

Young Writers Award 2009: Maureen Donahoe Encouragement Award winner

What Sort of Heroine?

by Liam O'Brien

The best pick-up line I've ever come across came from the mouth of F. Scott Fitzgerald. I read that the young writer, to engage the interest of a young woman, would talk to her at length about his literary ambitions before asking her "What sort of heroine would you like to be?" A slavish imitator of Fitzgerald in almost everything but literary talent, I figured the same line—word for word—used over a hundred years later would have similarly pleasing results.

It has, after a fashion.

It's late on a Monday afternoon. I'm at a café in the West End, by myself. A pretty young waitress with hair the colour of dark chocolate brings over the sandwich I ordered. I wonder if the line would work on her. I try to picture Amber, the girl I used it on the other night, the girl I'm about to meet. I can't; I must have drunk too much. Another Fitzgerald imitation. I didn't think I made much of an impression on Amber (my attempts at chatting her up certainly didn't pay off physically), but I did get her number. I awoke the next morning to a vague text from her, asking to meet her here.

I eat my sandwich and read a copy of *The Australian's* Review section that someone's left out. A girl called Constance has written a letter. Constance objects to the stereotyping of teenagers as selfish and apathetic by the Australian mainstream media. Constance and her friends discuss serious topics. They stayed up on election night in 2007. I think to myself that it's true 'Generation Y' does get a pretty bad rap. Then I think that I wouldn't want to get drunk with Constance.

I'm watching the waitress take other people's orders when I become aware of someone standing beside me. I look up and am glad to see that my memory of Friday night hasn't been entirely bleached out. Amber has blonde hair (elaborately done when I last saw her, tied back today), and is wearing a not inconsiderable amount of make-up. She looks like she'd still be very pretty without it, though.

"Hi Amber, how are you?" I ask.

"Yeah... pretty good," she replies, and sits down across from me. She doesn't look at me, and instead fiddles with a little silver ring on her hand.

"OK," she says, after a pause. "I'm not great at... like... saying what I mean, so I've written down the idea I had, that I wanted to talk to you about."

She hands me some lined pages torn out of a notebook. The gist of the gel-pen scribed address within is that Amber, taking my recycled pickup line to heart, would like me to write a short story about her. She realises that I don't know her too well, so I'm free to employ as much artistic license as I feel like. In an authorial little touch of her own, she leaves the biggest shock until the end: she is willing to pay me one hundred and fifty dollars for the completed story. I re-read the note, twice, while Amber leaves the table. She comes back with a chai latte, and I give the pages back to her.

"I'm a bit confused," I say.

"Yes?" she asks, after a sip.

"Why exactly do you want a short story written about yourself?"

She smiles, for the first time since she came in. "Well, I wanted to write one by myself, but I'm not good enough at it. So I thought someone else should do it."

"But I don't understand, what would you do with it after it was written?"

"Well, you know, I could show it to my friends... or it could be published in a magazine."

"And it has to be written by me?" I ask, feeling like I'm in an unusually vivid dream.

"Well, from what you said the other night," she says, "you sound like you're good enough to do it."

I break eye contact. I wonder just how talented I made her think I was.

"And this story," I say, deciding to leave the matter of my skills to one side for the moment, "You're the main character, but you'll be doing whatever I decide to write?"

"Well, obviously I can't be doing anything... bad... in it," she says.

"Obviously."

"But apart from that, yes."

She's a teenage girl. I decide to see how far generalising will get me. "So, should this story have vampires?"

"No. I want it to be realistic."

"Right."

I think I could probably write a decent story about her. Maybe not good enough for it to be published in a magazine, but good enough to satisfy her. Even if I can't, I can at least use her request as an excuse to further our relationship.

"Alright," I say. "I'll do it. But I think I'll need to spend some time with you before I can start writing about you."

"Well, I'm pretty busy," she says. "But I can probably hang out with you this afternoon."

“That’ll have to do, then.”

I follow her out of the café. Before we go, I ask her for the note back. Physical proof of her request seems a necessity.

The morality of writing a story for the sole purpose of financial gain doesn’t bother me. Fitzgerald did it. Even if he did think it made him a whore. The thought of being a whore doesn’t bother me either.

Amber and I separated after we left the café. I’m to meet her in an hour or so at some bar to further discuss our heroine. First I go to a newsagent’s and buy a blank notebook. I don’t know much about the work of a writer-for-hire, but I imagine they take notes. Plus, considering Amber’s under the impression that my creative output is worth one hundred and fifty dollars more than it actually is, I feel the least I can do is try to make my depiction of her as accurate as possible.

By the time I get to the place Amber chose, the sun is beginning to set. My thoughts have been alternating between how far I can potentially get with her and just what this story’s going to be about. I’m starting to think that the money may be less an incentive and more a hindrance to completing it.

The bar is small, and classier than anywhere I would choose to meet. I order a Jameson and Coke, and look for Amber. She’s sitting in a booth with a red-haired girl and a blonde boy. Both are just as attractive as Amber. All have gin and tonics. None of them appear to be on their first.

I sit beside the girl I haven’t met, and introduce myself to her and the boy.

“This is Jamie, and that’s Sara,” Amber says. “They can be the other characters in your story.”

I suppress a snort at her use of the word ‘your’.

“We’re so excited about this,” Jamie says, leaning forward. He seems to have had the most to drink of the three. “We always knew our lives would make a great story.”

“Really?” I ask. “What do you guys do?”

“Get fucked up,” Sara says. “Sometimes go to fashion shows and stuff.”

“Great, sounds cool,” I say, wondering if I’ll have to write a story about that. I’ve never been to a fashion show.

I had figured Amber would be alone and I could use the notebook I bought to ask her some questions. It would have served a dual purpose of aiding the story and creating some intimacy between us. Sara and Jamie’s presence, however, as well as the amount of alcohol all three have consumed, makes me think that plan might not work so well. Also, it’s too dark to write.

I finish my drink. Jamie offers to buy my second. Sara gets the third. I sip my free drinks and listen to the trio talk between themselves, occasionally chipping in myself. Sometime between the fourth and the fifth drink, I feel a growing sense of optimism. These people are perfect. They're as superficial and emotionally empty as the characters of all my favourite literature. In fact, I don't want to just write about them, I want to be them. I haven't got the money to live that way myself, but I might be able to convince them that I'm worth them paying my way. I've gotten this far with Amber, and Jamie and Sara seem charmed enough by me.

My newly altered state of mind brings with it an additional benefit: I feel creative enough to start formulating the plot of this opus. Or, if not the plot, the feel. A story of the disconnected, privileged youth of Brisbane, self-medicating with money and neon cocktails, impulse spending and impulse fucking their way to a cold, blurry future. A thinking person's *Gossip Girl*. This city's *Less Than Zero*. The return of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald Redux. The drinks keep coming. I become the conversation's focus, rather than its observer. I am the best writer of my generation. My work has a sublime balance of detached narration, flawlessly observed dialogue, and stinging wit. My three companions are icons-in-waiting, the perfect muses for the perfect short story. Forget short stories, this'll be a novel. No, not a novel, a novella. Long enough to be significant, but brief enough to be chic in the age of text messages. The greatest novella ever to come out of this city. Out of this country. Amber rubs my feet with hers. I place my hand on Sara's knee, and she doesn't mind. Jamie keeps buying me drinks, and I don't mind. It won't take long to get used to this. My work will make me rich and them richer. One hundred and fifty is just the beginning.

We stumble out on to the footpath. Sara throws up on a shrub. We've spent the past hour making out in the booth, but I've had to take my mind off trying to seduce her for now. She's way too drunk; if I go any further I'm liable to break the law. Jamie found some friends, and they decided to leave West End and head for the Valley, ambiguous pills in tow. I call a taxi, then text Amber. I've no idea where she got to. If my progress with Sara has been temporarily halted, I can at least try my luck with her. The taxi arrives and Sara falls into it. I'm watching it speed away when Amber texts back. She's at the Rumpus Room. I make my way there, and saunter up to the bar.

There's a girl standing next to me. It's the pretty waitress from this afternoon.

"Hey, remember me?" I ask.

She stares at me for a couple of seconds, before answering.

"Oh, yeah. I remember you."

"I'm a writer, you know," I say.

"Really."

She doesn't seem impressed, but I press on regardless.

"I'm very good. I'll probably be pretty well-known, in a year or so. I'm working on a novella. It's almost finished."

“Uh-huh.”

“My next one could be about you, maybe.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” she says.

“I’m sure I could get to know you,” I say, moving closer to her.

“Yeah, I doubt it,” she says, and walks away, to a group of girls on the far side of the room.

I shrug, and down my drink. I doubt her life is as interesting as Amber’s, anyway. Speaking of. Amber’s looking almost sober. She’s with some skinny kid with glasses.

“Liam, meet Matt,” she says. “I’m going to go get a drink, wait here.”

Matt’s social skills seem to be even worse than mine.

“What do you do?” I ask him

“Um, make films and stuff.”

“What sort of films do you make, then?”

“You know Antonioni?”

I nod. I don’t.

“Films like that.”

“Right.”

Amber comes back. She’s only holding one drink. I wonder if she’ll buy one for me later.

“Matt’s cool, hey?” she says.

“Yeah, he is,” I say.

“By the way,” she says. “You don’t need to worry about that story. Matt’s going to make a film about me, instead.”

“Oh, right,” I say. “See you, then.”

I leave the club, and walk out in to the cold night. I can feel my enthusiasm for the story evaporating as I sober up. Yes, Amber and her friends are interesting material, but there’s no point writing about them unless I’m actually part of their circle. I’ll just come off as some bitter outsider, an overly precocious pseudo-intellectual teenager with a grudge.

About halfway across the Victoria Bridge, I trip and fall over. On my way up, I start to feel better. Who ever heard of a good film made with a one hundred and fifty dollar budget?