
2009.4.1.1.Oliver

A CHAPTER FROM

A. STEPHEN ENGEL'S NOVEL

TOPIARY

PUBLISHED BY THE OLIVER ARTS & OPEN PRESS

The Oliver Arts & Open Press
2578 Broadway (Suite #102)
New York, New York 10025

Editor's Note:

A. Stephen Engel's novel is notable for a great number of reasons, but high among them is its enormous variety. An Oliver Arts & Open Press Newsletter said this: "Most of the book is written in 'conventional prose,' though the author does make use of up-seepings, like drinks of spring-water, in the styles of Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, John Ashbery and, when all else may fail, Emily Dickenson in order to express, in sentences, the reality of our common present-day nightmare reality." Add Gertrude Stein to that list, too. *Topiary* looks at our own present-day society, and, like George Orwell when he took *his* look in 1948, it's not happy with what it sees. But *Topiary*'s way of looking, even so, is both unflinching and also highly *literary*. And that's where Gertrude Stein comes back in. A. Stephen Engel is highly conscious of Stein, one of the many modernists he greatly admires. But he's conscious also of trying to turn Stein's prose method—well, almost upside down. The newsletter explained: "While Gertrude Stein tried to capture the 'eternal present' via repetition, cyclical sentences, and a verb-oriented 'grammar' attempting the elimination of nouns, Engel, in various sections of *Topiary*, does the opposite—attempts to express the present-day culture's stasis, clutter, and emptiness via a preponderance of nouns or 'things' at the expense, often, of verbs, prepositions and the immediacy of life as Stein tried to capture it."

Topiary is a literary novel written by an author with a genuinely unusual depth and breadth of literary consciousness—and with the true literary artist's ability to put that consciousness to work in his cagy and eloquent *cri de coeur* at what we've allowed our world to be reduced to. But there's hope, as well, even if not very much. And there's mordancy enough to take home with you. [Get hold of the book, read it](#), and see for yourself.

Meanwhile, here's a passage about someone who lives in the book, whom you'll meet again when you read it. That is, if you hurry, since he may not wait long for you before—well, let me not say too much.

—Eric Larsen

—November 6, 2009

The Possessed

The Possessed Man is not a bad man, nor a good one. He is terrified. Alone among friends and family, he “works” to support his family, but is not exactly sure of what he does. He “administrates creative product strategies,” according to the Job Description on file at Human Resources.

The Health Insurance covers his wife and two kids, both under seven years of age and subject to all manner of illness and disease. Then there were the pregnancies themselves (reproduction is not cheap), and the drugs he must take daily to function at his job without drinking to black-out, or veering to violence, or bursting into tears. He’s covered by the company plan, but loopholes open and money falls through. Deductibles. Co-payments.

He is no longer interested in his friends, the few that he has left, or in having friends at all. What good are they, except to drink with, and he’s not supposed to drink while on his pills—though he does anyway. And don’t think this is all confidential, that ‘they’ don’t know, the ‘they’ at the company, whoever they might be, that he sees a head-drugger to stay on top of things.

He’s thirty-nine and still paying student loans.

Graduate program at the University. MBA. Had to do it. Or else how would he have climbed to even his middling position on the ladder? He’s reached his final rung. He knows he hasn’t the energy to kill, the will that would enable him to climb further. In fact, the remaining energies of his life will be directed toward hanging on to the rung he’s reached. To remaining at his place on the limitless ladder to the sky. He can barely see the people at the bottom, but he would need quite a powerful telescope indeed to even glimpse the stars at the top.

The kids must to go to college. His wife, also a mediocrity, but in a different capacity at a different firm, a different profession, will grow stronger, as women tend to after fifty, after the sex and procreation, after the body, just when he is starting to collapse. Rapid rise from twenty to forty, slow descent, then at fifty the cascading tumble. Unless you’re at the top of the ladder, in which case fifty is not fifty, due to special treatments, physical training, private cooks, drugs, vitamins and surgeries. . . . He’s reached the end of something, he knows, but he has the responsibility to see things through, at least until the kids are out of school. But of course college won’t be enough. It wasn’t for him. He needed a Masters. His kids will need PhD s.

He worries that somehow The System will fail him. It has not failed him to this point, merely placed him at his rightful place in the hierarchy. But he fears that the system, based on protocols, laws, unwritten rules, tacit agreements among powerful entities, and technologies that he can never hope to understand, will collapse of its own weight and intricacy. He does not understand how the Network works, or how food gets to the

supermarkets, or how the parent company trickles his paycheck down the many holding companies and through his department and into his bank account. He does not understand the high level of partnership between the bank and the corporation it owns, which is the parent of the company he works for, and where he will spend his days before being traded or shuffled off in some arcane corporate deal or merger, or is fired outright. Laid off. Terminated. Gone. And then what? Sending out resumes as he'd done as a kid fresh out of college and as a young married man with his expensive MBA?

He fears limited resources, so he does not read the hard copy of The City News, but browses the paper's site on The Network. But when does he have time to read this, working nine to five as he does, which is not nine to five at all, but eight to six, seven, sometimes ten o'clock? By which point he is exhausted, despite his clockwork consumption of caffeine and nicotine.

And when he does call up the news from The Network sites, he realizes how small he and his life are, even in the context of the corporation, not to mention the role of the parent company in international affairs. Good god. The corporation is everywhere, in nearly every country. Many of these countries are at war with each other, and if the corporation's interests are seriously threatened, might go to war with The Nation.

But The Nation is already at war. He is glad that The Nation possesses the most well-trained, technologically advanced military force on the planet. He had not gone to the last war, for he was in graduate school. But the current war terrifies him, the destruction The Nation wreaks upon its challenger with missiles paid for with his tax money. He has been extremely nervous since the current war began. But he does not doubt that after the slaughter the Citizens will be treated to parades and celebrations on television and he will watch flag-waving marchers outside his office window.

He is neither angry nor satisfied with the affairs of The Nation any more than he is or could be with the machinations of The Company. It is all beyond his grasp. He is, if not happy, grateful to be able to rise each morning, take his pills, and begin the commute to his job and arrive at his job, no matter how demanding. No matter how trivial. No matter how wasteful of his time on earth. The countless meetings, the talk talk talk. The assignments from his superiors that he organizes and delegates to his subordinates. Often he finds himself with nothing to do, no actual work, but virtual work, deadlines planned for the future, the possibility of truckloads of data hanging over his head. So he spends many hours—those not spent attending meetings—creating plans and memos and scenarios for the monstrous jobs, the impossible tasks to come.

He finds his wife attractive. They go to the gym. He forces himself to “pump iron,” not to postpone the inevitable descent, but to make the landing smoother. He's seen many a man crash. But he doesn't have the energy for his wife that he once had. Maybe once a week, if that. And of course she has her career too, and they are both busy with the children.

He feels, given the uncertainty of the world, that he should own a gun, at least a rifle. The Police exist to protect his property, not his family—anyway, they are always there when

you need them, but seldom here where they could save your life, if so inclined. But he is confused by The City's Byzantine gun laws, and he is not comfortable letting The Government know he has a weapon. Should The Government turn for the worse, the gun owners in The Database will be the first ones visited by police. But he fears being caught with an illegal weapon, a mandatory jail term, and the end of his career and all he'd striven for. Only those outside The System can flourish unregistered weapons with impunity.

Truly, he would rather be dead. He might live another forty years. Forty years of this. Maybe fifty. Another reason to own a gun. He can think of no better way to exit. Effective drugs are as illegal as guns, and the medications the head-drugger prescribes won't kill him. Worse, they might put him to sleep, and he'd be caught holding the bag—or pill bottle—trying to escape, a Federal crime. He worked too hard for too long to lose it that way. If he must exit this earth, he will buy a gun. On the black market. What and wherever that is. If he makes the decision, it will not matter that his corpse is found holding an illegal weapon. Then again, if he gets caught in the act, before pulling the trigger, or chickens out, they will send him to an institution. Again, that would ruin him.

Of course, this is all hypothetical. Daydream talk. He has a deep responsibility to his family. His children. His is the kind of ethic that was instilled in his subconscious forcefully, frequently, and early on. It is so part of his psyche that he cannot even attempt to fathom it. Just accept it, passively, silently, albeit reluctantly.

Nevertheless, he does think critically about his children. He wonders aloud—to himself, of course—if he actually loves his children. His own childhood seems both distant and parallel. That is, he often feels mired in his own childhood and resents the adult, paternal role he must play. Also, he feels sorry for his children and fears for them. He does not understand the structure of the world outside his home and office cubicle, but he believes it is heading for a fall, collapse, chaos. What then? What of his children? What right had he and his wife to yank them from the peace of Cosmic Nothingness and thrust them into Time and Consciousness against their will?

© A. Stephen Engel. All rights reserved. Published 2009 by The Oliver Arts & Open Press.

Go to [Topiary's page](#) at The Oliver Arts & Open Press

See and read [Oliver's Newsletters and Announcements](#)

Read, Print, or Download this excerpt [in PDF format](#)