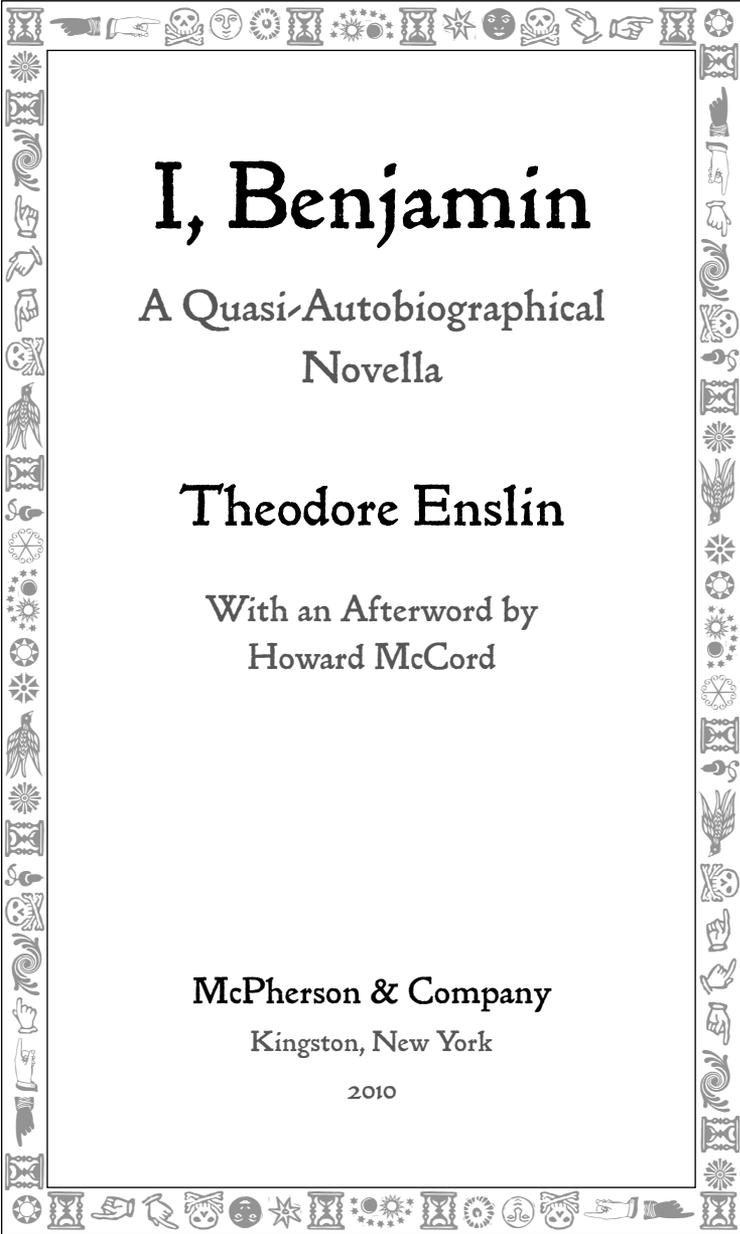


I, Benjamin

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I, Benjamin

A Quasi-Autobiographical
Novella

Theodore Enslin

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Howard McCord

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I, Benjamin

One Summer's Daydream



was allowed to enter their world, but only for a short time. There was a period during the season of the great rains, when my father returned from the dead to deliver a series of historical lectures. He had insisted that my younger friend, Mathias, act as his personal servant. Mathias was to serve him special meals – what the old man had particularly enjoyed during his lifetime – and Mathias was to double as a singing waiter – to render professional performances of operatic arias, particularly from Mozart. One of these sessions included *Là ci darem la mano* from *Don Giovanni*. There was a soprano voice offstage to complete this performance. I sat at table while my father ate, and Mathias sang. I was not allowed to eat, or join in the festivities, and it was doubtful if either of them knew that I was there.

After the weather had cleared somewhat, and my father had left, I decided to go on a short holiday

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journey into the back country which lies just off my left wrist, through the lake and marsh lands, past the blind set up by my friend, Roy Basileus, the painter turned duck hunter, up a gentle incline into hill country, past windmills and small houses where the maintenance crews stayed during their repair sessions. Eventually I reached the top of the ridge, where the last of these huts stands alone. Usually, this one is abandoned and shuttered, but this time it seemed occupied. I was greeted by a young man who explained that he had agreed to stay here for six months, to keep accurate weather reports. The six months were up, and he was returning to headquarters with his data, but there was a young woman staying on. She had lost her way some time back. He had taken her in, and now she still needed someone to look after her, until her companions arrived, and could take her back to her own country. Would I agree to stay on for a while? There were enough supplies, food and fuel, to last for several months. I was about to decline, when the woman herself appeared in the doorway. I knew immediately that I had no choice – I must stay – that something, some power which I could not explain, had led me here. The young engineer finished packing his gear, and bade

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us goodbye. I looked the place over – not badly set up for such an outpost. I said a few words to my new companion. I was by no means attracted to her – something inexplicable in both her looks and manner. She seemed ‘dark.’ Her accent, and some colloquial turns of speech, suggested that she might be Australian. This was re-enforced by constant reference to the outback. Eventually she began preparing an evening meal. In that country there is very little twilight, and it was dark by the time that she had finished. The food was decent enough, although I couldn’t readily identify most of the dishes. There was a wine that was delicious, and strongly fortified, judging from the pleasant languor which it seemed to produce.

There was little talk during the meal, and shortly after it the woman went to a far corner of the one room building, pulled out a foam mattress which was propped against the wall, undressed and went to bed. I sat for a while longer, finishing another glass of wine, and looked for my own sleeping arrangement. Yes, there was another foam pad close to the door.

It became light as quickly as it had turned dark the night before. I lay for a few minutes, trying to remember where I was. I became aware of the

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woman, lighting the cookstove, and preparing breakfast. Finally I rose and washed my face in cold water from a rain barrel, just outside the door. My, perforce, companion gave me a curt greeting, and set two cups of boiled coffee on the table, indicating which was mine. I drank it, and ate a heavy biscuit from a plate which she set between us. She said that she was going out to pick strawberries—no invitation that I should come with her. Actually a relief. I had brought along several books in my knapsack, and I spent a good part of the morning reading one of them.

Eventually the woman returned with a small basket of fruit. She prepared a lunch which we ate in silence. Eventually I attempted a conversation, complimenting her on her cooking, and the strawberries. She nodded. Eventually I asked her name. She scowled, and said, "Let us remain anonymous." End of conversation. To stay any longer in an atmosphere which had grown decidedly chilly was unacceptable. I got up from my chair abruptly, and left for a walk. It was a fine summer's afternoon, warm, except for an occasional puff of wind from the north, apparently from distant mountains which were still covered with snow. I found my own patch of strawberries, and picked

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enough to fill several pockets of my light jacket.

But when I returned, Ms. Anonymous greeted me almost as if we were friends. She had been looking at the book which I had been reading that morning—a history of Minoan Culture, and the ill-defined cult of matriarchy. She said that this tradition had long interested her, and then went on to say that she had recently attended a series of lectures on the subject. I realized that these must have been my father's lectures, and that we had been there together. I told her of my relationship. She simply nodded. "Ah."

Then she asked me if I knew Mathias, the servant who had sung Mozart arias while serving dinner to my father. When I had recovered from my surprise, she said, "But he is no musician," and sang a few bars from Zerlina's response to Don Giovanni. I realized that she was a musician, and must have been the offstage soprano at those dinners. I tried to say more, but it was obvious that the conversation had ended. She started to prepare the evening meal. I tried to make small talk at various times, but she would have none of it. The evening ritual was the same as it had been the night before. And so to bed.

Many more days passed in much the same

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way as the first one had. We were no closer to a friendship than at the beginning.

Then one evening, perhaps after more wine than usual, Ms. Anonymous undressed as usual, preparatory to going to bed, but she held out her hand, and said, "Yes." I was a bit frightened, but followed her to her corner. We made love. It was not wholly successful. It seemed as if there was a great deal of anger and restraint still between us. After it was over, she indicated that I was to go to my own corner.

Days passed as if nothing had happened. And then it happened again, a little less a standoff, and she did not repulse me when I made it clear that I would like to remain with her. From then on we slept together.

Finally we had visitors. Six men and women whom I had never seen before, and the engineer who had persuaded me to stay on. These were obviously the lost friends of Ms. Anonymous, and their speech was similar to hers. There was also that indefinable 'dark' quality, which seemed to hang like fog around them. They were not effusive in their greetings to a lost companion, merely indicating that we would all be leaving in the morning – that the cabin would be locked, and

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I should go home. They would stay in another of the huts that night. They all left, including the engineer, who was obviously a compatriot. We were to remain at the outpost one last night. For the first time our lovemaking seemed to have no barriers.

I woke early. It was still dark. Ms. Anonymous was already up and dressed. She came toward me, holding a lighted candle. Her other hand was extended. A firm handshake. But I started up, and upset the candle. Some drops of hot wax fell on the back of my left hand, and burned me.

She was gone, and I heard nothing from her companions. Nothing for it, but to return by the road along my left wrist. I was soon in familiar territory. I resumed my former life as a rather nondescript citizen of the village where I lived. I began to forget my experiences in the back country. Details blurred. Then one day my friend, Roy Basileus, brought me a pair of ducks for dinner. I had not seen him for some time, and we chatted for several hours. Suddenly he mentioned the country of the windmills, and a woman who had been lost there for several months—a soprano from a tiny country—he thought it might have been Ultima Thule. He appeared not to know

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of my part in this. After a few moments I asked him if he knew the soprano's name? "Why yes. I think it's Zerlina."

Nothing remains as a memento from that time, except for several scars on the back of my left hand.

I, Benjamin, had been allowed to enter their country, but only for a short time.