

## SIGNATURES by Stephen Dixon

I'm walking along the streets, on my way from this place to not particularly that, when a man stops me. "You in show business?"

"No."

"You look like you are."

"You made the same mistake a month ago when I was on a subway token line."

"That so? See any stars around?"

"They're probably all inside. You're the guy who collects celebrity signatures."

"That's right." He's looking around, hasn't time to talk.

"Doing all right by it?"

"I make out."

"This your best block?"

"What? Fifty-seventh? Good, but that's all. Hey there, Mr. Jones," he says to a man coming out of the restaurant we're in front of. Mr. Jones stops. The man goes over to him. They talk. Mr. Jones signs one of the three-by-five-inch sheets of paper the man's taken out of a leather pouch. "Thanks, Mr. Jones."

"Anytime," and he hails a cab.

"Oh don't you worry, I'll catch you again."

"As I said, Henry, anytime."

Henry looks at me, starts away, comes back. "You sure you're not in show business or famous of any kind?"

"Positive."

"Let me be the judge of that. What do you do?"

"Paint."

"Billboards? The town red? Real paint?"

"Pictures, pictures."

"Let me have your signature."

"I don't want to give it out."

"Everyone obliges me with their signature. Senators. Prime ministers. The uncrowned King of Spain. Let me have it."

"I can't write."

"I'm not asking for a message. Just your name."

"My signature's never the same. It changes from day to day."

"That'll make it even more valuable. Each a rarity unto itself."

"My hand hurts. The other one can't even scrawl. You haven't paper long enough to fit my last name. I'm sorry."

"I've had hard ones but never like you. You know Kit Gristead?"

"No."

"The Delicious Miss Kit. Movies. Television. Everything. The stage. Not now but always."

"Never heard of her."

"Everybody has. My dead uncle fifty years in the grave didn't, but everybody alive since she was maybe five including I'll bet faraway aborigines who don't even know their own president's name. Well she came up to me when I didn't see her and asked for one of these papers to sign. Then she said 'Next time I don't want to have to beg you, Henry.'"

"I don't want my signature getting around and maybe being forged."

"No forgers. I sell them to signature dealers. Reputable men. If they're good, they're mounted in frames or pressed into see-through paperweights or individual or whole sets of plastic dinner plates and go for a high price. If they're just fair to almost nobody, they're put in a fancy shoe box in the dealer's store and go for anywhere from three to eight a dollar. Besides, whose signatures are more known than the present treasury secretary and treasurer's who when they were

in town I also happened to get each to sign, and no checks of theirs have ever been forged.”

“When I become somebody, I’ll sign.”

“My trick’s to get you before you become somebody. Then when you do make it I check out your name with my files and the older the date you signed it, the more your signature’s worth. If you never become somebody you’re in my file for life, so what’s there to lose? If I die, my files are burned.”

“I’ll draw a little picture on your paper; that’s all I’ll do.”

“I collect signatures, not art.”

“If I become semi- or permanently famous my drawing will be worth a lot more money than just my name.”

“To a museum or gallery, but those aren’t the ones I deal with. My man wants from me full names and dates and maybe your moniker if it’s a familiar one, but no more. Hold it. How you doing, Mr. Wilson?” he says to a man walking past with a boy, a girl, and a dog.

“Hello, Henry.”

“Sign your name for me today?”

“Anything you say. What’s today, the fourth?” He signs.

“Who’s he?” the boy asks his father.

“Somebody you could say is famous in his own right.”

“I’m not famous. You are. Even your kids are more famous than me and probably even your dog. Any of them in show business yet?”

“She is. He isn’t. The dog does commercials.”

“Sign your name, young Miss Wilson?”

“Do it, honey.”

She signs.

“And I hope this signature will be worth something to me one day,” Henry says.

“The way she’s going it’ll be worth much more than mine in a few years.”

“Thank you, Henry,” the girl says.

They go.

“What’s he do?” I say.

“Mark Wilson?”

“The aviator?”

“The playwright. He’s good for two of your most successful plays in town today and maybe six more on the road. He’s worth millions.”

“I don’t know his work.”

“Comedies. Domestic entanglements. I stand in back in all his shows free. Fast-paced hysterical sellouts every night. Don’t kid me.”

“He didn’t say anything funny. But this seems to be a good spot for you here. Fifty-seventh near Seventh. Right out in front. Awning protection if it rains. Plaza Hotel just as good?”

“Central Park exit, mornings around twelve. One of the best.”

“And the best?”

“Why tell you? Information like that’s worth money and I’m grooming my own man. Somewhere in the forties off Broadway, but you’d never find exactly where in twenty years. You’ll sign now so I can be on my way?”

“One condition. You tell me what month it is and let me borrow your pen.”

He gives me a slip of paper on top of a cardboard the same size and his pen. Then he grabs them out of my hands before I can sign when he sees two women entering the restaurant. “Lisa Galivanti,” he says.

“Yes. I know you?”

“I know of you, Miss Galivanti. Could you sign your name for me please? I’m Henry Wax.”

“I don’t give my autograph to anyone, Mr. Wax.”

“I’m all right. Presidents have signed for me.”

“I wouldn’t even sign it for a president once.”

“You and this guy ought to get together.”

“I know him and we have got together. Hello, John.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t shake hands with strangers.”

“God, you’re so stupid sometimes. How have you been?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak to strangers either.”

“Who’s your friend?” the woman she’s with says.

“Like to come in and have a bite with us?” Lisa says.

“I’m not properly dressed. No tie.”

“I’ll get them to let you in without one.”

“I’ve no shirt under the coat.”

“You can wear a busboy’s jacket.”

“I always looked very bad in a busboy’s jacket without a tie.”

“Will you please sign this, Miss Galivanti? Your signature’s very important to me.”

“Sign it for him, Miss Galivanti,” I say.

“You know I never sign. I hate the word autograph. I think it demeans the person who asks me to sign.”

“This is a signature, not an autograph,” Henry says. “Your signature. I’ve thousands. It’s my business and pastime. I sell the famous and save the to-be’s and you’re famous.”

“He just got Mark Wilson’s,” I say.

“Mark’s? Well if Mark can sign and John says I should sign, I’ll do it this one time.”

“You’re a good one to stick around with,” Henry says, patting my back.

“Will you join us, John?” Lisa says.

“No.”

“Pill.”

“Thank you, Miss Galivanti,” Henry says. “Thanks very much. This one makes my day.”

They go in.

“You turned down something like that?” Henry says. “If you can then I shouldn’t feel so bad about your turning me down before. She’s one of the hottest. If I could get her name a dozen times today I’d get it and tomorrow and the next day too.”

“I’ll give you her old letters to me if you want.”

“They have her signatures on them?”

“Several with her first name. Mostly with her nick and pet names. Lots of O’s and X’s though and sometimes very spicy stuff. Highly commercial. She’s a good writer too.”

“I’ll just take the parts where her signatures are. I’ve my reputation also and don’t feel like branching out. Have any of those? First and last names both?”

“With dates. Canceled checks. Duplicates of old income-tax forms. Legal documents with both our names, I’m afraid. Marriage license. Divorce decree. They ought to be worth a bundle to you.”

“Send them to me and I’ll give you fifty cents apiece for them and I’ll pay the postage.”

“I told you I’d give them away.”

“Come on, you could use the money. And this will inspire you to dig up them all. Been with any other famous people where you have their signatures with dates?”

“Few.”

“Anything you got. Same fee goes all around. For the blurred ones I can only give a quarter. Here’s my address. And ten to fifteen cents for Galivanti’s handwritten first or pet names with or without the letters attached. Though to save postage you should scissor the signatures off, but leaving as much blank space around them as you can.”

“Anybody ever ask you for your signature?”

“Another collector once. Young. Thought I’d be famous for what I do. I’m the best at this, but that doesn’t rate me, though he didn’t have the head to know. Want to sign up now for the future?”

I sign.

“Date too.”

Today’s date.

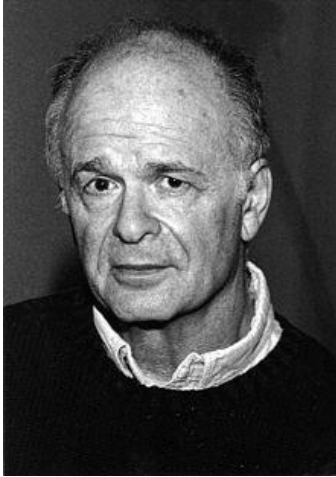
“And don’t go into my trade, you hear? You’ll kill me off.”

“It’ll be interesting to see what value my signature has for you in the next twenty years.”

“You’ll know.”

I go. He stays.

### About the author



**Stephen Dixon** (born **Stephen Bruce Ditchik**) (1936–2019) was an American novelist and short-story writer. He was born on June 6, 1936, in New York, graduated from the City College of New York and was a faculty member of Johns Hopkins University. He taught writing for many years in the Writing Seminars.

During his lifetime he published seventeen novels and eighteen story collections. He was nominated for the National Book Award twice for both of his the most well-known novels: *Frog* (1991) and *Interstate* (1995). The most recent of his short story collections are *Dear Abigail and Other Stories* (2018) and *Writing, Written* (2018).

His short story “Signatures” is taken from the collection “14 Stories” written in 1980.