

From *Ohiowa Impromptu*

Mr. Waddles Gives a Reading

Tom Waddles, just-arrived visiting writer-in-residence in Downstairs State's budding Creative Writing MFA program, was scheduled to read from his novel *Aubergines* at the Horned Rim Bookstore on Waistline Lane. The store's manager, Mandy Made, a psychology postgrad at Downstairs State, was languidly counting the chairs and wishing the whole thing were over. She read the odd novel herself, many of them very odd, most of them British for some reason (Greene, Waugh, Pym, that kind of thing), but mostly couldn't see the point, with real life all around: escapism, probably, American novels being so much closer to home, in more ways than one.

Still, a good turnout was anticipated, and they might actually sell a few books. Weedy theoreticians and armchair adventurers from the university English Department, plus the usual self-published local memoirists, failed poets, and multisexed singles on the prowl, could be expected to attend.¹ Mr. Waddles was already there. Mandy had recognized him not from his blurred and outdated publicity photo but from the unmistakable air of Britness broadcast by the purplish blotches on his face, his uneven teeth, the mud-brown parka with big leather buttons in which he was encased, and the standard-issue NHS glasses of a style not worn stateside since the early 1970s, except by Black Muslims and Southern white trash.

At the moment he was being very (rather than veddy) British just outside the store, having a nervous second cigarette (Duncan-Combs Dual-Filter) in the parking lot behind a huge gleaming

¹ I know, I've seen 'em. Traveling there in old, unwashed, and clearly despised automobiles that are rolling monuments to anti-materialism. Or aboard the city bus, now, proudly, powered by natural gas. Or straddling eco-friendly cycles, none more so than uni-, although bi- sometimes meant tandem, two pairs of sandals pumping, backpacks bumping a steady biorhythm, two hearts beating as one, and as for bi-gender, let's not even go there.

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4X4 Nexus-Pollard SUV that would really, he mused, cheese off the greenies back home. Funny: He already missed home, which he constantly disparaged when there, which he was most of the time, bar the odd trip to the Dordogne or Paris or, once, Italy, on a Stiles grant. But it was great fun to be in the States, too, especially as a published novelist. Public events were still a new factor in his life; he'd only done three of these gigs so far, all in England (one in London, two in Yorkshire), but it had become enough of a routine to familiarize him with all the usual symptoms of stage fright—sweating, palpitations, and an urgent desire to vanish—until the point at which the actual reading started. Then he would suddenly feel as if he had stepped across the threshold into a world where he was in sole and serene command.

Which, of course, he was.

Born and bred in the South Waddlesdale township of Hutton-le-Hole, where his dad was the manager of the local Earwicker's brewery and his mum wrote a nature column for the *Dales Diary*, Tom Waddles (B.A. South Leeds University, '89) had bidden fair to spend all his life as a secondary-school language and grammar teacher and unknown and unpublished writer, with three dense, if inventive, fiction manuscripts, *Bloodman*, *The Bridge of Thighs*, and *Aubergines*, bouncing from publisher to publisher and notching up the rejections, despite the unstinting efforts of his agent, Nuala Fanshaw of Russell Square, W.C.1: 137 thumbs down for *Aubergines* alone. Finally, after a series of lackluster years, part of which Tom spent in Paris trying to pass as a French intellectual, Gwyn, a bored editor at the botanical publisher Higher Greenery Press of Havisham, Kent, who also happened to be the neighbor and paramour of Nuala's widowed mum (a well-known TV botanist), said:

"Yes. But never again, mind."

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He even offered a small advance, sufficient for a few curries and maybe a weekend in Bournemouth, or even Boulogne. And warned of a very small press run.

"How small? Five? Ten?"

"Haha," chortled Gwyn, grimly. "You think you're joking. Maybe five hundred at most. I should warn you, I like it in parts but folk'll think it very difficult, like bloody Joyce or something."

They did; Gwyn was right. Twenty copies were sold. One chilly review appeared, in the *Harrogate Merchantman* ("who does he think he is, Marcel flaming Proust?"). Nuala fretted and threatened to abandon ship.

"Oh honestly, Tom, it's not that you're a bad writer, you aren't, you're quite wonderful in parts, but why do you have to be so damned *dense*?"

Then, thanks to one of those surprise interventions of Fate that make life seem so fictitious, Tom's professional life took off. While participating as one fifth of a panel of five obscure Yorkshire authors on an episode of the late-night Dales TV literary talk show *Book Burnings* dedicated to the life and work of the late Freddiedale novelist Upton Dyke, he was struck on the head by a Fresnel lantern that fell from the overhead batten, mishandled by an uncoordinated and soon-fired lighting coordinator.² The video clip of the incident, plus sneering voice-over by an up-and-coming reality-TV star, became a sensation on MeTube websites: Waddles is first seen sitting at a sharp angle, as if trying to pull away, on the far right of the semicircle of literary participants plus host (Clem Budgie), ignored by all while enduring, with his colleagues and the viewers, the braying voice of Henry Bowett, Professor of Book Reading at Strangeways University and author of *Pathetic Fallacy in the Twentieth Century: A Study of a Changing Relation Between Object and*

² Soon rehired, too. Melissa was her name, cup size: DD. 'Nuff said?

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*Emotion*³—who for some reason apparently feels obliged to downplay the late Dyke's talents—when a loud crack is heard, all heads save Waddles's look up, a voice (not Bowett's—he drones on) calls, "Watch out!" and an immense wire-trailing metal-and-glass object, the Fresnel, whacks Waddles in mid-cranium and crashes to the floor, sending him first lurching, then flying, forward, arms outstretched toward the camera, with a droll pop-eyed expression on his face, while in the background three of the other four obscure authors start nervously to their feet and look upward for further incoming missiles as Professor Bowett, oblivious, shakes open a pair of reading glasses, places them athwart his nose, and proceeds to declaim from a long-forgotten essay of his re: the influence of Socialist Realism on the novels of Upton Dyke. At this point the host, Budgie, reappears from stage left; loth to interrupt the great man, he nevertheless makes tentative hushing gestures with both hands, as if fanning away a noxious smell. In a rare instance of authorial solidarity Waddles is carried out, head lolling, by two of the other authors. Professor Bowett suddenly looks up with an expression of apprehension on his face. Fade to black.

Waddles was a writer, so of course it took him no time at all—an hour or two of head-throbbing consciousness at the most—to realize the commercial potential of a combination of public embarrassment and the Internet. As soon as the medical team at West Priestleydale General Hospital pronounced his concussion over and discharged him with a hefty bandage on his noggin and strict instructions not to touch alcohol for at least a week, well, all right, three days, he went straight to the Hogshead, had two pints of Earwicker's, ordered another plus short one on the side, and called tireless Nuala in London.

³ A gripping read. I started it last Tuesday 'round midnight and two nights later there I was, halfway through page one already.

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She was way ahead of him. There'd been, she exulted, 1,816,000 hits on the MeTube video *in the first five hours*.

"It's a sensation, Tom. Nothing like it since the one of Deepat Chaudry at the laundrette. When he got his head stuck in the washing machine?"

"Entire upper body, wasn't it? I have this distinct vision of him half swallowed up by the thing, like a goat by a python, legs kicking. Bloody embarrassing, anyway."

"As was your experience. But don't forget, Chaudry's next book, *The Tin Man of Uttar Pradesh*? It stayed on the Timbercrest bestseller list for nine weeks, and you and I both know the readership for it otherwise would have been Chaudry and the missus, at best. No, a little public embarrassment is what it takes. Remember what dear Oscar said...."

Oh yes, *dear Oscar*. She always said that instead of "Oscar Wilde" or plain "Wilde," because Wilde was a flamer and Nuala, being a London liberal, was infinitely tolerant of sexual deviants and Third Worlders. Not that Tom had anything against; after all, he had spent time in the cosmopolitan cafes of the Left Bank. Just not an awful lot *for*, absent empirical evidence.

"The only thing worse than being talked about...."

"Is not being talked about. Got it."

"But just think: a million eight hundred thousand more people have heard of you this morning than had heard of you at this time yesterday. There were articles in the *Telegram* and *Centre City Confidential*."

"But will that help *Aubergines*?"

"Leave it to me."

Those were the most welcome words in the English language, when spoken by a dynamite agent like Nuala. Sure enough, within days, thanks to lunchtime connections and a quickie in a Camden Town bedsit, she'd managed to post the MeTube video on the three most prominent book blogs: BookInsect; Lit Up; and Panting Book Person. Links were established between her web site and the book sections of eminent journals. Waddles appeared on another talk show, *Inverted Commas*, amid much hearty banter relating to loose cannons; dangling overhead lights--sorry, modifiers; "oops, there she blows"; etc. All very unamusing, but a week later the print run of *Aubergines* was doubled, then trebled, after a review appeared in the *Octagon* comparing Waddles' work to "the mature work of Philip Hotshott" and "the early whatsit." A London radio station interviewed him over the phone. He discovered with some degree of apprehension that he was being packaged as the "38-year-old Yorkshire Proust" (or "Prowst," depending on the interviewer's degree of literacy).

"I've never even read bloody Proust," he said down at the Hogshead.

"Oh aye?"

"Well, not all the way through anyway."

"Oh aye?"

"Well, all right, everything except *Albertine disparue*."

"Tha's what?"

"Never mind. Same again?"

"Oh aye."

Incredibly, a check arrived: £125. Tom bought a CD of Sibelius symphonies, a twelve-pack of Bulger's, and a necktie displaying a Highland sheep. Then, after a frothy rave in *Knightsbridge by Night* by Pippa Hansard, who was well known for being perfectly sober when she wasn't stoned to the gills, Mansion House bought the rights to *Aubergines* from Higher Greenery Press and contracted to publish *Bloodman* and *The Bridge of Thighs*, "with a little judicious tweaking here and there, nothing major."

"Let 'em tweak away," said Tom to Nuala. "Load of rubbish anyway."

"Now that's very Yorkshire of you but it's not how I want the Yorkshire Proust to talk."

"Oh, bugger Proust."

"One hears it's been done."

He had two sparsely attended book signings in Yorkshire, then one, better attended, in London near the Albert Hall and, more importantly, the Red Lion pub, where he spent a couple of hours with Nuala and her boring boyfriend Tariq, who, boringly, didn't drink. Then he took the Tube out to Deptford and had six pints of Miles Standish IPA plus shorts at a hole-in-the-wall pub called The Hole in the Wall and ended up upstairs with Bridie, the Wednesday barmaid who was a social worker on the other weekdays.

"Oooh, it's fun, innit," squealed Bridie, one of the few genuine Cockneys extant.

A couple days later, a mostly positive review by the influential critic Una Blow appeared in *The Thing Literary*—"Waddle's prose is thick and chewy but well-seasoned, like a well-aged side of Yorkshire beef"—and the visiting-writer-in-residence offer arrived from Downstairs State University.

“As a distinguished British author, you would be a great asset....” it began, causing Tom to wonder if he were still drunk, or had lost his mind. But a month later there he was, in the middle of bloody Middle America, with a job at a state university and a book signing and all.

“Aye, lad,” he said to himself in the darkening car park outside the Horned Rim Bookshop, flicking away his second fagend under the great gleaming 4X4. “It’s a bloody rum old life, ‘tis that.” In this he was quoting his Dad verbatim, and even added a phlegmy cough for verisimilitude (poor old sod, all he knew was hops and barley and Yorkshire cricket); then, stressing the second syllable of his name, *à l’américaine*, came a lady's voice from the gloaming.

“Mr Waddells?”

The illuminated bookshop door framed a curvaceous female silhouette just this side of plump. Rather nice, he thought, then he recognized Mandy Made, the manager of the bookshop; not bad looking by any means, nice pillowy tits and arse and those great American teeth of blinding white, but still a female type common to the academic/intellectual class on both sides of the pond: not quite (or not entirely) lesbian, but not entirely pro-man, either. The chip-on-the-shoulder kind who tried to make you feel guilty right off, without knowing anything about you, just because you were a bloke. Of course, this one, as the manager of the bookshop, had set up the event, and presumably knew quite a lot about him, or at least as much as Nuala and that publicist friend of hers had seen fit to disseminate. The basic c.v., really, not that anyone could suss out much from *that*: "Born in Hutton-le-Hole, Yorkshire, 1959...educated at Cleavings School, Hartleygate...graduated in French from the University of South Leeds...studied for a *maitrise* at Uni Jacques Martin Paris VII....Piker-award winning first published short story, 'Gas Gran's Greenhouse,' in *Glintings*, Vol. 4, No. 11, 1988...won 1994 Stiles grant to study the stories of Ignazio

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Lomazzi at Federico Fellini University in Periscopio, Italy.....first novel, *Aubergines*, published by Mansion House, 1997...divorced, two children...," etc.

And the rest was, etc. ⁴

It was eight o'clock, so Waddles mounted the podium, sat through Mandy the manager's biographical intro, which turned out to be identical to the press release, minus mispronunciations ("Waddells"; "Hutton Lee Hollow"; "studied for a mattress") and, when she'd done, stood up and opened his special first-proof reading copy of *Aubergines* in which yellow stick-it notes blossomed like buttercups. Thirty or more chairs, of which no more than ten were occupied, had been arranged at the back of the store in rows. On the lectern sat a plastic bottle of water and a microphone requiring the usual juggling to eliminate feedback. His audience stared at him as if he had a horn growing out of his forehead. But then he was, after all, a) a novelist and b) British.

He read from Chapter One, in which the narrator's mum (Doreen) fusses over dinner invitations, and where we learn of the quiet transformation of Eliot.

"Doreen, worried about having 'Nutter' Basingstoke to tea for the first time, said she was sorry that Mr. Crewes was away, and that she herself never saw Eliot, since either of these fellows might have helped to entertain old 'Nutter.' But Dad said that Crewes was always great fun but that Eliot was an old gossip that Mr. Aspinall down the pub had once referred to as— in his own words—a 'right fucking dickhead and thundering great horse's arse,' and no doubt would do so again."

⁴ Well? Make up your mind, Thomas. History or silence?

Doubtful titters rippled hither and yon. Tom remembered an outburst at the London reading; an old chap's whoops of excessive laughter had been the catalyst for a bone-jarring, chest-deep coughing fit necessitating, after it became impossible to ignore, the advent of medics, plus stretcher, oxygen tank, and ironic cries of "Give that man a fag." But New Ur listeners were quieter, being no doubt healthier as well, as Yanks were. He went on for awhile longer.

"Now, Dad's attitude might strike you as odd, because most of us remember Crewes as a right twit and Eliot as a really gas bloke, modest and helpful and always rallying round with advice and/or just the right amount of nicker. He knew how to keep his head down at the right time, too. So what happened, you ask? Well, what happened was this. Quite simple, really. Alongside the original 'good old Eliot,' and the round-buying Eliot of the Warden's Arms, a new persona (not to be his last) had sprung out, fully fashioned, like Athena from the brow of Zeus: *Eliot, husband of Beverly*. And Beverly, as we all know, was a thoroughgoing bloody cow."

"So *British*," exclaimed an aging but girlish lady in denim in the front row, for whom (an avid fan, with her husband, of the *Miss Mobbles* TV series) the Britishness was all; what was supposed to be going on hardly mattered, although she'd somehow managed to struggle through the first 90 pages (out of 430). When Tom closed his book and looked up, she applauded the loudest and made her way to the lectern bearing like an offering her copy of *Aubergines*.

"Are you from Yorkshire?"

"Yes, I am." He resisted saying, "Aye, lass," sensing the soul of a collector.

"Could you make it 'To Bill'?"

"Certainly. I take it that's not you...?"

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She smiled vacantly.

"Bee eye ell ell."

"Oh. Is that how...? Good. Thanks. There you go."

She stared at the dedication, then at him.

"Where are you from, in Yorkshire?"

"Ah. Place called ah. Hutton-le-Hole. Near Leeds."

"Oh," she said, miming a shiver of ecstasy, "*Leeds*," as if he'd said "Samarkand" or "Rio de Janeiro." "I'd love to go there someday." Then, with another spacey stare, she flitted off, fluttering fingers in fey farewell.

"Oh, aye," self-muttered Tom.

After signing four more dedications, to Edie, Marcus, Trey, and Kimberley Mac, and feeling that aimless sensation that so often accompanies the end of a book signing, when the stragglers stand around staring at the great man, not quite sure how to keep him under surveillance – without committing themselves to, say, buying a round – Tom was ready for a pint, or pints. So, when the audience had finally drifted off (although a couple were still loitering near the door of the shop, glancing uncertainly in his direction) and he and Mandy the manager were alone at the back of the shop, she rearranging things such as chairs and unsold books, he inquired about suitable places to sit down and knock 'em back, imagining a homey Midwestern bar with a jukebox, patronized by sturdy Midwesterners of Polish and German extraction, such as could be seen in the TV drama *Overalls*. (Sheila, his ex, had loved that series; indeed, the burly appeal of its

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star, Judd Novak, and their neighbor in the Dordogne's resemblance thereto, had played no small part in the collapse of the 10-year Waddles marriage.)

"I don't drink much," said Mandy, with high-minded irrelevance. He looked downcast. She relented. "But there's the Dew Drop Inn, out on the Fort Dean Highway. Popular with one and all." When pressed, she allowed as how she might show him the way, or even take him there herself. After all, he was a visiting British novelist, even if she didn't care much for the breed, or breeds (Brits, novelists).

She put on a multicolored beret kind of thing and a black coat and white scarf and handed a set of keys to a mole-bedecked young man with long unwashed hair who looked at Tom with the craven adoration of a dog.

"Awesome," he said.

On the way to the bar, in Mandy's run-down Helmut Trivia GL, in which the front passenger seat tipped forward every time she hit the brakes, bringing Tom's head perilously close to the windscreen—something she made sure to do as often as possible, Tom couldn't help noticing—her conversational gambit was to deliberately not show any interest at all in him as a citizen of the United Kingdom, a human being, a writer, or a man. Not that she wasn't tempted; it was just more important, she thought, to avoid misinterpretation, mixed signals, that kind of thing. You never knew, with a certain kind of guy. Especially a British guy. She remembered that awful Miles person who'd come over to teach Gender History for a semester while Penn, the Gender chair, was out making headlines with her and Fran's *in vitro* triplets; "gender is as gender does" was one of his less offensive remarks, and it only went downhill from there, and how she ended up face down under him on his couch that night she still couldn't fathom...

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"They do pretty good shepherd's pie, at the Dew Drop," she said, slowing down for an intersection. Tom tilted forward, then fell back with a thud.

"Good thing the seat belts work," he said.

"Of course, the bartender's Irish, I think. Yes, I'm sure he is. He used to be a professor at the university but decided there were more interesting people in bars."

"Sounds a bit like an Irish joke."

They shortly arrived at the Dew Drop Inn, a long, low brick building with narrow windows in which red-and-white neon signs winked "Sudbuster's" and "Boomer's Pale Ale." It looked quite a bit like the kind of working-class pub you might find in one of the grottier parts of Leeds, like Harehills or Chapeltown, he mused. Odd, how America could look fleetingly like England. Then you remembered before pushing the parallels too far: it was a big foreign country where they spoke a variant of English and thought all Englishmen were toffs or poofs. Despite Rod Stewart and Sid Vicious, not to mention Albert Finney, Maurice Micklewhite, Daniel Craig, and Mick Jagger.

And himself.

"Here you are."

Mandy did nothing that might indicate an intention to join him in a drink, such as turning off the car or removing her seat belt. She just half-looked at him with a pensive (or sardonic) half-smile.

"Aren't you coming in, then?"

"Can't. Bookstore to run."

"But you handed over your keys to that chap. Guy. With the long hair."

"Yeah, well. I'm not sure he knows what he's doing." She licked her lips. "He's a would-be novelist, you see."

"I take it you're not."

"Heavens, no. I was a psychology major."

But novelists are psychology majors, too, and the best of them are generals, Tom forebore to say, avoiding for once the boring but irresistible old argument What is art? Or rather, What is literature? Or just a good book? He felt fairly strongly about the subject, actually, but there were no dividends in getting all humorless and didactic about it when you were trying to impress a woman. And he was, of course. He couldn't help himself, brewer's droop and all.

"Sounds just like something we could discuss in a civilized fashion over a drink in there."

"Oh, I don't know."

It was an elaborate charade, her show of reluctance, he could see that, which in turn suggested that she was playing a game, and what game could that be but the oldest one, of man vs. woman?

"Oh, all right." Her shoulders slumped, as after great physical effort. She took the key out of the ignition and glanced at her watch. "But just a quick one, OK?"

"Absolutely."

He wasn't sure he was quite ready for this, all jet-lagged and fagged out that he was. But let it never be said that Tom Waddles missed a chance at a quick one, whatever it might be.

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