

YOUR SNEAK PREVIEW



*A hypnotic,  
horrifying,  
astonishing novel  
that manages,  
against all odds, to  
be redemptive.*

Sara Gruen, author  
of *Water for Elephants*

# THE GARGOYLE

Andrew Davidson



TEXT PUBLISHING CANONGATE BOOKS

Dear Reader,

You have a treat in store. Andrew Davidson's *The Gargoyle* is that rarest of novels, a truly original love story.

But it is more than that, because this is one of those novels in which the power of the storytelling will enthrall you. When we first read the manuscript at Text we were irresistibly reminded of Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind*. Like *Shadow*, this is a novel in which everything is at stake for the characters, and we really care what happens to them, but where the storytelling takes us at the same time on a magic carpet ride into history and strange lands.

This is, quite simply, a fabulously readable book, a novel to lose yourself in, and we promise you that, when you find your way out, the ending won't disappoint.

Andrew Davidson, the author, who comes from Manitoba in Canada, has been on something of a magic carpet ride himself. *The Gargoyle* is his debut novel and he spent six years researching and writing it. His book has now been sold around the world into 25 countries.

This is a magnificent piece of fiction-writing, about the power of stories, the timelessness of love and the possibility of overcoming one's personal hell to make life possible. I'm thrilled to be publishing *The Gargoyle* and I can't recommend it enough.

I hope you love it as much as we do.

Michael Heyward  
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# I

Accidents ambush the unsuspecting, often violently, just like love.

It was Good Friday and the stars were just starting to dissolve into the dawn. As I drove, I stroked the scar on my chest, by habit. My eyes were heavy and my vision unfocused, not surprising given that I'd spent the night hunched over a mirror snorting away the bars of white powder that kept my face trapped in the glass. I believed I was keening my reflexes. I was wrong.

To one side of the curving road was a sharp drop down the mountain's slope, and on the other was a dark wood. I tried to keep my eyes fixed ahead but I had the overwhelming feeling that something was waiting to ambush me from behind the trees, perhaps a troop of mercenaries. That's how drug paranoia works, of course. My heart hammered as I gripped the steering wheel more tightly, sweat collecting at the base of my neck.

Between my legs I had wedged a bottle of bourbon, which I tried to pull out for another mouthful. I lost my grip on the bottle and it tumbled into my lap, spilling everywhere, before falling to the floorboard. I bent down to grab it before the remaining alcohol leaked out, and when my eyes were lifted I was greeted by the vision, the ridiculous vision, that set everything into motion. I saw a volley of burning arrows swarming out of the woods, directly at my car. Instinct took over and I jerked the steering wheel away from the forest that held my invisible attackers. This was not a good idea, because it threw my car up against the fencepost wires that separated me from the drop. There was the howl of metal on metal, the passenger door scraping against taut cables, and a dozen thuds as I bounced off the wood posts, each

bang like electricity through a defibrillator.

I overcompensated and spun out into the oncoming lane, just missing a pickup truck. I pulled back too hard on the wheel, which sent me once again towards the guardrail. The cables snapped and flew everywhere at once, like the thrashing tentacles of a harpooned octopus. One cracked the windshield and I remember thinking how glad I was that it hadn't hit me as the car fell through the arms of the convulsing brute.

There was a brief moment of weightlessness: a balancing point between air and earth, dirt and heaven. *How strange*, I thought, *how like the moment between sleeping and falling when everything is beautifully surreal and nothing is corporeal. How like floating towards completion.* But as often happens in that time between existing in the world and fading into dreams, this moment over the edge ended with the ruthless jerk back to awareness.

A car crash seems to take forever, and there is always a moment in which you believe that you can correct the error. *Yes*, you think, *it's true that I'm plummeting down the side of a mountain in a car that weighs about three thousand pounds. It's true that it's a hundred feet to the bottom of the gully. But I'm sure that if only I twist the steering wheel very hard to one side, everything will be okay.*

Once you've spun that steering wheel around and found it doesn't make any difference, you have this one clear, pure thought: Oh, shit. For a glorious moment, you achieve the empty bliss that Eastern philosophers spend their lives pursuing. But following this transcendence, your mind becomes a supercomputer capable of calculating the gyrations of your car, multiplying that by the speed of the fall over the angle of descent, factoring in Newton's laws of motion and, in a split second, coming to the panicked conclusion that *this is gonna hurt like hell.*

Your car gathers speed down the embankment, bouncing. Your hypothesis is quickly proven correct: it is, indeed, quite painful. Your brain catalogues the different sensations. There is the flipping end over end, the swirling disorientation, and the shrieks of the car as it practices its unholy yoga. There's the crush of metal, pressing against your ribs. There's the smell of the devil's mischievousness, a pitchfork in your ass and sulfur in your mouth. The Bastard's there, all right, don't doubt it.

I remember the hot silver flash as the floorboard severed all my toes from my left foot. I remember the steering column sailing over my shoulder. I remember the eruption of glass that seemed to be everywhere around me. When the car finally came to a stop, I hung upside down, seatbelted. I could hear the hiss of various gases escaping the engine and the tires still spinning outside, above, and there was the creak of metal settling as the car stopped rocking, a pathetic turtle on its back.

Just as I was beginning my drift into unconsciousness, there was the explosion. Not a movie explosion but a small real- life explosion, like the ignition of an unhappy gas oven that holds a grudge against its owner. A flash of blue flame skittered across the roof of the car, which was at a slanted angle underneath my dangling body. Out of my nose crawled a drop of blood, which jumped expectantly into the happy young flames springing to life beneath me. I could feel my hair catch fire; then I could smell it. My flesh began to singe as if I were a scrap of meat newly thrown onto the barbecue, and then I could hear the bubbling of my skin as the flames kissed it. I could not reach my head to extinguish my flaming hair. My arms would not respond to my commands.

I imagine, dear reader, that you've had some experience with heat. Perhaps you've tipped a boiling kettle at the wrong angle

and the steam crept up your sleeve; or, in a youthful dare, you held a match between your fingers for as long as you could. Hasn't everyone, at least once, filled the bathtub with overly hot water and forgot to dip in a toe before committing the whole foot? If you've only had these kinds of minor incidents, I want you to imagine something new. Imagine turning on one of the elements of your stove—let's say it's the electric kind with black coils on top. Don't put a pot of water on the element, because the water only absorbs the heat and uses it to boil. Maybe some tiny tendrils of smoke curl up from a previous spill on the burner. A slight violet tinge will appear, nestled there in the black rings, and then the element assumes some reddishpurple tones, like unripe blackberries. It moves towards orange and finally—finally!—an intense glowing red. Kind of beautiful, isn't it? Now, lower your head so that your eyes are even with the top of the stove and you can peer through the shimmering waves rising up. Think of those old movies where the hero finds himself looking across the desert at an unexpected oasis. I want you to trace the fingertips of your left hand gently across your right palm, noting the way your skin registers even the lightest touch. If someone else were doing it, you might even be turned on. Now, slam that sensitive, responsive hand directly onto that glowing element.

And hold it there. Hold it there as the element scorches Dante's nine rings right into your palm, allowing you to grasp Hell in your hand forever. Let the heat engrave the skin, the muscles, the tendons; let it smolder down to the bone. Wait for the burn to embed itself so far into you that you don't know if you'll ever be able to let go of that coil. It won't be long until the stench of your own burning flesh wafts up, grabbing your nose hairs and refusing to let go, and you smell your body burn.

I want you to keep that hand pressed down, for a slow count of sixty. No cheating. *One Mis-sis-sip-pi, two Mis-sis-sip-pi, three Mis-sissip-pi...* At *sixty Mis-sis-sip-pi*, your hand will have melted so that it now surrounds the element, becoming fused with it. Now rip your flesh free.

I have another task for you: lean down, turn your head to one side, and slap your cheek on the same element. I'll let you choose which side of your face. Again sixty Mississippi; no cheating. The convenient thing is that your ear is right there to capture the snap, crackle, and pop of your flesh.

Now you might have some idea of what it was like for me to be pinned inside that car, unable to escape the flames, conscious enough to catalogue the experience until I went into shock. There were a few short and merciful moments in which I could hear and smell and think, still documenting everything but feeling nothing. *Why does this no longer hurt?* I remember closing my eyes and wishing for complete, beautiful blackness. I remember thinking that I should have lived my life as a vegetarian.

Then the car shifted once more, tipping over into the creek upon whose edge it had been teetering. Like the turtle had regained its feet and scurried into the nearest water source.

This occurrence—the car falling into the creek—saved my life by extinguishing the flames and cooling my newly broiled flesh.

### III

Let me begin with a description of her hair—because, really, it would be impossible to start with anything else. Her hair was like Tartarean vines that grow in the night, reaching up from a place so dark that the sun is only a rumor. It spread wildly

everywhere, dark curls so cascadingly alluring that they looked as if they would swallow your hand if you were lucky enough to run your fingers through them. Her hair was so outlandish that even now, years later, I am compelled to create these ridiculous metaphors, which I know I'll regret in the morning.

Her eyes, also, are going to force me to embarrass myself. They burned like the green hearts of jealous lovers who accuse each other at midnight. No, I'm wrong, they were not green: they were blue. Ocean waves tossed around her irises, like an unexpected storm ready to steal a sailor from his wife. No, wait... maybe her eyes were green: mood eyes, perhaps, like the bejeweled rings that purportedly change color according to one's frame of mind.

She appeared in the burn ward door dressed in a light green hospital gown, with those unsolvable eyes and that riotously entangled hair, and I waited for the gasp that inevitably came whenever someone saw me for the first time. I waited for her to cover her mouth with her hand, in shock and dismay. She disappointed me by only smiling.

"You've been burned. Again."

Generally I make it a rule not to respond to bizarre proclamations by strangers, but, honestly, in this case my silence was because I didn't want her to hear my broken toilet of a voice. My throat was healing, but my ear (the one that still worked) was not yet used to the corrupted quality. I wanted her to know only the voice I had had before, the one that could talk a woman into bed.

In the face of my silence, she spoke again. "This is the third time you've been burned."

I steeled my courage and corrected her. "Once."



A look of confusion crossed her face. "Maybe you're not you."

She moved towards my bed, her eyes never breaking contact with mine, and drew shut the thick plastic curtains around us so that our privacy was assured. She leaned in, within inches of my face, studying me. Nobody had ever looked at me like this, not before the burn and certainly not since. Her eyes, dancing between the blue and the green, had dark bags underneath them, as though she had not slept in weeks. When her lips were almost touching mine, she whispered a word. "Engelthal."

No doubt, reader, you have at some point in your life been face-to-face with an insane person. You can sense the madness immediately, usually even before the person says anything at all, but this nonsensical word clinched it for me. Meeting lunatics is not really that notable, as the world abounds with them; what interested me more was my reaction. Usually upon such a meeting, you only want to get away. If you're walking on the street you avert your eyes and quicken your step, but in the burn ward the only recourse I had was to ring the nurse's call button. But I did not do this. My only response to this possibly dangerous situation was non response. So who was less rational, the wild-haired woman or me?

She took a step back. "You don't remember."

"No." Whatever she thought I should be remembering, clearly I was not.

"That will make it more interesting," she said. "Are you aware that they're trying to poison my hearts?"

"No," I answered again, but I was interested in where such a comment might lead. "Are they?"

"Yes. I can't let them, because I have my penance to complete." She looked around the room, as if she were worried about being

overheard. "How were you burned this time?"

I could form a number of short sentences in a row, as long as I remembered to pause and breathe, so I told her a few quick details about my accident—when, where, how long ago. Then I asked her name.

"You know my name." She kept reaching to her chest as if she were expecting to find something there, which was obviously missing. Her movements reminded me of the way I had always stroked my birth- scar.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"They took away my necklace. They said it could be used to harm someone," she answered. "A young girl died here recently."

I thought about Thérèse. "How did you know?"

"Oh, I know some things about the dead"—she laughed—"but I suppose we're lucky."

"How so?"

"We've outlived a seven-year-old. We've outlived her a hundredfold."

"What are you talking about?"

"I have a dog named Bougatsa." Her fingers, now hanging at her sides, were twitching. "He'll like you."

"I don't like dogs."

"You will."

"They don't like me."

"Oh. Because you're so tough and mean, right?"

Was she really mocking a burn victim?

"What does the name mean?" I asked. "Bougatsa?"

"It's filling in Greek pastry, and my dog's exactly that color. Maybe I could bring him for a visit."

“Dogs aren’t allowed here.” Breath. “Even flowers can kill me.”

“Ha! Don’t try to sell me for dumb. You know you’ve worse things to fear than a dog.” She placed her hand lightly upon my chest, with gentleness. I shivered, not only at the touch but also at the gleam in her eye. “You’re sorely tempted to kill yourself and I can’t say that I blame you. But there is a time and a place for such things, and this is not it.”

Why would she say such a thing? I needed to change the subject. “You look good for seven hundred years old.”

“You don’t,” she said, looking down the length of my body. It was the first time that anyone had made a joke about my burns. “So, what do you think I should do with my hearts?”

“I think...” I paused momentarily, to make her think I was carefully considering the issue, when really I was preparing for the length of the next sentence. “I think you should give them to their rightful owners.”

Her eyes opened wide, as if I had inserted a key into a secret lock, and it made me wonder whether I had just pushed the wrong button on the insanity panel. But, just as quickly, her elated look was replaced by one of suspicion. She moved to one corner of my bed, where she intoned something in another language. “*Jube, Domine benedicere.*” Latin? A short conversation followed, with her talking into the thin air, in a language that I couldn’t understand, waiting for responses I couldn’t hear. After the first imaginary conversation was completed, she bowed deeply and walked to a second corner of the bed to repeat the performance. And then, a third corner. She concluded each conversation the same way she started it—“*Jube, Domine benedicere*”—and she returned to

her original position, with the look of suspicion gone.

“My Three Masters confirmed that it really is you. It is for you that I’ve been perfecting my final heart.”

The very act of saying this clearly caused great emotion to well up inside of her. She looked on the verge of tears as she said, “I’ve been waiting such a long time.”

Just then Beth drew open the curtains. She seemed shocked to find that I had a visitor after so many weeks without, but her surprise quickly turned to concern when she noted the gleam of insane happiness in the woman’s eyes. Then Beth registered that while my visitor was clad in a gown, it wasn’t the visitor’s shade of green but the lighter shade of a patient, and that she had the color-coded bracelet that indicated a psychiatric patient. Beth, professional as always, did not engage my visitor directly but refused to leave me alone with her. She called an orderly immediately to “escort” the woman back to the psych ward.

I felt that I had nothing to fear and, in fact, that it was nice to have a little wildness injected into an atmosphere so oppressively sterile. In the few minutes before the orderly arrived, the woman and I continued talking, calmly, while Beth stood in a far corner with a watchful eye. My visitor whispered so that she would not be overheard. “We have a common acquaintance.”

“I doubt that.”

“You only saw her once, in a crowd. She can’t speak,” she said, leaning in closer, “but she gave you a clue.”

“A clue?”

“Haven’t you ever wondered where your scar really came from?” My visitor reached up to her chest and I thought that she was going to point to the spot where my scar was on my body, but she was only reaching in vain for her missing necklace.

How could this woman guess precisely the words of the note that had been passed to me at the air show? Still, I am a rational man—this was a strange coincidence, nothing more. To prove it, I tried a little misdirection: “My entire body is a scar.”

“Not your burns. The scar that you were born with, the one over your heart.” At this very moment, the orderly arrived and began the process of cajoling the woman to leave. Beth helped, using her body to deflect my visitor towards the door.

My voice was not yet strong but I raised it as much as I could. “How did you know?”

The woman turned back towards me, ignoring the arms pulling at her elbows. “The problem with people like us is that we don’t die properly.”

With that, the orderly took her from the room.



There is a logical explanation for everything; therefore, there was a logical explanation for the woman’s knowledge of my scar.

First explanation: lucky guess.

Second explanation: a joke was being played on me by a friend, someone who thought it would be funny to send in an actress playing a psychotic woman with intimate knowledge of my life. The problems with this hypothesis were that I’d never told any of my friends about the Asian woman at the airfield, and that I no longer had any friends left to play tricks on me.

Third explanation: this woman liked my pornographic films and knew about the scar on my chest. It was a well-documented celluloid fact, as I’d never bothered with makeup to cover it. (Too much sweat in my genre.) Except that I was registered in the hospital not under my porn name but under my real one,

and given the way I looked it would have been impossible to recognize me as the man I once had been.


Final explanation: this woman loved my pornographic films and was a stalker who had tracked down my now-defunct production company. Someone, probably my bastard lawyer, had informed her of my accident and pointed her in the direction of the burn ward.

But if she was an obsessed fan, why didn't she mention my former career? And if she had come looking for the actor that she'd seen, how could she have seemed so pleased to meet the new me? And, finally, while much about the woman's behavior was odd, there was certainly nothing to suggest a hardcore porn addiction. Trust me, I've seen enough perverts in my life to pick them out of any crowd.

I supposed I would just have to ask her when she came again, because somehow I knew that she would. When I informed my nurses that I would welcome any future visits from the woman in the psychiatric ward, they all smiled strangely at me. How sad, they must have thought, that I looked forward to visits from a madwoman. But this did not deter me, and I even asked Beth to find out the woman's name. She refused to do any such thing, so I asked Connie. She also said it was against hospital policy to divulge the specifics of another patient. To this, I suggested that it would be "very, very mean" if Connie did not help me learn the name of the only person who had visited me in so long. As she wanted more than anything else to be kind, Connie soon came back with the information I'd requested.

The woman's name was Marianne Engel.

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A portrait of a man with short brown hair, wearing a black button-down shirt and a black belt, standing against a black background. The image is framed by a dark border.

ANDREW DAVIDSON was born in Manitoba, Canada and graduated in 1995 with a BA in English Literature from the University of British Columbia. *The Gargoyle* is his first book. Attracting enormous interest internationally, it will be published in 25 countries in 2008/2009.

He lives in Manitoba.

*'The Gargoyle is purely and simply an amazement, a riot, a blast. This book plucks the reader off the ground and whirls her through the air until she shouts from sheer abandonment and joy. What a great, grand treat.'* Peter Straub

## *The international publishing sensation*

After rolling his car down an embankment a man lies in hospital with severe burns to most of his body. He endures his pain, his disfigurement, and the excruciating treatments to remove his dead and rotting skin only in the hope of getting well enough to be able to end his life.

But then Marianne Engel—sculptor of gargoyles—appears. She is convinced she nursed him when he was burned once before, long ago. And she unravels a tale of their meeting in 14th century Germany at the monastery of Engelthal. Weaving stories within the story—fables of love in Japan, Iceland, Italy and England—Marianne slowly brings beauty and love into his life.

*The Gargoyle* is a wild, brilliant, beautiful journey, sweeping across centuries and continents. When it ends you'll want to read it again.



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