

## The P-Word

We don't talk about publishing much at my fine arts college. Sometimes that is interpreted as a kind of snobbery about the crass and commercial considerations of it all. I've met students who are a little ashamed that they badly want to be published.

But I say publishing is a big part of the art puzzle. There's you. And there's the one you're writing for, painting for, singing for, acting for, dancing for. Is not art the ultimate form of communication? The way one soul speaks to another? How can a story be art if it isn't told to someone?

For over 43 years Henry Darger lived in the same one-room apartment in Chicago. He never married, had no family, and no one in the hospital where he worked as a janitor knew much about him. But every day when he went home, his room was transformed into another world, a world of his own creation.

That world is expressed in a 15,000-page epic fantasy he called *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. He illustrated the work with hundreds of beautiful watercolor paintings and collages. He also wrote a second volume titled *Crazy House: Further Adventures in Chicago*. Nowadays his paintings hang in the Smithsonian and his apartment has been turned into a museum. But the only people who read his story are psychologists.

People like to hold Darger up as an ideal, the noble outside artist who is above publishing, a study in misunderstood genius. But it seems clear to me that Darger was a maladaptive daydreamer, a disorder in which someone becomes obsessed with an imaginary world to the point that he is not able to function normally. Unlike some maladaptive daydreamers, Darger wrote his down, but he never attempted to make his work palatable or publishable or even readable for anyone other than himself. His imagination lost context.

Just before he died in 1973, his landlord, who was himself an artist of sorts, became concerned about Henry. He hadn't paid his rent. He hadn't shown up to his work as a janitor. He entered Henry's room and found Henry ill and his work spread all over. Marvelling, the landlord studied the pages he could see.

"Is it any good?" Henry asked from his sick bed.

"It's very good," his landlord said.

"Too late," Henry said.