



**JERK**

STORY

**DENNIS COOPER**

**"A DISQUIETING GENIUS." – VANITY FAIR**

# JERK

SHORT STORY

DENNIS COOPER

 HarperCollins e-books



# Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Begin Reading	1
About the Author	
Other Books by Dennis Cooper	
Credits	
Cover	
Copyright	
About the Publisher	

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“Knife/Tape/Rope” was originally the text of a performance art work of the same name created and directed by Ishmael Houston-Jones in 1985.

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JERK





“Ladies and gentlemen, uh . . .” began David Brooks. He tapped his body mike to make sure it was working. Ping, ping. “The story you’re about to see is true, based on my own experiences as a drug-addicted, psychotic teen murderer in the early ’70s. But before I step behind the curtain over there . . .” He indicated a smallish, crudely built puppet theater in the heart of the auditorium’s vast, empty stage. “. . . and become the voices of my poor dead companions and victims . . .” He gave a little

flick of his head, an old habit from the days when he had extremely long blond hair. “. . . I want to acknowledge . . .” He looked at the back of his hand, where he’d scribbled a note to himself. “. . . Professor William Griffith of the University of Texas, and his undergraduate class in . . .” squinted “. . . in ‘Freudian Psychology Refracted Through Postmodern Example.’ Whoa, that’s a mouthful.” He grinned. “Thanks to all of you for coming. Now each audience member should be holding a file. In it you will find two pieces of nonfiction penned by yours truly. In a moment I will ask you to read the first story. Later in the show I will ask you to read the second. They describe situations I feel incapable of representing adequately in my puppetry at this time. They also allow me time to move scenery around, prepare my marionettes, and so forth. So if you’ll excuse me for a moment . . .” David grinned. “. . . I’ll take my place in illusion.” He walked behind the puppet theater itself. His half dozen assistants were already poised along the raised platform there, leaning over the stage’s rear wall, string puppets dangling from their splayed hands. He caught their eyes, held up eight fingers, and cleared his throat, having carefully shielded his body mike. Then he took his seat before the music stand with its softly lit script. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he read aloud, relishing the cool of his echo-y, magnified voice. “Please open your files and read the first piece of nonfiction. You have exactly eight minutes. Thank you.”

Dean Corll, a dumpy-looking man in his thirties, is sprawled in an overstuffed armchair, thinking about his life, then for-

mulating the best of those thoughts into a speech. About 5:30, 6:00 p.m., Wayne Henley and David Brooks, two thin teenagers, let themselves into Dean's house with a spare key.

"Boys," Dean announces, seeing them. "Sit, sit, sit."

The young duo flops down on the couch. "Hey, Dean," mumbles Wayne. David just sits there with his arm around Wayne's waist, sort of gawking at Dean like always.

"I have a . . . favor to ask you," says Dean. He rests his balding head back on the chair's filthy old doily and gives his living room a long, pained look.

"Yeah?" Wayne asks after a few seconds.

"It's about what we've done," Dean continues, voice a little scrunched by the bend in his neck. "And about what we haven't been able to do. What we'll never do, can't do."

"Is this about . . . what we've been *doing*?" Wayne asks cautiously. "I mean, the murder shit?"

"Yeah," Dean says, and looks squarely at both of their cute, jaded faces. "That. 'Cos I've been kidding myself . . . thinking us killing those boys was . . . like . . . an accomplishment? Only I realized today that there's tons of shit going on inside those boys' heads while we've been killing them that we don't know about. That . . . all this time I've been thinking, 'They're cute,' you know, period. So killing them was like . . . the big finish. But I realized today that we haven't . . . known them at all. Not any of them. So it's like they're not ours anymore, not even dead. They got away from us."

"Dean, listen," Wayne says anxiously. "Those guys are fucking dead. I was there, man. You're just—"

Knock, knock, knock.

“Who is it?” Dean yells.

“Buddy Longview,” says a tense voice behind the front door.

Dean thinks back. “Oh, right!” He gives Wayne, David a wink and two enthusiastic thumbs up. “Come on in, it’s open.”

So in walks this boy, maybe nineteen, skinny, angelic face, kinda bored-looking, wearing a T-shirt and Bermuda shorts.

“Make room for our visitor,” Dean says. Wayne and David slide to opposite ends of the couch. Buddy fills in the gap.

“Wayne, Buddy. David, Buddy.”

The teens nod at each other.

“Hi Dean,” says Buddy kind of sheepishly. He looks at Wayne and David like he wishes they weren’t there, then lets his eyes go out of focus on one of the rug’s myriad paisleys. “I’ve been thinking about what you said, man. About death and stuff. And . . . yeah, I’m sick of life. Definitely. I want to go. And I want to go like you said . . . make a big, fucking, gory mess.”

Dean leers at Buddy, picturing what he eternally pictures—sex, torture, mutilation—but newly aware of how superficially he understands the young stranger. “Yeah, all right. I’ll take you out, but first, as bizarre as this sounds, I want you to live here with me for a few days, a week, and let me get to know you.”

Buddy shrugs. “No problem,” he says softly, “but I’m a fucking waste. That’s why I’m here, right? So don’t expect much.”

“Right.” Dean reaches out for an old bamboo bong pipe. Even unlit, it stinks up the house like a big stick of incense.

They all get incredibly stoned.

“Time’s up,” announced David Brooks, noiselessly turning a page. The auditorium’s lights started dimming. “It’s four days later now. We begin the theatrical part of our story in the basement of Dean’s house. Buddy’s lying face down on a bed that’s basically just a large piece of very thick plywood on four legs. Dean and Wayne have smashed the back of his head in with baseball bats. Once screaming pitifully, he’s been silent for several minutes. Dean’s fistfucking what’s left of him. Wayne’s watching that go on, mesmerized. As usual, I’ve been running around with Dean’s Super 8 movie camera recording the murder for posterity.”

Looking up from the script, David eyed an assistant who yanked a cord. Round front of the puppet theater, curtains noisily parted on four marionettes, like tiny human beings, posed against the first of several spare yet evocative hand-painted sets. As the Wayne puppet turned its head to “speak to” the Dean puppet, the real David Brooks licked his lips, preparing to throw the first of his finely tuned vocal impersonations into the thick of that fakeness.

WAYNE (*smirking*): So, Dean, does it feel like Buddy’s dead? Is he . . . ours?

DEAN: Good question. (*He withdraws his fist from Buddy’s butt, and stands there, arms folded, wondering.*) Ultimately, no.

WAYNE (*angry, waving his arms around*): Shit, Dean. You think too much about this stuff. Who cares what the fucker was really like? Killing's just about *power*, man. You can make up whoever you want and . . . like . . . imagine that person in this fucker's body.

DEAN: Really?

WAYNE: Duh.

DEAN: Like how?

WAYNE: *You want me to tell you? You're the genius!*

DEAN: Hmmm. (*He concentrates on the dead body, wondering who he'd most want to have killed today if he could've killed anyone in the world. Meanwhile Wayne and David go across the room and start French kissing. Eventually an idea comes to Dean.*)

DEAN (*pretending he's a corpse by flattening his voice*): Hi.

DEAN (*laughing at himself*): Who the fuck are you?

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: I'm . . . the actor who played the older of the two sons on the TV show *Flipper*.

DEAN (*mock-startled*): Really? *I killed you?*

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: Yeah.

DEAN: God, I had such a huge crush on you.

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: I had a crush on you too.

DEAN (*with a shit-eating grin*): Tell me that killing you was incredibly sexy.

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: Your killing me was incredibly sexy.

DEAN: Say my cock is God.

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: Your cock is God.

DEAN: This is unbelievable.

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: This is unbelievable.

DEAN (*laughing uproariously*): Wayne! David!

WAYNE (*unfastening his mouth from David's*): Yeah, Dean?

DEAN: Guess who I decided the corpse is?

WAYNE: Uh . . . Jimmy Page.

DEAN: No, no.

WAYNE: Wait, *I* know who. That kid you always moan about . . . what's-his-name . . . Luke Halpin. On *Flipper*.

DEAN: Exactly.

WAYNE: Well, it would be kind of amazing if that was Luke Halpin's corpse. I mean, the manhunt, the publicity . . . we'd be famous!

DEAN-AS-CORPSE (*stifling a smirk*): Hi, Wayne. It's me, Luke Halpin.

WAYNE: Hey, faggot. Good riddance.

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: Watch out or I'll haunt you.

DEAN (*laughing*): Cool, huh?

WAYNE: Yeah, Dean. Cool. Now if you don't mind . . . (*He goes back to French kissing David as the curtains close.*)

“And so,” David Brooks read aloud, “days passed. We buried Buddy under the floor of a boat shed Dean owned. Maybe a dozen boys’ bodies were already rotting down there. Dean killed a couple more boys on his own. Then one day Wayne told Dean about this drugged out, incredibly cute boy named Jamie from our high school, and Dean said, ‘Sounds great.’ So Wayne, with my help of course, cornered Jamie, hyping him about a ‘party’ at Dean’s house, and he agreed to come with us that night. So, on the way to get Jamie, Wayne and I talked



about stuff. I was unclear at that time about what Dean's TV character fantasies meant. Wayne explained to me how since those characters are only what you see onscreen they have no interior life at all, unlike real human beings, who are really complex and impossible to understand, no matter how hard you try. So when Dean imagined his victim was, like, Luke Halpin, he felt he knew exactly who he'd killed down to the tiniest detail, and that knowledge made the death more meaningful and complete. So that was interesting. And about that time we arrived at Jamie's house, sat him between us, and drove to Dean's. We sat around there getting stoned for a long time and eventually Jamie decided that being killed would be cool, so we trooped down into the basement, and Dean and Wayne tortured him to death. So now it's a couple of hours later. We're still in the basement. Jamie's lying carved up on the usual table. Dean looks down into the corpse's wide open blue eyes, conversing idly with some made-up person. I'm filming the scene, walking around, crouching, standing on my tiptoes to get unusual angles. Wayne's across the room covered with blood and sweat, experiencing some kind of existential crisis about having brought poor Jamie over here to die. I still don't know what his exact problem was, but I think it had something to do with Dean having taken away the only thing Jamie ever owned, which was his identity. Anyway, this is what happened next."

DEAN (*whispering in the corpse's ear as the curtains part*): Did you like it when I cut off your balls?

DEAN-AS-CORPSE (*trying to imitate Jay North's chirpy little whine in DENNIS THE MENACE*): Yeah, Dean.

DEAN: You've been dreaming of this day all your life, right?

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: Right.

WAYNE (*punching the air, furious*): Dean!

DEAN (*glancing up*): Yeah, Wayne, what?

WAYNE: Stop doing that to Jamie, asshole!

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: I'm not Jamie, I'm Jay North.

WAYNE (*livid, shaking*): No, he's not!

DEAN: Somehow I tend to take *his* word for it.

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: Thanks, Dean. I love you.

DEAN: I love you too, Jay.

WAYNE: You're *losing* it, man.

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: Dean, who's that loudmouth?

DEAN: Oh, just some creepy kid I should've killed years ago.

WAYNE (*looking around for a knife*): Dean, you *fuck*.

DAVID: Hey. Wayne, maintain. (*He lowers the camera down to his side.*)

DEAN-AS-CORPSE: You were into Wayne? Weird. I can't see it.

DEAN (*stroking the corpse's cheek*): Long ago, darling Jay.

WAYNE (*finds, grabs the knife he was looking for*): That's it! Later, Dean. Much, much later. (*He rams the blade into Dean's flabby back, pulls it out, stabs, stabs . . . Gurgling blood, Dean collapses onto the floor.*) Die, you *fuck*!

DEAN (*beginning his death rattle*): Glug, glug, glug . . .

WAYNE (*looking down on the corpse of his teenaged friend*): Jamie, shit, I'm sorry.

DAVID (*flattened against a wall, terrified*): W-w-wayne?

WAYNE (*still talking to Jamie*): I guess I just thought . . . you know, it'd be sexy like always . . . seeing Dean kill you, helping him. And it was, but I'm sorry, you know?

DAVID (*very tense and a little jealous*): W-w-wayne!

WAYNE: Jamie, I loved you, man. I could never tell you . . .

DAVID (*pounding on a wall behind him as the curtains close*): My world is *falling apart!*

“So,” David Brooks read. “I just stood there waiting for Wayne to come to his senses. I’m a jealous person, always have been. Wayne’s revelation that he loved Jamie was totally intense. I mean, I’d suspected as much, but . . . here was the news I’d dreaded. But Wayne kind of came out of his stupor after about fifteen minutes or so, and we wrapped the bodies of Jamie and Dean up in plastic, took them out to the car, and laid them in the trunk. Since I figured I’d heard the worst, I made the mistake of making Wayne tell me the whole Jamie story, and he not only revealed a ton of mini-orgies, but even more orgies with all kinds of boys at our high school. I was stunned, right? Wiped out. Some of these boys were supposedly good friends of mine, and there was Wayne telling me they were all smoking dope and fucking each other every time I wasn’t around. We got to the boathouse, and buried the two bodies, and I thought, Well, at least it’s over. No more killing. Hopefully, no more affairs on Wayne’s part. He seemed contrite, just sitting there shotgun in my daddy’s Cadillac watching the landscape zoom by, but . . . Well, I’m

getting ahead of myself, ladies and gentlemen. House lights, please? Now, open your files again and read the second and last piece of nonfiction. You have exactly fifteen minutes. Thank you.”

“I wish,” Wayne says suddenly, then a fuzzy, subliminal, on-going thought jells. “David, drop me off at Dean’s, okay?”

David blinks at the road. “Why?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Wayne says. “I really don’t.”

The world’s whizzing by the windows in two sandy ribbons. David grips the wheel. “Then I’ll stay with you.”

“You don’t have to,” Wayne says, not even sure he wants company at the moment.

“I *will*.” David glares at him. “But then we’re *out* of that place, ’cos eventually the police are gonna look for all those boys, and knock on Dean’s door . . .” His eyes glaze over with imagination. “Shit.”

They drive on uneventfully. Darkness covers everything. After about a half hour David pulls the car into Dean’s gravel driveway and puts it in park. Slam, slam. They walk around to the front of the house, up the porch steps. Wayne’s feeling under the mat for the spare key when they hear a voice in the black to their left. “Hey,” it says, “who are you guys?”

“Friends of Dean’s,” Wayne says, narrowing his eyes. Now he can see a vague, seated human shape. “Who’re you?”

“Dean told me I could come by sometime if I was depressed,” says the voice, definitely a boy’s. “And I am, so . . . here I am.”

“Dean’s not around but you can come in with us.”

“Wayne,” David says angrily.

“Thanks, guys,” mumbles the boy. Wayne feels around for the doorknob, lock, finds it, inserts the key, turns, pushes open the door, reaches in, turns on the living room light. Light filters out, hitting David and the boy who’s in the process of standing up. He’s a skinny blond with an unshaven face, sort of androgynous, early twenties, Janis Joplin T-shirt, holey jeans, altogether Dean’s usual type. “Hi,” he says, shielding his eyes. “I’m Brad.”

“David,” says David. He gestures at Wayne. “Wayne.”

They troop inside, flopping on various couches and chairs. As usual, the place smells like a fucking bong pipe, and there’s a permanent, almost invisible fog of hashish over everything.

“So how do you know Dean?” David asks, glancing meaningfully at Wayne.

Brad sort of chuckles. “If you mean where did I meet him, I kind of don’t want to say until you tell me how *you* know Dean.”

“I barely know him,” lies David.

“And I’m more than a little familiar with him,” sneers Wayne with what’s as close as he can manage to a smile at the moment.

“Yeah?” Brad asks. He starts drumming his fingers on the arms of the chair. “How familiar is that?”

Wayne studies the boy until he’s pretty sure from the look in Brad’s eyes that he either shares their obsession with violence or thinks murder is a cool concept. “I know he tortures boys to death.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Brad mutters, still drumming. “I know about that too.”

Wayne, David eyeball each other for a second.

“You want to hear something wild?” Brad grins at them. “’Cos, well, I’m fucked up. *Totally.*” He laughs. “It’s hopeless. And it’s just a matter of time before I kill myself, or let Dean do it. He wants to. *Bad.* Maybe he’s even mentioned me to you. He’s trying to talk me into letting him torture me to death. And I keep considering it. The only thing I’m wary about is the pain. Otherwise he can have me. But he’s working on minimizing the pain. And I’m ready to die tonight if he’s figured out a way so I won’t be too uncomfortable.”

“Are you gay?” asks Wayne, vaguely attracted to the guy.

“It doesn’t matter.” Brad folds his arms defensively. “Sex is stupid.”

“Why do you want to die?” asks David.

“Well, why not, right?” Brad laughs. “That’s one thing. Life is too confusing. And death just sounds like a great place. The worst that could happen is nothing . . . like, just becoming nothing, which sounds okay to me. But if certain people are right, it could be really *out there*. Demons and shit! Retribution on the living! I’m ready.” He blinks. “So, what’s your thing with Dean about?”

“I’ve watched him kill a few guys,” Wayne says. “And I’ve helped out.”

Brad nods seriously. “If you want to help him kill me, I don’t care. Fine.”

“Except Dean’s dead. I killed him about three hours ago.”

Brad practically jumps off the couch, awestruck. “You’re the fucking *master*, man.” He points at his T-shirt, on which Janis Joplin’s tongue sticks out of her wide-open mouth like a bloody, bent sword. “I’m yours, if you want me.”

“Jesus,” David mutters, disgusted.

Now Brad looks carefully from David to Wayne and back. “You guys are gay boyfriends. I can always tell.”

“Oh, *come on*,” David whines, suspecting brainless homophobia.

“I’m not saying I mind gays. I’m just saying you are ones.” Brad grins endearingly. “That’s all. Anyway, Dean thought he was much, much more than just gay. Genius was closer to it. That’s out of his own mouth, but I agree.”

“Dean was smart.” Wayne gives a little snort. “Definitely.”

“So we can have sex while you’re killing me,” Brad says. “Dean showed me some home movies of him killing guys. I know how it works.”

“Intense, isn’t it?”

“Wayne!” David yells. It’s a lecture compressed into a syllable.

“But it *is* intense,” Wayne insists, glancing at his friend. “I’m not saying it’s okay to kill people, but it was definitely intense to help Dean kill guys, especially the way he did it, because it was mixed with this . . . lust?”

“Let’s watch one of the movies,” Brad blurts, bouncing up and down excitedly. “It’ll get me in the mood.”

“I don’t know where he hides them,” Wayne says. “Do you?”

“Sure!” Brad jumps up and runs to this wooden cabinet next to the TV. He reaches behind it, brings out a key and opens a drawer near the bottom, dumping out dozens of film cans onto the rug. From where Wayne’s sitting he sees the labels Dean attached to each can, names scrawled across them. *Robin, Eric, Colin, Buddy, Bert, Allen . . .*

“You’re not *really* gonna watch one, are you?” asks David.

Wayne looks at him. “Maybe. Besides, you should see how they turned out, man, since *you* were the fucking *director* of some of them.”

“Oh God.” David cringes. “I should, I guess. You’re right, I am kind of curious.”

Meanwhile, Brad’s been running around the room, bringing out the screen, setting up the projector, plugging it in, getting everything ready for a screening. Now he goes over to the film cans again, crouches down, and starts lining them up. Wayne goes over, joins Brad, studying the names. “So you’ve never seen any of the films that I costar in?”

“Nope.”

“Which ones have you seen?” Wayne asks, starting to get a hard-on just being this close to the guy.

“Well, *Allen, Phil*, and . . . *Steven*.” Brad points at that can. “Wicked film. Guy *loses* it. *Fuck*.” He snakes a hand down to his crotch and starts squeezing. “Slaughtered.” He looks dreamily at Wayne. “Oh, and *Bill* too. Excellent! And I think *Randy*, which wasn’t as good, but . . . Let’s see one you’re in.”

“This murder stuff turns you on?”



“Man,” Brad whispers, obviously meaning yes plus an exclamation point or two.

“’Cos it turns me on royally.” Wayne scans the labels. “How about *Wesley*? I’m particularly proud of how I acted with him.”

“God, I don’t know about this Wayne,” mumbles David. He’s still over on the couch, hugging himself really tightly.

“Relax.” Wayne starts threading film through the projector. Brad sits cross-legged in the middle of the room. He straightens out his posture, hands on knees, staring straight ahead at the empty screen like it’s the Maharishi or something. Wayne successfully threads film onto the take-up reel, walks over and flicks off the room lights. “Okay, here we go,” he announces, pushing play.

The screen fills with red-striped leader, then it runs out and there’s Dean’s basement. A long-haired blond boy is lying on the usual table. Wayne’s punching him in the face over and over. Dean’s fucking him and trying to rip a nipple off his chest.

“Now see *that*,” Brad says, rubbing his crotch. “I could get into sex with a guy if it was like . . . just the first part of my murder. I could kiss some guy and tell him I love him, and it’d be true, you know? Fuck, this is *hot*.” He grins over his shoulder at Wayne, who’s standing by the projector in case something screws up.

Wayne just looks back at Brad, wondering if he wants to kill him. “I understand,” he says.

David’s really hunched over now, wincing, watching the film out of the corner of his eye.

On-screen, Wayne is cutting off the boy's fingers with pliers. Dean has one fist in the boy's butt, the other hand around the boy's throat, and he's sucking the boy's limp cock like they're in love. The boy screams or at least his mouth is wide open.

Brad's longish hair starts flapping around so furiously that he's gotta be jerking off. Wayne's cock is hard too. David's just more and more balled up on the couch, looking like he wants to cry or something.

"Brad," Wayne says breathily.

"Y-yeah," the guy answers, his voice gone all wobbly.

"Maybe I *will* kill you."

David says something in a horrified voice but they're too concentrated on the film, etc. to hear.

"Excellent," says Brad. He peers over his shoulder. "But what about the pain?"

"Well," Wayne answers, "that's just part of it. You'll have to suffer a little. Big deal."

"Okay, okay." Brad turns back to the film. "Wait . . . wow, that's amazing." On-screen, Wayne and David are each sawing off one of the boy's legs. "Yeah, so pain's part of it, okay. I understand, no problem."

"*Stop* this," whispers David. He really sounds like he's going to cry, which would be a first.

"Why?" Wayne asks.

"Because . . . I don't know. Just *because*."

On-screen Dean has gotten what's left of the boy in a passionate embrace. Also, he's fucking his ass, which is a lot more

accessible now without the legs. Wayne's standing by the table, attentive, laughing.

"Brad?" Wayne asks.

"Yeah." Brad's jeans are down in a blue infinity sign around his ankles.

"I'm a novice, okay? I've helped but I haven't gone solo yet. So . . ."

"Okay," Brad says hurriedly.

". . . so . . ." Wayne looks at the unwheeling film, sees the end is near. "I'm ready to start, I guess." He peers at the screen, which is pretty much dominated by splattering blood. It looks like a purplish-red halo over the back of Brad's bobbing head.

"Okay," Brad repeats.

"Time's up," David Brooks announced suddenly. The house lights dimmed to near-black. "So, it's an hour later now. We're all in Dean's basement. Brad's strapped down on the usual table. He quit thinking death was the ultimate experience about eight wounds ago. Blood's spurting out of numerous ditches in him, and several prominent details on his body are already missing. Wayne's standing over Brad, holding a knife, covered with blood, and smiling sexily, I have to admit. I'm across the room, bawling my eyes out. I'm also holding the Super 8 camera loosely in one hand, but I've never turned it on, not even for a second."

BRAD (*as the curtains part, using an unrecognizable baby voice*):  
Stop . . . stop . . . stop . . .

WAYNE: You don't mean it.

BRAD: I . . . do . . . (*gathering a little strength*) Life, l-i-i-i-ife!

WAYNE: You're delirious, man. (*He stabs him in the stomach and churns the blade around.*) There. That's better, right?

BRAD (*wincing horribly*): God . . . help . . . me . . .

WAYNE: You're a fucking disappointment. Jesus! (*He pulls the knife out of Brad's stomach and stabs him about fifty times in the chest.*) Oof, oof, oof . . .

BRAD (*beginning his death rattle*): Glug, glug . . .

WAYNE: Finally. (*glancing over his shoulder*) Cool, huh, David?

DAVID (*sobbing*): No, Wayne.

WAYNE: You're a disappointment too, David. This is *hot*. (*His eyes twinkle.*) Hey, who are you really, dead boy?

WAYNE-AS-CORPSE (*flat voice*): I'm . . . Jimmy Page.

WAYNE (*laughing*): I know you hear this all the time, but you were a genius. Fuck. *I killed a genius!*

WAYNE-AS-CORPSE: I agree. And thanks.

WAYNE (*still laughing*): And were totally good-looking.

WAYNE-AS-CORPSE: Thanks, man.

DAVID (*really sobbing now*): Wayne, if you don't stop this I'm going to have a nervous breakdown!

WAYNE-AS-CORPSE: Sounds like one of my fans.

WAYNE (*laughing again*): No way, Jimmy. David's into faggot shit like Joni Mitchell.

WAYNE-AS-CORPSE: God, I hate her.

WAYNE: Me too, man.

DAVID (*hysterical*): Fuck . . . you!

WAYNE (*reverting to his charming old self for a second*): No, listen, David. Dean was right! I'm telling you, this character projection shit is a real rush. Because I've decided this is Jimmy Page lying here, right? And it is. It's *him*. I'm *convinced*. I don't know how it works, but . . . Come over here, David, try it. Join me.

WAYNE-AS-CORPSE: Join us.

DAVID (*horrified*): Wayne, stop this, please!

WAYNE-AS-CORPSE: Loser.

DAVID: Wayne, stop it! (*Trying to get Wayne's attention, he hurls Dean's Super 8 camera, but it accidentally makes contact, knocking a deep hole in the side of Wayne's head. Blood spews out. Wayne collapses to the floor.*) Oh my God! (*David starts running around the basement looking for a telephone he remembers noticing once. Finding it, he lifts the receiver and dials 911.*) Hello? There's been a . . . murder. Twenty-three murders, to be exact. H-h-hurry! (*He breaks down crying as the curtain closes.*)

THE END

*Three months later . . .*

Dear David Brooks,

Perhaps you will recall that my class and I attended one of your puppet shows several months ago. As part of my final assignment, students were asked to write a short essay on one of the events we attended during the semester. As it happens, one student, Peter Winterson, chose your

puppet show as his subject. I am forwarding his essay to you for your files. While I wouldn't say this was one of the finer essays I received—in fact I graded it a rather paltry D—perhaps it will be of some interest to you.

Sincerely,

Professor William Griffith

University of Texas

Austin, Texas

## On David Brooks's Untitled Puppet Show

Peter Winterson

The puppeteer's thoughts are simplistic yet arduous, like a drunken walk home from a neighborhood bar. But his "drunkenness" only began once he entered the abstract realm of reflection, while the point of the thoughts themselves, hurtling madly about in his psyche, seems nothing more than the first word, or perhaps phrase, in an embattled sentence that has yet to formulate to his satisfaction. Between the murders he has committed and the artistry informing his puppetry lies a path so overly complicated by his obsessive need to reconstruct his participation that the actual meaning is subsumed by it, almost the way a libretto is dissolved in the music of an opera.

Thus the object of his artistry seems less a tamed thing than a vast galaxy whose organization refuses to answer to an existing law. Within its schematic, all ideas lose their consis-

tency, all thoughts are corrupted, all feelings enter a state of levitation. The puppeteer's thinking is dislocated and each of its parts—images of images, derealized objects—displays an identity as defined as its existence is ghostlike. The feeling of mastery over things that intelligence gives him is great, but he nevertheless cannot possess those things.

This seemingly irreversible fragmentation of his ideas prevents him from grasping in their totality the very events which so energetically seem to solicit him, going so far as to touch the desires that are most difficult for him to admit. Forced to recognize successively all the qualities that compose these events, he cannot identify fully with them, or feel any comfort in his need for internal cohesion. He can only grasp the events by immediately dispersing them artistically.

Consequently, what he becomes aware of is not an emergence of things but a dissolution, such that memory appears to him to function less as a transfixed memorial to fleeting thoughts than as an exposure of the vagrancy of involuntary remembrance. Without privileged access to the moral codes through which his crimes acquire their meaning, his perception of them remains mediated by an encroaching emotion, compounded by his current sense of meaning, which is less about finding new things than seeing anew.

Perhaps these crimes would have disappeared into abstraction had the puppeteer not, at an irretrievable moment of sexual energy, attempted to understand them, and thereby awaken a childish response which refuses to yield to the for-

malist unity he now requires of his art. For while puppets have emerged, they merely confront his understanding with a hermeticism that is impossible to break open, further decentering and fragmenting his thoughts as they draw to them the emotion he believed he'd revoked, reanimating within their contagious parameters a set of desires he would prefer remain hidden.



## About the Author

**DENNIS COOPER** is the author of the George Miles Cycle, an interconnected sequence of five novels that includes *Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide*, and *Period*. His post-George Miles Cycle novels include *My Loose Thread*, *The Sluts*, which won France's Prix Sade and the 2005 Lambda Literary Award for Best Men's Fiction, and his most recent work, the highly acclaimed *God, Jr.* He divides his time between Los Angeles and Paris.

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