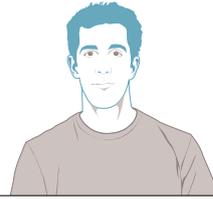


## Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }

# A NOVEL SITUATION

Nick's summer-reading breakdown



**S**UMMER IS THE SEASON TO LET GO. You exercised for months, so now, feel free to grab that fourth hotdog. This winter, you actually watched *The Blind Side*, starring (Oscar-winner) Sandra Bullock. In August, wash that down with *The Expendables*, starring (Fulbright scholar) Dolph Lundgren. You put in the time to psychically and culturally better yourself. Summer is when you flush all that hard work down the toilet. It's awesome.

Then there's the beach read, the written word's version of the Travel Channel. You can pretend you're learning, but you're really just watching a fat man trying to keep down a seven-pound burrito.

There are principles to this form of escapism: 1) It's a throwaway. If the book falls in the Sandals pool, there are 1,000 more copies waiting at the airport; 2) The plot typically involves lawyers or lovers; and 3) I tend to stay away. I once read Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed*, and my testicles still haven't redescended.

I enjoy noir. One of my favorite authors is Ken Bruen, and in his stories, damaged men riddled with self-hatred get blackout drunk and kill each other. They're a joy.

The books of Elin Hilderbrand are the polar opposite, but just like noir, her beach reads have a formula. In her novels, beautiful people deal with unexpected love and loss against the backdrop of Nantucket. Her latest tome, *The Island*, focuses on Birdie Cousins and her daughter, Chess, who loses her Ivy League fiancée in a mountaineering accident. Or there's *A Summer Affair*, in which a car accident forces Claire Crispin to give up her dream of glassblowing. Seriously.

I sound pompous, but these novels are popular. In the public library system, more than a third of all the Hilderbrands are checked out. For Bruen? Just 17 out of more than 200.

I try to be objective about these things, but the first page in Hilderbrand's *The Castaways* had me cringing. In walks Sergeant Dickson, but uh-oh, he's "without his usual peppermint breeze of self-confidence." (Only in Nantucket do the cops smell like candy.) Seems Tess and Greg MacAvoy drowned, and now their close-knit group of friends

is coming apart at the seams. I'd tell you more, but I barely cared myself. What kept me engaged was detecting the beach-read components.

First, everyone comes prepackaged with adjectives. Characters aren't developed as much as traced from preexisting archetypes. Thus we mourn the loss of Greg, who "had six-pack abs and the shoulders of Adonis" and a voice "somewhere between Frank Sinatra and John Mayer." I read that, and I'm glad Greg is dead. There's a palpable sense of laziness to the description, like the novel was written by someone on vacation, not for someone on vacation. This is a world where thunder sounds

like "someone on the second floor was picking up large pieces of furniture and then letting them drop" and points of comparison include "the Chief was so humorless, he made Jeffrey feel like Jay Leno." (Any place where Leno is the apex of comedy isn't a place I want to visit.)

Pronouns also play an immense role. As in a *Dick and Jane* book, the subject of each sentence is explicitly stated and underlined; like Hilderbrand is worried we're going to get the staggering amount of six total characters all jumbled. What's worse is that the characters are endlessly thinking about one another. Delilah's mad at Tess. Phoebe loves Addison. I once decided to count the number of first names on the page I was reading. 37! After that, each page read like roll call at an elementary school for children with incredibly unimaginative parents.

Of course the biggest device is that we're constantly forced to acknowledge the drama. I'm nearly paying a compliment when I say that *The Castaways* reminded me of *Anna Karenina*, the last novel I made myself read. For 800 pages, Anna weeps and frets about which rich jerk she should spend her life with, until she finally throws herself under a train. Coincidentally, the 7:10 to Moscow is my favorite character in that book.

Beach reads are about escape, but to enjoy the story, you have to go someplace unexpected. I already know how to be white and privileged. Give me switchblades. Give me renegade cops. Give me homicidal motorcycle gangs on a killing spree. And then, I can relax. \*\*\*



## Impersonals

# LOVE BUS

**T**O MY NEW FRIEND FROM THE #71 BUS: Thank you for striking up a conversation with me, even if it was merely about the weather. It's people like you who make the MBTA wonderful. I wish I had stayed until we arrived at Watertown Square. Who knows what would've happened? *Wet jeans*

### To the degenerate psychopath who felt the need to verbally assault me with obscenities:

I was minding my own business, waiting to turn left on Washington Street coming out of the Dedham Mall, when you start honking your horn at me. I put my hands up to say, "What do you want me to do? There are cars coming!" This is when you felt the need to start screaming obscene words at me. Very nice. Your mother must be very proud. Maybe you should learn how to calm the hell down and wait your damn turn. I so appreciate you calling me a c\*\*\*. Just think how lovely it would be when someone calls one of your female loved ones that. You're a disgusting, filthy-mouthed a\*\*hole.

*I hope karma comes around and takes a huge bite out of your ass*

### To my guardian phone angel:

You were at the Junction in Southie on a Saturday night. While in the one-woman washroom, I sent a few text messages and absentmindedly left my cell phone sitting on top of the paper-towel dispenser. Ten minutes later, I realized my phone was missing. About to sink into a pit of despair, I reported it to the bartender who reached under the bar and, miracle of miracles, handed my cell phone back to me. There are still good people in this world. Thank you! *Your forgetful friend*

Unrequited crush? Bad hair? Need to vent? Send your e-mails of love and spleen to [impersonals@improper.com](mailto:impersonals@improper.com), or fax 617-859-1446.

Send your stories and suggestions to [nick@improper.com](mailto:nick@improper.com).