

THE SHELF

4 fictional case studies in incel pathology

Patrick Bateman's violence is compulsive, spontaneous, and nihilistic; it is not a reaction. The women have not done him any wrong. Much like the Underground Man, Bateman sees himself as superior. But unlike the former, Bateman takes action in a postmodern world, showing how the tides have changed with time, and how he is one of the most repulsive portrayals of an incel in literature.

SAJAL HOSSAIN DHALY

You should never judge a book by its cover, but you can definitely judge a person by the covers lining their bookshelf. The term 'incel', shorthand for 'involuntary celibate', gained traction through internet subcultures. But incel ideology long predates the word itself. Inceldom is about sexual absence, of course, but also how the loneliness caused by celibacy is converted to entitlement. Literature, particularly those taking place in modern settings, has always featured alienated men struggling with their masculinity, desire for intimacy, and their role in society. Today, the term has been relegated to a mere derogatory slang slung around as a stand-in for "you have no social life."

The following are books populated with characters that embody—or orbits close to—what is now called inceldom. If you know someone who agrees with any of these characters, it may be time for an intervention.

Notes From Underground
Fyodor Dostoevsky; Richard Pevear, Larissa Volokhonsky (translators)
Vintage Classics, 1864

The Underground Man is frequently referred to as a proto-incel in modern literary discourse, and with good reason. A spiteful, self-loathing, misogynistic middle-aged man squatting under a railway track in self-imposed isolation, the Underground Man displays almost all traits synonymous with inceldom. A true hallmark of the incel archetype is wounded masculinity, and the Underground Man reeks of it, using his self-aggrandising narration as a way to mask it. The titular notes themselves function as not only the narrative structure, but as a key component that is widespread in inceldom. Incels—the social pariahs of modernity—resort to manifestos to express their thoughts and inner turmoils in a monological manner, for incels often cannot engage in dialogue, thanks in part to their social awkwardness.

The Underground Man's sense of self-importance and ego stands at a crossroads with his wounded masculinity; his spite and loathing towards people beneath his social standing—such as sex workers like Liza—stands in the way of his desire for affection and intimacy. When he is rejected by Liza, he retaliates through a barrage of verbal assaults, calling it his intellectual superiority.

The Catcher in the Rye
J.D. Salinger



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Little, Brown and Company, 1951

Holden Caulfield is an incel without the misogyny. Unlike the Underground Man, he does not convert rejection into entitlement. His discomfort with sexuality stems from grief, fear, and innocence. When faced with sexual opportunity, he withdraws rather than lashing out. Women are not his enemies; he idealises and protects them, almost like a white knight. This is seen when he is protective of Jane Gallagher, particularly in relation to Stradlater, the two of which can be likened to the "Stacey" and "Chad" archetypes popular in inceldom. However, Holden is merely sexually inexperienced, and is uncomfortable with adult sexuality. He is not contemptuous towards it, nor blames women for his shortcomings. His contempt is rather directed at society, and all of its "phonies."

Holden is often forgiven for his sexual juvenility in literary discourse because of the sexual trauma he alludes to having gone through himself throughout the novel. Perhaps this is the singular

factor keeping Holden Caulfield from turning into the Underground Man, and what makes *The Catcher in the Rye* such a longstanding beloved coming of age novel. Because despite Holden Caulfield's faults, underneath he is just a kid trying to do good.

Fight Club
Chuck Palahniuk
W. W. Norton & Company, 1996

"I am Joe's Enraged, Inflamed Sense of Rejection": The unnamed Narrator of *Fight Club* occupies a different sphere of inceldom. He is not celibate nor overtly misogynistic, but he shares with incels disdain for society, sexual frustration, and a fragmented masculinity. Also of note, the narrator literally has to invent an alter ego, Tyler Durden, in order to access desire and intimacy with his love interest Marla Singer. That relationship itself is awkward and dysfunctional, yet the narrator never directs those failings towards Marla. Instead, he directs his rage at late-stage capitalism, emasculation, and the loss of meaning in modernity.

Tyler Durden's rhetoric is anti-feminisation and embracing a masculinity that is almost mystical, all of which overlaps with incel talking points. However, to Palahniuk's credit, he does not romanticise this worldview. Tyler Durden is not a solution for the narrator's predicament; he is a symptom born out of his most violent, depraved fantasies. The book's narration reads like a manifesto itself, and the narrator's repetitive deadpan declarations reasserts how these are the innermost thoughts of a person who is on the verge of moral collapse.

American Psycho
Bret Easton Ellis
Vintage Books, 1991

Patrick Bateman represents the opposite extreme of inceldom. Where incels are defined by social exclusion, sexual rejection, and wounded masculinities, Bateman is defined by having excess of all that a traditional incel claims to desire. He has the looks of a "Chad", is privy to consensual sexual encounters, is financially stable,

and has a favourable social standing. Despite all of these, Bateman still feels hollow, and is a raging misogynist.

The character highlights how inceldom is not simply about celibacy, but also about the loss of morals and dehumanisation. He does not hate women because they reject him, rather because he does not recognise their humanity. Patrick Bateman's violence is compulsive, spontaneous, and nihilistic; it is not a reaction. The women have not done him any wrong. Much like the Underground Man, Bateman sees himself as superior. But unlike the former, Bateman takes action in a postmodern world, showing how the tides have changed with time, and how he is one of the most repulsive portrayals of an incel in literature.

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CREATIVE NONFICTION

MELBOURNE:

Where weather performs live

FARHANA SULTANA

When I first landed in Melbourne in January, the heat greeted me like a shockwave. 45 degrees Celsius, feeling like 48. The air pressed against my skin: dry, bright, unyielding. For a brief, disoriented moment, I wondered if I'd taken the wrong flight and ended up somewhere near the Sahel. I had no idea Melbourne could be this hot.

Australia's weather can be explained on paper: reversed seasons in the Southern Hemisphere; an ocean-ringed continent with a vast, dry interior; the driest inhabited landmass; and the powerful push and pull of El Niño and La Niña. But what science captures in maps and diagrams, Melbourne delivers through sensation. Across the continent, climate shifts are like pages in a book: the tropical north breathing through its wet and dry seasons, the arid interior stretching into heat and silence, the temperate south cooling



Flinders Street station, Melbourne CBD



Cherry Lake, Altona, Melbourne

I often joke that Melbourne's weather has no parents—it behaves like a spoiled child that never learned any manners. And I smile because some days that feels exactly right. The theatrics, the sudden sulks and sudden warmth, the grand entrances and messy exits—they all echo the long tradition of poets trying, and failing, and trying again to capture this place in words.

into winter and even offering snow in the alpine spine. The coastline softens some edges, sharpens others. Heatwaves, bushfires, floods, and cyclones thread themselves into everyday language. And what the atlas shows as neat climatic zones, Melbourne performs live—sometimes all in a single day.

Before I left, my Aussie (informal nickname for Australians) supervisor in Bangladesh—practical, quietly wise—offered one piece of advice: "Always keep an umbrella and a sweater in your bag." At the time it sounded like courtesy. Later I understood it was practically a Bible instruction. The light in Melbourne does not simply shine; it asserts itself. My cheeks, hands, and feet learned this quickly by tanning. Coming from Bangladesh, where skincare is woven into daily life and still

affordable, I suddenly realised how costly self-protection could be here. Standing beneath that white, unblinking sky, I thought: This heat alone could send me home.

And yet, I stayed.

What I learned more slowly was that this sun asks for awareness. In Australia, sunlight is treated with a kind of respect—spoken about openly, planned around, taught early in schools as it comes with consequences. The brightness that bleaches the sky also carries a risk people speak about plainly: skin cancer. Colleagues reminded me, gently but firmly, that this is not vanity or overcaution; it is care. The 1980s "Slip (on a shirt), Slop (on sunscreen), Slap (on a hat)" is not a slogan here; it is a public health memory. I began to see the sun not only as warmth, but as something to

enjoy mindfully, with small acts of preparation that help you stay safe while still appreciating its brightness.

Melbourne sits by the ocean and seems to borrow its temperament. One moment the day burns white and blinding; the next, a cool change sweeps in, quick and insistent. Clouds gather, rain needles down, and then, without apology, the sun returns. Calm follows disruption, and light follows storms.

"Four seasons in one day" is not a saying here. It's routine.

Australians have tried for generations to name this restlessness of land and sky. Dorothea Mackellar reached for it in the poem "My Country" (1885–1968), calling Australia a "sunburnt country... of droughts and flooding rains", a line held almost like collective

memory—recited in classrooms, quoted by grandparents, whispered whenever the weather grew dramatic. Henry Lawson, in contrast, wrote with a bush-worm honesty, capturing a land where wind, dust, and distance shape the rhythm of living. In his poems, the wind is never merely weather; it is a companion with a temper, a wandering voice that keeps its own counsel. That spirit still feels alive. Some days the wind in Melbourne moves exactly as those poets described—restless, insistent, unwilling to stay still for long. The sky changes its mind the way a storyteller shifts scenes. Clouds gather, leave, return, and then vanish again before you've finished a cup of tea.

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So I leave home carrying both an umbrella and a sweater, or a jumper, as Australians insist on calling it—no matter what the morning promises. In Melbourne, you don't check the weather app; you watch the weather. The sky performs live, revising itself constantly. Here, weather is not something you observe from a safe distance. It's something you negotiate with.

This is an excerpt. Read the full article on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature's websites.

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