



Meet Your Footnote: Umberto Eco

by [Gary Radford](#)



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Chapter One

Umberto Eco is probably the most well-known European cultural and literary theorist of the second half of the twentieth century. His recognition became even more widespread following the unprecedented international success as a fiction writer. His first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, became a literary event in Europe and America. When I was approached by Wadsworth Press to write a short introduction to Eco and his work as part of their Wadsworth Philosophers series, I gladly accepted. I had studied Eco's works as part of my BA in Communication Studies at Sheffield City Polytechnic and my MA in Speech Communication from Southern Illinois University. I had even read Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* from cover to cover. I loved Eco's novels and the way he wove his theories of meaning and signification into the dialogue of his characters and the structure of his plots.

It took me a just over a year to write *On Eco*. During that time, I had the pleasure of returning to Eco's texts, both theoretical and fictional, and reading them again with an eye to creating a short narrative that would enable the non-specialist reader to get a grasp of the main contours of Eco's long and diverse career. Writing this book reminded me of the experience of Eco's narrator in *The Name of the Rose*, a young monk by the name of Adso, who, many years after the murders at the abbey, returns to the site of his original adventure and the ruin of the burned library. Poking around in the rubble, Adso finds scraps of parchment that had "survived like treasures buried in the earth" (p. 500). Inside the ruins, Adso searches for the remains of the books:

Mine was a poor harvest, but I spent a whole day reaping it, as if

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from those disiecta membra of the library a message might reach me. Some fragments of parchment had faded, others permitted the glimpse of an image's shadow, or the ghost of one or more words. At times I found pages where whole sentences were legible; more often, intact bindings, protected by what had once been metal studs. . . Ghosts of books, apparently intact on the outside but consumed within; yet sometimes a half page had been saved, an incipit was discernible, a title" (p. 500).

And so it was with me, faced with an insurmountable mountain of material from which I would draw fragments, quotations, sentences, and other scraps of information that, when pulled together in the order of a narrative, might be able to tell the story of the great man's work. I knew that, in the end, I could only hope to end up with a "kind of lesser library, a symbol of the greater vanished one: a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books" (p. 500).

Recognizing this similarity of Adso's predicament and my own, I decided to make this predicament the theme of my book. How is it that I am able to create a text from a scattered selection of scraps and fragments and have that text produce a coherent meaning for an empirical or Model Reader? This was, after all, one of the central questions of Eco's own work. So, instead of writing a dry chronology and summary of Eco's writings, I decided to put myself in Adso's situation at the burned out library and attempt to explore the textual processes by which I could create "Umberto Eco" from these "fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books" (p. 500). I concluded the book by saying that my text was not about some real person in the real world - it was not a signified representing an underlying signifier. Whether or not Umberto Eco really existed as a man was irrelevant. "Umberto Eco" was a product of the relationship of my text with the reader. We had created him together through our interaction. If my readers could understand this idea, then they would have understood what is important about what Eco has to say.

The book was published in July 2002 and I was very happy with the outcome. Since I was teaching ENGL 4001 Literary and Communication Theory, it seemed entirely appropriate that I should set my book as required reading for my students (well, it is only \$15.95). We have spent the first four weeks of the semester working with the book. I have lectured on Eco's approach to meaning and language; we used Eco to understand the processes of meaning construction in the movies *Memento* and *The Usual Suspects*; we have read excerpts from *The Name of the Rose* and discussed how Eco uses the detective novel as a model for the production of knowledge, and the students have written two papers exploring their own understandings of what Eco, and my reading of Eco, has to say to them. So it has been Eco, Eco, Eco for

the last four weeks, and I have made no secret of my love for this material. The students find this enthusiasm to be quite quaint, even amusing at times.

All of this background is necessary to contextualize the events that I am about to relate.

Chapter Two

I had found out about two weeks ago that Eco would be presenting a reading from his new novel, *Baudolino*, at the 92nd Y in New York City on October 17th. Marie's sister, Theresa, found the event listed in *Time Out New York*. Marie and I purchased our tickets immediately, of course. I also copied the event information and handed it out to all of my students. I encouraged as many of them to go as could make it, with even vague promises of extra credit to act as an incentive.

The day of Eco's talk arrived. That morning was my Literary and Communication class. Just before the class was about to begin, my graduate assistant Chris Buffa came into the classroom, which is very unusual. He told me there was a message on my voicemail from Umberto Eco. Chris told me that Eco had said that he liked my book and he wanted to meet with me that evening.

"OK," I said, "sure he did. What did this 'Umberto Eco' sound like?"

"He sounded Italian," he said.

"Like on 'The Sopranos' maybe?"

"No, no," Chris insisted, "it really did sound like Umberto Eco."

"So how did he get hold of my office number?"

"I don't know."

Well, of course it was perfectly clear what was going on here. One of my students, or maybe a group of them, were playing a joke. I decided to find out who.

"Hey, guess what," I said. "Umberto Eco called me this morning and said he liked my book and, get this, he wants to talk to me about it."

I scanned the room and looked for the give-away responses that would tell me who had perpetrated this awful deed. The students looked interested rather than amused. I turned back to Chris.

"You're having me on, right? Are you pulling my leg?"

Chris insisted he was not. Rather confused and bemuddled, I started the class.

After class was over, I rushed back to my office to listen to this message for myself. Chris was there. He seemed anxious to see my reaction. I played the message:

“Hello Gary,” it began, “this is Umberto Eco, in flesh and body.”

There was a little chuckle at this remark.

“I read your book yesterday.”

The message continued, with the voice telling me that it would be speaking in New York that evening and that it would like to “keep in touch.” The voice certainly did not sound like one that my students could put on, unless they had an older Italian uncle who would help them out. It was all beginning to sound like it might be plausible. The voice did not leave a phone number, which is one reason why I was suspicious. But it did leave the name of a hotel, which was very difficult to make out. Both Chris and I listened to the message a couple of times to try and hear the pronunciation. It sounded something like the “Morgan Hotel.”

“What’s that?” I asked Chris.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I can look it up on the Web.”

So Chris brought up a list of New York City hotels and, sure enough, there was a Morgan hotel. Well, there was one way to find out if this was real or not. I called the number of hotel given on the web site.

“Hello, Morgan hotel.”

“Yes, hello. I would like to leave a message for one your guests please.”

“Certainly. Name please?”

“Eco. E - C - O. Umberto Eco.”

A brief pause, the sound of a keyboard. Then. . . the sound of a ringing phone! Then a mechanical voice telling me that the guest was not available and to leave a message after the tone.

“Ah, yes, er... hello, Dr. Eco. This is Gary Radford. You left a message for me this morning. You found my book. Er... yes, I would very much like to talk with you. Please could you call me back if you have a chance.”

And I left my phone number, and hung up.

“Well,” I tell Chris, “there is an Umberto Eco at the Morgan Hotel. That much is true.”

I had a meeting with Geoff Weinman, my Department Chair, scheduled. Geoff was at my office door wanting to leave. Before we did, I needed to share with him what was happening.

“Hey Geoff, check this out,” I said.

I put the phone receiver to his ear and played the message. Geoff’s eyes lit up and his mouth opened in amazement.

“Wow, Gary, that’s great! So, are you going to meet with him?”
“I don’t know. I left a message at this hotel. We will see what happens.”

And so we left for our lunch meeting. That meeting was to be followed by a meeting at 2:00pm with Dean Salmore. We arrived at Dean Salmore’s office at 2:00pm, right on time. There was a note on the door saying “Back at 2:10.”

“Well,” I told Geoff, “I’m going to run to my office and see if Umberto Eco called me back.”

I said this more as a joke than anything. I had no expectation there would be a call waiting for me. Even if this was Umberto Eco, I was sure that the last place he would be was sitting in a hotel room. When I got to my office, Chris was waiting for me.

“Umberto Eco called back!” he exclaimed. “About 20 minutes ago. He left a number!”

Umberto Eco called me back? That couldn’t be right, could it? I held the post-it with the number. Only one thing to do.

“Hello. Morgan Hotel.”
“I would like to speak to one your guests please. Eco, Umberto Eco.”
“Certainly.”

A click, a pause, and then the sound of a receiver being picked up. I was going to talk with Umberto Eco.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Eco? This is Gary Radford. I’m returning your call.”

“Ah yes, Gary. Hello, hello. I read your book. I like it very much.

Listen, I am in New York tonight. Can you come? Can you make it?”

“Why, yes, of course. I would be delighted....”

The voice cut me off.

“I will have a ticket for you. Six o’clock, seven o’clock, I don’t know. Maybe we can speak. I have to sign books and such things after. Then I am having drinks with some friends. I think I can invite one guest.”

“That would be. . .”

“OK, I see you later. Goodbye.”

The conversation ended abruptly, but this seemed to be a matter of style more than anything. The voice was charming and friendly. It seemed genuinely excited about finding me.

“Well,” I told Chris, “looks like I am invited to have drinks with Umberto Eco.”

Chris had a huge grin. I looked at my watch. It was 2:30pm.

“Oh blimey, I’m supposed to be in a meeting with the Dean!”

I ran down the stairs to the Dean’s office. Geoff and Barbara were already in conference. I apologized for being late, but that I had a good excuse.

“I was on the phone with Umberto Eco,” I told them. “He wants to meet me in New York this evening.”

It was the best excuse I ever had to be late for a meeting. Geoff and Barbara were thrilled!

Chapter Three

It is 7:30pm. Marie and I are standing in the lobby of the 92nd Street Y. There are lots of people milling about. There was indeed a guest ticket waiting for me at the box-office. I had called my good friend, Daniel Kolak, to tell him about what had happened today. Dan is the editor of the Wadsworth Philosophers series and the person I worked with while writing *On Eco*. Dan was going to meet us at the Y and take my extra ticket.

The event itself was very enjoyable. Eco gave some readings from *Baudolino* and then engaged in an on-stage conversation with another poet and novelist, Jay Parini. Eco was loose and good-humored throughout the talk. He talked about authors and narrators, and how lies could lead to great truths. The time went very quickly.

There was a book-signing afterwards in the lobby. Barnes and Noble were there selling copies of *Baudolino* for Eco to sign. Some people had brought their entire Eco collection for signature. Although the line was long, we did not join it. Instead, I hung out with Marie and Dan, and two students from my class who had made the effort to come, David Waxman and Kate Rossi. We talked for quite a while until we saw the end of the line finally make its way into the room. If I was going to make myself known to Umberto Eco, then this would be the way to do it.

I did not purchase a copy of *Baudolino*. Instead, I had bought a copy of my own *On Eco* which I would be delighted if Eco would sign. I also brought a second copy which I was going to present to Eco as a gift. While we were in the line, Dan said I should sign it and dedicate it to Umberto. So I did. It would be cool to think that Umberto Eco had a signed copy of Radford's *On Eco* in his own collection!

I made it to the front of the line. I showed Eco my book and began to speak.

“Dr. Eco, I spoke to you earlier today. I . . .”

“Ah, Gary, Gary, so we meet. Good, good.”

He turned to his on-stage interlocutor, Jay Parini.

“This is Gary. I tell you about Gary. He is going to join us tonight. For drinks.”

Parini looks my way. He holds out his hand and I shake it.

“Ah, Gary, good to meet you. Jay Parini. So you're going to be joining us tonight.”

“Why, yes, I would be delighted.”

“Good, good. . .”

Eco is signing my book. He has written “To Gary, with my thanks.” With my thanks? Thanks for what? I should be thanking him. He also accepts my signed (Radford) copy of *On Eco* with gratitude and a big smile. This man is so friendly!

I felt like a minor celebrity for a while. People wanted to know who it was that

Umberto Eco should be taking such an interest in. A lady came over and introduced herself as Eco's publisher.

"So what is this book you have written? Please may I have a copy?"

"But of course."

I ran over to my students, Dave and Kate. I had given them copies of my Eco book, thinking they might like to have them signed by Eco also. They hadn't joined the line. They seemed to be enjoying the bizarre drama that was going on in front of them, starring their bemused and star-struck professor.

"Dave," I said, "I gotta take your book."

Jay Parini also asked for a copy of the book. They obviously knew about it. Maybe Eco had mentioned it, I didn't know. I stole Kate's copy and gave it to Jay.

Eco was putting on his overcoat and getting ready to leave. He gravitated towards Marie and myself with a big smile.

"Dr. Eco, please allow me to introduce my wife, Marie Radford."

I turned to Marie.

"Marie, this is Umberto Eco."

It felt good saying that!

"Hallo, hallo. So nice. You come with us, yes? You come and we talk? You talk to Jay, he will tell you where."

Jay came over.

"You will have to make your own way there. We will be at Erica Jong's apartment. Take down this address."

Erica Jong? Did he say Erica Jong? Maybe he said Eric Young. I wrote down the address Jay gave me and we made our way back outside to the street. Umberto, Jay and the editor caught one taxi. Marie and I hailed another. We were soon on our way to Erica's.

Chapter Four

The taxi pulled up in front of Erica Jong's apartment building. A uniformed doorman opened the door to let us out. He wished us a good evening. Another uniformed doorman opened the door to the apartment building. Yet another doorman accompanied us in the elevator to the 27th floor. All of them knew that we were on our way to the Jong reception.

Marie and I stood outside of the door to Erica Jong's apartment. We could hear talking and laughing inside. Eco's voice was clearly audible. He was describing his surprise and joy at the questions posed to him by the audience following his conversation with Parini. We stood for what seemed a very long time, looking at each other, before I finally had the nerve to knock on the door.

The door opened. A woman dressed in New York black greeted us with warm and open arms.

"Why, hello, hello," she said, "I'm Erica. Welcome, welcome. Please come in."

She held my face and kissed me on both cheeks. Marie too. A man approached the door and introduced himself as Ken Burrows, "America's husband."

"Come on in. Please, may I take your coats. Help yourself to drinks."

Both Erica and Ken had big smiles on their faces. They treated us as if we were their best friends. We walked into the hallway and Umberto was there. He turned and saw us. Before we had a chance to pass our coats or pick up a drink, Umberto was beckoning us over.

"Gary, Gary. You are here. Good, good. You come with me. We will sit on the terrace where we can talk and I can smoke."

He beckoned us with wide gestures of his arms. I looked around, not knowing whether to pick up a drink first or just move directly to the terrace with Umberto. Marie gave me a nod and moved into the dining room for the drinks. I walked with Umberto to the terrace.

The terrace on the 27th was enclosed in glass and had a phenomenal view of Manhattan. It was a beautiful clear night and the lights in the buildings sparkled brightly. To my left, the Empire State Building rose majestically among the surrounding buildings. On my right, the lights of the George Washington Bridge swept over the river. Between these two bookends, Manhattan displayed herself in

all her beauty. And in the foreground of this magnificent scene sat Umberto Eco, one of my intellectual heroes, lighting up a cigarette, drinking scotch on the rocks, and waiting to talk to me!

Right away, Umberto wanted to talk about my book. He explained that he picked it up in the bookstore at Harvard University the day before. He was scanning the books in the Eco section, and my book was right there. He read all of it on the train-ride from Boston to New York.

He told us that he really liked my approach to his body of work. He was intrigued by my decision to treat “Umberto Eco” not as a person or an author, but as a textual construction made possible by my text. He seemed to really appreciate the connections I made between his work and that of Foucault and Wittgenstein. And he chuckled at the suggestion that he had things in common with, of all people, Schopenhauer! He said that my argument was essentially “accurate” and “correct.” There were some particular points of detail that he might dispute. He didn’t like that I referred to the concept of communication as described by information theory as the “Shannon/Eco Model of Communication.” He also noted that my spelling of Pinnocchio was incorrect. But overall, he said my book was “correct” and I had “got it right.” And he said this with a big smile on his face.

I was essentially speechless at this point. Thank goodness Marie was there to fill in my silence. I just didn’t know what to say. I thanked him for his remarks and told him I considered it a great honor just to know that he read my book. The fact that he thought I “got it right” was a statement so profound for me, I couldn’t think of an appropriate response. Should I say thank you again? Should I ask him to please put it in writing so people would believe this story? Thankfully, I didn’t have to say much at all. Umberto was very happy to go on talking about my book, of how glad he was to have found it, and how glad he felt that I could come and meet him in person. What was really staggering to me was that Umberto thanked me for this book about him. When Umberto signed my book at the 92nd Street Y, he included the phrase: “To Gary, with my thanks.” He repeated this sentiment to me again in person.

I can’t imagine a greater compliment that could ever be given to me and my writing. In that one moment, it seemed that all my years of reading, writing, and teaching all came together in one flash. This was the payoff that made everything worthwhile. Umberto Eco said I had “got it right.” All the day to day toil and tedium of academia just faded away and the real reward of being a scholar and writer became very clear to me. Promotions, pay raises, and publications are very nice, but they all paled in comparison to this moment. This was what it was all for. To have Umberto Eco find my book, read it, call me up out of the blue, invite me for drinks at Erica Jong’s place, and tell me I had “got it right.” Nothing beats that.

I had to ask Umberto how he found my phone number at this office that morning. He told me that he looked my name up on the Internet and found my FDU webpage.

“You are a narcissist. You have a big, big page. Very nice. Very big.”

Umberto had obviously gone to some effort to find me and contact me.

We sat and talked on the terrace for at least half-an-hour, although looking back on it now, my sense of time was totally non-existent. Other guests were coming on to the terrace to speak with Umberto. One couple came and said goodbye and that they had to leave. When they left the terrace, Umberto got up and said he needed to be with his other guests. He was, after all, the guest of honor. I said sure, it had been an absolute pleasure to have this opportunity to speak with you. He stood and walked into the other room.

Five minutes later, Umberto was back with a scotch in his hand and ready to light up another cigarette. He sat between Marie and myself again and engaged us in the most friendly and delightful conversation. He talked about everything: about his book tour, his apartment in Manhattan and the impact 9-11 had on him; about his rare book collection and the maintenance of his personal library (Umberto told us he was the proud owner of 50,000 volumes); his house in Bologna; of how he would love to have a dog but his wife was allergic to them. We listened in awe and with pleasure, content to be in the presence of this great mind who so obviously felt at ease with us. At the end of it all, Umberto said that if we should be in Italy, we should look him up. He would be delighted to continue this conversation further. He passed me an exclusive email address by which we could communicate with him. He said we should not be afraid to keep in touch.

Other guests came and went on the balcony to say hello and pay their respects to the guest of honor. But Marie and I were the only ones to be with him throughout the entire evening. I have no idea how long this conversation lasted. My sense of time was gone.

It was around 12:30 or 1:00am when the reception began to wind down. People began the rounds of saying goodbye. Erica and Ken were wonderful hosts. They were very attentive to Marie and myself. It was like they had always known us. As we were about to leave, I asked Umberto if he would mind if Marie took a photograph of the both of us. He said of course, but could we not use a flash. He explained he was photo-phobic and couldn't bear the light of the flash. We only had a kodak disposable camera which couldn't work in such low indoor light. So

Umberto agreed to a flash photograph if he didn't have to look toward the camera. He looked straight into my face with a broad and happy smile. I returned his gaze like a star-crossed lover. Marie took the shot. I hope it comes out!

We accompanied Umberto and Jay in the elevator to the ground floor. In the driveway in front of the apartment building, Umberto shook my hand one more time and said goodbye. I told him that this had been one of the best days of my life. He smiled once more, turned, and walked with Jay toward the corner of the block to hail a taxi.

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