

“GETTING IT” BOOK TALK AT NYU LAW SCHOOL, 4/13/10

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I imagine everyone here wants to know: Why on earth did I write a novel? How did I find the time? Perhaps even, is this a career change?

I'll start with the last one. No, I'm planning to stick with my current career, which I like. Although, if I got a million dollars for the film rights, I'd have to rethink my options. But that strikes me as rather unlikely.

How did I find the time? This was easier than you might think – but for a reason. I didn't write it just now – I've actually had it in my desk drawer for a while, and all that happened now was that I decided to quasi-self-publish it through iUniverse.

I've always loved reading fiction, and I've had writing ambitions since I was an adolescent. I come from a family that values artistic and intellectual endeavors above all others. I like to say that, if someone in my broader extended family had two children, Bill Gates and the third violinist at the Philharmonic, everyone would say: It's a shame Bill didn't turn out as well as the other one.

During my student days, extending through law school, I suppose I had the time to write a novel, but not the voice. And my aesthetic sense perhaps needed further development. I thought that fiction worth writing needs to be searingly and scathingly introspective, kind of like Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* if he meant it entirely seriously, which at the time I believed he did. But I didn't want to write like that. I resisted putting myself too harshly under the microscope, I didn't want to be unkind to others, and I especially didn't want to pour my heart into something that might end up being middlebrow and boring.

Let's fast forward to 1985, when I was a recent law school graduate, living in Washington, DC and working at the Joint Committee on Taxation on Capitol Hill. In those days, JCT staffers faced a boom and bust work cycle, rather than boom all the time as it is today. This meant that I occasionally had free time, especially if during a slow period my social life was quiescent. I briefly considered a historical novel, set in, of all places ancient Rome and Alexandria. But it became clear that wouldn't work.

At some point in 1985 – there may have been a Eureka moment, but I've forgotten it – I came up, I think in fairly short order, with the entire set-up for *Getting It*. Three associates are competing for a partnership slot, under the eye of a sadistic junior partner and a very distant senior partner. One of the associates is nice and normal, so of course he's a loser in this environment and has no chance. The other two pose the philosophical question: Which is worse? A total hypocrite or a true believer? And they really hate each other, motivating the action like a Hitchcock MacGuffin. Since they care, you care, although there's comic distance because you can see how grandiose and self-deluded they are.

The basic set-up is fully in place from page 1. This is one reason why I've never tried again to write a novel, at least to date. Without a set-up that immediately looks as good, it's hard to be confident of the payoff.

For each character, there's a real person I had known at some time in the previous decade who provided me with a starting point. One or two are more composites than the others. But they are not in the slightest realistic or recognizable portraits of the individuals who provided the seeds. The actual people were much nicer and more normal, but less dramatically usable, than the characters I turned them into.

Ashby and Cinders, the law firm in which it's set, is certainly no real firm I've seen or know about, or even a composite. (Although I will say, the law firm I liked by far the least of all those I've seen from the inside was in California, not Washington or New York.) Ashby and Cinders is essentially a nightmare fantasy version of the very worst potential that a law firm environment has to turn toxic.

Two final things helped me get going. First, leaving private practice for the JCT not only gave me the distance and perspective that you need for satire, but supplied an important finishing touch for the atmosphere. Grandiosity and toadying are so prevalent on Capitol Hill – not at the JCT itself, but in interactions between staffers and Members of Congress – that being there was educational. Second, as I'll discuss further shortly, I started reading P.G. Wodehouse.

Anyway, in mid to late 1985, with the basic set-up in place but not much more, I started writing *Getting It*. I used weekday evenings and weekends. The antihero is Bill Doberman. To quote the promotional language on the novel's back cover:

“Bill Doberman is a liar. He's also a conniver, a phony, a hypocrite, and a cad – and those are his good points. But will it all be enough to save him on the Night of the Long Knives – when his law firm, Ashby & Cinders, picks, at most, one new partner – coming up in just six weeks?

“His fellow associates hate him. The partner he's working for wants to destroy him. And does Mr. Cinders, sitting at the top of the food chain, even know who he is?

“Not to mention what Lyla will do if she catches him being unfaithful again ...”

A friend recently wrote to me: “Doberman was just a great total sociopath!
Obviously, your alter ego!

"I know you fantasize about being Doberman. Unfortunately, you possess ethics, morality, a conscience, and compassion. Too bad!"

But I would add that Doberman isn't just far more ruthless and calculating than I could ever be. He also lacks good judgment about how to live his life, and any sense of proportion. And at times he has less control over his impulses than Bill Clinton back in the day.

Doberman's arch-rival is Lowell Stellworth, the "languid yet fanatical master of the lengthy footnote." You could call him Jesuitical, as indeed I do. Or to quote the relevant passage at greater length:

"Never mind that work, for a man of Stellworth's stamp, was so desperately important as to dwarf all comparatively trivial concerns, such as his family or physical health. It still was by no means the only thing he lived for. Indeed, he viewed the theory that partnership could be attained through work alone much as a Jesuit would contemplate the heresy that salvation can be attained through works alone, without faith. Stellworth was always anxious to prove his absolute fidelity to the ideals that he saw as informing the spirit of Ashby & Cinders.

"Thus, what some saw as shameless toadying, Stellworth viewed as a quest for spiritual perfection, both real and manifest. Unfortunately, this quest frequently placed him in direct competition with Doberman, whose appreciation of the requirements for partnership was no less keen. The dream of Stellworth's life, short of partnership itself, was to expose the fraud and hypocrisy in Doberman's artistic rendering of the Ashby & Cinders ideal."

Doberman and Stellworth, along with the nice but nebbishy third associate, Arnold Porter, are working under the close eye of relatively junior partner Peter Crossley. Here's Crossley, just before the start of the meeting with all three of them that opens the novel:

“Crossley could easily visualize the pleasures that awaited him. First, in six weeks, would come the annual partners' meeting. There would be the flattering attention as he gave his precis of each associate. The faint praise he would offer - compliments for one's energy, another's thoroughness, a third's nuts and bolts knowhow. The expression of concern - the problems that worried Crossley about each one's performance. Much as he liked his proteges, he would say, it was his duty to share these concerns. Finally, there would be the exquisite agony of telling probably two, but better yet all three, of the associates that they would be well advised to seek employment elsewhere. As the type of person who had tortured insects as a boy but since fallen victim to a tender conscience, Crossley rarely felt pleasures as delicious as at that horrible moment when an associate's eyes would pop open upon grasping the bad news.”

Needless to say, we revisit this later in the novel.

The book has three ongoing, inter-linked subplots. First, Doberman makes a horrible blunder on the brief they're working on, citing a case that was reversed on rehearing because he failed to check the little red Shephard's volume in the law firm library. This being 1983, Lexis wasn't as available as it would be today – indeed, there weren't even desktop computers for all of the lawyers quite yet.

One by one, everyone else who matters finds out about Doberman's error. These are generally people who hate him, and have reasons of self-interest for making sure he

pays the price. Somehow he has to square them all away, one by one, while also worrying that they'll backslide.

In the second subplot, Doberman is dating one of the firm's paralegals, the not to be trifled with Lyla Stamper. She's very tough, and he actually likes that about her. She's also crucial to his fallback plan if he fails to make partner, as unbeknownst to her he realizes that her estranged father, at another law firm, would probably come through for Doberman if he married Lyla. But meanwhile he's intrigued by Gidget O'Malley, a secretary who has recently arrived from Southern California.

"Gidget's attractiveness to Doberman had something of the exotic, much as a young boy from India might pique the jaded sensuality of an aging Roman emperor. Coming from a totally different background than Doberman and with radically different values, Gidget had none of the neuroses that Doberman was used to, although conceivably she might substitute a full set of her own."

Gidget, by the way, is the closest to a real life person of any of the characters in *Getting It*. I'd recently had a painful break-up, and initially I felt reluctant to exploit it. But when you have good material at hand, you've got to use it, so I settled for being magnanimous rather than bitter.

Gidget "was a typical child of southern California. Years of ruthless cultural indoctrination, supplemented by a year of free psychotherapy through her community college's health plan and a stint at Esalen with a boyfriend, had imbued her with the belief that, deep down, each and every one of us is a warm, loving, caring human being, differing only in degrees of self-knowledge. All evidence to the contrary she dismissed, although not in these terms, as manifesting mere false consciousness. For example, at

Ashby & Cinders, she thought that people schemed and feuded simply because they did not love themselves enough, and thus mistakenly feared that they needed money, power, or status to achieve self-validation.

“If Gidget had been a close personal friend of Genghis Khan's, she likely would have told him that he was not in touch with his feelings, and must be very unhappy.” End quote. But she also has a sense of irony that Doberman, as a cynic, can play to, and that is probably rooted in self-doubt.

Odd couple though Doberman and Gidget might be, Lyla will not be amused if they get together and she finds out about it. She is no fool, and sees through him a little better than most of the characters, though, not, alas, quite well enough. She also knows how to protect herself. But for Doberman, this is actually half the challenge.

The third subplot involves Mr. Cinders of Ashby & Cinders, sitting at the very top of the food chain. To quote again, “Both Doberman and Stellworth wanted to emerge as the premier "nice young fellow" whom Cinders would take on his rounds of hobnobbing with the cream of the corporatocracy - all potential clients - at museum board meetings and charitable events. To this end, the two associates continually were trying to out-culture each other.”

But they're not very good at this. Doberman can't quite remember the difference between Monet and Manet. Stellworth has a hair-raising experience at a Robert Mapplethorpe show. And Doberman makes a huge blunder when Cinders wants him to report about a performance of a Wagner opera – reputed to last longer than the careers of some associates at Ashby & Cinders. Through a chain of circumstances, Doberman ends

up causing Cinders to be humiliated when he tries to impress potential clients by telling them about the performance. Cinders is not exactly one to laugh this off.

Doberman is an energetic improviser who rarely despairs. But he also doesn't think very far ahead. My problem, as I was writing the novel in 1985, was that I didn't think much further ahead than he did. I'd set him a trap, and he'd get out of it. The basic pattern is, he gets into trouble, tells a lie in order to live another day, but eventually that lands him in even bigger trouble and he has to tell an even bigger lie. While I certainly didn't mind the trouble I was causing him, it was also causing problems for me. As a writer, I was backing myself into a corner, and at a certain point the novel went off the rails.

Meanwhile, two things happened to stop me from working on it any more. First, my relative downtime at the JCT came to an end, as the Tax Reform Act of 1986 came roaring back to life. Second, I met my now wife, Patricia Ludwig, and decided that I'd much rather spend my free time with her than sink it into the novel.

Then my academic career started, and I shelved *Getting It* – potentially for good, it seemed, although I always kept transferring the Word file from one computer to the next throughout the late 1980s and the 1990s.

Finally, in the summer of 2000, I decided to return to it. I had just written a book about Social Security in which I tried to be lively and entertaining, at the same time as intellectually serious. While I always try to write clearly, the exercise of trying to push it a step further unexpectedly reawakened my creative writing impulse. I had already done enough academic writing for the summer to qualify in good faith for my summer research

stipend. And the article I was going to write next, while I thought it was worth doing, didn't really excite me and I was happy to put it off for a few weeks.

So I printed out what I had of the novel, gave it a good look, and started to think hard about it. I found the exact point where it had gone off the rails, and dumped the bad part into a separate file that I could mine for good phrases.

Engaging with what I'd written 15 years earlier was an interesting experience. While I had retained my feel for the characters and the set-up, I had little clear memory of the actual planning and writing that I had done back then. So it felt like having a third party collaborator, almost a stranger in some respects, who had done a good job in a lot of ways, and who I wanted to thank for entrusting me with this material. I wished I could have used him more, such as by asking for additional jokes and phrases, although I definitely would have insisted on final cut. But for better or worse he was gone.

My younger self and I obviously had a lot in common. But he was a somewhat frustrated, single, 20-something guy, still fairly unsure about the course of his life and career. I was happily married and in my 40s, with young children and in the middle of a career that I like. So in some ways we were quite different, and it was nice to be able to blend our viewpoints a bit. For example, I could take one of his characters, the nebbishy Arnold Porter, and give him young children based on my own parenting experience.

This time around, I knew I had to plan ahead more. So I mapped out the rest of the novel, scene by scene though I ended up improvising a bit. This enabled me to keep the momentum going, build to a climax, and make sure that almost everyone got, in a credible way, the exact fate that he or she aesthetically deserved.

In my mind, the biggest influence on *Getting It* is the hilarious fiction of P.G. Wodehouse. He had just been a name to me until, in 1983, I picked up *Code of the Woosters* while browsing in a bookstore, and found myself laughing out loud as I read it on the D.C. Metro on the way to work.

Wodehouse famously once said: "I believe there are two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making a sort of musical comedy without music and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right deep down into life and not caring a damn."

Like Wodehouse, I wanted to write the musical comedy without music, rather than digging deep. But perhaps Wodehouse was being unfair to himself. Just as *Seinfeld* isn't really a show about nothing, but about comically selfish and self-defeating neurotics, so Wodehouse in his best novels has an actual theme: emphatic psychological (though not practical) rejection of the serious, grown-up, adult world as crazy, excessive, onerous, and boring, in order to embrace a perpetual mindset of early adolescence.

Getting It is certainly different than that, but the inspiration has something in common. Again, its conception dates from near the beginning of my career, and the dominant feeling that inspired it was my being initially perplexed and nonplussed by this adult world of work where things actually mattered – they didn't just disappear at the end of the semester – and where people acted as if things mattered. I felt like a naïf, so Doberman was the perfect horrifying alter-ego whose world I could explore and be glad it wasn't mine.

Compared to a Wodehouse novel, *Getting It* is much nastier, more in the spirit of Evelyn Waugh. Some people have also compared it to early David Lodge, who I'd read but wasn't thinking about at the time.

Anyway, I've been sitting on it since 2000. I made some modest efforts to get it published, but in fiction I lack the connections and credibility that I have in academic writing. I came close at a leading university press, but the editor who supported it, and who knew me from my academic books, was on the verge of being fired, a victim of office politics, and they decided to pass. A few other leads that I pursued didn't quite pan out. Finally, last year I was talking to the wife of a colleague at another school, who told me that her brother had just published a novel on iUniverse and was pleased with how it had worked out. I figured why not and the rest, as they say, is history.

Finally, a word about the title. Why "Getting It"?

I've been told by at least one person that it's insufficiently descriptive, but nonetheless I like it.

Not many novels' titles are quadruple entendres, but this one is. There's the idea of getting or achieving what you want, whatever the it might be. There's sexual innuendo, as in "are you getting it." There's the sense of "this time you're really gonna get it." And finally, there's the sense of whether you really get it – whether you grasp or understand what's actually important.

At the risk of sounding pretentious, the play between these different senses of getting it – and the point that, in the final, most important sense of getting it, none of the characters ever does – is what I think the book is really about.

But none of this need matter to the reader if it's fast-paced and entertaining, and if you keep asking yourself, how on earth is Doberman going to get out of this scrape? So long as you want to keep turning the pages so you can find out, that is success enough for me.

Although, that said, a few sales wouldn't hurt either. I have some copies here that I'm selling for \$10, which is below the on-line price, and I'm also happy to sign people's copies.

Why don't we open it up now for any questions.