



A Letter to My Reader(s)

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I COULD BEGIN THIS LETTER the usual, polite way, thanking you for picking up my book, expressing a hope that you'll enjoy it. But beyond the usual courtesies, I believe that as author and reader we are, from now on, entangled in a peculiar, interdependent relationship. Take, for example, the beginning of this novel:

This much I know for sure.

My name is Peter Sinclair, I am English and I am, or I was, twenty-nine years old. Already there is an uncertainty, and my sureness recedes. Age is a variable; I am no longer twenty-nine.

These are the very first lines of *The Affirmation*, a novel by Christopher Priest. His character goes on to say, 'I once thought that the emphatic nature of words ensured truth. If I could find the right words, then with the proper will I could by assertion write all that was true. I have since learned that words are only as valid as the mind that chooses them, so that of essence all prose is a form of deception.'

So if, by picking up my novel, you are now reading my words, and if we accept that words are only as valid as the mind that chooses them, then we are *both* now in a kind of partnership, me writing the words and you reading them. As to whether they're a form of deception, it's true that the Peter Sinclair of the novel as quoted turns out to be a deliberately



unreliable narrator, which generates the page-turning quality of the story. But even with a reliable narrator, for example, my central character, detective nun Sister Agnes, there are still the frayed edges where ‘prose is a form of deception.’ For example, I might give you some clue as to what she looks like, height, perhaps, eye colour, what she’s wearing...but you, the reader, are doing a huge amount of work filling in the gaps; and the strange thing is, your Sister Agnes might look nothing like mine, and yet, you the reader are as entitled to your version of her as I am as writer.

And beyond the descriptions, there’s the actual story, the motivations, the actions that drive the tale. So we’re both having a bit of a think about what it would be like to be these people, for example, what it would be like to be so angry with someone that plotting to kill them becomes a sensible decision; or, to find yourself fleeing from the person you’ve always wanted to marry because they have actually just proposed to you and your dream has shattered; or, to be reunited with a child you were forced to give up; or to be that child, now grown-up, finding its mother again.

So, dear reader, we are both putting in the work. To return to the formalities — thank you for picking up my book. And I hope, at the end of it, you feel rewarded, entertained, moved, perhaps, by all our mutual effort.