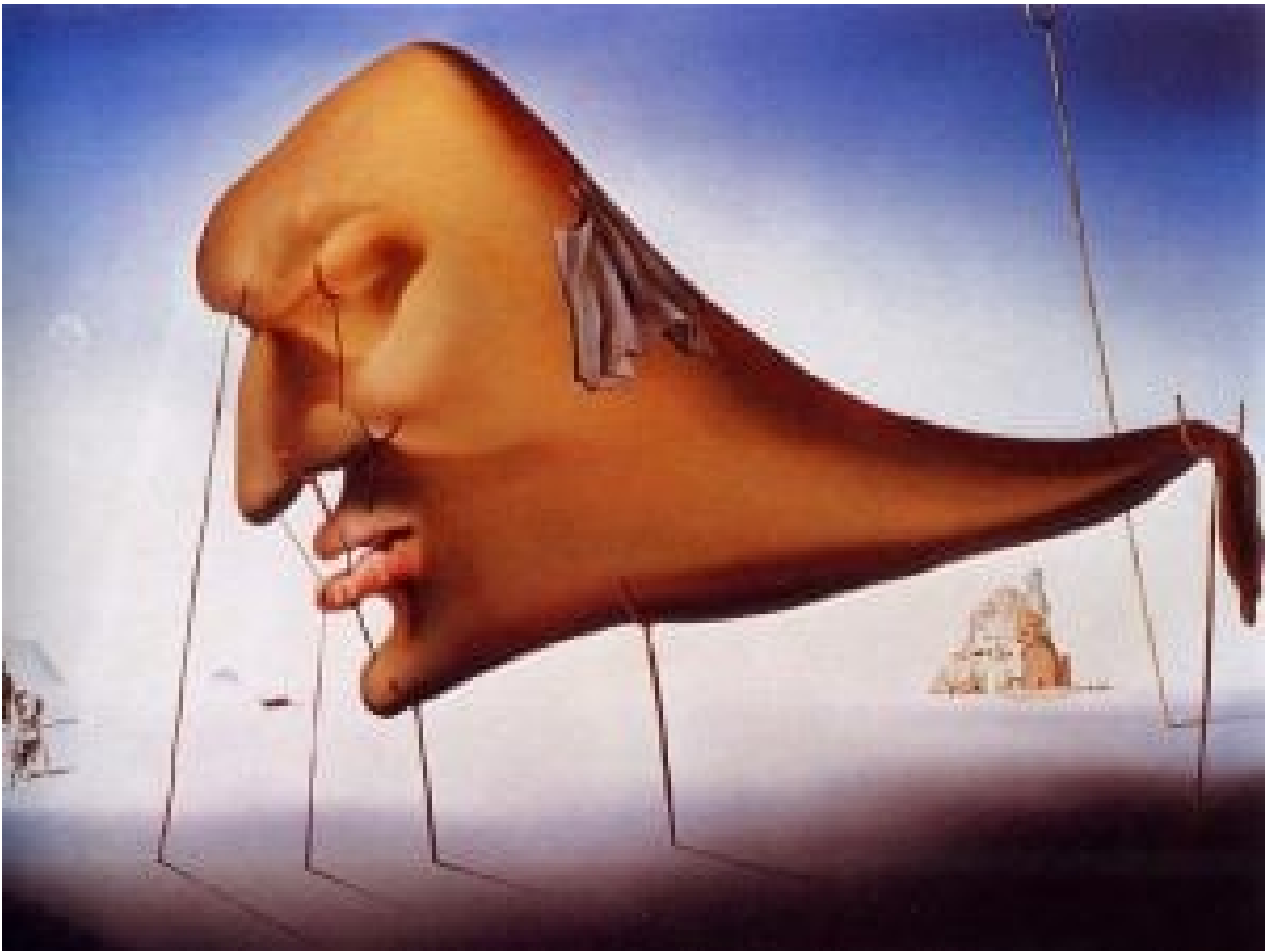


A Life in Dreams



Sleep by Salvador Dali, 1937

by [Justin Wong](#) (February 2022)

It was Autumn when I caught wind of the fact. It was a great cause for alarm to me, though many people in the self-same position would have seen it as one for celebration. It was a milestone in my career. In many respects, it was the greatest honour that could be bestowed on someone in my profession. Throughout my career, I had won numerous awards, these were given at lavish ceremonies, soirees with fancy food, black-tie events, where the best writers were awarded for their efforts. If one was fortunate enough to win, one received a handsome reward. One could be handed several thousand pounds as a prize for their efforts.

The news that I heard of this time, was greater than this, it

served as a kind of literary posterity. I heard that high-school students were going to be studying 'A Life in Dreams', a novel I had written twenty years prior. The book was relatively successful, it sold well. I was showered with praise for the work. In the instance of publication, I went from residing in relative obscurity to a household name. I look back on that earlier work, that novel with a degree of trepidation. It was an earlier work of mine, and I managed to publish twelve novels as well as some two volumes of short stories in the interim. I had other successes, rave reviews and lofty sales. I thought that in terms of my opus, *A Life in Dreams*, it was a formative, and thus lesser work. I thought my reputation as a writer rested on other works. I wasn't ashamed of my creation, far from it. It was not like one of those works that writers publish, only to refuse to be reprinted years down the line. The book, like many of my works, was still in print, a fresh copy could be bought in chain bookstores. One could find it down the high-streets, in online retailers, chanced upon in secondhand stacks, if one diligently scoured.

Although as much as I was proud of my work, previous novels that I published, the five-star reviews, the awards, my text being chosen as a work in which students of literature studied, was perhaps premature. It suggested that my work had reached the state of canonisation, an enduring masterpiece of fiction in line with great novels, poems, and dramatic works of our tongue.

As nice as it was to get this feedback, this accolade, I was doubtful that this would be the fate of my work. I didn't rate it as being a great work, certainly not in regards to my entire oeuvre. Although the news that this work was going to be studied made me wildly curious. Curious as to what they found in it, curious as to what could be learnt, if anything from ingesting the substance of its pages.

Chapter 2

I am trying to remember my state of mind twenty years ago, when I was writing this curious facet of my past, – *a life in dreams*. If I can cast myself back into the state of mind, twenty years ago, I remember my days filled with disappointments and angst. I managed to put this into my work. I don't think that any of my books could be classified as being autobiographical, although they could be said to borrow from life and experiences. I remember coming off of the back of a grueling heartache, as a girlfriend I then had, left me. I was heartbroken at this, distraught for weeks, months even.

These images and experiences probably more than likely went into the story of *a life in dreams*. It was about a young married couple going through an hour of tumult. The protagonist of my tale David Coe, is struck with a terrible illness. One that makes him ill, he soon becomes unable to provide for his wife, to walk very far. He is bedridden, a fraction of the lover one meets at the start of the novel. Although his wife, Sarah shows a desire to care for him, she gradually begins to fall out of love with him. She goes off with another man, one who is older, wealthier and healthier.

The basis of this story could be said to have been plucked from experience, particularly the aforementioned girlfriend that broke up our relationship. I found no sign that throughout our being together, she was being unfaithful. This wasn't to say that she was breaking up with me to explore other options. In the way she saw it, there were other avenues available for her to explore, ones that didn't involve her being with a writer yet to make a name in the world of *belles lettres*. If I could recall that far back in time, the moment when I was going out with my then girlfriend, Cary, I had published little more than a short story and an essay. I was hardly raking in vast amounts of cash, nor was I earning enough to support a family. She was young at the time, as was I. We didn't much talk about the need to have children, it was something that we discussed passingly. There were no definite

plans for her to be fat with my firstborn. I said that we were living together, and even though we stepped over into this place of familiarity, we were still somewhat casual, at least in the way we came across. If I was being entirely honest, I think our living together was more out of convenience opposed to a desire to share a life. We made no plans or grand designs to spend our resultant days in married convention. I developed feelings for her. I was stung as by a hornet when she relayed to me her plans. I talked previously how distraught I was at the news Cary uttered to me, that she was to break up with me. wishing to move out, to try her luck elsewhere.

With this pain I managed to create my work, – *a life in dreams*. This was scarcely a factual account of my life. It was scarcely represented the truth of my affairs. Though I'd be lying if I said that the disappointments that I suffered didn't inflame this idea.

I didn't know much about Cary's life after she left. There were friends we both had, some of them I still kept in contact with me. I heard about new developments in her life, a job she moved to, or a man she was seeing. They mentioned this briefly, and seeing as this was a past chapter of my life, I wished not to revisit it. I would be lying if I said that I wasn't curious about the shape that Cary's life took in the wake of our separation, though I didn't want to dwell on it for long, lengthy periods. This wasn't to say that if something particularly unfortunate happened to her, if she received her comeuppance, that I wouldn't revel in her misery.

Although I managed to put much of that anguish, that suffering of the heart into my work, writing. I had a story of David Coe, who finds out he had a rare genetic illness, something that makes him ill, condemned to his bed. his girlfriend now dutifully has to care for him. Was this not a reflection of things at that particular time in my life? I didn't have a life-threatening illness, though I could hardly provide for her. Cary probably thought my career as a writer was going

nowhere, she probably thought that I would be a failure.

A year after she left me, I published my first great success, *A Life in Dreams*.

Chapter 3

I'm a skeptic about the supposed study of literature. I have been in many Universities, conducted masterclasses, creative writing workshops. Much of this is wrongheaded, which is leading generations of students to think of literature as something it is not. This is certainly helped along by literary theory, structuralism, deconstructionism and other such schools. Such thinking often goes against the glaringly obvious point of the book, and how the author intended their work to be read. This wasn't to say that the idea of teaching and the interpretation of literature is an unworthy field of enquiry. Many great readers can see things in a text that eluded the consciousness of its creator. More often than not, literary theory is politicised, seen through the lens of continental theory. This is often unreadable, unclear, pretentious. This is what gave me reservations about my book being taught to impressionable minds, by a teacher indoctrinated in the current wave of an intellectual fad.

I wondered what it was they saw in that particular book, someone must have misconstrued it as being representative of a political ideology, one radical in nature.

I had no problem with a fresh generation reading my books, although I was certain that it would be a better experience if they just read the book in bed, by the light of a lamp, and then mused on it for moments afterwards.

I enquired about a local college nearby. They had a course in English Literature. I asked what books they were reading that year. On top of some poetry, they told me they'd be reading my novel, *a life in dreams*.

I told them that I wished to sign up for classes, that I wished to study in a formal setting, my book.

Chapter 4

The narrative of my novel doesn't end there, with Sarah, the wench of the tale evacuating the nest. This was whilst David is left there to suffer silently, in pain. Her leaving him is an additional torment the character has to face, a punishment for being punished. I believe this was the way it was framed in the novel, "a suffering of the spirit to go along with a suffering of the flesh."

She is said to have run off with someone who was older, more successful, established, at least compared to David. This section of my story can't be said to be derived from experience. As previously stated, Cary left me. I don't know who or what for. This was just as well, for if literature is made to take the exact shape of experience, if it was plucked whole from life, it would be preposterous, unbelievable.

Sarah in the story goes off with another man, someone whom she is very happy with. He is everything that David is not. He has vigor, he is healthy. A terrific lover. Throughout the story, David's fortunes alter. He is given an experimental drug. Taking part in the trial for this drug, he is nursed back to health. He was his usual self, before the illness crippled him. Even a tad bit stronger seeing as he suffered.

He learns of all of the developments in regards to his life with his one-time wife, that she went off with another man, after she left their intolerable marriage.

Sarah's life wasn't as it seems, a familiar pattern reemerged in her life when she discovers that her new husband has come down with a disease, leaving him in a similar predicament to David years earlier.

Meanwhile, David's fortunes are on the rise, and he finds

another woman, someone who was younger, more beautiful. He feels that he has been wronged by his previous love, walking out on him in his time of misfortune. She vows that she wouldn't do such a thing to him, that she wouldn't callously depart from his side in times of turmoil. He is happier living with his new lover.

Meanwhile, Sarah learns that David has recovered, that through some miraculous occurrence that he is as healthy as he was when first they fell in love. She worms her way back into his life. This was done subtly at first, and when David was invited around to a friend's place for dinner, he was surprised to find that she was there and provocatively clothed, as if to entice him into a sexual encounter.

From there they kept in contact with one another, and she would arrange things to do. Sarah eventually left the man who had fallen ill as David once had. At the end of the novel, she is begging David to get back with her, although there is something of an open ending, the reader is left guessing whether or not he accepts her advances, or rejects her.

I must say the wreckage of my life encouraged me to write this, the artistic process seems mysterious. This wasn't entirely autobiographical, scraps and portions of my own history were taken so as to inflame it. Perhaps the story itself was born of wish fulfillment, a desire to see the person who wronged me, by leaving me without good cause, to receive a punishment. I may have wished that Cary, like Sarah of the tale, would realise that she made a grave mistake in leaving me. I believed that this epiphany would come clear in the passing of time, my novel managed to successfully prophesy this reality.

Chapter 5

I enrolled at a local college, where they took on mature students. This was the part I was proposing to play. I was coy

as to my reasons for showing up in the classroom. I used a fake name, something that wouldn't rouse any suspicions. I also went to the classes clothed in a disguise, something that veiled my natural features, so the teacher, or anyone else for that matter, wouldn't recognise me. I had no desire for my cover to be blown. This wasn't to be vain, most didn't notice me, although there were times when they did. The version of the book that the students were encouraged to read, had my photograph on the back. I was unlikely to get called out for playing this part, that I was nothing more than an actor in a theatre.

I entered the classroom, wondering how this book was to be taught if taught at all. I was remarkably shocked as to what I found. I didn't expect great things to come out of a state education system, but this was shocking. The teacher was an old biddy, a veritable bore, who probably couldn't distinguish her Chaucer from her Coleridge. She was making assumptions about the book, ones I found entirely preposterous.

"So, you see, that this novel shows more than anything, that we in life are guided around by our financial circumstances. In this novel, Sarah doesn't desire to leave her husband, David, although is forced into the arms of another man, out of necessity."

I couldn't for the life of me, believe what I was hearing, that she could read this, and come out with such a fatuous stream of nonsense. I didn't disbelieve what she was saying that money plays no part in the affairs of our interior lives, the choices we make. Although to assume that this was the reason that Sarah left David, was unbelievable. It was clear life with him would have been grueling, that due to his illness, she was cast down from the role of lover to caregiver. This kind of thinking was part and parcel of the spirit of the age, a desire to lay accountability on the shoulders of someone else. Thus, Sarah didn't leave him because this was the easier thing for her to do, she was doing this because she

was the victim of a cruel and unjust economic order. Although little consideration was given to poor David, the true victim in the story, who had to contend with the loss of his limbs, his being immobile, and if this wasn't bad enough, he was left in the lurch by his lover, one who made a vow unto him, in sickness and health.

She made certain false assumptions about the story, and such that I, the author would class as a misreading. Though when she made such statements, ones that roused me to anger, I made sure to push back against this woman and her questionable interpretations.

"You see, what the story shows, is that although Sarah leaves, David, she never forgets him, and wishes to get back with him when he has recovered. This proves that she still has feelings for him, that she never stopped loving him, although it was the predicaments of life that pushed them apart." she said in so cocksure a manner, as if her interpretations were the only legitimate ones to have.

"Although, she only seems to want him when he is well and has the capacity to support her, she leaves one man who is ill, then leaves another one who has himself turned ill. She only seems to want a relationship when the going is good. What if I happened to say to you, that I would marry a woman when she is good-looking, but the second she ages, and there are wrinkles on her skin, I wish to pull the plug on the relationship."

"Well, I think that is itself a terrible thing to do."

"Oh, so you are willing to acknowledge that it is bad when men act in equivalent ways and wish to evacuate the relationship the second it ceases to be one of constant joy."

"Yes, but I believe that there are other things at play, there are other factors that went into her decision."

"That may be so, though if one is constantly getting rid of

people the second they are of inconvenience, all of the relationships we have with people will be transient, and fickle.”

“Although if we lived in a fairer society, then there would be little cause for people to make tough decisions.”

“Perhaps, although the nature of lives is that we are more or less healthy when we are younger and are riddled with disease as we age. Our final years will likely require much care. One cannot transform human nature.”

She said nothing else to this, although this was just one of the exchanges we had in the twelve or so weeks I attended her classes. She seemed intent on reading things into the text which were at polar extremes to my intent. I was willing she read all works in this exact way. To her the book wasn't so much a world comprised of words, but rather a mirror, reflecting her own prejudices back to her. She seemed to be filled with a few convictions, those she parroted, as if all of the problems that are involved in being human, are found in three issues.

Nevertheless, I went to the lessons, to hear her teaching my book. I thought that I was going there simply to be incensed, to get myself up into a fury and rage at having my work so explicitly misinterpreted. Although I was staying for something else, and this happened to be the test I was going to take, booked at the end of the semester.

Chapter 6

Cary leaving me was scarcely the end of the tale between the two of us. I was still in contact with friends we both shared. I heard scraps of information as to her whereabouts, what she was getting up to, who she was sleeping with. At the time of the release of my novel, I was happily enjoying the life of the bachelor, in the way I hadn't when Cary dumped me so unexpectedly. There were parties to attend, I was now

hobnobbing with the literati. Those who were famous, powerful. There were often young women at these shindigs, who were more than interested that I was a writer of some distinction, an artist. My novel was my ticket to these functions. I went to bed with some of these women, free-love being the fruit of my labour. I changed girlfriends regularly, different women came in and out of my apartment. My dream was coming true, I was now a professional writer.

It was in this period of my life that I was reacquainted once again with someone who transformed into a figment of my mind's eye, and that was Cary. I managed to run into her at a cafe, it was actually at one of my usual haunts. A place where we regularly dined for lunches on Saturdays when we were lovers. I was savouring a cappuccino at the time, and had my newspaper opened reading the culture section as I remember.

"Is that you!" a voice called out to me. I pulled down my broadsheet that was shielding the sight in front of me, along with my peripheral vision. Upon pulling the newspaper down, I noticed that it was Cary, who came out of nowhere.

"Oh Cary, how are you?" I asked.

"Not too bad, same old, same old," she remarked. And how about you?"

"Yeah, I've not been too bad."

"Oh yeah, I've heard about your book. The one you've published. I heard it's doing well."

"Yeah, have you managed to read it?" I asked her. Although if I was being entirely truthful, I wished the answer was no. She might notice a likeness to Sarah and herself. She might have noticed that she managed to fuel my imagination. Life serving as a blueprint from which I constructed my world of make-believe.

“No, I haven’t managed to pick it up, I’ve been so busy.” I thought that the answer was going to be no. She rarely if ever read my work, and if she did, it was begrudgingly so. “Are you still living at the same address?”

“Oh, yes. I thought it best not to move. I mean why bother, I don’t really need the extra space, how about you?”

“Yeah, I have moved to the other side of town.” she said, trying her best to be pleasant, as if wishing to worm herself back to my life. She stood there appearing quite innocent, as if she once ago, didn’t callously leave me to explore a new life. The way she appeared there, one would think if anyone managed to be the cause of our breaking up, it would be me rather than her.

What brings you here?” I asked her, for her story of her appearing back into my life seemed suspect.

“Oh, I just spent the day out with one of my friends, you know, going around the markets, and shops.”

“Ok, I hope you’ve had a good day!”

“Oh, yes, I better let you get back to your coffee and your newspaper.”

“Ok, see you around.”

Her story could have been just as she said it was, and she happened to be in the area, after meeting up with a companion, then running into me quite coincidentally. We live in a Universe where more absurd things have happened.

I went home, and thought little about my chance encounter, having other things to concern myself with, my latest book, such that I was labouring away at, my Continental girlfriend, – a model no less, – who had substance beneath the façade of a perfect appearance, with a substantial knowledge of Russian literature. In between our love-making we talked Turgenev and

Tolstoy.

My life had picked itself up from the place it was in the aftermath of my abandonment. If one was of a more spiritual persuasion, they could rightly view Cary leaving me as a kind of providence. Something that in time, elevated my life from the dreary state it was trapped inside. I thought that Cary was unencouraging of me, at least in an indirect way. When I was with her, when I hadn't achieved quite the same level of success that I did upon the publication of my first work, she thought that I was squandering energies, dedicating a life to literature. I think she thought that I wouldn't make something for myself in this endeavour, that I was destined to fail, falling on my head in the process.

She of course was proved wrong, and that was the section of my life when I started seeing more and more of her. We often ran into one another down the high street, even down my road. I spoke to her briefly during that period, not desiring to know what it was she was concerning herself with, primarily because I couldn't have cared less. Why should I run back to her arms when she treated me so badly? Besides, my life was of a greater substance in light of her leaving me. I was thus ambivalent towards her, not knowing whether I should have an intense dislike towards her, or if I should praise her for all she did.

I never let her know of my new life, the hot young girlfriend I had who had just turned twenty. This I wished to keep to myself. I could of course rub her face in the fact. This was especially so, seeing as she just turned thirty, with her fertility on the long march of decline. But I'd rather let sleeping dogs lie. That we would both get on with our lives, as separately as she made them.

It was one evening if I remember, I was chilling around in the house with my new love. She had made for me a beautiful meal, we sat down in the living room, listening to some music that

played softly in the background. I went to the bathroom. The bell rung when I was wet in the shower, I told her to answer it. She did this, wondering who it was, particularly as it was relatively late. I came out of the shower wondering who it could have been. I went into the hallway, droplets of water trailed after me on the hardwood floor. She was talking to Cary, who decided it was as good a time as any to pop by unannounced.

“Oh, I didn’t realise that you had company. I thought that I would pop by just to say Hi. I’ll let you get back to your evening,” she said. I stood there dumbfounded, not saying anything, as the scene, with my love there in the hallway seemed to fill in the gaps perfectly.

A heartless person could thrill themselves at this sight, this was an instance of schadenfreude. I must admit to being relatively sorry for her. Her heart seemed shattered upon this unexpected discovery. I felt bad as if she hadn’t caught me doing something innocent, but as if she had caught me sleeping with someone when we were together. Perhaps I felt empathy towards her, because it was a simulacrum of how I felt when she left me. The same feeling of dejection came back around, this time to her, and not to me. I wondered what else she expected.

Chapter 7

I had gone to the classes on my book, the work that I should in turn know better than anyone else. I must reiterate the fact that I was unimpressed with what I saw. The reality was that this book was being misread, willfully misinterpreted. It served as nothing more than a mirror to the prejudices of this teacher, who couldn’t see how biased she was being. The term was coming to an end, and we were set to do a test at the end of the year. I put my fake name down to do this. I wanted to see if I was in the right, or if this woman was. I didn’t necessarily blame the children, teenagers who are no more than

seventeen and didn't know any better. I was hardly a great reader hearkening back to that period.

On the day of the test, the rest of the people there looked nervous. I hated doing tests, not that this was in any way going to determine the outcome of my future. We all walked into the exam room, and upon turning over the sheet paper, we were apportioned the time of one hour to answer. This was to write an essay on the representation of men in the novel. I wrote what I believe I represented in my book, that the men were well drawn characters. Although they seemed to be the mere dupes of women in their lives. The men are represented as nothing than wallets to provide a decent way of life for Sarah, the main protagonist. The second they are incapable of fulfilling this function in her life, they are non-existent. My men are representative of the modern men in the west, that lack autonomy, and the willpower to stand up for themselves in moments of injustice, lest they are called out and treated as misogynists by society at large. The fact that David takes back Sarah after what she has done to him, shows that he seems to lack a backbone. He must be particularly unsettled seeing as he knows that if she had left him once when the going was tough, she would more than likely do the same again to him, if a terrible disease rendered him in a wheelchair. The novel doesn't necessarily end happily, but with bittersweet sense of foreboding that their love is doomed to fall apart again.

I thought I answered the question relatively well. It brought up thoughts and feelings, sensations I had when I wrote it.

I had to wait a month and a half along with the rest of my classmates, in order to get the results. I went to the college, and was handed an envelope, waiting to see my grade for that particular essay. It was likely the finest essay that had ever been written on the book, seeing as I was the one who wrote it, and thus I knew it with the depth of no one else, particularly not the snotnosed seventeen-year old's that made up the majority of people who studied the text.

I was rearing to see what was said, what my grade was, what the examiners comments would be. I opened the seal of the envelope, desperate to see what was inside. Upon unfolding the piece of A4 paper that was folded three times inside the envelope, it said:

Ungraded

The student doesn't seem to have an appropriate grasp of the book in question. It is as if he hadn't read it, or used it as a mouthpiece for his own preconceived notions, his bigotry.

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Justin Wong is originally from Wembley, though at the moment is based in the West Midlands. He has been passionate about the English language and Literature since a young age. Previously, he lived in China working as an English teacher. His novel *Millie's Dream* is available [here](#).

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