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THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF IVAN ISAENKO

by Scott Stambach

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A
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Selection*

WEDNESDAY BOOKS



A Conversation with Scott Stambach

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

I'm a bit of a weirdo in the literary world because I have no literary background! Back in college, I was 100 percent determined to become a research physicist or a rock star—whatever came first. In the end, I became a physics and astronomy teacher, which allowed me to be a physicist and a rock star.

Then I made the mistake of reading the book *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski. Anyone who picks this book up and fans through the pages will immediately see that it is one of the most unique and experimental pieces of literature ever written. But when I started reading it, I discovered that it wasn't just clever—it was enthralling. I couldn't stop reading. So much that while I was supposed to be visiting Machu Picchu in Cuzco, Peru, I found myself holed up in a cafe for six days reading instead of exploring the city.

When I finished the book, I had this thought: I want to write something that makes people feel the way I do right now. So over the next year, I made a commitment to write five hundred words a day, every day, no matter what. I wrote these really bad short stories and sent them to journals. Then somehow, then years later, I finished *The Invisible Life of Ivan Isaenko*, my first novel.

Would you care to share any writing tips?

God, yes. I learned way too much the hard way. Like...



Tip #1: Learn to love rejection to masochistic proportions.

I received 116 rejections before I ever published a single short story (and if that doesn't seem like a lot, I urge you to count to 116 while imagining a gut punch after every number).

But before I let it shatter my dreams, I did something clever. I reverse psychologized my rejections by making a folder in my inbox called "celebrations." Then I stuffed every rejection into that folder. I trained myself to be exhilarated by every new rejection. This was so successful that by the time I finally read *Dear Mr. Stambach, We are thrilled to accept _____ for publication in _____* I was thoroughly confused about how to feel.

Eight years later, I started shopping *Ivan* to agents. How many rejections did I receive before I got an email from my agent telling me that she loved the book? The answer is ninety!

I'm guessing you get the point—there is no way through this business without experiencing comical amounts of rejection. So...learn to love it. Maybe even enjoy it.

Tip #2: Find a routine that works for you and commit to it like a marriage.

Writing is not a career. It is art and art is a value.

Waiting until you feel inspired before living out your values is a huge trap. Imagine a mother whose deepest value is being a good parent. Would she

About the Author

wait to feel inspired before she decided to be a kick-ass mom? Nope. She'd commit to being a good caregiver even when she felt like holy hell.

The same goes for writing. Art is not about whether or not you *feel like it*. You may not always love what comes out. That's fine. You can always edit later. But the bottom line is that at the end of the day you've made art.

Tip #3: Have something to say.

Writers should consider the investment required to read a book: someone needs to drive to a bookstore, pay money on the gamble that they will like it, and then spend all the hours it takes to flip pages to the end. This is a lot to ask.

So if a reader is going to do all that work, you need to give them something back, something so real and human that they see a piece of themselves reflected in the story. Readers want to feel connected and understood.

What was the inspiration for this novel?

Much like Ivan, the exact birthday of the book is debatable. The only thing I know for sure is that sometime in the summer of 2007, I accidentally stumbled onto a documentary called *Chernobyl Heart*. It depicted way too well the realities inside of the hospitals in Eastern Europe where victims of the infamous nuclear explosion were hidden from the world. By the end, my eyes were soaked



and I was ready to step into the ring and go twelve rounds with Lenin's ghost.

The film was almost unbearable to watch for several reasons. But, one piece stood out, leaving me feeling most helpless and hopeless. It was the fact that even with the acute public interest, these kids had no voice. Yes, they got some camera time on an internationally distributed documentary. Yes, they got to mumble a few words into the cameras. But, it wasn't enough. There was too much pain there, too much history, too much hush-hush. Ultimately, *Ivan* is an homage to those kids.

In the days that followed, the idea of writing a novel chronicling their lives started to assemble. A year later, I was lucky enough to take a creative writing course taught by the brilliant writer of *Madeleine Is Sleeping*, Sarah Shun-lien Bynum. I ended up writing *Ivan* as a short story for that class. Fast-forward three more years, I decided to include it in a collection of short stories I was trying to publish. But, instead of publishing that collection as planned, I was urged to develop *Ivan* into a novel, and found myself back to my original inspiration. After fourteen months of feverish writing, the Mazyr Hospital for Gravely Ill Children came to life.

About the Author

Can you tell us about what research, if any, you did before writing this novel?

Most of my research came from two places. My initial spark and source material came from documentaries like *Chernobyl Heart*. The other was my Ukrainian high school sweetheart who

was kind enough to provide translations for all the Russian curse words.

Do you have firsthand experience with its subject or base any of the characters on people from your own life?

I'm happy to say that I don't have any firsthand experience with friends or family being involved in the radioactive fallout of Chernobyl. That said, this book would not have been written without my grandmother, Josephine. When I was old enough to know what was going on, but not old enough to process it, I watched the painful process of her passing away from cancer. I also happened to be in the room the moment she passed. That was when I learned how loud and lonely death could be. I never really processed that experience, but twenty years later, as I was writing this book, I realized that I was writing what I saw on the day my grandmother died into the life and death of Polina, Ivan's love. And for the first time I realized that I was making some meaning out of that experience.

What is the most interesting or surprising thing you learned as you set out to tell your story?

One of the most amazing things I learned didn't happen until much after I set out to write. Actually, it happened after it was already published.

Once *Ivan* was out in the world, I had the odd realization that the book was technically only half done when it was published. Obviously, I don't mean this literally (there's no way you can



get a half-finished book through all those intense copyeditors). What I mean is that so much of the book's meaning wasn't built until readers started sharing their thoughts with me and to the world. As much as I thought I knew what this book was about when I finished writing it, I realized that it wasn't complete until readers had their say. This was both surprising and beautiful. It made the book feel like a living, breathing thing existing in the world. In a way, I had to give up exclusive ownership of my book, my baby. In exchange, I gained a relationship with readers that felt much more collaborative and alive.

About the Author

Are you currently working on another book? And if so, can you tell us what it's about?

I'm in the process of writing two new novels. One is about a hotel in Rio de Janeiro that contains all of time. The other is about a derelict in New Orleans who finds himself in the strange position of having to raise his infant niece off the grid and hide her existence. I hope to publish one or more of them some day.



A Selection of Photographs

The following are photographs of Pripyat, the abandoned town where the Chernobyl engineers and their families once lived.



Jennifer Boyer



Ben Adlard

Reading
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Gold



*Behind the
Novel*



Jennifer Boyer



Recommended Reading

House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski

I could sum it up in a sentence: this book is the reason I became a writer. If you held this book in your hands and fanned through the pages, you would find a curious assortment of fonts; pages with words going backward, sideways, up and down; and some pages with only a single word. The book is extremely playful with form. But don't fall into the trap of thinking it's unreadable. I've never been so hooked on a book in my life, largely because of its engrossing premise: a family who discovers (to their horror) that their house is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.

Kafka on the Shore by Haruki Murakami

Haruki Murakami might be a genius. But not just any genius. A genius whose mind works unlike any other writer I've ever read. *Kafka on the Shore* is a magical and surreal story about a teenage boy who decides to leave home on an epic journey only to later discover that his father's been murdered and the evidence points to his involvement. Along the way, we're introduced to hidden dimensions, a magical crow, supernatural sex scenes, and a simpleton with a telekinetic connection to cats. The story is so addictive that only hunger and extreme exhaustion could get me to put it down. Half of the allure comes from the prose itself. Murakami reads so easily. He's like a wizard in the way he creates complex and charming stories with such simple prose. I remember telling a friend that Murakami's books are like fully functional intergalactic spaceships made out of Play-Doh.



Ultimately, Kafka is my reminder that prose doesn't need to brag to be brilliant.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
by Junot Díaz

I don't know of any book that's shown up on more "Best of the 2000s" lists (and very often in the number-one spot) than *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. And I couldn't agree more with the hype. *Oscar* is as close to perfect craft as anything I've ever read. It is the literary equivalent of Jackson Pollock. Every element hangs in artful balance. It masterfully juggles historical rigor, humor, and experimental prose with seriously heavy issues like immigrant belonging, masculinity, and the history of the DR's Trujillo regime. Telling a story like this, especially through such an innovative voice, is about as tough as storytelling gets. And yet somehow Díaz does it masterfully. I'm not too proud to confess that whenever I finish writing a novel, it's *Oscar* I turn to as the yardstick to measure my own craft.

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez

This was the other pivotal book that lit my fire to write. It was also the first book that taught me how beautiful words can be. Oh yeah, and it also happens to be one of the most inspired and ambitious novels ever written. This is illustrated perfectly in the story of how García Márquez came to write the book (which may be my favorite author story of all time). Apparently, he was driving

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his family through the mountains of Colombia on the way to a summer family vacation. However, when the idea for the novel came to him, he pulled a U-turn, drove all the way back home, and sold his car so that he could spend the next eighteen months writing nonstop. As it would turn out, the gamble paid off. The story filled with humanity, imagination, and magic. Not to mention, it scored García Márquez the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature.

***Consider the Lobster* by David Foster Wallace**

It's hard to imagine any Gen X writer not having a bit of a crush on David Foster Wallace. With that said, most people equate him with his long and dense works like *Infinite Jest*. Most don't know that his nonfiction is a whole other beast, made up of hilarious, accessible, and insightful investigative journalism. *Consider the Lobster* is probably the best example of this. In it you'll find stories about what happens when adult-movie starlets meet their fans, the wars that dictionary writers wage with each other, and the age-old question of whether lobsters feel pain. Wildly weird and enjoyable for readers of all ages.

***Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov**

Lolita needs to make an appearance on this list for a bunch of reasons. First, it's Ivan's favorite book. Actually, it's more like an obsession. He owns three copies and references it constantly. As for me, what I love most about *Lolita* is the voice. It is simultaneously beautiful and smart and clever



and crude and self-conscious. The main character, Humbert Humbert, might be my all-time favorite unreliable narrator. And it is certainly a voice that inspired Ivan's own brand of intellect, vulgarity, and charm.

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Reading Group Questions

1. As the last paragraph suggests, there are as many themes in *The Invisible Life of Ivan Isaenko* as there are pages. But if you were to put the author's overall message into a single sentence, what would it be?
2. At the beginning of the book, Ivan gets into a conversation with Natalya about Buddhism. Afterward, he says that he "bear[s] a striking resemblance to the Buddha sitting beneath the Bodhi Tree." What do you suppose he meant?
3. What did you know about the Chernobyl incident before reading this novel? How, if at all, did it teach you about, or change your impression of this event?
4. For seemingly no reason, Ivan bursts into tears after having exerted rigid control over his emotions for most of his life. When Natalya sees this, she comforts him and says, "You'll find, Ivan, that most of the evil in the world is done by men who are addicted to their own thoughts." What does she mean?
5. Ivan has a bit of a potty mouth. He can be vulgar and doesn't seem to know that he overshares a lot (especially as it pertains to bodily functions). What do you suppose was the author's intention for that element of Ivan's voice?
6. Ivan lives a very detached, managed, and curated existence. He does this so he doesn't have to feel too much or worry about any surprises. What is it about Polina or his relationship with her that is able to change his most entrenched habits?



7. Many of the themes of this book have to do with our heart's deepest values, those things that bring purpose and meaning to life and define how we want to be in the world. What are the core values that help guide your life?
8. At the Mazyr Hospital for Gravely Ill Children, patience and kindness is hard to come by. The nurses are impatient and ornery, as is Ivan and the director. It seems that Natalya is the only exception to this rule. What makes Natalya different?
9. Ivan seems annoyed that Ridick is able to cure the heart-hole children while the rest of the patients are left hanging in the breeze. He even quotes his hero Nabokov: "The world needs happy endings no matter how unethical." Why does Ivan use this quote? What do you think it means within the context of this novel?
10. Ivan seems to be both terrified and drawn to Polina because she is someone who can reflect his reality back to him. What does this mean for Ivan? What does this mean for us as human beings?
11. At the end of the day, what can we learn about our world—and ourselves—from Ivan's story?

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