



The Writer as Outsider

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GRAHAM GREENE's splinter of ice remains a fabled image of writerly detachment. Every writer, surely, must have one frozen in her heart. No matter what life throws at you, a part of you stores it up. As *material*. You are an external onlooker in your own life; an outsider.

In his 1971 autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, Greene tells a story to explain the genesis of the splinter of ice. He describes a childhood stint in Westminster Hospital recovering from appendicitis. A boy of ten in another bed, who had broken his leg playing football, died suddenly. As the boy's parents arrive and the screens are drawn, the other patients in the ward lie with their headphones on, listening to 'Children's Hour'. 'All my companions, but not myself,' Greene observes before arriving at his notorious image. 'There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer. *I watched and listened. There was something which one day I might need: the woman speaking, uttering the banalities she must have remembered from some woman's magazine, a genuine grief that could communicate only in clichés.*'

A terrible business involving a writer's ownership of and response to material recently unfurled in the US. A woman essayist and aspiring novelist had posted on a private Facebook group about her anonymous kidney donation. Another writer in the group – many members were long-term participants of a Boston writing centre – read the post, changed the narrator's name and wrote and published a fictional story about it. The donor read the piece and said that just as the kidney had been hers, so was the story. The second woman said *no*, it was *material*, which meant



it belonged to everyone, and writers, outsiders with their splinters of ice, were permitted to make off with even the most rawly emotive set of someone else's experiences. The first writer made accusations which resulted in the story being withdrawn from a public reading programme. Lawsuits flew from both sides. During the deafening brouhaha that ensued, in one of their many pieces on the subjects, the *New York Times* called both protagonists 'outsiders'. A third novelist – much better known than the other two – weighed in saying everyone she ever met existed to be turned upside down so that she could see what fell out of their pockets and with luck make a bit of a tale of it.

David Baddiel acknowledged the phenomenon in January 2022 when he wrote a newspaper piece about his father, who had died that month. 'There are many things people get from their fathers,' Baddiel wrote. 'Wisdom, courage, fortitude. Obviously what I got from mine was *material*.'

Some writers, rather heroically it has always seemed to me, manage to remain outsiders even to themselves. Raymond Chandler comes to mind. He used to say, of writing, 'When in doubt, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand.' One day, deeply depressed, Chandler rang his editor from the bath and said he was about to shoot himself. A silence followed, before BANG! When the police broke in, Chandler was asleep in the bath and there was a bullet hole smoking in the ceiling. He had missed. Here's the point. He used the experience in a novel — a character gets too drunk to be capable of killing himself.

Is something missing in the human department when one exists so far outside everything that scrolls by? Is one a writer first and a human second? Many writers have outed themselves and said so. And if they didn't say so, they were too busy smelting other people's lives into prose to notice. Hemingway comes to mind. As for the blue-eyed Greene, he fell out of fashion after his death in 1991, as so many artists do, in his case perhaps in part *because* of the whiff of moral ambiguity around the splinter. He became a kind of model for literary treachery, as well as a



cipher for all kinds of other unpopular traits such as womanising, cruelty and vanity. Oh yes, and his friendship with Kim Philby, which lasted until the spy died. It was Greene's almost exact contemporary, Orwell's star which rose, as it was, or seemed a more morally straightforward guiding light.

I believe Greene's time will come again. His twenty-eight novels dissect the themes a writer should be thinking about — what it is to be human, and how to battle on through doubts and failures. The tall Englishman is the patron saint of the splinter in all our rotten writers's hearts.