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Who Reads Novels? A Symposium

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Who Reads Novels?

A Symposium

Once upon a time—and not so long ago at that—the novel was easily the central literary form of the day, and not only for writers and professors of English but for anyone who had intellectual interests and a desire to understand the society he lived in. The novel was central in being indisputably the form in which the moral imagination had freest play and in which one could learn the most about contemporary life. In an old but still useful formulation, the novel, as befits its name, brought the news about the way people live.

Without going into a jeremiad about the death of the novel, it does nevertheless seem true to say that the novel has lost this central position among people who have made it their business to understand contemporary life. While the survival of the novel is not in doubt, it does seem that reading contemporary novels has become a much less important matter for people of intellectual and artistic interests than it once was. Such, at any rate, are the assumptions behind the questions that appear below. Granting for the moment that the assumptions are correct—and you may wish to argue that they are not at all correct—the questions seek to get at the reasons why the novel seems to have lost its cultural centrality and prestige. The questions are:

1. *Do you read many contemporary novels?*
2. *If you do, whose novels do you read and for what reasons?*
3. *If you no longer read many contemporary novels, why have you ceased to do so, and what kinds of reading have supplanted them?*

THE EDITORS

Clifford Geertz

1. Yes.

2. Whether or not the novel is less central in our cultural life than it was (everything is less central in our cultural life than it was), it remains a prestigious thing to be thought to read them, and so one answers this

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question with some unease when one in fact reads a great many. It seems a bit like flashing your cultural credentials. But I do read the received greats and near greats: North Americans such as Bellow, Updike, Mailer, Percy, Roth, Cheever, Heller, Pynchon, Barth, and all that crowd; British writers such as Powell (the lot! it's a disease), Fowles, Lessing, Greene, Amis; continentals, original or translated, such as Nabokov, Beckett, Böll, Robbe-Grillet, Grass, Solzhenitzyn; and a few Latin Americans and third-worlders: Borges (not a novelist, perhaps, but let's not get into that), García Márquez, Narayan, Chraïbi, Lubis. All this plus some good minor writers (an institutional designation, not an evaluative one; many of them are better than the crowned heads)—a Stern, Elkins, Reed, Styron, Jones, Malamud, Burgess, Donleavy, Flannery O'Connor; some passing excitements, usually disappointing—*Fear of Flying*, *Ragtime*, *Snow White*, *Speedboat*, *Cat's Cradle*. This does sound pretentious, but I am rarely *not* reading a novel, usually a recent one, and am thus unable to recognize myself in your description of people "who have made it their business to understand contemporary life" (and a poor business it is!) for whom contemporary novels are unimportant.

Why do I read contemporary novels? For pleasure—hoped for, anyway—in the first place. (I get my "news" from the *Times*.) Out of habit, in the second. I grew up intellectually at a time when the novel was indeed "central" in cultural—or, more exactly, college—life, and read my way through so many syllabi, wrote so many term papers, and argued so many arguments that I got addicted. And third, though I think the *nouvelles* aspect of the novel quite secondary (the *roman* element is more important), it remains true that from novels one does pick up notions about the way we live now which one doesn't run into anywhere else. It would take an essay to say anything sensible about what these are, why the novel is the natural vehicle for them, and what good or harm they do to your head. But Updike's high school, Bellow's New York (more, I am afraid, than his Chicago), or Heller's war, rival, in their impact on my mind, my own direct traffic, intense enough, with those realities.

And finally, I started out to be a novelist. Didn't everyone?

3. Yet, and yet. I understand that things are not the same. In the first place, I now read only "arrived" novelists, those with the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. I don't discover novels anymore, and I don't read any I don't have strong reason to think, from the reviews, are going to be worthwhile. I'm a standard consumer, tied to brand names; the risk has gone out, and with it some of the revelation. I never read first novels anymore (though sometimes, with a Doctorow or a Barth, I go back to them after reading a second or third). My students never speak of novels to me (though they do of movies). My friends read the same bottled-in-

bond stuff I do. And I never pick a book from the library or bookstore shelf just because it looks interesting. Even rediscoveries—genuine ones, like Jean Rhys—now come media-prepackaged. I keep finding myself reading reviews of novels that sound as though I would be well advised to look into them—even better advised than reading another Roth or Barth—but knowing that I never will, unless the author produces five more and arrives.

All this may just be age, but I don't think so. The same thing is not true with plays, movies, paintings. Whence comes this establishment conservatism in novel reading?

Part of the problem is, of course, that I do my experimenting elsewhere—in ethnography (my “field”), in the human sciences generally, and in good popularizations of “real” science. The sum of all this, it seems to me, is that the position of the novel in today's society rather resembles (in *some* ways) that of the church. It is clear that the church is still a force; it is even clearer that it is now but one force among very many, and that its hegemony, such as it was (a matter subject to some exaggeration), is completely and permanently lost. It is also clear—to me, at least—that this is a Good Thing, and that it no more betokens the death of the novel than the similar displacement of the church from the center of society betokens that of religion. Anyone who tried to understand the modern world mainly through novels would make Madame Bovary seem a stark realist. I think almost everybody understands that now, as almost everybody understands that piety does not make the world go round. The novel is no longer the center of our cultural life because that life has no center: a fact only those who yearn for a unity in things that the modern world nowhere offers will regret.

Another thing that has happened (and here, too, there are analogies with what happened to the church) is that the line between novels, or fiction, and other sorts of literary texts has become much less firm. It is not merely the formal blurring of genres, as with *Ragtime* on the one side and *In Cold Blood* on the other, but the emergence of the realization that different sorts of texts have, in many ways, much more connecting them than they do dividing them. We now increasingly see ourselves as engaged in rather similar occupations—*similar*, not identical—when we read, or construct, or study a text of any sort that is at all imaginative. This is clear in the emergence of a literary criticism, first in Europe and then here, that sees its vocation in such terms, analyzing verbal representations, whatever they are called—and in the fusion of that sort of criticism with a certain sort of philosophy, a certain sort of history, and a certain sort of ethnography, psychoanalysis, political theory, or art history, similarly *textueliste*. Structuralism is, of course, the most notorious expression of this, though probably not the most lasting

or most important. But though structuralism may—as I think, or perhaps only hope, is already happening—lose the direction of this general movement, the movement itself both broadens our conception of what counts as a text and weakens our sense of unbridgeable qualitative differences among fixed types of them, and it will continue, because it reflects the nature of things as they now are virtually everywhere seen to be.

The novel has lost whatever pride of position it had, not—or not so much—because it has declined in value in the eyes of those who “desire to understand the society [they live] in,” but because it has had to take its place, for such people, among other sorts of “literature,” as but another sort of voice in an enormous variety of them. It can still be heard and, so far as I can see, a great many people still listen. That they also listen, virtually simultaneously, to a great deal else makes for a certain nervousness, eclecticism, and uncertainty of purpose: a clutter in the mind. A place in the clutter is all any sort of text can now attain, and the novelist—in mine anyway, scattered in with *Russian Thinkers* and *The First Five Minutes*—still has that.

Owen Gingerich

Inquiring why I have stopped reading the contemporary novel is like asking me if I will stop beating my wife. I admire those around me who read any kind of novel: my wife as she manfully plows through *The Magic Mountain* or my son as he rereads *The Brothers Karamazov*. I sense a yawning gap in my education made by missing these and other classics, not to mention the novels of the 1970s. Yet my taste in extracurricular reading has always favored biography, history, travel, and adventure. I am the sort of reader who occasionally glances at the nonfiction best-seller list in the *New York Times* but never at the fiction list.

It's not that I have anything against novels—Max Brod's *The Redemption of Tycho Brahe* is among the last dozen books I have read. And I have read at least one recent novel (if it can be called that), Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead*, though I must admit that it was his elegant fakery that ensnared me. Rather, I feel a greater sense of exhilaration and intellectual stimulation in reading, for example, George Steiner's *After Babel*, a magnificently polymathic book on language, translation, literary criticism, and linguistic analysis.

Nor do I have anything against contemporary novelists. I have read John Updike in *The New Yorker* (though I prefer the scientific biogra-

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