," chuckled another cowhand.

Slowpoke Joe couldn't believe the bar room chat about feet. "This woman have hair the color of corn husks in Autumn. Her eyes like two small pools where I swim as child in Black Snake river."

"What the hell's he goin on about?" asked the bartender.

The cowhands were getting restless and the bartender expressed his dissatisfaction about the presence of Slowpoke Joe and Slim Whitback. "Maybe you should go see Sluggly Whisper. He sells woman's footwear and whatnot," he suggested trying his hardest to get rid of the two men without a scuffle.

"We know you Harvey Dickslop," blurted Joe pulling

his pistol from his holster.

"Well, there ain't no need for vi-o-lence," said the bartender reaching under the counter of the bar for his rifle.

Soon there was a bloody gun fight with the bullets going this way and that. Cowhands bit the dust. Whiskey bottles were shot off shelves. The mirror behind the bar shattered into a million bits. Glass was everywhere. When the shooting stopped, Joe and Slim stood in a puddle of blood. They walked behind the bar and the bartender was gone. He had slipped out like a rat and he took with him the whereabouts of Aphrodite Blossom.

(Jamie Dropping embeds himself as Slowpoke Joe (Bloody Boots Buried in the Sand, p.158))

"Do you want to hear something amazing?"

"Sure."

Professor Swinecraft pulled what looked like a small tape recorder from his short sleeved suit coat pocket. He gave Jamie a pair of earphones.

"This device records what ghost chasers call an EVP. Electronic Voice Phenomena. It is a special device that records sounds that are outside of our range of hearing. Listen closely."

Jamie put the ear phones in his ears and listened intently. He didn't know what to expect but he assumed there would be a voice or something like a voice. He closed eyes and listened to silence.

"Did you hear it?"

"What?"

"Listen again." Professor Swinecraft replayed the recording.

Jamie listened.

"I hear some clicking."

"Exactly. But what kind of clicking?"

"I'm not sure."

"It is the sound, of a typewriter. Not just any typewriter though. It is *the* typewriter. It is the Prime Author at work. I've got thousands of hours of tape just like this. This is proof, not only that the Prime Author exists, but the sound of clicking keys means that the Prime Author is working. But there are great periods of silence, where one can only imagine that the Prime Author is on a drinking binge, pleasuring himself in some den of iniquity or perhaps just participating in some unrighteous sloth."

"Incredible."

Jamie Dropping finds Thurme Swinecraft amazing. His intellect is an explosion of light. A pure genius. Thurme Swinecraft with his enormous testicles, dark bags under his eyes, wispy white hair, overgrown eyebrows, hair spilling out of his ears and large pores and oily monstrous nose.

Thurme Swinecraft had once loved a woman but she left him when she realized that he was already engaged to the Embedded Persona. But that was a long, long time ago. Now the Professor spends his afternoons on his lonely couch watching TV and usually eating microwavable

meals. Macaroni and cheese, canned laughter and coerced applause. Today, as the Prime Author would have it, he had decided to go out for a quick bite to eat.

Thurme Swinecraft pulled a fork and knife from an interior pocket of his short sleeved suit coat and plunged the knife into his hamburger.

"Professor Swinecraft, I know that you are retired, but maybe you could help me...mentor me. You could help me understand the theory better."

"With your choice of book...Bloody Boobs or whatever it's called...I think you should stick with Lacan or perhaps Derrida."

"Maybe you could help me find a better book?"

"Hmmm. It is something I could think about."

"Fantastic."

"Would you mind getting me some more water please?"

Jamie raced back to the kitchen and announced to the cook and dishwasher, "You won't believe who is here..."

"Another asshole who wants a cheeseburger without cheese?" yawned the dishwasher.

"Professor Thurme Swinecraft."

"Who the hell is he?"

"The man responsible for the theory of the Embedded Persona?"

"Sounds like a real asshole."

"He's absolutely brilliant..he's just delivered a lecture about the fictive-real...we are text...everything is

text...absolutely brilliant." Jamie quickly took a fresh *glass* pitcher full of water back to the dining room.

He poured a glass for the professor..

"This is a very disappointing cheeseburger without cheese."

"Would you like me to get you something else?"

"No, just the check please."

Jamie prepared the bill and went back to the table.
\$6.70

"So, Professor Swinecraft, will you help me?"

"I have given it some thought and my answer is no."

"No?"

"No."

"Why professor? We could maybe meet just a couple of times..."

"No. I think it is for the best. My doctor has told me that I should put the theory away. Maybe he is right. I have to admit, meeting you and having this discussion has been wonderful. It is good to see that I have defeated that baboon Polygoat. It is wonderful to see that my theory, that my ideas have endured. But I don't have the energy anymore. You must understand, young man, that theory had nearly destroyed me. While I labored on that theory, I paid attention to nothing else. Nothing else mattered. So much of my life was lived and I noticed none of it. " Here the professor stopped and just stared vacantly. Then he continued, "I once was in...there was this woman..." he paused and collected himself, "My cat, Jasper, my life long companion died while I was busy chasing papers. I was

even too busy to give him a proper burial. I pitched his dead body in the garbage. Can you imagine that? It is time to put the embedded persona away. I hope you understand, but no, I cannot help you."

Professor Swinecraft stood up and pulled seven dollars from his wallet. He sighed, "You can keep the change."

Thirty cents and a sigh.

And now we are at the end. Jamie Dropping watches Professor Thurme Swinecraft hobble out of the restaurant and into the suburban dusk with its lazy blues and humid reds. Is he disappointed? Immensely. Did he take the rejection personally? Yes. As the door closes, Jamie Dropping goes back to his book. He begins to re-read the pages describing the fictive-real and the real-fictive. But as he reads he doesn't think about the words on the page. The words don't even reach him. He is preoccupied with thoughts of the yin and the yang, plastic molecule decay, cheeseburgers without cheese, short sleeved suit coats, the fictive-real, the Prime Author, EVPs, hamburgers, text, the real-fictive...

He put the book aside and imagines Professor Swinecraft wobbling out of the restaurant. He couldn't help but think, "What an amazing mind."

Jamie hears the song *El Paso* from the radio in the kitchen.

Slim Whitback rode out of town on his trusty steed

Sparky. The sun was setting and Slim had a long way to travel until he reached the next town named Black Hatchet.

The sky was orange with a touch of scarlet. He took Aphrodite's boots that he found buried in the sand and held them tenderly in his arms. Her white boots embossed with little golden stars. He began to weep.

Sparky gave a nagging neigh. The steed was impatient to get out of town.

"Ah, Sparky I've got some dirt in my eyes. That's all," wept Slim. "We found Aphrodite's boots, so she has to be out there somewhere, bootless in the world."

He gave Sparky a limp kick and a half hearted "giddy up." Sparky neighed and stood on his hind legs. And then they were gone.

All that Slim had were a pair of Bloody boots that he had found buried not far from town. A pair of boots buried in the red sand. Slim knew it was a sign left for him by Aphrodite. She had left more than her footsteps, she had left her bloody boots buried in the sand.

(Bloody Boots Buried in the Sand, p.156)