

Science Fiction

# Henry James, This One's For You

By Jack McDevitt



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It came in over the transom, like a couple hundred other manuscripts each week, memoirs of people nobody ever heard of, novels that start with weather reports and introduce thirty characters in the first two pages, massive collections of unreadable poetry from someone's grandmother.

They all go into a stack for the screeners, who look through them, attach our form rejection, and send them back.

Actually there's only one screener. Her name is Myra Crispee. She has one green eye and one blue eye, and a talent for going through the slush pile. She picks out the occasional possibility and gets rid of the rest. Every day. Love my job, she says. When I ask her why, she says it's because I pay her the big bucks.

Tempus Publishing isn't a major outfit, but we do okay. We don't specialize. Tempus will publish anything that looks as if it'll make money. But most of the manuscripts we see have already made the rounds at Random House, HarperCollins, and the other biggies. Some come in from an agent, but that has no effect on the way we treat them. Unless we know the author, they all go into the pile.

Sometimes we get lucky. We published a couple of self-help books last year that did extremely well, and a novel about Noah's ark that became a runaway bestseller.

Anyhow, the day it arrived was cold and wet. The heating system had gone down again so I was wrapped in a sweater. I'd just opened the office and had turned on the coffee when Myra came in, carrying an umbrella and a manuscript. That

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was unusual. She doesn't usually take these things home.

"Hey, Jerry," she said, "I think we've got a winner."

"Really?"

She was beaming. "Yes. I was up half the night with it." She trooped over to her desk and sat down in front of what I thought was a second manuscript, but which turned out to be the rest of the submission.

"My God," I said, "that looks like a thousand pages."

She peeked at the end. "Twelve hundred and twelve. I've only read a few chapters, but if the rest of it is like what I've seen—."

"That good, huh?"

"I couldn't put it down." The magic words. We seldom saw anything that wasn't easy to walk away from. She leafed through the pages. "Incredible," she said. "Who is this guy?"

"What is it?" I asked.

"He calls it *The Long War*. It's about the war in the Middle East."

"Which one?"

"How many are we involved in? I didn't see the news this morning."

"It's been done," I said.

"Not like this, boss." She was still turning pages.

"Who's it by?"

"Guy named Patterson." She shook her head. "Edward Patterson. Ever hear of him?"

He was a stranger to me. "What's the cover letter say?"

She needed a minute to find it. "'Novel enclosed.'"

"That's all?"

"That's it."

We used to have a screener's box where she could deposit manuscripts that were potentially publishable. We dispensed with it because Myra rarely put anything in it. So she just brought the manuscript over and laid it on a side table. Then she walked back to her desk, pulled the next submission off the pile, and began turning pages. But I knew she was really waiting for me. Wanted me to pick up *The Long War*. "I'll look at it before I go home," I said.

She continued turning pages, sighed, and touched her keyboard. The printer kicked out a fresh rejection. "Okay," she said.

I was working on *Make Straight the Path*, an inspirational book by Adam Trent. It was pious and reassuring, loaded with anecdotes showing how the unbelievers get theirs. You wouldn't believe how his other books had sold. Penguin would have loved to have him.

I stayed with it, resisting the temptation to look at Patterson's epic. It *resembled* an epic. The manuscript obscured a coffee stain half a foot above the table. That made it official.

Now, lest you think I'm one of those editors who only cares how many copies can be moved, let me tell you that, while sales figures matter, it's always been my ambition to discover a new writer. Well, okay, all editors feel that way. But that's because we're generous and compassionate. So when Myra got up and headed for the washroom, I took a look.

Patterson lived in New Hampshire.

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I lifted the cover page and glanced at the opening lines. That night I hauled it down in the elevator, the whole twelve hundred pages, and took it home.

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I read it on the train. Read during dinner at Milo's. Read through the evening and took it to bed. In the summer of 2001, I went to the Army recruiting office with the young college student hero and cringed while he joined the Reserves. I rode with the UN inspectors while they played tag with Iraqi 'escorts,' and tried to surprise their hosts at suspect facilities. I sat in the councils of the president while his aides urged an attack on Saddam and constructed arguments they hoped the UN and the voters would buy.

The night got away from me, and I finally closed my eyes when the first light of dawn was hitting the curtains. I called Myra's voice mail a couple hours later, letting her know I'd be late. Called again around nine to tell her I wouldn't be in at all.

It wasn't simply one more war novel. This one had that cliffhanging quality, yes. But it was vastly more. It *owned* the war. Through the eyes of its characters the reader saw how it had happened, came to grasp the inevitability of the conflict. He understood what it had meant to ride shotgun on the convoys or to go house to house in Fallujah. He experienced what it was to fight an enemy who wasn't afraid to die. Who imagined killing to be a divine imperative.

I spent time with a group of insurgents, and came to understand what drove them. I carried stretchers through the

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burn wards of an Iraqi hospital when shattered bystanders were brought in. And finally I was with mothers in Ohio when the dread news came.

It had perspective, passion, fear, the determination of obviously flawed men and women in authority to get things right, the mounting frustration as those who had been liberated refused to throw roses.

I was holed up with it for six days. The outside world simply stopped until the last shots had been fired, and the fallout had begun to take its political toll.

It was a *War and Peace* for our time.

I had done better than find one more professional writer who could sell a few thousand copies of whatever. I had found a new Herman Wouk.

I finished late on a drizzly, cold evening, and sat staring out my apartment window at downtown Boston, thinking about Edward Patterson. On that night, only I, and Myra, knew who he was. Within a year, the whole world was going to know.

He lived in Laconia, at the foot of the White Mountains.

It was a quarter after ten. A bit late to be calling. On the other hand, this was a guy who, as far as I could determine, had never been published. I remembered my own reaction when the postcard had arrived from *Guns and Ammo* announcing my own first sale.

Myra, anticipating me, had gotten Patterson's number from information and printed it neatly above the title. I made myself a scotch and soda and reached for the phone.

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"Wonderful," he said. "Mr. Becker, that's great. You're actually going to publish it?" He sounded younger than I'd expected.

"Yes, Mr. Patterson. Ed. Is it okay if I call you Ed?"

"Sure. Yes. Absolutely. Can you hold a second?"

"Okay."

He must have covered the phone. But I knew what was happening. He was passing the good news to his wife. Or girl friend. Or whomever.

"I'm back," he said.

"Good."

"Mr. Becker, you have no idea what this means to me."

"I can guess," I said. "Ed, are you by any chance free to come into Boston tomorrow?"

He made a sound deep in his throat. "I'm a teacher," he said. "At the high school."

"Okay. How about Saturday?" We don't usually open the office Saturday but in this case I was willing to make an exception.

"I can do that," he said.

"Fine. I'll have a contract ready, and we'll celebrate by going to lunch." The truth was that I wanted him signed and delivered before he found out how good *The Long War* was. If he realized what he had, I'd wind up having to deal with an agent. Or possibly even get caught in a bidding war with MacMillan.

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He was maybe twenty-five. Tall, with a nervous smile. Light brown hair already beginning to thin. Sallow cheeks, pale skin, watery gray eyes behind bifocals. He wore a fatigue jacket and hauled a laptop in a stitched bag over one shoulder. Didn't look much like Hemingway.

He turned the pages of the contract with long, thin fingers, not examining it, I thought, so much as admiring it. When he got to the advance, he stopped. "Twenty thousand dollars?" he asked.

I was about to say I'd be willing to go higher because I liked the book. I'd expected to go higher. But it was always best to start out with a conservative figure. You can always move up.

"Seems like a lot," he added.

"Well," I said, trying to conceal my surprise, "Tempus believes in being generous." It didn't really matter. The book was going to make a ton, so there was no risk.

"It's certainly very kind of you." He smiled again. He looked like the kind of guy the other kids had picked on in the schoolyard. And I would never have believed him capable of the kind of rugged prose that informed *The Long War*.

I showed him where to sign, explained what we expected, that we'd want to be able to use his bio and likeness in promoting the book, that we might ask him to make a few guest appearances. I didn't mention that he was signing over all TV and movie rights, that he was giving Tempus a healthy share of any foreign sales, that we would also collect seventy-five percent of book club rights. And of course there was the

option clause. "Normally, Ed," I told him, "we'd want to retain the right of first refusal on your next novel."

"But—?" he said, suddenly looking worried.

"I want to be up front with you, Ed. Is there going to be a sequel?"

"A sequel?" His eyes clouded. "There'll be another book."

"Okay. Good enough. Tempus is willing to forego the option. We'd like instead to sign you to a three-book deal. Beyond *The Long War*."

His eyes slid shut, and I was looking at the most beatific smile I'd ever seen. Paradise had arrived.

"We're offering a seventy-five thousand dollar advance for the three."

He put the glass down and stared at me. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," I said. "Just sign on the line." I showed him where.

I know what you're thinking. But we do not try to take advantage of our authors. We were providing a major service for Ed Patterson. We were giving him a chance to launch a new career, to break away from his teaching job, to fulfill a lifelong dream. When you've been in this business for a while, you discover that it takes a lifelong dream to drive someone to write a novel. Especially a big one.

He signed the contract. Four books in all. In triplicate. I put one in a manila envelope and handed it to him. "Your copy," I said.

He was glowing.

"Now let's go celebrate."

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We went across the street to Marco's. It's a quiet Italian restaurant just off the Common. It was still a little early for lunch, so hardly anyone was there. We ordered a decanter of red wine, and I filled both glasses. "To you, Ed," I said. "And to *The Long War*."

He wore a grin a mile wide. "Thanks, Jerry." He sipped the wine, made a face at it, put it down. "Strong stuff," he said.

I finished my own and refilled the glass. "I have to tell you, Ed, *The Long War* is pretty good. How long have you been working on it? Four years? Five?"

"I guess you could say ten or eleven. Somewhere in there."

"Ten years? You've been writing this since you were, what, fifteen? Do I have that right?"

"Oh, no, Jerry. I didn't *write* the novel. Max did."

"Max? Who's Max?"

"Ah," he said. "That's the *real* accomplishment. That's my surprise."

I finished the second glass in a swallow. "You didn't tell me there was going to be a surprise."

The waiter arrived. We ordered. When he was gone we picked up where we'd left off. "What surprise?" I demanded. "Who wrote the book? Are you his agent?"

"Hell, Jerry, anybody can sit down and write a novel. All you have to do is be willing to stay with it for, what, a year or so? Or five, I guess. Sit down and be willing to write every day. That's all it takes."

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"What are you trying to tell me, Ed? Who's Max?"

He'd dropped the laptop onto the seat beside him. Now he set it on the table and opened it. Lights blinked on and the screen glowed cobalt blue. "This is Max," he said.

I stared at the computer, then at Ed. It was an ordinary HP model. Myra had one like it. Black case, the logo printed on the lid. "You said Max wrote the book."

"He did."

"Max is a computer."

"Actually, he's an artificial intelligence, Jerry." He leaned forward, breathless. "A *real* one."

"The computer wrote the book."

"He's an AI." He looked at me as if waiting for me to cheer. When I didn't a cloud crossed his face.

"I don't care what you call him," I said, "no machine could have written *The Long War*."

The big grin came back. "But he did."

"I don't believe it."

"A few years ago they were saying no computer would ever compete with a chess master. You look recently to see who's world champ?"

We sat staring at each other. The door opened and people came in. A family with a little boy. The boy had a pulltoy.

"It took four days," he said.

"What took four days?"

"To write the novel."

A chill settled into my bones. I drank down more of the wine. Two plates showed up. Pizza for Patterson. Spaghetti

and meatballs for me. But my appetite had gone south. "Four days," I said.

"Yes. Well, maybe a bit more. But not much." He took a deep breath and smiled modestly. "It took me almost as long to tell him what kind of book I wanted."

"It's just not possible."

"That doesn't include printing time, though."

"You're signed to do three more novels."

"Yes."

"I was expecting world-class stuff."

"They'll be good. Max was years in the making and has spent a long time analyzing the great books."

"How long?" I asked.

"How long what?" He was chewing on the pizza, obviously enjoying himself. But he looked as if he couldn't understand why I was unhappy.

"How long will it take to deliver the other novels?"

"Probably two weeks. It takes a while to run them off."

"Two weeks for another novel like *The Long War*?"

"Two weeks for all three. But they won't be like *The Long War*, although they'll be of comparable quality." He pushed his chair back and tried to look upbeat. "We've already decided on the next book. It'll be about the power and the downside of religious belief. Along the order of *The Brothers Karamazov*. But different, of course. Original."

I sat frozen. Yep, no problem for Max. You want something to make people forget *The Winds of War*? Have it for you Tuesday.

"You all right, Jerry?"

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"I need some fresh air." Or maybe we'd get a new *Huck Finn*. This time around we'd take a hard look at anti-gay prejudice. I threw money on the table and headed for the door.

"Jerry, wait." He was right behind me.

Maybe a new Dreiser novel. By Max.

Or something in the mode of Scott Fitzgerald.

Traffic outside was heavy. Buses, delivery trucks, crowded sidewalks. "If Max wrote the book, why's your name on it?"

"Legal reasons. He's not a person. Can't sign checks. Can't really do anything."

"Except write great novels."

"You got it."

He stood in front of me and flashed an enormous grin. He had no idea what he'd done. This child, who was obviously very good with electronics, had canceled William Faulkner, Melville, Cather: What would their work be worth in the shadow of this *thing*? I assumed if he could do *Karamazov*, he could produce a new symbolic masterpiece in the spirit of James Joyce. Call this one *Achilles*, in which a man's life is driven by a search for control. Or maybe something to push *Remembrance of Things Past* off the charts. In eight volumes, delivered over the course of a month.

"I couldn't be sure it had worked," Patterson said. "I don't read that much. Not fiction. I didn't know whether it was any good or not. What Max wrote. You were the test. We'll put his name on the cover though, if that's okay."

"What's Max's last name?" I asked.

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A bus was coming up behind him. It was a local, headed for Massachusetts Avenue. It had just picked up passengers at the corner, seen an opening, and was accelerating. It had broken loose from the traffic.

"Winterhaven. Max Winterhaven."

"Sounds pretentious."

"I thought it sounded literary."

Max Winterhaven was slung over his shoulder. I looked up at the bus driver, and I swear he knew what I was going to do before I did. I saw it in his face the instant before I gave Patterson his quick shove. His eyes went wide and he toppled backward. People screamed, the brakes screeched, and I either said, or thought, "This one's for Henry James."

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I got clean away. The descriptions that showed up on CNN a few hours later sounded nothing like me. They also reported that the dead man had been carrying a laptop, but it had been smashed. Police were trying to reconstruct it, but I never heard anything more.

There was no widow, I'm pleased to say. I don't know who had been with him the night I called. *The Long War*, as we all know, has become an international best seller. We are sending the checks to the deceased's mother.

Literary authorities are on the tube almost weekly, decrying the loss of Edward Patterson, a man of incredible talent, who would have become a towering literary figure, had he only been given time.

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