

EXCERPTS

HEPTING'S ROAD – A NOVEL OF TEACHING

Excerpt #1 – At the beginning of the novel during the week before school starts, Steve Hepting is attempting to snatch more supplies than permitted by the “Iron Lady” head secretary. Office worker Donna Medford provides assistance to Hepting, with the supplies-snatching caper as well as the covert acquisition of cafeteria vouchers for needy students.

“I just dropped by to say hi,” Steve said, maintaining the sappy smile. He craned a neck to scan the far corner of the office, searching past the dividers that cordoned off a space for head secretary Helen Beaufort. “Did you get the cafeteria vouchers?” he whispered.

“Helen’s not here,” replied Donna, maintaining the low volume. “She’s wandering the halls, searching for our invisible custodian, Jim. She wants him to deliver white paper to the copy room.” Seemingly unconvinced that they were alone, she quickly surveyed the area. “I’d be crazy to hand the caf cards over to you in the middle of the damn office. I stuffed them in your mailbox.”

“Good point. I don’t need any more grief from Capelli. I don’t think she likes me too much.”

“You mean Darth Vader’s sister,” muttered Donna, rattling off her favorite nickname for the principal. Grinning goofily, she began visualizing what had become known as “Hepting’s heroics” at the staff social last spring. “Yeah,” she said, pausing to intensify a mirth-induced smirk, “She’s still pissed off at you for firing the golf ball at her ass. That was a hell of a shot.”

“It was an accident,” protested Steve through clenched teeth. “How the hell could I purposely hit a golf shot that bounced off a tree trunk and hit my boss in the butt?”

Donna shrugged casually. “Everyone knows you’re a good golfer.” She paused. “And Capelli has a big ass.” Having milked the last drop of Steve’s unease about the incident, she kept her voice low out of habit. “Helen thinks you did it on purpose.”

“So do half the teachers,” muttered Steve, the timbre a blend of pride and angst. He cocked his head in conspiratorial fashion. “I need some extra supplies. Helen will be gone for a while. No one can find Jim when he’s needed.” He looked at the stack of cardboard boxes near Helen’s desk, each with a teacher name written neatly on the side. Grinning with foolish expectation, he held up a Lakeview canvas grocery bag that was sold to staff and parents to promote the school in the community. Steve had bought twenty last year and distributed them as prizes for his Basic English students. What he believed to be an innovative incentive ceased when they finally told him that the bags were, in their words, “mega-lame.”

“Don’t take too much like you did at semester change last year.” Donna tossed a key across the counter. “Helen has a pretty good idea of how much stuff is in the storage room.”

“Why are you whispering?”

She glared. “I don’t know. Just get moving. If you get caught, you’ll be so far up shit creek even GPS couldn’t find you.”

“You’d be in deep caca too,” Steve claimed. “You’d never throw me under the bus.”

“No, you’re right teacher-boy. I’d be driving it.”

Steve strode along the hallway to the storage room. He opened the door, expectant as a cryptologist entering an Egyptian tomb. He grabbed a few rolls of scotch tape, stuffing them into his bag. Small boxes of pens, pencils, and erasers followed, as did two packages of overhead pens, though he rarely used a machine. A hurried snatch-and-grab for binders on an upper shelf caused him to lose balance. As he tumbled backward, his canvas bag tilted and the illicit haul spewed onto the floor. Steve’s large frame met the same fate. The binders followed, tumbling downward. They bounced off his head and shoulders sending him rolling awkwardly along the floor in protection. Human limbs and ill-gotten loot lay sprawled across the linoleum. Lolling listlessly on his back, a shaken Steve made uncoordinated attempts to rub a sore skull with one hand while gathering displaced booty with the other. Donna arrived at the doorway, muttering obscenities. A sheepish Steve peered upward.

“Damn it Steve. Helen just buzzed on the intercom. She couldn’t find Jim and she’s coming back to the office.” Donna dropped to her knees to help gather the wayward supplies. “Shit. This doesn’t look good; you lying belly-up on the supply room floor and me on my knees beside you.”

“Kind of cozy, isn’t it?”

She clipped him playfully on the shoulder with a wayward binder. “Leave the bag and key and get the hell out of here. Keep Helen occupied while I pick this shit up.”

“Could you grab a few binders for me?” Steve caught the narrowing hazel eyes, frowning forehead, and clenching jaw. “I guess not.” He scrambled to his feet and hustled to the general office, arriving at the counter just before Helen entered from the main hallway.

“You must want your supplies box Mr. Hepting,” declared the officious Helen. If she was piqued at failing to locate the janitor, she did not show it. “Where’s Donna?” Neurons were always firing under the shroud of short white hair that topped a wrinkled face. The woman’s essence was at least ten years older than her reputed age of forty-seven. She bore a striking resemblance to former British Prime Minister, “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher.

Steve struggled to avoid an instinctual peek toward the storage room. "I think she saw Jim in the Counselor Center." He exhaled with relief as Helen accepted the explanation.

"We've increased the computer disks this year to fifteen from ten. The pen and pencil allotment went down again," Helen explained, plunking the supplies box on the counter. "Who needs pens and pencils in 2004? You're in the last group of five teachers using a lesson plan book with ledgers for recording marks. I think Ms. Capelli is going to eliminate those from the supply list next year." Helen smiled as if the next comment brought inner joy. "The budget is always tight you know!" She grabbed a clipboard. "Do you want to go through each item?"

"No I trust you." Steve smiled. "I'm sure everything I need is here."

There was a second supplies offering at the end of the first semester, though it did not match the bounty of the September opening. Each teacher was expected utilize the supplies in an appropriate manner. Borrowing, trading, bartering, and lending between teachers was permitted. Selling for profit was frowned upon. Outright theft, at least not from each other, was rare.

Helen handed a file labeled with Steve's name. "A copy of your car insurance must be attached to the parking form before you receive a permit decal. Make sure the furniture and equipment inventory is completed and that your room has the earthquake and fire drill posters required by law. Let us know where you'll be tomorrow." A humorless smile creased thin lips. "Ms. Capelli wants a meeting."

"What about?" asked Steve struggling to appear nonchalant. He wondered if the principal was aware of his extra helpings of supplies last year. If so why had she waited until now to confront him? He doubted whether she planned payback for getting smacked in the buttocks by his errant golf shot. However, she had been mightily peeved about being called Lady Macbeth by Steve's students last year. Perhaps that was the issue? Further reflection caused greater concern. Capelli may have discovered the unsanctioned purchase and distribution of cafeteria vouchers. The meeting had to be about *something*.

Excerpt # 2 – Approximately one-third through the novel Hepting is attempting to teach Macbeth to his group of disadvantaged, frequently disgruntled Basic English students. Principal Capelli has dropped into the room and is taking notes from a rear seat. The students do their best to impress the principal, no fan of slow-learning students, that Mr. "H" is teaching them Shakespeare so "good" that he will not be fired.

"I did mega-good on the test, didn't I? I really like this Shakespeare guy Mr. H.," said Chelsea gushing with pride and pulling Steve's attention away from Capelli and Carson. "I don't think I could understand it if you didn't explain it so good."

"Yeah, me too," claimed Chelsea's sometimes-pal, Paige. "That's why I aced the Act One test too. I knew all that stuff."

"I did better than you," countered Chelsea.

"Did not," snapped Paige.

"Okay, calm down you two. Yes, I was happy that all of you did so well on the Act One quiz." He stared the two girls into huffy silence. Why were they interrupting his teaching flow? He noticed Capelli jotting notes on a pad. What was the principal writing? She was a big fan of tests despite a background as a gym teacher. It was claimed that long ago she issued written final exams to her PE students.

Without the distracting lighter, Carson reconnected to the lesson. "So the witches say this Macbeth guy is going to get away with all those murders." He nodded, shaking his mop of hair, "Cool!"

"You're disgusting Carson," shot back Gail without raising a hand for permission to speak. "The nut-bar is killing every friggin' guy around and he's going wacko doing it. How's that cool?"

Steve smiled. Though it might not be an eloquent summary, Gail certainly had the gist of the plot.

Tiny chimed in. "It's not his fault. It's his bitch . . . oops sorry Mr. H.; wife, that causes all the problems." He shifted his head slightly toward the principal seated at the back. The next comment was supposed to be clever and subtle; and missed on both counts. "Why are girls control freaks? Macbeth was a good guy until his woman started yappin' at him."

Steve gulped and fought hard to avoid looking for Capelli's reaction to the easily discerned challenge. At least the boy had turned to face the front of the class again. "Frank, I've told you before, that type of language is not appropriate in this classroom. I'll see you at the end of the period." Trying to salvage a teaching moment, Steve added, "We need to look at other aspects of this story."

A hand shot up from the back. It was Carson. Steve groaned silently. "Yes Carson?"

"Do you believe in ghosts Mr. H.?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you believe in ghosts, like when the dead banker guy shows up at the dinner."

Stupefied, Steve became silent for a moment. What the hell was the kid talking about? "Oh, you mean Banquo?"

Carson waved a hand in frustration. "That's what I said," he blurted, not trying very hard to hide frustrated impatience.

"Do you Carson?" asked Steve, challenging the boy. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Nah," said the boy, "Ghosts are stupid, but the witches are pretty cool."

Tiny had long since stopped picking his nose, prompting Chelsea to seek new entertainment. Mimicking the boy, she flashed a quick glance to Capelli before turning back to Steve. "Mr. H., do you know any wacko women like Lady Macbeth?"

For the second time Steve swallowed hard. These students might have thought that Chelsea's comment was funny, but clearly he had to put a stop to this mess. Capelli chafed at being compared to Lady Macbeth last year, and that was heard through the student grapevine. This time she was being exposed to the insinuation firsthand. "Lady Macbeth does go insane, not wacko, and we'll find out more about her at the end of the play. She is a fictional character, not a real person. I don't know anybody, or have heard of anybody, who craves power and goes crazy like she does in the play." He struggled to look at the girl rather than Capelli.

Paige fired a hand in the air and Steve was grateful for the minor sign of classroom decorum. "I don't get the no one born from a woman can harm Macbeth line. I mean, everyone was born from a mother."

"He could be a test tube baby," claimed Milano who had finished the compulsive grooming of his nails. "It's a clean way to grow babies."

Steve groaned inside. Was this disaster never going to end?

Even Tiny realized the idiocy of the Milano's remark. "Test tube babies weren't around when Shakespeare lived you fathead." He sat back, grinning, evidently pleased that he had not used profanity.

Milano, hefty and no shrinking violet, bristled and glared at Tiny. Just as the discussion was about to degenerate into frenetic testosterone-fueled acrimony, Capelli rose and tromped out the door.

Trying hard not to show relief, Steve calmed the two boys and tried to avoid glancing at the departing principal.

Paige raised an eager hand. Not waiting for Steve's permission, she blurted, "We were good eh Mr. H.? We looked like we were right into the story and you were teaching us good. Capelli will like you now and not fire you."

Carson chimed in. "I put the lighter away," he said proudly. "And I showed I knew about banker's ghost and the witches."

"Banquo," corrected Steve. "The ghost is that of Banquo, not banker."

Carson shrugged. "Capelli probably thinks you got us learning so good that we're just like those sucky Lit students," he bragged, attempting to restore the good vibes.

"Do you think you passed the test?" asked Gail with a tinge of concern.

"What test?" asked a baffled Steve.

The girl offered a long stare. Maybe Mr. H. didn't study last night? Maybe Capelli was giving him a pop quiz? "Ms. Capelli was giving you a test like you give us. Carson checked out the marks you were getting, didn't you Carson?"

The boy shrugged uncommitted shoulders before answering. "I think you passed Mr. H."

Excerpt # 3 – It is just past the halfway point in the novel and Principal Capelli has arranged for Hepting to be transferred from Lakeview High. He will commence his new position, teaching fifth grade at Meadowvale Elementary, a school which services an affluent population. During the Christmas (winter) break Steve visits the school and sets off the intruder alarm. Responding to the call is Hank Medford, the insanely jealous and estranged husband of Lakeview secretary Donna Medford.

The face was familiar, the scowl reminiscent of an image that once sat on a Lakeview office desk. Steve gulped, struggling to keep a racing pulse under control and force a warm smile. Cautiously he raised a hand in a silly gesture to signal a friendly greeting, pal-to-pal. "Oh shit," he muttered, recalling Jim's description of the insanely jealous Hank Medford who preferred physical confrontation over calm discussion.

The narrowed viper eyes of Donna's estranged husband bore down on the tall flabby man. "Get away from the God-damn door," growled Hank.

"I teach here," Steve replied flatly, edging away from the entrance.

"Bullshit. This is my sector and I've never seen you before. Get away from the door before I call the cops." Hank advanced, confident. "What do you teach?"

"Basic English and Investment," blurted Steve before Hank's harsh glare pulled him up short. "I mean fifth grade," he corrected hurriedly.

Hank was immediately yakking into an old-style walkie-talkie, not attempting to cover the words. "No, the guy doesn't have anything in his hands." Silence followed as Hank alternated between nods to the instructions given via the voice-box and threatening glowers at Steve. "The gate was open when I got here." The communicator squawked a question. "He looks like a teacher," Hank admitted in response, "Big, flabby, and ugly, like Shrek." There was a pause as Hank pondered a question unheard by Steve. "Yeah,

he's dorky as hell, short hair, red parka, Eddie Bauer jeans. The hands look soft too, a real desk jockey."

Steve screamed inside, "I can hear you!" though chose to remain silent. He formed a warm smile that oozed teacher patience.

The gesture unnerved Hank. "Shit, he's smiling at me," he barked into the communicator. "What d'ya mean like how? I dunno. He's just smiling, creepy like." Vigorous nodding was followed by, "Okay, I'll check it out." Hank lowered the device from ear level and snarled at the stranger. "What's your name?"

"Steve Hepting, I taught at Lakeview until Christmas break. I've been transferred to Meadowvale." He looked at Hank's face, the bent nose separating several facial scars, testaments to boozy brawls in backwoods bars. Steve swallowed hard.

The man-in-black narrowed beady, ebony eyes. Why the hell would those central office morons transfer a high-school teacher to an elementary school in the middle of the school year? Before acting he decided to wait while the on-duty supervisor checked the employment lists. "It's about the only bloody thing computers could do, check up on people," he thought grimly. He hawked phlegm onto pristine snow as the voice on the mobile crackled a response. "Shit-ass pieces of junk," mumbled Hank upon hearing that the software program was inoperable. "Stay on the line," he barked. "I can work this out on my own." He glared at Steve. "Answer this teacher-boy. Who's the biggest bitch in the Lakeview office?"

"Huh?" responded Steve, wide-eyed with surprise. He decided to answer truthfully. "It's not Donna."

"You like her?" groused Hank, the dark eyes resembling coin slits in a vending machine. He scanned Steve's face. "She likes you back teacher-boy?"

Where the hell was this going? "I dunno," said Steve lamely, "Maybe a little bit. She's married so we're just friends." Steve caught Hank's viper look. "At work," he stammered, "We're friends at work."

Frowning with scary intensity, Hank sneered. "I think she likes one of those panty-waist Lakeview teachers. She's always bitching about why I can't be nice and kind like him. She says the guy's name is Yogi but I know that ain't true. Who the hell has a name like that?" He glared menacingly. "The shithead gives her flowers and sucky cards. I've seen 'em at Donna's place." He scowled again. "Do you know the asshole?"

A shaking Steve managed a croaking answer. "No, I don't. It sounds like a nickname." He added quickly, "I don't have one."

Hank stared. "You should, you look like Shrek." Scanning Steve strangely, the maintenance man concluded with, "If I find out who this Yogi dickhead is I'm gonna mash his face like an orange in a juicer."

Missing Steve's loud gulp, Hank reset the alarm and shook a dumbfounded head at another example of the mechanical ineptitude of teachers. "I gotta report you," he grumbled, "More shit-ass paperwork." He barked into the tech-gadget. "Yeah, belly-boy is legit." He issued a malevolent stare at Steve before motioning for him to enter the school. Hank stomped to the van. Shortly after, the vehicle spun out of the parking lot.

Still shuddering, Steve found the photocopy room, a narrow windowless cubicle near the main office. Flipping through the wallet papers, he found Louise Tayler's duplicate copy-card that Donna had given him. Sliding the card into the slot, he grinned mischievously when a green light signaled hundreds of remaining copies. Hauling out the last bundle of paper, Steve muttered with a sly satisfied smile, "Here's to you Mrs. Tayler, good-bye and good riddance."

After completing the photocopy task, Steve activated the alarm and exited the building without a hitch, motivated by an intense desire to avoid the unpleasant Hank. He planned to spend the remainder of the break watching sports, reading, and sparring with Charles for household dominance. In a bid to slim down, Steve had eschewed pizza and the irritated cat was giving him the cold shoulder. Fearful of rejection, he had not asked Charlotte for a New Years' Eve date. A woman like her would have a plethora of social options for the special night. Instead Steve settled on a quiet night at home watching a video. He purchased a pepperoni pizza as a special treat, an easy route back into Charles' affection.

When Steve arrived at quarter to eight for the first school day of 2005, only office worker Pam Forshaw and Barb were in the building. Pam cast a stern look at the new teacher. She held an official notice titled "Entry Code Violation," indicating a one-hundred-dollar charge for Hank's call-out. "You must be Steve Hepting," she said flatly. "I'm Pam Forshaw, Donna's friend." She waved the paper. "Your reputation precedes you." A hint of irritation hung on the words. She issued a longer stare, noting the bulging belly, thinning hair, and fleshy jowls. Donna claimed that Hepting was a nice guy. While he was not much to look at, he had to have a leg up on husband Hank, the mentally unhinged baboon with a serpent's charm.

"I've got the hang of the alarm system," Steve declared, looking at the violation sheet. "I'm not that great with technology."

Pam smiled gently. "You don't say?"

Excerpt # 4 – At just prior to the three-quarter mark in the novel Hepting is forced to deal with elementary report cards for the first time. He has barely managed to keep his head above water during the term and the task of reporting student progress only highlights the evidence that he is far from a proficient fifth-grade teacher.

For the teachers, the happy vibe caused by the school continuing to operate did not last long. March was report card month and that meant scrambling to ensure assessments were completed for each child. Steve was required to report on ten subject areas. With twenty-seven students, that meant over two hundred and seventy assessments. Each one of those judgments had to be based on numerous sets of varied information. Summer's task was worse. A primary teacher was expected to assess skill levels for each student in detail that even the child's mother would find difficult to complete accurately.

During precious prep time, Steve busily organized and stapled the multitude of sheets that comprised each report card, grumbling about the rote, mindless task. Report card completion had been a colossal challenge and a surrogate review of how successful his transition to elementary school had been. Math, Science, Social Studies, and PE were not insurmountable challenges. Steve had quiz results, assignment information, project marks, and observation notes in the lesson plan book he had carted from Lakeview.

Though it was the subject closest to Steve's training and experience, the letter grades for the three Language Arts categories, Reading, Writing, and Listening were more difficult to discern. He had divided the class into two groups throughout much of the term. Some students read *The Chronicles of Narnia* and others, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. He led discussion groups and assigned creative seat work. When students struggled with reading, Steve's instructions of, "Read it again," and, "Read it slower," provided minimal assistance. He joked and suggested, "Read it louder," and several students did, creating classroom chaos. He tried a favorite high-school line, "Skip a few words and get the general idea." Stacey Nichauser and her ilk could not bring themselves to do that.

Steve was an English teacher who had no idea how to teach reading. Worse, he was now cognizant of the deficiency. He had never concerned himself with the issue before. Students were supposed to know how to read before they entered high school. Yet reading ability could always be improved and for many BE students the need was critical. If Steve ever returned to teach at the secondary level, he was going to incorporate reading instruction in Basic English classes, no matter how much the teenagers whined.

Whole Language was the current methodology of choice and Steve had asked Summer about the strategy. "The child develops a rapturous love of literature by encapsulating the story in its entirety, not by digesting disjointed, disparate components. The broad thematic thrust provides meaning to the love of reading. It is holistic, like life itself." Summer smiled, satisfied with the eloquence.

Perplexed, Steve tried a concrete example. "So with a story like Macbeth, a whole language approach would focus on ambition and the impact on a person, internally and externally. You would not spend a lot of time on individual characters, Shakespearean

language, or memorization of specific passages like they used to make me do when I was in school.”

“Well,” Summer mused cautiously, “That’s not it exactly though you’re summoning the general vibe.”

“Good enough for now?” asked Steve hopefully.

Summer hiked slim shoulders. As usual she went with the flow, “Sure.”

Writing was easier to assess than reading. Steve could relate to spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Creativity and story flow at the fifth-grade level was more difficult. Barb explained that he should look at a piece of writing from a holistic point of view. Steve noted that the damn word cropped up everywhere in elementary teaching, whole language, the whole child, holistic marking, wholesome nutrition.

“How the hell do I evaluate listening?” Steve wondered, frustration etched in an aging face. You could only judge listening by the student action that followed. That was an attribute of obeying, not listening. Some Basic English students listened quite well, as evidenced by their ability to regurgitate the instructions given. They just refused to give assent to what was being asked. They were good at listening and terrible with compliance. All the fifth-grade students received ‘A’ grades for listening since they readily followed his requests with appropriate action.

Assessing Art was a nightmare. Some student work seemed Dali-inspired and in Steve’s logical mind, horrible. He thought the Seahawks logo was the epitome of abstract art. He liked visuals to be concrete so he knew what he was looking at. In his view Stacey Nichauser was an exceptional Art student. She rode horses on the family’s five-acre hobby farm. She liked horses; read about them, wrote about them and drew everything equine in Art class. When Steve viewed the drawings, he knew the images were horses and pretty damn good likenesses at that.

He had learned to avoid getting too specific with artistic praise. He had once commented on Don Palmer’s family portrait. “That’s a good drawing of your grandma.”

“That’s my mom,” Don replied sourly.

“Mmm, yes, I can see that now. And the young man with the muscles must be your older brother.”

Don stared at his teacher as if the man was blind. “That’s me, Mr. H.”

“Sorry, it does look like you, holding your little dog.”

“It’s our cat, Fairway.”

Totally lost on how to proceed, Steve patted the boy on the shoulder, grunted a, “Well done,” and moved on. Eventually he decided that passion is the key issue in Art. The

children loved Art and dived into projects with gusto. And since creativity is, in the end, in the eye of the beholder, all students received 'A' grades, including Don Palmer.

With the music letter grades completed by Stella Wong, Steve was left with a final hurdle, the Health mark. This was a challenge since Steve had not taught any Health. Before total panic set in, Sophie Larson rescued him with a simple solution. "That's it?" asked an incredulous Steve, taking in the advice. "All I do is write, 'The learning objectives for this subject will be covered in the spring term'?"

"Problem solved," said Sophie with a knowing grin and a wave of an arm.