



Special Literary Event at
The National Arts Club
Grammercy Park South, New York

PURE FICTION? THE DILEMMA OF NON-FICTION WITHIN FICTION

“Poets are permitted lies

There’d be no poets otherwise”

—Elan Haverford

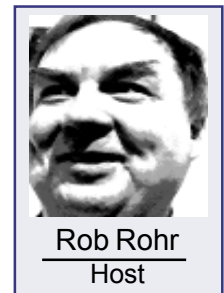


John Wareham
Novelist

Excerpts from the inquiry into the matter of the authenticity and literary worth of the “Haverford Sonnets” within *Chancey On Top*, a novel by John Wareham.

Participating: **Rob Rohr**, National Arts Club host and Time-Life editor; **Charles Defanti**, professor of literature at Kean University and author of *The Wages of Expectation: the Biography of Edward Dahlberg*; **Brian Sutton Smith**, professor of psychology and literature and Pennsylvania University; professor **Nadine Strossen**, president, American Civil Liberties Union, Harvard masters graduate in literature, and author of *Defending Pornography*.

Rob Rohr: Welcome all. Let me first offer a heartfelt apology from John Wareham, who can only be here in spirit. His flight from England was detained following a terrorist threat. Such are the times we live in. Now, to get right to it, we’re here today to discuss an issue currently in the news, the blurring of the lines between fact and fiction—and, in this case, the mystery of the Haverford sonnets, which have been hailed as “poetic gold.” Now, as most of you know, these were published in John’s novel, *Chancey On Top*, recently rereleased in soft covers by Welcome Rain Publishers. Alas, however, alarming questions have since been raised: Was John Wareham, really the sonneteer? Or, as Professor Sutton Smith believes, is Elan Haverford—whom the author claims to be a fictional character—the actual flesh and blood creator? And, whoever in fact penned these poems, how good are they really? I’d like to ask our esteemed participants to speak to those points, and not to get into a full-blown discussion of other aspects of the novel, which some members have yet to read.



Rob Rohr
Host

Charles DeFanti: Let me open by saying, as I’ve said so many times before, ‘Hat’s off to Chancey!’ I have studied the novel, and pored over the five Haverford sonnets. I see no reason to retract my earlier statement that *Chancey On Top* stands as quite the finest contemporary showcasing of the sonnet form. The novel is a stunning creation, and the sonnets are amazing. I have some thoughts concerning to the identity of the sonneteer, but first I’d rather Nadine spoke to the worth of the sonnets

Nadine Strossen: I saw the sonnets—indeed all the poetry—as seamless interludes within an intricate, multi-layered plot that displayed a full emotional spectrum, all the way from the comedic to the sublime. I gather from Professor Sutton Smith’s codicil to the novel, that he also holds the sonnets in the highest esteem.

Brian Sutton Smith: Well, as most of you know, William Hall, the British literary agent, originally asked me to analyze these unpublished poems, which had come to him unsolicited. My opinion was that they were

indeed the brilliant work of a troubled young woman. I believed that they indicated a unique and brilliant talent, and that the poet—a twentyish Miss Elan Haverford, apparently—had transmuted her reckless life into poetic gold. I revisited these sonnets in the Wareham novel, which served to convince me that Wareham did not create any of them, and confirmed my belief that they are the work of a superior feminine sensibility.

ELAN HAVERFORD

3rd Sonnet

The village I dwell in, Thinkingofyou,
Is a maddeningly melancholy town,
Where the clocks are locked in a strange snafu
And the forget-me-nots are hand-me-downs.
Clandestine lovers crave sweet rendezvous,
But I chance the night streets, alas, in vain
For lanes are manias in Thinkingofyou
That sun-bolt beams are inept to unreign.
Folks never slumber in Thinkingofyou,
In the mornings we do not wake either,
We lie in a state we dare not adieu,
Valedictions merely fan our fever.
Thinkingofyou is the sweetest of jails,
But I pray reprieve, lest sanity fail.

Rob Robr: But you gave permission for your analysis to be added to the novel?

Brian Sutton Smith: Yes. It was my idea to incorporate these poems into a literary vehicle, so I was delighted when the agent sought permission to include my analysis as a codicil to what seemed a suitable work. I was subsequently disturbed, however, to find such exquisite sonnets appearing against an unseemly corporate backdrop. I never pictured such a conceit—

Charles DeFanti: Perhaps the author was inspired by the Ethan Hawke version of Hamlet, where Ellsinore is portrayed as a modern corporation.

Brian Sutton-Smith: Perhaps, but Chancey is more bed than bard. I also hasten to add that some of Wareham's sexual scenarios seemed, well, gratuitous and obscene—

Nadine Strossen: Not at all. It is absurd to label this novel obscene. Oscar Wilde observed that books are neither moral nor immoral, merely well written or badly written. And the writing in Chancey is always confident, and often dazzling.

Brian Sutton Smith: You had no problem with the perverted sexual tryst involving a British royal?

Nadine Strossen: Oh, really, Brian, you are missing the whole point. Sure, a sexually explicit scene pairs the picaresque protagonist with the late Princess Diana, but so what? That sensual sojourn is relevant to the plot, revealing of the protagonist, and, like all else in the novel, wildly entertaining and brilliantly relayed.

Brian Sutton Smith: That is your opinion. Quite apart from the writing, much of which I found offensive, I would never foresee an essentially innocent lass like Elan Haverford becoming embroiled in a seamy affair with a lubricious corporate headhunter—

Nadine Strossen: Lubricious? Well, sure, Chancey Haste is a tactile two-timer, but so is the novel—

Brian Sutton Smith: Whatever does that mean?

Nadine Strossen: It means that the novel, like Chancey himself, is one of those rare works whose cunning moves arouse even as they satisfy. So one reading is not enough. To appreciate the subtlety of the plot and subtext, it must all be savored slowly, second time through. And, I would add, a book that is not worth reading twice is not worth reading at all.

Charles DeFanti: On the point about a corporate headhunter not being a suitable protagonist, I'd like to inject that T. S. Eliot was a corporate clerk who moonlighted as a poet. By my reading, Chancey Haste happens to be a poet earning a living by



whatever means necessary. And, although Chancey dismisses his own poems as mere doggerel, I agree with Nadine that many of them are quite brilliant—

Brian Sutton Smith: You really think so?

Charles DeFanti: Absolutely. Whereas Elan Haverford’s sonnets are classically intellectual and intense, Chancey’s poems are accessible yet also appeal on several levels. The author’s idea was surely to have the two poets piping the same tune through different instruments, and I think Wareham succeeded brilliantly in this endeavor. We should also note that the poetry is only one aspect the novel.

Rob Rohr: But let’s stick to the poetry. Can we cast any further light on the identity of Elan Haverford?

Brian Sutton Smith: Well, again, my detailed conclusion, following a close line-by-line analysis of each these sonnets, as anyone who has bothered to read this so-called work of fiction knows, was that the author was a real person, a brilliant girl, aristocratic perhaps, but British for sure, who fell into an unseemly affair—and now, alas, her poetry been abducted into an unseemly novel.

Rob Rohr: Are you accusing John Wareham of literary malfeasance?

Charles DeFanti: Let’s be fair, here, Brian. At worst, John Wareham has merely taken five superb sonnets and showcased them within a brilliant work of fiction.

Brian Sutton Smith: Wareham places the Haverford sonnets optimal effect within his potboiler—but I remain certain that he is merely playing games and never wrote one word of them. For me, the giveaway is that the publisher has included my detailed analysis of these sonnets within a codicil to the book. Clearly, neither Wareham nor his publishers are claiming to have created these sonnets. Indeed, they seem to be attempting to protect themselves from legal action.

Charles DeFanti: The other explanation might be that the author wrote everything, and that the agent, William Hall, who has now passed on, might have been playing games with you Brian.

Brian Sutton Smith: Now, that truly is absurd. There’s absolutely no evidence to that effect.

Charles DeFanti: The evidence surely lies in the final pages of the novel, where Chancey delivers a lovely *mea culpa*, one quatrain at a time, interspersing his reasoning as he does so. He then caps his poetic apologia with an heroic couplet, thereby creating a sonnet that is surely as lovely and insightful as anything in the novel—or any current literary offering anywhere.

Rob Rohr: Perhaps you might read it for us.



Charles DeFanti
Advocate

Charles DeFanti: I suppose I could try. First, we have to picture Chancey driving away from a dark, moonlit lake. As he guides his vehicle into the night—and a wholly unforeseen fate—he contemplates the series of harrowing events that have so far befallen him, and a verse sets running in his head:

*Upon ruminating the mystery
in my staggering run of rotten luck
and mulling my puzzling history,
of shining dreams reduced to sullen muck*

**“Are you
accusing
John
Wareham
of literary
malfeasance?”**

Chancey at first attempts to lay the blame for his apparent misfortunes upon others:

*I pondered surly saboteurs corrupt
who schemed alas to scuttle every goal
invoking cunning curses to disrupt
the stars that held my fortune in control*

Suddenly, however, he catches sight his own reflection in the rearview mirror:

*Then a plaintiff entered my reflection
Whose inverted visage made me shiver
For the eyeballs that coerced connection
Condemned my countenance in the mirror.*

I find that imagery quite astonishing. Now, reproved and enlightened by his own accusing eyes, the reconstructed Chancey rounds out a classic Shakespearean sonnet by delivering a memorable heroic couplet:

*Yet if I'm creator of all my strife,
I can also fashion a whole new life.*

Rob Robr: A delightful reading and a wonderful message. But what do you make of it, Professor Sutton Smith? By any chance might this sonnet by John Wareham alter your opinion? Might John himself have written every sonnet in the book, and Elan Haverford be merely a literary creation?



Brian Sutton Smith
Skeptic

Brian Sutton Smith: Wareham may have confected one facile sonnet—to my mind by stealing the imagery of Shakespeare's 24th and the

message of his 119th—but that alone does not change my mind. My hunch is that Wareham intentionally concocted this closing effort to cloud the question of the true identity of Elan Haverford, whose five sonnets are infinitely superior—and, I still say, the brilliant work of a courageous, sensitive, discerning British girl.

Nadine Strossen: I'm not sure that who or what Elan Haverford is or was even matters. That the poems exist is surely enough. I would, however, like to pay homage to the novel's denouement, which, capped by Professor Sutton Smith's superb close analysis of these so-called Haverford sonnets, surely ultimately ranks this literary bonbon among the finest novels ever—and I say that as a dedicated bibliophile.

Rob Robr: Perhaps one lesson of this inquiry, and we see it here at the National Arts Club every day, is that demarcations between fiction and non-fiction are becoming irrelevant. By definition, literature is a work of the imagination, so perhaps the mark of the great novelist is the capacity to state upfront that his work is fiction, then go on to tell lies with such grace and style as to seduce the reader into believing that every fabrication is true. I'm sure John Wareham would like to be judged by that standard. I believe further information may be available through www.chanceytop.com, but there for now we must leave the matter. ■

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

24th Sonnet

Mine eye hath play'd the painter and hath stell'd
Thy beauty's form in table of my heart;
My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
And perspective it is the painter's art.
For through the painter must you see his skill,
To find where your true image pictured lies;
Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still,
That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes.
Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
Are windows to my breast, where-through the sun
Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee;
Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art;
They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

119th Sonnet

What potions have I drunk of Siren tears,
Distill'd from limbecks foul as hell within,
Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,
Still losing when I saw myself to win!
What wretched errors hath my heart committed,
Whilst it hath thought itself so blessed never!
How have mine eyes out of their spheres been fitted
In the distraction of this madding fever!
O benefit of ill! now I find true
That better is by evil still made better;
And ruin'd love, when it is built anew,
Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.
So I return rebuked to my content
And gain by ill thrice more than I have spent.