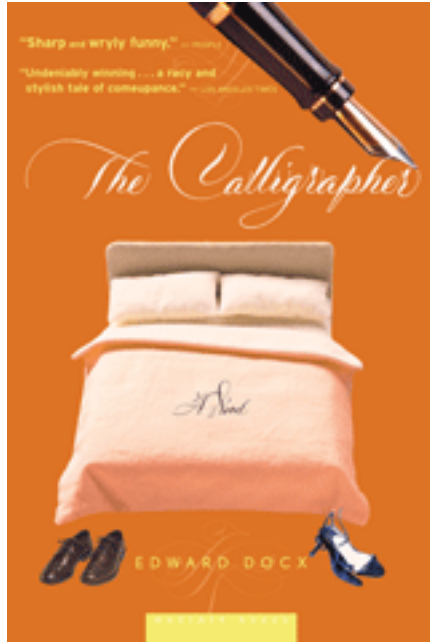


A Reader's Guide



The Calligrapher

by Edward Docx

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About *The Calligrapher*

"A sexy, satisfying read." — *Economist*

"Pure delight." — *Entertainment Weekly*

He isn't as smart as he thinks he is. She's smarter than she seems. Jasper Jackson is a serial heartbreaker greatly overdue for a reckoning. He is also a charming, sophisticated young Londoner, well-versed in the finer things in life, who manages to eke out his stylish modern existence with an unusual career in calligraphy. While working on a commission to transcribe the love poetry of John Donne, he glimpses an alluring woman in the courtyard outside his window. Madeleine is in every way his match — sexy, intelligent, and, above all, elusive. But his mission to seduce her marks the start of his unraveling.

A riotous novel of sexual politics and city life, Edward Docx's brilliant debut is a modern comedy of spurned lovers, elaborately planned seduction, sweet revenge, and surprising secrets.

"Audacious and deeply entertaining." — *Newsday*

"Arch, funny, and accomplished . . . a distinctive pleasure." — *Washington Post Book World*

"A sexy, satisfying read." — *Economist*

"A sly and hilarious look at orchestrated romance and self-deception." — *Time Out New York*

"Howlingly funny . . . As a satire on our age, this sparkling debut is faultless." — *Independent on Sunday*

Selected by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Jose Mercury News* as a Best Book of

the Year

A *Book Sense* Recommended Title

About Edward Docx

Edward Docx has been a columnist for the London *Express* and, most recently, for the *Times*. He appears frequently on British television and radio as a cultural critic. *The Calligrapher*, his first novel, has been optioned for film and translated into seven languages. He lives in London.

A Conversation with Edward Docx

Where did you get the idea for *The Calligrapher*?

Angelina Jolie's tattoos.

No, really — where did you get the idea for *The Calligrapher*?

At the outset, I couldn't find employment for my characters that wasn't either intensely tedious (lawyers, etc.) or so overwhelmingly interesting (speleology, etc.) that the writing became about little else but their work.

I had been struggling with various possibilities for my protagonist — cellist, artist, chess prodigy, that kind of thing — and none of them felt at all right. Then one evening I was sitting in one of the fashionable bars in London talking with a friend when Angelina Jolie walked in. I think she must have been in London to promote a film — but also around that time there had been a lot of press concerning her happiness with Billy Bob Thornton and, in particular, her tattoos. About half an hour later, she came past me on the way to the restroom and suddenly — *wow* — I thought I had it: *The Tattooist*. My friend burst out laughing. Not by any means a bad idea, but not quite the right *tone*. In the next few seconds, I suppose my mind must have moved from the tattoos themselves — "*Quod me nutrit, me destruit*" ("That which nourishes me also destroys me") was the one I remembered from the papers — to thinking about the skill of the person who actually held the tattooing instrument, his or her ability to write and draw in a formal or free hand. That led to another reflection about how few people have attractive handwriting these days. And *that* led directly to calligraphy (which, in Greek, means precisely that: "beautiful writing"). In any case, by the time Angelina came back, I was there.

In the next few weeks I checked all the calligraphy societies and related guilds that I could find to see what, if anything, had already been written on the subject. I also discovered that there were about fifty or so professional calligraphers in the UK. And that the top ten or so made a good living. Similar ratios applied in America. So that was it: the decision was made. My hero would definitely be a calligrapher.

I always knew my hero was going to be a young, modern-day Don Juan figure. But now I could also ask myself, "OK, if the guy is both a philanderer and a calligrapher, then what is he transcribing?" To which question, the most thoughtful (and interesting) answer, it

seemed to me, had to be John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* — since John Donne is surely the most eloquent anatomist of *amour* in English verse.

What's the book about?

The difference (and similarity) between men and women, between game and earnest, between fidelity and faithlessness. All of this subtly refracted through the *Songs and Sonnets* of John Donne, who, as well as being the greatest lover-poet in English verse, was himself powerfully preoccupied with the individual's quest for a meaningful truth — "constancy," as he might say — behind the facade of a perfidious age.

Probably a lot more than this too, or a lot less.

Do you think there is any similarity between our own times and John Donne's?

In many ways, obviously not. But in some important ways, yes. Jasper is angry with what he considers to be contemporary twenty- and thirty-something vacuity. For John Donne, the complaint was less with his specific generation and more directed at things like the sycophancy of the court, the Elizabethan preoccupation with outward show, the lack (as he perceived it) of any constancy in behavior or opinion or action — vicissitude. But ultimately theirs are closely related grievances: what both seek is some backbone of consistency in their peers, greater rigor of thought, an acknowledgment that a certain intellectual position carries with it a number of inescapable correlative positions, a willingness to entertain and engage with the human spirit rather than suffer the rough hegemony of the merely mercantile. In the end, they are asking the same question: what place does real skill and real talent and real knowledge and real thoughtfulness have in a society where the opposite is so clamorously asserting itself?

So are you anything like Jasper, the hero of the book?

No, not really. He's much more neurotic than I. If anything, the character that I identify myself with most is Madeleine, the heroine. (More and more, I find that the novel is about her as much as it is about him.) She is more engaged with the politics of sexuality, the power, the play . . . whereas Jasper deludes himself. He is, at root, a romantic, whereas she is deliciously sanguine. And I like the fact that the threshold at which her heart becomes engaged is so far in her emotional interior that Jasper can never be quite sure that he has crossed it.

Who are your literary heroes?

Well, my favorite novel at the moment is *Portnoy's Complaint*, by Philip Roth. I love the exuberance and the verve and the intelligence. And that combination of high style with low subject is my favorite form of writing. Something to aspire to. But if I were to imagine a gallery of literary mentors, then along one wall would be the Americans: Nabokov (though of course Russian by birth), for his exquisite and often unsurpassable word control; F. Scott Fitzgerald, for his ability to tell readable stories about glamorous people without letting his underlying point (to do, I think, with the quest for some sort of robust and truthful meaning behind the glamour) undermine his characters; Philip Roth; Don DeLillo, for his ability to write so well so unostentatiously while somehow telling a story that resonates beyond the story he is telling. And along the other wall would be the Europeans: Milan Kundera, for

teaching me that philosophical speculation is fine within the novel and that, after all, story is not everything; Evelyn Waugh, for the lessons in how to marry social satire to story and not diminish either; Martin Amis, for his commitment to each and every paragraph (often at the expense of the novel as a whole!); Jane Austen and Charles Dickens — always Austen and Dickens; and Dostoyevsky, because he is the greatest and twenty minutes with him is worth a lifetime's formal teaching.

What about recent authors or novels?

I liked Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*; I loved Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*; I admire Jonathan Franzen and, in England, a guy my own age called David Mitchell. I am a fan of Pat Barker and Kazuo Ishiguro.

How do you write?

In the darkness and by hand.

In the darkness? Explain.

I find it almost impossible to concentrate in any room that has anything in it besides a chair and table, a paper and a pen. I can't even have a window, in case someone attractive goes by. And I hate too much light, because then I can see other stuff — pictures, posters, other book jackets. I like just a pool of illumination on my work. I write everything by hand so that I get a preliminary edit when I type it up for the first time.

I wrote the book in two chunks. The first chunk was done in the basement of my local pub, the Washington. I couldn't afford an office and there was no point trying to work at home, so I set myself to find somewhere in my neighborhood where I could be undisturbed and yet remain solvent. I was explaining — moaning about — this quest to Terry, my local landlord, over a pint or two one evening when the thought occurred to one of us (I can't remember if it was me or him) that I use the pub cellar — a dark and empty place pressed into service only on Friday and Saturday nights as a comedy club. He said that if I really wanted to, then that was fine with him . . . though it was pretty grim down there — no windows, sawdust, redundant chairs, broken-legged tables, the tang of stale whiskey. Perfect, I said.

So all that summer I would go into the cellar in the morning — Terry would lock me in — and I wouldn't emerge until lunchtime. Then back in there again in the afternoon. There was no reception for my cell phone, and it was so dark and unexciting down there that really, the only tolerable place to spend any time was my imagination. I used to look up at the fire exit from time to time, but somehow it became a strange psychological barrier: I felt that if I pushed open that emergency door and went out into the sunshine, then I was caving in, failing. There's a section in the novel where Jasper and Madeleine go to a comedy club in a pub basement. Those passages will always mean more to me than anyone else, as they had their genesis during the long days of my incarceration. And the last line of the book — the emergency exit line — comes directly from staring at that door.

The second chunk was written in a beautiful but empty room in Trastevere in Rome, next door to a convent. (Rome is the best-looking city in the world.) There my regime was even more severe. Desk, chair, bed, and kitchen table. After a morning walk to the market to buy food at San Cosimato (also in the novel), I would get down to business. Once again I had to

keep the shutters closed or else the day would pour in. Complete darkness. I didn't even have a clock! I would listen to the convent bells so that I knew the time. Then at around six in the evening I would let myself out. (Never before — those were the rules!) My evening treat was to have a drink with a woman I know. We met more or less every evening for months, and I did a deal with her: I had to show her the evidence of my work, and if there was enough she would buy the drinks; if not, then I had to. She wasn't allowed to ask anything about it — just see the number of pages I had written. The more work I had done, the better my treat.

For Further Reading

The following titles may be of interest to readers of *The Calligrapher*.

[Several Deceptions](#) by [Jane Stevenson](#)

[The Book of Salt](#) by [Monique Truong](#)

[The Namesake](#) by [Jhumpa Lahiri](#)