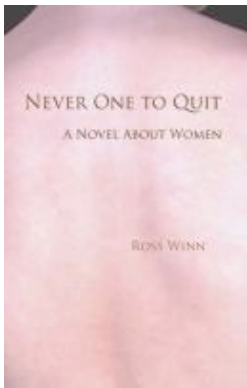




NEVER ONE TO QUIT

A NOVEL ABOUT WOMEN

ROSS WINN



The story of Edward Locke, a man looking at himself through the lens of the women in his life. Is he contemplating suicide, or just another relationship?

Never One to Quit

A Novel About Women

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Never One to Quit

Ross Winn

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First Edition

Dedication & Thanks

This book is dedicated to my mother Sandra. There was never a better mom in the whole world and there never will be, even if your granddaughter is doing her best to try. I miss your voice, but I will always hear it in my head.

To my readers and friends: Angela Fernandez, Charles Pearson, Craig Anderson, Chris Williams, Courtney Myers, Lisa Hoover, Shannon O'Connor, Janice Sellars, Michael McGreevy, and anyone I may have forgotten. Thanks for your support even if you didn't finish it all.

Special thanks to Kelly Caleb for going above and beyond!

Finally, thank you to Robert Posada for the cover design.

Any errors in this manuscript are mine and mine alone, but then I get to take credit for the good stuff, too.

Thank you for reading.

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Press Start

I don't remember what I said to her to make her want me. Sometimes when I meet a new girl it is just a button. With some people you just press the "start" button and off you go. We were lying in bed and she couldn't sleep. She asked me to read to her. So I just started reading the last thing I had written.

One of my favorite stories about the Buddha is about the two ways that he appears the fat Buddha and the skinny Buddha. I always wondered why there were two different looking Buddhas in art and sculpture. Was it an age thing or a culture thing? Was it about something else? I was in a coffee shop one afternoon and two robed monks came in with their heads freshly shaven. They were friendly looking guys and one wasn't Asian. Maybe that was why I approached them. We are all born without any prejudice or even awareness of race, but half a lifetime of cultural conditioning may have made a difference. I don't know.

Seeing robed monks in Florida is a rare occurrence, at least around Tampa Bay. I had been thinking about this question earlier that day, just a few hours before I saw these monks. Taking this as some sign of synchronicity, I walked over to where they were sitting and asked if I might join them. I knew they were taken aback by their reaction; more cultural conditioning I suppose. Living here in Florida among

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the heat, humidity, hate, and stupidity had probably made them wary. I understood it, but I thought my physical self might put them at ease. I did look like a fat Buddha after all.

I explained to them a bit about my journey. How after years of Buddha trying to get my attention, I had decided I was going to follow Buddha. I also explained that I was new to this and there were holes in my knowledge. That I was trying to learn and I had a question. They were very nice while I stuttered and stammered through my request, and they offered to answer any questions that they could.

"Why is it that there is both a thin Buddha and a fat Buddha?" I asked them. "Is it an age thing or a cultural thing? It doesn't make much sense to me because I have seen so many images of him both ways and I don't know why." Seeing their reaction, interested smiles, I just kind of trailed off.

The younger monk, the white kid, got this smile on his face and chuckled. The Asian monk looked at him and gestured for him to continue. Evidently this was one of his favorite stories and he loved to tell it. I stared at my shoes and sipped my coffee. Mentally, he seemed to pull up his sleeves somehow, to focus his attention. I was trying not to look or stare to make him uncomfortable while he relaxed more into himself as he began to tell his favorite story.

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"Buddha was a prince as you know, and his name was Siddhartha," the monk began. "Because he was a prince he was expected to do certain things and to be certain things. He was expected to be handsome, and he was. He was expected to dress well, and he did. He was expected to eat well, and he did. He was expected to be a man in all of the ways his people felt were important.

"Even though his father was the king this did not grant him leave to go outside the palace walls," the monk continued. "His father had tried to protect him from the trials of the normal people, thinking that this might prevent him from becoming a holy man as had been prophesied and instead make him a great king. Siddhartha did all of those things he was expected to and he was liked and respected by his people even though he had been distanced from his subjects by his father's decree.

"As we know, the Buddha did eventually leave the palace. He witnessed the plight of his people and through his understanding of their problems he began his journey to enlightenment. We also know he succeeds and sitting under the fig tree one day he did attain enlightenment. He learns and follows the middle way and then spends the remainder of his life teaching after founding the monastic order. This is a common story and some version of it is known to all Buddhists, just as you know the story, isn't that correct?"

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I nodded and then the monk nodded, took another breath, and continued his story.

"It is said that Prince Siddhartha was not an ugly man. He was attractive, but not remarkably so. He was physically fit, but not remarkably so. So it is not unbelievable to think women would find him attractive. The one thing that Lord Buddha was above all else was enlightened. Lord Buddha was *perfectly* enlightened. The word you see in English quite a bit is sublime. That word is pretty, but it really doesn't convey what Siddhartha had become.

"When Lord Buddha walked into a place there would be both men and women in every crowd. Of course both would gravitate toward him, but many women became enchanted. These women, and maybe even a few of the men, would throw themselves at Lord Buddha. Some might only beg that he touch their hand, but others were so entranced that they would throw off their clothes and appear mad with lust. Lord Buddha was so sublime that he was unconcerned with carnal things; sometimes he was not even aware of these reactions. You see, those who are truly enlightened are more focused and so while this may seem odd to you or I, it is because we are not so enlightened."

I was smiling now as well. The monk told his story so well that I enjoyed the cadence of his voice and the little flecks of color in his

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tone. It was in some ways an expression of my living in the now contrasted by this story of the past. It was very Buddhist thought, or so I contemplated.

"Some years later, one of the first monks asked Lord Buddha to 'let himself go'. To eat what he wished and not walk so much, so that he might become fat. That way, the monk explained, these women will not dishonor themselves because Lord Buddha would not be so attractive.

"It was a good plan on the face of it, and so Lord Buddha let himself go. Had Lord Buddha taken time from his teachings to meditate on this idea he would have immediately realized the folly of it, but he was focused on other things. Lord Buddha became fatter and eventually became what you think of as the fat Buddha. This changed nothing, because no matter what Lord Buddha might look like, he was still Lord Buddha. Women still ripped off their clothes and threw themselves at Lord Buddha because he was still so *sublime*.

"It is said that Lord Buddha eventually returned to his middle path when eating and returned to his normal size, but the problem with women was never solved."

We sat quietly for a moment. I sipped my coffee and the storyteller drank his water while the older monk chewed his salad. They

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respected my silence as I digested everything I had just been told. I started to speak slowly because I was still figuring it out as the words formed.

"So what you are saying is that even Lord Buddha had problems with women?" I asked.

The older Asian monk looked at me and answered, "No. What he is saying is that to Lord Buddha that wasn't a concern." His lips parted in a toothy smile. "But we are not that enlightened," he concluded. The three of us laughed together as I finally got the joke.

The story about Buddha is important to me for two reasons. First, it illustrates a central idea in my own sexuality that you don't have to be attractive in a physical way to be appealing. The second is that though some may understand women, I lack the part of the brain that allows that. This is unfortunate because women are the center of my life. My mother, or possibly my mothers, depending on how you see it, plus my lovers, my wives, my friends, and my daughters (both my actual daughter, that is, the one that in some small and pitifully failing way I have raised, as well as the other women I have somewhat figuratively helped to raise and teach some ways of the world). Even my own daughter calls me by my name, denying me even that modicum of respect as punishment for the many transgressions of my life as a parent I am sure.

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Do I deserve this punishment? I have no idea. Maybe but I am not sure? How do you answer that? I do feel remorse for much of what I have done. The good things, though they may sometimes metaphorically close the wounds or maybe at least stop the bleeding, will never heal the damage done.

Women are still as magical to me today as they ever were. You know how they say that you are born straight or born gay and you just know? I am not sure that is true, but I do remember the first time I knew a woman was beautiful sexually. I was five years old. The apartments we lived in were full of nursing students. I don't know why, but they were all over. I don't know or remember her name, but I know that she was dark haired and beautiful.

We used to leave our doors open in the apartment complex sometimes. They were big buildings and I think it had to do with the ventilation. As a child, I didn't feel that profound intellectual separation that would keep me from doing this now, so I just walked into her apartment because the door was open. I might have been chasing a ball or something. I do not remember all the details.

I guess she was getting ready for a date or maybe even work at a night job. She was sitting on a chair at the little dining table in her apartment. She was smoothing her stockings. These were not the pantyhose that women use today. They were silk stockings, the kind

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with garters and clips. Her skirt, a short skirt, was pulled up all the way past her panties. I could see the bulge of her pubis against her panties, the dark shape between her legs, and the cleft of her sex. I think I stared, but she just started talking about the day, or the weather, or something similarly inane. I watched the muscles in her thighs flex, and the shape of her calf.

That night I would lie in bed, thinking and dreaming of her body. I imagined I was a snake, coiling around her; sliding up and down against her. It wasn't a conscious act. I just knew I was supposed to be with a woman like that. I was supposed to feel her, taste her, consume her, and appreciate her. I never looked at her the same way after that day. I was too young to have an erection, at least too young to know what it was or what to do with it, so I do not remember if I had one, but I doubt it. If I had, I think I would have been hard every moment I saw her.

Late at night when I am by myself, sometimes masturbating and sometimes just drifting off to sleep, I still think of her. I wonder if most women know that they are still magical, and that we can love them our whole lives without even really knowing them at all.

Let me explain my view of women this way. Everything under eighteen is protected by law, anything over sixty is protected by nature, and everything else is fair game. People ask me, older women

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mostly but sometimes other men, why I keep seeing women who are much too young for me. I want to laugh and inwardly I wonder if they are crazy. Sometimes I just smile. There are six million years of evolution telling my little reptile brain that these women are what I am supposed to want: young, tight, fertile women. I just listen to that part of evolution. I never think that I am too old, too fat, or too much for them. I just try and show them that experience counts for something, which it does.

Women and the incredible wonder of them are part of the core beliefs in my life, which is probably why that story of the fat Buddha resonates so deeply with me. There are two others and the first is that I was born broken. It resonated even before I knew why. Before I intellectually or emotionally realized how much my own primal wound had shaped me as a person. I first read this idea explained in a science fiction novel. I don't recall the book any more but it said that we are all born broken and heal by learning. When I read that for the first time the feeling of that meme settling into my head had a palpable weight; the gravity actually shook me so deeply that I required some hours of quiet introspection to internalize it. I think it was quite some time before the immensity of that thought settled into its rightful place in my mind.

I tried to heal by learning for much of my adult life. I was a miserable failure at much of that attempt, by the way. All of the

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things I tried to learn and heal through were awful and dangerous to those around me. I thrust myself into life like a teenage boy fucking for the first time, or more politely, like a bull in a china cabinet. Did I break a lot of very pretty things in my journey? I don't think I can even know that. I may have just gravitated toward the broken flowers.

My journey has taken such a long and circuitous route that I fear I may have actually spent more than half my life simply looking for the right questions. I don't even know how or where to begin looking for the answers. I was raised Christian, spent time as an agnostic, researched and found I wasn't nearly inflexible enough to be atheist, considered Judaism but gave it up after being discouraged, went back to Christianity, and then finally listened to Buddha, who had been talking to me the entire time.

I have never been a good Buddhist or incredibly observant. I respect life, but still eat meat. I have concern for my fellow man, but only when it isn't overtaken by my modern misanthropy. I try to live in the now, but worry about my own past and my children's future. I don't know if I will ever be able to embrace and internalize Buddhism the way I did Christianity. I can't even be sure that I'm supposed to. I sometimes think this should be a core part of religion or spirituality; if you really think you have unquestionable and absolute proof and that you have all the answers then someone

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should just slap you hard in the face. Literally beat some sense into you.

I have been convinced since I was very young that I wasn't human. I don't think like normal people, or react like normal people, or even understand how *they* define normal people. I was thinking that I could write a story from the perspective of an alien disguised as a human on Earth. Several writers have done that and some of those books have been really good. I decided against it because it felt like a cheat. It was also insincere because I genuinely desire to be human. I have respect for humanity; I've had real human relationships, real friends, and real children. Respect is important to me. It also seems that respect is vastly more important to me than it is to others.

Yet still I feel less normal, and maybe less human, as each day passes. I can communicate with more people in more ways than ever before, but have fewer friends. I see the breadth of human opinion effortlessly, yet those visible opinions are controlled by fewer people than at any time in our history. I strive to be an example to my children and those around me, yet I feel less connected to other people today than I ever have. I lack a parish, a community, and even a relationship with my neighbors, but we all have common concerns and goals so why can't we share them?

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Trying to see where America went wrong I keep going back to those old congressional hearings tapes and footage deploring the evils of "rock and roll," "pornography," and "moral decline" and I shake my head. Every single thing that they said would happen did happen and it is all still happening now. Birth control did lead to more casual sex, so did cars for that matter. People still walk over and past others desperately in need. Americans read the Bible so selectively that they refuse to see that it is a book about social justice and community. It is this kind of idiocy that brings my misanthropy to the fore. My mind starts to spin out of control in manic rage.

As I was sitting in a restaurant the other day I ranted.

“When are you going to learn that I just don't like you? It isn't that you are boring or stupid, or even painfully unattractive and dense. Okay, yeah. Maybe it really is all of those things. All day I think to myself, ‘I am so pleased that I can't hear you right now. I am listening to the tapping of the keys and wondering just what it would cost to have you all killed. It'd probably be worth it, but then who would I mock?’

As a perfect example, I despise misogyny. I mean seriously, why would anyone bother hating only women? I mean aside from those homosexual men that detest femininity in all of its forms; at least their outlook makes some kind of rational sense. Why only despise

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women? It leaves out a huge sector of the population that desperately needs derision and scorn. Misanthropy is so much more magnanimous and enlightened.”

I got my laugh, but I don't think any of the people in the coffee shop realized how much of what I was saying was really how I feel. I saw a quote on a t-shirt the other day. It says “I'm not funny, I am just really mean and people think I am joking”.

This book on writing that I was reading says that you are supposed to start your novel by discussing the real world. That is the world that the protagonist character lives in. That protagonist, in case you are especially slow, is me. My name is Edward Locke. I was trolling for company in a used bookstore, cruising, looking for some lost woman that I might take solace in. I fell upon a book about writing. I had really enjoyed Stephen King's *On Writing* some years before, so I picked this new one up, *The Plot Whisperer* or some such, to pass the time while I scanned for some feminine company. What can I say I was bored, and though this new book wasn't nearly as entertaining as Stephen King's it was something. This book was more mechanical: steps, projects, ideas. As I scanned it I got the itch to actually write something myself. Quite a few things that have happened in my life happened due to boredom more than anything else.

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People say two things about writing which may or may not be true. They are actually the literary equivalent of a religious debate, like *Jesus Christ and Mythology* for theologians. The first is “Write what you know,” which is pithy and problematic. The second is that writing is about being creative, which is the worst kind of artsy doublespeak shit.

I have always been a writer. My mother was a writer who taught me to write. What was it Anthony Perkins said so well? Oh yes. “A boy’s best friend is his mother.” Slightly out of context but tangentially somewhat appropriate; we will talk more about my mother later I am sure. “Write what you know” is crap because most writers only know writing. Our lives are boring, disciplined, and scheduled. We sit in front of the computer and scan news articles. We make notes and we type for several hours a day. Some of us use a tablet, some a computer, some a typewriter, and some still might even use paper. What we know is syntax, structure, software, and tools. We know our partners, our lovers, and our friends. Aside from that, we have a fair piece of theoretical knowledge, but little practice in living. Our lives are boring and if we wrote about what we really knew, even our parents couldn’t read it.

The same goes for writing being about art. This is utter and complete bullshit. Writing is about discipline. You write every day. You write when you are happy or sad. You write when you are sick or well.

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You write when you are alone or with people. You write and you write and you write and you write. People can be creative, talented, and witty, but it means nothing unless they have the discipline to actually write. If you are an actual writer, you can't make art unless you write, but not all of your writing is art.

The ones that frustrate me more than the others are the ones that need a muse to move them. They aren't writing today because they don't *feel* creative or there isn't any art; they are too sick, too angry, or too hurt to write. Those people are the reason that most people feel inadequate and never start writing, because they think they need to be moved to write something. The big lie of art is that it is magical. The truth of it is that it is *work*, just like marriage.

You don't need to be moved to write. You don't need art, or style, or the "gift." You just take your time, every single day, and *write*. Harlan Ellison, an author of everything from *Angry Candy* to *Repent, Harlequin!* *Said the Ticktockman* talks about this. I think he says something like, "You don't think a bricklayer needs to feel good just to lay bricks do you? **Than** why do you need to feel good so you can write?" So this isn't a novel, exactly. It isn't a memoir either. It might be both or neither. So what is it? Funny you should. I was seducing a woman once and I asked her what her dream was and she told me she wanted a French castle. Well, beautiful castles are made of ugly bricks. I am just out here laying these bricks.

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I always wanted to write a book. I have started three, and they were all utter and complete shit. The ideas were good, but any idiot can have ideas. The hard part is writing them down. I wasn't there yet. I had been making many of those same excuses for many years. Maybe I should have played the role of some tortured *artiste* and just sat in the corner whining about how unfair it all is. Maybe it was the end of the world. Maybe it was a girl that finally convinced me to stop fucking around. Who am I kidding? Of course it was a girl.

It was pillow talk after sex just a few months ago. Jazmin is much younger than me. Her youth and physical perfection were like a fat line of coke and a shot of whiskey straight to the optic nerve. We were talking about music and I was telling one of my stories. The story was one of those long and winding things I tell that have flair and details. I think I was talking about meeting some band, Nine Inch Nails or Ministry, or maybe it was My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult. Doubtless something that happened before she was out of diapers. I have always been a storyteller and even before I could write them I could tell stories. It might be why I was such a believable and prolific liar in my younger days.

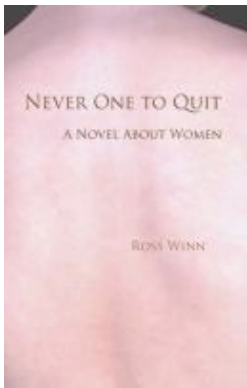
I told the story with my hands and my face as well as my voice. I was just coming to the end. She stopped me just before and shook me from my reverie. Physically she shook me, and when I really looked in her eyes she gave me one of those long, deep kisses that

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you feel in your toes and the muscle right at the base of your nuts. When she finished she was almost weeping. Her naked perfection was stunning as she spoke to me. While I listened, I pulled her on top of me and entered her again.

“This is what you are supposed to write,” she said. “There are stories right there in your head. You could call it a novel, or a memoir, or anything you wanted. Most people wouldn’t believe it anyway. They never believe the things that really happened.” Her mouth made a perfect ‘O’ as I slid all the way inside her and drifted off in the midst of her thought. Maybe it was the end. I wasn’t exactly listening.

I knew she was right. Most of this story really happened. The things that are actually fiction, the composite characters and the artistic license, those are the things that normal people would believe. The more outrageous things described really happened exactly as I describe them. Of course you probably won’t believe them or feel you cannot believe them. Any more than you might believe that this year I was fucking a twenty-one year-old Hungarian model that spoke five languages and came so hard and so much that she soaked through the bed the first time we had sex. Normal people don’t do the things I do. They don’t live the life I have lived, or even dream about the things I actually do every day. Normal writers don’t either. I am a freak, an alien, and not human as I understand the condition. Maybe I should stop, but I was never one to quit.



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