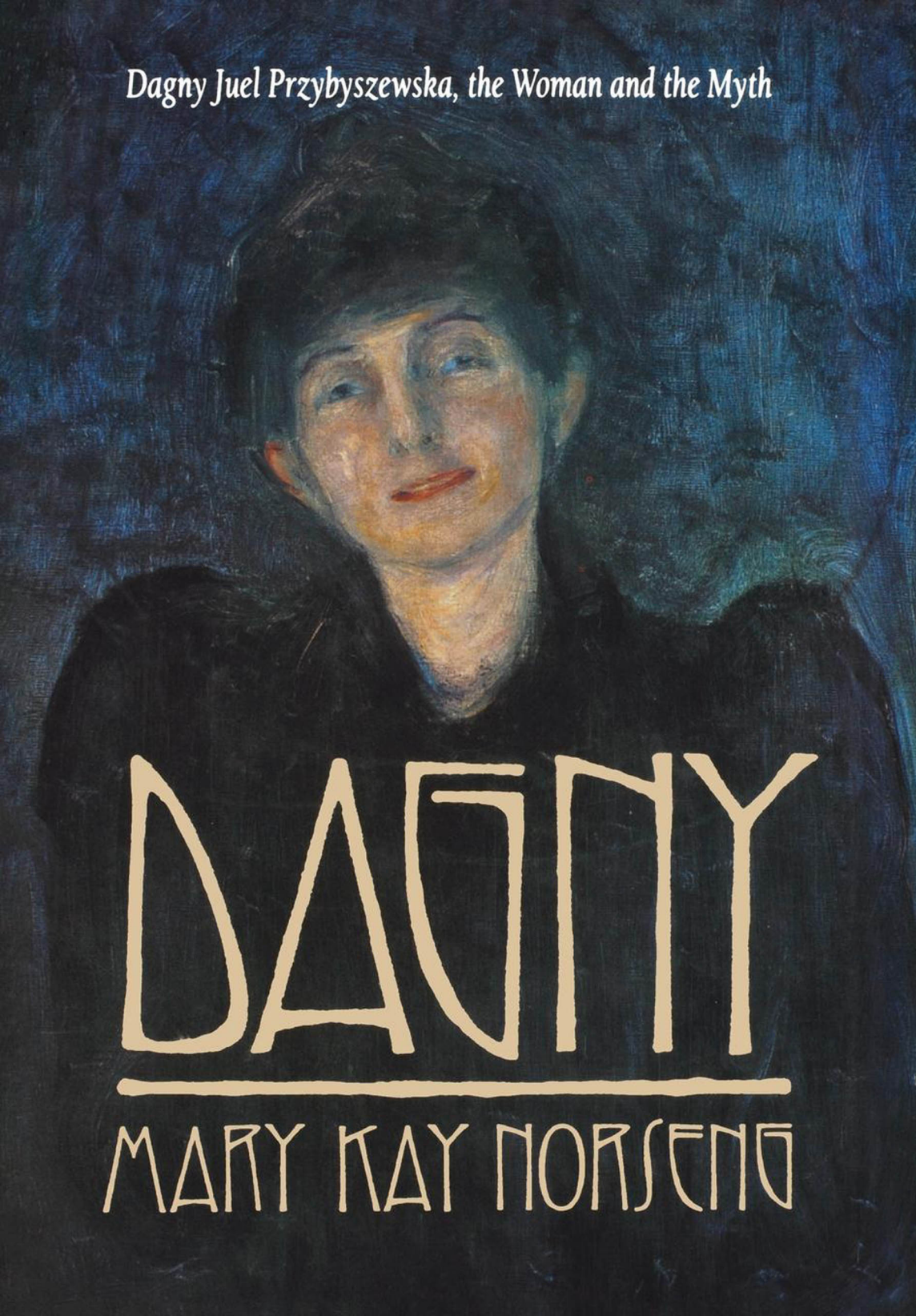
Dagny Juel Przybyszewska, the Woman and the Myth



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MARY KAY NORSENG

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MARY KAY NORSENG

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I want to tell my life's strange story. Perhaps not everyone will find it so strange. Perhaps the same thing has happened to others.—But I have never heard of it, and therefore I think I am the only one who looks this terribly tragic, mysterious fate in the eye.

Dagny Juel Przybyszewska, "Rediviva"

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INTRODUCTION

Hot winds sweep through the valley of the night,
A thousand wild eyes quickly tremble,
The sleeping earth moans anxiously in its dreams.
Feels the kiss on its will-less mouth.

All the golden leaves in a whirl!
The last dance . . .
My golden hair: a wreath of fire!
And soon so pale . . .

The earth opens its wide womb
And seething floods flow forth:
Glowing flowers
Grand as rainbows,
Blood and fire!
With terror's might
Raise their arms toward the shining stars.

Gentle winds sweep through the valley of the night,
A thousand golden stars quickly tremble,
The sleeping earth smiles calmly in its dreams,
Feels the kiss on its closed mouth.

("Vinden stryger hedt igjennem nattens dybe afgrund")

Dagny outside Kongsvinger Fortress, summer 1893.

Dagny Juel Przybyszewska seemed to leap like a flame from an unearthly womb. Mysterious, provocative, and inexplicably beautiful, she was the central woman in two of the major European cultural bohemias of the 1890s, first in Berlin, then later in Kraków. She had lived the first twenty-five years of her life in the decorous anonymity of the Norwegian upper class, when suddenly, in 1893, she stepped into the role of the elegant, erotic queen of the bohemians. She fulfilled people's fears and expectations of the role so well that they came to dissociate her completely from her past. A woman from Kraków wrote that "here nobody believed that she came from any home at all, people didn't even believe she had any parents. They thought she came out of thin air, who knows from where. Maybe she was a sorceress."[1]

By the time Dagny died at the age of thirty-three, her reputation as the angel/demon of the *fin de siècle* was so widespread that the thought that she had been anything else took people aback. A Norwegian feminist who had met her a year earlier at the home of her uncle, the Norwegian prime minister to the king of Sweden-Norway, wrote upon her death: "Last

year I was with her in Stockholm at a reception at Prime Minister Blehr's, where her [piano] playing inspired great admiration, and I got to know her as a fine, talented woman."[2] The remembrance was actually shocking by virtue of the nonprovocative picture it painted of the celebrated Dagny Juel Przybyszewska.

The truth is that Dagny belonged to both the world of the bourgeois and the world of the avant-garde. As opposed as they were, she seemed to be able to traverse both worlds with grace. She refused to be limited by the conventions of either and was not compelled to condemn the one to the other. She married Polish writer Stanisław Przybyszewski in 1893, and with him presided over the *Schwarze Ferkel* bohemia in Berlin—among its members were the Scandinavians Edvard Munch and August Strindberg—and later over the *Paon* bohemia of the Young Poland movement in Kraków. She wrote, she acted as a cultural agent for Scandinavian artists, including Munch, and she lived the life of the *bohême par excellence*. She had two children, she kept in close contact with her parents and her three sisters, and she often returned home to Norway.

The truth also is that Dagny grew increasingly alienated from both her worlds, falling victim to the burdens of the conflicting roles she assumed. In the process of breaking down the limiting notions of what a woman might become, she became a woman dispossessed. She was a love goddess who was imprisoned and betrayed by love, a wife who returned again and again to her childhood home, a mother who left her children, a writer who preferred silence. She died estranged from everyone and everything she had known, shot by a neurotic young man in a hotel room in Tiflis (now Tbilisi) near the Black Sea. He wrote, "She was not of this world, she was far too ethereal for anyone to understand her true nature."

The young man was right in a way he could not know, for Dagny Juel Przybyszewska, at once extraordinary and ordinary, personified far ahead of her time both the rise and the fall of the myth of the modern woman, a being intellectually, sexually, and spiritually free.

Nina Auerbach, in her book *Woman and the Demon* (1982), took as her subject the myth of womanhood engendered by the Victorian cultural imagination. Though her material is derived from late nineteenth-century England, it has much broader application, certainly to the continental European culture of which Dagny was a part. Auerbach wrote:

> This imagination is essentially mythic, though it tries to be scientific, moral, and "real"; its most powerful, if least acknowledged, creation is an explosively mobile, magic woman, who breaks the boundaries of family within which her society restricts her. The triumph of this overweening creature is a celebration of the corporate imagination that believed in her.[3]

Dagny's life proves Auerbach both right and wrong. People were indeed anxious to believe in her, but they were equally anxious to wish her away. The reality of the "modern woman," both for Dagny and for others, was as painful as it was inspiring.

Dagny was a woman of extremes—extreme desires, extreme conflicts, extreme contradictions. She lived more intensely than others, giving those around her a heightened sense of their own potential. Yet at times she seemed plagued with the passivity of a sleepwalker. She was a bohemian and a bourgeois, in love with life and obsessed by death, a rebel and a handmaiden. Still, of the brilliance, bravery, struggle, failure, and pain of her short life, only the scandal was remembered.

Word of her death spread like wildfire in dry heat. Articles about her appeared in the newspapers of France, Germany, Poland, and Scandinavia, one account more sensational than the last. She had been murdered by a jealous lover. He had dared her to laugh, and when she did he shot her. A friend, Maya Vogt, wrote to Dagny's sister Ragnhild from Paris:

> Good God—so many lies have seldom been printed at one time. I have to tell you about something that appeared in a French newspaper. You just have to laugh. That the poet Strindberg had loved her, and when she didn't return his love, in desperation he had traveled with Andrée to the North Pole and there met his death! It's unbelievable what they print.[4]

In the face of the scandal, Dagny's family kept silent. Her mother ordered all correspondence relating to her destroyed.[5] She was seldom spoken of. Dagny's granddaughter remembered that her great grandmother and aunts "only wanted to relate idyllic details" from that earlier time.[6] The "idyllic details" were piled up like stones on Dagny's name, the memories of the real woman buried under a rubble of silences and scandalous stories, until her own grandchildren scarcely knew who she was.

Yet it must be said that Dagny's own silence contributed equally to the entombment of her past. Her few surviving letters tell little, for she revealed so little, out of a need to protect herself or others. She tended to keep her anxieties well concealed. A friend and associate of the Kraków theater, Lucyna Kotarbińska, wrote: "And did any word of complaint ever come from her mouth? Sometimes, unwillingly, with a half-smile, she let slip, 'Oh yes, it is difficult.' But then she'd immediately come with different facts that were meant to change the difficult to something easier." Neither did Dagny defend herself in the face of accusations, whether they were made privately or publicly. She was who she was, and she seemed never to justify or apologize. In Kotarbińska's words: "She knew how to bear everything, and live through everything without accusing anybody, without a word of complaint. Never any hurt, never feeling the injustice. Always full of dignity."[7]

Dagny's only real personal legacy is her writing, four plays, a short story, a collection of prose poems, and a cycle of lyric poems. Whether she wrote more is not known. But these few works reveal an emerging voice that was strong, lyrical, dark, and erotic, at one and the same time defiant and despairing.

Even as she lived, Dagny was perceived to exist in a borderland between myth and reality, sensationalism and silence. Compounded by the distortions effected by time, she has slipped almost irretrievably from view. Since her death, many people have written about her, though few have striven to bring her life, much less her art, into focus. The tendency to fictionalize, both because of the provocative subject and the scarcity of historical facts, has been too tempting.

This fictionalizing process is changing with the growing respect for the accomplishments of women of the past and the accompanying legitimacy awarded them by the intellectual establishment. In the early 1960s, the Swedish scholar Erik Vendelfelt included a chapter on Dagny in his biography of Bengt Lidforss, suggesting that she should be viewed as a modern woman rather than a femme fatale. At approximately the same time, the Norwegian literary critic Sonja Hagemann wrote a compelling article entitled "Genienes inspiratrise" (Inspirer of the geniuses), attempting to raise Dagny's image from the realm of the seductress to the realm of the muse.[8] Hagemann also made the point, for the first time, that Dagny had written poetry, concluding the article with one of her prose poems. Still, it was the

image of the passive muse, "the prism that threw back the reflections" of the "geniuses," that took hold in people's minds, most likely because the notion of the muse is so closely wedded to its demonic counterpart, the femme fatale.

In the 1970s, two Norwegian scholars, Ole Michael Selberg and Martin Nag, discovered and published unknown literary works by Dagny: a short story, a number of plays, and a cycle of poetry.[9] Selberg and Nag wrote seriously about her impact as a cultural figure and as a writer. Ewa Kossak, Polish author and journalist, wrote the only book about Dagny, *Dagny Przybyszewska: Zbłąkana gwiazda* (Dagny Przybyszewska: Wandering star), in 1973. It is a lengthy, sympathetic biography which was translated from Polish into Swedish in abridged form in 1978.[10] A remarkable work in many ways, it traces in detail the course of Dagny's life and amasses a voluminous number of her contemporaries' reactions to her. Kossak had access to all that has been written about Dagny in Poland, where she has long been an adored cult figure.[11] My own book would not have been possible without Kossak's, upon which I have depended for much source material. But Kossak's book can also be problematical. Kossak could not resist romanticizing Dagny, freely mixing biographical and literary portraits, sometimes confusing facts or substituting imaginative supposition. She also virtually ignored Dagny's writing, thus failing to make use of Dagny's authorial voice in telling her own story.[12]

The process of reassessing Dagny's intellectual contribution to her time is most recently reflected in two new Norwegian literary histories: *Kvinners spor i skrift* (Women's tracks in writing) (1986) and *Norsk kvinnelitteraturhistorie: Bind 1, 1600–1900* (The history of Norwegian women's literature, vol. 1) (1988).[13] Whereas Scandinavian literary histories of the past, without exception, treated Dagny as the provocative companion of Munch and Strindberg, these studies from the 1980s treat her straightforwardly as a writer.[14]

Yet Dagny's prevailing femme fatale image is so firmly fixed that it must first be dismantled if it is to be lastingly rebuilt. I have, therefore, tried at once to deconstruct and reconstruct our ways of "seeing" her. I have broken the image up into the different faces of the woman—celebrity, myth, girl, artist, mother, daughter, sister, wife—in an attempt to illuminate each in a starker light. This approach is the most intrinsically effective. On the one hand, it both breaks down the stereotype and opens up new angles of

interpretation. On the other hand, it issues inevitably from Dagny's personality, which was one of many conflicting images, not a harmonious whole. My hope is that I can restore her varied images and recover the woman and her work from the melodrama of her life: from the sensationalism that surrounded it, the silence that fell upon it, and the clichés that have issued from it.

I have employed a nontraditional, essentially musical structure borrowed from the *fin de siècle* prose poem, which sought to elicit the deeper truths locked beneath the surface of traditional poetic language. Like the authors of the poem, I introduce a major theme and then return to it in its various manifestations, in an effort to elicit the deeper truths of Dagny's life locked beneath the melodrama. I rejected the more traditional, linear biographical structure because it automatically imposed on her life a fictional development that is historically unfounded, if not false.

One of the most serious problems in writing about Dagny is one she experienced in life: an overabundance of unreliable material about her, on the one hand, and the lack of reliable material about her, on the other. The extant literature, primarily on her as a public personality, is characterized by conflicting accounts, by a shockingly shoddy tradition of scholarship, rampant with falsehoods and sexist biases, and ultimately by the complex personalities of the artists and men who have been largely responsible for telling her story. In the opposite extreme, the memoirs and correspondence of Dagny and her family that could come closer to revealing the private woman have for the most part been destroyed or lost.

To correct the imbalance I have relied heavily on the personal correspondence that *has* survived, in particular the private family collections.[15] I use the everyday voices of Dagny and her relatives and friends to reconstruct a portrait of her that is at once immediate and authentic. As much as possible I have used Dagny's own literary voice to tell of her internal life. My synchronic approach to the material has enabled me as well to suggest what the Juell family dynamic might have been like as Dagny was growing up, based on letters from the later years. Virtually nothing exists from her girlhood. Yet understanding her family is a key to understanding how she came to be simultaneously so well and so poorly prepared for her role as one of the most modern women of the European *fin de siècle*.

I have sifted through the more sensational secondary material in an attempt to separate fact from fiction, though as I demonstrate in chapter 1,

"The Lady and the Literary Establishment," divining the "truth" is often an impossible task. I do not whittle down every account in the literature in an effort to expose the grains of truth each may contain. Rather, I use the sources to show how the emotional and ideological yearnings of the times both willed into being and finally destroyed a fantastic woman like Dagny. Whenever it is possible and constructive, I indicate the discrepancy between fiction and fact, though I usually relegate such information to endnotes so as not to interrupt the surface of the text. I consider the endnote apparatus to be an integral, corrective part of the reconstructive process. It can suggest not only how "fictions" became historical "facts" but how the "fictions" were used to trivialize or distort Dagny's persona.

The "truth" about Dagny Juel Przybyszewska does not lie in the mere forward flow of events, but rather in the myth of the modern woman she inspired and the attending ambivalence she provoked (chapters 1 and 2); in the shattering discrepancies between the myth and the realities of her life, be they her relationships to those she loved, her own conflicted personality, or her attempt to be an artist (chapters 3, 4, 7, and 8); in her writing (chapters 5 and 6); and in her fatal confrontation with the very ideology that made of her a modern goddess (chapter 9).

Dagny was a woman in historical and personal transition. Everything about her reflects this fact, even her name, even her face. Of her name: she was born Dagny Juell. In the early 1890s she experimented with the spelling of her maiden name, writing Juell, then Juel interchangeably in her books. Finally she dropped the last "l." After she married Przybyszewski, she signed her name Dagny Juel Przybyszewska[16] or simply Dagny Przybyszewska, the name she used as a writer. It is perhaps a reflection of the difficulty she experienced in breaking down tradition that people still insistently refer to her as Dagny Juell. I have chosen to call her Dagny, since it was her common signature through all the phases of her life.[17]

Of her face: she was irresistible to painters, sculptors, and photographers because of her elusory countenance. After her death, her friend Maya Vogt wrote to her sister Ragnhild, thanking her for Dagny's photograph: "My, how beautiful it is, as good as a photograph could possibly be, I think; the interesting thing in Dagny's face can't be reproduced well except in a painting. . . . I have longed so for her and suddenly I can see her so clearly with her fine head and her charming, graceful smile."[18] Yet the

most interesting thing of all is how varied and contrasting the individual portraits are.

Dagny Juel Przybyszewska represents transition and change, both as a woman in her own right and as the paradigmatic modern woman. In any transition the changes are wrenching, often threatening and seldom elegantly executed. No exception was made for Dagny. Yet she brought to her life, in all its stages, a seemingly inevitable dignity. Her powerful attraction, for her contemporaries and for us, seems to me to derive not only from her remarkable life but from the intensity with which she embraced it.

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DAGNY

DAGNY JUEL PRZYBYSZEWSKA,

THE WOMAN AND THE MYTH

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1 : THE LADY AND THE LITERARY ESTABLISHMENT

It is worthwhile having a picture of her. I do not know whether there was anything more rewarding [than her] in the entire Berlin circle. The others had talent, and were beset by talent; visionaries, filled to bursting with their obsessions and barely able to move; maniacs, possessed, poor devils. Fine, we have their work. If you take the time, you will get to know them, for they have transmitted every inch of themselves, down to their fingertips, through their art and literature. But Ducha was the Lady. There they stood with their stories and there she stood with her flickering eyes.

[*Julius Meier-Graefe, Berlin publisher and member of the* Schwarze Ferkel *circle*][1]

The "Lady" was Dagny. "They" were some of Europe's most avant-garde, late-nineteenth-century artists and thinkers. In the winter of 1892–93, before Dagny came upon the scene, "they" came together, daily and nightly, in a Berlin tavern they called *Zum schwarzen Ferkel* (The Black Piglet).[2] They were the revolutionaries of the art world, most notorious among them the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, who would befriend Dagny; the Swedish playwright August Strindberg, who would malign her; and the Polish cultural revolutionary Stanisław Przybyszewski, who would marry her within months of their first meeting. Munch and Strindberg went on to change the state of their art forms. Przybyszewski would not leave such a mark, but at the time and in this group he was the most inspirational of them all, a kind of dionysian devil who wanted every old law broken in the name of art and life.

The year Dagny came to Berlin Munch was twenty-nine and riding high on scandal and success. That fall in Christiania (or Kristiania, now Oslo) he had held a private exhibition, his "secession" exhibition, signaling his break with the Norwegian art establishment. Almost immediately the German Art Guild invited him to show his works in Berlin. The exhibition sent shock waves through the city, and the Guild voted to close it down on only the second day, ensuring its success as even the most enthusiastic review could not have done. Munch immediately signed a contract to exhibit his paintings in Düsseldorf and Köln, and by December he had brought them back to Berlin. He had suddenly become "a big name . . . , and he could delight in hearing unknown people talk about him on the street."[3] That spring he would paint his beautiful portrait of *Fru Przybyszewska* (p. 00).

Strindberg was forty-four when he first met Dagny. He had already written *Fadren/The Father* and *Fröken Julie/Miss Julie*, two of the plays that would alter the face of the modern theater. His works were not being performed in Sweden, but these two revolutionary dramas, both staged briefly in Berlin, then shut down—*The Father* by the censorship office, *Miss Julie* mainly by outraged women in the audience—had gained him a following in the city. Poor and depressed in his own country in the fall of 1892, Strindberg was brought by friends and admirers to Berlin, where *Fordringsägare/Creditors* was performed in January, at the same time as *Miss Julie* opened in Paris. His reputation as a European playwright was on the rise, and he himself was lionized by his fellow artists and intellectuals, in particular the mostly younger men of the *Ferkel* group. Four, five, and six years later, when the group had long since dispersed, he would explore his fears of the disturbing Dagny in works like *Inferno*, *Klostret/The Cloister*, and *Brott och brott/Crimes and Crimes*.

Przybyszewski was twenty-four, one year younger than Dagny, who would soon change the course of his life. He had come to Berlin in 1889 to study architecture but was ultimately more interested in the structures of the psyche than of the city. Literally hell-bent on exploring the unconscious, he read Nietzsche, studied neurology, steeped himself in mysticism, occultism, witchcraft and satanism, and made sex a near religion. In 1892 he published three psycho/physiological essays on Nietzsche, Chopin, and the Swedish poet Ola Hansson. In 1893 he published his first novel, the satanic *Totenmesse* (The mass of the dead). He would go on to write novels,