

Sweet Thunder intro

Like probably all writers since Shakespeare, I'm often asked that hard-to-answer question, "Where do you get your ideas?"

[Somehow,] "Out of my head" ^{can be taken the wrong way.} doesn't seem to make the most convincing case for creativity. But with this particular book, I finally have a more classy response as to where I got the stuff of inspiration. From Shakespeare! ^{# The title primarily,}

~~In limited quantities,~~ I should add. ~~The first is the title,~~ taken from **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, the scene in which Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, harks back to hunting bear in

the company of the strongest man in the world and a certain slayer
of dragons:

“I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,

When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear

With hounds of Sparta...I never heard

So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.”

Hopefully I'll connect that title to the book in a minute here,

but the second debt to Shakespeare, because he pretty much owns

the property, is the bedrock idea under the story. For each novel

as I work on it, usually across a couple of years, I try to keep in

mind one single word that the book is about. Its theme, its plot

mechanism, its personality, so to speak. For example, I believe

The Whistling Season was fundamentally about compassion,

or forgiveness; and **Work Song** about redemption, atoning for

earlier sins; and **The Bartender's Tale** perhaps ^{was} ~~is~~ about

conscience, what people do or don't do according to their sense of

right and wrong. / At that same level, / the pulse under the skin of

the ~~book~~, **Sweet Thunder** is deliberately about identity--

personal identity, mistaken identity (although not to the merry-go-

round whirls of confusion Shakespeare conjured in some of his

plays), finding identity, choosing identity.

satisfaction, bringing me here tonight to this terrific bookstore.

Well, onward to ^{THIS} the current book, **Sweet Thunder**, the third novel with its central character, the genie in the bottle, once again none other than Morrie. Morris Morgan, the shall we say “inventive” teacher in the one-room school in **The Whistling Season**, and the fortune-seeker at that Richest Hill on Earth, the copper mines of Butte, Montana, in **Work Song**. With his golden tongue and quicksilver mind, Morrie has turned out to be such a treasure as a character that I figured it would be a mistake

not to welcome him back onto the page, and let him take over the telling of this story.

I've always thought that what writers are doing when we sit around in our own heads all the time is trying to figure out how to write better than we know how, and if we're lucky, one of the results can be a character whom readers love more than we could ever have hoped for. Right now, Morrie is that for me, with this book and its predecessor, **Work Song**, getting the most uniformly good reviews any of mine has ever had. Back in **Work Song**, when Morrie first alights into Butte, the Associated Press reviewer made one of those leaps of the imagination that gladden

a writer's heart, saying he could picture the movie some day, with Johnny Depp as Morrie and Nicole Kidman as Grace, his Butte landlady of the time. But they seem to be pretty slow about reading Associated Press dispatches in Hollywood, proving once again that literary IQ rises as you come north.

slow
DOWN

along the
Pacific Coast

In any case, with **Sweet Thunder**, Morrie and the predicaments that seek him out now add up to a kind of unintentional trilogy, as I've kept going back--with others books like ~~THE~~ last year's **Bartender's Tale** in between--to plots back there in the old days of robber barons and Wall Street run amuck.

Those were the old days, weren't they?

LOOK
UP

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The new book takes place about a year after Morrie and his dimpled bride, Grace, set off on their honeymoon, as orchestrated in **Work Song**. They've been hitting the high spots of the world

in San Francisco.

and now the holiday season of 1920 finds them on Nob Hill. So

here we go, ~~with~~ ^{to} the opening scene of the book, with Morrie as

our narrator to launch the story.

San Francisco reading

“Morrie, don’t fall off the cable car, please. At least not until we reach the top of the hill.”

Grace’s flash of smile and dimple reassured me her warning was of the teasing sort, although hardly the usual honeymoon endearment. Indeed, standing precariously on the steps of the crowded conveyance as I had to, I nearly lost hold in my startled reaction to what I was seeing. Not the fancy San Francisco shops bedecked with holiday wreaths nor the picturebook view of the dusky bay and its ferry fleet like bright waterbugs, arresting as those were. No, what caught my

eye as the cable car climbed the steep street was the bowler-hatted figure evincing sudden great interest in the cooked chickens hanging by their necks in a Chinese grocery storefront. My heart beat with the question: Could it be? After the gambling mob in Chicago all those years ago, after the goons of Butte, another one?

Another window man.

The species was unmistakable, in my experience. Someone tailing an individual of interest by blending in with other pedestrians until the individual happened to glance around, as I had just done, forcing an about-face to the nearest display behind plate glass. But

why now, why here? What perverse kind of luck was following me through life like a secondary shadow?

"I thought I saw someone I recognized," I vaguely made my excuse to Grace.

She craned to peek past me from where she sat. "Somebody from Butte? We should have said hello."

"No, no, I must have been wrong. A case of mistaken identity."

The cable car clanged to a stop atop Nob Hill and I helped her down, my mind still taken up with that sighting. Grace slipped her arm through mine, gay as a Parisienne on promenade, as we strolled past the flivvers and delivery vans lining the manicured driveway of

our hotel. "I can't wait to hear Caruso tonight," she snugly pressed my arm to her side. "What's he singing, again?"

"Mmm? *Pagliacci*. The clown who cries."

"Oh, my. What for?"

"Effect."

"Those Italians. Remember Rome?" An even more fervent squeeze of my arm. "But this tops it all, you man of the world, you. Caruso. Polly-whosis. Deluxe hotel on Snob Hill." She laughed her delight. "It's like a dream, don't you think?"

"Very like." Knowing what I must do, I stopped short of the columned entrance where the doorman in gaiters and ruff waited to

bow us in. "My dear, you go on up to the room. I'll just nip around the corner for today's papers."

"Don't be long, darling," she dimpled in a way more than wifely, "we don't want to be late for the singing and crying."

The newspaper vendor, Blind Tony, was ensconced in a hutch practically buried in stacks of newsprint. Throughout our stay I had always made generous with a silver dollar for the day's two bits' worth of the *Sporting News* and either the San Francisco *Call* or *Bulletin*. This time I gave him an amount that clinked in his hand.

"That old silver eagle seems to have company, guv'nor."

“Let’s regard it as rent on a sense of hearing, shall we, Tony,” I responded. Keeping my voice low, I asked whether his keen ears had picked up any footsteps following my own.

The sightless eyes squinted in recall. “Funny you should mention it. Right after your last couple times here, there been a set of leather soles and catpaw heels that go by, slow like.”

I had to think fast. “Here’s what those pieces of silver and I want you to do....”

Having enlisted the news vendor, I turned to saunter off toward the hotel as usual, but as soon as his booth concealed me at an angle from anyone down the street who might be watching, I ducked back

and into the structure, hiding behind the bulky torso of Tony and stacks of newspapers.

Significantly cocking an ear, Blind Tony alerted me to the approach of the man in the bowler hat. I dove a hand into my side pocket for the precautionary item I carried there by habit.

“Help me find my house key where I dropped it, can you, guv’nor?” Tony called him over.

As the stranger obligingly stepped up to the booth, I reached out and grabbed him by the necktie, flourishing my brass knuckles in front of his nose and demanding to know who he was.

The man managed to fumble a business card into sight:

BAILEY PRIVATE INVESTIGATIVE AGENCY
HELENA, MONTANA

WE SEEK AND FIND

“I’m Bailey,” he choked out.

Blinking, I asked the requisite question, namely what on earth he wanted of me.

“I have something for you,” he squawked the gist of it as best he could, “from Sam Sandison.”

At that name, I released my grip on his necktie and let the set of brass knuckles slip back into my suitcoat pocket. My surprise not lessened in the least, I inquired: “Why in heaven’s name didn’t you

simply walk up to me like a civilized human being and deliver whatever it is?"

Sulkily adjusting his tie and what composure he could find, the private detective replied that he liked to get a sense of the person he was dealing with before getting down to business.

[Very well, then, I was glad to oblige.] "How did you"--I wasn't going to dignify Seek and Find--"track me down?"

That met with a snicker. "There aren't any too many Fancy Dans trotting around to places like this who pay off in Montana cartwheels."

I looked sharply at Blind Tony, who was communing with the heavens. "His money is as good as yours, guv'nor."

"So anyhow," said Bailey, "let me give you what's coming to you." He darted a hand into his suitcoat, and I froze at the glimpse of a shoulder holster and its resident revolver. / What he produced, however, was a set of papers. A legal document from the look of it, and as I speedily read through it, a confounding one.

While I was trying to digest the contents, Bailey, piqued at being snaffled by the necktie, huffed that he almost hadn't taken this cockamamie case, since Sandison was the client. "He's the Strangler, you know."

“Yes, yes, I do know,” I said absently, still deciphering legalistic thus-and-therefores. “I am also fully aware that vigilante justice, to call it that, against cattle rustlers happened a long time ago, and ever since then Sandy--”

The detective rocked back on his heels. “Holy cripes, you get to call him that? Maybe that explains something like this.”

Thinking hard, I tapped the document against the palm of my hand. “You know what this is about, do you?”

“Have to,” Bailey replied cautiously. “I never take a case blindfolded.”

“Then with this proposition of his, would you say Sam Sandison is of sound mind?”

“Are you kidding? He can run circles around either of us in the brains department.”

That at least was no surprise. Pocketing the document, I parted with the private eye. “Enjoy San Francisco.”

“Have a ton of fun in Butte,” he called after me sardonically.

Grace was gussyng up for the opera when I stepped into the hotel room. Fixing her hair, although her crown braid of flaxen tresses always looked flawless to me. Her compact form filled the latest

gown as effectively as a dressmaker's form. In the dresser mirror she gave me her best smile, bright and teasing, as I came up behind her and put my hands on her silken shoulders. How lucky you are, Morris Morgan, deservedly or not, to have this woman in your life, I told myself yet again.

I stood rooted there, weighed down by a pocketful of legalese, as Grace with a little hum busied herself at her hair again. There are times in life--this most definitely was one--when you can feel fate and destiny pressing on you like a heightened law of gravity. Add in some unknown measure of danger, and deciding becomes a burden like no other. To do or not to do; try that on, Hamlet. A surreptitious

SLOW,
DRAMATIC

telegram to Sandison turning down his madcap proposition would mean Grace's lustrous head need never be bothered with this; other vulnerable parts of either of us as well. That would be prudent, no doubt wise. The other choice, though. What a chance. What an intriguing gamble. What a wink of fate.

“I have news,” I announced, although I had totally forgotten to buy newspapers. “Down in the lobby, I met up with an emissary from Butte. The long and short of it is, Dora Sandison has passed to her reward--”

“Oh, what a shame,” Grace expressed proper respect. “She was such the lady.”

--and Sam Sandison has bequeathed us their house."

At those words, I felt something like electricity go through her.

"In the west end?"

Aren't mansions always? "Very nearly as far in that direction on the compass of social climbing as one can go, I suppose. Ajax Avenue."

"Is it," her eyes were large with trying to take the prospect in, "one of the show-off ones?"

"Mmm, in reasonably better taste. I was only ever there a time or two, but I remember it as roomy and done in a style of its own."

Much like Samuel Sandison himself, I did not bother to add.

Grace absorbed that for a moment. Then flung herself into hugging me. "Morrie, you rogue! What a wonderful Christmas present!"

As I regained my breath, she ran her fingers up and down my lapel and confided with a bit of a blush: "I have a confession to make. It's awful of me, but...I'd begun to wonder how you are as a provider."

That made two of us. For the fact of the matter was, our money was evaporating fast. Just prior to winning Grace's hand, I had attained a junior fortune on a sporting wager. More like a sure thing, actually, for who in his right mind would not have bet against the heavily favored Chicago White Sox in the 1919 World Series,

intuiting as I did that the team would not play its best for owner Charles Comiskey, known in sporting circles back there as Cheap Charlie. I admit I did not foresee that his baseball minions would succumb to bribes and deliberately let Cincinnati win, but it came to the same, which is to say a satchel of cash for Grace and me to embark on married life. With that wherewithal, our honeymoon had turned into a honey year. Europe, New York, New Orleans, and of course San Francisco, we hit the world's high spots in the manner to which we were all too soon accustomed. The document beneath the fabric Grace was so fondly fingering had spared me a confession of my own, namely that I possessed not the foggiest notion how to

support us, in high style or low, once the satchel was empty. Now, whether or not we had any money, we at least had a mansion, ready and waiting for the claiming.

SLOW “Ah, Grace,” I tucked a stray tendril into her interrupted hairdo, “there is one slight wrinkle in Sandison’s bequest that I should perhaps mention.”

“Fire when ready, you splendid provider, you.”

“The house comes with Sandison.”