

**Queering the Mainstream:
Armistead Maupin and *The Night Listener***

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Queering the Mainstream: Armistead

Maupin and *The Night Listener*

Though Armistead Maupin is a well-known, successful novelist focusing on gay themes and motifs, his work has seldom been the subject of intense critical scrutiny. Some of his works received notice in the late 1970s for their honest illustration of the lives of marginal sub-cultures, specifically homosexuals, but as Queer critical theory evolved and became more widely known and used, Maupin remained strangely outside of its critical focus. His 2001 work, *The Night Listener*, was a *New York Times* bestseller, but it is also a work that demonstrates a high level of technical skill and literary awareness. Critical issues raised with *The Night Listener* include the murky distinction between fact and fiction; the role of the author as not only the creator of a story, but a character within it; and discourse between an author and his other works, the reader, and the literary canon. Aside from the technical devices Maupin uses, he also is a vehement social critic and satirist. By focusing his stories on the cultures of marginalized groups, Maupin illustrates the inequality of modern American society and the veil of hypocrisy with which mainstream Americans shield their eyes. Though he is widely known for his honest depictions of the gay lifestyle, his works are not overtly didactic and instead rely on the reader's empathic connection to his characters. Setting Maupin's technical accomplishments aside, *The Night Listener* remains a work of value that addresses many themes and asks many questions. Maupin's vision creates characters who are multifaceted and transcend mainstream stereotypes. He uses current events to help frame

moral and ethical debates within his works, as he does with the Matthew Shephard incident, in which a young gay man was the victim of a hate crime in 1998. The details are not recounted, but his characters instead simply empathize with the young, innocent victim, and lament the circumstances that would lead to any senseless brutality. Maupin also covers the traditional thematic bases, but alters them to fit inside of his marginal world. Family, love and sex are all given time in the work, but for all of the questions that Maupin's themes address, few answers are offered. Maupin does not wrap his stories up neatly in the Victorian way with the beneficence of Providence rescuing the hero or heroine from certain misfortune. Instead, Maupin leaves the reader wondering where the novel leads, in effect wondering what the real ending is. By leaving questions unanswered, Maupin draws the reader into the work, leaving the tidying up of details to them. Maupin creates in *The Night Listener* an intricate, multilayered work that uses techniques such as intertextuality and metafiction to examine important themes such as the nature of straight and gay identity and even more intriguingly, the nature of fiction itself.

To be able to grasp the intricacies of *The Night Listener*, it is essential to understand the plot and characters in the work. In essence, *The Night Listener* is a first person recounting of the recent life of Gabriel Noone, successful radio personality and writer. Gabriel specializes in serialized storytelling over the airwaves, and his stories are about the lives of Will and Jaime, characters whose lives parallel and intersect those of Gabriel and his partner Jess. The narrative is written in first person and from Gabriel's perspective. As the novel begins, Gabriel and Jess have ended their relationship, and Gabriel is lonely and questioning many aspects of his life. While he is mired in

depression and self-doubt, an editor that Gabriel knows sends him a galley of a manuscript. The book contained within is *The Blacking Factory* by thirteen-year-old Pete Lomax, a chronicle of a life of sexual abuse, neglect, sickness, and, ultimately, hope. The hardship of Pete's life and his refusal to surrender to despair helps to distract Gabriel from the recent breakup with Jess. Gabriel finds out that the book was sent to him because Pete is a huge fan of his, and they begin exchanging phone calls. As the work progresses doubt begins to settle in about the truth of Pete's identity. No one has seen him, and there are no records of his existence. His adopted mother, Donna, maintains that the mysteriousness of Pete is due to the circumstances of his escape from his abusive situation, as not all of the offenders involved were apprehended. She still believes there are many of them out in the world looking for Pete. Nobody ever sees Pete, and he vanishes as quickly and ethereally as he arrived, with the only remaining connection to him being the uncanny similarity between his and Donna's voices.

It can be difficult to separate the voices of Gabriel and Maupin in *The Night Listener* because of its emphasis on the process of writing and the act of writing *The Night Listener* in particular. When Gabriel mentions that he is writing the work that the reader is currently reading, what message does the reader take from that? By creating a multilayered work, Maupin does more than simply tell a story, he allows the reader inside the process of writing the actual story they are reading. The entire novel is predicated upon the hierarchical relationship between Maupin as author, Gabriel as narrator, and Pete as fiction. Maupin takes care to establish a metafictional framework for his novel. As much as it is about Gabriel and Pete, it is equally as focused on the relationship between an author and his work, fact and fiction. The link between fact and

fiction, truth and lie, is a major theme in *The Night Listener* as the work contains fictionalized representations of actual events in Maupin's life, most notable among these, his being drawn into an elaborate hoax by an abused thirteen year old author who was, in reality, neither thirteen, nor even a boy. To help untie the complex knot that is *The Night Listener* it is necessary to establish a framework that grants just enough slack in the knot to loosen it without losing all of its intricacies in the process. Maupin provides hints within the work at how to go about this. He does so by weaving together a tapestry combining autobiographical fact with fiction, self-reflexivity with intertextuality, and a metafictional awareness of his place within the literary community. By splicing together these somewhat disparate ideas into a homogenous whole, Maupin creates a complex and complete work that not only tells a story, but also simultaneously demonstrates an awareness of scholarly conversations and conventions. It is through Maupin's successful merging of literary technique with honest narration that *The Night Listener* reaches beyond mere popularity and places both the work and Maupin, himself, squarely in the realm of literature. One of the methods Maupin uses in *The Night Listener* that illustrates his knowledge of both literary technique and the literary canon is intertextuality or references within a work to other works.

Two foundational truths of intertextual analysis are that all texts are interdependent on one another and are all a pastiche of quotes from other writers. Though the basic idea of intertextuality is widely known, various critical models support different methods of analyzing these references. In her analysis of intertextual traditions within the modern critical academy, Jill Durey asserts that an incomplete usage of the original theory of intertextuality as offered by Mikhail Bakhtin "has resulted in more

confusion and distortion than illumination of the subject matter"(1). Since she is a stolid supporter of Bakhtin's original framework, her belief is that intertextuality is a "dialogue between the novelist and earlier writers, not just between the texts themselves, as subsequent theorists seem to think," as well as being an interpretive model that incorporates "the three main constituents of Bakhtin's theory: that of writers, texts, and intertexts," the same elements "that theorists have found it difficult to incorporate into their expositions and reworkings of the theory"(2). Durey clarifies the theory, and her tripartite constituency is abundant and obvious in *The Night Listener*, as Maupin creates links not only to his other works, but also the works and life of Charles Dickens. Though there is a small intertextual link between *The Night Listener* and his most well known series, *Tales of the City*, in the character of Anna, Gabriel's accountant, more interesting is the intertextual parallel that Maupin creates to Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*.

Many writers refer to other works and authors in their works, but *The Night Listener* does it so repetitively that there can be no denying that Maupin intends something by it. Through a life's work, Maupin has mirrored the literary life of Dickens. *The Night Listener*, in particular, contains specific, repetitive allusions to Charles Dickens. Just as Dickens and Maupin write using serial form, the protagonist of *The Night Listener*, Gabriel Noone, also works through a serialized medium, radio. Early in the work, Gabriel receives some galleys from an editor that wants him to do a "blurb". The book is called *The Blacking Factory* and is by young author Pete Lomax. Though Gabriel explains the connection to Dickens with biographical details from Dickens' life, he offers just this nugget and no more exposition. Just as Dickens was forced to work in

a boot blacking factory, sitting "for twelve hours a day, labelling boot polish and learning the pain of abandonment," his novel *David Copperfield* fictionalizes this same incident and stresses its impression on the young, educated Copperfield's mind (Maupin 27).

While, unlike Pete, Copperfield "was not beaten or starved," he was "coldly neglected" by his stepfather Mr. Murdstone and his sister after Copperfield's mother died(153). He is also prevented from returning to school and instead is sent to work in the Murdstone and Grinby warehouse labeling bottles.

David Copperfield was Dickens' first novel using first-person narration as well as being a work about a writer. As Copperfield writes the blacking factory incident, even with the benefit of hindsight, he still cannot escape the shock of the warehouse's "panelled rooms, discolored with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, [...]; its decaying floors and staircase; the squeaking and scuffling of the old grey rats down in the cellars; and the dirt and rottenness of the place" because these things "are things, not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant"(155). Copperfield has never been able to escape those initial impressions of abandonment, but Dickens and Pete do. Just as Pete is able to still smile and laugh about some of the horrible abuses he has suffered, the older Dickens has more perspective on life and is able to mock the pain of the blacking factory in *Great Expectations*, as Joe Gargary and Mr. Wopsle, upon arriving in London, decide the first thing that must be done is to see if the real boot blacking factory matches the one on the label (210). This autobiographical detail is addressed by Dickens' friend and biographer, John Forster, who finds that the incident in *David Copperfield* is carefully modeled on Dickens own childhood experiences. Maupin equates the sense of loss and abandonment exemplified by Copperfield with the abuse that Pete has

undergone. It is often assumed within criticism that the Blacking Factory incident was formative for the young Charles, who hoped and dreamt of a genteel life, much as Pip does in *Great Expectations*. The abandonment by his family to a life of menial labor granted Dickens a particular insight into the fragile, yet resilient, mind of a child that is easily verifiable in his characters. This resiliency is evident in Pete, whose voice instantly brings Dickens to Gabriel's mind, the voice being that of "some latter-day urchin pickpocket," or "[t]he Artful Dodger by way of Bart Simpson" (28). Though he is but a teenager, his abuse has given him a powerful insight and age beyond his years. Even though he recognizes that "we all have a blacking factory: some awful moment, early on, when we surrender our childish hearts as surely as we lose our baby teeth," this moment's consequences cannot be foreseen, and "the outcome can't be called"(27). Gabriel describes the voice in a way that even people who know little about Dickens will understand. Dickens is widely known for his depictions of orphaned or otherwise wounded children in an authentic manner, while still granting them a measure of toughness and adaptability that only a child possesses. By framing the book and author in this Dickensian light, Maupin is able to give life to a character, Pete, that neither the reader, nor Gabriel will ever see. The entire contents of Pete's book are not given to the reader, but the important details are. He lived a harsh life of sexual abuse by parents and their friends who only thought of him as an object. He escaped from them via the legal system, but had already contracted HIV from one of his encounters. Even though his life has been a Dickensian nightmare Pete manages to still maintain the "scrappy as all get-out" voice that again conjures Dickens' legendary orphans (28). Little does Gabriel know, that his "Blacking Factory" moment is just beginning.

Maupin's relationship to Dickens is not one that exists solely in *The Night Listener*, but also one that can be seen in his standard authorial technique. Both Dickens and Maupin published serially. Dickens actually published many of his works and virtually all of his novels serially, while Maupin's six volumes of his *Tales of the City* series appeared serially in both *The Pacific Sun* and *San Francisco Chronicle* newspapers. In *The Night Listener* Gabriel is a serialized radio show host, telling stories weekly to a diverse audience. Robyn Warhol addresses the effects and purposes of serialization in her article "Making 'Gay' and 'Lesbian' into Household Words: How Serial Form works in Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*" Maupin's early work *Tales of the City* first appeared in serialized installments in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, much as Dickens published his works serially. As Warhol notes, though, it is "an ironic twist worthy of one of his own outrageous plots, [that] Maupin appropriates serial form—arguably the most Victorian of narrative conventions—to propagate a profoundly anti-'Victorian,' anticonventional vision of sexual life"(2). While there is irony in the clash between Victorian convention and modern sensibilities, Maupin does not focus on this structural irony. Instead, he illustrates a situation in which "a gay couple [is] the closest thing the novels present to a 'normal' family" and that his use of "serial structure [...] render[s] the idea of lesbian and gay sex 'ordinary' for a mainstream reading audience"(6). In effect, what Maupin does is rely on "serial form infiltrat[ing] domestic space, blurring the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' discourse" and bringing into the lexicon new "household words"(3). Critic Graham Storey explains that to Dickens, household words were intended to portray "wholesome humor and fancy, of belief in the sanctities of the home" as well as to confront a broad range of social ills

(14). *The Night Listener* cannot be said to have "wholesome humor," but this is to be expected as a continuation of the satiric twisting of Victorian conventions. Maupin is off-color, politically incorrect and subtle, but unlike in the Victorian form, Maupin's characters resonate with life and vitality instead of the vague archetypal characters common in Victorian fiction. His characters are flawed, but not caricatures. Though Maupin does focus on homosexuality in an honest, forthright way, he is attempting to tackle more issues than the straight versus gay dichotomy. He is also using his *Tales of the City* works to make AIDS real for an audience comfortable with the genre of realist, sentimental fiction" and that while simultaneously making

that audience more comfortable with homosexuality, it is also to make the reality of AIDS excruciatingly uncomfortable for a readership that might not be equally touched by the factual accounts running side-by-side in the newspaper with the serials' installments (9).

Maupin, like Dickens, also uses "audiences' emotional affinities for the characters of serialized domestic fiction as a tool for liberal social reform"(11). *The Night Listener*, in particular, does not have the overt humor of his *Tales of the City* works, but rather focuses on creating an empathic connection between the characters and reader. Though Maupin's focus is on the margins of society, his marginalized characters still manage to represent people in the mainstream world. Just as Gabriel is a mid-fifties, gay writer, he is also a spurned man earnestly seeking to fix the problems in a long-term monogamous relationship with the man he loves while trying to reconcile the self-doubts he has about them because of their age difference. Even though this character is one who is marginalized, there is something overwhelmingly normal about him. By normalizing the

outsiders and marginalizing "normal" people, Maupin is attempting to demonstrate, not that homosexuals deserve any particular benefits, but that all humans have quirks and difference. Gabriel's truck-stop fling addresses this idea directly. The reader is confronted with a gay man and straight man engaged in sexual activity together. How are the two different in that moment? Maupin uses this incident and others like it to suggest the hypocrisy of even creating a false dichotomy in which there are pseudo-norms such as gender. In an era of ever increasing media presence, barely a week passes when there is not a news report about a supposedly "straight" man engaged in some non-straight activities.

Just as Maupin incorporates details from his own life into his fiction, so too does Dickens. The most widely known example of this is the blacking factory incident from *David Copperfield*. Dickens critics have seized upon this autobiographical detail in an attempt to develop a more complete understanding of Dickens the man; among these critics are Edmund Wilson and Graham Storey. Wilson identifies within Dickens a psychological trauma resulting from his own childhood working in the boot-blackening factory. It was not because the work was hard or traumatic, but that it shattered the young Dickens's ideal vision of the world. Due to this trauma, though, Dickens establishes a strength of will and vision that grants his works a deep social criticism that Wilson believes is often overlooked (1). Maupin, too, disguises social criticism in his works, with *The Night Listener* exemplifying his ability to frame criticism covertly through the story instead of offering explicit commentary. Where Dickens focuses on class differences and inequalities, Maupin attempts to disempower divisive stereotypes. His characters demonstrate authentic humanity while remaining on the outside edges of

mainstream culture. By illustrating characters in this way, Maupin caters to a main tenet of Queer theory, exposing similarities rather than differences. Inevitably, Maupin's characters, like Dickens', transcend their supposed societal roles. Both authors ability to do this relies on storytelling style. Storey's analysis also offers insight into parallels in the styles of Maupin and Dickens. Like Dickens, Maupin shows, rather than tells, the reader details. Both authors use descriptive text to demonstrate the inequalities and corruption of society's morals without offering any specific ideas or answers to those questions. They refrain from being overly didactic and expository, instead relying on their stories' perspectives to influence the reader.

While Dickens may be considered most famous due to his portrayal of common, ordinary people, Maupin is most famous for his depiction of marginalized characters in fairly common situations. *The Night Listener* in particular addresses a number of marginalized groups: homosexuals, the AIDS afflicted, drug users, victims of sexual abuse, and non-traditional families. Virtually all of Maupin's characters within *The Night Listener* live on the margins, even characters such as Gabriel's father Pap, a bigoted Southern pseudo-aristocrat and his young wife, who was a schoolmate of Gabriel's. The young author, Pete Lomax, is the victim of sexual abuse and is an orphan, while his adopted mother is blind. Maupin also establishes margins within the margins for his characters. The best example of this is Gabriel. He is a marginalized homosexual man due to his age. As the novel begins, the reader finds out that Gabriel is fresh out of a ten-year relationship and his partner was 15 years younger than he. Gabriel feels powerless and impotent, lost in the thought that he will "never be strong enough, never be handsome enough, never be young enough, to really be a man among men"(132).

Maupin also examines age difference between partners, as in himself and Jess, his ex, and his father and young wife Darlie. Ultimately, "*The Night Listener* discloses two embarrassments around age hierarchy: that it is immature and can't last, and that it is [...] pedophilic"(Sinfield 115). In addition, Jess has AIDS and a large portion of their life together revolved around the certainty that Jess would be dying in the relatively near future as had happened to many of their friends. In this framework, Maupin's traditionally marginalized and powerless characters, specifically homosexuals, are used as a new point of focus. By drawing characters that live on the shadowy borderlands of mainstream society, Maupin is able to satirically demonstrate that the traditional mainstream is not that traditional at all. He further uses this recurrent theme to illustrate, much as Queer literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests, that "the recognition that categories of gender, and, hence, oppressions of gender can have a structuring force for nodes of thought, for axes of cultural discrimination, whose thematic subject isn't explicitly gendered at all"(2443). In Maupin's caricature of the Victorian world of Dickens, homosexuality is never the real issue. Just as it was for the Victorians, sex is the issue. Instead of overt didacticism rationalizing and explaining the homosexual mentality, Maupin shows the dark side of heterosexuality instead. In *The Night Listener*, Pete has been victimized by his family and their friends. As Gabriel explains Pete's story to his father for the first time, Pap wonders aloud whether people might get the wrong idea about Gabriel befriending a teenage boy because he is gay. He continues to say that "the boy was abused by gays," at which point Gabriel corrects him, offering that Pete "was abused by pedophiles"(70). In Pete's situation, the demarcating line between straight and gay is irrelevant. This was an issue of sexual assault; the gender identity of

the assailant is unimportant. Later in the work, Gabriel has a sexual encounter at a truck stop in which this point is brought up again. After a torrid fling in the back of a tractor-trailer, Gabriel notices the family pictures attached to the sun visor. Tempers flare as Gabriel suggests they are both normal homosexual men and is rebuffed by the nameless truck driver who attests "he is not a queer"(236). As Gabriel retreats into the night, he is left to "laugh about the postures of the closet"(237). Though the metaphor of "the closet" is fairly common knowledge, this brief reference also seems to allude in some way back to Sedgwick, the author of the notable work of queer theory, *The Epistemology of the Closet*. The connection to Sedgwick's work is one that underscores most of Maupin's fiction, which is not surprising considering Maupin is a well-known and published gay author. The implication of this on Maupin is that, while his work is definitely about homosexual characters, perhaps their homosexuality is not the sole defining portion of their characters, but just one fragment, and that also, the divide between heterosexual and homosexual is not that great of a divide at all, it merely appears as one.

Perhaps the most obvious of the conventions that Maupin uses is metafiction. Linda Hutcheon, a prominent literary theorist who examines metafiction in many of her works, remarks upon the high level of self-awareness that metafiction demonstrates within a work. This self-awareness or "fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" can be referred to as "narcissistic" or, more broadly, as metafiction (1). Common motifs within works of metafiction include stories about authors; stories about the writing process; works that seem to overtly flaunt the reader/author relationship; and works in which the narrator or characters seem to

realize they are in fact characters in a text. Maupin's *The Night Listener* contains all of these motifs. Not only are they present, but seemingly ever present. Intertextuality of the type displayed by Maupin in *The Night Listener* is also metafictional, as he intentionally draws parallels to Dickens' works and life. Far from limiting any conversation, metafictional dialogue is inclusive and expansive. It can only create new spaces for analysis and theory to occupy. By confronting the reader directly in this manner, the novel seeks to break through the fourth wall convention and include the reader as a participant within its fictional confines.

A brief character description of Gabriel Noone, the protagonist, demonstrates many metafictional qualities. Primarily, Gabriel is a writer and a teller of stories. As such, he continually frames the narrative from the writer's perspective. At times, it is difficult to separate the author from narrator, autobiographical fact from fiction. Almost from the outset, Gabriel alerts the reader that he is "a fabulist by trade, so be forewarned," and that he has "spent years looting my life for fiction"(2). Even from the beginning, Gabriel muddles the line between truth and story, much as Maupin does in writing this. As is explained in an interview with Maupin by Dick Donahue in *Publisher's Weekly*, Maupin "wanted to work much closer to home than ever before. And there were things in my own life that I felt I might never explain to myself if I didn't try to contain them in fiction"(Donahue). There are many other semi-autobiographical layers to *The Night Listener*, from Gabriel and Maupin's shared Southern roots, to the central plot of the work, Pete and his book. Maupin, too, received a galley from an editor to provide a blurb for and was pulled into a situation almost identical to Gabriel's. Gabriel also reinforces his role as narrator by explicitly stating, time and again, that he cannot be

trusted with facts and that he has a habit of inserting details to make a story better, even if they are untrue, what Gabriel terms "jewelling the elephant." Gabriel is also "unsure of his literary powers," and considers himself having "broken into the Temple of Literature through some unlocked basement window"(7). Again, the voice of Maupin and Gabriel become muddled. Who should the reader not trust? Even though Gabriel warns the reader time and again not to make "the graceless leap from fact to fiction," the same leap has just been made by his editor friend, Ashe Findlay (18). How is the reader supposed to separate the author from the narrator when they share so many of the same qualities? Just as Maupin rose to fame through his serial stories, Gabriel has become popular through serialized radio shows. These small clues will be readily apparent to those familiar with some of Maupin's biography, but otherwise simply seem to be a part of Gabriel's storytelling technique. Another method that Maupin uses to connect *The Night Listener* to his wider body of works is to conjure images of Maupin's other works within *The Night Listener*. Gabriel's young accountant, Anna, is actually the daughter of a lesbian couple in his *Tales of the City* series. This clever insertion of a continued, created, urban mythology again demonstrates authorial awareness of the larger world of storytelling and writing. Even within the first twenty pages of the book, Maupin litters page after page with references to writing and the act of creation, as well as continually blurring the line between Gabriel as narrator and Maupin as author. The use of metafiction is a common and popular technique for post-modern writers. Metafictional literature represents a refocusing on literary conventions and traditions instead of a focus on linear plot and storyline.

Even aside from examining Gabriel as the writer or storyteller of *The Night*

Listener there are many other metafictional clues that Maupin leaves for the reader to decipher. As the identity of Pete and the horror of his story become clearer, Jess wonders if Pete is exaggerating his story, much as Gabriel admits he is wont to do, in order to make "a better story"(128). As a writer, Gabriel identifies with Pete and is offended at the suggestion that all of the traumatic stories about Pete could be embellished. Instead, he just calls Pete's vivid style "a mechanism," used by "writers [to] explain things to themselves"(129). With the layered, metafictional narrative structure of the work, it is easy to get lost in the allusions. In a certain sense, Maupin, Gabriel and Pete are all the same person. They are all the author. Maupin is a real author, Gabriel a fictional author, and Pete a fictional, phantom author. By that same token, they are all characters in someone's work. Even though Pete turns out to be fictional, it is he who initiated the story. In essence, he created Gabriel's role in the drama, just as Gabriel recreates him through *The Night Listener*. Though he is the narrator and author of the story, Gabriel has "lost his perennial sense of authorship" and feels "as if [he]'d been reduced to a mere character in the story," in which "someone else was controlling the plot"(265). The reader is left with the surreal reality that no one conforms strictly to the role they should be assigned in the text. Pete is an author who is not an actual person, Gabriel is a narrator who is not even sure he can tell a story correctly, and Maupin resorts to fiction to better understand the events outlined in *The Night Listener*. At the end of the book, Gabriel begins a new serial installment of his radio show and starts it by repeating the first paragraph of the first chapter, circling the narrative back to its own beginning after telling the reader he has just finished "the first chapter of this book"(335). Not only is Gabriel the narrator, but he is the author as well? This strange setup by Maupin parallels

the Pete situation. Just as Gabriel is a fictional character authoring a physical, real book, so too, was Pete. There is then a curious moment between him and Pap, in which Gabriel explains he had to change some of the names for privacy and safety reasons. Pap then wonders if that just makes the whole story a lie. Almost as if Maupin was speaking directly to the reader, Gabriel laughs and explains that "[t]hat's what fiction is for, Pap," it offers a chance to write the story the way it should be told, a way "[t]o fix the things that have to be fixed"(342). By repeatedly baring the device throughout *The Night Listener*, Maupin is able to simultaneously tell a number of stories. He is telling Pete's story, Gabriel's story, and via fiction, his own story. The true story wouldn't have been the same; it would have been too messy.

Like Gabriel, Maupin was taken in by a young boy's words of bravery and strength in the face of adversity and abuse. Like *The Night Listener*, there was no real revelation of truth in the end. While Gabriel is pretty sure there is no Pete and that Donna imitates his young voice, he is never sure. Even after meeting Donna and being told that Pete has died, Gabriel gets a call mere days later from Pete, who says they just had to flee the area because it was dangerous. Maupin received no real closure to this either. He penned a blurb for the young author's, Anthony Godby Johnson's, book *Rock and a Hard Place* and was one of many famous people to be ensnared by the hoax. Other notable victims of the hoax were Fred "Mister" Rogers and the gay author Paul Monette. As mentioned earlier, Maupin wanted this novel to be closer to himself than any of his other works. Given the circumstances of the novel and its impetus, this is not that strange. It offers Maupin the same chance to "fix" the problems with the real story, much as Gabriel fictionalizes his experience to fix it. Just as fiction can contain

autobiographical details, so too can autobiography contain fictional details. In his work *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, Timothy Adams examines several well-known autobiographies and notices a strange trend of fictionalization within them. What Adams finds is that, as a product of memory, autobiographical facts can easily be mis-remembered or changed to better suit the purpose of the autobiography. Simply labeling the text an "autobiography" confers no guarantee that it is an exact facsimile of events. Rather, autobiographies function as a personal "mythology" that "seeks to refine the self's folk stories, those successive versions of events we tell ourselves, consciously and unconsciously"(169). Inevitably, memory is fallible, but "what makes autobiography valuable then is not its fidelity to fact but its revelations - to the writer as much as the reader—of self(170). This insight explains many of the autobiographical details found within *The Night Listener* and further supports Gabriel's attempts to tell the story right. In addition to the overarching hoax storyline, numerous other details about Gabriel's life mirror those of Maupin. Just as Gabriel speaks of being in the Navy during the Vietnam War, Maupin served as well. Also, Maupin was raised in Raleigh, North Carolina, again mirroring Gabriel's life as a youth in Charleston, South Carolina. The conservative climate of the South appears in vivid color in Pap, Gabriel's father, a bigoted, pseudo-aristocrat in the Charleston high society. Other truths woven into the fictional fabric of *The Night Listener* "include Gabriel's ten-year relationship with Jess and their recent breakup, and Gabriel's relationship with his father, a key character in the novel"(Gaustad 244).

There is currently only small-talk going on in the critical community about Armistead Maupin and his works. This is odd because not only does Maupin address

critically important thematic issues, but he also demonstrates a skilled hand at the technical side of writing. By creating a work that can be read in different ways, he has managed to create a bridge, however narrow, between scholarly literature and popular literature. On one hand, this is simply a novel full of suspense and enjoyable to read, while on the other it contains a wealth of elements rife with critical potential and waiting to be examined. By aligning himself with Dickens, Maupin creates the mirage that he is a form of modern day Dickens. While at first glance, there seems to be little of Dickens in Maupin, upon closer examination, the parallels between their lives and works becomes clear. Maupin is no Dickens clone; his attention to characters on the margins of society reflects a re-ordering of Dickens' Victorian ideal and its translation for a contemporary audience who find themselves more accepting of diversity. Maupin further weaves together fact and fiction like fine silk, leaving only the slightest noticeable line between the two, if the line is noticeable at all. Not only is *The Night Listener* a well-written story, but its metafictional qualities reach outside the stringent boundaries of fiction and brings fiction and the process of creation to the forefront. Maupin uses metafictional clues to alert the reader to the muddied line between fact and fiction, author and work. By crafting a story chronicling the lives of marginalized people and couching it in the literary techniques of intertextuality and metafiction, Maupin has created a work that relies upon examining the genre and techniques of fiction as methods of interacting with the world and uncovering answers to questions that have no easy answers.

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