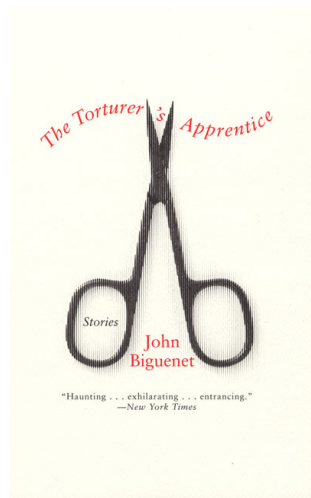


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**The Torturer's Apprentice**  
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### But What Does It Mean?

It was early, maybe 8:15 in the morning, when the phone rang. The voice on the other end of the line was looking for the author of "The Vulgar Soul," which had just appeared in *Granta*, the British magazine. When I confirmed I had written the story, the caller said that he was a member of a U.S. State Department reading group and had been delegated to locate me.

*Granta* is as famous for its reportage as for its fiction, so I could understand the interest of the State Department in the journal. But in "The Vulgar Soul," a young man, devoid of any religious belief, watches as the five wounds of the Crucifixion gradually appear on his body. The faithless stigmatic searches for a cure even as he is celebrated by the faithful. Abandoned by them when the wounds fade, he is offered an unexpected opportunity to embrace what he has resisted. I wondered, politely, if perhaps the reading group had mistaken my work for nonfiction; after all, it had concluded an issue of the magazine otherwise dedicated to memoirs.

No, I was assured by the voice on the phone, no one assumed that the piece was autobiographical.

Then what was it, I asked, that the readers at the State Department wanted to know.

"The ending, what does it mean?"

I shouldn't have been surprised by the question. The conclusion of "The Vulgar Soul" is certainly unexpected — many readers have described it as shocking. But I hesitated to offer an explanation of the story's final scene.

Instead, I suggested that a work of literature is a joint construction between writer and reader. The author alone doesn't establish meaning. The reader brings his or her unique experience to the imagining of the story, so every reading is, in some sense, a different story. I got carried away here (remember, it was only 8:15 in the morning) and suggested it was a bit like the relationship between an architect and a carpenter. "It's my design, but every reader builds a different house."

Impatient with what must have seemed my dodging of his question, the man stopped me. That was all very fine, making the reader a co-author, very postmodern, but he had a report to make. He just needed to know what the end of the story meant.

I sensed that the tip of his pen was pressed against a pad of paper, poised to copy whatever I said. So I pointed out how the conclusion reiterates elements that are implicit in the rest of the story and how its final sentence draws aside a curtain that has veiled the fundamental question posed by "The Vulgar Soul."

That seemed to satisfy the caller. Or else he gave up trying to get a simple answer out of me. (The man was from the State Department; he knew how to be diplomatic.)

After he hung up, I thought about why I had resisted telling him what I know he wanted to hear. I certainly understood his muted exasperation at my reticence to offer an explanation, but I'm not the only writer who turns evasive when asked what a story means.

To a reader, it may seem a kind of conceit, that unwillingness of an author to disclose in unequivocal language what a work of literature merely intimates. In fact, I think it's actually a kind of humility, an acknowledgement that the writer is incapable of accurately expressing in any other words what he or she has managed — probably with great difficulty — to convey in the story.

Perhaps that seems too scrupulous, like a mathematician who insists upon reminding us that converting pi into a decimal equivalent results in only an approximation of that transcendental number. It is true that an approximation can be a useful falsehood. But the decimalization of pi will never allow the calculation of a perfect circle.

So writers resist paraphrases of their work. They fall back on the same formula: a story means what it says. When I consider my own fiction, I realize the corollary of that axiom is also true: if you know what it says, you know what it means.

"My Slave," for example, is the confession of an individual who has acquired the means to buy his first slave. This new master narrates how his life has been transformed by the purchase, justifying his actions until the very last sentence, when the dehumanized slave answers her owner's arrogance with a crushing assertion of her dignity and, surprisingly, of her power.

Or take the title tale of my new collection of short stories, *The Torturer's Apprentice*, about an itinerant torturer in the Middle Ages whose falsely accused apprentice must submit to the Queen of Torments, the strappado. In applying his art to the boy, the apprentice's fond master discovers an implacable truth: pity can be as dangerous a distraction to a torturer as cruelty.

If I am asked what one of these stories means, I don't know how else to answer other than to repeat the story. And I think there is no solution to this problem because, as Marcel Duchamp suggests, there is actually no problem. I almost always suspect the reader knows perfectly well what the story means.

Let's discount the young reader without sufficient experience to recognize the subject of the story or the foreign reader unfamiliar with the cultural context of the piece. Then, unless the story is incompetently constructed, its meaning ought to be available to most readers.

So when such a reader asks what the story means, perhaps that reader is really begging the writer to make it mean something else,

something more conventional, something that can be formulated in commonplaces with which we are already comfortable. But that suggests we read to be confirmed in our beliefs rather than shaken.

Kafka says literature should be the axe for the frozen sea within us. The ice, so to speak, always gets the point. As does the reader, I think.