

BEHIND THE BOOK

I won't lie. I still walk around with the book. Everyone who has an inkling of being a writer has one, in some shape or form. When I was younger, I took unctuous pride in the uniqueness of its shape, or the textures of its pages, always looking for that particular bohemian cover with stout personality. But the illustrious writer's notebook that would someday relinquish the inspiration captured in a single moment and blossom into the perfect story was total bullshit. I know this because I have eight notebooks stored in various corners of the world and I've never gone back to look at them for an idea, not even once.

When people ask him how he develops his ideas, Stephen King openly admits he doesn't use a notebook. He says, if the idea sticks around in your head long enough, it's probably worth writing about; and if you can't remember it, most likely it wasn't any good. I won't lie, I still carry a notebook, but it's mostly so I can sleep at night. It's a garbage can for all of the space junk rattling around my head. But it's that one sticky piece of formless matter that adheres to bottom of the can and won't shake loose—that's the one I stick my head down for and peel off to see what it says.

Nestor Hardy is not in one of my notebooks, not *a priori* anyways. Sure, he may appear here or there as flashes of who he'd become, arise in random scenes or plot lines as they materialized, but I've never gone back to steal from that trap. Nestor stuck around in my head for a while and became an actual being who started a long walk and invited me along.

I clearly remember when it began, years ago in Santiago. I was sitting in my apartment off Plaza San Enrique and this boy just burst onto the scene, running through my mind like a childhood memory. He was more a character of science fiction, appearing out of nowhere on the side of the railroad tracks, beaten and barely alive, only to be discovered by two young girls who took him in. Sounds like more a fantasy than an actual story. Still, I sat and wrote him out, never mind the bustle of my wife and her daughter running around the apartment and talking it up as they did. I fell into his world and wrote out a couple thousand words in under one hour. I go back now and look at the manuscript, and I know the story is nothing. It reads kind of stupid, really. But Nestor is there, nonetheless. Just like that first story, he fell out of nowhere and stuck around like Kafka's cockroach, too big to brush out the window.

As I toyed with the story over the years, I learned to write fiction. I wrote scenes with the boy and some other characters, trying to know what he thought and why he did what he did. In reality, I learned more about the surrounding characters as Nestor emerged from the background. Some of those scenes are in the book, but most are not. Eventually, he found his place.

What I learned about the process was humbling. Producing a book of length was not simply sitting down to write words. The complexities overwhelmed me, and for years I merely attempted to write a two-legged chapter here or there that was self-standing and grammatically correct. Even though the chapters were miles apart, I began to see a world emerge where Nestor existed as a living element. When he came alive during those writing sessions, even for fifteen or twenty minutes, I began to understand the joy of putting an idea onto paper, the thrill of entering a world of imagination that pulls you along its conscious undertow.

And therein lies the magic. That's why you write. To create something from nothing and get lost in a place that doesn't exist, yet paradoxically exists as much as any memory you've ever had in your life. Being the conduit that blurs the lines between real and imaginary is exhilarating and tempts the very nature of the universe. I know that the Nestor and the other characters in *Scarboys* are figments of my imagination, yet I feel as connected to them as anyone I grew up with in my childhood.

The only compensation is that I know how the story ends.