

State University of New York at Buffalo
Department of English

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Dear Winn:

Here it is.

Whatever "it" is.

"It" is a mystery. More precisely, it is a postmodern mystery as I've defined that term in my serious writings. "In postmodernism, writers take as their subject matter the relationship between the book and its author or between the book and its audience."

So, is this "it" a thing-in-itself? Does it have people and events "in" it? Such confusions lie that way. Or is "it" just a thing, inert, a Sleeping Beauty waiting to be kissed into life by a loving reader—you, for example.

As my agent, you know, better than anyone, how I've thrashed around all these years with my questions about readers and reading. How does a book get from paper page to an experience in the mind? Do books mean or do readers make meaning? Do words constrain or just clue us?

If there was ever a book that followed the old maxim, Write about what you know, this is it. What I know is books and readers. Although, I suppose, if I knew, why would I have spent all these years trying to figure out how readers respond? So maybe this is a book about not knowing what you know.

Fact: in my seminar last year, one of the students was poisoned. I've built up a narrative out of the texts that this woman's dying, so to speak, happened in: transcripts of the police interviews with the people involved, student papers, some department memos, newspaper accounts, and parts of my journal of the events—a whole mix of different voices—narratives—"takes"—texts—on this event.

Just to be safe, I've changed the names. And my perception of these people and events is sufficiently idiosyncratic that we can truly make the customary claim that any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

There is one exception, sort of, to this fictionality (as literary critics term it). The hero, if he is the hero, is a professor whom I frankly call Norman

Holland. Is he fictional? Of course. Is he real? As the postmodern tradition of "the disappearance of the subject" takes hold, I am less and less certain.

Yours more or less truly,

/Norm/

From the *Buffalo Morning News Gazette*, March 8, 1984

Grad Student Dies, Poisoned in UB Class

Fingerprint All English Grad Students, Say Police

(CITY, March 7) A University at Buffalo student collapsed and died in an early morning class Wednesday, and Buffalo police say the young woman was poisoned.

Patricia Hassler, a 22-year-old graduate student, said to be from Iron Springs, Georgia, took her seat and "instantly keeled over," said Dr. Norman Holland, whose class Hassler was attending. When campus police and paramedics arrived, she was already dead, according to campus police spokesperson, Sgt. Herman Gehring.

Hassler arrived late for the class, where she was to give a presentation. "I was terribly shocked," said Paul Penza, a classmate. "Poor Trish. She had a marvelous mind and, as a writer, a distinctive voice."

Lieutenant Norman ("Justin")

Rhodes of the Homicide Unit, MBPD, is in charge of the investigation of Hassler's death. He has asked for all graduate students in the English Department to be fingerprinted.

At first, students and others who had seen Hassler collapse described her death as due to a stroke or heart attack. Lt. Rhodes' announcement that police had found she was poisoned was unexpected.

It was Medical Examiner Robert Welder, said Rhodes, who established that the victim was poisoned. He declined to comment further on the case except to say that police were not yet disclosing the name of the poison.

Patricia Hassler was a first-year graduate student who had begun working toward her Ph.D. at UB in the fall semester of 1983. She earned her bachelor's degree in English at Yale University in New Haven.

UB Dean of Students, Reynard Overten, said that the University has been unable to locate the victim's family, because the addresses on her application appear to be out of date.

“She was a student in whom we all saw a great deal of promise,” said Dr. Romola Badger, chair of the English Department. “We all regret this tragic event, and we extend our deepest sympathies to all her parents and friends.”

Dr. Holland is a specialist in “literature-and-psychology.” He applies psychology to literary problems, and his class is noted at UB for its unusual teaching technique. Students write about one another’s reading and writing styles in papers that “are as frank as what you’d hear in a psychiatrist’s office,” according to an English Department official.

But the teacher said the unusual style of the class could not possibly be related to Hassler’s death. “I’ve been giving this kind of seminar for years, and we’ve never had any kind of trouble.”

Ironically, Lt. Rhodes is no stranger to writing and dramas. In addition to his work as a detective, he is well known as a playwright. Lt. Rhodes is a native of Buffalo and son of Mr. George Rhodes and Mrs. Henrietta (“Pookie”) Goodrich, the former Mrs. Rhodes, both of West Eden.