

authority

for Máire Davies

I wanted to be a successful author. I wanted, then, at the beginning, to produce novels and stories and screenplays that a loyal readership bought and discussed. Especially discussed. Sometimes a large readership who gave me a comfortable living and popular acclaim, sometimes a small but devoted and discerning one, giving me a satisfying superiority over more popular but less accomplished rivals. But I cannot blame my readers, as there never were any. I never could get down, then, at the beginning, to putting fiction onto paper, as opposed to thinking about how writing careers might develop. Until now. And even at this beginning of the plot I haven't really fictionalised yet, sitting in my office at the bank, reading *The Times* book reviews when I should be refusing loan applications, and contemplating variant forms of success.

At this point the realization strikes, that my whole attitude has been wrong. I had not seen what is significant about writing. The important thing is to do something significant, and the significant thing about writing is that important things happen in it. It can't be put more clearly than that. People love and hate and feel joy and misery, better than they do outside a story, more consistently and more interestingly. People have real characters in a story; they don't just lurch from one action to another. It is better joy, better misery, love, hate, even better indifference and boredom, because you can see where it is going. All touched with meaning. So why not better success too, better authorship. And I can make that.

After my epiphany in the office, I put aside the useless reviews of ineffectual books and took up a big blue-covered ledger book with fine quality white pages, and with a Mont Blanc pen began to write. It is a story about a writer,

me. How I begin to write and how I acquire my large and faithful readership. The story begins with a single story, published in a small-circulation magazine and soon reproduced on the internet. A modern story: an ambiguous ending which does not really say whether the central problem, of an artist's struggle between what he owes his audience and what he owes to truth, is resolved. But a traditional story, too, with real vivid unusual people that the reader takes immediately as acquaintances whose fate she cares about. The tension between the modern suspended cadence and the vivid sympathetic characters is disturbing. So disturbing that readers needed a continuation. So the author wrote another, and another. And so on, not chapters of a novel or a trilogy, but an indefinitely long sequence of plots and episodes, with overlapping characters and incomplete resolutions, always and never ending. Like life, as critics said; like love, as readers thought, and wanted more.

Critical acclaim, popular attention, money, prizes. It took twenty years, but then twenty years is nothing in the story of literature. What is important about literature, and earns its acclaim, is that it is real. Aeneas' exploits did lead to Rome, and there it is. Romeo did stand beneath the balcony; you can see it today. I did write world famous stories; you, whether or not you exist, are reading one. Moving readers in fiction may not seem as heroic as founding a city or defying two families for love, but wait. People are a deeply miserable lot. Everyone harbours disappointment and resentment. It is as if we enter the world clutching a promise that our lives will be rich and satisfying, and then early on we realize that the promise is a fraud, and spend the rest of our lives trying to find who pulled the trick on us. Depression, war, murder, divorce. One of our few escapes is in imagination, in trying to grasp with our minds that promised satisfying perfection. When we just taste the edge of it the bitterness drains just a bit, a little prick in the abscess. And this is what my readers experienced, to a wonderful degree. That's what I'm telling you now; that's where we've got to now, with my readers more and more absorbed in the universe of linked stories, each one

complete but each one open enough to need the others. Monads. Gradually, as you come to see that the promise is fulfilled, as long as you do not look for it in your own life, the desperation neutralizes, hardly needs draining. Conflict fades, cooperation flourishes, there's less point in thwarting others. Nothing is immediate, of course, but long after my death you look back and see these as the stories that ended war and misery. But who are you? You'd like to know, but you'll have to read more before you do.