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## Notebooks

Last week I lost a notebook and found it again at the weekend, my relief tempered by disappointment when I turned the pages and saw how little I'd used it. Notebooks are a writer's workshop, says Somerset Maugham in the preface to his own published selection of sketches and impressions, but if so mine was deserted. Where were the great ideas and suggestive phrases? All I could see were offcuts and shavings, odd memos to an absent creator ('put the pterodactyl *after* A comes round'). And, of course, the gaps in the record, the stories that stopped or weren't written at all: 'He was everywhere, his head poking out of the fireplace, those wide eyes bobbing about in the soup.'

Entries in notebooks aren't dated (a dated notebook is a diary), but omissions and changes in direction often signify a break in activity – illness, death, work – from which the writer returns in a different hand, re-inked by experience. What was I thinking all that time? What was I reading? Perhaps I was writing properly. 'You should have been an actor', the long gaps say, like friends at an awkward reunion when they are reminded of something funny from the past, when the things they have done with their lives (like proper writing) seem for a moment to be the things they ought not to have done, when the path not taken shines particularly brightly.

I was an actor briefly, in the late 1980s after university, when I joined a small ensemble called The Irish Company and found myself cast as James Joyce in a dramatic anthology by Gemma O'Connor of extracts from Irish literature called *Ferocious Chastity*. It was a good selection, the title phrase of which was borrowed from Sean O'Casey (who may have borrowed it from Karl Marx), and used to describe the