



What Might Have Been

I had some pretty great teachers when I was in high school. There was Mr. Greene, my geometry and geography teacher who used to practice his golf swing in class. He would lecture while holding an imaginary golf club. You could see him going through the proper steps, visualizing his technique. Lining up perfectly with the ball that wasn't there, adjusting until his handgrip was perfect. When he'd swing and bring his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun that definitely wasn't shining inside our classroom, you could always tell if it was a good swing or not based on his facial expression as he followed the ball to the imaginary hole at the end of the fairway.

Mr. Bray, a Vietnam War veteran was demonstrating a particular reaction in chemistry class. He made a small explosion which triggered the school fire alarm, and then he immediately sprint for the classroom door. We exchanged glances, concerned he was abandoning us to the imminent flames. He was actually running for the phone on the wall right beside the door. Turns out, he had the fire department on speed dial since they'd already been called to his classroom twice that week. He was desperately trying to get ahold of them and assure them it was all under control before they sent another truck and likely gave him a big fine.

Senora V taught my three years of Spanish, which she'd be proud to know I still use regularly (if not always eloquently.) She had a great way to correct your pronunciation, specifically of the letter C. "NO. NO. NO. NO. You live in a CITY not in a KITTY." I wonder if she ever learned how to correctly pronounce February with her Columbian accent.

Mr. Buchmiller's AP History class was all about learning to consider new perspectives and challenge our understanding of stories we'd heard simplified and repeated to us over and over again. To illustrate this, he devoted the first day





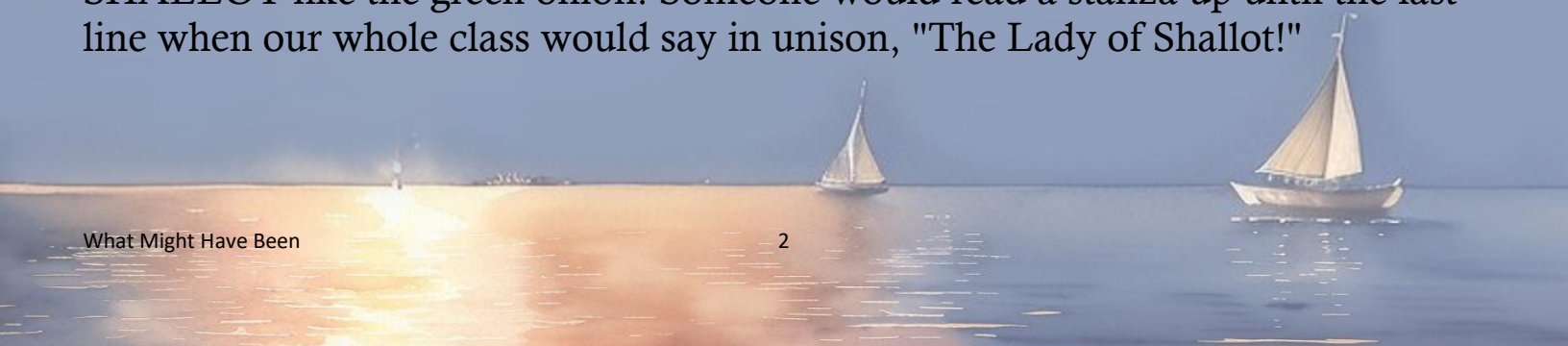
of class to discussing the fairy tale Cinderella, allowing the students to recite the story before he introduced critical questions like, "How much does this Prince really love Cinderella if he can't even recognize her apart from her glass shoes?" "Why is Cinderella the hero of the story when her problems are all solved by magic and she does very little on her own?" I've since read many similar examples of this sort of literary criticism, but this introduction was a memorable one for me.

It is Mrs. Rajala, my prof for three years of Honor's English class who I find myself thinking of most often today. This woman had a love of stories that was quite literally infectious as far as I am concerned. I remember hearing her reading Percy Shelley's poem, "I am Ozymandias, King of Kings: Look on my works, ye mighty and despair!" Then, her shoulders went up and she said in her deep Boston accent, "Whooooo! It just gives me chills."

I can hear that same voice and picture her fist in front of her when as she told us about that brave and proud Dan'l Webster, who would argue against the Devil himself before a jury of any man, no matter how wicked, so long as they be American! Raj knew just how to deliver dramatic moments, like in DANTE'S INFERNO, when she'd lean her head forward forward, look over the top of her glasses and hold eye contact while she read the famous inscription, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

One year, she gave us Edith Hamilton's MYTHOLOGY to read then tested us with two long lists of names. We had to correctly match the lovers in each column: Orpheus and Eurydice, Odysseus and Penelope, Theseus and Ariadne, Eros and Psyche. I found it absolutely hilarious that Narcissus appeared on both lists. To quote the Disney film, "I haven't felt this much love in a room since Narcissus discovered himself."

I loved learning about King Arthur with Raj. We were reading Lord Tennyson's poem, "The Lady of Shalott." The title is supposed to rhyme with Camelot and Lancelot, but my classmate Sam insisted we pronounce it as SHALLOT like the green onion. Someone would read a stanza up until the last line when our whole class would say in unison, "The Lady of Shallot!"





Once, we had some visitors in our class Great Britain. Raj was beside herself with excitement, "It's said that Arthur will return one day when England needs him again. Tell me, are you all anxiously awaiting the return of your Once and Future King?" She was briefly crestfallen when they matter-of-factly answered, "No," but she quickly recovered and said, "Well, we're keeping the dream alive here in the States." I like to think it would make Raj happy to know that one of her students wrote a book called CONVERSATIONS WITH KING ARTHUR a decade and a half after being in her class. (I also think she'd be a bit proud to see how much I mark up my first drafts when I am doing revisions on my work. She was known to make our term papers bleed with her red pen.)

There are lots of moments from Mrs. Rajala's class which my mind returns to frequently. We were all reading John Greenleaf Whittier's poem MAUD MULLER. We often went around the room reading portions in turn, and I know it was Jocelyn who read the final lines, "For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: It might have been."

It might have been.

In the last five years or so, several people have heard me say that in another life, I might have done well as an artist on YouTube. It was probably around 2010 when I first heard a child say, "When I grow up, I want to be a Youtuber." I thought that was a pretty great ambition for a kid, no less realistic than a kid wanting to be a rockstar. In fact, I remember saying to someone at the time that Youtube fame was the modern day equivalent of growing up to become a rockstar. It was one of those moments I recognized the culture had shifted without me noticing. Up to that point, I had never considered Youtube as a viable career.

That said, YouTube is a huge part of my life. It's pretty-much the only thing I use to listen to music. Most of my favorite artists: The Longest Johns, Poor Man's Poison, Malinda, Geoff Casellucci, Katzenjammer, The Oh Hello's, I almost certainly would have never discovered without the magic of YouTube.





It's my source for all sorts of education topics, from Hank Green's science facts, to Neil Degrasse Tyson's countless interviews of Quantum Quandries, to the Men of the West and Jess of the Shire breaking down topics in Tolkien books into chunks that make the stories much easier to understand and appreciate. Youtube even provides me a sense of community and routine as each week, I get to hear Brandon Sanderson and Dan Wells discussing the craft of writing, Adam Savage answering questions about MYTHBUSTERS along with the techniques for building things by hand, and James and Mason giving nerdy reviews on their WEEKLY PLANET Podcast.

YouTube is also how I've seen the work of some incredibly talented artists like Scott Christian Saava, Christian Pearson, Martina and Hantsi at Nerd Forge.

Creativity is my passion, as I imagine it is for most similarly minded people. I do my best to make time for writing and drawing while still working a myriad of jobs. I think I've been fairly successful so far. I've been pretty steadily releasing finished books I am proud of. But, I've definitely spent a great deal of time imagining what it would be like if I got to focus on creativity all the time and be able to financially support myself using my talents.

The scenario I'd come up with is this: I somehow go back in time to 2010 or 2012, speak to my younger self and say, "You need to set up a schedule of regularly putting things on Youtube, artwork of some kind, at least two per week, and stick with it." I know the work ethic I was developing at that time, and with that prompting, I think I really could have figured out how to make something enjoyable, find an audience over time and build a way to support myself using creativity.

I'd share this scenario fairly often with people when my artwork came up in conversation, and I'd add that there are so many wonderful artists on YouTube today, it felt as if my window had closed.

Well, toward the end of 2023, I decided it was time to make a serious attempt at YouTube. I was working on my King Arthur book, which I knew I wanted filled with illustrations. I'd done several drawings for it, but I'd stopped making progress months before. It seemed like YouTube would be a good





motivator. I could record myself drawing, post the recordings, hopefully get feedback from people who saw my sketches and then after a few months, I'd have both a finished book and a collection of art videos.

I challenged myself to complete 200 YouTube videos in 2024. This would be ambitious, certainly. It would require about four finished videos per week, but I felt it was doable. I began my challenge on New Year's with a sketch of author John Green who regularly tells the story on Youtube of the song Auld Lang Syne, a story which brought me to tears when I first heard it and is the reason I now bring in the New Year singing, "We're here. Because We're Here. Because We're Here. Because We're Here." (Sidenote: In September of this year, I found an autographed copy of John Green's *TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN*. It is now among my favorite possessions. The feeling I got when I found that book led me to give several of my loved ones signed books from some of their favorite authors for Christmas this year.)

The learning process that came with my first several Youtube sketches was fast and it was delightful. When I draw, I frequently rotate the image so I have the best angle for my wrist. I found that when I sped up the recordings, the rotating became dizzy-ing, unpleasant (almost unbearable) to watch. So, I got better at keeping the image more or less upright as I drew it. It would take more time, but the results were much smoother.

I also almost always use a reference image when I'm drawing, but I discovered that if I did a preliminary sketch in a light color before I started the recording, it was much less distracting than drawing over the reference. Against, good results but then I was drawing everything more than once.

Originally, I would narrate many of my drawings, but I found I liked them much better if I found some related music or a quote from the person talking about their own creative process. Again, the quality of my videos was certainly improving, but it was taking longer and longer to produce each one.

The turning point came for me came when I found this phenomenal discount on a drawing tablet I'd been wanting for a long time. The device allowed for more intuitive navigation across the screen (rotating, zooming in and





out, etc.) It was an absolute game changer. I could suddenly complete a sketch in less than half the time it took me on my previous device. This meant that the extra time I was spending on the video production was becoming a frustration. I'd started creating on YouTube to motivate me to draw more, but now, the other elements were taking up so much time that I regularly felt bothered I had to do those things instead of just drawing like I wanted to.

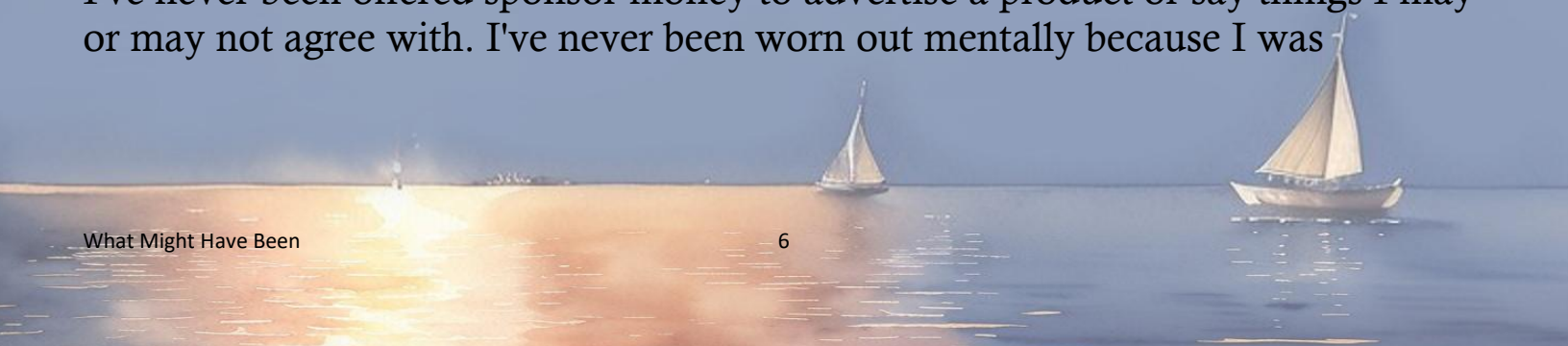
At some point, I recognized this wasn't serving me the way I'd hoped it would. My goal goal for the year no longer felt like a positive thing.

I put 34 videos on Youtube in 2024, well short of my goal of 200, but I can sincerely say that I'm not bothered by that fact. I did publish my King Arthur book with 75 pages of my illustrations. Holding that book in my hands this summer was an accomplishment I'm proud of. I've also gotten to regularly and steadily express my creativity amid a flurry of changes in my work life over the past few months. I'm absolutely happy and grateful with where I'm at as this year comes to a close.

When I was 17, about to graduate high school, someone told me that the doors that are meant to be open for me would always be open, and the doors that were supposed to be closed would always stay closed. I've held onto that and watched it be true in my adult life more times than I can count.

I am not a YouTube Art Sensation. I've never been able to support myself or my family through my creativity. I don't devote day after day to finishing art projects without needing to work a "regular" job. I pretty much constantly have some idea or other consuming my thoughts, making me wish I had more time just to make things.

But you know what? There are a LOT of things that come with being a Youtuber that I am so grateful are not factors in my life. My income has never been dependent on an algorithm. I've never needed to adjust the nature of the things I make because a computer can't predict what an audience wants to see. I've never been offered sponsor money to advertise a product or say things I may or may not agree with. I've never been worn out mentally because I was





bombarded by a volley of internet comments on a video I made. In fact, I've largely not been affected by any online reputation at all. I've never needed to worry about internet followers doing something in my name.

Instead, I've gotten to work some amazing jobs and I regularly interact with a huge variety of wonderful people. One of the best compliments I was ever given was from a friend named Ronit who said, "Danny, I feel like you've lived 15 different lives."

Thank you for that, Ronit.

And while doing all those different types of jobs, I've been able to consistently devote time to creativity. I've made some things I'm proud of and gotten to deeply explore some topics like King Arthur not because someone was paying me and making demands, but simply because I found them fascinating. I'm also entirely confident that the quality of my writing is better now that I do so many different things than it would be otherwise.

2025 is nearly here, and New Year's is a great time for Resolutions. Mine is this:

I'm done talking about What might have been when it comes to YouTube or to my career. This isn't something people will be hearing from me anymore. I have been incredibly fortunate so far. I'm grateful for every door that's been opened for me, and for all the doors that stayed closed.

December 20, 2024



JOHN GREEN



JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

