

THE WHITE PAGES

A one-act comedy by
Jonathan Dorf

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ROBERT, bookish thirtysomething insurance adjuster.

NANCY, same age, and far too nice to be true.

TOTO, late teens to early 20s and not the sharpest tack in the box.

THE OTHER CUSTOMERS, played by the same actress, or not:

MOLLY, the First Customer.

POLLY, the Second Customer.

DOLLY, the Third Customer.

To increase the cast size, the Customers may be played by different actresses.

NOTES ON THE SET

While it's important to create the idea of the bookstore, the set may be as surreal or as suggested as necessary, given the budget or limitations of the production.

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, late teens to early 20s 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 30s, 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. *(Beat.)* 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: *(Handing 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 wonderful. We're having a dinner party tonight, and 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's 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—

TOTO: *(Taking a selfie with the book:)* Three shades of white selfie!

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.)

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.* *(Flips through the pictures:)* According to the catalogue...we should have one copy.

ROBERT: Of the movie or the book?

NANCY: *(Smiling, thinks he's made a joke:)* The book, silly.

(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. (*Beat.*) 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. (*Beat.*) Would you like to join our Book Traders club? For a \$75 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 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:*) Hmm...

NANCY: Did you want another piece of fruit?

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

NANCY: Wrapped?

ROBERT: What's that?

NANCY: Would you like your book wrapped?

ROBERT: In wrapping paper?

NANCY: Or a bag.

ROBERT: No—the environment—thanks.

(Nancy hands him Tess.)

Thank you.

NANCY: Come back soon.

(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. *(Waving For Whom the Bell Tolls at Toto:)* And neither does this book. 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.

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(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:)

NANCY: 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 with you in a minute.

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

ROBERT: 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?

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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 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:*) Mmm...

(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.

TOTO: Aw, do I hafta'? You hardly pay me anything—

NANCY: You're my nephew.

TOTO: So.

NANCY: If we don't get rid of the pages we tear out, they get mixed in with the new pages. It's a huge mess.

TOTO: That happened to me once. I'm like trying to read, and there's this totally random page with all this typing on it.

NANCY: The furnace...

TOTO: All right. *(Exiting, under his breath:)* I can't wait 'til school starts again.

(Toto disappears into the back room. Pause)

NANCY: You look very flushed.

ROBERT: I'd like a refund.

NANCY: We're happy to exchange your books. *(Beat.)* Are you positive you don't want a piece of fruit? *(Beat.)* The sign does say no refunds.

ROBERT: Where?

NANCY: *(Pointing:)* There.

ROBERT: Where?

NANCY: It's (*Grabs the sign and holds it in front of him:*) right—

ROBERT: I don't have my glasses—

NANCY: (*Searches—finds it:*) here.

ROBERT: I gave you three perfectly good books. You've—

NANCY: traded—

ROBERT: destroyed—

NANCY: exchanged—

ROBERT: incinerated them. Since I can't get the books back...as such, I've asked for a refund. You offer me fruit. Am I the only one who sees the problem with this?

NANCY: I'm sorry.

ROBERT: What are you going to do about it?

NANCY: A gift certificate. Would you like a gift certificate?

ROBERT: Here?

NANCY: For a friend, maybe.

(Enter Toto.)

TOTO: Man, the furnace is packed. Where do you keep those giant garbage bags?

ROBERT: (*Taking one more look around at the bookcases, to Nancy:*) How do you sleep at night?

TOTO: (*Confused, thinks Robert is talking to him:*) In boxer shorts. Unless it's really cold. Then I wear sweats. (*Beat as he gets more confused:*) What?

(Robert exits.)

Why did he want to know how I sleep? Aunt Nancy? (*Beat.*) You know, it's weird. I was sweeping out the furnace, and there was a piece of paper that was half black, but not totally.

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And I'm lookin' at the part that's not burned, and I'm thinkin', "this is a really nice piece of paper. It's all the same color. White. Really creamy white white." Only it's got some typing about Indians or something. About an inch from the top. And it makes me mad. It's like, why'd they go do that. You get this piece of paper that's totally perfect, and then somebody's gotta' ruin it. Messes with your head.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(The book store. The next day. Toto continues to stack and restack the pile of books from the day before.)

TOTO: *(Counting:)* One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

(He reaches the end of the stack, then starts to restack them on the other side of the counter.)

Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. *(Taking a selfie:)* Inventory selfie!

(Enter Nancy.)

NANCY: How's the inventory coming?

TOTO: Good. I'm up to seventeen. *(Resumes his stacking:)* Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. *(He reaches the end and begins restacking.)* Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three—when should I stop?

NANCY: Later.

TOTO: OK. Twenty-four. Twenty-five, etc.

(His counting becomes more silent. Nancy exits. After a moment, enter Robert, a box of pens in one hand and a bag of fast food takeout in the other. Robert steps up to the counter.)

ROBERT: May I have a book, please?

TOTO: Aunt Nan—

(Robert claps a hand over Toto's mouth.)

ROBERT: I'd just like to get the book I didn't get yesterday. Remember, I brought in the three books? I'm going to move my hand now. OK?

(Toto nods. Robert removes his hand.)

I even know the book I want. It's this one right here.

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(Robert points at The Count of Monte Cristo, one of the books in Toto's stack.)

TOTO: Then I'd only have nine.

ROBERT: *(Looking around at the bookcases:)* Nine.

TOTO: I'm taking inventory. It's easier to count when you've got ten books in a stack. If you take one from my stack, then I have nine.

ROBERT: Instead of ten.

TOTO: Totally.

ROBERT: What if you took a book from somewhere else?

TOTO: *(Beat – not convinced:)* Yeah...I guess.

(Toto hesitates, then gives Robert the Dumas novel.)

ROBERT: Thank you. Fish stick?

(Robert offers Toto the fast food bag.)

TOTO: Aunt Nancy doesn't like me to eat. Says I'll get it on the pages.

(Robert opens the fast food bag, opens a little box of fish sticks and puts it in front of Toto.)

ROBERT: It's the fish stick sampler.

TOTO: *The fish stick sampler?*

ROBERT: *The fish stick sampler.*

(Toto attacks the fish sticks. Robert, looking satisfied, searches for something to sit on. Eventually he gives up and sits on the floor. Toto nods with satisfaction and keeps stuffing his face.)

TOTO: *(Returns to counting quietly:)* Thirty. Thirty-one, etc.

(Robert pulls out a pen and starts writing furiously in the book. Toto, oblivious, continues to "take inventory." After a while, Toto glimpses up and sees Robert writing.)

You can't do that.

ROBERT: Stop me.

TOTO: *(Beat.)* Aunt Nancy!

(Robert runs through one pen and switches to another.)

Aunt Nancy!

(Enter Nancy.)

ROBERT: You owed me a book.

NANCY: You can't do that here.

ROBERT: It's my book. You owed me a book for *Gravity's Rainbow*. I chose this one.

NANCY: But you're vandalizing it!

ROBERT: Just putting back what you took out.

NANCY: *(Beat.)* Would you leave please?

ROBERT: I'm browsing. *(Pointing at the small sign:)* Browsers welcome. *(Beat.)* I took today off. I'll adjust tomorrow, or maybe the next day.

NANCY: Toto!

TOTO: *(Stops counting:)* What?

NANCY: He's not browsing.

TOTO: You said to do the inventory.

NANCY: *(Targets the corner of Toto's mouth:)* Is that a bread crumb?

TOTO: ...no?

NANCY: Toto!

(Toto resumes counting. Robert continues writing.)

NANCY: *(To Toto:)* I want him out by the time I come back.

(She exits.)

TOTO: Aunt Nancy!

(Nancy returns.)

NANCY: What?

TOTO: When are you coming back?

NANCY: *(Flustered:)* As soon as he's gone.

(She exits again. Robert writes. Toto looks like he wants to do something, only he's not sure what it is.)

ROBERT: As an insurance adjuster, I've learned that many – if not most – fires are started for revenge. Literature tends to imitate fire. Very big on revenge.

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