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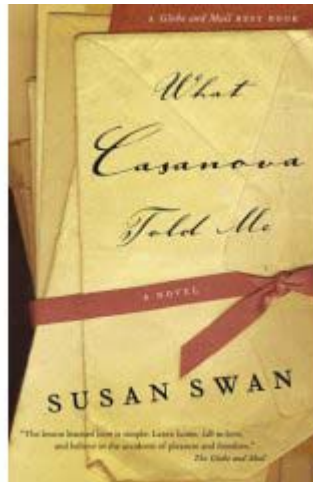
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### Postcards from the edge: A conversation with Thomas Wolfe

What happens to a writer's books when those works are no longer popular?

That aspect of a writer's fate has long occupied acclaimed Canadian novelist Susan Swan, who recently had an opportunity to seek the opinion of someone she considers a literary father figure. She documented her fictional conversation in a postcard narrative which has been posted on the Living with Legends: Hotel Chelsea blog, a non-corporate blog written by two long-term residents, Ed Hamilton and Debbie Martin.

#### Left: Author Susan Swan

The conversation, the result of a vivid dream Swan experienced while staying in the Hotel Chelsea last summer, was with the iconic American writer Thomas Wolfe.

Wolfe, who died in 1938, appears in Swan's dream and speaks with her about his experiences and life after death, both in a literary and metaphysical sense.

Swan was in New York to promote her book *What Casanova Told Me*. Interested in how the power of book reviews can help or destroy a newly published work, Swan says the dream took her by surprise because of its clarity and timeliness and the ghostly significance of Wolfe's words.

"I lived in Thomas Wolfe's old suite in the Hotel Chelsea two years ago and I sublet it for a few days last summer when I was promoting my book *What Casanova Told Me*," said Swan. "The suite has huge floor to ceiling windows and has a real presence. There had been rumors that it was haunted and while I was there, I dreamt about Thomas Wolfe."

#### Right: Swan's novel *What Casanova Told Me*

Wolfe, an American literary icon, a prolific writer and an alcoholic, had a short but brilliant career and is considered a canon of American literature. His classic work *Look Homeward, Angel* was published in 1929, nine years before his death. It was followed

by the novel *Of Time and the River* and a collection of short stories, *From Death to Morning* in 1935. In 1936, his essay *The Story of a Novel*, an autobiographical work was published to great critical acclaim. Wolfe also produced a large number of short stories and magazine articles. After his death, at age 38, from tuberculosis of the brain, three additional novels were published and included *The Web and the Rock*, *You Can't Go Home Again* and *The Hills Beyond*. All were taken from an enormous manuscript by Wolfe that was discovered after his death.

Swan, a longtime admirer of Wolfe's writings, is a member of the Thomas Wolfe Society based in the United States. The society encourages scholarly study of and general interest in Thomas Wolfe's work and career. She describes Wolfe as both vivid and doomed, and admits her knowledge of his work probably influenced her dream.



**Left: Thomas Wolfe**

"He was passionate about his work. In addition to being drunk, I think he worked himself to death," said Swan. In my dream, he appeared to me as the rather cherubic muse who, in his early twenties, met his first editor Max Perkins, who compared Wolfe to Percy Shelley."

The conversation was no less than what she would have expected from the author. "Wolfe talks about losing his place in American literature," said Swan, stating the postcards explore not only his death but the death of the popularity of a his published works. And Wolfe, who was once regarded as the fashionable author to read, laments to Swan that his work is now relegated to the stuff of undergraduate study. His views, his sense of humour and his own remarks about a writer's afterlife dominate their fictional conversation. She chose to document those words using the postcard form of creative writing because "it is more playful than the novel form and it is still evolving," said Swan.

Here is an excerpt from Swan's fictional conversation with Wolfe: "Following a silence of 15 years, I had brought forth a new work and heard it dismissed as 'inconsequential, plodding novel & neither original nor memorable', 'brittle & overwhelmingly self-pitying' had been some of the dismaying phrases. [Says Swan to Wolfe] 'At least they didn't say I couldn't write my way out of a paper bag.' Thomas Wolfe replies. 'The only thing a writer needs to concern himself with is staying open to experience. If we aren't vulnerable we can't write'."

In the aftermath of her experience at the Chelsea, Swan says she learned a great deal from the dream and writing about her fictional experience with Wolfe. "I learned this was a fascinating subject and want explore loss as part of a writer's life in greater detail. It is important because the thing that nobody understands about writers' lives is what happens to them after they are no longer popular," says Swan.

She describes the current publishing scene as "a frenzied commercial market where writers feel they must write bestsellers to be considered important and being only as good as their next book".

"It is important for writers to hang on to the passion they feel for the craft of writing," said

Swan. "There is a flood of information on the Internet and the market is filled with new books. It is becoming more difficult to get a new book out because it is a horse race.

"The satisfaction has to lie with writing itself," said Swan, " and losing is the art that writers need to master.

"I do believe in ghosts and have experienced a number of encounters," chuckled Swan whose postcards describe Wolfe's presence as floating into the room. In them she talks of Wolfe's raspy cough and gagging which startles her awake. The ghostly Wolfe in one postcard, settles into a chair, swills scotch, and jokes and chats about the writing life.

To read a print version of the full conversation, click here or visit the [Living with Legends: Hotel Chelsea](#) blog to read the formatted version of Swan's full conversation with Wolfe.

What does the future hold? Swan says she plans to go back to rekindle the conversation with Wolfe at a later date, joking that "perhaps next Hallowe'en would be a good time." Currently on sabbatical, she is working on a new book with the working title, "Black Ships". It draws its influence from her family's history and the discovery of oil in South-Western Ontario.

She is also actively involved in the Writers' Union of Canada and will assume a position as its Chair next year. "I am going to be Chair of the Writers' Union of Canada," says Swan. "I hope to raise the profile of humanities and work on issues like income averaging and pensions for artists and writers."

For more information about Susan Swan, visit [www.susanswanonline.com/index1.html](http://www.susanswanonline.com/index1.html).

**More about the Hotel Chelsea**