

# FrameWork 10/16

Jacquelyn Ross on Derek Sullivan

## The Scholar & The Ant

By Jacquelyn Ross

**T**here once was a great bookish man who lived in the country. He lectured once a week at the university in the neighbouring town, but otherwise passed his time doing research of a very complex kind. He woke each morning with a furrowed brow, lurching with a mug of piping hot coffee towards his study where he worked all day long hunched over mountains of paper, occasionally clutching the ends of the heavy cherry wood desk with his large hands when he felt as if he might be on the cusp of grasping something. Having never married, he wedded his work, disregarding etiquette and taking each meal over an open book. He answered the phone when it rang from time to time but the majority of his days were spent in silence, talking only to the birds, and once, to an ant who appeared on the ledge of his open window as he was taking in the magic evening light.

“Hello!” said the Ant, from the windowsill.

The Scholar looked up from his work, wondering who might be addressing him. There was not a man in sight. Outside, fields of wildflowers wriggled in the summer wind; grasshoppers clicked lightly. He stuffed a finger into his left ear to loosen some of the dark yellow wax that had been building up there. He rubbed what he found off onto his trousers.

“Sir, I wonder how you are finding that book! The author’s past work was delightful and I would like to know the bent of this latest protagonist! Is he amicable, do you think? Empathetic?”

The Scholar squinted out through his dirty reading glasses, refocusing on the black speck on the window’s ledge. An ant, like any other, looked back at him with a curious intensity—a look of, dare I say, intelligence—as if he might be more self-aware than others like him.

“Who is that, who asks me about this book I am reading?” the Scholar asked the black speck. “It is a fine enough book of fiction but it presents me with many problems. You call this writing ‘delightful’, but I read for research, not pleasure. Now hurry along so I might continue with my very important work.”

But the Ant was persistent; the Scholar’s derision had made him stubborn. “Would you believe it if I told you,” the Ant said, “that I was once a critic for the Los Angeles Review of Books?”

“Be gone with you, who says such nonsense! An ant cannot read, much less form opinions about literature!”

“Oh, but ants are very hardworking. I read from morning ‘til night! Neither should you overlook me for my size, for my smallness allows for very close reading.”

The Scholar paused to consider this tiny being, whose fierceness was unlike any ant he had previously encountered. Glancing at his clock, which read a quarter past seven, the Scholar reckoned he had already put in a good day’s work and might afford a short chat with this small ant. Despite his initial irritation (he hated to be interrupted) he had to admit that it was stimulating to converse with a fellow reader. His was a solitary, country life: productive in its stillness but lacking in intellectual companionship.

"Forgive me," the Scholar responded, "for not getting off to a very good start. I am in fact very interested to know, what is the opinion of an ant in regards to this unusual piece of contemporary literature? You see, for a lifetime now I have concerned myself only with the grandest narratives: stories of heroes and villains, war, peace...sweeping historical texts with high stakes, noble pursuits of love or truth..."

"...So when a colleague—and one whose work I respect greatly—left this curious book open on her desk the other day, naturally, I was intrigued. Unfortunately the book has turned out to be a colossal disappointment. Murky, rambling, utterly obtuse. What should I make of such an odd thing?"

"Dear Scholar," the ant replied. "I can only speak from experience, and from a perspective very close to the ground. But I dare ask: have you ever been bored?"

"Bored? Why no, I pass each day immersed in my work. I have no time to be bored when there's so much to do." The Scholar gestured in an epic fashion to the momentous paper topography of his study.

The Ant nodded sympathetically. "I, too—an ant—have plenty of work to do. Tedious, straightforward work, walking back and forth carrying this crumb or that one to my gluttonous Queen...Still, it was boredom that gave me reason to read..."

"I'm not certain where you are going with this, friend," the Scholar responded. "I hope you are not suggesting that I should be in any way dissatisfied." His once-hot cup of coffee was now cold, but he sipped from it anyways, increasingly distracted by their conversation.

The Ant continued, nonplussed: "Imagine my surprise stumbling over the pages of *Gulliver's Travels* between the fruit bowl and the door! Since that day I've taken my crumbs on many, many detours. And what I can tell you from my experiences—from many years as a vagabond, walking and reading—is that meaning is, above all, *relative*."

The Scholar adjusted his eyebrows with mild interest, "Relative?"

"...And value—a question of scale!" the Ant exclaimed, puffing out his chest with pride at some epiphany that remained, for the Scholar, rather abstract.

"Excuse me, dear Ant, that is a wonderful notion, but I don't know how all of this relates to the book in my hand. I ask you again: What do you make of this puzzling work?"

"Ah," the Ant replied, with a sounded exhale. "Such economy of language! Such intellectual acuity! Have you ever in all your days encountered something so small, yet full of life? Something so inconspicuous, so mundane, that you risk overlooking it entirely?"

The Scholar cocked his head to one side to reflect.

"To the reader of grand narratives who knows only heroes and villains," the Ant continued, "I have but one piece of wisdom: linger in your confusion and see what results."

The Scholar sighed, disappointed in the Ant's response. Comfortably accustomed to clarity and concrete things, he felt cheated by the Ant's roundabout insights. He would have thought that such an experienced book critic would have had something more to offer him.

A sudden wind came in off the field. The sun was beginning to set and the Scholar yawned. Saying goodnight to the Ant, who was still going on about something or other, the Scholar reached towards the latch that held open the window. While on most days the windowpane stuck stubbornly in the frame, this time it came down smoothly and in an instant, catching the Scholar unaware. Crashing closed with a thud and a lingering rattle, the mortified Scholar hastily hoisted open the fallen guillotine only to find the Ant's body, crushed, a tiny black speck.

After considering for a moment the tender corpse of the inquisitive reader he knew only too briefly, the Scholar brushed the Ant's remains out the window with the back of his hand. It was the first thing he had done in quite a while that gave him pure pleasure.