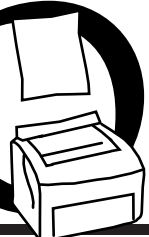


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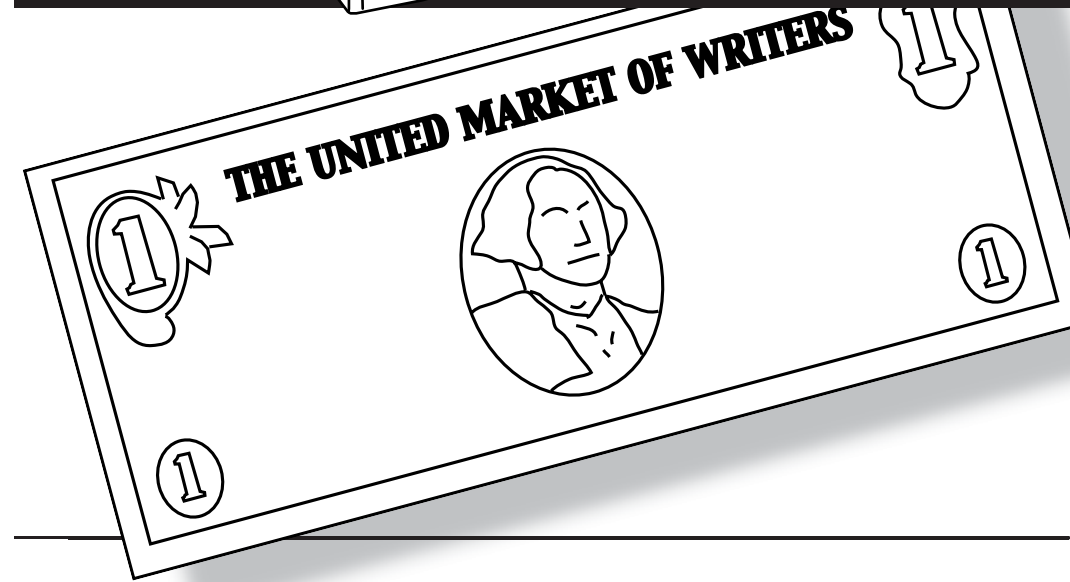
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the Introduction from
**'The Complete Short
Works of Daniel Pagoda'**

BY SCOTT CARLSON

have traveled upstate to the printer where this book was rolled out on an assembly line and personally ripped nine aggravating pages out of each and every copy. But I didn't.

With so many uncertainties in the interpretation of Art, the only thing I know for certain is that I don't know the meaning behind anything I write, unless I know there truly is

none. I haven't written anything simply about nothing since "Swindled." With that meditation, there has to be something here.

You're welcome to try and find it. And even though I haven't looked myself, I promise that if you do there won't be any kind of mean joke waiting for you at the end.



I was just about ready to lay down dead, and, in three days time, rise from the grave, bringing to his offices the edited manuscript.

"Not so fast," he scolded. His assertive nature was rising. "I want to talk to you about those papers you sent back."

"What papers?"

"Don't play dumb, Daniel. You sent back the scripts for the short story collection without signing off on them."

"Right," I said with calculated disinterest. "I don't think we'll be doing that."

He moaned a little, wearied by the prospect of arguing with me.

I advised Virgil to check page 174 of the copy he'd sent to my house. Through the other end of the telephone wire, I heard pages fumbling until he stopped and read the title aloud. "What's wrong with this story?"

"May I ask where you found it?"

"Your old undergraduate college phoned us a few weeks back. They said one of the teachers found it while cleaning out her office. I thought you might be pleasantly surprised to see it."

I informed Virgil that pleasant surprise was definitely not what I felt.

"That," I explained, "Was my first

whole thing. Do you know what he found out?"

She didn't know.

"He hated it. He read it all back to himself a few times, but he couldn't finish it. The story had lost all meaning to him."

This author dejectedly paged back and forth, I told her, wanting to know where his intimacy for the tale had vanished, and then stumbled upon the drawings. The most recent ones he had been working on were labeled as action figure and playset designs, based on the assured success of the movie.

He suddenly understood why he didn't love his story anymore. He wasn't putting time into it to perfect his craft, or because he believed the story was worth being told. He knew what was really driving him further toward the end. And without meaning or pride in his work, the story was left unfinished. His resulting personal disgust killed any impulses to write for almost a decade.

"You need to take this," I said, pushing "Swindled" across her desk. "You need to take it and never give it back. I'm afraid this author won't write for another decade if you don't."

In the end, Professor Mark convinced me to accept the scholarship money I had rightfully won. Like I said, I've never been any good at standing my ground.

I sent a cluster of my other works to the woman at the university who had called, along with a lengthy letter of explanation. They sent me back a very polite rejection. These things happen.

The school plastered my name across all sorts of obnoxious posters and hallway advertisements for the new issue of *The Lynch Mob*, touting my story as "award-winning." I didn't get drunk off of my confidence this time.

Mike Harper sent me a very nice letter after the annual was published. A lot of people had complimented "Swindled," he said. I sent him a very polite thank you and buried his letter in a box in my room.

Friends and other classmates who saw the posters at school made a point to ask about the story. Some of them wanted to know what it was about. Most wanted to know if I thought it was good enough for them to drop cash on the whole annual.

"It's an honor to be published," I told them all. "But I don't expect you to spend all kinds of money because you only want to read one story. I can send you a copy of it if you like. It's one of my favorites. It's called 'The Face.'"

I ran into Mike Harper the other day. Some years after my first novels had performed reasonably well for the critics, Mike was put in charge

seven and eight. He sat down with me once it was finished and read it back to me. It was one of the best stories I ever wrote.

I made a point of saving it. Fate, however, did not agree with me. Fate carried it away to an island where all the world's *Lost Stories* go, where they can eat big dinners and play in the ocean. I have never seen it since. I suppose these things happen.

The second story I wrote and lost was called "Shorty," a cautionary tale of magic wands, which was as tightly plotted as an eleven-year-old could manage. I entered it in the Young Authors Contest, an elementary school competition open to those who considered themselves writers. "Shorty" won that year.

I tried hiding it better than the last story I wanted to keep. But Fate knows all and sees all, and now I can only imagine "Shorty" and the green slime alien are playing Marco Polo together in the ocean. I suppose these things happen.

Drunk with the confidence my new title granted me, I, the "award winning author," decided the next logical step would be to attempt a novel. "Novelist" was about a writer who follows a best seller with a true-life crime book. My friend Fate made a small cameo, ensuring that the sub-

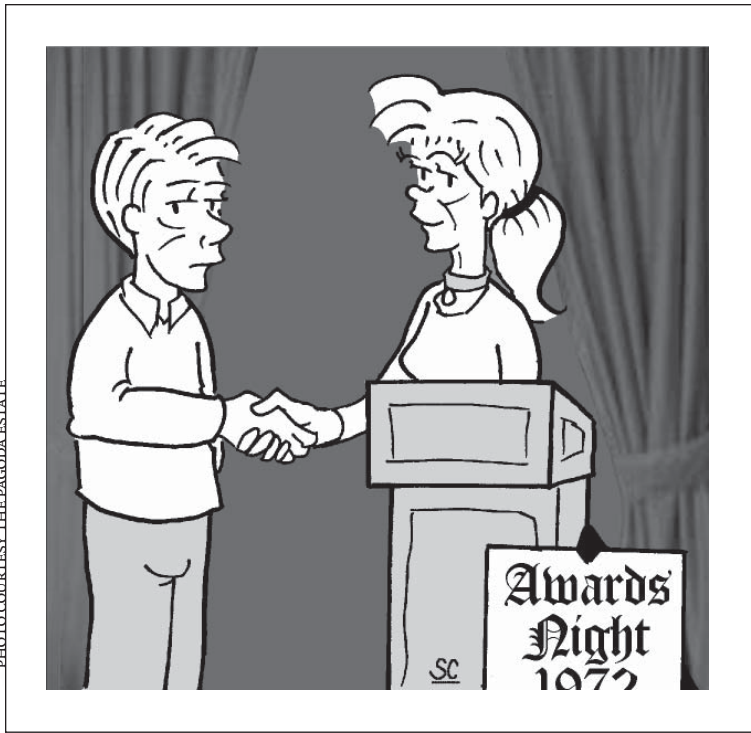
ject of our hero's book escapes prison and tracks the author down for it. Forty pages later, I had a mental breakdown, or as close to a mental breakdown as a sixth grader could have, and threw the pages away.

If I knew how to bribe Fate into taking *Novelist* to the *Island of Lost Stories*, I would have dressed it up as best I could and shipped it off, but I don't think the disguise would have fooled him. Fate is all-knowing and all-seeing. Fate didn't come. I have not been able to get rid of those damn pages since.

Almost a decade passed without much creative productivity, but as college opened its doors to me, I soon picked up where I had left off eight years prior. I celebrated a new found love of writing and story-telling with possibly the most embarrassing story I could have written.

Most writers will admit that the question we are most often asked is "where do you get your ideas?" I'll vouch for its volume, but in my experience, the question "What made you want to become a writer?" is always voiced first.

I have always answered this question with an asinine reply to lighten up the question-and-answer sessions: "I got into this business for the peril and danger of book signings. I was misinformed." But now



The uneasy truce: Daniel Pagoda accepts a literature department award for "Swindled" from Prof. Debra Mark.

A few weeks before finals, I received a call from a woman who represented a university I had a hard time distinguishing. I scratched my head and we spent a few minutes in confused banter until she finally blurted out the reason for her call.

"We recently received some of your work, and it's good," she said. "Very good, frankly."

I thanked her. My heart danced a little quicker.

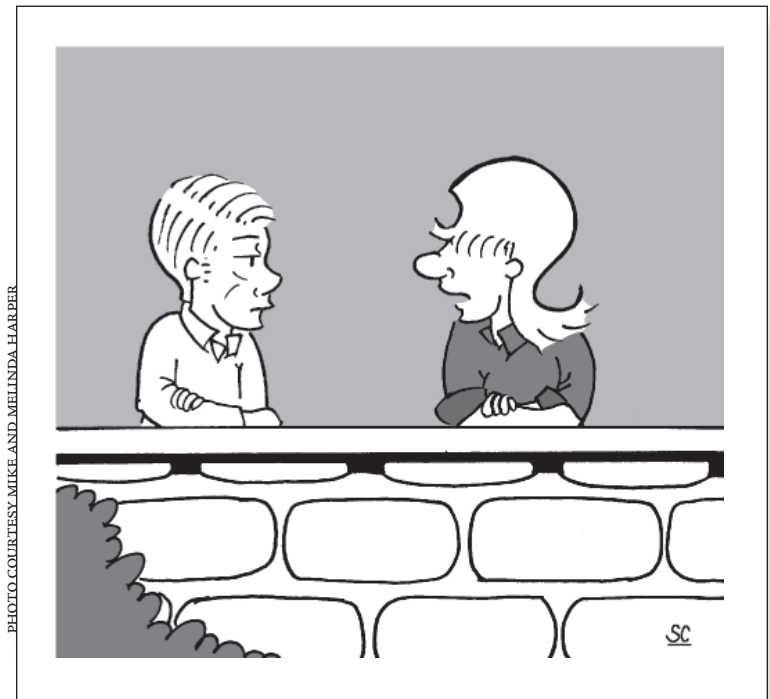
"We award a grant each year to a student with a promising writing

talent. We're considering you for our selection. However, we'll need to see a few more samples of your work first."

I raised an eyebrow. "More?"

"Yes, at the moment, the only thing we have is a piece a professor of yours sent us called 'Swindled.' It's remarkably well-written, but we'd like to see a few more samples before we make our decision."

"Absolutely," I said, my voice crumbling. "I'll send them off immediately. By chance, do you know who



The only known photograph of Daniel Pagoda and Mike Harper, believed to have been taken sometime after the events described in this introduction.

I had class later on that evening. On my way, I saw Mike smoking outside, sidled up to him and asked if he really thought the book was as good as he said it was. He seemed offended.

"I was just asking," I explained. "Someone I know got it and read it one day. He said it wasn't very good, and I trust his opinion."

Mike stood up straight, studying me. "What did he say?"

"He didn't think it had much of a point to it."

"Your friend just doesn't get it.

The point was that it had a point, but you need to put your own point into it to figure out the point for yourself."

I blinked. "How can a book have a set meaning if you substitute your own ideas entirely?"

He looked hard at me. "A book like that has to have a point to it. Why else write it?"

"So, you don't think the writer is laughing somewhere because he wrote a pointless book that everyone else thinks has some secret meaning