

THE WHITE PAGES
Jonathan Dorf

List of Characters

ROBERT

NANCY

TOTO, on the younger side of college age

THE OTHER CUSTOMERS, played by the same actress

MOLLY, the First Customer

POLLY, the Second Customer

DOLLY, the Third Customer

If played together with *Bookends*, actors from the former are meant to double as actors in *The White Pages*. The POLICE CAPTAIN doubles with ROBERT, either JANE or SUSAN (if using two different actresses in *Bookends*) with NANCY, ERIC with TOTO, and either JANE or SUSAN (or a second actress if only one actress plays Jane and Susan) as THE OTHER CUSTOMERS

SCENE 1

(The Book Traders Book Store. A sign advertises, "Used Books Bought and Traded." A slightly smaller sign invites, "Browsers Welcome." An even smaller sign, virtually invisible to the audience, says, among other things, "No Refunds." TOTO, college age and the quintessential empty young man, endlessly stacks books on one end of a counter, then restacks them on the other side. Lining the store walls are locked glass bookcases. NANCY, late thirties, the store owner and Toto's aunt, stands behind the counter—by the cash register. ROBERT, Nancy's age, a customer and the kind of guy who looks like an avid reader without being nerdy about it, tentatively reaches out to make sure the books are really glassed-in.)

NANCY

Would you like a piece of fruit?

ROBERT

What?

NANCY

A piece of fruit. With your book.

ROBERT

Do people usually—

NANCY

Yes. Yes they do.

ROBERT

Oh. OK.

NANCY

Be right back.

(Nancy exits. Enter THE FIRST CUSTOMER carrying three books. Robert reads the spines to see what she has.)

FIRST CUSTOMER

(a friendly smile for Robert)

Dubliners. Joyce? I found it both a vivid and unflinching portrait of dear, dirty Dublin at the turn of the century and a moral history of a nation and a people whose golden age has passed.

ROBERT

Ah yes. "The Dead."

FIRST CUSTOMER

The dead what?

ROBERT

"The Dead?" The last story—isn't it? I remember all that beautiful imagery with the snow blanketing the living and the dead.

FIRST CUSTOMER

(no idea what he's talking about)

Oh. Yes. It was a vivid and unflinching portrait.

(Nancy returns with a small basket containing an apple, an orange, a peach and a pear. The First Customer browses the locked bookcases.)

NANCY

There we are. Which would you like?

(Robert points at the orange.)

There you are.

ROBERT

I bet normally the fruit basket's ready and waiting.

NANCY

Oh—I just hadn't put it out yet.

ROBERT

You were probably shocked when I walked in.

NANCY

Why would I—

ROBERT

Oh. I thought . . . I work at the insurance company on the corner. Golden Eagle? I thought maybe you knew I worked there and figured an insurance guy wouldn't read books. I'm an insurance adjuster. We're not exactly known for being bookish.

NANCY

What sort of insurance . . . ?

ROBERT

Homeowner's et al. Fire mostly.

NANCY

Oh.

ROBERT

Childhood habit—I liked to fix things for the neighbors, so now I clean up their accidents. Sort of.

(brief pause)

Is that glass fireproof?

NANCY

I don't know.

ROBERT

Last thing you probably need is more insurance. Don't worry. I'm an adjuster, not a salesman.

(checks his watch)

An adjuster who's about to be late for work.

(Nancy smiles and opens one of the locked cabinets and pulls out a book.)

NANCY

And here's your book. Receipt's stuck inside.

ROBERT

Thank you.

(Robert starts to exit, scanning the bookcases for a moment before he goes. The First Customer approaches Nancy.)

NANCY

Molly, I didn't even see you come in.

FIRST CUSTOMER

(hands Nancy the three books she brought)

Dubliners was absolutely stunning. It was both a vivid and unflinching portrait of dear, dirty Dublin at the turn of the century and a moral history of a nation and a people whose golden age has passed.

NANCY

What can I get for you today?

(Robert, now at the door, opens the book to take out the receipt and stops short.)

FIRST CUSTOMER

Surprise me. If you have something with a blue cover, that would be great. We're having a dinner party tonight, and I think the tablecloth is going to be blue.

NANCY

Let me see what I have in the back.

(Exit Nancy. Robert approaches Toto, who continues to sort books back and forth.)

ROBERT

I think there's been a mistake. This book—

TOTO

Looks like a nice one.

ROBERT

It has nothing in it.

TOTO

What?

(Robert hands it to him. Toto fans the pages.)

What are you talking about? There's zillions of pages.

ROBERT

They're blank.

TOTO

Really.

ROBERT

Look.

(Toto examines the pages very slowly. Robert looks to the First Customer for support. She smiles vapidly and turns away, occupying herself with her fingernails.)

TOTO

There're different shades of white. That's cool.

ROBERT

What!

TOTO

Look—that's kind of creamy white, and that part over there—in the corner—is . . . white white.

ROBERT

Where's the writing?

TOTO

Right here.

(points to the front and back covers)

Thomas Hardy's Return of the Native is a masterpiece of tragic passion, a tale that perfectly epitomizes the author's own unique and melancholy genius. It's the forerunner of the twentieth century psychological novel—OK?

ROBERT

Inside. Where's the writing inside?

(beat)

TOTO

Aunt Nancy!

(to Robert)

Aunt Nancy's coming.

(Enter Nancy carrying three books.)

NANCY

(to the First Customer)

I have a blue, a white and a black. They should match fine.

FIRST CUSTOMER

You're a lifesaver. Take care now. Bye, Toto.

TOTO

(almost drooling)

Bye.

(The First Customer exits.)

NANCY

(to Robert)

Can I help you?

ROBERT

This book is blank.

NANCY

Yes?

(Nancy checks the covers as Toto did.)

ROBERT

You really should check the books more carefully before you resell them.

NANCY

Would you like another piece of fruit?

ROBERT

I'd like another book.

NANCY

Would you like to look at our catalogue?

(She shoves a large pile of pictures at him. He holds it at arms length, not looking at it.)

ROBERT

I really should get to work. Do you have anything else by Hardy? Tess of the D'Urbervilles? Jude the Obscure?

NANCY

I loved the movie. Tess. According to the catalogue
(flips through the pictures)
we should have one copy.

ROBERT

Of the movie or the book?

NANCY

The book, silly. (smiling, thinks he's made a joke)

(Nancy scans one of the locked cabinets and finds what she's looking for.)

ROBERT

Why do you keep the books in locked cabinets?

NANCY

People are greedy. They try to read the books without paying for them.

ROBERT

Not because of fire then.

(Nancy shakes her head and unlocks the cabinet, pulls Tess, then relocks the cabinet.)

NANCY

Here we go.

(reading the jacket)

From what I understand, Tess Durbeyfield is Hardy's most striking and tragic heroine.

ROBERT

I've always wanted to read it.

NANCY

The novel builds to a tragic climax that makes Tess of the D'Urbervilles one of the most poignant and heartbreaking novels in all of English literature.

ROBERT

Oh.

(brief pause)

Have you ever read Last of the Mohicans?

NANCY

Loved it. Even gave it to Toto to read.

TOTO

Yeah. It was this unforgettable portrait of fierce individualism, deep moral courage, and profound friendship. It's rich with insight into our national character and consciousness.

NANCY

When I saw you walk in with the Cooper, I said to myself, "someone will snap that right up."

TOTO

I heard you. You said, "someone will snap that right up."

NANCY

That and the . . . uh, Pyn . . . Pun . . .

ROBERT

Pynchon. Thomas Pynchon. Gravity's Rainbow.

NANCY

Don't know that one.

ROBERT

Wonderful.

NANCY

I'm sure it's lovely.

(beat)

Don't you worry. We'll make sure the books you brought us go to good owners.

(brief pause)

Would you have any interest in joining our Book Traders club? For a seventy-five dollar annual membership, you can trade for any book in the store, and when you're done with it—assuming you haven't ripped the cover off or peed on it—you can trade your book for another one.

ROBERT

For free?

NANCY

Of course for free. Once you get your membership, you can keep on trading all year long. You could even start with this book.

ROBERT

(considering)

Hmmm . . .

NANCY

I don't remember—did you want another piece of fruit?

ROBERT

Just the book. Thanks. I should go . . .

Wrapped? **NANCY**

What's that? **ROBERT**

Would you like your book wrapped? **NANCY**

In wrapping paper? **ROBERT**

Or a bag. **NANCY**

No—thanks. **ROBERT**

(Nancy hands him Tess.)

Thank you.

Come back soon. **NANCY**

(She exits, leaving Toto at the counter. Robert begins to exit, but eager to get a start on reading Tess, he opens the book and realizes it is also empty. Enter grandly the **SECOND CUSTOMER**, female and a contemporary of the First Customer, brandishing Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls.)

SECOND CUSTOMER

This Hemingway was greater in power, broader in scope and more intensely emotional than any of the author's previous works. One of the best war novels of all time.

ROBERT

May I see that for a second?

(The Second Customer hands the book to Robert.)

Blank. The pages are blank.

SECOND CUSTOMER

But Hemingway was greater in power, broader in scope and more intensely emotional than in any of his previous works. It was one of the best war novels of all time.

ROBERT

Excuse me.

(Robert turns his attention to Toto, who continues to stack and restack books mindlessly. Robert shoves Tess in Toto's face.)

This book has no writing in it. And neither does *this* book.

(Robert waves For Whom the Bell Tolls at Toto.)

And neither does the book I had before.

(brief pause)

I gave you three classics—a Cooper, a Pynchon and a Singer. An *Isaac Bashevis Singer*. And the books you've given me—there's nothing in them. Empty pages. Creamy white pages. Tan white pages. Yellow white pages, and *white* white pages. Where the hell's the text?

TOTO

Aunt Nancy?

SECOND CUSTOMER

(rips her book away from Robert, to Toto)

My friend Molly says that William Faulkner's Light in August features some of Faulkner's most memorable characters. Could I trade the Hemingway for the Faulkner?

TOTO

Faulkner?

ROBERT

(to Toto)

Do you work here?

TOTO

Aunt Nancy?

(Enter Nancy, wearing a soot-stained apron and clutching the cover of Gravity's Rainbow.)

SECOND CUSTOMER

What's that one? Is it new? It looks so interesting: Gravity's Rainbow. I'd like that one.

(Robert recognizes his book. Beat.)

ROBERT

That's my book!

NANCY

Oh. Excuse me.

(She removes the apron. To the Second Customer)

Would you like a piece of fruit with that?

SECOND CUSTOMER

Do you have any plums?

NANCY

I can check in the back.

SECOND CUSTOMER

Would you?

NANCY

(starts to exit, leaving the copy of Gravity's Rainbow on the counter)

New crate came in this morning. So busy I haven't had time to check it.

ROBERT

But—

NANCY

With you in a minute.

(Nancy exits. Robert turns back to Toto.)

ROBERT

Excuse me.

TOTO

She'll be back in a minute.

(Robert picks up the copy of Gravity's Rainbow to inspect.)

ROBERT

(panicking)

What did you do to the pages? You tore out all the pages!

SECOND CUSTOMER

(tugging on Gravity's Rainbow)

Excuse me. I'm taking that.

ROBERT

It doesn't have any pages!

SECOND CUSTOMER

No pages?

ROBERT

Look.

(Robert shows the Second Customer the empty cover.)

SECOND CUSTOMER

Toto, where are the pages?

TOTO

(shrugs)

I can get some.

(Toto fumbles under the counter and grabs a bunch of unevenly sized, empty sheets of paper, and a bottle of glue. Toto takes the book back from Robert, slops some glue inside the cover and attaches some of the pages.)

ROBERT

What are you doing?

TOTO

There's no pages.

(Nancy returns with a nectarine.)

NANCY

I have nectarines. I also have figs. And what's in the basket.

ROBERT

(to Nancy)

Excuse me, but I need to get to work. I want a refund on Gravity's Rainbow, and I want my other two books back.

NANCY

Be with you in a moment.

(hurriedly finishing off Toto's glue job and handing Gravity's Rainbow to Second Customer)

Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon. And here's your nectarine.

SECOND CUSTOMER

I know Molly will just drop dead from envy when she finds out I've read the Pynchon. I'm seeing her tonight. She's throwing a dinner party.

(smells the nectarine)

Umm . . .

(The Second Customer exits.)

NANCY

Can I help you?

ROBERT

I want my other books back and a refund on Gravity's Rainbow.

NANCY

Polly—the woman who just left—she's in our book club, so I'm sure I can get Gravity's Rainbow back for you. Good as new—she doesn't even open them. We don't actually give refunds. And the other two books, they haven't even left the store yet. All better?

ROBERT

I want my book the way it was.

NANCY

The way it was.

ROBERT

Where are my old pages? Where's Gravity's Rainbow?

NANCY

(beat)

Toto, go clean out the furnace.

Want to read the rest? Click the back button on your browser and follow the instructions at the top of the page for requesting a perusal copy.