***Two Month Review* Presents**

*The Invented Part*

By Rodrigo Fresán

Translated from the Spanish by Will Vanderhyden

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**Introducing *The Invented Part***

[Podcast Episode 1.1](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/2-introducing-rodrigo-fres%C3%A1ns-the-invented-part/id1253564436?i=1000389329496&mt=2)

A lively if sometimes-disjointed paean to creativity. Invented, and deeply inventive as well, an exemplary postmodern novel that is both literature and entertainment.—*Kirkus Reviews* (STARRED REVIEW)

One of the most respected Spanish-language authors of our times, Rodrigo Fresán (*Kensington Gardens*) has been praised by the likes of John Banville, Jonathan Lethem, Enrique Vila-Matas, and Roberto Bolaño, and his work has earned comparisons to David Foster Wallace, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and many others.

That might all sound like hyperbole, but won’t as soon as you start reading *The Invented Part*, the first book in a projected trilogy (*The Dreamed Part* was recently released in Spanish) this novel mixes high concept science-in-fiction ideas with hilariously manic lists, and deep dives into the history of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*, Kubrick’s *2001*, The Kinks, and more.

The plot of *The Invented Part* is simple enough: an aging writer whose books about how writers and writing are no longer the preferred flavor of the literary world wants to change—and extend—his life by breaking into CERN and the Large Hadron Collider so that he can merge with the so-called “god particle” and become a consciousness outside of time, one that can rewrite reality according to his whims.

Although the overarching plot is pretty wild, the book is filled with heart and humanity, with each chapter taking a different stylistic approach to the writer’s life and times, opening with a moving story of his near-death experience at a beach while his parents’ relationship falls apart, and including a section on the writer’s sister’s marriage into a wealthy family that is as insufferable as it is bizarre, resulting in her own madness. There’s also an anxiety-ridden section with the writer in the ER, panicked that he’s having a heart attack, which triggers a tidal wave of story ideas that he hopes to be able to one day write. (If only he can merge with the god particle!)

There are also incredible sections—half historical, half invented—about Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Gerald and Sara Murphy, about William Burroughs, about *2001: A Space Odyssey*, all of which add to the underlying exploration of the relationship between great art and the artists that give rise to it.

For all of its inventiveness and depth, *The Invented Part* is also an incredibly readable book. Fresán is an irrepressible and consummate stylist whose writing is imbued with great intelligence and insight, pop culture references and literary hijinks, unforgettable characters and mind-bending ideas. It’s a testament to the power and expanse of fiction, and reaffirms Fresán as one of the greatest novelists of our time. Overall, it’s a joy to immerse yourself in, and, like the best of authors, will leave you craving more.

Which is good, since Open Letter has already signed on two more Fresán titles, *The Bottom of the Sky* (May 2018) and *Mantra* (TBD), with plans to complete the “Parts” trilogy as well. The manuscript of *The Bottom of the Sky* is available for interested reviewers, and Fresán is available for interviews both in English (by phone) and Spanish (written).

Also worth noting that translator Will Vanderhyden—whose other translations include Carlos Labbé’s *Loquela* and *Navidad & Matanza*—received an NEA Translation Fellowship and a Lannan Fellowship for his work on this book. He too is available for interviews or to answer any questions about Fresán’s other books.

**Some Notes on “The Real Character”**

[Podcast Episode 1.2](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/3-the-real-character-the-invented-part-pages-1-45/id1253564436?i=1000389329493&mt=2)

I can’t think of another book with as many epigraphs as *The Invented Part*. Sixteen! There are quotes from David Foster Wallace, Iris Murdoch, Bret Easton Ellis, Marcel Proust, Bob Dylan, and many others. Eleven others, to be exact. Covering the first two-and-a-half pages of the book. Some of these are pithy (Juan Carlos Onetti’s “Always lie”), whereas Geoff Dyer’s runs seven full lines.

Taken as a whole, these sixteen (again, sixteen!) epigraphs make a good deal of sense and serve almost as an overture for the book. They tend to revolve around ideas about reality vs. fiction. About writing and autobiography, and the relationship of both to the truth.

All of that comes together in this one from John Cheever, which also works to frame my initial thoughts about “The Real Character” (emphasis on “real,” emphasis on
“character”), the first part of *The Invented Part*.

Writing is not crypto-autobiography, and it’s not current events. I’m not writing my autobiography, and I’m not writing things as they happen to me, with the exception of the use of details—thunderstorms and that sort of thing. No, it’s nothing that happened to me. It’s a possibility. It’s an idea.

It’s easy to see The Writer (the main focus of the novel, known as The Boy in this particular chapter) as a stand-in for Fresán, and maybe when we get deeper into the book, it will make more sense to write a post about that. But for now, I want to focus on the last bit of Cheever’s quote: “It’s a possibility.” Because this book is all about possibilities—the way things were, the way they could’ve been—and the interplay between the possible and the invented.

\*

“The Real Character” is basically an origin story. It shows The Boy (who will eventually become The Writer) on vacation with his parents (or “*onvacation*” since he hears it as a single word), at the beach, running and playing unselfconsciously while his soon-to-divorce parents read in the sun and bicker with each other. And then there’s an event that could’ve broke any number of ways, and which, in retrospect, is the moment that serves as a secret source for all his future writings.

Is this the most important thing that’s happened to him yet?, The Boy wonders. (Who knows, he responds; and, at the other end of his story, decades later, he’ll say yes, when he realizes that the most transcendent events *take place* in the past but only *happen* in the future, when we’re truly cognizant of their importance, of the influence and weight they’ve had on everything that has and will come to pass. And it’s that which happens *after* that makes the *before* sad or happy. We need to know where we’re coming to in order to fully understand the texture of where we came from. [. . .]

This is the sort of idea that could launch a thousand weed-filled dorm room conversations. We never know what was most important until that moment is long past. In the present, we might sense the possibilities, the way our life could shift based on a single decision or accident, but we never get to see those other pathways. Except maybe in fiction, but fiction has the benefit of being able to make those choices or events part of a larger whole—whether things turned out for the best or not.

This is jumping way ahead, but later in the book The Writer echoes this idea when talking about “logical irrealism”:

If magical realism is realism with irreal details, then logical irrealism is its twin opposite: irreality with realistic details . . . And yet, is there anything as irreal as so-called realism? Those stories and novels with dramatic pacing and a perfectly calculated and managed sequence of events. Like *Madame Bovary*. Or the neat structure and the precise pacing of most detective novels. But reality isn’t like that. Reality is undisciplined and unpredictable. Real reality is authentically irreal . . . There is more realism and verisimilitude in a single day of the free and fluid and conscious drifting of Clarissa Dalloway than in the entire prolix and well-measured life and death of Anna Karenina.

All this talk of fiction, possibilities, and books is the perfect segue to go back to the parents on the beach who are sort of, kind of reading the same book together:

On the beach, under the sun, the father and mother read the same book. It’s not the first time they’ve done this. That’s how they met: the two of them reading the same book. On a train, the most romantic of all modes of transit. That same book they never stop reading. And, of course, there’s no better argument than that for putting a conversation in drive and taking a ride down the tunnel of love. But as tends to happen with everything that seems charming in a romance’s initial hours, this ritual of reading separately together—of reading the same book but different books, at the same time—now just produces a kind of irritation. The kind of annoyance we experience when, after a long time, we still feel obliged to do something that we obliged ourselves to do in the first place. And, then, you can’t help but wonder, why am I doing this, damn it, damn it, how did I get here, could I be more of an idiot? [. . .]

And the father and mother don’t know it yet, but they’re reading different versions of the same novel in the same way that they’re writing different versions of their marriage and the imminent allegations of their defense and/or prosecution. Because the book’s author decided, almost desperate, just before dying, to alter the temporal flow of the plot—which wasn’t initially linear, but sinuous, present and past and present—and to reorganize it chronologically. To see—he’d just put so much work into those pages and nobody seemed that interested in them, considering them a successful failure or something like that—if, that way, the novel improved, if it was appreciated more, if it sold better. His instructions were followed post-mortem by his literary executor. The new version was considered inferior and he reverted to the original, to the one that—just like real time—moves forward and backward and forward again. But for a few years, in English and in translation, both versions existed at the same time. And The Boy—when he was no longer a boy, when he was able to read and compare them, multiple times—was never sure which his mother had read and which his father had read. Who moved straight and true from past to future and who was left spinning in place.

It’s made explicitly clear later, but the book The Boy/The Writer’s parents is reading is *Tender Is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. A novel that really was published in two differing orders: one that was semi-complicated and filled with flashbacks, the other that was more straightforward and chronological. With art there’s always the opportunity to rearrange things and explore other possibilities.

\*

Another thread that runs throughout this chapter is a sort of tension about the possibility of going back in time and changing one’s life. This is most explicit with the parents, who, while they’re lying on the sand have that untoward thought that a lot of parents have at one time or another—what if I could go back to the time before I had kids?

No, the father and mother are dragged along by The Boy. The father and mother drag their feet, and a wicker basket, and an umbrella, and towels, and their own bodies. And the father and the mother are dragged by The Boy. As if he were steering them, lassoed, pulling them along, strangling them with an invisible and inseverable rope around their necks. And it’s not like the mother and father have tried to sever it, but it’s also not like they haven’t thought many times about *what* it would be like to cut it. And—presto!—magically return to the past, to those other beaches, where The Boy only existed as a pleasant and egotistical fantasy. The father and the mother return, further away all the time, to The Boy as a mere idea that occurred to them every so often. An idea to enjoy for a while and then hide away under lock and key (one of those keys that you can’t ever find when you look for it and that, with the aid of a pair of parentheses, seems to become invisible) in the drawers of a more or less possible future, always yet to come or, at least, a lateral future, in the possible variation of a possible future. This is what every father and mother in the universe dreams when they close their eyes, though none of them ever confess it. Right there. In that instant. Before falling asleep and dreaming of any other thing, of free falling or being naked in public—the greatest hits of the common nightmare. But first, like the trailer for a movie that will never premiere. About what it’d be like to not be parents. To wake up on a planet where there wasn’t someone resting—yet restlessly moving and making noise—in the next room. About times when they went to bed late or not at all. [. . .] And sometimes The Boy’s dreams overlap with his parents’ dreams, producing a strange phenomenon: The Boy dreams he’s running on a beach without them and his father and mother dream they’re running on a beach without him. And they’re all so happy. And yet the next morning they understand that they can’t live without each other; that, though less and less, they still need each other; that now, nothing and nobody can or will ever be able to separate them or untie the knot of their lives.

And yet, the invulnerability of that instant of pure love doesn’t last long; and now The Boy is trying get away from them, running.

\*

One of my favorite aspects of Fresán’s writing—which he really exploits in this novel—is his endless list making. Amusing, poignant, wooly, and overflowing, these lists make manifest all the various possibilities of a given situation.

What does The Boy think about? Lots of things! A good writer would point to the racing nature of the boy’s mind, how thoughts are freer when you’re small and haven’t yet heard how stupid your voice sounds when it’s recorded, or what you look like when you dance. An equally good writer might pull out a few telling examples of what’s going on in The Boy’s mind—ideas that illuminate his character and fears, while foreshadowing the arc of his story. (I’m not sure that’s a book I would think is “good,” but whatever.) Fresán provides forty-one random examples of The Boy’s thoughts over six pages, ranging from the childish,

\* Why does Superman appear to exert himself equally—the same muscle

tension, the same knit brow—when he picks up a car or alters the orbit of an

entire planet?

or,

\* Is Jell-O animal, vegetal, mineral, or interplanetary?

to the more character-specific,

\* What’s a comma doing putting itself between two numbers? Was mathematics created just to drive him crazy, a universal conspiracy in which everyone pretends to understand something that’s clearly incomprehensible and has no sense or logic? And what makes a psychotic so sure that 2 + 2 makes 5, while a neurotic knows that 2 + 2 makes 4 but just can’t handle it? And what about the person who always thinks that 2 + 2 equals 1 + 1 + 1 + 1, or the exact number of times you have to let the phone ring before answering or hanging up?

to the more philosophical wonderings a reader looking back on life as a child might think.

\* Why is it that now, later on, when people sing “Happy Birthday” they seem to always be thinking about their own birthday, about how many they’ve had, how many they’ve got left, about whether or not they are *happy* birthdays?

\*

Although I think the seven sections of this novel could be read in any order, “The Real Character” is a great opening piece, introducing The Boy/The Writer and Fresán’s literary style (references, digressions, lists, and sidesteps) alongside a number of key motifs, not the least of which is the idea of “the invented part,” which comes up near the end and which is where I’ll leave off for this week.

The invented part that is not, not ever, the deceitful part, but the part that actually makes something that merely happened into something as it should have happened. Something (everything to come, the rest of his life, will spring from that there and then, from that exact moment) more authentic and valuable and pure than the simple and banal and often unsubtle and sloppy truth. [. . .]

Then, unavoidably, unable to avoid it, when answering those questions, he’ll put on a parentheses face, he’ll invent something, anything, when answering how he invents the invented part. The invented part—an oh so insubstantial cloud that, nonetheless, manages to make the sun shut its mouth and stay quiet for a while—is nothing but a true shadow projecting itself across the real part.

**Reflections and Mirrors**

[Podcast Episode 1.3](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/4-place-where-sea-ends-so-forest-can-begin-part-1-invented/id1253564436?i=1000389329494&mt=2)

Even though it’s not directly related to what I want to focus on in the first section of the second part of *The Invented Part* (pages 46-98 of “The Place Where the Sea Ends So the Forest Can Begin”), I just have to point out this passage, which sort of hits close to home . . . It’s one of The Writer’s statements about literature that The Young Man and The Young Woman have been gathering:

“My surprise at how, all the time, less of what’s written outside the country is read inside it and that it’s only read when that foreign writer is published by a small local publisher and thus ‘discovered’ by some local critic or academic, no matter that the book has already been circulating there for years. As if foreign writing is only worthy of consideration after being appropriated and nationalized. And, sometimes, there are even discussions that establish absurd connections and comparisons—convinced to the point of fanaticism, insisting on impossible chronological influences of something written there on something written here—with some national writer, more a sect writer than a cult writer. Someone, generally, already conveniently and comfortably dead, and hence possible to manipulate. Someone who, no doubt, neither read nor knew of that generally far-superior foreign writer.”

Yeah.

But what I really want to start with are two *other* quotes from The Writer about the process of writing itself. Or, more to the point, the way in which writing represents reality.

Writing is a discipline that becomes more difficult every day. It’s like what happens with a camera lens. Or with the human eye. At first, everything appears upside down, head down, feet up. And it’s the machine and the brain that take charge of straightening it, righting it, and giving it some logical meaning. But it’s a deceptive meaning. An illusion. And so, at any moment, everything can come crashing down and expose the deception in all its clumsy obviousness.

And:

Literature doesn’t serve reality. That’s why it’s fiction . . . But let’s get back to the idea of realism. To that whole fallacy of literature as reality’s faithful mirror . . . A lie, impossible. Reality doesn’t function like it does in supposedly realist books, it doesn’t respect such dramatic pacing, neat sequences of events, one after another in perfect and functional formation . . .

The idea of literature being a mirror of reality—and the corollary that follows about how literature is just an *artifice* pretending to reflect reality—is an idea that’s been around for essentially ever. Here’s a quote from Stendhal’s *Charterhouse of Parma*:

A novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet. And the man who carries this mirror in his pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shews the mire, and you blame the mirror! Rather blame that high road upon which the puddle lies, still more the inspector of roads who allows the water to gather and the puddle to form.

And although it’s not exactly the same, there’s also this bit from Stephan Dedalus in *Ulysses* (a book that pops up a few times in this particular chapter):

Stephen bent forward and peered at the mirror held out to him, cleft by a crooked crack, hair on end. As he and others see me. [. . .]

Drawing back and pointing, Stephen said with bitterness:

—It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant.

\*

I don’t want to suggest that Fresán’s approach in this chapter is a simplistic refutation of the idea that fiction should serve as a reflection of reality. The Writer more or less takes that viewpoint apart in his mini-rant about “logical irrealism” as the counterpoint to “magical realism” on page 65. That bit is brilliant—and pretty much defines the sort of books that I like to read—but The Writer isn’t Fresán, or not exactly. He’s a *reflection* of Fresán, a sort of fun-house mirror version of Fresán, in which Fresán’s more rational, muted views can be exaggerated and over-emphasized. (See the fourth part of the interview we’re running on Three Percent, which is an excerpt from *The Dreamed Part* in which The Writer unleashes a screed against our screen culture.) I think what Fresán is doing in this section is more subtle and interesting than a straightforward attack on the tenets of neo-realistic literature. Instead of mirroring “reality,” this section essentially reflects the book itself, creating a series of mirrorings, or doublings, that articulate a part of Fresán’s aesthetic approach and create a stronger sense of literary sincerity than a simple “reflection of reality” ever can.

 Instead of trying to explain what I mean in some pseudo-academic, well-crafted, persuasive set of arguments, I’m going to resort to a simple list of observations and long quotes.

\*

In the first chapter, we get The Writer’s near-death experience as a child, which serves as the origin, or birth, of all his future ideas. In this chapter, we see The Writer after he’s gone, all of his creations created, his body having left the Earth.

\*

Now, The Young Man inhabits that terrible moment in the life of any writer, any prewriter. A zone without limits where *everything* seems worthy of being told, *everything* could end up making a good story, *every* horse looks at you with those bet-on-me eyes. But it’s all a dreamer’s dream. A desert of deceptive fertility where nothing germinates. Just titles, first sentences, endings, dedications, epigraphs (of which, like in The Writer’s books, there will be, for many people, too many), acknowledgements (which, like in The Writer’s books will be, for most people, too many; but The Young Man has been reconsidering their inclusion ever since The Young Woman told him that, “I don’t believe them, they’re false, they’re acknow*lie*dgements”), and speeches, and even cover designs for editions with various publishers and in various languages.

So many epigraphs and acknowledgments—just like in the book you’re reading . . .

\*

From all those hours and hours recorded in a variety of formats—from celluloid, to video, and even to digitalization for mobile phones and tablets—The Young Man and The Young Woman have selected a handful of what The Writer tended to refer to as “my minimal maxims,” which he repeated again and again throughout his books. So, a curious effect. An audio-visual effect. A kind of slippery passageway between fiction and nonfiction. Like someone who sounds—simultaneously, a twofer, a special offer—like the ventriloquist dummy of a ventriloquist. And The Young Man and The Young Woman are going to toy with it, splicing together similar sentences from different periods (like that timeless and constant and strange addiction to quoting Faulkner, a writer he almost never read), establishing an idea with The Writer looking young and more or less successful and finishing it off with The Writer looking older and more remote and, then, showing that same sentence, almost verbatim, appearing in the mouth and the role of one of his characters.

\*

There’s also the fun aspect of this chapter—which has a lot of visual elements throughout—opening with The Young Man and Young Woman videotaping The Writer’s library, leading to a long series of reflections on the nature of libraries (or *liferaries*), on their importance, on the reactions people have to them, all ending with the Young Woman proclaiming, in disgust, “Ugh, I hope we don’t open by showing the books and desk and all of that.”

\*

Speaking of the book The Writer is obsessed with, *Tender Is the Night* fits right in with this general theme, given its two editions that are similar to each other, yet not.

\*

More arcane, but these two excerpts from *The Invented Part* bring to mind *The Bottom of the Sky*, another of Fresán’s novels (coming to English readers everywhere in spring 2018!).

The Young Woman talks in her sleep and says strange things, that she repeats the verb “fall” and the place “swimming pool” over and over again. [. . .]

And third, because then she read The Writer. And it’s not that she fell in love with him. But she did fall in love with the character of a woman who went in and out of his books, in different times and circumstances, in different swimming pools and cities and even planets—and that produced in her the irrepressible need to know more, to get a little closer.

Pulling in bits from the rest of Fresán’s oeuvre not only establishes a larger backdrop against which his books play out, but helps to reflect and recontextualize what’s come before.

\*

The very phrase “bottom of the sky” implies a sort of reflection.

\*

One of the more intriguing reflections within this chapter itself is the contrast between The Writer’s “minimal maxims,” which are all reflections on the process of writing or being a writer, and the imaginary writers that The Young Man has created. On the one hand we get the slippery pontifications of what it’s like to write (“So, that’s how I think about the writing of stories and novels. A particular balance of feelings and sound and phrasings and word games.”), and on the other, we get actual creations (“Cash Krugerrand, the literary agent whom everyone derides in public but dreams of having [and being possessed by] in private.”). Creative material versus more dogmatic pronouncements *about* writing.

\*

One of the things I’m really enjoying about this slow reread of *The Invented Part* is how there are elements of traditional novels—great characters and characterizations (see the description of the Young Man and Young Woman on pages 58-9), enough of a plot to keep pulling the reader through (we get hints of the future of The Writer, and his interaction with the Young Man, in this part), and sentences and phrases that carry a weight of significance (“That’s why others exist: so that we convince ourselves that, for a while, we can stop thinking about ourselves when really, in that moment, we’re just thinking about what others think of us.”)—while also indulging in more playful, intellectual games that aren’t simply rehashed tricks of 60s metafiction or whatever, but seem to be something new.

I’ll leave off this week with one final quote to that sort of speaks to that:

Look at them: The Young Man and The Young Woman are literary animals. They live to read literature and dream of making a living off of a literature based in reading. And they know that modernism (when anything was possible), postmodernism (when everything had been worn out), and post-postmodernism (when, since everything had been worn out, anything was possible) have already passed. And so, now, they’re waiting for the new thing, for what’s next, for their own moment and the corresponding era that corresponds to them.

**Let’s Get Weird**

[Podcast Episode 1.4](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/5-place-where-sea-ends-so-forest-can-begin-part-2-invented/id1253564436?i=1000389329492&mt=2)

Last week I was at the New Directions party for BookExpo and ran into a reviewer who has been reading *The Invented Part.* He's greatly enjoying the novel so far, but thought that this particular section—focusing on Penelope's interactions with the Karmas—would be the most off-putting to average readers.

At first, I was sort of taken aback. *This section? The one with the most tragi-romantic plot? The funniest section so far? The one that takes potshots at the sort of rich and awful and awfully rich family we all love to hate? The one with the glowing green cow? This one's the most difficult?*

Short of *Finnegans Wake*, I don't like to think of books as being "difficult." I think that certain types of books subvert existing expectations about what fiction can—and should—do, and that that gives some people fits. When you're used to getting a certain type of information in a certain way, with a certain sort of end goal in mind (narrative closure, the answer to the mystery laid bare, happiness), books that provide different info in unexpected ways might well frustrate you. They can be "hard to figure out." In other words: not all readers like weird shit.

This could turn into a long post about style, altering reader expectations, books that teach you how to approach them, and other differences between novels obsessed with plot and those that focus on form. But instead, I just want to go over some of the aspects that complicate this section of Fresán's novel.

**1) What's Up with the Two Narrators?**

One of the first things a reader will notice about this section is that it's written in two different fonts (Times New Roman and American Typewriter) that seem to represent two different narrators. They both advance Penelope's story at different times, but for the most part, Typeface #1 (Times New Roman) provides the bones of her story (falls in love, husband ends up in a drug-induced coma on their wedding night, she has to go live with his crazy family, from which she eventually escapes) and Typeface #2 gives additional commentary, like the color man on a sports broadcast.

[Typeface #2 starts after the asterisk.]

Not long now, just a little while, all landing is inevitable, and Penelope’s ears are covered, and, in back of the aircraft, watched over by a doctor and nurse, her husband breathes mechanically, deep in a coma for two weeks now. \* The story, of course, doesn’t begin here. But this is a good starting point, as good as opening—like in those black and white films of Hollywood’s golden age—with a map filling the whole screen and, across it, a line that draws itself from one point to another. And, like in those same movies, lines of text rising from the bottom of the screen and climbing, like a sunrise, to the highest point, explaining everything that happened before, a long time ago in a galaxy far far away. But all at the same time, as if all times were the same time. Backward and forward and up and down and, also, to the right and the left and at oblique and sharp and steeply ascending and descending angles. A lot like the tumbling, head-over-heels deluge of speech that spews forth after drinking multiple liters of truth serum, but, also, like the panoramic and encompassing way the gods think, leisurely reflecting on a landscape where past and present and future occur simultaneously. “All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath.” Who said that? Francis Scott Fitzgerald?

This is a fairly unusual strategy, and one that takes a little while to adjust to, mostly because

**2) Who Is the Second Voice?**

There are a lot of hints in here that this second voice—the American Typewriter typeface—is The Writer, Penelope's brother:

[Typeface #2 starts after the asterisk.]

Sing, O goddess, the wrath of Penelope. A ruinous wrath that caused her family countless sorrows; but that was, it seems, of great inspiration to her brother, who’s now more particular than ever. A brother transformed into particles, courtesy of the God particle and now, all of him, stardust, *blowin’ in the wind*, floating here and there and everywhere, high above in the Big Sky looking down at this little Earth. \* And like the dysfunctions in satellites provoked by hysterical solar storms, he appears, without warning, like those parentheticals directing a histrionic and operatic ghost to enter and exit the most innocent of crime scenes. Lo, here he is, incorporeal yet omnipresent, interfering and interceding and—sheltered by the alibi of *le mot juste* and all that—obsessively repeating ideas and judgments. Projecting himself like the loop of a video that no search engine can locate to download and edit; a video from a security camera where he enters the frame and, after overpowering a fragile scientist, shuts the door and, alone and inside a laboratory, as everyone first orders and then begs him not to, presses a button so that everything, including him, is set in motion and spins and spins and spins until it provokes a nauseating vertigo behind the eyes. Being a nuisance, yes. [. . .] Nothing more and nothing less than that instant, suspended between nothing and everything when a writer spends an eternity of seconds thinking of what he’ll subsequently put down in writing. A map of unfathomable distance separating the measures of the cerebral score from the arrival of the fingers to the goal of the keyboard. Coming out of the same body but from a different source, in a different font. And, to state the obvious, that font is American Typewriter, right?; because that was the script on his first typewriter. And because Penelope’s brother was (is?) a writer, always, with a particular and often criticized interest in American literature, and over and out for a while and . . .

Based on that little bit, it's possible to read these two voices as *both coming from The Writer*. Maybe Typeface #1 is his original attempt to write out Penelope's story, and Typeface #2 is his voice from wherever he is now. Which bring us to

**3) What Happened to The Writer?**

We more or less lay reference to this in the jacket copy, but sticking to the part of the book that we've read so far, this is the closest we've gotten to an explanation:

[All from Typeface #2.]

Here, again, he feels the temptation to modify and literarily enhance that hospital Penelope was moving through with the description of a different hospital. A hospital in the city of B where, later, he’d go with an emergency, a red pain biting his chest at the height of his heart. And going even further: to add additional details about the laboratory/accelerator near Geneva where he’d be transformed into what he is now. [. . .] And here he follows her, her brother, who, not dead but yes disappeared, part of the air and everywhere, watches her not on a TV screen of the netherworld, but as if he were reading her; as if she were a character in a book, that book he never managed to write but that he can’t stop thinking about or wondering about or playing with sometimes complex and sometimes not so complex possible choices, like the one that a flight attendant with the enigmatic smile of a sphinx presents Penelope with now: “Beef, chicken, fish, or pasta?,” she asks.

That more or less clarifies everything, no?

**4) Is This Magical Realism?**

Of the sections we've read so far, this is definitely the one that strays the furthest from so-called "realism." There are the allusions to the author as a disembodied voice commenting on and editing the story, possibly from some ethereal beyond, and then, if that weren't enough, we get this:

And her most recent “achievement” (because Hiriz’s disasters, somehow, end up being flexible conversations at tense dinner tables) has had something to do with her thinking that she can develop a special food for cattle. A diet that, she swears, would make them bigger and more productive. It makes no difference that Hiriz knows nothing about cows, or bulls, or about what they eat, or even what they are for and what they do. Hiriz invested “a little funds, a little savings” in a hundred head of cattle (Penelope hears about this on the way from the airport to Mount Karma, Mamagrandma’s matriarchal mansion) and created, all on her own, a race of colossal mutant bovines the color of emerald fluoride. A fierce and anabolic breed that reproduce at a vertiginous rate and have developed an insatiable carnivorous appetite, prompting them to laughter each other with raw bites and eat each other in a revelry of bovine cannibalism.

Giant green cannibalistic cows. Like the narrators say at the beginning, "Fasten your seatbelts. Turbulence. Deploy the landing gear. Flaps down. \* Here we go."

**5) What's Up with the William Burroughs Stuff?**

So, in the middle of this section, amid discussions of—and jokes about—the Karma Family, there's a long expository bit about William Burroughs's time in Mexico with Jean Vollmer, including a description of the fateful night when Burroughs shot and killed her. This digression is sparked by the performance of Lina, Penelope's one friend in Karma Land:

On the stage, with a red hole in the side of her head, Lina is sitting in front of a TV that broadcasts nothing. Lina is Joan Vollmer, sitting in front of a TV, broadcasting her death and life from the depths of the pre-Columbian netherworld. In the body and voice of Lina, Joan Vollmer is hating on the beatniks and refusing to resign herself to be a minor member in the body of the beat.

Typeface #2 immediately comments on this performance:

Lina isn’t doing justice to the person that Joan Vollmer was and the character that she could be. Joan Vollmer as a sort of Megamix, where parts of Penelope and parts of Hiriz and parts of Lina mix together: the fury of the centuries, the eternal dissatisfaction, the artistic temperament that’s nothing but a single, unrelenting bad mood, functioning as a kind of tormented manifesto of aesthetics and ethics. Joan Vollmer as the universal woman (this really *does* seem to him to be Lina’s great idea, an idea that he’ll guiltlessly rob) and goddess of the afterlife watching over everything, her face illuminated by the cold phosphorescence of a screen that tunes in a single channel, broadcast from a celestial and ancient and circular hell.

If Fitzgerald and *Tender Is the Night* is the spirit hovering over the first section of the book ("A Real Character") and part of the second, Burroughs is the one that takes over the second. I see this whole part (pages 97-207) as the Beat Section. In terms of style, this section is much more free-flowing than the earlier ones, filled with jazzy riffs, all running on for page after page, em-dash after digressive em-dash, in basically one long paragraph that can occasionally feel like a processing of the raw materials of art. As if the first narrator is just getting down all the main points, the bulk of the story, and the second narrator is reworking it, molding it, adding in the appropriate facts ("Or because the protagonist in one of her brother’s favorite books was also the son of a comatose father and a restless mother and that book was called . . . \* *The World According to Garp* [1978] by John Irving.) or pulling new observations out of the initial material.

All of these various elements—the dual narrators, the addition of more non-realistic elements, the essayistic bit on Burroughs, the way the whole section sort of provides a reworking-in-progress of the main story—all set this section apart and force the reader to readjust. (The first of many readjustments, to be honest.) But everyone reading this should remember that this section also contains a lot of *fun*. The Karma bits are wild—Mamagrandma always riding her horse!—and hilarious, and too recognizable. It's a long tale of Penelope that has all the aspects of a great story—love, tragedy, humor, a miracle ending . . .

In closing, there is one quote from this section that sticks with me, though, that's less fun, and more ominous:

And one thing is certain, undeniable: you must be very careful of the spirits you invoke for the love of art, the ugly spirits, the malignant spirits always given to poetic justice and tragedy. It’s not good to mess with the reality of the dead. Rewriting their reality is like playing with a loaded gun.

**Who Wants to Be a Writer?**

[Podcast Episode 1.5](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/6-place-where-sea-ends-so-forest-can-begin-part-3-invented/id1253564436?i=1000389329495&mt=2)

Following the long, more digressive section about Penelope and the Karmas, we return in this part to The Young Man and Young Woman who are staying outside of Penelope's house (paid for with the diamonds she found when fleeing the Karmas) and making a movie about The Writer. A much more concise, direct section, these 30 pages include a lot of hints about the overall plot of the novel (e.g., allusions what happens to The Writer, another reference to Ishmael Tantor, Penelope's destruction of the house) while continuing to dwell on the nature of being a writer.

Or, to be more specific, The Young Man's burning desire to be *known* as a writer.

The Young Man would sign in blood any microscopic-clause-crammed contract to be worthy of such questions, to be published, to be a “cult writer” or a “writer’s writer” or whatever. But, please, let it be in print, black on white, and let it have a beginning and an end, and later on let him see it on display for a while in bookstores where he’ll reposition it in a prime location and ask the employees—disguising his voice and hiding his face—what they think of it, whether or not they liked it, and walk out worrying that they might have recognized him and are laughing behind his back, but it doesn't matter, hopefully they recognized him and . . .

This is by no means uncommon (I suspect half of the attendees of the AWP Writers Conference would sign anything to be a published author), but will stand in stark contrast to The Writer's relationship to being a writer, which we'll get more info about in the next chapter. But in the meantime, I think it's interesting to see how The Young Man almost fetishizes the *idea* of being a writer, even to the point that, when he finds a video of The Writer praising him (The Young Man) as being one of his all-time favorite writers, The Young Man doesn't outwardly worry about how this is even possible (given that he hasn't written a book), but instead jumps immediately to the idea of how to get this out there into the world, so that everyone can hear The Writer praising him:

I have a lot to do, The Young Man says to himself. Suddenly, ecstatic, he has a map, instructions to follow, an objective in reach, a goal so near. The first thing—with a rapid dance of his fingers across a keypad—will be to upload that video from The Writer’s camera, launch it into the space of the Internet and wait for it to, inevitably, return to that planet of shipwrecked astronauts and spread like a virus and come back to him and to The Young Woman. And The Young Man can almost see The Young Woman’s surprise—her mouth half open, the circle of her lips letting out an: “Oh!”—when she sees and hears his name as one of The Writer’s favorites. Then her love, her adoration for him, will be inevitable, The Young Man says to himself. And then . . .

Again, not uncommon! Along with political tweetstorms and sharing *Game of Thrones* rumors, drawing attention to yourself and your accomplishments—so that friends and fans can heart and retweet—is one of the main reasons Twitter exists.

Even as someone who's not a writer, I can sympathize with this urge to be in print, to see your name on the front of an actual book, to be on a bookshelf, or, even better, to see someone enjoying your creation on the subway, but at the same time, the process of being a writer is all-consuming. It's not a job like any other, which The Young Man does acknowledge:

The Young Man thinks too much. The Young Man wishes he could think less. The Young Man wishes he’d wake up one day and discover that his thing was really the law or industrial design or odontology. Professions that you can disconnect from once you get home—professions that are left far and away, like certain animals mislabeled domestic—and that aren’t pulling at your sleeve all the time, calling your attention and obliging you to imagine what Julien Sorel or Christopher Teitjens or Jay Gatsby would have done (automatically recalling, another symptom of the same troubling affliction, that the real name of the latter was James Gatz) in this or that situation. Much safer and more relaxing professions that—when people ask what you do—don’t generate other questions, uncomfortable ones, like “What are your books about?” or “What’s your name?” or “Are you well known?” or “Were any of your books made into a movie?” or ultimate classics with a complicit wink like “I’ve got a great story . . . want me to tell it so you can use it?” and “Being a writer you must meet a lot of interesting women, huh?”

It's worth noting that the next section of the book—the first in which we get to meet The Writer, fully grown up—is called "A Few Things You Happen to Think About When All You Want Is to Think About Nothing." I don't want to spoil this section for anyone reading along with the podcast, but this part revolves around the inability of The Writer to shut down, to turn off his creative impulses.

Taken as a whole, *The Invented Part* is about the idea of being a writer, about creativity and where the "invented part" comes from. About the way in which writing, thinking about writing, being a writer, shapes a life, and about what might come next. For most people I know in the book industry—and I'm including publishers, booksellers, writers, translators, agents, etc., in this—books are more of a lifestyle than a profession. You rarely have the chance to turn off, to not be thinking about the book you're reading/about to read/just read/should read, or how that connects to everything else you're doing. It's like [this ad](https://www.ispot.tv/ad/7mXK/mlb-com-at-bat-not-playing-baseball-featuring-adam-jones) for Major League Baseball: *If you're not writing a book, you're reading a book. Or you're thinking about writing, or reading about writing, or talking about writing, or writing about reading*.

Given the all-consuming nature of writing and books, why would anyone want to be a writer? And what does being a writer do to you?

\*

The flipside of being a writer is being a character. There's a great story by Felipe Alfau called "Identity" in which a writer's friend begs the writer to make him a character in a future story. His life has been insignificant, people never pay attention to him—or even notice him, to be honest—he hasn't amounted to much or anything. BUT, if his friend puts him in a story, then he'll be immortalized! A story about the most insignificant person makes that person significant. (Isn't there a paradox about this? That the least interesting fact is interesting simply by being the *least*?)

But not everyone wants to become a character. It's risky for authors to put elements of their friends and lovers into print. See the relationship between the Murphys and F. Scott Fitzgerald post *Tender Is the Night*. Transforming experience into art is all fun and games until someone recognizes unflattering aspects of themselves in your prose.

And that's the last thing I want to include this week—Penelope's desire to get out from under her brother's shadow. When she appears at the end of this section, there are three things that define her: the need to not remember a particular thing to the point that she wants to forget that she's forgetting, her initial desire to be a character like Cathy Earnshaw, and her current desire to escape from her brother's influence and reputation.

Since I love how these bits are woven together, I'll end with this really long quote:

Sure, it’s been years since she accepted the fact that she’d never be a combative Cathy Earnshaw. Not even a Jane Eyre. But with every bit of the little strength she has left she refuses to end up like an exotic and foreign Bertha Antoinetta Mason, mad and burning in the attic of Thornfield Hall, throwing herself from the flaming roof, her infidelities and alcoholism and hallucinations forgiven, chalked up to a genetic disorder. Bertha, who sacrifices herself to leave the path free and open for the marriage of the blind Edward Fairfax Rochester and the servant Jane Eyre. Penelope doesn’t want to be the lame and boring device of an envious sister—because the merely very talented Charlotte was always intimidated by Emily’s rare genius, and didn’t hesitate to lovingly sabotage her memory, imposing the survivor’s official version—that neatly ties up the plot. And everybody’s happy.

But no—that’d be too easy.

To the contrary, the role that Penelope has fallen into is that of the lone survivor. Everything and everyone around her dead or disappeared. And the responsibility of telling the story is hers and hers alone. And, truthfully, she never wanted to be a writer. She just wanted to have and to live a good story. And now she’s so tired. So tired that, if she had a rifle, she wouldn’t hesitate to empty it into The Young Man’s body. To fill him full of lead and defend herself by saying she’d thought he was a burglar. And end up exonerated or in jail. Either way. Anything so long as the small storyline of her life diverges from the atomic and particular saga of her brother, who absorbs everything and rewrites it. Including the only thing that, she assumed, was hers and hers alone and that she—not for revenge but out of desperation—tore out the way you tear the page from a book that, though you never open it, you’ll always know is missing a page and that it’s that page.

**Portraits of Rage and Mortality**

[Podcast Episode 1.6](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/7-few-things-you-happen-to-think-about-when-all-you/id1253564436?i=1000389555346&mt=2)

This week's podcast with special guest Jonathan Lethem is one of the best yet, and really digs into the meat of this chapter (mortality and creation). So, rather than try and frame this section as specifically and in as deep a detailed fashion as I have in weeks past, I think I'll just focus on an aspect of this section (and the book as a whole) that I can very much relate to: anger at the contemporary world. Especially the contemporary world as it relates to books and literature.

I wrote a book last summer during a residency in Marfa, TX that was more or less a litany of all the shit about book culture and the way we talk about books that bugs me on a near daily basis. Lists in place of reviews. "Literary Twitter" in general. Lit Hub's Book Marks thing. Using algorithms to determine what to publish. Using algorithms to determine what to read. [Instaread](http://www.instaread.co/) and its imitators. The fact that almost all book organizations are poorly named and include a reference to "book," "lit," a combination of the two. (BookLamp, Jelly Books, Lit Hub, BookGrabbr, Litbreaker, Readgeek, Whichbook, BookRiot, Bookperks, BookBub, BookJetty, etc., etc., etc., etc. etc.)

The book was half-screed against the current trends in book culture; half-lament that none of this matters since we're all going to die anyway. And although the latter can make you more zen about the former ("does it *really* matter if 85% of BuzzFeed's books content is about *Game of Thrones* and *Harry Potter* given the current state of the world?"), it's still very easy to get wrapped up in all the frustrating things the come along with dedicating one's life to the promotion and cultivation of real literature. (Not agented ideas for bookish-like objects. The fetishization of the book industry will never not piss me off.)

All of which is to say, I feel this on a near daily basis:

Could it be because of things like this—so stupid, but that he feels so passionately about—that it seems like his chest is parting in two to reveal the reddest of seas? Is that the reason for this pain? And, obviously, this wasn’t the only literary rant that he found himself—between fascinated and worried—going off on these days. The Lonely Man, who’d always considered himself a kind of evangelist of his vocation and all his colleagues, in conversation with the dumbest or wildest of animals, promoting the pleasures of reading, and always publishing highly favorable reviews, because, he explained with a question: “Why malign something when there’re so many good things to recommend?”; some time ago, he’d found himself possessed by a new and unknown and almost Hulk-green fury. A euphoric thirst for vengeance and an exhilarating longing for destruction that, who knows, might’ve had something to do, once again, with the arrival of that pain in his chest and that made him so much like certain characters of Jewish American literature. Saul Bellow’s Von Humboldt Fleisher, Joseph Heller’s Bob Slocum, Bruce Jay Friedman’s Harry Towns, Phillip Roth’s Mickey Sabbath. People who, howling with rage and joy, laid waste to everything in their paths: families, jobs, and even hospitals. Homo Catastrophicos, their genesis the apocalypse of everyone else.

And this:

There was a time, thinks The Lonely Man, when people related to books like that. 2 x 1. What the writer gave you and what you did with it inside your own head. Now, not so much, less and less: it’s not the content that matters, it’s the packaging. The device. The latest model. Little mirrors and colored glass. Reading on it all the time, more than ever, but in homeopathic doses. And writing more than ever but, also, writing more about nothing and, the truth is, The Lonely Man couldn’t care less about these issues, which he thought and wrote about a great deal in another era, another dimension, just yesterday, in the days when he was healthy or at least felt healthy.

\*

I also like how this chapter opens with the idea of a portrait. If the first part opens with a near metafictional reflection on the medium of writing ("How to begin. Or better: How to begin?" [Adding the question mark that—nothing happens by chance—has the shape of a fish or meat hook."]), and the second is all about video ("The first thing they film, of course, is the library. Close-ups and wide shots and zoom-ins and zoom-outs where they can read titles but not names."), this section opens in a more museum-like fashion ("Don't touch."), focusing on the idea of a portrait:

The name of his creator doesn’t matter, the name of the portrayed man either. Anonymous author, yes. And one of those neutral titles, simple and simply descriptive. The kind of prosthetic title (the true title was amputated by the passing of years and the movement of forgotten things) applied when anything is better than nothing. Anything, as long as it isn’t that, for him, oh so irritating Untitled trailed by a number, an attempt to cover up the author’s lack of will, or the lack of expertise of the experts in his work. Something helpful when the time comes to present it at the hour of the catalogue and the auction. And that’s it. And moving right along. And next! and look to the future.

So, now, Portrait of a Lonely Man. And done. Period and new sentence. A simple descriptive title. And period and new paragraph.

\*

The last thing I want to note about this part is the quality of the stories it contains within. The set-up is pretty simple: The Writer has chest pains and goes to the emergency room expecting the worst. While there, his mind goes into overdrive and he comes up with story idea after story idea after story idea. So much that he could write—were he still healthy—all of which he's willing to abandon in exchange for more life.

A lot of these stories revolve around death and being a parent, and they're all pretty amazing. Any number could be expanded into more full-length pieces although, to be honest, I think they're maybe even better in these abbreviated versions that act like a seed, pointing toward the potential of the idea.

My favorite is actually a non-death, non-parent one (and don't worry, ideas about parenting and death and inheritance and family will be back in force in the not too distant future), which is also one of the funniest.

The title “The Little Dwarf” [. . .] seems, at first, a redundancy, a joke as bad as it is cruel and wrong. But no. Or yes. It depends on how you look at that boy, about four years old, who appears in its opening lines, on a street in the city of B, so that two friends, taking a walk to their favorite bookstore, encounter him and watch and discuss him with barely hidden fascination. The two friends are writers and have been resigned for a while now to the fact that everything they see on this side can end up being useful in the other part, a place they refuse to call “their work,” but, really, what else can they call it? So better, yes, to call it “The Other Part.” As mentioned, the boy must be three or four or five years old. But even though, for his age, he’s the “right” and “normal” height (note: find better adjectives), the boy is already, also, a dwarf. The short arms, the short legs, the big head. The boy is, for the two writer friends, a curious organism: a being living in two times at the same time. His present as a boy of the appropriate height already coexisting with his increasingly near future as a dwarf. The two writer friends watch him walk by, give a slight shudder, change the subject: neither of them can stop thinking about the little dwarf and, now in the bookstore, leafing through books, they can barely contain the desire to run out of there. To head home at full velocity, to their desks, to their computers, to see how and where they can insert that little dwarf into what they’re writing. He’ll fit somewhere, in the other part.

Tune in Thursday to hear more about this section, along with stories from Jonathan Lethem's own hospital experiences and some talk about whether to blurb or not to blurb.

**The Inverted Part**

[Podcast Episode 1.7](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/8-many-f%C3%AAtes-or-study-for-group-portrait-broken-decalogues/id1253564436?i=1000389608423&mt=2)

As has been mentioned time and again—in posts and on the podcast—each of the seven sections of *The Invented Part* operate under a different style and literary technique. Sure, there are similarities in voice and general outlook, in recurring stories, themes and ideas, but Fresán keeps experimenting with different approaches to this material throughout the book. It's probably not completely wrong to say that this novel is as much concerned with cataloging various literary styles and structures as it is with the plot. (More on that coming!)

Last week we had the internal monologue section, with The Writer thinking his time had come and being unable to shut off his brain while in the hospital undergoing an MRI and waiting to learn his fate. By contrast, this week's section ("Many Fêtes, or Study for a Group Portrait with Broken Decalogues") is much more fragmented and discontinuous. (Warning: That's what this post will likely be as well. Buckle up?)

Specifically, the rubric for this section is the "biji."

The biji (筆記) is a genre of classic Chinese literature. “Biji” can be translated, roughly yet more or less faithfully, as “notebook.” And a biji can contain curious anecdotes, nearly blind quotations, random musings, philosophical speculations, private theories regarding intimate matters, criticism of other works, and anything that its owner and author deems appropriate.

As you'll hear in Thursday's podcast, Brian likens this section to a puzzle being put together. Even more than that, he sees this section as building the frame to the novel as a whole. And we do get a lot of plot pieces in this part, providing the emotional outline of The Writer's life—especially in relation to his parents, which reminds me that I would like to write a long post about the parent-child relationships running throughout this book. I'll just make a note of that here so that I don't forget.

As you'll also hear on Thursday, we weren't sure what the daggers before every "biji" or fragment represented. We are dumb. We are also lazy. Here's what I found in four seconds of using the Google.

The dagger is usually used to indicate a footnote if an asterisk has already been used. A third footnote employs the double dagger. Additional footnotes are somewhat inconsistent and represented by a variety of symbols, e.g., parallels (‖) and the pilcrow (¶), some of which were nonexistent in early modern typography.

One of the echoes from an early section that shows up here is the recurring phrase "have you read all these books?"

(In relation to this book and the daggers and the asterisks in the previous section, a better question might be: have you read all the footnotes AND the footnotes to the footnotes?")

In 1998, the Modern Library put *Tender Is the Night* at number twenty-eight on the list of one hundred best novels in English of the twentieth century. *The Great Gatsby* is number two, after *Ulysses* by James Joyce.

Has he read all of those novels? Just those one hundred novels?

He looks on the Internet and finds it and—memo for the girl from the beginning—he discovers that yes he has read ninety-three of the one hundred on the list.

And says to himself that that is something.

Then he thinks that Christmas is coming.

This is very much a book in conversation with other books.

Actually, that's not quite right. It's a book steeped in a world in which books matter. There are books that are books for writers. ("He sure is a writer's writer!" "You mean his books don't sell, but people go to his panels at AWP?") But this is a book that's maybe a bit of that, but a bit more of a reader's reader book. A book for the people who believe in books and are surrounded by them.

"Have you read all those books?"

I'm not sure if I've mentioned this here, on the podcast, or solely in conversation with myself, but I take great solace in being surrounded by way more books than I will ever read. It's probably 50-50 that I'll make it through the titles on my "to read *soon*" shelves. And I'm good with that. In no way will that reality prevent me from buying more books, being swayed by the new shiny authors, and the promise of some mind-altering literary experience. If life is mostly managing anxiety, and if I am being honest, I'm way more anxious when I feel like I don't have *too many* books physically around me. I take four times the number of books I need to on every flight, breaking my back mainly because I'm scared of being on a plane and not liking the one and only book I took with me. What would I even do?

The way in which Christmas is dropped into that excerpt above is at the crux of what I think I want to write about this week: the way this novel is almost inverted in its aims, condensing the plot into little information dumps while unfurling a near-endless investigation into the mystery of how literature is transformed from facts into something more.

How the "invented part"—which is the best part, the magical part—comes to be. And why that matters.

This is the story: Christmas Eve 1977, his parents and their friends, models and artists and publicists and beautiful people, storm a prestigious department store branch and, within a few hours, are “subdued by the forces of order.” [. . .]

And “subdued by the forces of order” means that the army comes in with tanks and bazookas and many people die, among them several customers who were there buying Christmas presents. [. . .]

It was never clear if his parents died during the retaking of the department store or if, weeks later, they were thrown from a seaplane into the waters off that beach where they used to take him on vacation and where one time he almost drowned without them noticing.

Imagine another book. A book written by a writer concerned with using words to represent events in cinematic ways on the page. A QWERTY writer. (That's an in-joke for the Rochester translation community, but I'm letting it stand.) A writer who has a name like "Jodi Picoult." A writer who would take those three paragraphs and make them ride for a hundred pages. With emotional crescendos, endless details about the politics and emotional background that led The Writer and Penelope's parents to "storm" a department store, a really muscular descripton of the "forces of order" shutting things down, and a charged denounment involving parents, children, and broken dreams, this imaginary book would be a lot more than three paragraphs.

Instead, here are three other paragraphs from the same "bijis" that point to what Fresán is really up to.

Another note: This part of the novel (and it will be very complex) will be built around the testimonies of hostages, between terror and wonder, seeing themselves subdued by “that couple from those ads on a sailboat.” Some of them won’t be able to stop admiring the perfect cut and tailoring of their guerilla-chic style uniforms. Someone will ask for their autographs and to take a picture with them. And his parents, of course, will comply. And they smile at the camera. And that oh so Murphian photo will appear on the front page of daily and weekly newspapers in the coming days and weeks. [. . .]

The attack is filmed by news cameras and (not long ago he saw those shaky scenes again) the quality of the film is curiously similar to the postcards of battles from World War One. Something that looks much *older* than it actually is. [. . .]

An inconfessable confession, inadmissible admission: he’s increasingly convinced that he’d benefitted from his parents’ disappearance. And not just because it made him seem so much more interesting when he published his first book where his parents’ disappearance made an appearance. [. . .] His parents, on the other hand, hadn’t even left behind good-looking corpses. His parents were like dead stars whose light still twinkled a little, from so many dark years of unfathomable cosmic distance. His parents were, yes—a good story.

It's trite to point this out, but this is just as much a book about making books as much as it is a book about the life and times of its imagined characters.

Two more long quotes!

“Wuthering Heights Revisited” tells the story of a beautiful and romantic young woman who, obsessed with gothic novels, marries a rich yet bohemian heir who has come to Europe to find success as an artist. Her husband falls seriously ill and both of them return to his family’s home, on the other side of the ocean. There, the young woman suffers and, discovering that she is pregnant, runs away without saying anything to her in-laws out of fear that they won’t let her leave and will claim her child for the heir. The young woman, without a home, lives with her brother. The boy is born and the young mother, sensing that she’s going mad, discovers not only that the boy won’t ever love her, but that in addition, as the years go by, he’ll love her brother more and more. One night, the young woman takes her son for a walk along a beach that leads into a forest. And the young woman comes home alone and smiling. And she says she doesn’t know what happened, that she doesn’t remember anything, that she was “possessed by the ugliest of all the Ugly Spirits,” and, when questioned about the boy, she sings and sings and doesn’t stop singing.

“Dear: dear, dear, dear . . .”

In a paragraph and a sentence, we get the whole crushing story of Penelope's life. And that line, "sensing that she’s going mad, discovers not only that the boy won’t ever love her, but that in addition, as the years go by, he’ll love her brother more and more." Fuck. That's so much more poignant than a chapter trying to capture her inner emotional states.

I'm just spitballing ideas here, treating this blog like a private notebook, but in a way, this book works really well by inhabiting a world of books, a world of books that the reader is also familiar with, and allowing the stories and aspects of those other books to fill in the outline of this book's plot. In a less convoluted way: I don't need more of Penelope's story, because with this one line I realize that I've read it before somewhere. Or if not exactly read her story, I can imagine having read that story. Or seen it, or heard it.

What's the fun in trying to write a story that's all plot and characters and neo-realism? We've all seen that, we've all read better versions. Creating something new in the world of contemporary realism seems so daunting . . . and not nearly as enriching and inventive and exciting as what Fresán's doing. *Especially* since there still is so much heart and emotion and meat to this novel.

Although to be honest, anyone who would ask "have you read all these books?" would probably also ask, "why do you read?"

What could his parents—in full-on process of deterioration, their morale broken—have seen in *Tender Is the Night*? What could their systematic serial reading of the novel—as if searching for a secret code, an explanation for everything in their world—have helped them with? Maybe, seeing themselves reflected in the Divers just as the Murphys (though they deny it) saw themselves reflected in the Divers, his parents were able to understand themselves better and maybe forgive themselves. Or perhaps, to the contrary, the bourgeoisie and comfortable image reflected back to them by that black and magic mirror—the warning from a Lost Generation that under no circumstance should they lose their generation again—did nothing but harden their respective positions and they read that book the way other people read Sun Tzu or Von Clausewitz. As a call to arms.

**Structure, Time, Memory, and the Sadness of a Disillusioned Writer**

[Podcast Episode 1.8](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/9-life-after-people-or-notes-for-brief-history-progressive/id1253564436?i=1000389854751&mt=2)

As has been noted on a few occasions, *The Invented Part* is made up of seven clear sections (one of which has three chapters), which are grouped into three different parts. So far, we’ve read five of them:

Part I

“The Real Character”: The Writer as The Boy nearly drowning at the beach.

Part II

“The Place Where the Sea Ends So the Forest Can Begin”: Young Man and Young Woman are working on the movie about the absent Writer.

“A Few Things You Happen to Think About When All You Want Is to Think About Nothing”: In which The Writer feels his own encroaching mortality and wants more time to write all the stories that flood his brain.

“Many Fêtes, or Study for a Group Portrait with Broken Decalogues”: Notes about a book The Writer wants to write (which seems to be *The Invented Part*) and his various inspirations.

“Life After People, or Notes for a Brief History of Progressive Rock and Science Fiction”: Features Tom, a childhood friend of The Writer’s, who gets a call from The Writer right after The Writer breaks into CERN and does what he does to end up “floating through time and space, happily multidimensional.”

Before listing the two sections we haven’t read, I want to take a second to point out a structural pattern that I’m only noticing now, on this re-read. Namely, that this is a symmetrical book with sections 1-7, 2-6, 3-5 reflecting each other, with section 4 being a sort of fulcrum around which the rest balance.

For example, in section 3 we’re in the mind of The Writer, approaching a false death (remember—he thinks it’s the end times, but tests prove that his chest pain was nothing serious at all) while constantly constructing ideas.

In section 5, The Writer has gone beyond, and we’re in the mind of a friend of his—who receives an incredibly powerful story from The Transcended Writer. First approaching death, now on the other side of it. Initially making stories to maybe write, now dropping a story into someone’s mind.

If I’m right about this sort of overarching, almost mathematical, structure, then section 6 (“Meanwhile, Once Again, Beside the Museum Stairway, Under a Big Sky”) should be about the Young Man and Young Woman from section 2, and the last section—the only one of Part III—“The Imaginary Person,” should end back with The Writer, fully grown, no longer The Boy from section 1.

Just something to keep in mind (maybe!) as you contemplate the book as a whole. Fresán may have written all seven sections at the same time, but he’s a genius, and the connections and underlying structures are far from random. Again: genius.

\*

Speaking of structure—and this came up at the very end of the podcast you’ll hear on Thursday—this particular chapter is really interesting in terms of how much time actually elapses during the course of these pages.

Here’s the opening:

“Dun dun dun da-DAdun, da-DAdun . . .” He realizes that he’s in big trouble when, hearing a strange sound in his house and not being able to locate its source, he finally discovers that the sound is springing (springing, ah, such a sonic verb) from his own mouth. Through clenched teeth. And that it’s nothing but his own voice singing low, deep, martial, the ominous and instantly catchy and unforgettable musical theme that marks the entrances and exits of the dark and asthmatic and uniformed and reconstructed Darth Vader in the movies of the *Star Wars* saga.

So that’s what he’s doing, advancing through a house that’s too big for him now. And he moves through its hallways and bedrooms with the sneaking suspicion that, behind and beneath them, are more hallways and more rooms. [. . .]

“What year is it?” he wonders.

“Does it matter?” he answers.

For a couple months now—since his wife left him, taking their little son with her—he’s been living in the near-suspended animation of the minute-to-minute. It’s harder—but it hurts less.

I never noticed how many references to time are embedded in this opening page until copying this out. References to what he’s doing “now,” questions about the year (and it not mattering), the couple of months since his wife left, living in the “near-suspended animation of the minute-to-minute.” Given the ending twist to this chapter—The Writer living beyond it all, having merged with the god particle or whatever—this focus on time passing feels not at all coincidental.

After a digression about the ex-wife and his relationship with his son, we get a minor meditation on the past:

The past is a telephone that rings like those old telephones never rang, the ones that, in the beginning of their history, only rang to inform you of something decisive, historic. And, yes, with time there will be many people (though not as many as, for example, those who fixed in their memory the precise and private context that surrounded the death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy or the death of John Lennon; those moments in History, with a capital H, that turn into something almost palpable, something that’s almost breathed and enters the lungs and heart and brain) who’ll remember with millimetric precision exactly what they were doing when they found out about the disintegration of that writer.

And then amid those reflections we get the most direct statement about what happens to The Writer and a statement from The Transcended Writer himself, which really drives home this “time” theme:

But *yes* Tom was wide awake and with fifty years draped over him like a very heavy blanket when the writer, who’d once been his best childhood and adolescent friend, evaporated in a storm of particles and quantum physics and dark matter. And, yes, Tom remembers precisely what he was doing then. Not only when he learned of the “accident”—better and more in-depth, on the news that night—but in the exact instant that it took place. Because he’d just finished not talking to the writer but listening to him \* (“I’m calling you after so long because you have to know where I am and what I’m about to do, what I’m doing, what I did; because now all times are one for me. Now I no longer have time, I’m atemporal,” his friend had said from so far away) talk on the telephone; because Tom didn’t dare interrupt him, didn’t dare say a word. Tom just listened to his sharp and clear voice for a long time on the answering machine recording, after his son came to find him in the bathroom and said: “*Papi*, the phone is making a weird noise.”

Now, I could be wrong—and probably am—but I think this moment of Tom’s son telling him about the phone ringing is the only real “now” of this chapter. The rest of it—memories of meeting The Writer and Penelope, of Tom’s relationship with his son Fin, the bits about *Life After People*, Pink Floyd, *2001: A Space Odyssey,* even the words of The Writer, which are seemingly implanted into Tom’s mind along with Penelope’s story—are all memories filling in around this moment.

(The one exception is the final bit of this chapter which begins, “It’s night now. The dead of night.” A bit of a coda after the storm in which Tom remembers Penelope’s story, forever seared into his mind—“It’s late now, now it’s too late to forget—now he’ll never forget it—what Penelope did or stopped doing with her little son.”—and has the most touching of moments with Fin.)

\*

Similar to the William Burroughs part in Penelope’s Mount Karma section, Fresán incorporates a lot of factual, real-life events and artworks here. Specifically, this is the “Pink Floyd section,” telling of Syd Barrett’s mental breakdown, his random appearance at the recording studio where Pink Floyd II was recording *Wish You Were Here*, along with descriptions and accounts of a few other Pink Floyd albums.

Similar to how Fitzgerald transformed the real life of the Murphys into *Tender Is the Night*, Fresán is transforming real-life stories about art into new art. Transforming information about creators into a creation about a creator.

All of these stories are told within Tom’s mind though, which adds an interesting wrinkle or two. It’s a bit of a cliché to say that you are what you read (or watch, or listen to), but like Brian mentions on the podcast, major works of art oftentimes serve as sort of touchstones to determine and shape friendships. (Anyone I meet who mentions *The Crying of Lot 49* and Twin Peaks and Dan Deacon will become an insta-friend.)

Interpretation does play a role though, as does one’s memory. The mind isn’t a flawless recording device, but something more mysterious and active, in which things shift and morph and become something else.

For example, there is this:

And his friends are left there to cry. And to record. And, with time, Waters and Gilmour think that that might have been the moment, after wrapping up *Wish You Were Here* (that in the beginning didn’t entirely win over the critics, that reaches number one in sales on both sides of the Atlantic when it’s released, and that time and perspective and distance elevate as their unanimous and indisputable crowning achievement), the exact and perfect time for the band to break up. The precise instant—from which there was no going back—to conclude their life cycle, with that ode to the omnipresent absent friend. And that way avoid the imminent ex-friendships resulting from the convulsive and revulsive recordings of *Animals* and *The Wall* and *The Final Cut*. To go, to let go, with those airs bottled in the fullest of emptinesses, the absolute and joyously sad emptiness of their lyrics and music. With that magic moment—at the end of “Welcome to the Machine” and the beginning of “Wish You Were Here”—when someone seemed to be trying to tune in a radio, the one in David Gilmour’s car. And you heard voices and a few bars of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4. And suddenly all the sound drops, like a candle blown out for the birthday of an era. A pause that it took Tom many listens (staring intently at the needle above the grooves, trying to see what was happening) to grasp wasn’t a potential defect in his parents’ stereo equipment reacting to some secret frequency so that then, after the entrance of that vintage acoustic guitar solo, everything would climb again, like the highest of rising of tides.

What’s interesting about this is the bridge between the story about Pink Floyd breaking up to Tom’s personal story about internalizing that specific moment in which Tom *remembers the album incorrectly*. As Rodrigo mentioned to me in an email, “Wish You Were Here” doesn’t come at the end of “Welcome to the Machine,” but at the end of “Have a Cigar.” We are in Tom’s memory here now . . . And, as a tease, I’ll just mention that Rodrigo said that this will be explained in *The Remembered Part* . . .

\*

Finally, I have a few quick notes about parents and their children. This is something I’ve been honing in on throughout my re-read. From the opening section about The Boy and his parents (who lead a *crazy* life!) to the proliferation of stories about fathers and sons that The Writer comes up with while at the hospital to Penelope’s story to Tom and his son. Still not 100% sure of what to make of all this, but there’s a theme of disappointment and failure that runs throughout. Along with fears of death and violence.

That really comes home in this episode, in which The Writer “gifts” Tom the full story of Penelope and her son, which isn’t fully explained, but which Tom can’t get out of his mind (“now he’ll never forget it—what Penelope did or stopped doing with her little son”) and leads him to go to Fin’s room and the final, pretty emotional sentence of this section: “Sitting on the edge of the bed, he holds his son to keep from falling.”

\*

One last quote:

Major Tom: until a few minutes ago I was a disillusioned writer. And there’s nothing sadder than a disillusioned writer, Major Tom. A disillusioned writer has that sadness that makes no one sad but himself.

**I See You**

[Podcast Episode 1.9](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/10-meanwhile-once-again-beside-museum-stairway-under/id1253564436?i=1000390111241&mt=2)

Last week I referenced my theory about how the whole of *The Invented Part* is structured, with the fourth section serving as a fulcrum, and the parts on either side reflecting each other. So, the first section is mirrored in the seventh, the second in the sixth, third in the fifth.

Granted, I read the book last year when we were preparing it for publication, so yes, I was cheating a bit, but I was still glad to see my theory play itself out in this section (the sixth), which features The Young Man and Young Woman and mirrors the second section, "The Place Where the Sea Ends So the Forest Can Begin." Without giving away too many details, I'll just say that this part wraps up a ton of plot points from the earlier section: Why did The Writer name The Young Man as one of his favorite living authors? What's the deal with Ishmael Tantor? What happened to The Writer after breaking into CERN and merging with the so-called god particle? What would The Writer do with this power? Why so many pages about airplanes? (Actually, we'll come back to that last one next week.)

On the podcast we've mentioned the fact that Fresán wrote the seven sections of this book simultaneously at least a dozen times. As a gratuitous reminder, here's the section from his interview with translator Will Vanderhyden in which he mentions it:

I wasn’t saying that I write with the same degree of genius and talent that The Beatles had, not at all. I was saying, and I explained this in the interview, that after reading a memoir by Geoff Emerick, The Beatles’ sound engineer, the thing about equalizing and utilizing different channels on the sound mixer ended up having a great deal to do with the way I wrote *The Invented Part*, whose seven parts I wrote simultaneously. I had seven files open, and I worked on a different one each day. And, at the same time, I didn’t really know where that novel was going, until my son provided me with the key, the little toy figure that appears on the cover of the original edition, which has now become a kind of little literary icon . . . I was bogged down. I had spent years writing a novel, I knew what I wanted to say, I even had a plan, but it wasn’t coming together.

If you're reading this book for the first time, it's easy to see it as a sort of wild, Beat-poet inspired ramble through the mind of an aging author. (I'm reminded of a drunken conversation I once had with Wells Tower in which he complained of Roberto Bolaño, "Is there anything this guy *doesn't* include in his novels?")

But, as you reread, or think about, or revisit the book, it becomes more and more clear just how intricately the novel has been constructed. There are little clues and hints and references littered throughout, such as this bit from the second section, in which The Young Man is recounting all the writing workshops he's attended:

The one with the guy who insisted “that everything begins and ends with Chekov.” Which caused The Young Man a lot of anxiety: because The Young Man read Chekov, enjoyed Chekov, but never understood what his genius was. And he understood even less all the people who wanted to write like that. Those endings that were so open, where nothing was resolved and where all you seem to hear was the voice of the wind slipping in and running around. Endings where, for example, a man and a woman meet beside a museum stairway, with the whole sky above their heads, just to say goodbye to each other. And that’s about it.

On first read you might think that's pretty funny, or it reminds you of a professor you once had. But then, a mere 322 pages later, you get this bit about The Young Man and Young Woman:

Meanwhile, once again, beside the Museum stairway, under a big sky, he and she wonder how and why they’ve ended up there, after so long without seeing each other (though really it was only a few minutes ago that they said goodbye, again), and only so they can say goodbye.

Or, to really drive this home, twenty-nine pages later, this section ends with:

Meanwhile, once again, beside the Museum stairway, under a big sky, he says to himself that this is, in a way, the closest thing to an Anton Chekov story he’ll ever write. He wonders, also, if all the preceding might not be clearer if it were rearranged in strict chronological order, from back to front, with the most nocturnal of tenderness, until it arrived to this eternal present, meanwhile, once again, beside the Museum stairway, under a big sky.

Books that reward you for paying attention are the best.

\*

So, in relation to this section we have, on the one hand, Chekov, and on the other, *Rick and Morty*. There're elegant phrasings (e.g., "meanwhile, once again, beside the Museum stairway, under a big sky"), emotional partings, and a tragic death alongside a giant museum of The Writer, which is The Writer, who has been transformed into the Big Sky, an almighty figure who can control everything, including The Young Man and Young Woman, whom he keeps bringing together, beside the Museum stairway, under a big sky, to have the depart, say "goodbye" until he's ready to intervene and replay this same moment, with slight variation, yet again.

I couldn't help but think of this "museum" as a giant Rick-shaped head, tweaking reality over and over again, while Morty flips out on the side, "oh, oh geez Rick, you can't just be toying with people's existential realities that way. That's, that's just not good Rick. You built a museum of yourself to be worshipped and now you're making everyone read your books over and over, with like, no regard for their free will? Y-you've gone too far." (My Morty impersonation is only good in person, when inebriated.)

One way to read this section is to treat it at face value, as the culmination of the novel's "plot." The Writer has accomplished his goal of merging with the god particle and transcending space-time in order to rewrite reality whenever he wants. Which is crazy. Which would be glorious!

Or, you can see this as a new spin (a quantum spin? sorry) on metafiction, in which the pretense that a book is reflecting reality is shoved aside in favor of acknowledging that characters are just that—characters.

*The Invented Part* has always been a book about "the invented parts" of fiction and art, and part of that inventing is rewriting, redrafting, tweaking, and rejiggering scenes and sentences. Here, in this section, we're witness to a new version of that, in which we get to the see the Writer doing this right on the page, with comments on his own writing, or bits like this, which almost look like MS Word with track changes turned on:

Insert: “Big Sky” was one of X’s favorite songs before becoming X and ascending into the big sky, and that’s that. There was a time when X, before becoming X, could compose lyrical tirades about songs. Now, since becoming X, X prefers to let the song itself sing and he just steps aside to listen to the song being sung. ~~That song is like the equivalent and replacement of all the sacramental hymns floating in the naves of all the churches and cathedrals. Glory to the Creator, Blessed be, Hallowed be thy name, Forever and ever, etcetera.~~

And right from the beginning, The Young Man and Young Woman realize that they are characters under the Writer's control:

There was a time when, yes, they were the ones who decided and improvised how they said goodbye and how they got back together, amid tears and laughter, masters of a story that might have been poorly written but, at least, they were the ones writing it.

Now, not so much, not anymore.

Now, the goodbye is final and refined and elegant.

A carefully considered and calculated and far better written goodbye; but a goodbye written by someone else.

Written by someone who is never entirely pleased with the result and, so, starting over, saying “hello” again to say “goodbye” again. Though now the one who writes and edits them seems to be concentrating not on the twist of the reunion, but, solely, on the pogo-stick of the goodbye.

There's even a moment in which The Young Man breaks free for a minute before The Writer (referred to here as X) takes back over with a vengeance.

Like, he suddenly remembers, those plantation owners who ceaselessly read *The Count of Monte Cristo* to their slaves, forced to roll Montecristo-brand cigars: as if giving the prisoners the gift of a great fictitious revenge whose smoke and fragrance they’ll never get to breathe in. And, suddenly, intoxicated by that not new but, yes, sudden memory (and frightened by the carelessness of X, who, distracted maybe, allowed him to remember it), he starts to tremble. And he feels him come back. X. Firing off shrieks like flares. And entering his head and scrambling it until, there inside, on a tropical island, plantation owners don’t read *The Count of Monte Cristo* to those working the land anymore; they read them *Dracula*—the story of a hunter who suddenly finds himself hunted. [. . .]

And X’s message is clear: “Don’t get clever, there’s no way out, I’m the only one who thinks around here, and you, now, are nothing but the writing of my writing, the ink of my ink, the blood of my blood, circulating through the tangled mess of wiring that grows inside my centrifuge brain.”

And, yes, there it is, there it remains.

The edifice of the Museum has the shape of a head.

Rick's head!

Metafiction has been around for a very long time—long before John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* directly addressed its own structure, and before Gilbert Sorrentino borrowed, and then trapped, two characters from other books in *Mulligan Stew*, Laurence Sterne was pulling back the curtain in *Tristam Shandy*—and there's no real reason to go over all of that right here, but I do want to mention that this particular flavor of metafiction reminds me a lot of Macedonio Fernandez's *The Museum of Eterna's Novel (The First Good Novel)*. A fellow Argentinian writer, Macedonio's book was a huge inspiration to Borges, and is made up of two parts: 122 pages of prologues ("The Model Prologue," "Prologue of Indecision," "Another Prologue") followed by 126 pages of the "novel," in which an author forces his characters to practice their lines and movements in preparation for his novel. Actually, there is a third section as well. This page, which comes between the two aforementioned parts:

**Were those prologues? And is this the novel?**

*This page is for the reader to linger, in his well-deserved and serious indecision, before reading on*.

So much fun. Both of these books are just a joy to read. Especially if you're at all into the idea that fiction is a fiction, and there's no good reason to strictly adhere to the illusion that words on a page correspond—via images and ideas—to the so-called "real" world. In these books you get to see creators at play; in more realistic books, you get Jonathan Franzen.

**Airplanes, Hyphellipses, and What's Next?**

[Podcast Episode 1.10](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/11-the-imaginary-person-the-invented-part-pages-441-552/id1253564436?i=1000390376530&mt=2)

This is likely going to be a quote-heavy post, so why not start things off right:

How to end.

Or better: How to end?

Adding the question mark that—nothing happens by chance—has the shape of . . . / OF WHAT? / INSERT HERE /; sharp and pointy pages like the edges of the wings of Jumbo Jets / FIND, PLEASE, A BETTER SIMILE TO CREATE THE ATMOSPHERE OF AN AIRPORT /, slicing into both those who rise and those who fall, pulling them, dragging them down the air-conditioned aisles or making them fly in pieces through the air to land just inside the airport of these parentheses / COULD THERE BE PLACES MORE "BETWEEN PARENTHESES" THAN AIRPORTS? (EXPAND) / that more than one person will criticize or judge as unnecessary; but that, in the uncertainty of a beginning, are oh so similar to hands coming together in an act of prayer, asking for a fair voyage now drawing to an end. And good luck to all, wishes you this voice / ALLUSION HERE TO THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE VOICE OF THE SIREN LOUDSPEAKERS THAT SING AND CONFUSE TRAVELERS IN AIRPORTS? TO THE IRRITATION OF SUCCESSIVE CHECKPOINTS CLOSING LIKE CHINESE BOXES OR RUSSIAN NESTING DOLLS? / that the gag of the parentheses renders unknown, and yet—like with certain unforgettable songs, whose melodies impose themselves over the title—it recalls the voice of someone whose name you can’t quite identify and recognize. / BOB DYLAN? PINK FLOYD? LLOYD COLE? THE BEATLES? NILSSON? THE KINGS? / And, yes, if possible, avoid this kind of paragraph from here onward / FORBID ANY FUTURE MENTION OF ELECTRONIC READERS ON PAIN OF DEATH? / ALLUDE TO THAT CHINESE CURSE "MAY YOU HAVE AN INTERESTING LIFE" TRANSLATED NOW INTO MILLIONS OF ASIANS ENSLAVED BY THE WEST TO PRODUCE THEIR SMALL ELECTRONIC INVENTIONS THAT, LATER, WILL IN TURN ENSLAVE THEM, TURNING THEM INTO ADDICTS OF A NEW FORM OF OPIUM? THE CYCLE OF THE INTERESTING LIFE? HAKUNA MATATA? / FEAR THAT THE WHOLE THING IS BEGINNING TO SOUND LIKE AN OBSESSION OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT, FEAR OF BEING LIKE THOSE LUNATICS SCREAMING IN EMPTY STREETS / because, they say, it scares away today’s readers, accustomed to reading quickly and briefly on small screens, counting up to one hundred forty, and send / AND, ALONG THE WAY, ASKING, JUST TO KNOW, WHAT PARENTHESES MEAN AND WHAT IS THE RAISON D'ÊTRE, BUT PLEASE; WITHOUT SUCCUMBING TO IMAGES LIKE "PARENTHESES ARE LIKE PRAYER PINS" / THE THING ABOUT PARENTHESES AS "HANDS COMING TOGETHER IN AN ACT OF PRAYER" IS MORE THAN ENOUGH ALREADY / and . . .

(All the caps above are actually in small caps, and a different font in the book itself. But *not* American Typewriter, the font that has come to stand in for the Transcended Writer in earlier chapters. Something new.)

This might sound familiar, and that's because here's the opening of the novel:

How to begin.

Or better: How to begin?

(Adding the question mark that—nothing happens by chance—has the shape of a fish or meat hook. A sharp and pointy curve that skewers both the reader and the read. Pulling them, dragging them up from the clear and calm bottom to the cloudy and restless surface. Or sending them flying through the air to land just inside the beach of these parentheses. Parentheses that more than one person will judge or criticize as orthographically and aesthetically unnecessary but that, in the uncertainty of the beginning, are oh so similar to hands coming together in an act of prayer, asking for a fair voyage just now underway. We read: “*Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate*;” we hear: “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.” And good luck to all, wishes you this voice—halfway down the road of life, lost in a dark woods, because it wandered off the right path—that the gag of the parentheses renders unknown. And yet—like with certain unforgettable songs, whose melodies impose themselves over the title and even over the signature lines of the chorus, what’s it called? how’d it go?—this voice also recalls that of someone whose name isn’t easy to identify or recognize. And, yes, if possible, avoid this kind of paragraph from here onward because, they say, it scares away many of today’s readers. Today’s electrocuted readers, accustomed to reading quickly and briefly on small screens. And, yes, goodbye to all of them, at least for as long as this book lasts and might last. Unplug from external inputs to nourish yourselves exclusively on internal electricity. And—warning! warning!—at least in the beginning and to begin with, that’s the idea here, the idea from here onward. Consider yourselves warned.)

So, not exactly the same, but made up of the same bones. Although now that we're on the airplane, approaching the end, coming in to land, we get to see how The Writer/Fresán puts the meat on those bones. It's almost like seeing the rough draft, but in the mirror, after The Writer's story has unfolded, in contrast to that opening section in which he's a little boy, having the singular experience that will make him into a writer.

And yes, the novel is an ouroboros, as The Writer looks out the window to see a beach that's mighty close to the one in part one . . .

Now he looks out the little window and down below is a beach, and the mouth of a river opening onto the sea, and a speck floating in the water that—he could swear it—is a boy who looks up at the sky and points at the airplane and at him inside it, looking down. Now, at the end but again at the beginning, his mouth is full of water and laughter. He’s drowning but, seen from the present of his future, as if invoking the ghost of vacation past, he knows he’ll survive, that he’ll live to tell it and turn it into a story. But knowing how it ends doesn’t remake it any less interesting. Just the opposite, the details of that small moment merge with the immensity of what’s to come and, for example, now he can specify that the novel, the same novel, that his parents are reading is *Tender Is the Night* (1934, first published in four installments, between January and April of that year, in *Scribner’s Magazine*) and that its author is Francis Scott Fitzgerald (St. Paul Minnesota 1896 / Hollywood, California, 1940). He also knows why they’re arguing, near but far away, on the beach, unaware their son is drowning. And also—courtesy of *Ways of Dying*—he understands in detail what’s happening—the way the water is entering his body to dilute his blood. The fireworks of endorphins getting ready to explode in his brain, throwing the party of the white light at the end of the tunnel. An entire life revisited in a couple minutes, like one of those little books with pictures printed in the margins that, when you flip through it at full speed, creates the illusion of a kind of movement. Seeing himself from outside as if, correcting what he just finished writing, he were reading himself and, reading himself, he remembers how he read once that one of Truman Capote’s favorite questions was what do you imagine you would imagine—“what images, in the classic tradition,” to be precise—in that eternal moment of drowning.

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So what is real, and what is this book exactly? In some ways, this chapter totally pulls the carpet out from under the reader—makes sense that it all takes place on an airplane—or overturns the chess board, or whatever metaphor you prefer to use when referring to some literary mindfuckery. Regardless, this is the chapter in which what you've been lead to believe—that The Writer broke into CERN and now can control reality as if it were a piece of writing—didn't happen.

Of course, something went wrong, nothing went right. The whole moment had the tremulous and ultraviolent choreography of one of those old silent (but seemingly filmed at full volume) Keystone Kops movies. Or, better, of one of the Coen brothers’ movies where dreamers and visionaries like Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski or Llewyn Davis or Herbert I. “Hi” McDunnough or Tom Reagan or Ulysses Everett McGill don’t get what they deserve but do get what a good story deserves, and so—for them as for him now—events precipitate, *yessir*. They spotted him approaching a restricted access door and, immediately, he was jumped on by several guards who—they weren’t fooling him—were direct descendants of SS officers. They quickly subdued and removed him without a beating (“Elvis has left the building,” he thought as they cuffed his hands and feet and dragged him out of there), but executing a series of tai-chi martial arts moves and Vulcan death grips on his cervical nerves that left no trace, and he wasn’t so much tossed as deposited in a holding cell that was far nicer and cleaner than the flat he lived in and that, oh boy, seemed decorated entirely with, yes, IKEA-brand furniture. [. . .]

And then—ultimate humiliation—he was rescued by IKEA.

IKEA, who wasn’t as he’d thought him, as he’d described him, as he’d, in part, invented him.

IKEA was an excellent person, who had always been very grateful to him for everything, and who pulled strings and used his considerable influence to get him released and paid his fine in the millions for “attempting to bring about the end of the world.”

I love the fact that even after admitting this, The Writer falls right back into making fun of his invented IKEA and everything that he stands for. Although in the greater scheme of things, this imagined IKEA gets in the final—and maybe the best, or at least the one that hits closest to home for me and The Writer—shot.

At the Swiss writers' conference, The Writer is on a panel playing the role of slightly older writer who can crap on the new trends with some authority and respect. He does all of his various bits—about writers who don't read, who just want to be known as being writers (see all of #AmWriting on Twitter ever), about Twitter, about the future of books being more concerned with the package than the content, etc., etc. —the same sort of bits we've been reading (and loving, and cheering on) for five hundred pages. And then, there's a long response from his archnemesis IKEA, who lays bare the truths of conventional readers:

I’ll take this opportunity to give you some far more useful advice than the advice you once gave me, ha. No, seriously, listen: enough already with these books about writers, books about writing. Nobody’s interested in literature, beginning with the majority of readers, man. And writers are only interested in their own writing and, at most, to seem impressive, the writing of some distant dead man whom they latch onto as if they’d known him all their lives. Normal people just want to pass time and feel represented. Haven’t you ever read the comments on Amazon that condemn a book with the worst rating? No? Read them and you’ll learn. The reason is always the same: ‘I didn’t identify with any of the characters’ or ‘There wasn’t a single character worth getting to know.’ Why do you think all my books have the characters’ faces on the covers? [. . .] And also, enough with your referential mania and stop with your enumerations and lists and going around pointing out and acknowledging each and every one of your sources and debts and allusions. This display of honesty is in bad taste and it makes you look like the combination of an old man of the nouveau riche and a little orphan of literature. The worst of both worlds. And no one expects or asks you for that display of honesty. We all steal things, nobody admits it, and we don’t like that you go around reminding us of our little sins. [. . .] And while you’re at it: quit repeating that thing about the one hundred forty characters of Twitter. That’s not how it works. Not exactly. Don’t talk about things you don’t understand and, even worse, don’t get pissed about what you don’t know. Relax, man.

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As I was finishing my reread of *The Invented Part*, I was reminded of a piece of punctuation that I helped (with Kaija Straumanis) to invent some years ago: the hyphellipsis.

This was something that we came up with during a translation workshop that was meant to function halfway between a normal ellipses and an emdash. We envisioned it as three dots floating halfway up, in the space where a normal emdash would go. Looking back on it though—and trying to figure out how best to represent it in three-dimensional space—it might make more sense to think of these three little dots suspended mid-line between two parenthesis (. . .)

Which, more so than an ouroboros, represents the overall pattern of this novel. On the two ends, you have the two parentheses—one looking toward the future, one toward the past. In between, we have five sections that are held in between these two hands, each dependent more on its overall surroundings than what came before or after, almost like little dots held aloft. Like a hyphellipsis.

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So what comes next?

*The Dreamed Part* is out in Spanish, there to be read by all of you whose comprehension of the Spanish language is far more advanced than mine. (It takes quite a bit of attention and expertise to wade through the torrents of language and games and lists and references when reading Fresán in English; I can't imagine what it's like trying to undertake this in your second language.) And he's currently working on *The Remembered Part*, which will round out the trilogy.

Two things I know: The Spanish press has referred to the first two volumes of the trilogy as Fresán's own *Inland Empire.* A big fan of David Lynch's works (we spend most Mondays discussing *Twin Peaks: The Return*), this totally makes sense, especially in the way in which *The Invented Part* opens up his creative process, peeling back layers, letting the reader see how his own personal obsessions and touchstones are invoked, recombined, expanded, and woven into his texts. This thrills me to no end.

The other thing I know is that *The Dreamed Part* has much more Nabokov than Fitzgerald. Does this mean that it's more stylistically tricksy and less straight emotional? That's also thrilling.

Looking back over the novel we just finished reading, here are a bunch of ideas of what *might* lie ahead: More on Ishmael Tantor. Full explanation of what happened to Penelope's son. More about the rivalry with IKEA. Some sort of recourse from trying to break into CERN? Or maybe something entirely different, a new reworking of these tropes into a beautiful, imaginative, mind-bending novel?

Whatever comes next, I'll be there for the ride, enjoying every second of it.

**Interview with Rodrigo Fresán Conducted by Will Vanderhyden**

[Podcast Episode 1.11](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/12-the-author-himself/id1253564436?i=1000390620992&mt=2)

Rodrigo Fresán was born in Argentina in 1963, spent much of his adolescence in Venezuela, and moved to Barcelona in the late 90s where—apart from a brief stint in the U.S. as an Honorary Writing Fellow at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program—he has lived ever since.

He published his first book of fiction, *Historia argentina*, in 1991 to great critical and commercial success, making him a reference point in a new generation of Argentinean and Latin American writers eager to escape the typecasts imposed by the global success of the Latin American Boom writers. Since that time, Fresán has published nine more books of fiction. His stories have been widely anthologized and his books translated into a variety of languages.

He has also worked as a journalist and columnist, writing prolifically for various publications in Spain, Argentina, and elsewhere. He has translated, edited, annotated, and/or written prologues for the work of numerous writers including John Cheever, Denis Johnson, Carson McCullers, Iris Murdoch, and Roberto Bolaño.

Fresán’s fiction has been praised by the likes of Jonathan Lethem, John Banville, Enrique Vila-Matas, and Osvaldo Soriano and described as “singular,” “virtuosic,” “irreverent,” “contagious,” and “kaleidoscopic.” He has been compared to Thomas Pynchon, Don Delillo, Geoff Dyer, and David Foster Wallace and called a “pop Borges,” a “genius inventor,” a “guru of literary trends,” and “the only pure postmodern writer in the Spanish language.”

Fresán’s writing is saturated with literary and pop culture references, particularly—though by no means exclusively—references to modern and contemporary English-language literature and to global pop culture of the 1960s and 70s. His books are typically sprawling in both form and content, eschewing conventional narrative structures in favor of more open and fragmentary forms and incorporating elements of science fiction, literary and cultural criticism, and rock journalism. His style is characterized by a hyper self-conscious, encyclopedic, and darkly humoristic narrative sensibility and a prose that is simultaneously playful, kinetic, and unabashedly prolix.

Across his expansive body of work, Fresán explores myriad subjects (Argentina’s dirty war and globalism in the 1980s in *Historia argentina* and *Esperanto*,religion and pop art in *Vidas de santos*, Mexican identity in *Mantra*, Peter Pan and the lysergic 60s in *Kensington Gardens*, and science fiction and 9/11 in *The Bottom of the Sky*, for example) invariably linked to his own obsessions and preoccupations—childhood, memory, the pitfalls of idealism, great literature, writers’ lives, art, and pop culture to name a few—with an approach marked by an insatiable curiosity and an irrepressible compulsion to tell stories.

In a way, *The Invented* Part—Fresán’s ninth book of fiction and second to be translated into English—subsumes all the books that preceded it. His most overtly autobiographical work to date, this novel—now merely the first book in a trilogy whose second volume has already been published in Spanish and whose third is well under way—is an exploration of the capacious mind and creative process of an aging writer, jaded by readers’ tweet-length attention spans and his own struggle to find a way to feel relevant and to keep on writing. That struggle plays out on the page, across seven novella-length sections that, in one way or another, are descriptions of the novel the writer is trying to write. All of it amounts to a novel (Can I call this a novel?) that is quintessentially Fresanian: a carefully orchestrated yet tornadic crescendo of big ideas, leitmotifs, extended metaphors, humorous lists, surreal and satirical set pieces, reflective digressions, story sketches, and “referential mania,” revolving around questions about what it means to live and create art in our globalized, hyper-mediated, and technologized post-millennial world.

**Will Vanderhyden: How to begin . . . I suspect that—considering its subject and scope—this novel contains, in one form or another, the answer (or an answer) to any question I might come up with . . . But setting that suspicion aside for the moment, in the interest of establishing a framework for talking about this book, I think it might be helpful for newcomers to your work to start with some questions about where you think you fit in terms of literary traditions and trends. So, first off: to what extent do you consider yourself an Argentine writer? I know it’s facile to reduce writers to their nationality, but Argentina’s literary tradition is a unique one and your work seems both inextricably bound up in it and somehow external to it. What does that tradition mean to you and where do you fit in it?**

Rodrigo Fresán: I consider myself *very* Argentine in the sense that I don’t consider myself Argentine at all. There’s nothing more Argentine than this, I think. Among the many and exceedingly varied disadvantages of having been born where I was born there is—if you’re a writer—one great advantage, which Borges describes in his essay “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” and which, for me, is something like the trade’s tables of the law for someone who starts out writing as an Argentine in order to, suddenly, right away, as quickly as possible, turn, Argentineanly, into something else. There he writes: "What is Argentine tradition? I believe that this question poses no problem and can easily be answered. I believe our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which one of the inhabitants of one or another Western nation may have [. . .] Everything we Argentine writers do felicitously will belong to Argentine tradition, in the same way that the use of Italian subjects belongs to the tradition of England through Chaucer and Shakespeare [. . .] Therefore I repeat that we must not be afraid; we must believe that the universe is our birthright and try out every subject; we cannot confine ourselves to what is Argentine in order to be Argentine because either it is our inevitable destiny to be Argentine, in which case we will be Argentine whatever we do, or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask. I believe that if we lose ourselves in the voluntary dream called artistic creation, we will be Argentine and we will be, as well, good and adequate writers.”

And, it seems to me, there’s nothing more to add . . .

**WV: You have described yourself as “a reader who writes.” Is that a better way to think about where you fit in terms of Argentine tradition, among writers whose work is grounded less in their nationality and more in their library?**

RF: Yes, another very Argentine trait. In way, all the writers I admire and am interested in (the aforementioned Borges, Bioy Casares, Cortázar, Piglia, Pauls, Pron, Saccomanno, and on and on) are overflowing with books and writers. I have said it many times in too many interviews: I think that, while other literatures from Latin American and even from Spain have their roots firmly buried in the ground where they take place, Argentine literature’s roots are buried in the wall and, more concretely, in the wall of the library. The tradition of the Argentine writer is built more on the foundation of the figure of the reader than the figure of the writer. And this seems good to me, because when it comes down to it, to tell the truth, everyone who ends up writing does so because they started out reading. The true homeland of writer is his or her library. And a writer’s library is also an important part of his or her biography: a liferary. Nabokov said that the only possible biography for a writer would have to pass through the history of his or her style. I agree, but an important part of one’s style is formed and informed and deformed by the history of one’s readings.

**WV: Continuing in the vein of facile classifications . . . I remember hearing an interview with David Foster Wallace where he responds to a question about whether or not he’s a realist by saying that he doesn’t know any writers—even so-called postmodernists like himself—who don’t consider themselves realists, in terms of writing about what life *really* feels like to them. He goes on to say: “I mean, a lot of stuff that is capital ‘R’ realism just seems to me somewhat hokey, because obviously realism is an illusion of realism.” The narrator of *The Invented Part*, The Writer, seems to have similar ideas, even ironically coining the term “logical irrealism” to contrast his own writing with “magical realism.” He says: “If magical realism is realism with irreal details, then logical irrealism is its twin opposite: irreality with realistic details . . . And yet, is there anything as irreal as so-called realism? Those stories and novels with dramatic pacing and a perfectly calculated and managed sequence of events. Like *Madame Bovary*. Or the neat structure and the precise pacing of most detective novels. But reality isn’t like that. Reality is undisciplined and unpredictable. Real reality is authentically irreal . . . There is more realism and verisimilitude in single day of the free and fluid and conscious drifting of Clarissa Dalloway than in the entire prolix and well-measured life and death of Anna Karenina.” Can you talk about what these various classifications mean to you and how they relate to your work?**

RF: I agree with Wallace: there are many realities that are in this one just as there are many worlds that are in this one. Nabokov (a writer I’ve gone back to in recent years, more dazzled than ever), again, is useful when it comes to positioning myself on this issue in an interview: “Reality is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates it’s own special reality having nothing to do with the average ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye. [. . . ] You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it’s hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects. [. . .] We speak of one thing being like some other thing when what we are really craving to do is to describe something that is like nothing on earth.” And let’s go a little further: “The most we can do when steering a favorite in the best direction, in circumstances not involving injury to others, is to act as a breath of wind and to apply the lightest, the most indirect pressure such as trying to induce a dream that we hope our favorite will recall as prophetic if a likely event does actually happen. On the printed page the words ‘likely’ and ‘actually’ should be italicized too, at least slightly, to indicate a slight breath of wind inclining those characters (in the sense of both signs and personae),” he points out as a sort of editorial advice in *Transparent Things*. “I am no more guilty of imitating ‘real life’ than ‘real life’ is responsible for plagiarizing me,” he explains in the preface to the collected stories *Nabokov’s Dozen*. And more, even more Nabokov: that flower plucked by Nabokov, in that interview, as an example of how “reality is a very subjective affair” and that “I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization.” That, again, reality is nothing but “an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms.” And that, of course, there is a neutral reality that includes and involves all of us; but that, in the next breath, each of us has our own reality and entirely personal perception of that flower. And that there’s no such thing as “everyday reality” which is a term that “presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known.” And still more: “‘Reality’ (one of the few words which means nothing without quotes),” he concludes in the afterword to *Lolita*.

The thing about “logical irrealism” was just a joke (I hope a good one) to escape from the “magical realism” that—when I first started to write and publish—every foreign publisher and academic and critic seemed to be searching for, even though it wasn’t there, in Argentine literature just because it was Latin American. In any case, Colombian or Chilean or Mexican or Peruvian writers of my generation had it much worse in that sense because their past and present were much more irradiated by their totemic writers and by the luminous shadow of the Boom. In Argentina, we were never that concerned with/interested in the Boom and, besides, all the great writers from my country embraced the fantastic genre as one/another facet of reality.

**WV: Now, this is a question that, in a way, the book takes as its point of departure—so it might make a good segue into talking about to what extent *The Invented Part* is autobiographical, to what extent the book’s primary narrator, The Writer, is you—but: what made you want to be a writer? Or, to put it another way: how and why did you end up pursuing a career/vocation as a writer? And: how is the reality of that story different from The Writer’s origin story in the book?**

RF: It isn’t autobiographical, but it is the most personal in certain respects. In ways that have more to do with what I have written than what I have lived, in the sense that it is about how a writer, who is also me, thinks. In other words: I don’t have a mad sister, but I do have a very sensible son; my parents weren’t killed during the military dictatorship of the ‘70s-80s, but we did have to flee the country and barely made it out (the most precise version of that story is told at the end of *Historia argentina*, my first book). In terms of what it was that made me into a writer, I don’t have a precise memory of that. I always wanted to be one. Even before I learned to read and write. That’s why, in *The Invented Part*, I invented en epiphanic instant in the life of the book’s narrator when his writerly-vocation is activated after he almost drowns . . . As far as I’m concerned, I have always considered it a great privilege and gift to get to live and not have to betray my childhood dream of what I wanted to be when I “grew up.” Not many people get to keep and concretize that. But maybe, yes, it’s all linked to my own almost-death: I was born and declared clinically dead. I had a very complicated birth. And, mysteriously and miraculously, I came back from the other side. I lived to tell the tale. To tell it and to write it.

**WV: In *The Invented Part*, you explore the relationship between disastrous moments in the lives of certain famous artists—F. Scott Fitzgerald and his relationships with Zelda Sayre, Ernest Hemmingway, and Sara and Gerald Murphy; William S. Burroughs and the killing of his wife Joan Vollmer; the members of Pink Floyd and the loss of their original band mate Syd Barrett—and the famous works of art that emerged from the wreckage. How do these famous instances of the confluence of life and art parallel The Writer’s own situation and inform the decisions he makes in the book?**

RF: I wouldn’t say they inform any of his decisions (his decisions are, in general, bad when not catastrophic), but they do function as talismans for him or as the floating remains of a shipwreck that he can cling to. Also, clearly, he thinks about them to not think about himself and a body of work (his own) that would be hard pressed to ever reach those heights. And there’s an additional application of these geniuses and figures (like the figures of Bob Dylan, the Brontë sisters, and Vladimir Nabokov in the next “installment” of the monster) all of them have something in common: they were consummate (and some consumed) rewriters of themselves.

**WV: This will likely be clear to anybody who has read the book, but can you talk about where the title, *The Invented Part*, came from?**

RF: It’s from a letter that Gerald Murphy sent to Francis Scott Fitzgerald. I had already used it as an epigraph in *Historia argentina* and . . . we can agree that it makes a great title and it was always a mystery to me that nobody had used it. “I know now that what you said in *Tender Is the Night* is true. Only the invented part of our life—the unreal part—has had any scheme, any beauty,” writes Murphy, who—along with his wife Sara—had been upset by how, without consulting them, Fitzgerald had used their marriage as the point of departure for his second great novel.

**WV: *The Invented Part*, like many of your books,has a triptych or three-act structure, with the long middle section divided into five subsections. Although there is a narrative arc that develops in a quasi-linear way throughout the book, there is also the sense that all seven parts are happening simultaneously: they overlap, riff off each other, and sometimes tell different versions of the same events. Where did this structure come from? To what extent was it planned and to what extent improvised? How was it written? Did you start at the beginning and write through to the end or was the final structure something that you came to later on?**

RF: I always think in trios, triads, triptychs, triangles. I fear that it has to do with the influence resulting from very early exposure to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* and The Beatles’ "A Day in the Life". Once I said that I write the way The Beatles recorded and it was misinterpreted in the sense that I was accused of considering myself as great as The Beatles. Well, no . . . The truth is, I said what I said thinking more about George Martin (The Beatles producer) than about The Beatles. Anyway, the headline was misinterpreted. People today just read headlines and feel compelled to retweet them right away without reading the entire interview. I wasn’t saying that I write with the same degree of genius and talent that The Beatles had, not at all. I was saying, and I explained this in the interview, that after reading a memoir by Geoff Emerick, The Beatles’ sound engineer, the thing about equalizing and utilizing different channels on the sound mixer ended up having a great deal to do with the way I wrote *The Invented Part*, whose seven parts I wrote simultaneously. I had seven files open, and I worked on a different one each day. And, at the same time, I didn’t really know where that novel was going, until my son provided me with the key, the little toy figure that appears on the cover of the original edition, which has now become a kind of little literary icon . . . I was bogged down. I had spent years writing a novel, I knew what I wanted to say, I even had a plan, but it wasn’t coming together. I was stuck in uncertainty, I had five hundred pages of nothing, and then my son, Daniel, who was five years old at the time, told me he had found the cover for my next book. We saw it in the window of a stationary shop on the way to his school. It was a windup toy: a traveler wearing a raincoat and hat, carrying a big suitcase. We bought it. “I want him to be the hero too,” Daniel said. I ended up discarding that last idea, but I hung onto the toy. And that’s when it happened: it was as if I’d been wound up and set in motion and I didn’t stop until I got to the end.

**WV: In this book and elsewhere you tell an anecdote about a conversation you had with the Irish writer John Banville in which you ask him what is more important, plot or style, and he responds by saying: “Style goes on ahead giving triumphal leaps while the plot follows along behind dragging its feet.” Can you talk about this idea and how it relates to your work?**

RF: What Banville said seems to me a great sentence. And a great truth. And it was a great privilege to be there and hear him say it. But in *The Invented Part*, I reproduce it and, I hope, politely and respectfully add to it. I’ll cite here what I say in the novel: “Later he wondered whether it might not be possible for style to go back a few steps and lovingly lift the plot up in its arms, as if it were a brilliant and complicated child, and turn it into something new, different: into a stylistic plot, into the most well-plotted of styles.” In my life as a reader, the truth is that it’s harder and harder for me to read anybody who doesn’t rely on style.

**WV: Your fiction wears its influences on its sleeve, but not only do you fully acknowledge your literary forbearers, you repurpose, and—à la Borges, when he wrote: “Every writer creates his own precursors”—(re)create them. Your books, both in form and content, revolve around and play with the work and lives of other writers, both real and invented: your narratives are full of ersatz and factual stories of great artists and writers; your writing is riddled with quotations, allusions, and rewritten/recycled/re-contextualized ideas. But out of this bricolage of references you create your own sensibility, your own voice—an undeniably original style. Can you talk about what style means to you and where you think it comes from?**

RF: Ah, that is the great mystery. Over the years I have come to realize that personal style is nothing more than the way in which the wounds of successive failures stop bleeding and scar over. Out of all those things that never turn out how you thought or hoped they would, if you persevere, in the end your own style will emerge, inside of which, yes, in my case (and in everyone’s case; I just don’t have any problem admitting it and acknowledging it) many other voices coexist. I am a referential maniac. And I’m very proud of it.

**WV: Even this idea of “referential mania,” is itself a reference. In his story “Signs and Symbols” Nabokov uses the term to describe a psychological disorder suffered by the institutionalized son of an elderly couple of Russian Jewish émigrés. This disorder causes the patient to imagine that “everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence” and that: “Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme.” You’ve turned referential mania into a literary device, a way to harness information overload, to make stories out of the multitude of stories that have been personally meaningful to you at different times in your life. Is there a particular moment or experience that kick started your referential mania?**

RF: I think I talked about this somewhat in response to previous questions (early exposure to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, The Beatles’ “A Day in the Life”, etc.). But maybe the Big Bang . . . I remember perfectly my father coming home with the freshly released, the first, and automatic favorite *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and looking at that cover and wondering who all those people were and what were they doing there, and feeling already how that image was setting in motion a referential mania that would become the incurable and delightful pathology of all my future books.

**WV: The Writer has theory about the formation of the reader/writer. Can you describe that theory? And while we’re at it: who are your readers?**

RF: I’ll quote myself again or, better, quote The Writer from *The Invented* Part: “A theory of the reader/writer: As far as the formation and/or deformation of a writer, I believe the process is a lot like the formation of the reader. When we start writing, as children, the most important thing is the hero, identification with the hero. We fall in love with the boy or girl in the story, and then take it upon ourselves to find out if they’ve starred in other adventures. So, stacks and stacks of comics and Sandokan, the Musketeers, Nemo, Jo, etcetera. And there/here is as far as most readers go (and they can stop here, no problem). To continue the adventure, into the jungle, a new kind of reader appears. A slightly more sophisticated reader, with a particular interest in the structure of the adventures and, later, a particular fascination with who created them and under what circumstances—with that living ghost called author and with the distinct possibility of other similar authors. The final and most evolved stage of reader—and writer—is one who, in addition to all the foregoing, is also concerned with and enjoys a particular style. That’s the only way you can fight back and make peace in our digital and pluralized times, electrified by writers who narrate but don’t write, by writers who simply recount but on whom you can never count when you need them the most. And there are few writers—the truly great ones—who make their style come through in their prose and, also, in what their prose tells. And thus, the miracle of a plot and a style all their own—unique, nontransferable. If there is a goal, it is certainly that—to have plot and style make space and time for a new and personal language. That the invented part of what’s told *also* be the way that fiction speaks and expresses itself. But—warning—never forget that the style you achieve is always—though *a* *posteriori* you try to convince yourself of the opposite, that everything was coldly calculated—just a detour along the path. Style ends up being nothing more than the hangover following a bender. What’s left behind and provokes a headache and so let’s see what we can do with this. Style is the successful distillation of a failure, the glorious, unforgettable accident. A laboratory problem, like in *The Fly*, like in *The Hulk*. That’s the only way to understand the expansive yet Prussian digression of Saul Bellow or the novelistic mutation of Shakespeare in Iris Murdoch. A thing you find when you’re looking for something else entirely.”

As far as my potential readers go, I’ve always said that I like to imagine them as people who are a lot like me but slightly more intelligent.

**WV: There is a symbolic/mythic space that exists in *The Invented Part* and throughout your fiction called “Sad Songs.” Though its function and location seem to shift from one book to the next, I feel like it has something to do with nostalgia, with childhood memories, and with the origin of life-long obsessions. Can you talk about this idea and it’s role in your fiction?**

RF: I wouldn’t say that it’s nostalgia, rather that the past is increasingly interesting. And also increasingly big. Because yesterday keeps getting fatter, tomorrow keeps getting skinnier, and the present keeps sneaking away to purge in secret. Of all times—and I get this Proust no less—the past is the place that’s best written and the one you can write best. It’s a place where we already were but that we can always go back to. It’s not “a foreign country: they do different things there,” as L.P. Hartley wrote, but the country where all of us were born and that we leave behind just so we can go back. In the future, we will all die in the past. Maybe that’s why they say that our entire life passes before our memory’s eyes in a matter of seconds, in the moment of our definitive goodbye, right? When it comes to childhood, everything happened there and everything that happened there keeps happening to us because—as readers or writers—we will always be animals that can only fall asleep if, first, someone comes and tells us a story. The idea of Sad Songs is, on the one hand, a joke/homage to certain tics of magical realism and, on the other hand, a very convenient and functional strategy: when I can’t think of where to go, I go and go back to Sad Songs. And Sad Songs can be anywhere in the world and even—like in *The Bottom of the Sky*—on another planet.

**WV: The narrator of *The Invented Part* has strong feelings about screen culture, about the prevalence of certain technologies—i.e. ebooks, smartphones, Facebook, twitter, etc.—and their implications for literature. To what extent do you share his feelings? How do you think technology is changing the way we read and write?**

RF: A little. But not that much. It irritates and bothers me, but I can look the other way. In *The Dreamed Part*, the second book in the trilogy,the reason for and root of the protagonist’s luddite passion is clarified. But I don’t know if I should say or give anything away in that sense. Yes, maybe, it might be appropriate here to offer a fragment from the next book where the narrator, in the form of a list of questions, delves into a particular preoccupation of his (also mine) about how we have sold our souls and our eyes to certain gadgets. There I go, here it comes: “Think about it a little: not that long ago none of you were going around carrying those little devices with you everywhere and you lived lives that were more or less the same as the ones you live now and you were masters of the same intelligence quotient and the same powers of internal and external observation . . . Tell me, what is it that has changed so much in your lives and the lives of your acquaintances in recent years that has made you feel the obligation or need to share everything that happens to you and everything that you happen to think of, eh? Sure, if all of you had, courtesy of some fork in space-time, been in Dallas with your little phones that morning in 1963, we’d probably know exactly how many shooters there were and where they shot from and we’d be able to see JFK’s head explode from all possible angles. But seriously, I mean it, believe me: nobody is interested in that photo of what you’re eating or that sunset you’re seeing or your most recent deep thought that you just have to share with all of humanity unless you’re interested in their reflections and their sunsets and their meals too . . . Isn’t it true that not that long ago you liked many fewer things and that you took your time to think about whether something was or wasn’t worthy of a *like*? Isn’t it true that just a few years ago you didn’t read so much and definitely didn’t write so much? Isn’t it true that it used to make more to sense to go to the bathroom to read than to write? Isn’t it true that you used to live without wondering whether everything you did or thought was inspiring enough and worthy of being instantaneously and constantly sent out into the fullest emptiness in all of history? Isn’t it true that those lives were actually more interesting and that, every so often, it was fun to sit down with a friend, live and direct and in person, and say to them: ‘You have no idea what happened to me last week’ and then proceed to tell them with a full luxury of details, just as you had practiced in your heads, with authentic tears and laughter? Isn’t it true that it’s more appropriate to tell people about your pregnancies or tumors in privacy and one on one and in different ways depending on the person and not to tell everyone at the same time with the same words? Isn’t it true that there was a certain charm to coming home and—when it wasn’t bad news—finding a handwritten note on the ground beside the door or on a desk or stuck to the refrigerator door and opening it and under that cold light reading the warmth of that message? Isn’t it true that it’s disturbing to think that the activity you do most throughout the day is stare at your phone? Isn’t it true that it’s much more pleasant not to feel that already-diagnosed-by-neurologists ‘phantom vibration’ at the height of your pockets, as if it were the phone that we forgot and that isn’t even there calling and reminding us of its existence from far away, like the reflex and memory of some unforgettable amputated body part. Isn’t it true that you kind of miss that delectable torture of not being able to remember something—a name, a title, a song—and not find it and abort it immediately via Google so that, instead, you allow that forgotten thing to live and expand and, while you try to defeat it, you awaken other memories and other songs and titles and names? Isn’t it true that it used to be so gratifying to be the first to remember something in a gathering of the absent-minded? Isn’t it true that it was much easier to detect the early symptoms of Alzheimer’s and to get ahead in its treatment without the use of instantaneous memory aids? Isn’t it true that it was exciting when every time you took a photo you were also making a choice? Isn’t it true that it was better to have memories that were far more precise than all those blurry photos where you can’t even tell who is in them? Isn’t it true that it was more exciting when every time you didn’t take a photo you were also making a choice? Isn’t it true that you used to film and photograph your kids less and you looked at them more and saw them better at home or at end-of-year performances or at birthdays? Isn’t it true that life was a little better when everyone who made fun of you in high school or at work could only do it from nine to five and not like now, on Facebook (‘Facebook friend’ was a great oxymoron, he thought) or Instagram or wherever, at all hours of the day and night, and you there promising and deceiving yourself that you won’t log back on to see how they hit you and insult you and laugh in your screen-face. Isn’t it true that it’s better to go out into the street and meet up with friends and not to capture virtual monsters that cost you less and less money, which takes more and more work to earn? Isn’t it true that it was better to go out walking in the street and randomly run into people instead of knowing where they are at all times but never seeing them in person? Isn’t it true that it was so nice to go out walking and be sure that nobody could call you on the phone? Isn’t it true that it was better to go out into the street when there were none of those new stoplights, on the ground, specially located to protect people who keep getting run over because they’re walking, head down, looking at the screen of their phone? Isn’t it true that it was nobler to immediately come to the aid of the unknown victim of an accident instead of making a video and “sharing it” first? Isn’t it true that it’s weird that doctors, when it comes time to let family members say goodbye to their loves ones—many of them dying because they were so concentrated on their phones they never saw what was coming at them until it was too late—have opted, I read about this the other day, to unplug the screens of the monitors that register the dying vital signs, because many people, reflexively, ignore the dying person and stare at those devices with the sound of videogames of game over? Isn’t it true that everything sounded better when all the phones sounded more or less the same, when their voice was more or less the same? Isn’t it true that you kind of miss those days when having a good memory was something to be proud of and not something we put in the hands of that device in our hands? Isn’t it true that it was exciting to memorize the phone number of a person you loved and to dial their digits one and a time, as if they were the letters of the person’s name, instead of just pressing a button without ever knowing what those numbers might add to or subtract from our hearts? Isn’t it true that we should be prouder of the memory of our soft brain than that of our hard disc? Isn’t it true that the world seemed better ordered and fairer when it wasn’t so easy to reach anybody via email, and certain levels of friendship and hierarchies of familiarity and rules of protocol were respected? Isn’t it true that things worked better when someone asked the legitimate owner first before casually giving away their phone number and email address to just anybody? Isn’t it true that it was a pleasure to unplug the phone or to think that you had achieved enough success in your life that you could dispense with it, that you had someone to deal with those ring-ring-rings or with those ringtones personalized—like those car horns that used to sing “La cucaracha”—with songs from TV shows or movies or famous speeches or, even worse, the wailing of your own baby? Isn’t it true that you made love more often or at least thought about making love more often or slept more and more deeply dreaming about making love and not about staring at and talking on your phone? Isn’t it true that it was much more enjoyable to go to the bathroom with a book and not a phone? Isn’t it true that spy thrillers and love stories were much better and more exciting when their moles and kitty cats had to search for and locate a phone on the street or in a bar and weren’t carrying it with them everywhere? Isn’t it true that the president of the United States still looks more elegant in the oval office with an old-school telephone and not holding one of those plastic and metal wafers? Isn’t it true that everything was more comfortable when you didn’t have to declare them at airports as if they were lethal weapons? Isn’t it true that it was easier to live a calmer life in a world where phones weren’t exploding and the new model of something wasn’t worse than previous models? Isn’t it true that your lives were better when you were people who thought something, and thought about it for a while before broadcasting it, and your face and name were out in the open and not the maniacal masks of avatars and aliases and anonymous and invasive body snatchers? Isn’t it true that everything was much nicer when phone calls were much less frequent and lasted much less time? Isn’t it true that life was more relaxed when you spent time reading absolutely nothing and maybe achieved some kind of Zen emptiness, unlike now when you read all the time, and all you read are brief stupidities that, in their accumulation, end up turning you into a big stupid nothing. Isn’t it true that what makes you check your social media profiles every minute isn’t the satisfaction of seeing yourselves there but of confronting the constant dissatisfaction of not really being seen by anyone? Isn’t it true that everything was much nicer when you didn’t have to take constant and interminable seminars to be able to use new applications, suspecting that soon everything would completely flip upside down and you’d have to start from mechanics’ ground zero and take classes to learn how to hold a spoon and slurp down your soup? Isn’t it true that everything seemed much grander and much more expressive when the world was much smaller and much more incommunicado? Isn’t it true that everything felt much more exciting and adventurous and proximal and close when the long-distance thing existed? Isn’t it true that it was easier to trust those foldable and uncomfortable and silent but oh so much more believable paper maps that, in addition to showing you where you were, pointed out where you had been and where you would be? Isn’t it true that the air felt lighter and the landscape shone much brighter when the only thing you knew about writers was what was in their books or in the occasional interview and when you knew absolutely *nothing* about the life and work of readers because readers didn’t write? . . .” And enough, for now, right?

**WV: Most of your books change over time, meaning subsequent editions are published with corrections, changes, and entirely new content. Like for instance, in the case of *The Invented Part*, you added some 60 pages of new material to the book as I was translating it. This tendency of yours to continuously rewrite, to add, reminds me, again, of Borges and his quintessentially postmodern ideas about the impossibility of an authentic or definitive original, about how all writing is rewriting, about how literature is alive and cyclically shifting with every reading, rewrite, translation, never fixed and never finished . . . Where does this impulse of yours come from? And, while we are it: can we call your novels novels?**

RF: Let’s say that it’s hard for me to let go of my books (though it gets easier all the time: material fatigue as time goes by . . . ) When it comes to what I do, the truth is I don’t think much about genres and formats. I prefer to imagine that each one of my books is a different room in the same house that I am discovering as I move through it. Someday, I hope, I’ll climb up to the basement or descend to the attic.

**WV: *The Invented Part* has now grown into a trilogy. The second volume, *La parte soñada* [*The Dreamed Part*] has already been published in Spanish and you’re well into the writing of the third volume, *La parte recordada* [*The Remembered Part*]. Can you talk about how this happened? You didn’t set out to write a trilogy did you?**

RF: In the first place, *The Dreamed Part* wasn’t going to exist. When I wrote *The Invented Part* I had no plan to do a trilogy, just the opposite, when I finished the novel I had the impression that everything would end there and that I was going to devote myself to something else. And yet, I spent almost a whole long year adding small fragments to *The Invented Part*, first for the French translation, which came out un January, and, then, to the English translation, which is just coming out now. I didn’t have a plan about how and what the next book after *The Invented Part* would be, but I was thinking of something small, of something uncomplicated and quickly written. And yet, I realized that I was having a really hard time letting go of the voice of *The Invented Part*. I really liked what I had achieved with that voice: it’s a kind of third person in first person. I think that, also, when I finished the novel, I had become sort of addicted to that version of myself, a kind of alter ego/Mr. Hyde who could say all the things that not only could I not say, but that I couldn’t even think. It was appealing to see how I would have been if I had suffered certain constants and not done certain things, like become a father. Then that small book that I had thought of, whose idea was a night in the life of two kids and their slightly mad uncle, going all over a city looking for their parents, was abducted by *The Dreamed Part* and, in fact, that story of the two kids was the last thing I wrote, turning it into the final four or five pages of *The Dreamed Part*. And the truth is that when I accepted that I was going to continue with the voice of *The Invented Part*, I felt very comfortable and the writing of this second novel went quite quickly, as is the writing of the third one, *The Remembered Part*. The idea is that the trilogy ends up creating a portrait, between figurative and abstract, of how a writer thinks . . . A memoir not of a life but of a method. When you remember something, at the same time, you decide to forget something, because you never remember the totality of events. That, in itself, is already exists a form of editing and narrative building. The same thing happens when you dream and when you invent. That is, if you will, the formal center of the trilogy. To invent and to dream and to remember. Those are the three motors of the narration of a life that together make a work of art. The inevitable problem, of course, will be what to do when the trilogy is finished. But it will be a happy problem, I hope.

**Complete List of Podcast Episodes and Guests**

[Episode 1.1:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/2-introducing-rodrigo-fres%C3%A1ns-the-invented-part/id1253564436?i=1000389329496&mt=2) Introducing Rodrigo Fresàn’s *The Invented Part* (Will Vanderhyden)

[Episode 1.2:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/3-the-real-character-the-invented-part-pages-1-45/id1253564436?i=1000389329493&mt=2) “The Real Character” (Pages 1-45) (Jeremy Garber)

[Episode 1.3:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/4-place-where-sea-ends-so-forest-can-begin-part-1-invented/id1253564436?i=1000389329494&mt=2) "The Place Where the Sea Ends So the Forest Can Begin: Part 1" (46-98) (Mark Binelli)

[Episode 1.4:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/5-place-where-sea-ends-so-forest-can-begin-part-2-invented/id1253564436?i=1000389329492&mt=2) "The Place Where the Sea Ends So the Forest Can Begin: Part 2" (99-207) (Tom Flynn)

[Episode 1.5:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/6-place-where-sea-ends-so-forest-can-begin-part-3-invented/id1253564436?i=1000389329495&mt=2) "The Place Where the Sea Ends So the Forest Can Begin: Part 1" (208-230) (Rachel Cordasco)

[Episode 1.6:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/7-few-things-you-happen-to-think-about-when-all-you/id1253564436?i=1000389555346&mt=2) "A Few Things You Happen to Think About When All You Want Is to Think About Nothing" (231-300) (Jonathan Lethem)

[Episode 1.7:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/8-many-f%C3%AAtes-or-study-for-group-portrait-broken-decalogues/id1253564436?i=1000389608423&mt=2) "Many Fêtes, or Study for a Group Portrait with Broken Decalogues" (301-360)

[Episode 1.8:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/9-life-after-people-or-notes-for-brief-history-progressive/id1253564436?i=1000389854751&mt=2) "Life After People, or Notes For a Brief History of Progressive Rock and Science Fiction" (361-404) (Tom Roberge)

[Episode 1.9:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/10-meanwhile-once-again-beside-museum-stairway-under/id1253564436?i=1000390111241&mt=2) "Meanwhile, Once Again, Beside the Museum Stairway, Under a Big Sky" (405-440)

[Episode 1.10:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/11-the-imaginary-person-the-invented-part-pages-441-552/id1253564436?i=1000390376530&mt=2) "The Imaginary Person" (441-552) (Valerie Miles)

[Episode 1.11:](https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/12-the-author-himself/id1253564436?i=1000390620992&mt=2) The Author Himself! (Rodrigo Fresán, Will Vanderhyden)