

The Fourteenth Flour

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Nicole Hazan

I.D: 332578483

Adviser: Prof. Evan Fallenberg

22/06/2014

הקומה הארבע עשרה

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

ניקול חזן

ת.ז: 332578483

מנחה: פרופ' אבן פלנברג

22/06/2014

Table of Contents:

<u>Aims and General Description</u>	3
<u>Conceptual Background</u>	4
<u>Shape of Project</u>	8
<u>Bibliography</u>	11

Aims and General Description

'The Fourteenth Floor' will be a novella told in the first person through the eyes of its protagonist, Bianca Mills. Bianca has recently begun working for Leo Strom, the head partner and founder of a highly successful London law firm. She is determined to become the youngest female associate ever to be made partner and one evening, leaving the office, Bianca stumbles across Leo's lost son. Bianca returns him to his father, believing this to be an opportunity to elevate herself in her boss' eyes. This incident at first seems unfruitful, but later sparks a sequence of events which draw Bianca into a world she is not sure she wants to be a part of. Although she is ambitious, Bianca is unused to the ruthless, sexist and intimidating work environment she has thrown herself into, and the novella centres on her struggle to discover where she belongs. Her old, stationary, comfortable world (represented by her fiancé James) and the new, money-centred one of excess (represented by Leo Strom) create a tension throughout the text. A realist piece, the story will expose the gritty, sleazy aspects of London work culture and mentality in a post-modern world. Other themes involve feminism: exploring what it means to be a woman immersed in an alpha-male environment, as well as personal struggle, resistance to change and eventual self-discovery.

Conceptual Background

Reading Zadie Smith's 'NW' has had a significant influence on me when deciding how to write this novella. In Smith's novel, she succeeds in portraying an eclectic portrait of London life, looking at working and middle class characters in North West London. From the atmosphere on buses to middle class talk at Hampstead dinner parties, to writing in the vernacular, Smith is able to create a tone that to me is entirely London.

I wish to emulate some of this when writing my own novella. Whilst I don't want to focus on the working classes, I do want to show the gritty, sleazy and less glamorous side of upper-middle-class London life whilst keeping the same, light tone that Smith maintains in her own novel. My novella will take place essentially in North London and the City, and when writing I intend to think about how Smith creates atmosphere, through attention to dialogue, dress, weather and general cultural quirks that create a vivid picture in the mind of the reader and generate a sense of unmistakable British culture.

Being a Londoner myself, I will also draw from my own knowledge of culture when creating a sense of time and place. A close friend of mine works in a successful London law firm and I consequently visited her workplace on a recent trip to England to get a sense of the environment and atmosphere there. In regards to women and feminism, one of the central themes of 'The Fourteenth Floor,' I intend to read Sheryl Sandberg's non-fiction work 'Lean In.' In this text, Sandberg examines women's attitudes in corporate environments and their psychology of success. This will be pivotal for me in my exploration of Bianca's character. Bianca is often preoccupied with how she is perceived in the workplace. As an attractive young

female she is conscious to create a good impression whilst facing inappropriate and sometimes sexually demeaning comments or reactions from the men who work with her. In her book, Sandberg discusses the conflict that women have when 'signing themselves out' of the race before they need to. Sandberg explores the psychology of women being good mothers to their children whilst maintaining a corporate career. Bianca does not yet want children however she does face a conflict in maintaining her work-life balance. The resentment of her fiancé James at her eighteen-hour work days represents this tension: the conflict between the personal, professional and the see-saw movement of both as Bianca discovers what it is she really wants.

Other non-fiction sources will include the internet blogs 'roll-on-Friday' and the Goldman Sachs 'elevator blog,' where lawyers and other business professionals anonymously leak secrets and gossip of their profession. These blogs have been the cause of great controversy in the corporate world and I intend to spend time on these websites for an insight into the attitudes of other professionals in a similar workplace to the one Bianca surrounds herself in.

In regards to crafting my novella, I relate to and aspire to incorporate elements of Stephen King's text 'On Writing.' He explores the craft of writing itself, examining aspects of plot, character and syntax. His teachings have influenced my writing for many years and I intend to continue employing them when writing and envisioning 'The Fourteenth Floor.'

Other influences on this novella and indeed to my writing in general include two of Jonathan Franzen's novels 'Freedom' and 'The Corrections.' These novels explore middle-class American characters and their suffering and psychoses in a

post-modern society. Franzen's ability to create rounded, plausible characters – both minor and major - is an accomplishment I wish to emulate in my novella. In 'Freedom', the protagonist Patty suffers from depression and acts in extreme ways and yet the reader is still able to sympathise with her. Similarly, I want my protagonist Bianca to be likeable to the reader although she is vain, manipulative and often selfish.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels have greatly influenced me as both a reader and writer. For many years, I have been inspired by the subtlety in his style in which he gives the reader limited access into his characters' thoughts and feelings despite writing in a first-person narrative. The idea of 'stripping back' prose has been greatly influential to me and in my novella, I want the reader to work to gain access into Bianca's true feelings which she denies, even to herself. Ishiguro often deals with themes of self-denial and delusion in his novels and I will examine how his protagonists come to terms with the impact of their wrong decisions and in which subtle ways he reveals this to his reader.

Ian McEwan's recent novel 'Sweet Tooth' shows its protagonist as a beautiful young career woman exploring her sexuality in 1970's London. McEwan's protagonist, Serena, is simply not taken seriously by the male workers at her workplace since as a low level worker in MI5, she experiences overt sexism that halts her from professional advancement in any meaningful way. Serena is more sexually confident and less ruthless than Bianca but I have been influenced by the attitude of the male characters' viewpoints towards women in 'Sweet Tooth.' I intend to explore how, even in a post-modern environment, women can be demeaned and insulted as much as they were before the rise of feminism, and worse, how they themselves are

Nicole Hazan, I.D: 332578483 A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing, 'The Fourteenth Floor'

willing to assign such treatment to 'the way it is.' I will explore the exciting dynamic between power, money, sexuality and gender in my novella as shown through the confusion that Bianca encounters in 'The Fourteenth Floor.'

Shape of Project

The story will be told in a linear narrative from Bianca's perspective and will take place over the course of around a year. The novella will open in the City of London in the run-up to Christmas where Bianca and her colleagues are working eighteen hour days at Leo Strom Associates in order to finish projects before they go on the Christmas break. It is revealed that Bianca is engaged and lives with her fiancé, James, yet they are experiencing problems, largely due to her long hours at work. The reader gets the sense that Bianca is struggling to keep afloat and is unable to sufficiently control her work-life balance.

In the opening chapter, Bianca encounters Leo Strom's son trying to get out of the building as she attempts to leave work. Although she is exhausted and it is late, she sees it as an opportunity to make an impression on Leo, the managing partner, and escorts his son (Daniel) to his office. Leo treats her rather dismissively but a few weeks later calls her back and uses his power and influence in order to manipulate her into babysitting his son when he flies to Geneva over the Christmas holidays. From a personal perspective, this is an unwise decision for Bianca. However, she is aware that it may help her professionally, and although she is reluctant to accept, she eventually does so.

The second chapter takes place in Leo's mansion in Eaton Square (central London) where Bianca is awed by the sheer amount of excess that Leo obviously surrounds himself with. The mansion is absolute luxury. Leo's daughter, Lisa, has flown to Spain without telling her father but Bianca spends the week babysitting Daniel with very little incident. At night, because she has no bathing suit, she swims

naked in his swimming pool and on the last night, James joins her for New Years Eve. The chapter closes with a phone call from Leo Strom where he alludes to the fact that he has security cameras and has in fact seen her naked at night in his pool.

The next chapters take place when Bianca returns to the offices after the Christmas break. Her relationship is momentarily in better shape after reconnecting with James over the holidays, but her routine soon returns to eighteen hour work days as Bianca once again makes her job her priority. Bianca barely sees or hears from Leo, except when he asks for inappropriate requests involving work and his family which she uncomfortably fulfils. Months pass and she has an awkward and inappropriate encounter with a male colleague in her team. After much deliberation, Bianca approaches Leo Strom who responds by firing the offending colleague. He moves Bianca to another team in a better position at the firm.

The next parts of the novella focus on Bianca experiencing the sleazy and sordid life of a lawyer outside of the work place. She begins to go out more with Leo Strom and her other colleagues as she becomes more distant from James and is torn between enjoying the luxury of the lifestyle and being disgusted by it. Although she is already vain, she becomes more preoccupied with her appearance and in maintaining an expensive wardrobe and when James comments, she lies to him about how much she has spent on material items. She also begins to lie to James about where she is, telling him she is working late when she is in fact out socialising with her team after work.

The novella's climax occurs when Bianca is forced to make a decision about what it is she really wants. By now, Leo Strom has gotten underneath Bianca's skin and she finds herself drawn to him and his family although she is not fully aware

what this means for her or her relationship. James and Bianca's relationship has become fraught again and she is finding it hard to juggle the many different aspects of her life. In fact, neither option – neither world and neither man are good for Bianca and at the close of the piece it is something she finally realises. The climax involves Bianca's choice: will she choose a life of excess and excitement, comfort and boredom or neither? And in this male dominated environment, is she really in control?

Bibliography

1. Franzen, Jonathan. *Freedom*. London: Fourth Estate, , 2010.
2. Franzen, Jonathan, *The Corrections*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007
3. Ishiguro, Kazuo, *The Remains of the Day*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005
4. King, Stephen, *On Writing*. Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001
5. McEwan, Ian, *Sweet Tooth*. London: Vintage, 2013
6. Sanberg, Sheryl, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. New York WH Allen, 2013
7. Smith, Zadie, *NW*, Penguin Books, London 2012

Websites:

8. Roll on Friday: www.rollonfriday.com
9. The Goldman Sachs Elevator Blog: <http://gselevator.wordpress.com>