



28  
 Christopher Lappas  
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One of the highest praises I can offer for a debut novel is, when I have finished reading it, to immediately hope that the author writes another one.

28 is the central character of this complex work and she is an enigma – to herself, to the narrator, Scribe, and to the reader. However, Christopher Lappas treats us to three other important and strong characters: Scribe himself, Scribe’s young son Andre and Scribe’s X.

The number 28 is everywhere in the book: the title, the number of chapters, the floors of a building, almonds, beads and, of course, 28 herself. Even the number of pages of text is devisable exactly by 28 and Ilura Press has set the price at \$28. The author also asserts that he took twenty-eight years to write the novel. There is a hint of Toni Jordan and Graeme Simsion in Scribe’s interest in numbers as he tries to make sense of his interactions with 28.

The principal setting for the novel is a hospital, with 28 inhabiting a room on the lowest level and Andre lying in a coma up on another level. We observe the characters emerging in their unique ways – 28 to Scribe, Scribe to himself and, hopefully, Andre back into the world. Only X seems to be stuck in a dystopian world of her own construction.

However, as the novel progresses, very little is as it first seemed. Scribe and 28 both struggle with demons and issues from their pasts. This could have been a straightforward, evolving love story, but it isn’t. If anything, it is a story of the development of the love that 28 and Scribe each develop for themselves, or at least the possibility of it. The reader is also left wondering whether X will ever change her attitude and behaviour, especially towards Scribe.

The narrator is given the name Scribe by 28, as he documents stories she tells him, which may or may not be 28’s own story.

Lappas appears to have taken great care with the way he has structured this novel and with the layout and design of the physical book, including the number of pages. Even the numbering system of the twenty-eight chapters reflects the recurring references to levels in buildings. So too the things said by the characters and what is later revealed about them, or what the reader may suspect about them. On the very first page, 28 says, “Oh, I won’t fall, I never fall.” The possibility of falling recurs throughout the novel, and then chapter twenty-six is called ‘Falling In’.

Scribe is drawn in to 28’s stories as he records them and has the rest of his life on hold, waiting for Andre to wake out of his coma. He muses, “Should I question what I write? Should I question my sanity when my discussions with 28 are the most tangible aspects of my life right now? ... Visions of my son are sadly like a dream, but I must try to make them my reality.”

‘Reality’ and ‘sanity’ and what these mean are an important part of the novel. The reader is repeatedly invited to ask, “Whose reality?” and “What is sanity?”

Although it is not important to this as a novel standing on its own, I was led to wonder how much autobiographical material has found its way into the narrator’s own narrative. Scribe talks about his Greek-Turkish antecedents and the author has his name on the cover of the book as ΧΡΗΣΤΟΣ ΛΑΠΠΑΣ – a nod to his own background.

On the publisher's website, Christopher Lappas says about the process of writing this book: "When I began writing 28, one of my intentions was to create a plotless novel, or at least to come as close as possible to what could be considered plotless. I soon found it was impossible to achieve anything like I had intended." In the process, he has created something unlike any novel I have ever read – it is almost a deconstruction of a novel. Yet the characters are there in all their complexity. It is a wonderful exploration of humanity, relationship, what it means to be sane and whether it is possible to escape oneself.

I found reading this book a delightful adventure. It is complex and unusual and had me wanting to keep reading (in bed), even as my brain was telling me to turn out the light and get some sleep. Having enjoyed the adventure, I now look forward to reading it again to try and understand more thoroughly the way the author has constructed this multi-layered work of genius.