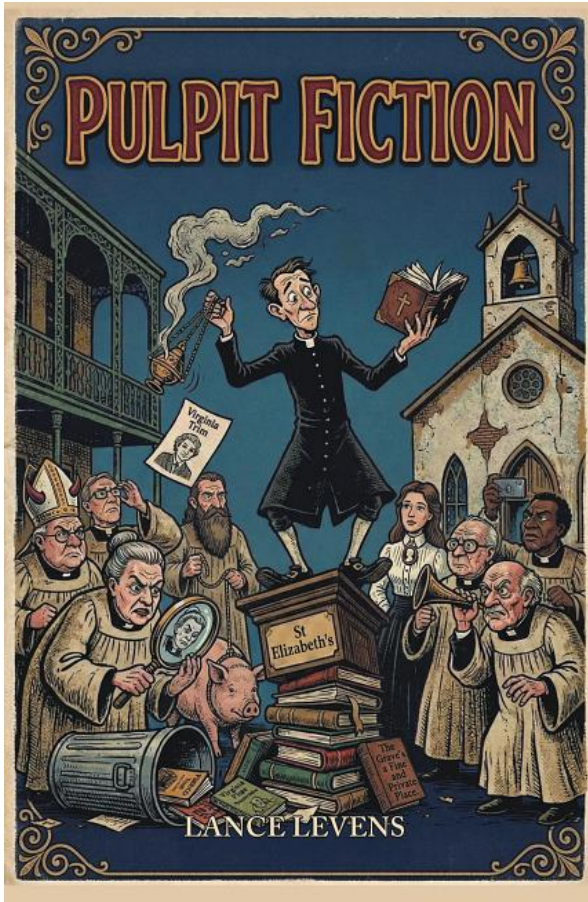




A conservative Episcopal priest fires his progressive choir director and the choir revolts. Their rebellion turns the church into comic chaos.

Pulpit Fiction

By Lance Levens

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PULPIT FICTION



LANCE LEVENS

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First Edition

Chapter One

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After his organist, Toni Kruger, stormed out of his office in tears, Father Boo Jameson locked the door behind her and leaned back against it, exhausted. Three hours of stomach-churning argument. Finally, he had fired the woman!

Relishing this moment of peace, he took a deep breath. He would sleep tonight, even though he expected repercussions. Toni and her choir friends were rich, and he suspected they could be vicious.

What was he?

A priest, for Christ's sake!

With his bald head pressed back against the door and his skinny arms, he resembled St. Sebastian, martyred by arrows. He took one more deep breath and was feeling better when he heard those furious steps returning—returning! —on the freshly waxed heart pine floor. What else could the woman say that she hadn't already said? *He was too rigid; he was too pro-life. There are other options. Loosen up. You're so uptight. Join the twentieth century. Read this lesbian theologian. Look at that therapist.* Dear G-d, please, please let it be that she forgot her purse.

As she twisted the gold doorknob, he watched. Let her twist all she wants, he thought. I'm done.

She jerked once, then twice. Then came a clattering burst of jerks.

The choristers shuffled out of the choir room.

"Toni?" he heard Betty Schmidt call, the wife of Walter Schmidt, the psychologist/chorister, and Toni's guru. "Are you okay?"

Toni pounded on the office door and yelled, “I’m not finished with him!” She shouted: “Come out of there and talk to me!”

He had expected anger, but a melodrama in front of her own groupies?

She slapped the wood beneath him.

“You are so gutless!” she yelled. “Come out here! Tell them their choir director has been canned because she refuses to be one of your little fundamentalist automatons!”

Boo threw open the door. His glasses slipped to the tip of his nose, exposing the dark shadows of his insomniac eyes.

“I am not a fundamentalist!” he shouted.

He glowered at her, his head and neck quivering. Glaring up at him was a fierce, pinched-faced woman in her mid-forties. In-your-face but petite and old-fashioned, she wore a cameo of Mozart, a white, starched blouse, an anti-Emily Dickinson, both fists balled at her sides.

Boo’s lips twitched, and something sucked the last whisper of breath from him. He emitted a feeble squeak before slamming the door shut as quickly as he had opened it.

He listened from the other side as she muttered—not complete sentences, but he caught the “mf” word. A final foot stamp, followed by an “o-o-o-h!” as she turned and marched back to where Betty Schmidt stood.

“Toni, honey, I don’t think this is the way to go about this.”

Boo stumbled to his desk and collapsed into his swivel chair, his whole body hot and throbbing, and his fists balling on their own. His well-intentioned plan to handle this with grace and dignity, befitting St. Elizabeth’s, was blowing up in his face. Naturally, he had expected her to be upset. She’d been there for ten years; he’d been there for two. But

the vestry stood one hundred per cent behind him on this. She refused to follow his directives. Repeatedly. He'd put her on a probationary period. They'd attended management seminars together—therapy for dysfunctional boss-employee relationships. He had consulted the vestry, always with Toni present. Surely, she had known this was coming!

His bust of Martin Luther, dressed in monastic cassock, looked down on him from the top of his filing cabinet.

“What are you staring at?” he said to the statue.

Pieces of well-chewed gum stuck to Luther's face giving him the look of a chunky teen in need of Clearasil.

Approaching voices. The choir. All twenty of them!

He should have bolted when he had the chance. They planned to jump him, twenty to one—an Episcopalian mugging!

Ahead of the pack, Toni yelled. “Come out of there, you coward! Come out and face the music!”

The murmuring outside told him his fears were unfounded. The choir wasn't joining her. They were trying to coax her back into the choir room, where they were rehearsing *The Messiah* for their Christmas concert. They tugged at her until she relented; their rubber soles squeaked as they whispered about the squabble, reentered the choir room, and the waxed hall fell quiet again.

In the quiet, he recalled last year's Beetle Nose affair.

One Wednesday evening, choir rehearsal night, he entered the sanctuary to get a look at the St. Francis Day preparations and found the choir lined up around the altar. They were wearing masks of various Celtic gods.

Buddy Bidwell resembled King Kong, only there were long, orange feathers on top and a bamboo pole that protruded out of each ear three feet.

Walter had a two-foot-long nose of oak, covered with beetle-like bugs.

“What kind of bugs are those?” Boo asked.

“Here, feel them.”

Boo ran his hand across them. Slick black backs, carved and impressed into the wood.

“Dung beetles,” Walter said. His mask muffled his voice. “Without them, we’d all be smothered in excrement.”

Boo tried not to giggle.

Walter and Toni took center stage, Walter facing Toni’s back. Toni portrayed a Celtic man-eating deity with a nose like a giant cinnamon bun and red hair that dangled to the floor. Walter was the mate and the meal du jour. The accompanying music grew cacophonous as the two began to wiggle and writhe.

Walter’s wife called out:

“Walter Schmidt, what do you think you’re doing?”

“This is how they did it on the History Channel.”

“Go, go, go!” Buddy Bidwell yelled. He clapped and the rest of the choir joined in. “Wal-ter, To-ni, Wal-ter, To-no!”

Boo leapt up.

“Stop!”

“What’s the matter?” Toni asked. “Did we skip a step? Somebody get the book. It’s in the first pew.”

A chorister dashed down, fetched a large coffee table-sized book and Toni flipped through the pages to a photo of the dance. Several choristers gathered round.

Then she spotted Boo.

“Wait! YOU cried stop?”

Boo chose his words carefully.

“This is a Christian church,” he pointed out. “We worship Jesus Christ.”

Other choir members removed their masks. The orgiastic mood sagged into confusion.

“These are pagan gods,” Boo said. “Pagan. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“It means at St. Elizabeth’s we’re open to other forms of spirituality,” Buddy Bidwell said. “There are many paths to G-d.”

“No,” Boo said, shaking his head, “there are most certainly not many paths to G-d.”

“Who says so?” Bidwell’s muffled voice came through his King Kong mask.

Two years had passed since that night. It had taken that long for matters to come to a head.

Boo cracked the door. The dark hall reeked of wax. He could hear murmuring in the choir room. Toni was crying, no doubt calling him a fundamentalist monster, while her choristers, whom she had trained in all matters theological and aesthetic, were lapping it up and already plotting revenge.

Chapter Two

"Go on," Boo's conscience urged. "Talk to them! You're their priest! Before this gets out of hand."

He stepped out. His breath was finally returning, though all he could inhale was the smell of wax. Light—yellow and sad—poured into the hall from the choir room. Heading into the darkness, past the neat wooden cubicles where the choir organized their books after every service, his stomach cinched. The Oxford Book of Renaissance Madrigals and Motets, a red, tastefully cloth-bound volume whose cover depicted curly-haired, fat-cheeked angels blowing elongated trumpets, their grace notes floating lyrically out.

Then, he was there.

The entire choir huddled around Toni, who sat slumped on the piano bench with her face buried in Kleenex as they soothed, stroked, and comforted.

Boo felt like a schoolboy about to enter the ogre principal's office.

There was Buddy Bidwell, the chiropractor, with his flat nose, short hair, and gin-and-tonic Kirk Douglas chin, his blood-gorged biceps. His sidekick was the politically correct Sancho Panza, Walter Schmidt, whose long, sad-eyed face and gray beard made him the parish therapist. His practice thrived thanks to St. Elizabeth's.

"I'm sorry it came to this," Boo said.

Toni's face, red and puffy, emerged from the Kleenex. She put her glasses back on and plucked her hair.

"So," Bidwell said as he stepped out of the group. "She can stay till Christmas; then she's out?" He wore a red polo shirt and tan chinos.

"Till Christmas," Boo said

He glanced at the clock on the wall: 9:30. Suddenly, he wanted to turn and run. Go home, watch *Hogan's Heroes*. Hogan could get out of anything.

With Bidwell standing just feet away, he tried to lighten the mood by side-stepping him and walking to the piano, where he thumbed nervously through a furry-cornered copy of the Messiah.

"The best Messiah I ever saw was performed by a Tibetan boys' choir. They had great teeth. My mother was there. She loves great teeth."

Unsmiling, the choir glared at him.

Boo's eyes moved from person to person, twenty sets of eyes glued to him.

He said a brief prayer, put his fingertips together in front of his face, and touched his lips with his thumbs.

"We disagree on everything," he said quietly. "I'm sorry. There's no other way."

"Tell me one hymn I played wrong," Toni said, "or one note I missed. I have never played a sour note in this church! Never!"

Then, Bidwell launched forward and pushed him hard in the chest. Boo's glasses flew off as he stumbled, windmilling backward over a chair. He reached out to steady himself but grabbed nothing but air

"Buddy, stop!" Buffy yelled as she overturned chairs to reach him.

Buddy lifted him like a lightweight doll and slammed him into the wall and his head bounced off.

Walter leapt over the chairs to Buddy, but Buddy shoved the therapist, who fell backward, landing on top of Buffy, who had been trying to get to her husband.

"You don't belong here!" Buddy yelled down at Boo, who cowered with his arms over his head and face.

Without his glasses, Boo was blind. The world blurred and swirled into shapes and colors he couldn't distinguish.

"Go back into the hole you crawled out of!" Buddy shouted. "You got that, shrimp?"

Toni dashed out of the room sobbing, overturning a chair.

Buffy struggled to her feet and grabbed Buddy's arm. "Baby...no, please don't do this..."

But her husband continued to shout down at Boo curled on the floor, covering his face with his hands.

"You...freak! Why we ever hired you, I'll never understand. Go home! Get out! Get lost!"

Every shout pounded Boo like a hammer.

From the front, Buffy pushed Buddy backward; from the back, Walter and Betty pulled.

"You haven't heard the last of this!" Buddy shouted over Buffy.

Now the altos and basses, pushed, as well until the entire choir, some over eighty, managed to force a still-steaming Buddy Bidwell out of the choir room.

On the freshly waxed pine floor, curled up in a fetal position, Boo lay with a lump above his right eye throbbing. The pain spread through his head like a river seeking a thousand mouths.

Go home! Get out! Get lost!

Hurting and confused, he lay there, wondering if he should move.

Finally, he hoisted himself off the floor and sat down. Someone handed him his glasses, and everything came into focus.

He tried to breathe, deep and slow, deep and slow...

Toni zipped back in long enough to sweep a Handel into her black leather valise while the choir drifted out. Some eyed him, others looked straight ahead. No one lifted a finger to help. The old building seemed to settle over everyone like an old friend and a new enemy, at once.

Back in his office, Boo snapped his briefcase closed and ran his finger wistfully over the gold cursive "Boisfeuillet Jameson" before locking the door. His heart was still pounding, but he had fired her.

But what would be the cost? The choir was connected to the rich and powerful in the community. What would they do to retaliate? And what would be the emotional cost to him if he stood his ground and fought?

Chapter Three

That night, at home in his Jones St. apartment, he sat down at his computer. Sipping tea, he allowed the images and sounds and smells of the fight into his mind. He focused on Toni, her Mozart cameo and long brown hair, ruling her choir minions like a wicked queen rules her cadre of evil dwarves. Gradually, Toni's flesh and blood was transformed in his mind into a fictional character. He would work her into his new novel, the sixth he'd written since his seminary days.

No one in his parish knew about his double life as a priest and a novelist. And that's the way he preferred it. Nor was he worried someone from his parish might read his books. His novels were sleazy detective stories; at least, that's the way he thought of them, beneath the taste of his highbrow Episcopal congregation. His pseudonym, Virginia Trim, could be found on the shelves at every Barnes and Nobel in the mystery section. Of course, he donated his earnings to charities. Still, at times, he felt like a cartoon superhero. By day solid citizen, starched collar, tie and clean shave, but by night, a muscle-bound caped crime fighter, who sought out and punished the villains of Gotham City.

As he began typing, the wise-cracking voice of his protagonist, Brick Stone, rose within him. Where the voice came from, he could not have said. He only knew it felt good. Brick packed a gun, which he would never do. He talked a wise-cracking, street smart speech, sarcastic and sometimes brutal. He loved Brick. Brick Stone gave him strength and power he had never known before.

Tonight, Toni Kruger was about to enter his plot transformed into Hannah Shane. He began typing:

I agreed to meet her at the Chez Raymond, a French restaurant in Phipps Plaza. Not my cup of tea, but she saw herself at home in such a setting. Over the phone, she sounded shaky.

It had been fifteen years, but I would have known her anywhere, Hannah Shane, the SAT whiz kid of my high school class—petite, starched white shirt, long brown hair, pursed mouth, a Mozart cameo and that in-your-face defiant look. I'd read a Bio in the Atlanta papers that she'd taken a degree in material science at MIT, where she worked on a project with some Noble Prize winner. Then to Harvard Med and a residency at Sloan-Kettering, then to Germany where she'd studied at several high-powered think tanks. Now she worked in Atlanta, out of some obscure medical complex with international linkups. Her palazzo on West Paces Ferry was big enough to house the state legislature.

When I spotted her standing by the fountain, I wanted to slap her, like I always wanted to slap her in school. Or worse. Now, I just said hello.

At our table she sat looking prim with her long brown hair down, a new pair of glasses, the Ben Franklin type, and a buttoned to the neck blouse that allowed no looks.

I ordered a Millers.

"I invite you to Chez Raymond—on my tab— and you order a Millers?" she said.

"I'm a simple man. What's on your mind?"

Her drink came, a glass of Chablis. "Brick, I want to enlist your services."

"For what?"

"Be my bodyguard."

I dragged from the beer. It was cold and tingled as it went down.

“Homey don’t play that.” That was a lie, but she didn’t know it.

“I can pay—well.”

“How big?”

“500 a day.”

Behind Hannah, a string quartet began playing “Deutschland Uber Alles.” It seemed appropriate.

“Make it seven-fifty and I’ll take one more swallow of this beer.”

She not only made it seven-fifty, but she also bought me a Chateaubriand. I chewed slowly, trying to piece together what this little genius she-devil was afraid of.

She knew about Ricky the Tool’s death with his fiancée in a local sleazy motel, but when I mentioned his name, her jaw tightened up.

“So—you were friends with Ricky?” I said.

“He had some dealings with the clinic.”

“And the dame?”

“Dr. Elizabeth Fox-Marcelloni. A psychiatrist who gave her patients useless herbal remedies. Whoever killed her did the community a favor.”

She spat out the word useless as if it were poison.

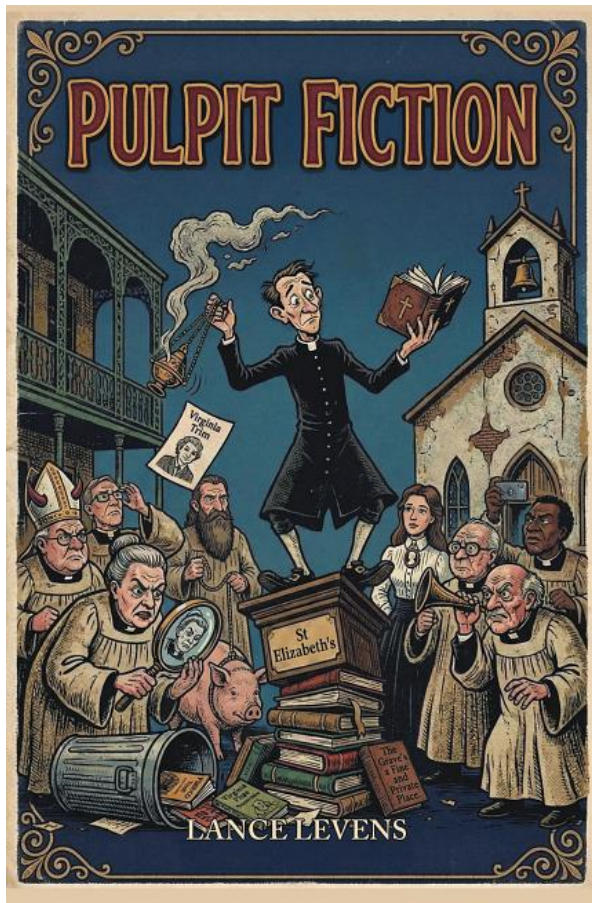
By the end of the evening, we were beer and wine smooth. When I ordered her a cab out front, she leaned forward and kissed me on the lips.

“Thanks, Brick. For old times.” She smelled like paradise.

Boo sat back, re-read it all and sighed.

‘Toni Kruger, meet your fictional self, Hannah Shane.’

That night he prayed for the Holy Spirit's guidance. Maybe, it wasn't healthy, taking real people and doing to them in fiction what he could never do to them in reality. But after six successful novels, by now it was the way he wrote. Plus, he needed to do it. He needed this escape. It helped him forget the repercussions he knew were coming from the firing. Soon, the whole congregation would know, including his bishop. And then what?



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