

IMPLICATION

There is a passage in his recent novel, *The Folks That Live on the Hill*, which makes the point and at the same time illustrates how implication is used in casual speech to refer to sex:

"Let's have a nice early night tonight," said Desirée. This apparently straightforward proposal had several levels of meaning. An early night and no more meant something like what it said, was basically a temporal expression, advertised that there would be no later part to the evening, no social extension or excursion . . . a *nice* early night meant not merely the exclusion of anything in the way of company but the inclusion of what it would be only fair, what it is indeed inescapable, to call sexual activity. This is . . . better, much better, guessed at than described.

The explicit treatment of sexual acts is certainly another challenge to the novelist's artistry — how to avoid reiterating the language of pornography, how to defamiliarize the inherently limited repertoire of sexual acts — but not one that I propose to tackle in this book.

43 The Title

The last volume was written in fourteen days. In this achievement Reardon rose almost to heroic pitch, for he had much to contend with beyond the mere labour of composition. Scarcely had he begun when a sharp attack of lumbago fell upon him; for two or three days it was torture to support himself at the desk, and he moved about like a cripple. Upon this ensued headaches, sore throat, general enfeeblement. And before the end of the fortnight it was necessary to think of raising another small sum of money; he took his watch to the pawnbroker's (you can imagine that it would not stand as security for much), and sold a few more books. All this notwithstanding, here was the novel at length finished. When he had written "The End" he lay back, closed his eyes, and let time pass in blankness for a quarter of an hour.

It remained to determine the title. But his brain refused another effort; after a few minutes' feeble search he simply took the name of the chief female character, Margaret Home. That must do for the book. Already, with the penning of the last word, all its scenes, personages, dialogues had slipped away into oblivion; he knew and cared nothing more about them.

GEORGE GISSING *New Grub Street* (1891)

THE TITLE of a novel is part of the text — the first part of it, in fact, that we encounter — and therefore has considerable power to attract and condition the reader's attention. The titles of the earliest English novels were invariably the names of the central characters, *Moll Flanders*, *Tom Jones*, *Clarissa*. Fiction was modeling itself on, and sometimes disguising itself as, biography and

autobiography. Later novelists realized that titles could indicate a theme (*Sense and Sensibility*), suggest an intriguing mystery (*The Woman in White*), or promise a certain kind of setting and atmosphere (*Wuthering Heights*). At some point in the nineteenth century they began to hitch their stories to resonant literary quotations (*Far From the Madding Crowd*), a practice that persists throughout the twentieth (*Where Angels Fear To Tread*, *A Handful of Dust*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*), though it is now perhaps regarded as a little corny. The great modernists were drawn to symbolic or metaphorical titles – *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses*, *The Rainbow* – while more recent novelists often favour whimsical, riddling, off-beat titles, like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, *For Black Girls Who Consider Suicide When The Rainbow Is Not Enough*.

For the novelist, choosing a title may be an important part of the creative process, bringing into sharper focus what the novel is supposed to be about. Charles Dickens, for instance, jotted down fourteen possible titles for the serial novel he planned to start early in 1854: *According to Cocker*, *Prece It*, *Stubborn Things*, *Mr Gradgrind's Facts*, *The Grindstone*, *Hard Times*, *Two and Two Are Four*, *Something Tangible*, *Our Hard-hearted Friend*, *Rust and Dust*, *Simple Arithmetic*, *A Matter of Calculation*, *A Mere Question of Figures*, *The Gradgrind Philosophy*. Most of these suggest that at this stage Dickens was preoccupied with the theme of Utilitarianism, as incarnated in Mr Gradgrind. His ultimate choice of *Hard Times* is consistent with the broader social concerns of the finished novel.

Edwin Reardon's indifference to the naming of his novel is a symptom of his loss of faith in his vocation. Having married imprudently after publishing a few novels of modest literary merit but limited circulation, he is compelled to churn out formulaic three-deckers, which he despises, at a crippling rate of production, to make ends meet. Gissing was expressing his own frustration as a struggling author in this book, and gave careful thought to its title. As he explained to a foreign correspondent, "Grub Street actually existed in London some hundred and fifty years ago. In Pope and his contemporaries it has become synonymous for wretched-authorism . . . an abode not merely of poor, but

of insignificant writers." By Gissing's time the literary marketplace had become much bigger, more competitive, and publicity-conscious. Reardon is a memorable portrait of a writer who is not quite gifted enough, or cynical enough, to survive in this milieu. Neither is his idealistic young friend Biffen, who, still full of enthusiasm and idealism, plans to write a mould-breaking novel faithfully recording the banal life of an ordinary man. His announcement of its title provides one of *New Grub Street's* few laughs: "I've decided to write a book called 'Mr Bailey, Grocer.'" When eventually published, it is admired by his friends but panned by the reviewers, and Biffen calmly commits suicide, Reardon having died from overwork in the meantime. *New Grub Street* is not a very cheerful book, but as a study in the pathology of the literary life it is unequalled, and still surprisingly relevant.

Novels have always been commodities as well as works of art, and commercial considerations can affect titles, or cause them to be changed. Thomas Hardy offered Macmillan a choice between *Fitzpiers at Hintock* and *The Woodlanders*; not surprisingly, they plumped for the latter. Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* was originally entitled *The Saddest Story* (of course); but it came out in the middle of the Great War, and his publishers persuaded him to go for a less depressing, more patriotic title. The title of Martin Amis's second novel, *Dead Babies* (1975) was apparently too shocking to his first paperback publishers, who issued it two years later as *Dark Secrets*. The American publishers of my *How Far Can You Go?* persuaded me to change its name to *Souls and Bodies* on the grounds that the British title would be shelved by American bookshops under How To Do It books, a silly argument to which I have always regretted yielding. (I don't know what they would have done with Carol Clewlow's *A Woman's Guide to Adultery*, or Georges Perec's *Life: a User's Manual*.) I wanted to call my third novel *The British Museum Had Lost Its Charm*, a line from the song, "A Foggy Day (in London Town)", but the Gershwin Publishing Corporation wouldn't let me; so I had to change it at the last minute to *The British Museum is Falling Down*, though the inspiration of the song left its trace in the fog-shrouded one-day action of the novel. Perhaps titles always mean more to authors than to

readers, who, as every writer knows, frequently forget or garble the names of books they claim to admire. I have been credited with novels called *Changing Wives*, *Trading Places* and *Small Change*, and Professor Bernard Crick once mentioned in a letter that he had enjoyed my *Having It Off*, but perhaps he was having me on. (I couldn't tell which of my books he was referring to.)

44 Ideas

"Please, I must do something. Shall I clean your boots? Look, I'll get down and lick them." And, my brothers, believe it or kiss my sharries, I got down on my knees and pushed my red yahzick out a mile and half to lick his grahzny vonny boots. But all this veck did was to kick me not too hard on the rot. So then it seemed to me that it would not bring on the sickness and pain if I just gripped his ankles with my rookers tight round them and brought this grahzny bratchny down to the floor. So I did this and he got a real bolshy surprise, coming down crack amid loud laughter from the vonny audience. But viddyng him on the floor I could feel the whole horrible feeling coming over me, so I gave him my rooker to lift him up skorry and up he came. Then just as he was going to give me a real nasty and earnest tolchok on the litso Dr Brodsky said:

"All right, that will do very well." Then this horrible veck sort of bowed and danced off like an actor while the lights came up on me blinking and with my rot square for howling. Dr Brodsky said to the audience: "Our subject is, you see, impelled towards the good by, paradoxically, being impelled towards evil. The intention to act violently is accompanied by strong feelings of physical distress. To counter these the subject has to switch to a diametrically opposed attitude. Any questions?"

"Choice," rumbled a rich deep goloss. I viddied it belonged to the prison charlie. "He has no real choice, has he? Self-interest, fear of physical pain, drove him to that grotesque act of self-abasement. Its insincerity was clearly to be seen. He ceases to be a wrongdoer. He ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice."

ANTHONY BURGESS *A Clockwork Orange* (1962)