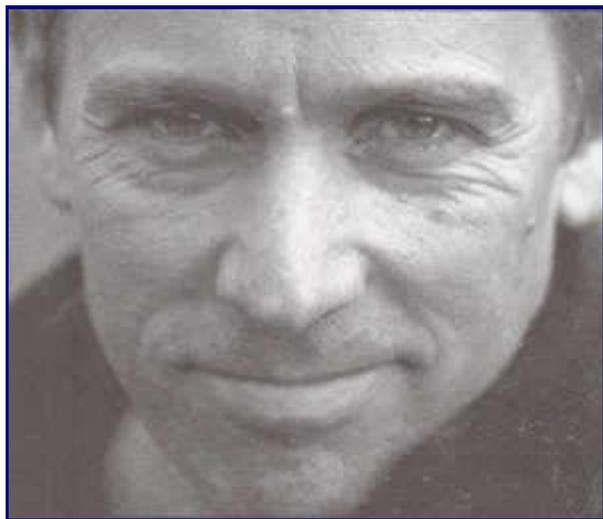


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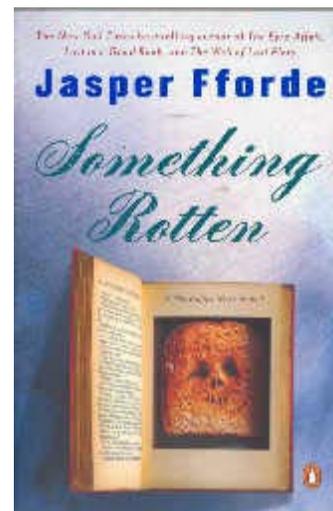


A READER'S JOURNAL

Something Rotten
A Thursday Next Novel, No. 4
by
Jasper Fforde

Published by Penguin Putman/NY in
2004

A Book Review by Bobby Matherne
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In the *dramatis personae* Fforde gives a listing of the all the characters accumulated over the previous three Thursday Next novels. Here's a test for you. Read this description of SpecOps.

[page xviii] SpecOps: Short for Special Operations, the governmental departments that deal with anything too rigorous for the ordinary police to handle. Everything from time travel to good taste.

To find out how you did in this short test ask yourself if you chuckled or otherwise found anything remotely funny about the description of SpecOps. If you answered, "Yes" you are a candidate for reading the Thursday Next series of novels and if this one is your first, you should hie yourself over to visit Thursday inside "Jane Eyre" where she shows exceptional good taste by changing the lugubrious ending to the novel(1). If you answered, "No" because you found nothing funny about the description, you obviously think that ordinary police have good taste and therefore you are grossly unsuited to read further in this review and should stay away from all Thursday Next novels.

Something is rotten and it's not the smell of the Cretan Minotaur who has escaped from the fantasy-genre prison book "Sword of the Zenobians" and is loose in Nebraska as this novel begins. Thursday is in the open range of Nebraska and pauses to note the difference between the real world and the fictional world in which she had lived while giving birth to her son. She meets Jurisdiction Agent Bradshaw at the top of page 73 of "Death at Double-X Ranch" and comments that the purple sage looks better than most fictional vegetation. This passage gives us Fforde's insight into how life would be in a fictional world and should remind us how good we have it in the oftentimes chaotic real world.

[page 2] I shielded my eyes against the sun and looked around. A carpet of sage stretched all the way to the mountains, less than five miles distant. The vegetation had a repetitive pattern that belied its fictional roots. The chaotic nature of the real world that gave us such soft, undulating hills and random patterns of forest and hedges was replaced within fiction by a landscape that relied on ordered repetitions of the authors' initial description. In the make-believe world where I had made my home, a forest has only eight different trees, a beach five different pebbles, a sky twelve different clouds. A hedgerow repeats itself every eight feet, a mountain range every sixth peak. It hadn't bother that much to begin with, but after two years living inside fiction, I had begun to yearn for a world where every tree and rock and hill and cloud has its own unique shape

and identity. And the sunsets. I missed them most of all. Even the best-described ones could hold a candle to a real one. I yearned to witness once again the delicate hues of the sky as the sun dipped below the horizon. From red to orange, to pink, to blue, to navy, to black.

So what's rotten? Is something rotten in Denmark? Noooo. Something from Denmark is rotten in England, Hamlet. Not quite rotten, but he does get on the nerves of those around him with all his vacillating and indecisive wavering. Not just any Hamlet from Denmark, but *the Hamlet*, namely, the Prince of Denmark from the Shakespeare play, "Hamlet". He lives at Thursday's mom's house which also provides a residence to Herr Otto Bismarck who is still trying to resolve the Schleswig-Holstein problem of 1863-1864. Actually it's Thursday's mom and dad who's trying to resolve it, and Dad is off trying to locate Bismarck's opposite number from Denmark.

What's this about Thursday's son, you ask? His name, Friday, natch! And he is rather precocious for the tender age of 2. He speaks eloquently, but only in Lorem Ipsum. What is Lorem Ipsum, you ask? Have you ever seen a sample page of text intended only to illustrate how text would look formatted or typeset on a page, and the content of the text is not important? The universal text used for such displays looks like Latin, but is utterly meaningless. It begins with these words, "Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet" and just goes on with no repeats and looks for all the world like some learned dissertation in Latin. Friday speaks Lorem Ipsum, for the most part. In emergencies, he lapses into spurts of English to save Thursday from extinction, but otherwise he seems to be rather eloquent and meaningful in his short phrases of Lorem Ipsum. Here's a conversation between Thursday and Friday. (If this seems idiotic to you, remember the test? You probably failed the test and should have stopped reading several paragraphs ago. Bye.)

[page 30, 31] "Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet!" Friday cried indignantly.

"Yes, it was impressive, wasn't it?" I agreed. "Bet you never saw Pickwick move that fast — even for a marshmallow."

"Nostrud laboris nisi et commodo consequat," replied Friday with great indignation. "Excepteur sint cupidatat non proident!"

"Serves you right," I told him. "Here, have a cucumber sandwich."

"What did my grandson say?" asked my mother, staring at Friday, who was trying to eat the sandwich all in one go and making a nauseating spectacle of himself.

"Oh, that's just him jabbering away in Lorem Ipsum. He speaks nothing else."

"Lorem — what?"

"Lorem Ipsum. It's dummy text used by the printing and typesetting industry to demonstrate a layout. I don't know where he picked it up. Comes from living inside a book, I should imagine."

Millon de Floss (remember I warned you), who we have met before in the three previous novels makes his appearance in this novel as Thursday's officially sanctioned *stalker*. He's been waiting two and a half years for her to return so he could pick up her trail again. Coming home Thursday spots two guys lurking and knocks one out and talks to the other one. He shows Thursday his badge and introduces himself as a Grade-1 stalker. De Floss explains to Thursday that his previous job was stalking Lola Vavoom and, when he moved on, she sent him a glass tankard with "THANK YOU FOR A GREAT STALK, LOLA" etched onto it. "Have you ever met her?" he asks Thursday.

[page 41] Once, Mr . . . " I looked at the pass before handing it back. "De Floss. Interesting name. Any relation to Candice?(2)"

"The author? In my dreams," replied the stalker, rolling his eyes. "But since I'd like us to be friends, do please call me Millon."

"Millon it is, then."

And we shook hands. The man on the ground moaned and sat up, rubbing his head.

"Who's your friend?"

"He's not my friend," said Millon, "he's my stalker. And a pain in the arse he is, too."

"Wait — you're a stalker and you have a stalker?"

If this makes you think of big fleas having littler fleas which bite them, I won't bore you with the reprise of the poem Fforde writes, replacing "fleas" with "stalkers". A nice similarity, isn't it? But he recovers nicely with the name of the stalker's stalker, "Adam Gnusense." Fleas are a Gnusense, too, aren't they?

When Thursday meets Yorrick Kaine, the Chancellor of England, we find out a bit about the nature of fictional characters when they slide out of their books into real life.

[page 48] He didn't appear to have aged at all in the two years since I had last seen him, which is what I would expect from a fictioneer. Still looking in his late twenties, with black hair swept neatly to the side, he might have been a male model from a knitting pattern. I knew he wasn't. I'd checked.

Her father, who slides in and out of time at will as part of his Chrono-Guard job, sometimes get confused as to what the time is when he appears, stops time, and has a chat with Thursday. He says on page 102, "Sometimes I don't know whether I'm thening or nowing." This time when he appears, she is very glad to see him and cries out, "How are you? I haven't seen you for years!"

[page 60] He turned and stared at me. "My dear girl, we spoke only a few hours ago!"

"No we didn't."

"We did actually."

"We did *not*."

He stopped, stared at me for a moment and then looked at his watch, shook it and listened to it, then shook it again.

"Here," I said, handing him the chronograph I was wearing, "take mine."

"Very nice — thank you. Ah! I stand corrected. Three hours *from now*. It's an easy mistake to make. Did you have any thoughts about the matter we discussed?"

"No, Dad," I said in an exasperated tone. "It hasn't happened yet, remember?"

"You're always so *linear*," he muttered, returning to his job comparing the pictures to the assassin. "I think you ought to try and expand your horizons a bit -- Bingo!"

He had found a picture that matched my assassin and read the label on the back.

"Expensive hit woman working in the Wiltshire-Oxford area. Looks petite and bijou but as deadly as the best of them. She trades under the name 'The Windowmaker.' " He paused. "Should be Widowmaker, shouldn't it?"

And thus we get introduced to one of the running jokes. She had the "n" added to her name in some typographical error and has been called the Windowmaker ever since. A typical real-life thing to happen which rarely happens in fiction, up until now.

If you've ever had your dad appear unexpectedly in your world for a short chat, and it seems as if no time had gone by at all, this happens literally whenever Thursday's dad pops up in her world. He stops time in the outside world until he's ready to leave, and he starts it again as he slips off into somewhere and somewhen, places and times unknown.

Thursday's son, Friday, occasionally waxes eloquent, such as when she tells him he's going to stay with her mom for the day.

[page 65] I picked up Friday and gave him a kiss. "Be good, Friday. You're staying with Nana for the day."

Friday looked at me, looked at Mum, stuck his finger up his nose and said, "Sunt in culpa qui officia id est laborum?"

I ruffled his hair, and he showed me a booger had found. I declined the present,

wiped his hand with a hanky, then went looking for Hamlet.

Thursday drives Hamlet past the National Croquet Stadium to downtown where he becomes interested in a Will Speak vending machine which recites passages from his own play. Thursday has to explain to Hamlet that actors speak the lines in plays here in the Outland, a concept which confuses Hamlet, who says, "But I'm the real me?" to which Thursday replies, "In a manner of speaking." Hamlet finally warms up to the idea and gets excited when told that Helen Bonham Carter plays Ophelia in a recent rendition of the play. "This gets better and better! When I tell Ophelia, she'll flip — if she hasn't already."

As they're walking across the street a small steamroller bears down on them and Hamlet pushes Thursday out of the way. No one hurt, but this conversation about the difference between real life and fiction ensues or rather continues. Thursday starts it off.

[page 76] "You see?" I said to Hamlet as we walked away.

"What?"

"This is *exactly* what I mean. A lot happens in the real world for no good reason. If this were fiction, this little incident would have relevance thirty or so chapters from now; as it is it means nothing — after all, not every incident in life *has* a meaning."

"Tell that to the scholars who study *me*," Hamlet snorted disdainfully, then thought for a moment before adding, "If the real world were a book, it would *never* find a publisher. Overlong, detailed to the point of distraction — and ultimately, without a major resolution."

"Perhaps," I said thoughtfully, "that's exactly what we like about it."

There is a Catch-22 about being dressed as Hamlet which goes like this: you would have to be mad to dress as Hamlet, so if you dress as Hamlet and act normal, you must be mad! Here's how this plays out when Thursday introduces Hamlet to the clerk in Café Goliathe as her cousin Eddie to cover up his real identity as the fictional Hamlet.

[page 77] "He's my cousin Eddie from Wolverhampton."

"Really? Then why is he dressed like Hamlet?"

I thought quickly. "Because . . . he's insane. Isn't that right, Cousin Eddie?"

"Yes," said Hamlet, to whom feigning madness was not much of a problem. "When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw."

"See?"

"Well, that's all right, then."

Next, Thursday asks Hamlet if he'd like a coffee drink and his response mirrors what many folks feel when they are confronted with a huge array of coffee choices in a Starbucks or P.J.'s Coffeeshop. You ask a simple question and you get bombarded with an onslaught of words you never heard of before and you are expected to digest all these words and answer rationally within a second.

[page 78] "What is there?"

"Espresso, mocha, latte, white mocha, hot chocolate, decaf, recaf, nocaf, somecaf, extracaf, Goliachino(tm) . . . what's the matter?"

Hamlet had started to tremble, a look of pain and hopelessness on his face as he stared wild-eyed at the huge choice laid out in front of him.

"To espresso or to latte, that is the question," he muttered, his free will evaporating rapidly. I had asked Hamlet for something he couldn't easily supply: a decision.

"Whether 'tis tastier on the palate to choose white mocha over plain," he continued in a rapid garble, "or to take a cup to go. Or a mug to stay, or extra cream, or have nothing, and opposing the endless choice, end one's heartache — "

"Cousin Eddie!" I said sharply. "Cut it out!"

"To froth, to sprinkle, perchance to drink, and in that — "

Thursday had never played golf with her former boss, Braxton, and, given his love of the game, this was a mistake on her part. Instead she had simply promised him that she would take up the game. When she arrives to ask for her old job back, this is his response immediately after he listed the various things she had done wrong while on her job before her disappearance for over two years.

[page 86] "But what's worse was that you lied to me systematically from the moment you came under my command. You said you would learn to play golf, and you never so much as picked up a putter."

"But — "

"I have proof of your lies, too. I personally visited every single golf club, and not one of them had ever let someone of your description play golf there — not even on the practice ranges. How do you explain *that*, eh?"

"Well — "

"You vanish from sight two and a half years ago. Not a word. Had to demote you. Star employee. Newspapers had a field day. Upset my swing for weeks."

Thursday makes special note of the crop of TV shows that flourished during her absence, "Celebrity Name That Fruit!", "Toasters From Hell" and "You've Been Stapled!" That last one contains a "collection of England's funniest stationery incidents." Plus she is told about the newest Starbucks location — just when you think they have one in every corner of the world. "Starbucks wants to open another coffee shop in the Hardy Boys series." Thursday objects, "There's already sixteen." (Page 114) She also discovers that Millon de Floss's hobby is collecting vacuum-cleaner serial numbers. He was "investigating a rare Hoover XB-23E" when she talked to him.

The Emperor Zhark, whom Thursday described to her mother as "a homicidal maniac intent on galactic domination," appears twice in this novel, even getting his name in the chapter headings of Chapters 17 and 18. Nothing unduly strange about that, except for the clause his book-agent secured in his contract. Thursday asks him:

[page 157] "Do you get book-title billing?"

"We gave that one away in exchange for chapter-heading status. If this were a novel, you'd have to start a new chapter as soon as I appeared."

"Well, it's a good thing we're not," I replied.

And yet Thursday is in a novel, and so Zhark does get chapter-heading status. When you start having fun with fiction, it's hard to know when or where to stop, isn't it, Jasper? Emperor Zhark discovers from reading an advance plot line that he is to be deposed as Emperor and given a public execution. Thursday says in exasperation, "What do you want me to do? Go and talk the author out of it?"

[page 163] "Would you?" replied Zhark, opening his eyes wide. "Would you really do that?"

"No. You can't have characters trying to tell their authors what to write in their books. Besides, within your books you are truly evil and need to be punished."

What Thursday says is true, but recently a movie came out (2006) in which a character in a novel does exactly that, namely, tries to talk the novelist out of getting rid of him. The movie is called, naturally, "Stranger Than Fiction," and may be based on ideas picked up by the screenwriter from Jasper Fforde's Thursday Next novels, such as the very passage above. One would only have to ask oneself, "What if a character in a novel tried to talk the author out of killing him off?", and write down how that might play out. The movie was really good in its own right and offered a lot of insight into how the production of a novel proceeds. It showed interactions between the novelist and the characters that are usually off-screen, so to speak, during the writing of the novel.

Whenever a foreign word appears in a text I'm reading, I always attempt to render a translation, especially

if it's a Germanic or Latin-based language. So when Friday speaks Lorem Ipsum, it's a relief for me not to have to attempt a translation. But it looks so much like Latin, and Fforde is so clever, I always try a bit anyway. Here's an example. Friday is calling his mother, Thursday, in Lorem Ipsum, "Duis aute irure dolor est!" Later, on page 256, Thursday asks Friday about the activities of her mother and Otto Bismarck while she was gone.

[page 256] "Did Bismarck and Gran . . . kiss?"

"Tempor inididunt ut labore," he replied enigmatically, "et dolore magna aliqua."

"I hope that's a 'definitely not,' darling," I murmured, filling up his beaker.

As she fills his beaker, she catches her wedding ring on the lip of the cup, and stares at it. Her husband Landen, who had been eradicated by Kaine's minions, has now been un-eradicated after she made a deal with Kaine, but un-eradication has its flaws, among which is an On-again-Off-again nature which is unpredictable. Luckily her wedding ring provides an instant clue if he's back.

[page 256, 257] I stared at my wedding ring in a resigned manner. Landen was back again. I clasped it tightly and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" came Landen's voice.

"It's Thursday."

"Thursday!" he said with a mixture of relief and alarm. "What happened to you? I was waiting for you in the bedroom, and then I heard the front door close! Did I do something wrong?"

"No, Land, nothing. You were eradicated again."

"Am I still?"

"Of course not."

"There was a long pause. Too long, in fact. I looked at my hand. My wedding had gone again. I sighed.

When Thursday explores her Uncle Mycroft's laboratory, she finds a small box there which can change gold into lead, and she asks her Aunt Polly, "What's the point in that?" A physicist or chemist might say that turning gold into lead is *plumbum*(3) crazy!

Since bioengineering brought dodos, mammoths and neanderthals back into existence with their ancient pre-neocortex ways of thinking, almost talking, and other idiosyncratic manners of being. Bowden and Thursday head to the Neanderthal Nation to ask for help from some neanderthals.

[page 266, 267] We parked a little way down from the Nation and got out of the car.

"Can't we just park inside?" asked Bowden.

"They' don't like cars," I explained. "They don't see the point in traveling any distance. According to neanderthal logic, anywhere that can't be reached in a day's walk isn't worth visiting. Our neanderthal gardener used to walk the four miles to our house every Tuesday and then walk back again, resisting all offers of a lift. Walking was, he maintained, 'the only decent way to travel — if you drive, you miss the conversations in the hedgerows.' "

"I can see his point," replied Bowden, "but when I need to be somewhere in a hurry — "

"That's the difference, Bowd. You've got to get off the human way of thinking. To neanderthals nothing is so urgent that it can't be done another time — or not done at all. By the way, did you remember not to wash this morning?"

"He nodded. Because scent is so important to neanderthal communications, the soapy cleanliness of humans reads more like some form of suspicious subterfuge. Speak to a neanderthal while wearing scent and he'll instantly think you have something to hide.

Neanderthals, according to the science of doyletics, had *only* doylic memories, *no* cognitive memories(4). The neanderthal, Stig, sizes up Bowden Cable and receives this retort.

[page 270, 271] "How can you know me that well?"

"There was a silence for a moment as Stig turned the rabbit on the spit.

"You live with a woman whom you don't truly love, but need for stability. You are suspicious that she is seeing someone else, and that anger and suspicion hangs heavily on your shoulders. You feel passed over for promotion, and the one woman whom you truly love is inaccessible to you — "

"All right, all right," he said sullenly. "I get the picture."

"You human radiate emotions like a roaring fire, Mr. Cable. We are astounded how you are able to deceive each other so easily. We see all deception, so have evolved to have no need for it."

Ever try to have sex with the curtains open in a hotel room with hundreds of apartments in the tall building right across the street where people might be looking down on you? Well, people in novels have such feelings also, but Thursday Next may be the first one to voice her feelings. Landen seems to be staying "On" for longer periods of time and it seems to Thursday like a good time for some long-awaited connubial bliss. Thursday is sharing her thoughts with us.

[page 279] I was back in time to help Landen scrub the food off Friday, read the boy a story and put him to bed. It wasn't late, but we went to bed ourselves. Tonight there was no shyness or confusion, and we undressed quickly. He pushed me backwards onto the bed and with his fingertips —

"Wait!" I cried out.

"What?"

"I can't concentrate with all those people!"

"Landen looked around the empty bedroom. "What people?"

"Those people," I repeated, waving a hand in the general direction of everywhere, "the ones *reading* us."

"Landen stared at me and raised an eyebrow. I felt stupid, then relaxed and gave out a nervous giggle.

"Sorry. I've been living inside fiction for too long; sometimes I get this weird feeling that you, me and everything else are just . . . well, characters in a book or something."

"Plainly, that is ridiculous."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. Where were we?"

"Just here."

And so it goes as Thursday wraps up her last novel in the arms of Landen, her beloved husband. We'll skip the standoff where her assassin gets hit by a falling grand piano and the revelation where Thursday discovers that she was her own grandma. Let's just say if you've made it this far through this review, you'll find yourself pulled through all of the four Thursday Next novels and the trip will be one of delight and fun, every neanderthal step of the way.

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. The novel in which this happens is [The Eyre Affair](#) by Fforde, the first book in the four Thursday Next novels.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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**Footnote 2.** Candy floss is the British name for what we Americans call "Cotton Candy."

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

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Footnote 3. The scientific name for lead is the Latin word, *plumbum*, from which word our word for plumbing arose, since plumbers have until recently used a lead to connect pipes together. My father always had a ready supply of lead and a melting pot. Came in handy when I got a set of forms one Christmas for making toy soldiers out of lead.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 3.](#)

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**Footnote 4.** For more information on the science of doyletics and why neanderthals had no cognitive memory, read my essay, [The Childhood of Humanity](#).

[Return to text directly before Footnote 4.](#)

