

MISTERWRITER'S BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE

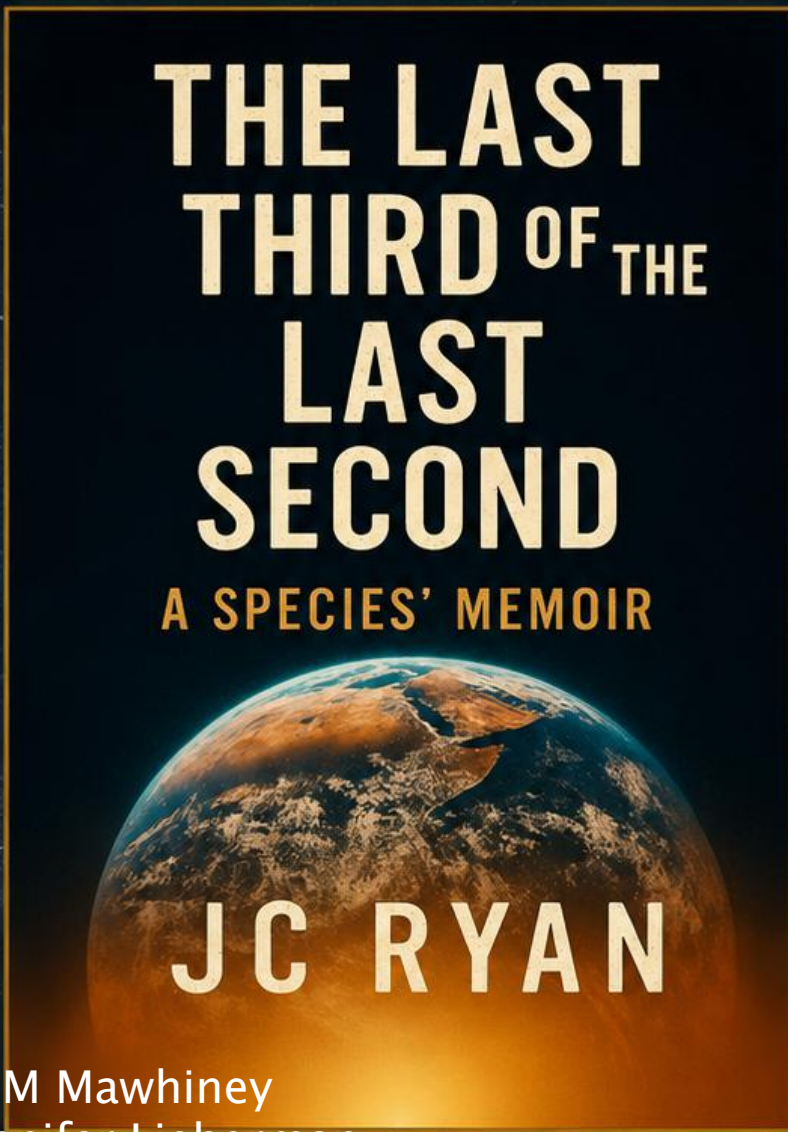
BOOKS • STORIES • IDEAS • INSPIRATION

AUGUST 2026



AND SUSPENSEFUL
THE READS THAT KEEP YOU UP AT NIGHT

YOUR GUIDE TO GREAT READING



INSIDE:

- Interview: A-M Mawhiney
- Interview: Jennifer Lieberman
- Article: Namibia: Candace MacPhie
- Sampler: The Last Third of the Last Second by JC Ryan
- Sampler: A Boy Called Swift by William Gensburger
- Story: The Open Door by Michael Barrington
- Article: How to Hypnotize Yourself and Why You Should.

www.BooksPieces.com

MISTERWRITER'S BOOKS & PIECES

M A G A Z I N E

BOOKS • STORIES • IDEAS • INSPIRATION

INSIDE

INTERVIEW: Author **A-M**

Mawhiney p3

INTERVIEW: Author **Jennifer**

Lieberman p6

SAMPLER: **The Last Third of
the Last Second** by JC Ryan

.....p10

SAMPLER: **A Boy Called Swift**

by William Gensburger....p17

STORY: **The Open Door** by

Michael Barrington p33

ARTICLE: **Namibia** by

Candace MacPhie p49

ARTICLE: **How to Hypnotize**

Yourself and Why You

Should. p51

VIDEO CORNER p54

AD RATES p55

Publisher Notes

As a magazine featuring writing and books, it makes sense to include sample

chapters from new books. Also stories and interviews.



JC Ryan and I released 'The Path of Duty and Honor: If George Washington Returned' for America's 250th celebration. The reviews have been outstanding, with a lot of requests for a sequel. We are currently working on a new series called 'The Quantum Keys,' which revolves around a family of four and their Belgian Malinois in the search for 10 quantum keys that can cripple any technology remotely, and the people willing to kill them for the keys. Want to be updated on this? Click [HERE](#).

We are **ACCEPTING STORIES** once again, but with a critical eye as we can only publish a few each issue. To submit, email EDITOR@BOOKSNPIECES.COM and attach your story as a Word doc and a brief synopsis of the story. Maximum 2000 words. We will let you know if we wish to publish it.

Sign up for a **FREE** subscription to this magazine, as well as special offers, freebies and discounts. [JOIN HERE](#).

We also have paid book promotions in lieu of advertising. Check out our promotion packages on p. 55

Enjoy this issue, and thanks for reading.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Gensburger'.

William Gensburger

INTERVIEW: A-M Mawhiney

Her career was as a social worker and then as a university professor and senior administrator, and ended with her retirement in 2018. She began writing again during the first lockdown in 2020. To her surprise, she found herself writing her first novel, *Spindriffs*. It was a finalist in the 8th annual Rakuten Kobo Emerging Writers' Prize and shortlisted for the Whistler Independent Book Awards in 2022. Its sequel, *Spelldrifts*, was released in 2023, and her latest book, *Fugitive Rifts*, was published in July 2025.

When did you start writing?

My creative writing started when I was eight years old, with gloomy, four-line poetry. I continued writing through secondary school and then stopped when I headed to university. A busy life with a full-time career as a social worker and then a university professor disrupted my dreams of becoming a famous novelist. I started writing again during the first international lockdown in March 2020. I was desperate to find hope in a distressing world and, to my surprise, began to write a story about a future, almost Utopian world with dark secrets.

Tell us about your published works. How did they come into being? What is your latest book about?

I have self-published three books with publication services provided by FriesenPress based in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. My debut novel, *Spindriffs*, was a COVID novel about a future worldwide Earth Project to save the planet. When I finished writing, I thought my writing career was over until two pre-teens urged me to write a sequel that included a dragon and a magical wolf. This required a great deal of imagination to shift from the world in *Spindriffs* to a world



of fantasy in *Spelldrifts*. My third book, *Fugitive Rifts*, is unrelated to the first two, and is real-world fiction about four very different teams who each face challenges that shatter their dreams. All three books have themes about resilience, helping each other, and coming-of-age character arcs.

Before you begin writing a book, do you already have the plot and characters mapped out in your mind, or does the story unfold as you write?

I am a panster writer! I sit at my desk, put my fingers on the keyboard, and start writing. I may have a vague idea of what will happen with the characters on each writing day, but most often they and my imagination take me in a different direction. I often write myself into a corner and find a long walk or organizing closets helps me find what might happen next. Then I write some more. The only thought I had ahead of writing *Fugitive Rifts* was wanting the story to involve four teens.

**Where are you currently residing?
Could you also share your educational
qualifications and age?**

I reside in the City of Greater Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. Sudbury is known for its forty-year re-greening project, which continues to rehabilitate the environmental devastation caused by over 100 years of destructive mining practices.

I retired at age 65 in 2018 as an academic from the local university after almost forty years as a professor and senior academic administrator. I am seventy-three years old. I have two undergraduate degrees, a master's degree, and a Ph.D. My majors were Sociology and Social Work.

Was becoming an author a conscious decision?

I would have to say becoming an author was an act of desperation during lockdown. I was finding lockdown isolation difficult after the first few weeks and knew I had to find something to do to take me away from feelings of hopelessness and distress. I grabbed my laptop thinking I was probably going to journal and instead the first sentence that emerged became the first sentence in Spindriffs: "When she awoke it was with such joy in her heart." I was gobsmacked and had no idea who "she" was or why she was joyful. After thinking frantically, while cleaning closets for a few hours, I then continued writing.

How do you balance writing with other responsibilities? What are your hobbies and interests apart from writing?

During the pandemic, as a retiree, there were few "other" responsibilities, so it was easy to immerse myself in writing. With the next two books, I did have to balance other responsibilities but was still able to safeguard time for writing for several hours almost every day.

Having a very supportive partner who takes care of day-to-day practicalities such as meal preparation and shopping allows me to remain focused on my writing. When I need a break to think about what comes next, I putter around with cleaning,



walking, visiting friends, and somehow my creativity flows when I get back to my computer.

As for other interests, I belong to a writing group that was formed in 2020 at the Humber Workshop. We meet, with rare exceptions, every two weeks to talk about our writing, give feedback to one of us, and write from prompts. I have a strong network of friends, and our get-togethers keep me socially active. My partner and I spend lots of time with family, and we enjoy watching local basketball games. I recently started to play the piano again and am enjoying another rediscovered creative outlet. And I read every day.

I know I am fortunate to be retired because it means I have much more available time to write than many other authors. On the other hand, I am aware I have fewer years left to continue writing, so I feel compelled to make this a priority while I can.

Tell us a little about your works in progress. Do you intend to become a full-time author?

My current work in progress is about a minor but important character from *Fugitive Rifts*. She has no memories of her past, and this new book is exploring what happened to her in her past.

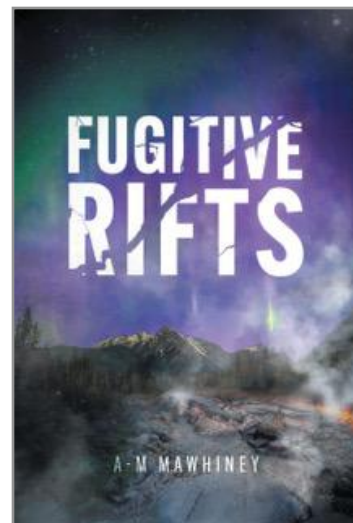
I have been a full-time author since 2020.

What would you like to say to budding authors who lose motivation when a few of their works do not perform well?

I would like to say never give up on something you love to do. One way to work through

disappointment about outcomes—sales, fame, reviews, etc.—is to reframe or remind yourself why you write. I write for the joy of writing and am inspired by moments when someone tells me they loved reading one of my books, or when I see positive reviews, or am asked to speak or write about my books.

I would say to a budding author, take a long view. If you love writing, just keep writing. If you run into roadblocks, figure out ways of dealing with them. Join a writers' group, spend time with people who are supportive, and network with other authors. I have met many supportive authors virtually through social media, and on disappointing days, touching base with them can help motivate me to keep writing.



Learn more about A-M Mawhiney at
<https://www.ammawhiney.ca/>

Interview courtesy of Literary Harbringer

INTERVIEW: **Jennifer Lieberman**



JENNIFER LIEBERMAN is an actor/writer/producer from Maple, Canada. Her award-winning Solo Show YEAR OF THE SLUT is now the 5-time-award-winning and Amazon #1 best-selling novel YEAR OF THE WHAT? Lieberman's short films have screened at several international festivals, including the Festival De Cannes Court Métrage; DETAILS, her directorial debut, was a semi-finalist for Best Female Director at The Art House Festival of Beverly Hills in 2022, and her latest short film THE PENIS FAIRY won Best Comedy Short at the Culver City Film Festival in 2023 & Best Screenplay at the Hollywood Short Film Festival 2024. Jennifer founded Make Your Own Break Ltd. to help emerging actors and writers to create opportunities for themselves (like she did).

Hosts: Al Warren and Joe Goldberg

Guest: Jennifer Lieberman, author of *Independent Theatre Production for the 21st Century in 7 Simple Steps*

Al Warren: Jennifer, how did you first become interested in acting and writing?

Jennifer Lieberman: I grew up in Maple, Ontario, and started writing when I was about eight years old. I'd watch television shows and imagine myself as a guest character, then write scripts featuring myself in those worlds. At the time, I was also a competitive gymnast, so acting wasn't really an option until I reached university.

Joe Goldberg: Your parents weren't thrilled about you pursuing acting, were they?

Jennifer Lieberman: No, they weren't. Looking back, I understand why. The entertainment industry is incredibly difficult and unpredictable. Even successful actors often struggle to sustain long-term careers. It's a challenging profession, but it's also incredibly rewarding if you love it.

Al Warren: How did you eventually make your way into the industry?

Jennifer Lieberman: After university, I moved to New York to pursue theater because I

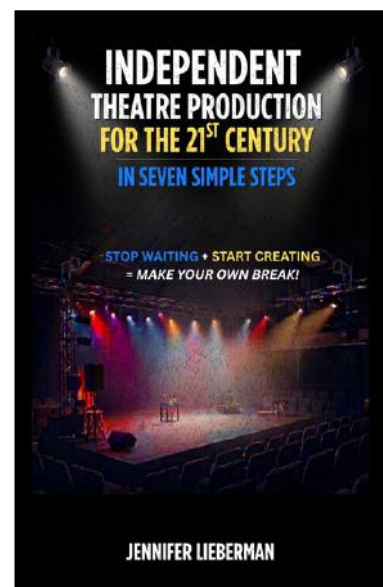
believed that's where serious actors trained. Later, film production opportunities brought me to Los Angeles. In L.A., I began producing my own projects, which completely changed my creative life.

Joe Goldberg: One of those projects was a one-woman show. How did that come about?

Jennifer Lieberman: Someone suggested I create a one-woman show to showcase my talent because I didn't have enough film credits or a demo reel. I wrote and performed a show featuring ten different characters to demonstrate my range. I originally thought it would simply help me land an agent, but it turned into something much bigger.

Al Warren: What did you discover during that process?

Jennifer Lieberman: I discovered that I





loved creating my own work. Writing, producing, and performing my own material was more creatively fulfilling than being cast in someone else's project. That realization changed everything.

Joe Goldberg: Many successful productions began as one-person shows. Why are they so effective?

Jennifer Lieberman: A one-person show allows performers to showcase their abilities while creating opportunities for themselves. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* started as a one-woman show, as did *A Bronx Tale*. Solo performances can open doors because they demonstrate talent, determination, and originality.

Joe Goldberg: Your show eventually became an award-winning novel. Did you expect that?

Jennifer Lieberman: Not at all. The show won the Audience Choice Award at a festival in New York, and people kept telling me it should become a book. At first, I resisted because I considered myself a theatrical writer. Eventually, I embraced the idea, and the show evolved into my bestselling novel, *Year of the What*.

Al Warren: What qualities do creatives need to succeed?

Jennifer Lieberman: Drive, perseverance, and resilience. You have to love the creative process enough to continue even when you're not receiving recognition or financial rewards. You also need to stay open to opportunities and be willing to pivot when circumstances change.

Joe Goldberg: You often talk about making your own opportunities.



Jennifer Lieberman: Absolutely. Before I created my own show, I volunteered to help other actors produce theirs. Through that experience, I learned valuable skills and built important relationships. Sometimes helping someone else achieve their dream can unexpectedly lead you toward your own.

Al Warren: Your new book is *Independent Theatre Production for the 21st Century in 7 Simple Steps*. What inspired you to write it?

Jennifer Lieberman: After producing more than forty independent theater and film projects, I realized there wasn't a simple, practical guide available for emerging producers. I wanted to create a roadmap that would help artists avoid common mistakes and successfully bring their projects to life.

Joe Goldberg: What are some of the key lessons in the book?

Jennifer Lieberman: Everything begins with identifying your goal. Your goal determines the material you choose, the team you assemble, your budget, fundraising strategy, and marketing plan. Producing theater is a collaborative process, so building the right team and having realistic expectations are essential.

Al Warren: You also stress that theater isn't usually about making money.

Jennifer Lieberman: Exactly. Around eighty percent of theater productions don't break even. Creators need to pursue projects because they're passionate about them, not because they expect financial success. The motivation has to be bigger than money.

Joe Goldberg: How has producing your own work changed you?

Jennifer Lieberman: The biggest lesson is that I no longer wait for someone else to give me permission or an opportunity. I've developed the skills to create my own projects. That's incredibly empowering because it means I can continue growing as an artist regardless of whether someone hires me.

Al Warren: What are you currently working on?

Jennifer Lieberman: I'm involved with both Broadway and Off-Broadway productions as a producer, developing a feature film that I wrote and will appear in, and continuing work on several other film projects. I'm also writing the second book in my series. *Year of the Bitch* is scheduled for release in early 2027.

Joe Goldberg: What's your advice for creatives trying to break into the industry?

Jennifer Lieberman: Keep moving forward. Build relationships, collaborate, and create your own opportunities. Work leads to more work. If you're actively creating, networking, and showing up fully, opportunities will eventually follow.

Al Warren: Where can listeners find you online?

Jennifer Lieberman: I'm most active on

Instagram at @IAmJenLieberman. People can also visit MakeYourOwnBreak.com for information about my consulting services, workshops, and books. All of my books are also available on Amazon.

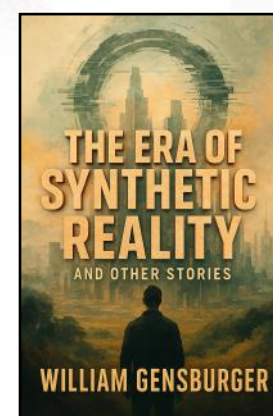
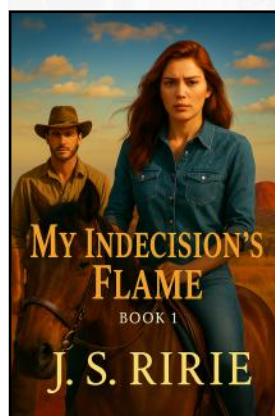
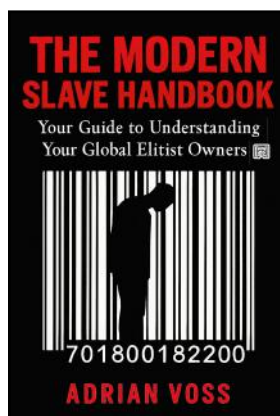
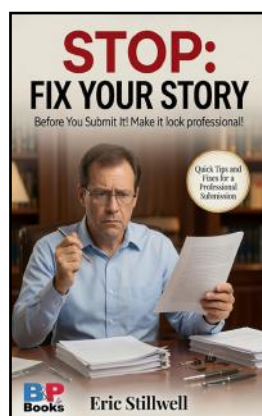
Al Warren: Jennifer, thanks for joining us.

Jennifer Lieberman: Thank you, Alan and Joe. I had a wonderful time.

House of Mystery is an electrifying weekly radio program hosted by Canadian author and broadcaster Alan R. Warren, airing on the NBC News Talk Radio network and syndicated across the US and Canada. Through insightful interviews with acclaimed authors, experts, and cultural figures. With a rich mix of fiction and non-fiction topics

Alan R. Warren is an award-winning Canadian true crime author and broadcaster whose work has captivated readers and listeners across North America. With **more than three dozen books published**. He is also the long-time host of the popular *House of Mystery* radio show on the NBC News Talk Radio network.

Joe Goldberg is the award-winning thriller author. He was a government and corporate intelligence officer. Joe is a college instructor in digital communications. He resides near Chicago, most likely cooking and listening to Jimmy Buffett music.



BOOK SAMPLER:

The Last Third of the Last Second

A Species' Memoir, Captured In The Last Flicker Of Time

by JC Ryan

An intelligent living being, whose origins we have no clue of, did it. Said being goes by many names: God, Ra, ET, and so forth.

"Here's the thing: nobody knows for sure. We've got two main camps: Accidental and Deliberate competing in the Origin Olympics."

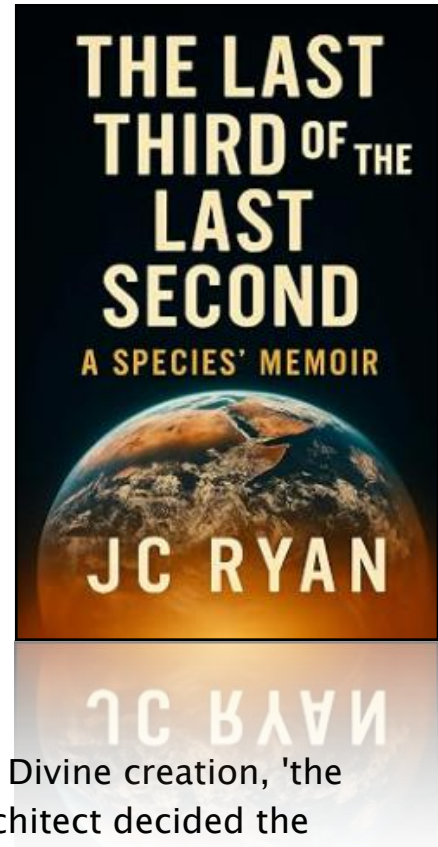
He began pacing; over the decades, he'd worn paths in the lecture hall carpets. The university never complained. He was world-famous.

"The accidentalists are playing what I call the 'Origin Strike Lotto.' They believe in abiogenesis, the theory that life can arise from non-life. Pure chance. Cosmic accident. Oops, we exist.

"The deliberatists say we're here through design. Divine creation, 'the ultimate intelligent design,' where an omniscient architect decided the universe needed conscious beings capable of love, war, and taxes."

"And then we have the extraterrestrial Uber service. Life didn't start here; it arrived special delivery from somewhere else in the cosmos, hitchhiking on asteroids like microscopic stowaways on a cosmic freight train. Which, of course, begs the question, how did life originate over there? In any event, that theory just moves the location; it doesn't explain how it happened."

"Here's the thing," Whitfield continued, his voice taking on the cadence of someone who'd explained this thousands of times but still found it amusing. "Each side is absolutely convinced they're doing real science while the other is peddling pseudoscience. The accidentalists say the deliberatists are



intellectually lazy; everything they don't understand gets filed under God or aliens."

"That's not fair—" Grace Okonkwo retorted.

"Maybe it's unfair, but fairness doesn't explain it either. Nevertheless, accidentalists have their own challenges with their theories."

He clicked through to an image of primordial Earth: volcanic, hostile, decidedly lifeless.

"The deliberatists point out that the accidentalists insist Earth manifested life from nothing. Picture this: Earth was a formless void, and darkness covered everything. No life anywhere in the nothingness. Then, about 3.7 billion years ago, give or take a few hundred million, when Earth was in its infancy, only about a billion years old, boom! The perfect lightning bolt hits the perfect primordial soup at the perfect moment. And voilà! The cosmic version of Frankenstein's monster, Microbe."

He gestured dramatically, nearly knocking over his water bottle.

"This soup, supposedly brewing for a billion years, had all the right ingredients in perfect ratios. All it needed was a kick-start. A lightning strike, and there was Microbe. The single-celled primogenitor from which all Earth's life, past, present, and future descended, including all of humanity."

"When you put it like that, the odds seem... improbable," said Elena Petrov quietly from her seat in the third row.

"That's precisely what the deliberatists say, Ms. Petrov. The accidentalists cite the Miller-Urey experiment, in which amino acids emerged from sparking a mixture of methane and ammonia. Sure, amino acids are life's LEGO blocks, but living cells have much more than amino acids. That's like tossing some sand and wires into a blender and expecting an iPhone to pop out."

Nathan Torres raised his hand. "But given the right conditions and time, anything can happen!"

"Okay, let's think about that for a moment. Whether it's a pool of chemicals struck by lightning or deep-sea hydrothermal vents where life got

cooked up, or any of the abiogenesis hypotheses, the odds are still astronomical. You need the right ingredients, exact quantities, perfect timing, an ideal environment, enough food for sustenance, and a program to replicate... My guess is you've got a better chance if a tornado hits a junkyard to accidentally assemble a Boeing 747, complete with a flight crew and complimentary peanuts."

The class laughed, but Whitfield's expression turned serious.

"Let's talk about intelligent design. Anyone brave enough to defend it?"

Silence.

"Come now. Statistically, at least 30% of you believe in some form of intelligent design. This is a safe space for 'unsafe ideas.'"

Jessica Murphy raised her hand again. "If the universe is so complex and fine-tuned for life, doesn't that suggest design? The physical constants, the laws of physics; change any of them slightly and we couldn't exist."

"Excellent point, Miss Murphy. The universe does seem suspiciously well-calibrated for our existence—"

Marcus jumped in. "But the US National Academy of Sciences calls intelligent design 'untestable, unscientific, a religious movement masquerading as science.'"

"They do indeed, Mr. Bennett. They also point out a flaw in the intelligent design logic. If complexity proves design, what about birth defects? Childhood cancer? The fact that we eat and breathe through the same tube guarantees that thousands choke to death annually? Does that mean the designer sucks? Maybe have quality control issues?"

"Or maybe," Elena said slowly, "we're asking the wrong question. Instead of how life began, maybe we should ask why it matters that we know?"

The room fell silent.

Whitfield smiled, his first genuine smile of the day.

"Miss Petrov cuts to the heart of it. So, neither side can prove its case? Abiogenesis relies on 'mindless chemistry,' intelligent design posits an invisible architect, and panspermia merely relocates the problem to another cosmic address. All are equally unprovable with current evidence. So why do we care so deeply?"

"Because," Grace said, "if we know where we came from, we might know where we're going."

"Ms. Okonkwo, are you saying we'll be going to a different place if we knew where we're coming from?"

She shook her head, slowly. Deep in thought. "Probably not."

"Or," Marcus countered, "because humans can't stand not knowing. We'd rather have a wrong answer than no answer."

"Both valid points," Whitfield said. "But here's my take, accumulated over 45 years of pondering this question: We only know in part, and until we know in full, the universe will remain inexplicable to us. And that drives us absolutely insane, which probably explains our insane genesis theories. As far as I'm concerned, knowing in part and admitting it is better than pretending to know in full."

He clicked through to a new slide, which showed various creation myths from around the world.

"Every culture in human history has created an origin story. The Babylonians had Marduk slaying Tiamat. The Norse had Odin killing Ymir. The Japanese had Izanagi and Izanami stirring the cosmic ocean with a jeweled spear. Even modern science has its creation myth; the Big Bang, which sounds like something a toddler would name after dropping their toys."

"But the Big Bang has evidence," Nathan protested.

"There's a reason why it's called the Big Bang Theory, emphasis on theory. Yes, scientists say there is evidence for the Big Bang Theory, and it remains

the most widely accepted creation theory among numerous others; however, they all remain theories."

"So you're saying science is just another religion?" Marcus asked, clearly thinking he had the professor cornered.

"No, not at all. I'm saying that so far, there are only theories, and humans are meaning-making machines. We can't help it; we just hate it when we can't explain it. Science utilizes math and observation. Religion does it with faith and revelation. Both are trying to answer the same question."

Marcus nodded.

Whitfield pulled up another image: a photo of scientists in lab coats next to a photo of priests in robes.

"Look at them. Both in ceremonial garb. One uses beakers, the other chalices. Both seek truth through ritual. Both are seeking truth through prescribed methods. Both are convinced that the other is missing the point. Is it to-may-to as in American English or to-mah-to as in British English?"

"That seems like false equivalence," Grace argued. "Science updates its beliefs based on evidence brought forth by new technologies. Religion stays the same for thousands of years."

"Really? That's news to me. We should've told Martin Luther before the Protestant Reformation. Or the Pope before the Second Vatican Council. Or the countless schisms in every major religion. Humans revise their beliefs constantly, but we just pretend we don't. Even scientists defend their theories like theologians until better evidence drags them kicking and screaming to new conclusions."

The classroom energy was building. This was what Whitfield lived for: the moment when students stopped reciting and started thinking.

"Let me tell you about a chemistry party 3.7 billion years ago," he said. "Whether it was lightning, deep-sea crockpots, God breathing life into us, or aliens seeded the cosmic garden, one thing is certain: we're here. Against all odds, improbabilities, and cosmic indifference, we exist."

He paused, letting that sink in.

"And what have we done with this impossible gift? Well, that's what the next seven weeks are about. You see, I don't care where we came from; I'm very much interested in where we're heading.

"Neither theology nor science can fully explain everything. That's why the universe seems weird. Not because we don't have answers, but because we can ask the questions. We're the exception on this planet, we're the only ones with consciousness contemplating consciousness, accidents asking if they're accidents."

"Professor," Elena asked, just when the bell rang, "do you believe in God?"

Nobody moved. The question hung in the air.

It was not a pc question, but Whitfield didn't seem offended. "I believe I'll answer your question in lesson four."

"For next week, think about this: how will not knowing how life began safeguard us from extinction?"

Twenty minutes later, the Whitfield Six, as they called themselves, had their first session in full swing at "The Grind," the campus coffee shop.

"I need alcohol," Rashid announced, staring at his coffee like it had personally betrayed him.

"It's two in the afternoon," Grace pointed out.

"Time is a social construct. So is sobriety."

Elena stirred her tea thoughtfully. "Do you think he believes in God?"

"Classic Whitfield," said Marcus, who'd asked around about the famous professor. "Apparently, he does this every semester. Drops existential bombs then walks away from the explosion."

Jessica, who had been quiet during most of the lecture, finally spoke up. "My pastor says professors like him are why young people lose their faith."

"Did you?" Nathan asked. "Lose your faith, I mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Or maybe I'm finding it in a different way." She paused. "Is it wrong that the lightning strike theory makes more sense to me than Genesis?"

"Genesis is metaphorical," Grace insisted. "You can believe in God and science."

"Can you, though?" Rashid challenged. "If God used evolution, He's a kind of sadist. Billions of years of suffering and extinction to produce... us? We're the end goal? That's like spending your entire life savings on a lottery ticket that wins you another lottery ticket."

"Maybe we're not the end goal," Elena suggested. "Maybe we're just another step."

"Toward what?" Marcus asked.

"Extinction, according to Whitfield," Nathan said glumly.

Buy this book [HERE](#).

Also visit [JC Ryan's website](#) for his other successful books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JC Ryan's books have received high acclaim from readers who have bought more than 800,000 of his books and read more than 57 million pages. He is the bestselling author of over 35 books. Ryan has been married to his college sweetheart since 1978; they have two married daughters and a grandchild.



BOOK SAMPLER:

A Boy Called Swift

by William Gensburger

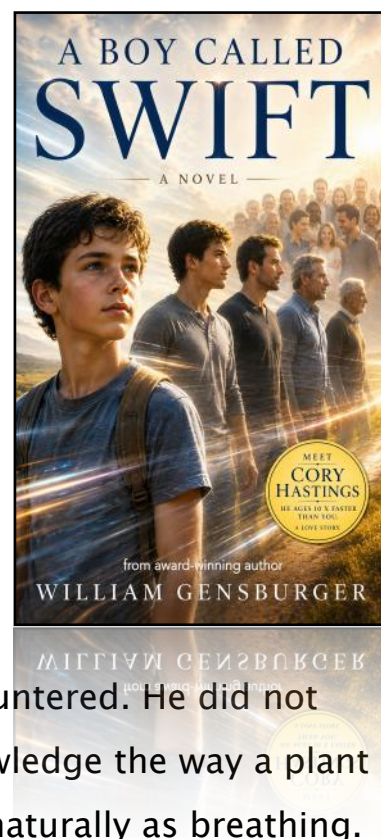
Some people change every room they walk into. Cory Hastings changes every life. Born with a condition that makes him age ten times faster physically and mentally, in ways most people never have to reckon with, he moves through the world with a quality of attention that draws people toward him and holds them there. *A Boy Called Swift* is the story of what happens when an extraordinary life meets a woman brave enough to choose it, and a community of people who discover, in his orbit, what they were always capable of being.

Chapter 3: The School, The Girl, and The Bracelet

They had skipped kindergarten entirely, on Dr. Voss's recommendation, because a classroom of children learning to identify colors and practice sitting still was clearly not where Cory needed to be at five months of calendar age.

They had kept him home instead, Carol moving through the curriculum with him at the kitchen table with a patience that surprised even her, because Cory was the most focused student she had ever encountered. He did not fidget. He did not lose interest. He leaned toward knowledge the way a plant leans toward light, not straining, simply orienting, as naturally as breathing.

By the time he was seven months old, he knew his alphabet thoroughly, could read simple words and short sentences, and had a working command of addition and subtraction that had moved well past the single digits. He



could tell you what a fraction was and why it worked, could look at a simple pattern and tell you what came next and why, and asked questions that sent Carol to the internet before she could answer them, which she did without embarrassment because she had learned early that intellectual honesty was the only currency Cory respected.

First grade, Dr. Voss suggested, might be worth trying: a structured environment, other children, the socialization that no amount of kitchen-table learning could fully replicate. Carol thought about it. Richard thought about it alongside her, which mostly meant lying awake at certain hours, running the possibilities. In the end, the argument that decided it for them was the simplest one available: their son needed other children. He was seven months old in calendar time and developmentally almost six years old, and children needed each other at that age. They would try it for half a week. If it wasn't good, they would pull him out.

He lasted three days, and they were, in the long catalog of days that made up the life of the Hastings family, among the most consequential they would ever live; not because of what went wrong, but because of what, in the middle of everything going wrong, went quietly and permanently right.

Cory wore a blue jacket on the first morning. Carol had bought it two weeks earlier, spending more than was sensible on something he would outgrow within the month, but she had wanted him to feel good, and the jacket was exactly the right shade of blue, and when he put it on and looked at himself in the hallway mirror, he nodded in the decisive way he nodded when something met his standards.

She had taken a photograph. She would keep it for the rest of her life. She walked him to the entrance of Sycamore Elementary and crouched down

to his level at the gate, straightening the collar of the blue jacket, and he looked at her with his dark, serious eyes, and she could see that he was nervous, which was one of the most ordinary things she had ever seen him be, and it broke her heart open in the best possible way. "You're going to be fine," she said.

"I know," he said, in the tone he used when he was not entirely sure but had decided that certainty was the more useful posture.

She kissed his forehead. He squared his small shoulders and walked through the gate.

He had taken perhaps ten steps into the schoolyard when he stopped. The yard was full of children, running, shouting, organized into the fluid temporary clusters that children form and dissolve without thinking, and Cory stood at the edge of it and went very still, taking it in with the concentrated attention he brought to any new environment. He looked, Carol thought from the gate where she stood watching, simultaneously older than every child in that yard and younger than all of them; it was the particular loneliness of being Cory Hastings, and she felt it on his behalf so acutely that she had to grip the gate to keep from going back in after him. Then a girl detached herself from a group near the climbing frame and walked toward him.

She was six years old, small and fair-haired, with a gap between her two front teeth and an expression of open, uncomplicated curiosity that had not yet learned to disguise itself as anything else. She walked straight up to Cory the way six-year-olds walk straight up to things that interest them, and she stopped in front of him and looked at him with her head tilted slightly to one side. "You're new," she said.

"Yes," Cory said.

“I’m Samantha. But everyone calls me Sam.”

“Cory.”

She considered him for a moment with the frank appraisal of a child who has not yet learned that staring is impolite, then seemed to reach a conclusion. “We could be friends,” she said. “If you want. It’s easier if you know someone.”

Cory was quiet for a beat, and Carol, still at the gate, still watching, held her breath. “Okay,” Cory said. “I would like that.”

Samantha smiled, the full gap-toothed smile of a child who has just organized things to her satisfaction. “The swings are good,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

Carol watched her son walk across the schoolyard beside a fair-haired girl she had never seen before, and felt something loosen in her chest that she hadn’t realized had been clenched.

The classroom was the problem. It was always going to be the classroom. Cory’s teacher was Mrs. Dwyer, thirty years in the profession, patient and experienced, and completely unprepared. She had been briefed by the principal, a brief briefing more concerned with managing expectations than with actually preparing her, and she approached Cory’s first morning with the professional equanimity of a woman who believed she had seen everything.

By ten o’clock, she understood that she had not. The first-grade curriculum at Sycamore Elementary began, as it always began, with letters and sounds and simple words, the building blocks laid down carefully one at a time for children encountering them for the first or second time.

Cory sat at his desk and listened with complete attention, and when Mrs. Dwyer held up the card with the letter A and asked if anyone knew what sound it made, Cory's hand went up. When she called on him, he gave her not just the short A sound but the long one, and its common exceptions, and two words in which it behaved differently again, all delivered in the clear conversational tone of someone summarizing something he had known for quite some time. Mrs. Dwyer looked at him over the card. He looked back at her, not with arrogance; there was nothing of arrogance in him, not then, not ever, but with the open attentiveness of a student waiting to see what came next.

What came next, over the following hours and then the following day, was the same in every subject. Reading: Cory could already do it, had been doing it for months, and when the class was given their first simple reader, he moved through it in under three minutes and sat with his hands folded, waiting while the other children sounded out the first page.

Mathematics: he had moved well past the first-grade syllabus at the kitchen table with Carol, and when Mrs. Dwyer put a simple addition sum on the board, Cory had solved it before she finished writing it. He was not trying to show off; he was simply doing what came naturally, engaging fully with whatever was in front of him and moving through it at his own pace. The problem was that his pace and the class's pace were incompatible in a way that widened by the hour. Each calendar day he sat in that classroom, he advanced ten developmental days further along, and each day the other children noticed a little more.

By the afternoon of the second day, the whispering had started. Children have finely calibrated instruments for detecting difference, and Cory was, to those instruments, deafening.

Samantha noticed the whispers. She moved her seat, picking up her things during a transition and relocating to the empty desk beside Cory without making a production of it, and when Marcus Heller from the back row said, “Sam, why are you sitting there?”

She said, “Because I want to,” in a tone that closed the subject entirely.

Cory looked at her sideways, and she gave him a quick gap-toothed smile and returned to her book. He returned to his work. It was, he would reflect much later, the first time in his life he had felt something he could only describe as companionship that did not require explanation.

He came home on the second afternoon, quieter than usual. Carol gave him space, letting him move through the house and settle and find his own way to whatever was sitting on him. He ended up at the kitchen table with a glass of water, and she sat across from him and waited. “It’s too slow,” he said finally. “The work. I finish before they’ve started, and then I have to wait, and I don’t know what to do while I’m waiting because I don’t want to make them feel...” He stopped.

“What?” Carol said gently.

“I don’t want to make them feel like I think I’m better than them. I don’t think that. It isn’t better; it’s just different. But I don’t know how to show them that.” He turned his water glass in his hands. “And every day it gets further apart. Every single calendar day, I’m ten developmental days ahead of where I was, and the gap just keeps widening, and I can’t stop it, and sometimes it feels like...”

“Like what, baby?” He looked up at her.

“Like I’m failing at being ordinary. Like there’s something everyone else knows how to do that I can’t figure out.”

Carol opened her mouth and closed it again. The ache in her chest was enormous, and she would not let it show because he needed something steadier than her grief right now. Samantha had come home with him that afternoon, falling into step beside him at the gate as though it were already established practice, and she was sitting across the table with a glass of juice, small legs swinging, listening with more attention than her six years might have suggested.

Now she leaned forward. "It's not failing," she said to Cory, with the directness of a child who has not yet learned to hedge. "It's the opposite of failing. You're ahead. That's not a problem you have; it's a gift you have. There's a difference."

Cory looked at her. "It doesn't feel like a gift."

"No," Samantha said, matter-of-factly. "I don't suppose it does. But it is one. You should embrace it." She said it the way she said most things, simply and without decoration, as though the truth of it were obvious and the only question was whether you were paying enough attention to see it.

Cory was quiet for a long time, and then something shifted in his face, not all the way to believing her, not yet, but a degree or two in that direction.

Samantha reached up and unclasped the bracelet from her wrist. It was a simple thing: small colored beads on a thin elastic cord, blue and green, and one small yellow bead near the clasp. She set it on the table between them. "Take it," she said.

"Samantha, that's yours..."

"I know it's mine. I'm giving it to you. When you feel nervous or like the gap is too wide, just touch it. It helps. Having something in your hand."

He looked at the bracelet, then at her, then picked it up and slid it onto his wrist, where it sat slightly loose, and he ran his thumb across the beads

once: blue, green, yellow, green, blue. Carol, watching from across the table, had to look at the wall for a moment. "Thank you," Cory said.

Samantha shrugged with the easy generosity of a child who has given something away and already moved on from it. "You're welcome," she said and picked up her juice.

The third day was a Wednesday, the last day Cory Hastings would spend at Sycamore Elementary, and it ended in a way that none of them could have anticipated. It began at recess. The children were on the playground in the thin autumn sunshine when Samantha caught her foot on the edge of the climbing frame and went down hard on the blacktop. The sound was bad, a crack that turned heads across the yard, and the way she landed was worse, her left leg twisted beneath her at an angle that made Mrs. Dwyer, who was closest, go pale and reach immediately for the radio on her hip.

"Don't move her," she said to the children clustering around. "Nobody touch her. I'm getting help." She moved quickly toward the building, already talking into the radio.

Samantha was not crying. She was very white and very still, and her eyes were fixed on the sky with the focused inward look of someone managing serious pain, and Cory, who had been ten feet away when she fell and had crossed those ten feet without being aware of deciding to, knelt down beside her on the blacktop. "Sam."

Her eyes found him. "It's bad," she said through her teeth. "I can feel it."

He looked at her leg. He looked at his hands. He did not think about what he was doing; it was more like recognizing, like something in him identifying what needed to be done. He placed both hands gently over her leg, not pressing, just covering, and he felt something move through him

that he had no name for, something warm that started in the center of his chest and traveled down through his arms and into his palms, and he stayed very still and let it go where it needed to go. The children around them had gone completely silent.

When Mrs. Dwyer came back two minutes later with the school secretary and the first aid kit, Samantha was sitting up. The white had left her face, and she was looking at her leg with an expression of calm bewilderment, flexing her foot experimentally.

“What...?” Mrs. Dwyer stopped. “Don’t move, Samantha, we need to...”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Samantha said, with the directness of someone reporting a fact. “It did. Now it doesn’t.”

There was blood on the blacktop and a scrape along Samantha’s knee and what had been, two minutes ago, the unmistakable shape of a serious injury. There was no serious injury now. Mrs. Dwyer looked at the leg and looked at the blood and looked at Cory, still kneeling on the blacktop with his hands in his lap and the small bead bracelet on his wrist, and she did not say anything for a long moment.

The children said things, said them to each other in the low urgent way of witnesses who need to process what they have seen, and by the time the school day ended, those things had traveled home in backpacks and on tongues, and by three-thirty the phone in the school office had begun to ring.

The parents came the next morning; not all of them, but enough, a knot of mothers and two fathers gathered in the school lobby before the bell, speaking in low voices that carried the frequency of people who have decided something is wrong and are working out what to do about it.

Mrs. Dwyer had given the principal a full account of the event the previous evening. The principal, a compact man named Gerald Sutter who wore short-sleeved shirts regardless of the weather and had strong opinions about order, had listened with his hands flat on his desk and, at the end of it, said “I see,” in a way that meant he had already decided.

Carol arrived with Cory at the usual time and walked into a lobby that went briefly quiet when they entered. She felt it, the particular quality of a room that has been talking about you and has just stopped, and she put her hand on Cory’s shoulder and walked through to the principal’s office, where Mr. Sutter was waiting with the door open.

Mr. Sutter was not unkind in the delivery. He was, however, immovable in the conclusion. There had been an incident. The other parents had concerns. Some of the children were upset. He felt, and he wanted to be clear that this came from a place of genuine care for all students in his school, that Sycamore Elementary was perhaps not the right environment for Cory at this time.

Carol looked at him for a long moment. “Mr. Sutter,” she said, in a voice as steady and precise as a level on a straight edge, “your job, while my son is in this building, is to protect him. Not to manage the discomfort of people who don’t understand him. To protect him. From what I can see, you have allowed him to become a spectacle, and now you are asking him to leave because the spectacle is inconvenient.”

Mr. Sutter’s mouth tightened. “Mrs. Hastings, I understand your frustration, but there is clearly something very...” He chose his words carefully. “...wrong with your boy. And I think for everyone’s sake...”

“We’re leaving,” Carol said. She stood. She took Cory’s hand. “He will not be back.”

She walked out through the lobby without looking at the parents still gathered there, through the door, and into the autumn air, and she did not stop walking until they reached the car. She buckled Cory into the back seat, closed the door, and stood on the pavement for thirty seconds with her eyes closed and her hand flat against the roof of the car, breathing. Then she got in and drove home.

Richard got the call at the job site shortly before noon. He told his foreman he had a family emergency and was in his truck and moving before he had finished the sentence. He pulled onto their street and saw two things simultaneously: his wife's car in the driveway, which he had expected, and a gray sedan parked at the curb with a magnetic placard on the door that read Department of Child and Family Services, which he had not. He sat in his truck for a moment, then got out and went inside.

The woman in his living room was perhaps forty, with a professional manner and a sympathetic expression that Richard clocked within ten seconds as the kind practiced in front of a mirror. Her name was Margaret Hollis, and she had arrived, she explained, because the school had filed a report; a routine report, she was quick to say, using the word twice in the first minute, and she was simply there to assess the home environment and ensure that Cory was being properly supported. She said it warmly.

Richard did not find it warm. Carol was sitting on the couch with the particular stillness she deployed when she was angry enough that movement felt dangerous. Cory was in the kitchen, within earshot, with a picture book and his water glass. He was listening to every word. They all knew he was listening to every word.

“We have a physician,” Carol said. “Dr. Anita Voss at the university medical center. She has been monitoring Cory since he was three weeks old. She can speak to his care.”

“Of course,” Margaret Hollis said, making a note. “I’d love to speak with Dr. Voss. And we’d also love to arrange for Cory to be assessed by some of our own specialists. We have access to excellent facilities...”

“No,” Carol said. A beat. The sympathetic expression recalibrated slightly.

“Mrs. Hastings, I understand this feels intrusive, but our concern is simply Cory’s well-being...”

“I said no.” Richard put his hand briefly on Carol’s arm, not to stop her but to tell her he was there, and looked at Margaret Hollis directly. “Our son is in the care of one of the best developmental physicians in this state. He is loved, he is housed, he is fed, he is learning. What is it, specifically, that you believe we are failing to provide?”

Margaret Hollis held his gaze. Something shifted behind her eyes, something not entirely professional. “Mr. Hastings, a child in your son’s school reportedly exhibited highly unusual behavior yesterday. We have an obligation to investigate when...”

“My son helped a little girl who was hurt,” Carol said flatly. “If that is the basis of your investigation, I’d suggest you reconsider your priorities.” The visit lasted another twenty minutes. Margaret Hollis was professional throughout, pleasant, thorough, making her notes with quiet efficiency. At the door, sympathetic expression fully restored, she said she hoped they could work together cooperatively in Cory’s best interest.

“If I need to pursue a court order to ensure proper evaluation,” she said gently, “I will do that. I want to be transparent with you about that.” She left.

Richard closed the door. He and Carol stood in the hallway and looked at each other, and between them passed the kind of communication that requires no words. From the kitchen doorway, Cory watched his parents. He had his thumb on the beads of the bracelet, moving across them slowly, one by one.

The neighbors came in the late afternoon. Mrs. Petrakis appeared at the back door first with a covered dish and the expression of a woman who knows that food is the correct response to most crises.

The Okoyes sent their eldest daughter with a card signed by the whole family. Two other neighbors appeared at the front door within an hour of each other and offered, with a sincerity that surprised even themselves, to help in whatever way was needed.

And then Marjorie Feltstein came. She lived four houses down, and she was seventy-three years old, and she had the bearing of a woman who has arrived at her opinions through decades of careful observation and no longer feels any need to apologize for them. She came in the early evening, and she sat in the armchair that had become, by unspoken agreement, her armchair, and she looked at Carol with her sharp dark eyes and said, without preamble, "How bad is it?"

"We may have to go to court," Carol said. Marjorie nodded slowly, as though this confirmed something she had already calculated, and was quiet for a moment before she looked up. "I want you to hear what I'm about to say, Carol, because I mean every word of it. I have been watching that boy since the day you brought him home. I have watched him change and grow in ways I cannot explain, and I stopped trying to explain them some time ago because explanation is not the point. The point is what he is. And what he

is ...” She stopped and chose her words with care. “... is something this world doesn’t have a category for yet. And when the world doesn’t have a category for something, it gets frightened, and when it gets frightened, it reaches for control. That is what is happening here. It has nothing to do with his welfare and everything to do with their discomfort.” Carol was very still. “I will speak on your behalf in court,” Marjorie said. “I will speak as a neighbor and as a witness to this family’s character and as someone who has lived long enough to recognize the difference between a child who is being failed and a child who is being feared. If it helps, I will say all of that under oath.” Carol reached across and took the old woman’s hand and held it, and neither of them said anything for a moment, and the evening came in through the windows and the house settled around them.

The knock at the door came at six-fifteen. Carol opened it to find Samantha on the step, still in her school clothes, with her mother standing behind her.

Samantha’s mother was a pleasant-faced woman named Diane, a little younger than Carol, who had the slightly dazed expression of someone who has been told something remarkable by a six-year-old and is still working through it. She had a tin of cookies in her hands, and she introduced herself at the door with a warmth that was entirely genuine. “Samantha told me what happened,” she said. “All of it. I want you to know what Cory did for Sam today; I don’t know how to explain it, and I’m not sure I need to. I just know that she walked off that playground on her own two feet when she should have been in an ambulance, and I know who was with her when it happened. If there’s anything we can do, anything at all.”

Carol looked at this woman she had never properly met and felt, again, the specific relief of being seen clearly by a stranger and not found wanting. “Thank you,” she said. “Please. Come in.”

Samantha had already come in. She found Cory in the study with his picture book and the lamp and the bracelet on his wrist, and she sat down across from him in the chair that was becoming, through the accumulation of these afternoon visits, simply her chair.

“How are you?” she said.

He considered the question. “I’ve been better,” he said. “But I’ve also been worse.”

She nodded. “Your mom’s going to fight for you.”

“I know.”

“She’ll win.” He looked at her.

“How do you know?” Samantha shrugged with the easy confidence of a six-year-old who has not yet learned that outcomes are uncertain. “Because she’s right,” she said simply. “And being right matters. Eventually.”

Cory was quiet for a moment, then reached up and touched the bracelet once, briefly, and something in his face settled. “Eventually,” he agreed.

In the living room, the adults talked in low voices about courts and caseworkers and what comes next. Outside the November dark had come in fully and the street was quiet and the lights were on in the houses along it, each one a small warmth against the cold, and in the study of number forty-two, two children sat across from each other in the lamplight, one of them turning the pages of his book, one of them watching him with the open uncomplicated attention of a child who has decided that this person is worth watching, and neither of them said anything more. It was, for the moment, enough.

BUY THIS BOOK HERE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

William Gensburger is the author of several award-winning fiction and non-fiction books, including 'The Path of Duty and Honor,' 'Texas Dead Books 1 & 2,' 'Distant Rumors: 10 Stories,' 'The Era of Synthetic Reality and Other Stories,' and 'Verisium: Conversations with AI on the Meaning of Life and Death.' [www. MisterWriter.com](http://www.MisterWriter.com)



STORY

The Open Door

by Michael Barrington

“Will you have me blushing, James?”
He hadn’t noticed how close she was standing until she spoke. She moved past him then, carrying the tray, the faint clink of china marking her path into the kitchen.

“And you’re long past calling me Miss Clabby,” she added over her shoulder. “Nollaig will do. I’m no longer your teacher; that was fourteen years ago, 1921.”

He followed her to the doorway but didn’t step inside. He wondered if she was looking for the boy who had left for England. The years had changed him—his shoulders were broader now, his face leaner, the passage of time having pared away whatever softness youth had once allowed. But his eyes and his voice remained the same.

The kitchen was small, warm from the range, a kettle murmuring somewhere just below a boil. She set the tray down and began clearing it with practiced ease, as if she had done it a hundred times.

“It’s strange. Being back in Ireland. Coming home.”

“It always is—for a while.” She didn’t turn.

He watched her rinse a plate, her sleeves rolled up just enough to show her wrists, the movement of her hands steady, unhurried. Nothing in her manner suggested surprise at his return, though she’d been the one to write the letter, hoping he’d come.

“I didn’t expect...” He stopped, unsure what he meant to say.



“No one ever does.” She glanced at him, measuring.
He nodded; fingers tightening against the wooden doorframe. A
pause.

“How is she?”

The question hung in the air between them.

Nollaig dried her hands before answering. “Resting.”

“That bad?”

Leaning back against the counter, she folded the cloth between her
fingers. For a moment she said nothing, as if weighing how much to give
him.

“Dr. Lynch comes once a week,” she said finally. “It’s mainly pain
control.”

James felt the answer more than he heard it.

“And the rest of the time?”

“I’m here.” A slight pause. “As much as I can be.”

He took that in—the matter-of-fact way she said it, as though there
was no other possibility.

“You come every day?”

“After school. I only teach in the afternoon.” She gave a faint shrug.
“It’s not far.”

“And at night?”

“I stay.”

Something in the simplicity of it unsettled him.

“And in the mornings?”

“I’m here until noon.” Her eyes met his again. “She doesn’t like to
be fussed over.”

That, at least, he understood.

“She never mentioned anything in her letters. About being ill.”

“She wouldn’t.”

The kettle rattled. She turned away to lift it from the heat, pouring
water into two cups without asking if he wanted one.

“You should sit.”

“And my father?”

The question came out sharper than he intended. Her hand paused briefly on the teapot.

“What about him?”

“Nobody wrote to me.”

She nodded.

“What happened?”

Putting the pot down carefully, she hesitated as if the answer required a careful touch.

“In Monahan’s. He collapsed. Drink still in his hand.”

“A heart attack?”

“That’s what Doctor Lynch said.”

James looked down at his boots, the silence stretching between them until the kettle’s final hiss died out. “And the funeral?”

“Was attended,” she said, her tone softening.

The ghost of a smile touched his mouth at her choice of words.

“Few, I take it.”

“Enough.”

She brought him the cup holding it out until he took it. Their fingers brushed, just briefly. He noticed the warmth of her hand, the steadiness of it.

“Sit, James,” she said again, softer this time.

Pulling out the chair he lowered himself into it. The wood creaked faintly under his six-foot frame.

For a moment, they said nothing.

“Why did you stay?”

“You haven’t touched your tea.”

He didn’t move.

“I’m sorry.”

He looked up. “For what?”

“For speaking so plainly.” A small breath. “You’ve only just come home.”

“I’d rather know.”

“Yes. I thought you might.”

She took the chair opposite him but angled slightly away, toward the window where the last of the light was fading.

“You should look in, but she’s sleeping. You can talk to her in the morning. She tires easily.”

“You’ve been managing all this on your own?”

“Not entirely.” She smiled faintly. “There are others who come and go. But I’ve had the easier part of it.”

“Easier?”

“I’m not family.”

He frowned. “That makes it easier?”

“In some ways.” She looked down at her hands. “You can do what’s needed without... remembering too much.”

The words lingered. He took a sip of tea.

“I didn’t think it would be like this.”

“How did you think it would be?”

He shook his head. “Different.”

“It always is.”

The light had almost gone now. The room seemed smaller for it; the walls drawing in.

“Will you stay?”

The question surprised him.

“I’ve only just arrived.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

He held her gaze but didn’t answer. She nodded, as if she hadn’t expected one.

“You must be tired,” she said, rising. “Your old room is all made up.”

“And you?”

“I sleep in with your mother. I’ve a cot in her room.”

There was no hesitation in it. No sense that it required explanation. She moved past him toward the hallway, then paused.

“Come along. You should take a look at her. Then, you’ll need your rest.”

He followed her, aware of the quiet between them.

Outside, the wind stirred faintly against the walls. Inside, the house held its breath.

In the days that followed, James fell into a rhythm that did not feel like his own yet required no effort to keep. Rising early before the light had fully settled over the fields, he walked the boundary of the farm. The land was smaller than he remembered, though not diminished—only clearer now, its limits more honestly drawn. Fences needed mending. A gate hung loosely on its hinges. The outbuildings leaned slightly, as if time had pressed a quiet weight against them. They stood in stark contrast to Manchester—the hurried streets, the endless noise, and the life he had built as manager of The Shamrock Inn, successful in almost every measurable way yet littered with failed relationships.

By midmorning he would return to the house. Nollaig was always there. Sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes in his mother's room, sometimes stepping out into the yard with a basket of washing balanced against her hip. She moved through the place without hesitation, as though she had long ago learned where everything belonged. He noticed how little she spoke unless spoken to. Not out of reserve, but economy. Nothing unnecessary passed her lips.

His mother had good hours and bad ones. On the better mornings, she would wake enough to recognize him, her eyes clearing just long enough to take him in.

"You've come home," she said once, as if confirming something she had suspected all along.

"For a while."

She studied him, then smiled faintly. "We'll see."

Then she drifted back into sleep. Nollaig stood at the foot of the bed, hands loosely folded, watching without intruding.

"She knows you," she said later, when they were alone.

"I wasn't sure."

"She always would."

He wanted to ask more, but the moment passed.

They walked together sometimes. She noticed the slight graying at his temples. He was no longer the boy who had left, yet there were moments

—usually when he laughed or looked uncertain—when she caught a fleeting glimpse of the student she had once known.

There were things he wanted to ask her—about the years between—if there'd ever been anyone in her life—but each time the questions formed, they seemed to belong to another kind of conversation, one they had not yet reached. Instead, they spoke of smaller things. The school. The children. Who had left, who had married, who had died. Names he half-remembered. Others he did not.

“You’ve been away too long,” she said once, not unkindly.

“Perhaps.”

“And yet you’ve come back.”

“For now.”

She let that rest.

One afternoon, the rain kept them inside. The house held the sound of it—the steady tapping against the windows, the soft hiss along the thatch. Nollaig sat at the table with a stack of copybooks, a pen moving steadily across the pages.

“You still mark them by hand?”

“How else would I do it?”

“I thought perhaps things had changed.”

She looked up briefly. “Some things don’t need to.”

He watched her work.

“You read them all?”

“Every word.”

“And they read what you write?”

“They do.” A faint smile. “Whether or not they like it.”

He pulled a book from the shelf, more to occupy his hands than from any real intention to read. After a few minutes, he realized he had not turned a page.

“You’ve done a great deal here.”

She didn’t look up. “It needed doing.”

“For my mother.”

“For your mother,” she nodded.

“And my father.”

Her pen paused.

“He required less attention.”

James leaned back in his chair. “You didn’t have to stay.”

“No.”

“But you did.”

“Yes.”

He waited, but she offered nothing more.

“Why?”

This time she looked at him.

“Does there have to be a reason?”

He held her gaze. “I think there usually is.”

She considered that, then set her pen down.

“Your mother needed someone. And I was able. That’s all?”

She gave a small, almost imperceptible shake of her head, as if dismissing the question rather than answering it. “Sometimes that’s enough.”

He began to notice the small things. The way she paused at the doorway before entering his mother’s room, as if gathering herself. The way she sat beside the bed—not too close, not too far—her presence offered but never imposed. The way she listened, even when there was nothing to hear.

Once, late at night, he found her in the kitchen, her head bowed slightly, eyes closed. He thought she might be praying. But when she opened them, there was no sign of it—only a quiet tiredness she quickly put aside.

“You should sleep,” he said.

“In a while.”

“You’ve been on your feet all day.”

“As have you.”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

He had no answer.

It was not one moment, but many, that altered things. A hand brushing his as they reached for the same cup. Her voice, low and close, as she spoke to him in the dim light of evening. The way she said his name—without formality now, but without familiarity either. Something in between. Twice he nearly asked why she had never married, and twice he stopped himself, unsettled by how much the answer mattered to him.

In his old room, sleep came slowly. The house held different sounds now. The soft movement from his mother's room. The occasional tap of a window shutter. The faint closing of a door. He found himself listening for them. One night, unable to settle, he stepped into the hallway. A thin line of light leaked from beneath his mother's door. He hesitated, then knocked lightly.

"Come in," Nollaig's voice whispered.

She was seated beside the bed, a book open in her lap, though she wasn't reading. His mother slept, her breathing shallow but steady.

"I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You didn't."

He stood in the doorway.

"You should rest," she chided.

"So should you."

"I will."

But she made no move to rise.

He took a step into the room.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then, quietly: "She won't last long."

He nodded, though the words struck deeper than he expected.

"I know."

She gave him a look; something unguarded in her expression. "It's easier, sometimes, to say it out loud."

"Yes."

Another pause.

"Goodnight, James."

"Goodnight."

He lingered a moment longer, then turned and left. But the stillness of the room followed him.

By the end of the week, he realized that leaving would not be simple. Not because of the farm. Not even because of his mother. But because something had begun to take shape between himself and Nollaig—quietly, almost without consent. And once noticed, it could not be set aside.

A few days later, the wind had picked up after supper, pressing itself against the cottage walls, slipping through whatever cracks it could find. Nollaig rose without a word and lit the fire. The turf caught slowly, the flame steadying, throwing a low, lambent light across the room. James watched her from a chair by the table.

She moved with that same quiet assurance he had noticed before—nothing wasted, nothing hurried. When she bent to place another sod of turf on the fire, a strand of hair slipped loose and brushed her cheek. She didn't notice. Then she turned to the sink.

“Leave them.”

She glanced back. “Leave what?”

“The dishes. They'll keep.”

She studied him for a moment, then gave a small nod and wiped her hands on a cloth. When she sat down, it was beside him rather than opposite, close enough that he could hear her breathing, her gaze, and shoulders turned toward the firelight.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Outside, something rattled—loose metal, maybe, or a branch catching the gutter. The sound came and went. Inside, the fire settled into itself.

“You've changed the place,” he said finally.

“Only what needed changing.”

“And the rest?”

She shrugged. “Some things aren't improved by being taken apart.”

The silence returned, but it was different, heavier now, carrying the weight of something newly unsettled between them.

“Nollaig.”

She looked at him, not fully, just enough.

“I was thinking...” He stopped, the words suddenly awkward in his mouth, feeling almost like he was back in school. “About staying.”

“I thought you might.”

“You did?”

“You don’t come all this way just to leave again.” A faint smile touched her lips. “Not unless you’re running from something.”

“And am I?”

“Only you can answer that.”

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “It wouldn’t just be the farm.”

“No?” she asked, though her voice had softened.

He shook his head. “There are... other reasons.”

She looked back at the fire, as if the answer might be written there. He was moved watching the firelight fall across her face, faintly framing features he had failed to fully notice before—folds, forged perhaps by time, or by a life lived without indulgence.

“You should be careful, James.”

“About what?”

“About what you think you’ve found.”

He felt something tighten in his chest. “And what do you think that is?”

“I think,” she said slowly, choosing each word, “you’ve come home to a place that feels smaller than the life you’ve made in England. And you’re trying to make it fit.”

“That’s not it.”

“No?” She turned, meeting his eyes fully for the first time. “Then tell me what it is.”

His eyes locked with hers, but the certainty he’d felt moments before slipped away.

“It’s you,” he said, quieter now.

She didn’t move.

“I didn’t expect...” He gave a short, uncertain laugh. “I didn’t expect anything, if I’m honest. But since I’ve been back...”

He hesitated again. The fire shifted and crackled in the grate. Nollaig's hands were clasped in her lap. He noticed they were not as steady as before.

"You should stop." She said gently.

"Why?"

"Because this is nonsense."

"You don't believe that."

"I need to."

There was no sharpness in it, only a kind of weariness. "You remember a classroom. A girl who knew her books. A girl who loved to teach. A girl who taught you. A woman you've turned into something else."

"That's not fair."

"It's true."

He sat back, the bluntness of her words hanging in the air, sharp and unrelenting, forcing even silence to recoil.

"But what if it isn't?" he said after a moment. "What if it's not memory? What if it's now?"

She closed her eyes briefly, as if bracing herself.

"James... I am not—" She stopped, then tried again. "I am not the woman you think I am."

"Then tell me who you are." His voice, urgent, impatient.

A long silence.

When she spoke, her voice was lower. "I am fourteen years older than you. I am a woman who has already lived the better part of her life. I have made my peace with that." She looked at him again. "And you are just beginning yours."

"I know."

"No, you don't. No, James, you know the number. That's not the same thing."

"That doesn't mean—"

"It means everything." Not harsh, but firm. "There are things you will want. A life. A family. Children."

He didn't answer.

She watched him, searching his face.

“You think you can set that aside now,” she said. “But time has a way of asking for it back.”

“And what if I don’t want any of that?”

She almost smiled. “Then you are the first man I’ve ever met who doesn’t.”

The wind struck the side of the cottage again, harder this time. The shutters rattled, then settled.

He stood before he’d quite decided to. Her gray eyes followed him, but she did not rise. For a moment he hesitated—then crossed the small space between them. Up close, he could see the uncertainty she’d tried to hide. It was there, just beneath the surface.

“I’m not mistaken.”

Her breath caught, just slightly.

“You might be,” she whispered.

“Then let me be.”

That was when she looked away. Not in refusal—something closer to surrender.

He reached for her then, slowly enough that she could have stopped him. She didn’t. After drawing her to her feet, there was a brief, fragile pause—something unspoken passing between them, equal parts fear and recognition.

“This is foolish,” she murmured.

“Probably.”

“And people will talk.”

“They always do.”

At that, she let out a breath that might have been a laugh. When he kissed her, it was tentative at first, as if both of them were waiting for the other to pull back. Neither did. Her hand came to rest lightly against his chest, not pushing him away, not pulling him closer—just there, as if to confirm he was real. When they finally separated, she didn’t step back.

“God help us,” she murmured.

“Nollaig—”

“No, don’t say anything.”

“Why.”

“Because if you do, I might believe you.”

He didn’t answer.

The fire shifted again behind them, sending a brief flare of light across the room before settling into a steady glow. It had burned low by the time they parted.

For a while, neither of them moved. The room seemed altered, as if something had been said aloud that could not be gathered back in. Nollaig turned first, not abruptly, but with a kind of quiet resolve. She bent to the hearth and settled the turf, her hands steady again, though he sensed the effort it cost her.

“You should sleep.”

It was the same words as before, but they carried something else now—distance, perhaps, or protection.

“And you?”

“In time.”

He hesitated, as if waiting for something more. When it did not come, he nodded and left the room.

The bedroom was colder than he had expected. He sat on the edge of the bed without undressing, the silence pressing in, broken only by the faint movement of wind through the thatch. He replayed the moment—not the words, but the spaces between them. The way she had not stepped back. The way she had responded.

God help us, she had said.

Not *God help me*.

He lay down fully clothed and stared into the dark.

In the morning, she was already gone. The kitchen was in order; the fire laid but not lit. A cup sat on the table, turned upside down to dry. Nothing out of place. Nothing to suggest the night before had been anything but ordinary. Only her absence made it otherwise.

His mother stirred when he entered her room.

“You’re awake early,” she said, her voice thin but clear.

“So are you.”

She studied him, longer than usual. “You won’t be staying.”

It was not a question. He felt the words settle in him before he answered. "I haven't decided."

She gave a faint smile. "You have. You're just waiting to agree with yourself."

He almost laughed, but didn't.

"And Nollaig?" she asked after a moment.

He looked away. "What about her?"

His mother's gaze did not shift.

"You're not the first man to think he's found something he can't live without," she said. "And you won't be the last to learn otherwise."

"Mother... That's not fair."

"No," she agreed. "It isn't. But let me finish." The effort of speaking had tired her. She closed her eyes. "Go on now," she murmured. "I've known Nollaig a lot longer than you."

The reality of his mother's death seemed slow to take hold, arriving in fragments throughout the day and leaving behind a hollow ache he could neither escape nor fully comprehend. The funeral came and went with a swiftness that surprised him. He followed the coffin to the grave and stood among neighbors and relatives, feeling as though the day belonged to someone else. His tears were shed by two people at once: the child who had loved her without question and the man who only now understood how much of his life had been anchored by her quiet presence.

Through it all, Nollaig quietly managed what needed managing. She spoke with visitors, saw to the arrangements, and somehow remained near enough that, even in his sorrow, he never felt entirely alone.

He walked the fields again the next day but saw them differently. Where before he had measured fences and buildings, now he measured distance—between the house and the road, between the farm and the town, between the satisfying life he had lived in England and the uncertain Irish one that seemed suddenly within reach. Or just out of it. By late afternoon, the sky had lowered, pressing a leaden light over everything. He found himself on the road to Strokestown without quite remembering the decision to go there.

Her cottage stood as he remembered it—small, contained, the door closed against the weather. He knocked once. No answer. Again. At last, he heard movement inside. The latch lifted. Nollaig stood there, still wearing her coat, as if she had only just returned herself. For a moment, they simply looked at each other.

“You came.”

“Yes.”

She stepped aside to let him in but did not touch him as he passed.

The room was cool.

“No fire?”

“I wasn’t sure I’d stay.”

He turned to her. “And now?”

She met his eyes, but something was guarded there again.

“I don’t know.”

The honesty of it struck him more than anything she had said that night before. He took a step toward her.

“We can’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

“I’m not pretending.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Thinking about things. About us. Something one of us should do.”

He almost smiled at that, but the tension held.

“And what have you decided?”

She shook her head. “That deciding too quickly would be a mistake.”

“For whom?”

“For both of us.”

He let out a breath, turning away briefly, then back again.

“I’m not afraid of it.”

“Of course you’re not.” A softness entered her voice. “That’s part of the problem.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She didn’t answer immediately. “It means you’ve had a few weeks to think about things.”

“And you’ve had years?”

“Exactly.”

The admission seemed to settle the room. He stepped closer.

“And if we don’t find out?”

She gazed steadily at him now. “Then we will spend the rest of our lives wondering. And perhaps that’s the easier burden.”

He stopped. The space between them remained.

Outside, the wind had dropped.

The quiet felt deliberate, as if the world itself were waiting. James studied her, seeking permission, or refusal, or some clean certainty he could hold on to. He found none. Only the same unresolved quiet he recognized in himself.

“I’m staying here,” he said finally. It was not a promise, not entirely. More a statement of intent, offered without demand. “I’m not going back to England.”

Nollaig nodded once.

“I know.”

Neither of them moved.

When he stepped back out onto the road, the light was already fading. He did not look back immediately. When he did, the door was still open, and she was still there.

Watching.

He raised a hand, not quite a wave.

She did not return it.

But she did not close the door//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Michael Barrington, an award-winning English author, has written 13 books, mainly historical and literary fiction, and published more than 60 short stories and articles in the USA, Europe and UK: www.mbwriter.net.

ARTICLE:

Namibia

by Candace MacPhie



On the night train departing Windhoek, Namibia, my goal is to sandboard the dunes in Swakopmund. The overhead lights in the two-car train are on high, a twenty-year-old movie's blaring through the loudspeakers. I'm the only woman, traveling solo on this eight-hour, four-hundred-kilometer trip. I'm responsible for me and plan to stay awake until we reach the coast.

I wake when the train stops. Daylight. Dang, I lost to the lull of the train. I search the skyline for Swakopmund's famous cream and rose lighthouse. Nothing. I shrug on my backpack and step on the platform.

Walvis Bay

I flip through my travel guide. Walvis Bay—a town south of my chosen destination. I drop my head. One year into my around-the-world backpacking adventure, you'd think I'd be an expert. Not so much.

The tourist office lady recommends I visit the tour company across the street. Because there are no buses. No trains for days. No way to reach my goal.

Losing confidence, I'll ever find my way out of this town, I lope into the shop. Mom and Pop—the owners- smirk at my story. Pop offers to drive me. I blink. My mouth gapes at his unexpected kindness. He races along the beach road, while pelicans swoop and dolphins play in the waves. Dropping me at the door of my hostel, waiting to ensure I'm comfortable.

Their generosity and hospitality saw me safely to Swakopmund.

I sandboarded later that day. And it was awesome.//

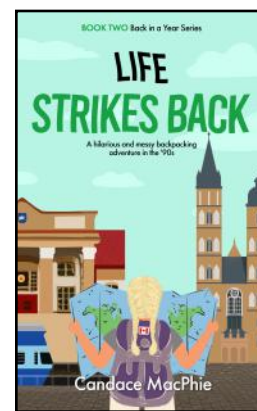
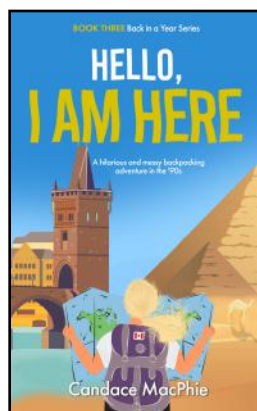
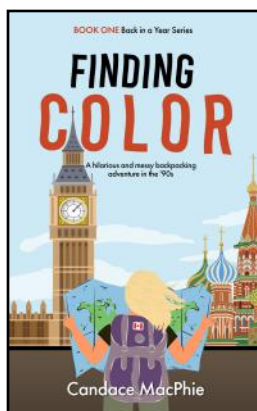
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Born in Montreal, Quebec, Candace spent years backpacking and working around the world. She holds a Bachelor of Commerce degree, an MBA, and has worked for twenty years on four different continents and now calls Calgary, Alberta home.

Instagram: @candacemacphie Facebook: <http://www.candacemacphie.com>

Photo credit: Olga Ernst/Wikimedia Commons



ARTICLE:

How to Hypnotize Yourself, and Why You Should!

by William Gensburger

There's an element of mystery around hypnosis. Most people are familiar with the stage hypnosis performance, where a group of people suddenly and inexplicably fall into a deep trance and then wind up doing silly things such as clucking like a chicken or dancing around the stage like a dog. And certainly that is one element of hypnosis.



A better realization about hypnosis is that it is something we do to ourselves every day without knowing it. I'm being serious. Here are some times throughout the day that you are actually hypnotizing yourself:

Daydreaming.

Watching a movie in the theater or on television.

Lying in bed moments before you actually fall asleep.

These are just three instances where you have practiced self-hypnosis. Hypnosis state of absolute relaxation where your guard is down, and your conscious mind is not really running the show. And it isn't just the relaxation; it's the quieting down of your conscious mind and allowing your subconscious mind to come and play.

Most of the problems that we have are related to our belief system, and our belief system is governed by our subconscious mind and not our conscious mind.

As an example: quitting smoking. It's been described as being as difficult as quitting heroin, and yet the physical addiction tends to be short-lasting while the mental addiction has a massive hold on you. And people who want

to quit tell themselves that they want to quit quite frequently. But they do not believe it because their subconscious mind has been trained that the cigarette offers comfort and a sense of peace and satisfaction. So when we want to get somebody to quit smoking, we have to convince the subconscious mind that it is easy, acceptable, and have the subconscious mind give permission. Now I know that sounds silly, but most of our habits, fears, and phobias are often generated from the subconscious, triggered from a variety of different sources, often from childhood, that have cemented into a belief system. This is why hypnosis can be extremely effective.

Hypnosis bypasses the conscious mind and addresses the subconscious directly through the use of verbal and visual cues and pattern adjustments, in such a way that the subconscious accepts it and carries it through to the conscious mind when awakening.

Here's how you can hypnotize yourself. The easiest way would be to sit in a comfortable chair or lie in bed. Sitting is preferable because in bed there's a greater chance that you will fall asleep.

Rather than closing your eyes straight away, find a point ahead of you and slightly above eye level and stare at it. Don't let your eyes close; resist the temptation. Take a deep breath, hold it, and then release it slowly, longer than you inhaled. Repeat this two more times. By now, your eyes are starting to get very heavy because it's very hard to focus on that one spot. So allow your eyes to close and allow your body to fall into the chair you're sitting in. Now focus on your face and the muscles relaxing around your face. Feel a warmth in your face. I do the same for your chest, arms, stomach, legs, and feet. And you do this by telling yourself silently, 'I am relaxed. My arms are heavy. My feet are heavy,' and so on.

Now tell yourself that you're going to start to count down from 10 to 1, and with each number you're gonna feel more and more relaxed; your mind is going to clear and just go with the flow. If thoughts pop in, allow them to and then dismiss them. And start counting slowly. With each number, fill your body and sink in further. Feel the warmth through your body as you settle into this place of comfort and peace. When you get to 1, just relax and

enjoy the sensation of absolute peace. If you were in a hypnosis session with me, at this time, I would be prompting you to see how deep in a trance you are. But I promise you that you are in a trance right now.

So why should you hypnotize yourself? Well, if you don't want to visit a hypnotherapist, such as myself, you can try doing it yourself. First, structure instead of goals that you would like to achieve. Start small. As you get more and more used to hypnotizing yourself, your goals can increase in size.

Self-hypnosis is very effective for things such as controlling what you eat, nail biting, stress, and test anxiety for students. For controlling tempers and temperament, finding value and a positive outlook rather than a negative one.

Of course, any HYPNOTHERAPY session we would tackle more complicated things in a way that is easier having someone else drive it than trying to do it yourself. But one of the things that I do in my sessions is that I record them and send them to the client afterward so that they can listen to the audiotape anytime they need. This is an effective way to cement what we have achieved.

If you are reading this, I would like to try a free audio session, you may download one from my website: <https://www.gensburger.com/hypnosis/> you will also find a lot more information on hypnosis and what it can do for you.

Hypnosis is not something to be wary of. You cannot be made to do anything that you would not normally do. You remember everything during the hypnosis session. There is no magic and no trickery. And unlike the subscription model of pretty much every other medical service, you do not need endless sessions. This is not like psychotherapy or any of that. I invite you to ask me any questions that you may have. You may reach me from my website.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

William Gensburger is a certified hypnotherapist, as well as an award-winning author of many books. He uses hypnosis to assist in his writing, as well as to reduce the stress of life.

VIDEO CORNER

William Gensburger interview with Glen 'Sportcat' Jackson. Click [HERE](#).



Michael Barrington presents The French Resistance, Walnut Creek Library - Click [HERE](#).



Candace MacPhie interview with Kino Isaac. Click [HERE](#).



A-M Mawhiney book trailer. Click [HERE](#).



Ad for A BOY CALLED SWIFT. Click [HERE](#).



MISTERWRITER'S BOOKS & PIECES

M A G A Z I N E

BOOKS ♦ STORIES ♦ IDEAS ♦ INSPIRATION

SHOWCASE YOUR BOOK. REACH **REAL** READERS.

Get your book in front of thousands of engaged readers
in a beautifully designed, premium digital magazine.

AUTHOR FEATURE PACKAGES

BASIC FEATURE

\$50

- ✓ 1 Chapter Excerpt
(up to 3,000–5,000 words)
- ✓ Book Cover Image
- ✓ Synopsis
- ✓ Author Bio
- ✓ Buy Links
- ✓ Included in PDF &
Online Edition



STANDARD FEATURE

\$100

- ✓ Everything in Basic
- ✓ Featured on Our Website
- ✓ Mention in Email
Newsletter
- ✓ Social Media Post



PREMIUM FEATURE

\$150

- ✓ Everything in Standard
- ✓ Priority Placement
(Near the Front)
- ✓ Larger Author Profile
- ✓ Interview / Q&A
- ✓ Additional Book Listing
- ✓ Newsletter Feature
- ✓ Social Media Promotion



FRONT COVER FEATURE

(Where Available)

Maximize your exposure with our
most premium placement.

+\$50

Add a front cover feature
(where available).



CURATED CONTENT

We select quality books
our readers will love.



ENGAGED READERS

Reach an audience of
avid readers and
book lovers.



PROFESSIONAL EXPOSURE

A magazine-quality feature
that builds credibility and
boosts sales.

