

Writers' Plot Thickens Into Auction for Free Speech

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Now's your chance to die in a Stephen King novel or be portrayed "in a good light" in the next thriller from John Grisham -- while championing the cause of free speech.

That's the idea behind a charity auction on eBay that starts Sept. 1 and features 16 authors selling character names to the highest bidders. All proceeds go to the First Amendment Project, a nonprofit legal group dedicated to free speech.

In addition to King and Grisham, writers agreeing to sell a name in their upcoming books include Amy Tan, Peter Straub, Nora Roberts, Lemony Snicket and Dave Eggers. All have penned summaries of what they plan to offer in an auction preview at <http://www.ebay.com/fap>

Not all are selling characters. Neil Gaiman has offered to include "your name, or the name of someone you love" on a gravestone in his upcoming novel. Snicket, a popular children's writer, is offering "an utterance" by a certain character, but concedes the spelling may be "mutilated."

The most priceless preview comes from horrormeister King, who writes that he will want his buyer to provide a physical description and nickname ("can be made up, I don't give a rip," he writes) and that "a buyer who wants to die must in this case be female." The winning bidder will appear in King's book "Cell" next year or in 2007.

In all cases, anyone named must grant their permission, said David Greene, executive director of the First Amendment Project. Each auction will last 10 days. To deter fraudulent bidding, once bidding goes over \$1,000, participants will be contacted to verify that they intend to pay, said Eric Gazin, president of AuctionCause, the company managing the event.

The auction was started by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Michael Chabon, who serves on the advisory board of the First Amendment Project. He began soliciting contributions from writers a few months ago, when he realized the group was running out of money. Gaiman suggested he consider an auction modeled after a smaller charity event he held last year, in which he sold the name of a cruise ship in his next novel for \$3,500.

Chabon, who also plans to sell one of his character's names, said almost every writer asked to participate agreed immediately.

One who did balk told him, "It's a great cause, but I just can't give somebody else that amount of control over my book. I need to be able to name my characters."

Chabon admitted that the couple of times he has auctioned off minor characters in his novels -- to raise money for his

children's school, for example -- he wasn't too happy with the results: "The winning names were not even remotely names I would have chosen or invented."

But that paled beside what happened to a novelist who held a similar charity auction years ago, Chabon said: A rival author won and asked that his name be inserted in the novelist's book. That's why he has a line in his preview reserving "the right not to use the name if it is offensive, mischievous, ill-intentioned or inappropriate."

By Leslie Walker

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