

(Original version)

HOW I BECAME A FAMOUS NOVELIST

STEVE HELY

GROVE PRESS, 2009

9780802170606

336 pp.

\$14.00 USD

Just the title of Steve Hely's novel *How I Became a Famous Novelist* implies that it is going to be at least tongue-in-cheek tale if not an out-and-out send up of itself and its author. At the very least you would think it's going to be funny ~ and you would be right.

How I became a Famous Novelist tells the tale of Pete Tarshaw (a particularly evocative name, I think), a voluntarily-down-on-his-luck writer who spends his days turning jumbled notes and scatter-shot stream-of-consciousness ramblings into polished college papers and application essays for the clients of a term-paper-mill outfit called EssayAides. His life seems to be an extension of that which he had when he was in college (his habits are certainly those of an *Animal House* type denizen of many an academic campus), and his plans and goals for the future are, at the beginning of the story, on about the same level. That is to say: nonexistent.

Enter Ms. Polly Pawson (another name fraught with meaning, me thinks) and the fateful wedding-invitation email. Polly had been Pete's college girlfriend who had "first slept with me because it was easier than walking back to her room," (he tells us with more than a tinge of admiration in his voice). However, while simulating the same slovenly approach to the college experience Pete has, Polly sneaks around behind his back, applying to law schools. Inevitably, the inks barely dry on her law school acceptances, Polly dumps Pete and, bereft of his supposed-to-be-slothful soul mate, Pete slips into a decline that has lasted to these many years. The email (sent from the law offices of Mintz Cohen Condon Keane, where Polly is an associate) wakes him up.

Suddenly Pete finds that his life has a purpose again – to become a famous novelist and thereby steal Polly's thunder at her own wedding. That'd teach her.

The narrative is an often funny and occasionally hilarious recounting of his still largely puerile endeavors to fulfill that purpose (and just by the way, show up the darlings of the publishing and literary world at the same time). Between alternating fantasies

about the waterfront property he's going to buy with his royalties and the disdain he will rain down upon Polly's wedding party, Pete writes the book (*The Tornado Ashes Club*) with as little effort as possible based upon a formula he concocts by perusing bookstore shelves and best seller lists. The book itself (for which he also has little but disdain) goes to the editor and publisher to do with as they will, and voila! The book is published, and Pete is a famous novelist.

The aftermath of Pete's book being published, becomes a bit of a tornado itself (as, perhaps, Hely intends) which picks him up and whirls him through a California BooXPO at which he meets his childhood author hero (fictional Nick Boyle) and boinks (or is boinked by) the mystery writer (equally fictional Pamela McLaughlin) whose largest claim to fame in Pete's estimation is that she owns her own island. It spins him through the shambles of his appearance at Polly's wedding; the heaping of more humiliations upon his own head in various academic and video interview settings; obsessive checking of his book's stats on amazon.com; a government investigation of him in an attempt to get at his old boss who is comfortably (one assumes) ensconced in the Caymans; and six months of house arrest during which he does some cathartic Oprah watching, some reading, and apparently some much needed soul searching. Finally, when the tornado blows itself out and deposits him (or his remains, figuratively speaking) back in his old neighborhood haunt, chastened and the dross burned away, writing his memoir of the experience, we find Pete Tarshaw (or at least he finds himself) a better man, cutting himself no slack in this book and, this time, with his sights set a bit higher.

How I Became a Famous Novelist is sprinkled with depictions of both ivory-tower literati and the sacred cows of popular fiction familiar enough to make one wince even as she's laughing. Yet, his spot-on satire in both of these arenas is not at all surprising once one discovers that, among his other achievements (such as writing for *The Late Show with David Letterman*), Hely spent two of his Harvard years serving as the president of the *Harvard Lampoon*.

Ah. Small wonder, then, that one can hear the subtle echo of Bluto Blutarski among the depictions of fast food litter and beer bottles and self-indulgent sexual fantasies of campus life on the other side of the desk.

All in all, *How I Became a Famous Novelist* is a fast, fun read, particularly if you've any experience at all of academe and/or the life of a popular fiction writer. The grins and giggles make it well worth your time.

Oh, and you might be interested to know that *How I Became a Famous Novelist* is, at this writing, ranked at #5,152 on amazon.com