



William Peter Blatty

The Exorcist
ISBN13: 9780062094353

In January 1968, I rented a cabin in Lake Tahoe to start writing a novel about demonic possession that I'd been thinking about for many years. I'd been driven to it, actually: I was a writer of comic novels and farcical screenplays such as *A Shot in the Dark* with almost all of my income derived from films; but because the season for 'funny' had abruptly turned dry and no studio would hire me for anything non-comedic, I had reached James Thurber's stage of desperation when, as he wrote in a "Preface to His Life," comedy writers sometimes take to "calling their home from their office, or their office from their home, asking for themselves, and then hanging up in hard-breathing relief upon being told they 'weren't in.'"

My breaking point came, I suppose, when at the Van Nuys, California, unemployment office I spotted my movie agent in a line three down from mine. And so the cabin in Tahoe where I was destined to become the caretaker in Stephen King's terrifying *The Shining*, typing my version of "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" hour after hour, day after day, for over six weeks as I kept changing the date in my opening paragraph from "April 1" to April something else, because each time I would read the page aloud, the rhythm of the lines seemed to change, a maddening cycle of emptiness and insecurity magnified, I suppose, by the fact that I had no clear plot for the novel in mind that continued until I at last gave up the cabin and hoped for better luck back "home," a clapboard raccoon-surrounded guest house in the hills of Encino owned by a former Hungarian opera star who had purchased the property from the luminous film actress, Angela Lansbury, and where I finally overcame the block by realizing that I was starting the novel in the wrong place, namely the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C., as opposed to northern Iraq.

Almost a year later I completed a first draft of the novel. At the request of my editors at Harper and Row, I did make two quick changes: cleaning up Chris MacNeil's potty mouth, and making the ending "less obvious." But because of a dire financial circumstance, I had not another day to devote to the manuscript, so that when I received a life-saving offer to adapt Calder Willingham's novel *Providence Island* for the screen for Paul Newman's film company, I instantly accepted and left my novel to find its fate. For most of these past forty years I have rued not having done a thorough second draft and careful polish of the dialogue and prose.

But now, like an answer to a prayer, this fortieth anniversary of the novel has given me not only the opportunity to do another draft, but to do it at a time in my life I will be 84 this coming January when it might not be totally unreasonable to hope that my abilities, such as they are, have at least somewhat improved, and for all of this I say, *Deo gratias!*
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