

An aerial photograph of a river with numerous green islands and white rapids. The text is overlaid on the image in four horizontal black bars with white text.

**FARE FORWARD**

**LETTERS FROM**

**DAVID MARKSON**

**LAURA SIMS**

# FARE FORWARD: LETTERS FROM DAVID MARKSON

Edited by Laura Sims  
Written by David Markson

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Publicist: [nina@powerHouseBooks.com](mailto:nina@powerHouseBooks.com)

# FARE FORWARD:

Letters from David Markson

EDITED BY

**Laura Sims**

REMINISCENCE BY

**Ann Beattie**

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## INTRODUCTION

I first wrote to David Markson in February of 2003. In my impassioned fan letter I said:

Reading *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was revelatory to me—it rejuvenated my faith in the possibilities of literature. It served as solid proof (ironically enough) that there *was* a living soul out there—someone who was not only trying to “make it new,” but who was succeeding wholeheartedly in the endeavor... your work astounds me for the perfect balance it strikes between innovation/art and compulsive readability. In fact, “perfect” is the one word I would choose to describe your work as a whole. Of all the books I’ve read in the past five to ten years, your latest three novels (*Wittgenstein's Mistress*, *Reader's Block*, and *This Is Not a Novel*) have been the most important and influential to me personally.

I cringe now at the grandeur of my pronouncement—but David wrote me back. He sent me a polite handwritten note the very next day, expressing his “deep thanks” for what I’d written. I was surprised, and consistently thrilled, when we carried on from there—exchanging postcards and letters more and more frequently, warming toward each other, and toward a genuine correspondence, with each one.

When I wrote to David, I would stew over the words and lines as if each note were a crucially worded poem. I even obsessed over which postcards to use—which image would prove how erudite, how cosmopolitan I was? Which image would mark me as the philistine I feared myself to be (at least in comparison with the man who had written *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*)? David always sent plain white post office-issue postcards, but I chose ones from an eclectic collection I’d begun to gather expressly for our correspondence; now those cards are accumulating dust in a storage drawer. Sometimes I browse through them and see images I chose with David in mind—Caspar David Friedrich’s “Sunset (Brothers),” or an early photograph of Gertrude Stein—and I wish I could still send them to a certain address on West 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

Our correspondence and friendship spanned the years from 2003 to his death in 2010. It grew through the years, deepening with each letter and card but also, eventually, with several visits and increasingly frequent phone calls. It was an unequal relationship in many regards. David had an illustrious, if underappreciated, writing career behind him (and still before him, as his reputation grew in those final years); I was just beginning to publish poems in a serious way, and looked up to

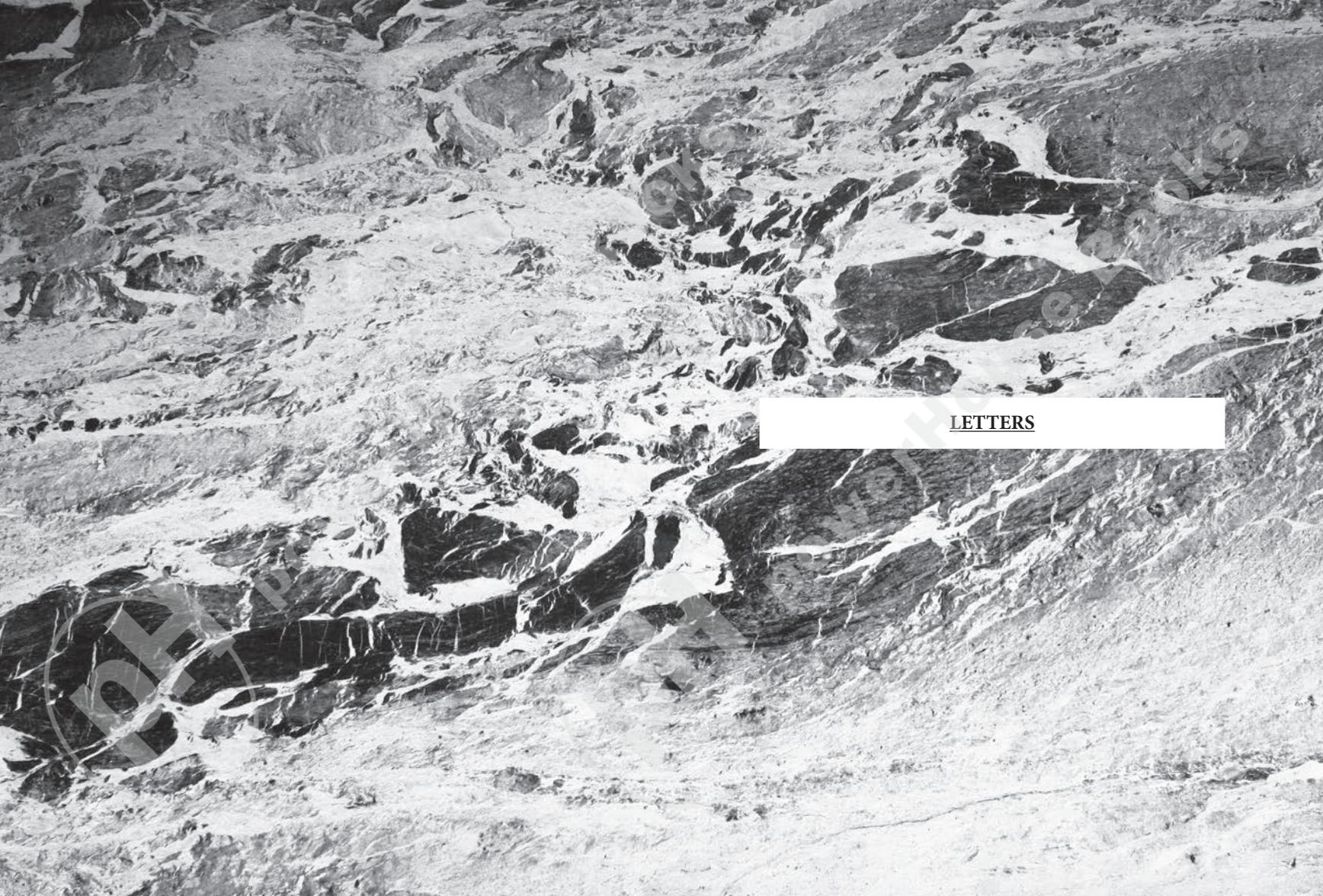
him as a model of what an avant-garde writer should be. We were also, age-wise, at very different stages of life. During those years, David endured various ailments and health scares related to old age, enjoyed the bittersweetness of a last romance, and then suffered its loss. He saw his final book, *The Last Novel*, published, and attempted to escape from what had become his habitual method of composition. During our seven years of correspondence, I got married, published a first book of poetry, lived in Japan for half a year on a fellowship, moved from New York to Wisconsin and back again, published a second book, lost a job I had cherished, and finally, by the time of David’s death, was seven months pregnant. Through it all, David’s notes punctuated and brightened my life, whether he was chiding me (“Why why why do you do all those readings?”), praising me (“James Joyce...said to tell you, ‘Mazel Tov’—which is Irish for ‘Zowie.’”), or confiding in me (“I am desperately trying to write a new book.”). For seven years he was a great, glowing presence in my life, one to which I turned for literary companionship, mentorship (though he never critiqued my work, except to say it was puzzlingly “difficult”), and also, simply, for friendship.

In 2008, I finally began to come through on the promise I’d made to David early on to spread the good word about his work. I published an essay, “David Markson and the Problem of the Novel” in *New England Review*, and then chaired a panel, “In Celebration of David Markson,” at the 2009 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference. Small gestures, ultimately, but public ones at least. I made a recording of the panel for David, and lent him a small tape recorder so he could listen to it—and he did, over and over again, until the

tapes wore out. I didn't see the tape recorder again until May of 2010, after months of promises to return it, when David finally sent it back. I hadn't heard from him for a couple of months, but I was too distracted by pregnancy and job-related distress to give his silence much thought. When I got the package, there was no note, which was very unlike David. I called him right away and left a message—was he mad because I hadn't been in touch? Was everything okay? He returned my call later that day, sounding like his jovial self, so I felt reassured—enough to put him out of my mind yet again. Several weeks later, a novelist friend of his wrote to tell me he had died. I was shocked and distraught, and felt that somehow I'd failed him.

This book of letters is not meant to remedy that failure. Nor is it meant to be a comprehensive memorial to Markson the Man or even to Markson the Man of Letters—it reveals a slice of Markson's life, as shared with one person in bits and pieces through the years, but it doesn't reveal, as a lifelong journal or a lifetime collection of letters might, the full arc of his thoughts and feelings, or the full spectrum of his character. The letters here provide a snapshot, not a panorama, but a snapshot is remarkably appropriate for Markson—it gives a narrow, intense glimpse of a man whose work has been narrowly, but intensely adored. It reveals, in its intimate focus, the undeniable vibrancy of the voice of one of contemporary American fiction's greatest innovators—a voice his fans will recognize, and delight in; a voice that will surely delight newcomers to his work as well. In these casually written lines, David's playfulness, his offhand literary erudition, his prickliness and stubbornness, his loving kindness, and above all, his damn good companionship, are on

full display. These are attributes of the man that I'm happy to reveal, and preserve, alongside his incomparable body of work.



**LETTERS**

Feb 4 '03

Dear Laura Sims—

Thank you, and then some, for the kind letter about my work—truly appreciated.

Please do believe that, even though this response won't be half so good as you deserve. Not feeling well here, ergo I've none of the energy it would take to convey how pleased I was—how pleased I *am*—to have received it. I'll reread it more than once, also.

I've heard from the fellow writing the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* essay,<sup>1</sup> actually, but am grateful you're thinking of doing something on my work for some other periodical.

News that may remotely interest you is that I've only lately finished a new book, just now being submitted by the agent. Very like the last two,<sup>2</sup> tentatively called *Vanishing Point*. Whether it's any good or not, however, is another question altogether.

Hey, forgive this, please. As I said, a bum stretch. But I do send you all my best wishes—and again, deep thanks.

Yours—

David Markson

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<sup>1</sup> *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, a tri-quarterly literary journal from Dalkey Archive Press that features critical essays on innovative fiction. Henceforth *RCF*.

<sup>2</sup> *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*.

Feb 7 '03

Dear Laura S—

A P.S.: I still regret that inadequate answer to your letter. (Whatever it is, here—age, the rotten weather, my 97 sundry infirmities, etc.) But it does occur to me to add: if you ever do write an essay on my work, don't hesitate if/when you have any questions—of any sort—textual, biographical, your choice. Be my pleasure, seriously.

Yours again—  
David M.

Incidentally, Astoria<sup>3</sup> is by chance named in my new ms!<sup>4</sup>

Mar 18 '03

Dear Laura S.—

Don't hate me. I just glanced into my new ms for the first time since giving a copy to my agent—and it's not Astoria in there, it's Corona.

Just shows you what us benighted Greenwich Villagers know about exotic foreign territories—alas!

Forgive, eh?

My best—  
David

---

3 My neighborhood in New York at the time.

4 What would be *Vanishing Point*.

Mar 21 '03

Dear Laura—

Yes, I remember seeing that piece<sup>5</sup>—someone, maybe Bill Kennedy,<sup>6</sup> sent it to me (I have no computer)—and if I'd run into the guy [who wrote it], even in my mid-70s I would have punched him in the mouth. Gawd, of all the naïve, self-contradictory horseshit, full of misreadings, meaningless conclusions, incorrect facts—even insults—well, never mind. (Though in fact I'd still like to whack him one.)

Re the *Newsday* article, only on delayed 2<sup>nd</sup> thoughts do I remember chatting with the columnist Dennis Duggan, but don't recall ever seeing the piece itself. Maybe looking for it under his name would help you?

Otherwise, again, my best.

Ever—  
David

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<sup>5</sup> While researching his work, I'd tracked down numerous reviews and articles online. I'd asked him, here, about one in particular that I'd found to be sloppily written and insulting.

<sup>6</sup> William Kennedy, American novelist.

June 5 '03

Dear Laura:

Hey, mazel tov on your good news.<sup>7</sup> Assuming your taste in men is as acute as it is in books, I'm sure he's a winner. My very best to you both.

Even in Wisconsin. Hmmm. I've a vague feeling I've heard that Madison ain't a bad choice. Be happy out there, eh?

Guy name of Jack Shoemaker, who had been the publisher at North Point, and was at Counterpoint when they did *Not a Novel*, has started a new outfit called Shoemaker & Hoard, in DC. They will do my new one next winter, maybe Feb.

Meantime, lissen. Sometime last year I had a note from Ann Beattie, in Key West, saying she was reading here at the 92<sup>nd</sup> St. Y and that there'd be a ticket left in my name. I didn't get there. A few weeks later I had a dinner date with Kurt Vonnegut and a couple of other chums, and I finked out on that too. But do, as soon as you receive this, scribble me a card with your phone # on same. I will try, try try, to get off my butt and set up a drink or whatever. Honest. (I cannot explain this goddamn reclusiveness, but it's in the last few books, I'm sure.)

---

<sup>7</sup> My good news was my impending marriage, and a planned move (from New York) to Madison, Wisconsin.

Aug 24 '03

Dear Laura—

Are you really surrounded by water, as on that card? Gee, surrounded by water. Sort of like...hmmm....Manhattan island?

I take all sorts of advantage of it here, too. Back when my kids were about 5 and 7 (they're now 38 and 40) I once took them for a ride on the Staten Island Ferry!

It truly does look spectacular. How'dja know?

Stay well, do well, both of you. (See the last two lines, Part III, "The Dry Salvages.")<sup>9</sup>

All my very best again—  
David

<sup>9</sup> "Not fare well, / But fare forward, voyagers." – T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," *The Four Quartets*.

Oct 1 '03

Dear Laura:

Poor innocent child, thinking a man of 117 years of age would remember what T.S. Eliot quote, that long after I'd sent it. Have you not heard of "senior moments"—or weeks—the current euphemism for rampant senility?

Re your job,<sup>10</sup> Cavafy, a great poet, worked for the Dept of Public Works in Alexandria for 30 years. (That's in my new book. I think it's in my new book.) (Also, that's the original Alexandria, not the one in Virginia.)

Did I say I was 117? Now that the heat/humidity has finally lifted, I sometimes don't feel a day over 109.

Have you guys learned all the words to "On Wisconsin" yet, or just the first stanza?<sup>11</sup>

Hey, again, stay well, etc. Oh, hallelujah—in the context of that last phrase, I just remembered what Eliot quote! So, do so, hear?

Thine—  
David

<sup>10</sup> A temp job I had on arriving in Wisconsin, doing administrative work ("the clerical equivalent of digging ditches/cleaning sewers," as I'd told him in a letter on 9/20/03) for the Fitchburg Department of Public Works.

<sup>11</sup> "On, Wisconsin! On, Wisconsin! / Plunge right through that line! / Run the ball clear down the field, / A touchdown sure this time. (U rah rah) / On, Wisconsin! On, Wisconsin! / Fight on for her fame / Fight! Fellows! - fight, fight, fight! / We'll win this game."

Oct 11 '03

\*No note, but a neatly excised article from the *New York Times* travel section called “36 Hours in Madison, Wisconsin” that begins, “On an isthmus sandwiched by Lakes Mendota and Monona, Madison, the capital of Wisconsin, is a progressive university town noted for the good life...”

Nov. 8 '03

Dear Simsy<sup>14</sup>—

Hey, thank you for that copy of the *RCF*. I was pleased to see your essay,<sup>15</sup> even though it's hard as hell for me to read same intelligently, what with knowing absolutely nothing about Diane Williams<sup>16</sup>—not having read one word (of her or of anybody else under the age of seventy, it begins to seem). But you make it all about as vivid as it could be under such circumstances. In other words, you write nice. So indeed, yes, I want you “on my side.” For that matter, stop threatening and get to it, hear?

Yes, I know about that “other woman.”<sup>17</sup> In fact she's already delivered several essays at one conference or another in France. As did someone from Temple U. at an American Lit Ass'n thing in Boston last spring. Plus there's the *hombre* presumably doing the one for *RCF*. So I repeat, kiddo—get to it.

You did see the Markson stuff in a much earlier (1990) *RCF*,<sup>18</sup> no? If we've mentioned this, excuse my ever more pervasive senility, eh?

14 This was his first use of this nickname for me; for some reason he alternates, from here on out, between two spellings: “Simsy” and “Symsy.”

15 “Diane Williams.” In *RCF*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3.

16 Diane Williams, American fiction writer, author of *Romancer Erector* and *Vicky Swanky Is a Beauty*.

17 Françoise Palleau-Papin, the French scholar who published *This Is Not a Tragedy*, the first book-length study on David Markson, in 2011 (Dalkey Archive Press).

18 “John Barth/David Markson.” *RCF*, Vol. X, No. 2.

Otherwise I wish I had some news—or at least something cheerful to say—but my under-the-weatheriness is even more pervasive than my empty-headedness. Just awful. DON'T GET OLD.

Speaking of which, it only lately occurred to me that tomorrow, around lunchtime, will be fifty years to the hour since Dylan Thomas died about four blocks from where I now sit. He was in a coma for approx. five days, and it was about three before that when I last chatted with him at the White Horse<sup>19</sup> (also four blocks off). But good gawd—a half century ago?! Old, did I say?

Thine—  
David

Dec 4 '03

Dear Laura:

Do forgive the silence. I appear to have gone to 938,627 MDs since my last. No, only a few, just seems that way. // You'd never told me you were a poet, you know?<sup>20</sup> So how'd I know? I sure do wish you luck on placing a book. // I just saw a first pre-pub review of my own new book,<sup>21</sup> only Kirkus, but it appears I am single-handedly keeping American lit significant. I wonder if guys like Roth or Barth or DeLillo know that, poor deluded souls.

Meantime I turn 76 on 12/20. About eighteen months ago I was 27.

Thine—  
David

<sup>19</sup> The White Horse Tavern, at Hudson & 11<sup>th</sup> Street, was a popular Greenwich Village gathering-place for writers and artists (including David, Dylan Thomas, Bob Dylan, James Baldwin, and Norman Mailer) during the 1950s and 60s.

<sup>20</sup> I had, in my very first letter.  
<sup>21</sup> *Vanishing Point*.



**Interview with David Markson** <sup>124</sup>  
*by Laura Sims*

To many readers, even to those of us encountering it almost fifteen years after its publication in 1988, David Markson's groundbreaking novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* seemed, and still seems, to have come from literature's future: one that allows for a stripped-down reinvention of character, plot, and narrative while maintaining the emotional intensity and magnetism of the best conventional novels. Markson has refined this alluring combination in the four books that follow *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, each one becoming more and more minimal, thus more and more radical, in their use of the traditional elements of fiction. This loosely defined tetralogy (of which each volume can be readily read by itself) consists of: *Reader's Block*, *This Is Not a Novel*, *Vanishing Point*, and, most recently, and the occasion for this interview, *The Last Novel*.

In this latest book, one can detect Markson's singular voice as well as another defining feature of Markson's work: *The*

*Last Novel* speaks to its predecessors through a plethora of literary/artistic/athletic/operatic/you-name-it allusions, and through self-reflexive comments on structure, such as: “Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.” This interconnectedness is most noticeable in the last four books, but one can trace the tendency in all of Markson’s books, from the recently re-released early “entertainments,” *Epitaph for a Tramp* and *Epitaph for a Dead Beat*, to the more seriously literary *Springer’s Progress* and *Going Down*.

Although the mainstream literary world has been far too slow in fully appreciating Markson’s work, this May, the American Academy of Arts & Letters honored Markson with an Award for Excellence in Literature. Perhaps it’s a sign that the world is catching up, becoming prepared for Markson’s inventive fiction; we can hope that his readership will markedly increase as he gains more much-deserved attention. In any case, whether the world-at-large is ready or not, Markson will continue to court innovation in the book(s) that will follow *The Last Novel*. As he explains in the interview, he is determined to reinvent his narrative *modus operandi* yet again; *The Last Novel* may mark the end of what has become one of contemporary literature’s most exciting and accomplished series of novels, but it marks a new beginning in Markson’s endlessly pioneering career.

—Laura Sims

**Laura Sims:** In *Vanishing Point*, your protagonist speaks about “shuffling and rearranging” his index cards, by way of explaining his method of composition. What does this say about how you yourself go about it, at least in regard to your more recent books? I mean of course those that are crammed with intellectual bits and pieces?

**David Markson:** It says a great deal, actually. Though in fact my books have always been filled with that sort of material, even if I had to handle it differently, earlier on. Springer, in *Springer’s Progress*, Kate, in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*—they’re both walking repositories of intellectual trivia. But in those instances, the stuff simply fell as it occurred to them, meaning where it was called for in the narrative. But in these last four volumes—where that material *is* the books—the approach had to be new. All my life I’ve been an inveterate checker-off-in-margins, but in recent years, writing *Reader’s Block* and the rest, I simply began to copy out the stuff that interested me instead. And where better than on three-by-five cards?

**LS:** But doesn’t that become unwieldy? After all, there must be thousands for each book, finally.

**DM:** Do I describe this or don’t I, I can’t remember? I file them one behind the other, in the tops of shoe boxes, ultimately two of those taped end to end. So it comes to about two feet per book, I’d guess. But even as the stacks are expanding, I’m shuffling and rearranging repeatedly, as you quoted a minute ago.

**LS:** Be more specific.

**DM:** Oh, well—an item about Dante, let's say. If that one seems to go relatively near the front here, then where does this other Dante go? Oh, but now wait, this Guido Cavalcanti on the same theme, which of the two do I connect that one with? And before or after? And how nearby, so the connection might be spotted? Et cetera, et cetera. Obviously, because of the numbers alone, it's far more complicated than that. And on top of which, this is going on for a couple of years also, starting with the lonely very first few cards, and then with each additional one being dropped into one tentative spot or another as I keep on adding.

**LS:** But even at the end, surely a lot of it still has to be somewhat random?

**DM:** Of course. There are hundreds of things that I find intrinsically interesting, or that echo different themes, but which have to simply fall where they may. Nonetheless, as I said, those other placements are all generally much more intricate and interconnected than I've indicated, and often pretty subtle. I'm also aware that a fairly high percentage of my readers are conscious of very little of it all.

**LS:** But good readers are?

**DM:** Naturally, sure. In fact, an amusing story. Even before he finished the first of them, Kurt Vonnegut called me. "David, what sort of computer did you use to juggle all that stuff?" I had to tell him I didn't own one—I still don't, incidentally—and that

it all came out of my aging and rapidly deteriorating brain. Plus of course those ubiquitous index cards.

**LS:** Why are you suddenly laughing?

**DM:** More to the same story, actually. That first of the series, *Reader's Block*, is the one in which I mention all those suicides, everybody from Empedocles to Sappho to Hart Crane to Sylvia Plath, there must be a hundred and fifty of them scattered through. Well, and of course also my central figure, Reader himself, at the conclusion. So in any case Kurt called me back a little later, when he'd actually finished. This time it was, "David, I worry about your mental condition."

**LS:** Presumably you reassured him?

**DM:** I'm still extant.

**LS:** But sadly as of recently he isn't, alas. Meanwhile—

**DM:** Wait. Listen. Under the circumstances, would another Vonnegut recollection or two be out of place here?

**LS:** Of course not. Do, yes.

**DM:** Both anecdotes that come to mind involve me anyhow. The first goes back to when I was trying to find a publisher for *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Or rather when my agent was. Elaine, my ex-wife.

**LS:** And you had fifty-four rejections. For the work most people consider your most important. It's still beyond belief.

**DM:** The most dismal part of it wasn't the number of turn-downs, but rather the reasoning behind them. Editors who truly admired the thing, but then announced that it was too intellectual or too offbeat for most readers to handle. Or worse, places where the editor was, in fact, willing to take a chance, but then the sales clucks vetoed it. Trust me, it got to be pretty draining, after a while. This was back in the mid-1980s, by the way. And in any case, somewhere back along in there, there was this major international PEN conference here in New York, writers from all over the world. In recent years I've pretty much ceased to be a PEN member, but at that time I went uptown to sit in on some of the sessions. And at one juncture I was wandering down a corridor in the hotel—I forget which hotel it was—and out of the corner of my eye I spotted Kurt, backed against a sort of cul-de-sac wall, and literally *surrounded* by admirers—at least twenty or more. You know, probably younger writers from everywhere to hell and gone, getting a chance to exchange a word or two with someone they had previously only been able to admire from a distance. Anyhow, I just kept on walking. But then after half a minute, no more, Kurt caught up to me and led me on down the hall—urgently, almost. I don't know what sort of excuse he'd made, to bolt that way. And what did he want? As soon as he found us a quiet alcove—"David, tell me what's happening with that manuscript?" I didn't even remember having spoken to him about the problems. But there he was, that concerned. Now maybe he'd been famous for long

enough so that basking in all that adulation was something he could easily wave aside—but still, I found it extraordinary. Who the hell was I? Practically nobody at that entire convention had ever heard my name, at that juncture. But this was Kurt, who he was.

**LS:** All of us should have friends like that.

**DM:** But that's part of the point there too. He and I weren't even ever that close, though it would turn out that I'd see a good deal more of him in subsequent years. He was always that way. That second incident I had in mind was only three years ago or so. He was doing a gig at that enormous Barnes and Noble in Union Square. And the place was just mobbed, I mean to the extent that they'd actually had to lock the front doors some hours before it started. I was sitting a little behind and to the side of him, with a couple of others, waiting to go to dinner afterward, and I had a classic view of the kids lined up to get books signed, and it was utterly astonishing. They were being rushed through by the security people, guards snatching their books and slapping them down for Kurt to autograph, no conversation permitted, no requesting please make it "For Evelyn," just snatch, slap, accept it back, and down the nearby escalator you go. But I kept gauging their faces. As I said, again relatively young people, most of them. And it wasn't the predictable look of excitement or admiration you'd see with virtually any other famous author, or even awe, but I swear, there was something almost religious-seeming in it. Is that a ridiculous exaggeration? The more reasonable word I'm looking for is "devotion," maybe. Which

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Publicist: [nina@powerHouseBooks.com](mailto:nina@powerHouseBooks.com)