

## **Offline Interview**

By Matthew Arnold Stern

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**Why did you choose Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" as the basis of your book?**

I first read "Bartleby" in college in 1983, the same time I was starting my career in the computer industry. At the various jobs I worked at since then, I've run into people who reminded me of characters in "Bartleby," including quite a few Bartlebys. So, when I wanted to write about my experiences in the computer industry, the "Bartleby" connection was there.

**There have been a couple of movies, including the 2001 Crispin Glover film that recasts "Bartleby" in a modern setting. How is *Offline* different?**

I made a point of not seeing any of the "Bartleby" movies so that they didn't influence my book. But from what I've read in reviews, they seem to follow the original story closely. I wanted to experiment with the story, change the parameters, and explore the themes more deeply.

**Give us an example.**

The most important example is the difference in Bartleby's boss. If you look at the Narrator in Melville's story, he is detached, insensitive, and ineffectual. So, in *Offline*, I chose a boss for Bartleby who is the opposite – a compassionate, dedicated, and competent woman manager.

**How would a woman manager be different than a male manager?**

What I've seen from my experience is that female managers are more willing to consider emotion. I'm not saying that they are more emotional, and they certainly make rational, logical decisions. But they are more willing to consider their own feelings and the feelings of others in their actions.

Men in general have been taught to suppress emotion, especially in business. For a man, being professional means being impersonal and unemotional. These suppressed emotions have costs of their own. Women are afforded the option to be more sensitive and to consider their feelings. Whether women managers do or don't depends on the individual. Some women managers feel they have to be as hard, if not more so, than their male colleagues, especially those who had broken into male-dominated fields. Some are more willing to express and trust their feelings. Lucy is that type of manager.

**But Lucy gets in trouble because of her feelings.**

Of course she does! What good is a story if your main character doesn't get into trouble? ☺

With Lucy, I made her greatest strength her greatest weakness. Her compassion makes her vulnerable, but it also saves her in the end.

**The events in *Offline* take place just before September 11, 2001. Why did you choose those dates?**

I set *Offline* in late August 2001, because they are the last two full business weeks before September 11. In the United States, the first Monday in September (in that case, September 3, 2001) is a holiday.

When I started writing *Offline* in 2000, I set it in late September 2001, because that was when I originally planned to finish the book. I was halfway finished editing my first draft of the book when September 11 hit. After I recovered from the shock and the mourning of that event, I wondered if *Offline* still made sense to write. I felt, as many did, that we were in a new world, and that corporate squabbles like the one in *Offline* were somehow irrelevant.

As events unfolded after 9/11, it became clear to me that *Offline* was more relevant than ever. In fact, *Offline* poses some important questions for this post-9/11 era: How can we stay compassionate when we feel so powerless? How can we reach out to people who won't accept us? How can we stay true to our values when those in power push us in other directions?

But I wanted to set *Offline* at a time when those questions were not in the forefront, when we still had a sense of invulnerability to heighten the conflicts in the book. This is why I moved the events in *Offline* up to the final two weeks in August. As people read and watch the dates in the story advance, they would do so with the knowledge of what is coming.

**Another striking aspect of *Offline* is its Christian themes, such as the New Testament quote on Lucy's mug. Yet, you're Jewish. Where does the Christianity come from?**

There have been Jews who have written about Christian themes before. One of them is also named Matthew, and I heard the book he contributed to is doing very well. ☺

The Christian themes started with that quote on Lucy's mug from the Book of John. That quote (John 13:34) was in Melville's original story. As I began to change the parameters of the story, one of the things I changed was to make Lucy a person whose faith was heartfelt and serious, in contrast to the intellectualized Christianity of Melville's Narrator.

For more information about *Offline*,  
visit [www.matthewarnoldstern.com/offline](http://www.matthewarnoldstern.com/offline)

**What role does Christianity play into your book?**

Lucy's faith is the source of her compassion, and it drives her to want to help Bartleby. Lucy's deep-seated faith contrasts with the Narrator in the original story who merely used his faith to assuage his guilt.

**But isn't it a no-no for bosses to project their religious views in the workplace, especially in these politically correct times?**

It is. Bosses should not use their position to proselytize, nor should they make decisions about hiring, firing, or performance appraisals based on their religious views. We've seen plenty of court cases about that. But Lucy doesn't proselytize or display her religious views anywhere but on her coffee mug. Typically, a cross necklace, or days off on religious holidays, or the manner of dress is the most people at work show of their religion.

Lucy does carry a moral compass that guides her decisions. And later, at a critical moment in the story, her faith does influence someone else.

**Would you consider *Offline* a Christian novel?**

I didn't write *Offline* with a Christian viewpoint in mind, of course. As the book unfolded, I saw many similarities to Christian books. *Offline* features a character who struggles to stay true to her principles despite all the pressures to violate them. She strives to live according to her religious faith, despite the difficulties she faces. It's the same struggle faced by the faithful of other religions and anyone with high moral standards. So, *Offline* isn't a Christian novel in the way the *Left Behind* series is, but it deals with the same struggle between faith and temptation.

**But *Offline* includes a make-out scene and some PG-13 language.**

True. One bit of advice I got from a reviewer – a Christian, in fact – is not to make Lucy too much of a goody-two-shoes. A person can have faith and still have sexual feelings and let out a few hastily chosen words. Remember that the top-rated Christian film last year, *The Passion of the Christ*, was rated R.

**Would some readers have problems with a Jew writing about Christian themes? What about Jewish readers?**

I hope not. Jews and Christians shouldn't be adversaries. We all have a desire to see a more moral and humane world.

Rabbi Harold Kushner expressed this belief as well, which he described in his book *To Life!* He was once invited to speak at a Methodist church. One of the rabbi's congregants heard about the talk and said to him, "Hey, Rabbi. I see you're speaking to the competition Tuesday." The rabbi smiled because he knew the man who joking, but he then corrected him: "No,

Christianity is not the competition. Apathy and selfishness and a neo-paganism that sees Man as an animal and his every urge as legitimate – they are the competition. And the church and the synagogue are allies on the same side of that battle.”

**You decided to self publish *Offline*. Why did you decide to do that?**

First, I like the creative control. I’m able to design my own cover, typefaces, and branding. As a technical writer, I’m used to doing my own layout and creating my own templates. So, I like being able to do that work myself.

Second, and more importantly, I think self-publishing is the best way for me to get started in novel writing. It has always been hard for new writers to break in, but it’s harder now because of the high costs of launching a new book and the shrinking number of independent bookstores willing to offer space to a new writer. If I could sell 5,000 or 10,000 copies by myself, that would be considered a self-publishing success story and would encourage major publishers to pick up my book. But, if I were to sell that many through a traditional publisher, that would be considered a failure. And a publisher wouldn’t consider picking up my next book.

Also, self-publishing gives me the time to build up a readership. Word of mouth and grass-roots marketing take time. If I’m fighting for shelf space at a large bookseller, my book may only have a few weeks before it goes to the remainder bin. By using print on demand, I never have to worry about *Offline* going out of print or whether it will be displayed in the front window or the bargain rack. As long as the printer can keep up, I can have product to meet whatever demand there is.

**But wouldn’t you like to see your book at Barnes and Noble or Borders?**

Barnes and Noble and Borders can carry *Offline*. I have information on my *Offline* Web site how customers can ask the stores to carry it, and how booksellers can order it.

**What do you like to read?**

Whatever I can squeeze in during those ten minutes or so of peace and quiet called “going to the bathroom”. ☺ I liked the first three *Harry Potter* books, but I couldn’t get into the more recent books. I’m also a fan of humor, including David Sedaris, Scott Adams (both his cartoons and prose), and Dav Pilkey (who my seven-year-old introduced me to). Of the classic authors, I enjoy Emily Dickenson, Mark Twain, Matthew Arnold (naturally), and of course, Herman Melville.