

an awful lot of time in this book eating and talking. There was not much else to be done with him. I was putting him into bed a lot with Andrea and keeping his wife and children conveniently in the background . . . Certainly he would soon meet a school-teacher with four children with whom he would fall madly in love, and I would shortly hold out to him the tantalizing promise of becoming the country's first Jewish Secretary of State, a promise I did not intend to keep.

Forster does not undermine, as radically as that, the illusion of life generated by his story, and invites our sympathetic interest in the characters and their fortunes by referring to them as if they are real people. So what is he trying to achieve by drawing attention to the gap between Margaret's experience and his narration of it? I suggest that, by making a playful, self-deprecating reference to his own rhetorical function, he obtains permission, as it were, to indulge in those high-flown authorial disquisitions about history and metaphysics (like the vision of England from the Purbeck hills) which are scattered throughout the novel, and which he saw as essential to its thematic purpose. Urbane humour is an effective way of deflecting and disarming the possible reader-response of "*Come off it!*" which this kind of authorial generalizing invites. Forster also makes a joke out of the interruption of narrative momentum which such passages inevitably entail, by apologetically "*hastening*" to return us to the story, and ending his chapter with a fine effect of suspense.

But suspense is a separate subject.

3 Suspense

At first, when death appeared improbable because it had never visited him before, Knight could think of no future, nor of anything connected with his past. He could only look sternly at Nature's treacherous attempt to put an end to him, and strive to thwart her.

From the fact that the cliff formed the inner face of the segment of a hollow cylinder, having the sky for a top and the sea for a bottom, which enclosed the bay to the extent of nearly a semicircle, he could see the vertical face curving round on each side of him. He looked far down the façade, and realized more thoroughly how it threatened him. Grimness was in every feature, and to its very bowels the inimical shape was desolation.

By one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight's eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of the early crustaceans called *Trilobites*. Separated by millions of years in their lives, Knight and this underling seemed to have met in their place of death. It was the single instance within reach of his vision of anything that had ever been alive and had had a body to save, as he himself had now.

THOMAS HARDY *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873)

NOVELS ARE NARRATIVES, and narrative, whatever its medium – words, film, strip-cartoon – holds the interest of an audience by raising questions in their minds, and delaying the answers. The questions are broadly of two kinds, having to do with causality (e.g. whodunnit?) and temporality (e.g. what will happen next?) each exhibited in a very pure form by the classic detective story and the adventure story, respectively. Suspense is an effect especially associated with the adventure story, and with the hybrid of detective story and adventure story known as the thriller. Such narratives are designed to put the hero or heroine repeatedly into situations of extreme jeopardy, thus exciting in the reader emotions of sympathetic fear and anxiety as to the outcome.

Because suspense is particularly associated with popular forms of fiction it has often been despised, or at least demoted, by literary novelists of the modern period. In *Ulysses*, for instance, James Joyce superimposed the banal and inconclusive events of a day in modern Dublin upon the heroic and satisfyingly closed story of Odysseus's return from the Trojan War, implying that reality is less exciting and more indeterminate than traditional fiction would have us believe. But there have been writers of stature, especially in the nineteenth century, who consciously borrowed the suspense-creating devices of popular fiction and turned them to their own purposes.

One such was Thomas Hardy, whose first published novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), was a "sensation-novel" in the style of Wilkie Collins. His third, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), was more lyrical and psychological, drawing on Hardy's courtship of his first wife in the romantic setting of north Cornwall, and was the favourite novel of that master of modern autobiographical fiction, Marcel Proust. But it contains a classic scene of suspense that was, as far as I know, entirely invented. The word itself derives from the Latin word meaning "to hang", and there could hardly be a situation more productive of suspense than that of a man clinging by his finger-tips to the face of a cliff, unable to climb to safety – hence the generic term, "cliffhanger".

About halfway through *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the young and somewhat fickle heroine, Elfride, daughter of a Cornish vicar,

takes a telescope to the top of a high cliff overlooking the Bristol Channel, to view the ship that is bringing home from India the young architect to whom she is secretly engaged. She is accompanied by Henry Knight, a friend of her stepmother's, a man of maturer years and intellectual interests, who has made overtures to her, and to whom she is becoming guiltily attracted. As they sit on the cliff top, Knight's hat is blown towards the edge, and when he tries to retrieve it he finds himself unable to climb back up the slippery one-in-three slope that terminates in a sheer drop of several hundred feet. Elfride's impetuous efforts to assist him only make things worse, and as she clambers back to safety she inadvertently sends him sliding further towards disaster. "As he slowly slid inch by inch . . . Knight made a last desperate dash at the lowest tuft of vegetation – the last outlying knot of starved herbage where the rock appeared in all its bareness. It arrested his further descent. Knight was now literally *suspended* by his arms . . ." (*my italics*). Elfride disappears from Knight's view, presumably seeking assistance, though he knows they are miles from any human habitation.

What happens next? Will Knight survive, and if so, how? Suspense can only be sustained by delaying the answers to these questions. One way of doing this, beloved of the cinema (whose effects Hardy often anticipated in his intensely visual fiction) would be to crosscut between the anguish of Knight and the frantic efforts of the heroine to effect a rescue. But Hardy wants to surprise Knight (and the reader) with Elfride's response to the emergency, and therefore restricts the narration of the scene to Knight's point of view. The suspense is extended by a detailed account of his thoughts as he clings to the cliff-face, and these thoughts are those of a Victorian intellectual, on whom recent discoveries in geology and natural history, especially the work of Darwin, have made a deep impression. The passage in which Knight realizes that he is staring into the eyes, "dead and turned to stone", of a fossilized arthropod millions of years old, is one that perhaps only Hardy could have written. His work is notable for such breathtaking shifts of perspective, which display the fragile human figure dwarfed by a Universe whose vast dimensions of

space and time were just beginning to be truly apprehended. And invariably his characters, fallaciously but understandably, read into this disparity of scale a kind of cosmic malice. Confronting the dead eyes of the fossil, which have replaced the living, seductive blue eyes of Elfride in his field of vision, Knight acquires a new understanding, both poignant and bleak, of his own mortality.

The scene is extended for some pages by the same means: philosophical reflections on geology, prehistory and the apparent spitefulness of Nature (the wind whips Knight's clothing, the rain stings his face, a red sun looks on "with a drunken leer") punctuated by questions that keep the wire of narrative suspense taut: "Was he to die? . . . He had hoped for deliverance, but what could a girl do? He dared not move an inch. Was Death really stretching out his hand?"

Elfride, of course, rescues him. How she does it I will not divulge, except to say, by way of encouragement to those of you who haven't yet got round to reading this delightful book, that it entails taking off all her clothes.

4 Teenage Skaz

Old Sally didn't talk much, except to rave about the Lunts, because she was busy rubbering and being charming. Then, all of a sudden, she saw some jerk she knew on the other side of the lobby. Some guy in one of those very dark grey flannel suits and one of those checkered vests. Strictly Ivy League. Big deal. He was standing next to the wall, smoking himself to death and looking bored as hell. Old Sally kept saying, "I know that boy from somewhere." She always knew somebody, any place you took her, or thought she did. She kept saying that till I got bored as hell, and I said to her, "Why don't you go on over and give him a big soul kiss, if you know him. He'll enjoy it." She got sore when I said that. Finally, though, the jerk noticed her and came over and said hello. You should've seen the way they said hello. You'd have thought they hadn't seen each other in twenty years. You'd have thought they'd taken baths in the same bathtub or something when they were little kids. Old buddies.⁸ It was nauseating. The funny part was, they probably met each other just once, at some phoney party. Finally, when they were all done slobbering around, old Sally introduced us. His name was George something - I don't even remember - and he went to Andover. Big, big deal. You should've seen him when old Sally asked him how he liked the play. He was the kind of a phoney that have to give themselves room when they answer somebody's question. He stepped back, and stepped right on the lady's foot behind him. He probably broke every toe in her body. He said the play itself was no masterpiece, but that the Lunts, of course, were absolute angels. Angels. For Chrissake. Angels. That killed me. Then he and old Sally started talking about a lot of people they both knew. It was the phoniest conversation you ever heard in your life.

J. D. SALINGER *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)