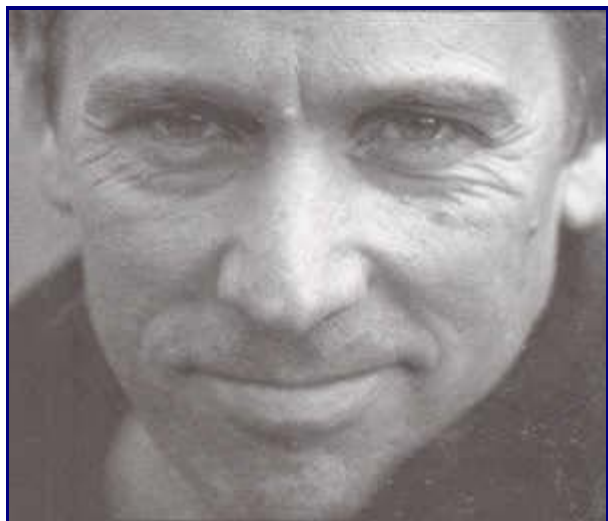


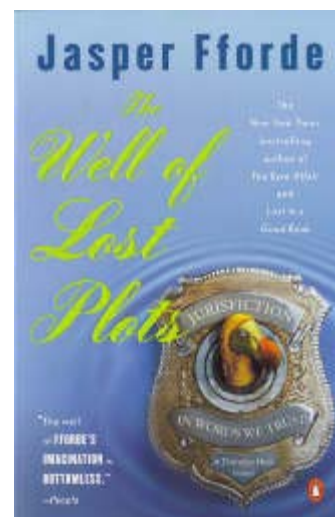
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Well of Lost Plots
A Novel
by
Jasper Fforde

Published by Penguin Putnam/NY in 2002
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2006



"Ever wanted to be in books?" the ad reads.
"Jurisdiction needs enthusiastic staff and is recruiting now! Volunteers needed for an exciting and challenging job. Please apply, in

person, to Norland Park, *Sense and Sensibility*, anytime after chapter 5. Duties can be hazardous and might involve painful and prolonged death. No timewasters, please." In the twentieth century many cheap paperbacks contained advertising like this sample from the three or four in the back of this book.

No, it's not an ad that Thursday Next answered to get her job with Jurisdiction, it's an ad for you the reader to consider answering. Of course, it has the equivalent reality as an ad for Howgart's School of Magic where some parents might want to send their children to become wizards.

Thursday stumbled into *Jane Eyre*, and later found Heathcliff wandering around in the Outland which is what characters in BookWorld call where we readers live.

When her husband Landen gets spirited away into some book, Thursday tries her best to locate him, to no avail. But, along the way she discovers she's pregnant with his child and since Acheron's sister is trying to eradicate both her and her baby, she decides to hide out in an unpublished novel in the Well of Lost Plots. Thursday replaces a character who is going on a vacation and takes up residence in the moored seaplane she used as a home.

Not much work to do, just an occasional line or two to speak, so she can relax and allow her baby to grow to term. Miss Havisham from "Great Expectations" takes Thursday under her wing and teaches her some of the basic techniques of a Jurisdiction Agent and soon Thursday is studying, taking the text, and performing an assignment to qualify as a beginning agent.

Ever wanted to be in books?

Jurisdiction

needs enthusiastic staff
and is recruiting now!

Volunteers needed for an exciting and challenging job. Please apply, in person, to Norland Park, *Sense and Sensibility*, anytime after chapter 5. Duties can be hazardous and might involve painful and prolonged death. No timewasters, please.

Meanwhile Aornis, Acheron's sister, is as evil as her brother and bent on revenge. She gives Thursday amnesia and only by the help of Gran, Thursday's grandmother, is Thursday able to remember that she is pregnant and the full name of her lost husband.

Have you ever noticed that no one on the Starship Enterprise ever went to the toilet to relieve themselves? In books, only those things happen, only those places are present that the author writes about. This is the basic premise of the BookWorld that Fforde creates for Thursday to wander around in. In this piece of dialogue we hear Mary asking Thursday about what it's like to be an Outlander, someone from the real world outside of books. This is ironic because Thursday, to us, is a book character, but within the novel, she's an Outlander.

[page 4] She touched me inquisitively with a slender index finger as though I might be made of glass.

"I've never seen someone from the other side before," she announced, clearly relieved to find that I wasn't going to shatter into a thousand pieces. "Tell me, is it true you have to cut your hair on a regular basis? I mean, your hair actually grows?"

"Yes" — I smiled — "and my fingernails, too."

"Really?" mused Mary. "I've heard rumors about that but I thought it was just one of those Outlandish legends. I suppose you have to eat, too? To stay alive, I mean, not just when the story calls for it?"

"One of the great pleasures of life," I assured her.

I didn't think I'd tell her about real-world downsides such as tooth decay, incontinence, or old age. Mary lived in a three-year window and neither aged, died, married, had children, got sick or changed in any way. Although appearing resolute and strong-minded, she was only like this because she was *written* that way. For all her qualities, Mary was simply a foil to Jack Spratt, the detective in *Caversham Heights*, the loyal sergeant figure to whom Jack explained things so the readers knew what was going on. She was what writers called an *expositional*, but I'd never be as impolite to say so to her face.

At one point in the narrative Jack opens a door to a place of which the author had not written a description, and he nearly falls into the Text Sea. The one color panel of the book illustrates how the solidity of BookWorld tapers off into the words and characters of the Text Sea. It is where no longer needed props, buildings, etc, are dumped when they are de-constructed into words and letters.

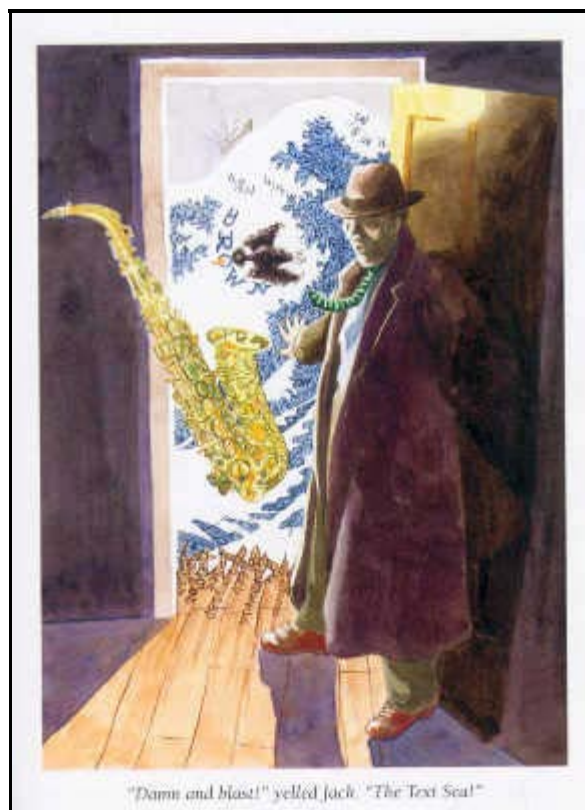
Apparently the reality of the Text Sea leads "Unnamed Police Office No. 1" to ask Thursday this question, "What's the point of alphabet soup?" Naturally Thursday answers, "I don't know." The questions seemed to be a test of whether Thursday was in fact an Outlander, so when that failed the following conversation ensued.

[page 18] "Are you sure you're from the Outland?" he asked suspiciously. "Then tell me this: Why is there no singular for *scampi*?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're *not* from the Outland," said Unnamed Police Officer No.1 sadly. "You should be ashamed of yourself, lying and raising our hopes like that!"

"Very well," I replied, covering my eyes,



"Damn and blast!" yelled Jack. "The Text Sea!"

"I'll prove it to you. Speak to me in turn but leave off your speech designators."

"Okay," said Unnamed Police Officer No. 1. "Who is this talking?"

"And who is this?" added Dr. Singh.

"I said leave *off* your speech designators. Try again."

"It's harder than you think," sighed Unnamed Police Officer No. 1. "Okay, here goes."

There was a pause.

"Which one of us is talking now?"

"And who am I?"

"Mrs. Singh first, Unnamed Police Officer No. 1 second. Was I correct?"

"Amazing!" murmured Mrs. Singh. "How do you do that?"

"I can recognize your voices. I have a sense of smell, too."

"Is it true that in the Outland, more than one person can speak at the same time?" another character asks Thursday later in the book. If you've ever wondered as I have how the author of a play signifies when dialogue for a group scene is to be overlapped, then you've noticed that in books only one person at a time speaks, but in real life, we Outlanders just talk whenever we want to, no matter who else may be speaking at the same time.

Ever noticed that characters in books, except for James Bond novels, rarely have breakfast? Fforde did and he writes about it. Snell visits Thursday in *Caversham Heights* and notices the bacon and eggs.

[page 45] "Is this breakfast?"

I nodded.

"Fascinating! I've always wondered what a breakfast looked like. In our books we have twenty-three dinners, twelve lunches and eighteen afternoon teas — but no breakfasts." He paused for a moment. "And why is orange jam called marmalade, do you suppose?"

I told him I didn't know and passed him a mug of coffee.

One of the things which fascinates me about the above dialogue is the question about marmalade, which, like the question about alphabet soup, presupposes that an answer exists which everyone must know, just as everything in a novel is explained by the author, so everyone knows. But real life, here in the Outland, has things like alphabet soup and marmalade, which among other things, we are not given explanations of and some of which may have no traces of an explanation. Time and again Fforde in his niFfty way comes up with items which elucidate aspects of Outland reality which differ from Book reality.

Since Generics (undeveloped characters) learn the attributes of a strong leading personality quickly, the number of them must be limited to keep from having a large number of abrasive housekeepers, like Mrs. Danvers, for instance. Snell tells Thursday they had Merlins coming out of their ears recently. Thursday asks him to tell her how many.

[page 46] "Nine thousand!" he breathed. "We even altered plotlines to incude older male mentor figures! Do you think that was wrong?"

"I'm not sure," I said, slightly confused.

"At least the Merlin type is a popular character. Stick a new hat on him and he can appear pretty much anywhere. Try getting rid of thousands of Mrs. Danvers. There isn't a huge demand for creepy fifty-something housekeepers; even buy-two-get-one-free deals didn't help — we use them on anti-mispeling(1) duty, you know. A sort of army."

In the early days of computers in the 1960's, back when programmers actually still dealt with binary digits or "bits", if someone lost data, and asked where it went, we'd say, "in the Bit Basket." It was our metaphor for an irretrievable loss of data. Everyone had a Bit Basket and it could hold an infinite quantity of bits, since each bit of data was imaginary. In BookWorld, their equivalent to our Bit Basket is the Text Sea.

Books which are unpublished there may "languish in the Well until they are broken up for salvage. Others are so bad they are just demolished — the words are pulled from the pages and tossed into the Text Sea."

In our time when cell phones are ubiquitous, one wishes that cell phone etiquette or "celliquette" were equally ubiquitous. But until the new technology matures we will be stuck with having to wait for a clerk to get off a personal cellphone call before she will serve us, a waiting customer. Since I dislike rude clerks as much as I do waiting, I usually leave and go somewhere else for my purchase of goods and service. Here's an example of the need for footnoterphone etiquette in BookWorld. Snell is talking to Mr. Grnksghty when a call comes in.

[page 52] "Ah, yes!" replied the man, gazing at me from over the top of a pair of half-moon spectacles. "But that was a long time ago. Charlotte Brontë, now she *was* a writer. A lot of good work for her, some of it barely used — "

"Yes, speaking," interrupted Snell, starting vacantly at the array of glassware on the table. "I'm with Thursday down in the Well. . . . What's up?"

He noticed us both staring at him and explained, "Footnoterphone. It's Miss Havisham."

"It's so rude," muttered Mr. Grnksghty. "Why can't he go outside if he wants to talk on one of those things?"

It is not surprising to find Thursday receiving junk calls on her footnoterphone which she has to learn to ignore, which is pretty darn hard to do when the call is happening inside your head(2).

Plot devices are so common, only writers might even note their appearance. The old "do we cut the red wire or the blue wire" plot device appeared in a recent JAG episode as well as several movies involving bombs in elementary schools, Air Force One, etc. It's an old standby and the timing on them is essential to the story. Snell explains "Someone has been cobbling together plot devices from half-damaged units that should have been condemned. It's not only illegal — it's dangerous. The last thing anyone needs is a 'Do we cut the red wire or the blue wire?' plot device going off an hour too early and ruining the suspense — how many stories have you read where the bomb is defused with an hour to go?" (Page 55) When Thursday and Snell arrive to inspect the plot devices they find a dark, shabby room full of people chatting. Thursday the narrator tells us, "The atmosphere in the room was so thick with dramatic clichés you could have cut it with a knife." Sometimes Fforde toys with us readers such as using a dramatic cliché in the previous sentence to liken an agglutination of dramatic clichés to a dense fog.

Whenever Thursday is asking how things are going for her, her answer usually sums up her activity quite well. The responses she receives from her summations are usually droll — witness this exchange with the Cat formerly known as Cheshire, who asks her, "How are you getting along?"

[page 71] "I'm not sure," I replied. "I was attacked by grammasites, threatened by Big Martin's friends and a Thraal. I've got two Generics billeted with me, the characters in *Caversham Heights* think I can save their book and right now I have to give the Minotaur his breakfast."

"Nothing remarkable *there*. Anything else?"

When notified of a shortage of the letter *U* and the need to decrease consumption, King Pellimore offers a suggestion which has already been adopted in the United States, if they exist in Fforde's novels, which is uncertain, because like breakfast in other novels, they never seem to be mentioned. The King's suggestion matches my sentiments exactly. When quoting from Rudolf Steiner's works, I find many over-usages of the letter *U* due to British translations from the German originals and I simply delete the extra *U*'s, thus doing my part to save pixels from being tossed in the bit basket and live trees from being ground up into wood pulp for paper.

[page 107] "How about respelling?" suggested King Pellimore, stroking his large white

mustache. "Any word with the *our* ending could be spelt *or*, don'tchaknow."

"Like *neighbor* instead of *neighbour*?"

"It's a good idea," put in Snell. "*Labor, valor, flavor, harbor* — there must be hundreds. If we confine it to one geographical area, we can claim it as a local spelling idiosyncrasy."

"Hmm," said the Bellman, thinking hard, "do you know, it just might work."

He looked at his clipboard again. "Item three — Tweed, are you here?"

Harris Tweed signaled from where he was standing.

"Good," continued the Bellman. "I understand you were pursuing a PageRunner who had taken up residence in the Outland?"

Tweed glanced at me and stood up.

"Fellow by the name of Yorrick Kaine. He's something of a big cheese in the Outland — runs Kaine Publishing and has set himself up as head of his own political party — "

Will Hollywood ever make a movie of Jasper Fforde's novels? I would not deign to suggest the possibility either way, but it is more likely that Hollywood would steal Fforde's ideas and make a movie without crediting him(3) by simply "recycling" his ideas from the Thursday Next novels. No need to wait for it to happen, it already has. The latest first-run 2006 movie "Stranger Than Fiction" has the following plot: "Fiction and reality collide when Will Ferrell realizes he's a character in Emma Thompson's new novel — and she's about to kill him off." Fforde clearly recognizes the dearth of original ideas even while creating so many himself. He has Libris explaining that by "1884, for all intents and purposes, we had depleted our stock of original ideas."

[page 114] There was a muttering amongst the collected Jurisdiction agents.

"*Flatland*," said Bradshaw after pausing for a moment's reflection. "It was the last original idea, wasn't it?"

"Pretty much. The leftover pieces were mopped up by the SF movement until the 1950s, but as far as *pure* ideas are concerned, 1884 was the end. We were expecting the worst — a meltdown of the whole BookWorld and a wholesale departure of readers. But that didn't happen. Against all expectations, recycled ideas(4) were *working*."

Few readers note the ISBN of the book they're reading. It is a unique code number which identifies the exact version of the book you are holding in your hands when you read. It identifies the publisher and the serial number the publisher attached to the book. If the ISBNs of two books don't match, they're not the same book, no matter how much they otherwise seem to be. Libris tells the Commander that the ISBN has been useful for book navigation. It is essential to leave behind the ISBN of a book before entering the book, in case a rescue is required, so that the rescuers will enter the book you are stuck in instead of some other version of the same book. The ISBN and the page number in the BookWorld act as Geo-Satellite Positioning does in the Outland for pinpointing an exact location.

[page 117] "You didn't like the ISBN positioning system, either, Commander," replied Libris, "yet book navigation has never been easier."

Here in this Next passage is direct evidence of Fforde having a character meet his author and the two of them having mutual affection for each other instead of the hokey plot-device of the author wanting to kill off the character. Thursday was talking to Captain Nemo from Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea." He had just offered her coffee.

[page 156] I thanked him and we continued to walk along the lake's edge.

"A beautiful morning, would you not agree?" he asked, sweeping a hand towards the lake and the puffy clouds.

"It usually is."

"From a terrestrial view it is *almost* passable," added Nemo quickly. "It is nothing but a passing fancy to the beauty of the deep, but in retirement, we all have to make sacrifices."

"I have read your book many times," I said as courteously as I could, "and have found much pleasure in its narrative."

"Jules Verne was not simply my author but also a good friend," said Nemo sadly. "I was sorrowful on his passing, an emotion I do not share with many others of my kind."

This scene takes place inside a fictional book *Caversham Heights* between a real person, Thursday Next, and the fictional person, Captain Nemo, from a different novel. But there is the original idea of Fforde's, so far as I know, a fictional character having an interaction with his own creator, the novelist. One can easily imagine how Hollywood might recycle this original idea of Fforde's, mix in the recycled idea about one murdering the other, and make mega-bucks off it without even giving credit to the originator of the idea, much less any royalty.

To guard against insidious and creeping misspelling viruses, Thursday took to carrying around a carrot. If it suddenly changed into a parrot, that was a sure sign of the virus in the local area. Bradshaw opens a cabinet and the virus-holding jars are broken.

[page 168] "Ahh!" he cried, staggering backwards and dropping his gum as the carrot transformed into a loud *parrot*. Bradshaw, his actions instinctive after years of training, pulled the cord on his Eject-O-hat and vanished with a loud *bang*.

The room mutated as the misspelling got a hold. The floor buckled and softened into *flour*, the walls changed into *balls*. I look across at Havisham. Her carrot was a parrot, too — it had hopped onto her other shoulder and was looking at me with head cocked to one side.

"Go, go!" she yelled at me, pulling the cord and vanishing like Bradshaw before her. I grasped the handle and pulled — but it came off in my hand. I threw it to the ground, where it became a *candle*.

Obviously nothing good can come from misspelling. And it didn't. Thursday had her close encounter with the Minotaur, but not the breakfast he was hoping to make of her. After she jumped, just as his jaws closed in on her, the Minotaur left in the direction of Zane Grey's works where he could hide out in a cattle drive. (page 172)

From being an expert LiteraTech in real world England, Thursday becomes a novice Jurisdiction agent in BookWorld. Still someone is trying to get to her and eliminate her which causes her to ask her mentor why.

[page 176] "But . . . but why am I a threat?"

"I don't know," admitted Miss Havisham. "You are the most junior member of Jurisdiction and arguably the least threatening — you can't even bookjump without moving your lips, for goodness' sake!"

When the unexpected becomes par for the course, one prepares oneself for anyone. Like the frog growing out of the man's head. It's how one punctuates the scene that matters. Thursday is narrating.

[page 181] I walked down the corridor, opened another door into a room that had nothing in it except a man with a frog growing out of his shiny bald head.

"Goodness!" I said. "How did that happen?"

"It all started with a pimple on my bum," said the frog. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Professor Plum."

"You want JurisTech. This is Old Jokes. Try next door."

And this book is chocked full of wise advice, such as the salubrious effect of failure, something

management writers rarely acknowledge. Thursday has passed all her requirements and Havisham is delighted.

**[page 255] "Firstly, congratulations on becoming a full Jurisdiction agent."
"I'm not ready for this!" I hissed. "I'm probably going to fall flat on my face!"
"Probably has nothing to do with it; you shall. Failure concentrates the mind wonderfully. If you don't make mistakes, you're not trying hard enough."**

When Thursday meets Bradshaw's wife, she is taken aback because Mrs. Bradshaw is a gorilla. How did you find out, Mrs. Bradshaw asks Thursday, "Is it the hair?" delicately pouring the tea with her feet. This is wonderful farce, underplayed and delectable. Bradshaw's problem is that they have an invitation to a convention and he's never taken his wife out in public. Thursday offers her suggestion.

[page 299] "To hell with them all," I replied. "Anyone who can't accept that the woman you love is a gorilla isn't worth counting as a friend!"

Like Mighty Mouse, Thursday comes to save the day at the convention. Through her ingenious actions, Text Grand Central (TGC)'s new operating system is revealed to be a shallow fraud which would have kept forever any new ideas from entering books. Millon De Floss in his wrap-up of the event explains the solution arrived at.

[page 354] To avoid a repeat of this near disaster, the Council of Genres took the only course of action open to them to ensure TGC would be too inefficient and unimaginative to pose a threat. They appointed a committee to run it.

Before we close the covers on BookWorld and say goodbye to the Well of Lost Plots, let's eavesdrop on Thursday talking to the Cat formerly known as Cheshire about dreaming of oysters. This time of year as Thanksgiving Day nears with the 20-lb turkey waiting in the freezer to be defrosted, baked and stuffed with oyster dressing, I often dream about oysters — day-dreams about where I might get the best price on a gallon of fresh-shucked oysters. Sometimes I dream about oysters writing my reviews.

Thursday speaks first.

**[page 364] "I don't think I've *ever* dreamt about oysters."
"Really? I dream about them all the time. Sometimes on the half shell and other times in an oyster bed. Sometimes I dream about them playing the piano."
"How can an oyster play the piano?"
"No, I dream about them when *I'm* playing the piano."**

There's a tempest brewing that indicates a wordstorm is coming, so I must quickly close this review before it suffers grammatical warpage and becomes impossible to copy-edit. One must always be nice to one's copy-editors by tying down all the loose ends to a piece of writing before a wordstorm hits. I can hear the words howling outside my windows right now, so it is time for a full stop.

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

Footnote 1. This is an *egregious* misspelling of misspelling. My Cassell's Concise gives this definition of "misspell" — "a common misspelling of misspell." Even the dictionary's example of a misspelling had two *l's!*

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

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

Footnote 2. ". . . Special on at St. Tabularasa's Generic College — superior-quality Blocking Characters available now for instant location to your novel . . ." is an abbreviation of the junk call from page 94. Got it? You may return to the main text at this time.

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

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

Footnote 3. Isn't it amazing that a movie industry which adamantly refuses to let ordinary people copy their movies or even show them to others for a fee without permission blithely steals ideas for movies from extant books and makes full length movies of them? Perhaps this is a coincidence, you say? I just checked my entroposcope and the beans and rice are still random, indicating no local decrease of entropy. Clearly this is an example of Hollywood treating ideas as if they were not property, but treating their incarnation of the ideas as their own property. For details on treating ideas as property, see Sic Itur Ad Astra.

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

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

Footnote 4. The phrase "recycled ideas" is a code word for "stolen ideas" in our world which does not recognize "ideas" as primary property, up until now. With the acceptance of Andrew J. Galambos' [definition of property](#) as a derivative of a person's life, ideas will come to be regarded primary property and treated as more valuable than secondary property which is what is currently called simply, *property*, up until now.

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

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

