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Survival of the Fictiveness: The Novel's Anxieties Over Existence, Purpose, and Believability

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Survival of the Fictiveness:
The Novel's Anxieties Over Existence, Purpose, and Believability

by

Jesse Mank

An Abstract of a Thesis
in
English

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

August 2012

State University of New York
College at Buffalo
Department of English

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Survival of the Fictiveness:
The Novel's Anxieties Over Existence, Purpose, and Believability

The novel is a problematic literary genre, for few agree on precisely how or why it rose to prominence, nor have there ever been any strict structural parameters established. Terry Eagleton calls it an “anti-genre” that “cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together” (1). And yet, perhaps because of its inability to be completely defined, the novel best represents modern thought and sensibility. The narrative form speaks to our embrace of individualism while its commodification seems so natural, perhaps even democratic, to a capitalist economy. A historical look at the novel’s inception reveals that the medium is inextricably linked with shifts in cultural hierarchy and class division. As a result of the volatility in which it was conceived, I argue that the novel has always been an extremely self-conscious genre, self-conscious to a degree of neuroticism, expressing anxieties about its existence, believability, and relationship with society. Today, literary fiction continues to express anxieties, though it is mainly concerned with its ability to survive in an age of digital media and a fledgling publishing industry. The purpose of this thesis is to study the spectrum of novel’s anxieties and discuss its relationship to existing theories of postmodernism.

Jesse Mank
17 August 2012

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Barish Ali, Dr. Aimable Twagilimana, and Dr. Karen Sands-O'Connor for their generosity of time and guidance when this paper was merely an idea. I would also like to thank Mick Cochrane for mentioning my thesis to Brock Clarke, who I might also thank for recommending some very useful texts, one of which ultimately (and sadly) ousted his own brilliantly anxious novel *Exley* from my case studies. (Sorry!) Finally, I owe Janet McNally a lifetime of acknowledgements for her patience, love and support. I read most of the novels contained herein under her influence.

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Introduction

It is painfully obvious to say that novels are written by novelists. But for the purposes of my study I am going to focus on the novel as a genre, mostly independent of the people who write them. Novels are not unlike Frankenstein monsters, patchworks of ideology and cultural ideas, sewn together to create something new, an autonomous life form that will outlive its creator. I say autonomous because it is not uncommon for a novel to be reinterpreted in opposing directions. Our most treasured novels are Rorschach tests to their readers, or the era in which they are being read. For example, the current popularity of Jane Austen, both in the cinema and in countless Austen-inspired book series, is propelled by an insistence that her novels were romantic and that she was a feminist. While Austen certainly used her novels to criticize Edwardian patriarchal law and practice, and while her texts do contain some progressive ideas about gender, she was far more conservative than the average modern reader would like to admit. To say that Austen is a romantic writer is to completely ignore the obsessive pragmatism of her storylines, always preoccupied with the business end of marriage. When we talk about Austen, we rarely are speaking of Jane Austen the person of whom we know relatively little about; we are speaking of her novels. And while there was indeed a real Jane Austen who penned those novels, we are often reading those novels for evidence of ideas that the real Austen could not possibly have been aware of – Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, psychoanalytic theory, and more. In this way, novels contain ideas that the novelist did not intend, absorbing the era and ideology in which they were written for later excavation and interpretation.

It is with this logic that I isolate the novel from the novelist. For indeed the novelist is filled with anxieties – *Am I getting my point across? Is this storyline*

plausible? Will this book sell? – but these anxieties are distinctly different from the anxieties of the novel itself. The novel, like any living entity, largely worries about its survival. But it is more complex than this. The novel, as we will see, worries about its function in society, its responsibility to tell the truth, and then the weight of determining what truth is. And as society changes, introducing new cultural vessels of ideology, so, too, do the anxieties of the novel change.

But how does this argument stand in relation to existing postmodern theories? Linda Hutcheon calls postmodernism a “commitment or doubleness, or duplicity” that simultaneously challenges and reinforces conventions, both of genre and of culture (1). For her, the tension between the self-reflexivity and worldliness of postmodernism contribute to a kind of historicity that legitimizes even as it subverts (18). Leslie Fiedler argues that postmodernism abandons the elitist views of modernism by embracing mass culture and placing greater emphasis on “the subjective response of the reader within a psychological, social, and historical context” (Best 10-11). These are largely the terms that my study depends on – the hyper self-awareness of the novel and its somewhat blind allegiance to the reader. To this, I add that the novel is a medium anxious in its own skin, before it even enters itself into a public discourse. It is uncomfortable to speak with absolute authority due to an awareness of its own limitations, whether it is a limitation of representation or a limitation of cultural position. Best and Kellner remind us that “postmodern theory follows discourse theory in assuming that it is language, signs, images, codes, and signifying systems which organize the psyche, society, and everyday life” (27). But of course the novel is, and always has been, merely one of many mediums of communication, each uniquely limited in its interaction with, influence on, and representation of society. In this way, the novel has always been engaged in competition

with other signifiers. Due to the nature of its construct – an author composes in solitude over many months or years, not knowing if his or her work will be published – the novel exists outside of, or perhaps alongside, time. It speaks to an imagined audience of the future; it speaks with a cognizance of preceding literary works and a cognizance of competing mediums. Here, the self-reflexivity of postmodernism is limited in its scope; it does not recognize the novel's anxiousness surrounding its own existence.

For this reason, I do not see my position as a strictly postmodern argument, nor is this a study in metafiction. It is, rather, a psychiatric profile of the novel, an attempt to record the struggles of legitimacy that have imbued the medium with a kind of ethos, a sense of character that has transcended authors of different literary periods. It is possible, I argue, to read nearly any literary novel and find evidence, however subtle, of an anxious self-awareness – be it through intertextuality or a veneration of storytelling. It is the latter method that I feel is unique to my argument, that is, that the novel often finds ways to justify its own cultural importance to the reader by illustrating the redemptive properties of storytelling in its own fiction, and it does this as a combat tactic, a method of survival in a battlefield of other competing signifiers. I will begin by looking at the early novel to see how circumstances surrounding the novel's inception led to an intrinsic uneasiness. Later, I will look at the contemporary literary fiction to see how these anxieties manifest themselves in the face of a fledgling publishing industry.

Chapter One: The Early Novel

I. Highbrow Guilt

The rise of the novel was the product of converging paths, a series of events and sociopolitical shifts that resulted in a medium suited to all parties involved – writer, reader, and bookseller. But its rise to prominence was neither easy nor welcomed. The first one hundred plus years of its existence saw the novel as sensational and lowbrow by the literati. Though mostly rooted in class tension, the source of this hostility is manifold and necessary to understanding the anxieties of the early novel. For the purposes of my argument, I have chosen to end the period of the early novel at 1850, by which time the novel was accepted as a reputable literary form and on its way to displacing poetry and drama.

One source of the anti-novel sentiment comes from a shift away from patronage and towards a free market economy. Prior to the novel, wealthy patrons of the arts commissioned literary works – primarily poetry, non-fiction, histories, romances and plays. As a result of this system, the subject of literature was controlled and contained, aligned with the interests and agendas of those who could afford to sponsor it – the court, the church, the affluent, and nobility. In this way, literature was an extension of the aristocracy's cultural authority. As a class of writers who were capable of writing without patronage emerged, made possible by an improved standard of living throughout the Industrial Revolution, the power to determine what was published slowly shifted to booksellers. These booksellers, with no agenda other than to sell as many books as possible, published whatever the book buying public wanted. This shift is confirmed in a 1725 issue of *Applebee's Journal* where Daniel Defoe notes, "Writing [...] is become a very considerable Branch of the English Commerce. The Booksellers are the Master

Manufacturers or Employers” (Watt 53). While Defoe appears relatively indifferent to the change, critic and political writer James Ralph wrote in *The Case of Authors* (1758) that the bookseller:

[...] feels the Pulse of the Times, and according to the stroke, prescribes not to cure, but flatter the Disease: As long the Patient continues to swallow, he continues to administer; and on the first Symptom of a Nausea, he changes the Dose. Hence the Cessation of all Political Carminatives, and the Introduction of Cantharides, the shape of Tales, Novels, Romances, etc. (Watt 54-55)

James Ralph, like many who benefitted from the previous publishing model, felt that the product of the bookseller, most notably novels, pandered to the tastes of the public and was therefore debased and of a decidedly less literary quality. And then still, one could imagine a heated sense of resentment felt by the former patrons of the literary arts, to have one’s status as cultural gatekeeper displaced by the merchant class.

The novel also posed a political threat. Leslie Stephen, in his *English Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, suggests that “the gradual extension of the reading class affected the development of the literature addressed to them” (26). In other words, the rise of the novel is inextricably linked with the rise of a literate middle-class. The content of novels differed from previous literary works because it chose to focus on common subjects, rather than gallant heroes of noble background. Here, it is worthy to note that the novel descends from the medieval romance, sentimental and formulaic tales that solely concerned noble, archetypal characters. The plots of the romance idealized heroism and purity. Unlike romances, which simultaneously allowed one to escape reality while reinforcing the superiority of the upper classes, novels sought to use fiction in order to

subvert reality. The novel's focus is realistic, shunning the fantastical, with a predilection towards social commentary and moral instruction. Terry Eagleton calls novels "romances," but makes this distinction:

[They] have to negotiate the prosaic worlds of modern civilization. They retain their romantic heroes and villains, wish-fulfillments and fairy-tale endings, but now these things have to be worked out in terms of sex and property, money and marriage, social mobility and the nuclear family. (2)

England's industrial revolution would eventually provide both income and leisure time to a group of people previously excluded from literary indulgences, most significantly women – the wives of tradesmen, whose domestic duties were displaced by the manufacturing of textiles and soaps – and household servants, who had both access to books and leisure time to read. For many, this connotation alone would have been enough to tarnish the reputation of the novel. Add to it the fact that these books were "corrupting" the minds of the lower classes with political ideas, and we can better understand the contempt towards the genre. To loathe the novel was to see it for what it was, a threat to the status quo.

A final early objection to the novel is one of form. This protestation is rooted in an elitism that supposes the classics the model that all literature should follow. In the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), William Wordsworth writes, "The invaluable works of our elder writers [...] are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (qtd. in Austen 219). Samuel Coleridge, in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*, likened novel reading to "spitting over a bridge," "snuff-taking," or "swaying on a chair or gate" (Austen 220). Some of this animosity may be rooted in the novel's relation to the

romance, a genre that, while popular with the aristocracy, was not appreciated for its literary merit. While the word “romance” takes on different meanings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is almost always equated with light entertainment and commercial product, not serious literary achievement. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge represent the intelligentsia of their day, writing the prominent and esteemed genre of poetry, a genre that the novel would eventually supplant.

While it may be difficult today to understand completely why the novel was regarded with such suspicion, the suspicion is well documented and it is at least clear that it was based in class and culture tension. But, as many cite *Don Quixote* (1605) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) among the first novels, it is important to remember that not only was literacy among the working class at this time rare, but novels were far too expensive for the English masses to afford. Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel*, writes, “The price of a novel [...] would feed a family for a week or two,” further noting that *Tom Jones* “cost more than a labourer’s average weekly wage” (Watt 42). And so the success of these early novels, despised and debased by the arbiters of taste, was still owed to a small group of the wealthy and educated. This meant that some of the very same who openly reviled novels must have also been secretly reading them.

Knowing that readership included dissenters, the early novel, as if riddled with insecurity, needed to justify its existence and cultural merit. One way to do this was through the use of epigraphs, usually preceding chapters. Citing poets, playwrights, classical works, and, quite often, the Bible, epigraphs function to set a thematic tone or to foreshadow the events of a chapter. But an additional task of the epigraph, especially in the early novel, is to create an associative link between the work in question and an earlier, more established work of literature, creating an intertextuality that begs the

company of more esteemed writers. It is through the use of epigraphs that the novel demands to be taken as high art. The literary epigraph was commonplace in the eighteenth century's most popular novels, such as James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1757) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), both of which use quotes from Shakespeare to elevate their texts.

Sir Walter Scott used epigraphs extensively in his Waverly novels. Below I have listed the sources for the first ten chapters of his 1818 novel, *The Heart of Midlothian*:

Chapter 1	1798 verse by J.H. Frere, English poet and diplomat
Chapter 2	1718 verse by Matthew Prior, English poet and diplomat
Chapter 3	1772 verse by Robert Ferguson, Scottish poet
Chapter 4	Verse from a Scottish folk tale, "Kelpie"
Chapter 5	Verse from Sir David Lindsay, 16 th Century Scottish poet and Lord Lyon
Chapter 6	Verse from traditional Scottish child ballad, "Johnnie Armstrong"
Chapter 7	Verse from Shakespeare's <i>Merchant of Venice</i>
Chapter 8	Verse from traditional Scottish ballad, "Arthur's Seat Shall Be My Bed"
Chapter 9	1801 verse by George Crabbe, English poet
Chapter 10	1801 verse by George Crabbe, English poet

Note that all ten epigraphs are in verse, reflecting the influence of poetry, the esteemed literary genre of the day, and all but one of the epigraphs were penned by persons deceased, reflecting Scott's desire to associate the novel with a long literary tradition. *The Heart of Midlothian* contains fifty chapters, all of them preceded by an epigraph and all of them following the pattern of the first ten. Shakespeare is invoked an astonishing twelve times (with excerpts from *Midsummer's Night Dream*, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth*,

Henry V, *Henry VI*, *Merchant of Venice*, two from *Hamlet*, and four from *Measure for Measure*) and the works of respected poets Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Pope, Burns, and Lord Byron are all employed at least once.

The use of epigraphs in the eighteenth and nineteenth century novels was widespread and I have here chosen to use one of Sir Walter Scott's novels not only because it exemplifies the desire to associate the novel with more well-regarded literary works, but also because the trajectory of Sir Walter Scott's career tells the story of the novel's rise into reputability. A lawyer by trade, his writing career began in the late 1790s, publishing a number of poetry books through a printing press that he founded. By 1813, Scott was so well regarded that he was offered the position of poet laureate. Scott's first novel, *Waverly* (1814), was written to make good on the rising popularity of the novel form, but was tellingly published anonymously in order to protect his identity as a poet. Like other writers who attempted to make the transition from poet to novelist, Scott continued to publish his novels anonymously even after he was widely recognized as "the author of *Waverly*."

II. A Question of Truth

Because the novel, unlike other art forms, relies solely on language, and specifically narrative language, to engage its audience, it is forced to enter a social contract of signification, or as André Brink puts it, “This can be confirmed, in the domain of literature, by any reader who takes up a book to make the simple and basic, but immensely significant, discovery that there are no people or houses or trees or dogs between the pages, but only words, words, words” (5). This invocation of semiotics is significant as the act of novel reading constantly forces the reader to resolve what is real with what is make-believe. One of the reasons non-readers of fiction often cite for not appreciating the genre, lies in the leap of faith readers must make when entering a novel, or in other words, they want to know why anyone would want to spend so much time with made-up characters in a made-up story. This is a major source of the novel’s anxiety, both in its early years as well as today.

It is important to remember that the novel’s next of kin is the romance, whose characters were two-dimensional and storylines fantastical. Northrop Frye, who calls the novel a “realistic displacement of romance” (McKeon 141), defines the difference between the novel and the romance as such:

The serious literary artists who tell stories in prose [...] also tell us something about the life of their times, and about human nature as it appears in that context, while doing so. Below them comes romance, where the story is told primarily for the sake of the story. This kind of writing is assumed to be much more of a commercial product, and the romancer is considered to have compromised too far with popular literature. (McKeon 142)

We will speak more of the tension between literary and commercial fiction later, but this quote nicely transitions from my previous argument – that the novel was initially perceived as lowbrow because of its association with the romance – and into my next assertion, that the novel is constantly burdened with the task of trying to negotiate its own fictionality and resolve it with the larger truth that it purports to tell.

Michael McKeon, in *The Origins of the English Novel*, reminds us that a convention of the pre-novel romance was the “disingenuous claim to historicity” (105). Romances, operating under the auspices of travelogues and histories, offered fantastic tales of heroism that blended with supernatural elements. But McKeon tells us:

By the end of the seventeenth century, their supernatural element has declined so drastically that a major problem for modern scholars is the determination of whether or not their claims to historicity are to be taken seriously – that is, whether or not “imaginary voyages” may have actually have occurred. (McKeon 105)

Consider that nearly every novel published in the eighteenth century purported to be a “true” story, and we begin to see that the shades of difference between the romance and the novel were, at least initially, subtle. Brink tells us, “writers of narrative were practically unanimous in their paranoia about “fiction,” about “meddling with the Unclean Thing,” as William Hazlitt so charmingly termed it (69). Consequently, early novels, if they were not overtly advertised as *true stories*, were sold as journal entries, travelogues, letters, and memoirs – anything to subvert or distract from their own lack of truthfulness.

Robinson Crusoe, often cited as the first English novel, is a perfect example. The original title page reads:

The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty years, all alone in an uninhabited island on the Coast of America, near the mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. WITH An Account of how he was at last strangely delivered by PIRATES. Written by Himself.

Strangely absent are the words “novel,” “Daniel” and “Defoe.” Marthe Robert reminds us that Defoe himself was skeptical of the novel as a genre, asserting that *Robinson Crusoe* is “a true story whereas the novel is a lie, insipid and sentimental by nature and created to corrupt men’s hearts and their tastes” (Robert 53). When detractors charged that Defoe’s claim to historicity made his book a romance and therefore a lie, Defoe evaded the issue stating that the story was “in its Substance true,” going on to argue:

Stories which have a real Existence in Fact, but which by the barbarous way of relating, become as romantick and false, as if they had no real Original. [...] Nothing is more common, than to have two Men tell the same Story quite differing one from another, yet both of the Eye-witness to the Fact related. (McKeon 120)

His official position on the novel was that “supplying a Story by Invention ... is a sort of Lying that makes as great Hole in the Heart” (McKeon 121). McKeon argues that the historicity of *Robinson Crusoe* was critical to Defoe’s story having any moral or spiritual impact on the reader, that is, “if stories cannot claim their historicity, they are romances, and cannot be taken seriously by writer or reader” (McKeon 121). Indeed, we have already established that the novel differs from the romance in that it aims to reveal some higher truth about our lives. Of course, this creates a paradox; one must, as both a writer

and a reader, invest in a made up story about made up people – *a lie* – in order to access a larger truth about human nature.

Unable to make this conceptual leap, claiming truth or historicity can be nearly seen as a convention of the early novel. One way this was done was to claim that the main character was the author of the text, with no evidence of the real author's name. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1721) claimed to have been written "from her memorandums" (Defoe), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) was credited to "Lemuel Gulliver, first a Surgeon, and then a Captain of several SHIPS" (Swift), and while Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) boldly proclaimed itself a novel, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) was first published as an autobiography.

Yet another way novels claimed historicity was to make some overt overture to truth on the title page. The title of William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) was followed by the words "FOUNDED IN TRUTH"; Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) similarly proclaimed that it was "FOUNDED ON FACT"; Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) was subtitled "A Tale of Truth." A less direct claim to historicity appears in the preface of the first edition to *The Last of the Mohicans*:

The reader, who takes up these volumes, in expectation of finding an imaginary and romantic picture of things which never had an existence, will probably lay them aside, disappointed. The work is exactly what it professes to be in its title page – a narrative. As it relates, however, to matters which may not be universally understood, especially by the more imaginative sex, some of whom, under the impression that it is fiction, may be induced to read the book, it becomes the interest of the author to explain a few of the obscurities of the historical allusions. (Cooper 1)

Cooper goes on to provide a historical overview of Indian history in New England, concluding the preface by asking all those who are about to read these volumes to “abandon the design” (4). Without using the word “novel,” Cooper’s preface and final request nearly apologizes for the fact that he has indeed written a novel. In *The Monsters of Templeton*, a 2008 novel that appropriates some of Cooper’s characters, author Lauren Groff provides an epigraph from Cooper:

An interesting fiction...however paradoxical the assertion may appear...addresses our love of truth – not the mere love of facts expressed by true names and dates, but the love of that higher truth, the truth of nature and of principles, which is a primitive law of the human mind. (ix)

Such a quote advances Cooper’s insights into the rewards of the novel – the ability to tell a greater truth through an imagined story – but it also betrays his defensiveness about fiction, as if he were imagining throngs of readers asking, *is this true?* That a novelist nearly 200 years later feels the need to invoke this quote tells us that this anxiety never quite dissipates.

And so just as the early novel expressed anxieties surrounding its cultural merit, it also seemed reluctant to commit to its own fictions. As the novel rises in popularity, we see, by the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, less of these anxieties expressed. Writing in a genre already established and respected, Melville and Hawthorne felt free to stretch the boundaries of narrative. Dickens freely used the novel as a vehicle for social reform. And as if the novel had forever existed as an esteemed literary form, Modernism reveals an era of writers enjoying intellectual and creative freedom within the genre. Though even at the height of the novel’s esteem, Holden Caulfield warns us that he won’t indulge in all the “David Copperfield kind of crap” (Salinger 3), betraying an uneasiness about the

conventions of the novel. As the literary novel's popularity wanes in the late twentieth century, a consequence of competing forms of entertainment and a dysfunctional publishing industry, the novel's anxieties about truth return, this time with additional anxieties about survival.

III. Metafiction Before It Was Invented

One final way that the early novel expressed anxieties about its existence was by appealing, either directly or indirectly through a metafictional device, to the reader in order to reconsider his or her prejudices towards the novel format. Metafiction is the image of the novel seeing its own image, negotiating its identity and relationship with the *real* world. André Brink argues that there is a “linguistic consciousness” (16) in early novels and that “the self-consciousness of language/narrative in the Postmodern novel goes back to the very beginning of the novel as we have come to know it” (17). Indeed, some of the earliest novels contain characters who read novels, talk about novels and, occasionally, even write novels. In this way, postmodernism did not invent metafiction, it only gave a name to something which existed since the novel’s inception.

The most overt example of this can be found in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1803). It is an early novel which expresses its own unique anxiety about the novel, that is, it ponders how the novel could be used as a moral guide without morally corrupting the reader through its own devices, or as Susan Fraiman puts it, “*Northanger Abbey* suggests that Austen’s ambition extended beyond producing novels to theorizing what the novel as a genre was and what it could be” (VIII). Austen’s heroine, Catherine Morland, is a devout reader of gothic romances, a pleasure which distorts her worldview. Here, we already see the novel justifying its own existence. Too aware that the supernatural and fantasy elements of romances and gothic novels not only did little to elevate the status of these narratives, but also had a negative effect on young female readers (setting them up for fantastic events that never come to pass), *Northanger Abbey* seems to make a case for the elimination of such extravagances, leaving us with the novel as we know it. Besides the self-reflexiveness of the plot itself (it is a book about a girl who reads too many

books), Austen's narrator makes a direct appeal to the reader when we are informed that our protagonist reads novels:

Yes, novels – for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding – joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such woks, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom she can expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. (Northanger 22)

After this call of solidarity, the narrator goes on to actually cite other authors, beginning with respected poets Milton and Pope, and ending with novelists Sterne, Burney, and Edgeworth. This impassioned defense concludes with the narrator calling the novel form:

... [a] work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (Austen 23)

Appearing relatively early in the novel, this passage is not the end of *Northanger*'s self-awareness. A conversation about novels occurs between Catherine and the arrogant John Thorpe. Tellingly, the unlikeable Thorpe protests, "I never read novels; I have something else to do. [...] Novels are so full of nonsense and stuff. [...] [T]hey are the stupidest things in creation" (Austen 31). *Northanger Abbey* is perhaps the most extreme of examples in the Austen canon, but a close reading of her catalog reveals evidence of self-awareness in each text, especially in her narrators who tend to abruptly wrap up the plots in fairy tale fashion.

Austen's work is largely influenced by Ann Radcliff, whose novels also occasionally found themselves defending the merits of fiction. (As a side note, Radcliff's *Udolpho* is repeatedly invoked in *Northanger Abbey*). This occurs especially in *Romance of the Forest* (1791), the title itself alluding to the romance genre. There is a peculiar awareness of storytelling in the novel. In one scene, Pierre La Motte criticizes his servant's Peter's storytelling, asking him why he decided to include information about a seemingly superfluous pipe, making point to keep Peter focused on his narrative (Radcliff 49). Later, La Motte admonishes Adeline for believing in the supernatural, calling the inventors of such romantic tales "simpletons" (Radcliff 99). He goes on to say, "Your good sense, Adeline, I think, will teach you the merit of disbelief" (Radcliff 99). To say that there is merit in not believing in fictional stories is an unusual thing for a character in a work of fiction to say. *The Romance of the Forest* is not a romance (nobility are not portrayed in a flattering way), but rather, a gothic novel. And then it seems to parody the conventions of the gothic novel. Like Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Radcliff is aware of both her audience and her critics – and seems dissatisfied with both.

It is from books that Adeline “derived her chief information and amusement” (Radcliff 82). When she is unable to “develop the mystery” of her real life, she turns to the more pleasing mysteries found in books. The redemptive power of fiction or storytelling is not only a recurring theme in literature, it is also one of the most powerful ways that the novel petitions to its readership. In *Romance of the Forest* it is through the narrative of the found manuscript (a story within a story) that Adeline is drawn out from her passive existence and into the action of the novel’s mystery. But again, La Motte is the doubter, refusing to believe that the manuscript is true, dismissing it as a “strange romantic story” (Radcliff 144). Like John Thorpe’s protestations about the novel in *Northanger*, it is clear which side Radcliff wants the reader to take. The language surrounding the found manuscript seems an appeal to the reader to indulge in the occasional “illusion of fancy” (132), to bring past sufferings present and celebrate the human means of recording them.

It would be an oversight on my part to discuss metafiction in the context of the early novel and not mention Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759), and yet, its lack of focus makes it both too overwhelming and too obvious to spend any significant amount of time on here. Terry Eagleton says of it, “The novel is about the attempt to get the novel started” (80). It employs nearly every trick of subversion up the postmodern writer’s sleeve – direct address, allusions to other writers and novels, allusions to its own chapters and page numbers, changes in typography, blacked-out words, and above all, an awareness of its own messy inability to tell a story. Sterne asks the reader to reread chapters and threatens to rip pages out of the book. Sterne’s Shandy alternates between apologetic and self-satisfied with his sinuous tale, at one point admitting, “Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; — they are the life, the soul of reading! — take them out

of this book, for instance, — you might as well take the book along with them” (47). This is but one of many passages that ponder the role and function of the novel. In chapter XI, he writes:

Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation. As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; – so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-breeding, would presume to think all; The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. (71)

This passage anticipates the literary novel’s anxieties about truth, a topic we will explore later, but it also hints at the tension between literary fiction and commercial fiction. It speaks to the expectations of a certain kind of reader who expects the author to simply tell a story and explain why events occur. It reminds me of an exchange between author and reader I witnessed several years ago at a literary reading. When asked about a character’s motives, author Ann Patchett declined to answer, instead offering this: “In literary fiction, it’s like dropping off ransom. You drive halfway and I drive halfway and we have an exchange. Commercial fiction puts you in back of the Towne Car and drives you there” (Patchett). Over 240 years later, Patchett’s off-handed words to a young reader, echo Sterne’s, suggesting that from very early on, the literary novel wanted to be something other than a vehicle to tell stories. It is an attempt to create art by creating a tension between the text and the reader. *Tristram Shandy* may be a satire of or experimentation with the novel form, but it ultimately reflects a slew of anxieties about writing, about truth, and about the conventions of storytelling.

I would like to conclude this part of my argument with a brief return to *The Heart of Midlothian*. After the obligatory opening epigraphs (the first coming from *Don Quixote*), the novel commences with a rather bizarre letter addressed to the reader from a fictitious author (Jedediah Cleishbotham) and is followed by an opening chapter that offers a coach full of noblemen arguing about the novel. It sounds too postmodern to come from a novel written in 1818, but indeed it is true. When one of the gentlemen claims that “no one now reads novels,” another argues:

May they not be found lurking amidst the multiplied memorials of our most distinguished counsel, and even peeping from under the cushion of a judge’s arm-chair? Our seniors at the bar, within the bar, and even on the bench, read novels; and if not belied, some of them have written novels into the bargain. (Scott 21)

The passage takes on greater significance when we consider that Scott published novels anonymously to protect his identity as a poet. It is a passage that simultaneously addresses the taboo of reading novels among the upper classes and also illustrates how at ease early novelists were with expressing these anxieties to their readers.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the novel begins to enjoy success as a medium of literary merit worthy of academic study. Eighteenth century novelists (and poets) would be shocked to learn that, by the mid-nineteenth century, novels were consistently taught at the university level. They might be further amazed to learn that, by the end of the nineteenth century, one could even earn an MFA in creative writing, essentially a degree in novel writing. But even at its peak, the novel retained a level of self-awareness and, for lack of a better word, neuroticism. Marthe Roberts, who reminds us that the novel “can only be convincingly truthful when it is utterly deceitful,” accuses the novel not only of

megalomania but also a “vague but nonetheless profound sense of guilt” (66). Indeed, the novel’s inherent need to shroud larger truths in fictionalized accounts will always provide a source of anxiety. There will always be an uneasiness between text and reader as both know that, while novels imitate reality, they are not actual depictions of real people and real events. Faithful readers of fiction simply trust the text, suspending their disbelief for the duration of 300 or so pages. Worthwhile texts will deftly avoid drawing attention to the make-believe aspect of the genre, or alternately, thrust its deceit stage center in the manner of postmodernism. Further, the class tension that surrounds the novel’s inception never quite dissipates, with friction between commercial and literary fiction continuing to plague the contemporary novel. After all, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, correlating taste with class, argues that “The scarcer or more difficult to access an aesthetic experience is — the novel very much included — the greater its ability to set us apart from those further down the social ladder” (Hallberg). Throughout its early history, the novel makes its way up the rungs of this ladder, but not without a struggle. With such volatile beginnings, like a child born into a dysfunctional home, the novel is fated to live out a volatile, dysfunctional existence.

Chapter Two: The Contemporary Novel

I. The End of an Era

Like the shift in publishing practices in the era of the early novel, the consolidation of media publishing houses have affected the course of the contemporary novel. These new owners, giant publicly traded companies, were not satisfied with the small profit margins of books (traditionally around 5%) and demanded more blockbuster titles, placing a greater pressure on editors to publish books that will appeal to public tastes. It is a trend first chronicled in *The New Yorker's* 1980 three-issue article "The Blockbuster Complex." Thomas Whiteside argued that media conglomeration not only influences the type of novel being published, but suggests that its tendency to rely on Hollywood and television as promotional tools will eventually hollow out the industry. He also cites a long list of changes in the industry that place great demands on publishers, changes that include the economy of publishing trade paperbacks, the demands of large chain book retailers, extravagant advances and salaries paid to bestselling authors and "big-time" literary agents ("I-The Blockbuster Complex" 66). What this boils down to is a greater need for high-profile "blockbuster" titles that will earn large profits and outsell competitors. Whiteside writes, "Indeed, much of what publishers and editors are doing is becoming ever more closely entangled with what advertising men, television producers and talk show hosts, and Hollywood producers and packagers are doing" ("I-The Blockbuster Complex" 71). The implied message of the article is that the literary world is growing less literary and more corporate. Books that are intended to sell thousands of copies per week must appeal to mainstream tastes. One can see how this type of expectation would affect working novelists, especially those who do not write "blockbusters." Gideon Lewis-Kraus explains that it is a system that works well for a

select few high-profile literary novelists like Salman Rushdie or Phillip Roth, but, “it’s not great for young writers who won’t look attractive on television, or debut novelists whose sales fall far short of their giant advances, or second- and third-time novelists whose books have been ‘critically well-received.’”

There is another force at work and that is the type of reading that the average modern reader is willing (or able) to engage in. The classic tension between high and low art is perhaps best seen as a dividing line between art and commercial product. It is a dichotomy that is again rooted in class tension, one side claiming cultural superiority and the other claiming accessibility. Conversely, one side is accused of elitism and the other accused of pandering to the lowest common denominator. As evidence of this tension, Whiteside reports on the controversy that arose when the American Book Awards sought to supplant the National Book Awards on the grounds that it “reflected an elitist attitude toward the tastes of the reading public.” Unlike the National Book Award, the panel of balloters for The American Book Awards included representatives of national chain bookstores and created categories for popular commercial fiction like Westerns and mysteries. Authors of literary fiction protested the award, boycotting the ceremony, and, in the case of 1980 winner Phillip Roth, refusing to accept the award (“II-The Blockbuster Complex” 120).

The state of the publishing industry has not improved in the thirty years since *The New Yorker* piece. The last ten years have shown us high turnover rates for CEOs in publishing as well as lay-offs, freeze acquisitions, and even shutdowns of entire imprints. In 2008, *New York* magazine published “The End,” Boris Kachka’s harrowing look at the decline of the publishing industry, outlining the struggles of the few semi-independent midsize publishers still in existence, the firing of several influential CEOs that allowed

editors to foster literary works, the bleak state of book retail, the exorbitant amount of money spent on “mediocre” books, and the negative effect of e-books. “Forget literary taste,” Kachka writes, “everything is cost-benefit analysis.” This means that the publishing industry has created a model in which commercial fiction still thrives, but is now “hostile” for literary fiction. The article cites novelist Dale Peck who has abandoned his literary pursuits for multi-million dollar thrillers about demons. Peck says, “The system works just fine for commercial fiction. But for literary fiction, I think we had a nice run of it in the commercial world” (Kachka). The end of the publishing industry was echoed in 2009 when Harper’s published “The Last Book Party,” an account of the Frankfurt Book Fair (the world’s largest trade fair for books). Gideon Lewis-Kraus describes a world of decadence and corruption well aware of the industry’s free fall. Shrewd, super-agents like Andrew Wylie, the agent responsible for creating the huge advance system, exert their power and influence over the future of the literary canon, while literary awards like the Man-Booker Prize are exploited and manipulated for marketing purposes. Gideon writes, “I realize the Booker shortlist is six titles because that is the smallest number by which the industry can ensure, given today’s tentacular corporate congestion, that every single person in English-language publishing will either win or just barely lose the Booker” (Lewis-Kraus). The behavior he describes is a neurotic reaction to publishing industry in crisis.

As if the end of the publishing industry as we know it were not enough to rattle the contemporary novel, the recent popularity of e-books have created unease in the literary world, both for publishers and authors. At the 2009 BookExpo, Sherman Alexie said that he “refused to allow his novels to be made available in digital form,” calling the

Kindle “elitist” and expressing a desire to hit a woman he recently saw using one on a plane (Rich).

And so what effect does all this have on the content of the novel? In novels published since 2000, I argue that we see an increase in the self-awareness of the novel. In the most overt examples, this means novels about novels or novels about novelists. But we also see many, much more subtle messages regarding fiction in recent novels, usually in the form of characters that find redemption through reading, writing, or storytelling. If we choose to see the novel as living, breathing organism, something larger than the novelists who write them, then the novel is struggling to live, justifying its existence to a dwindling readership.

II. Books About Books

In the last section I established that influence of media conglomerates has changed the climate of the publishing industry, moving it away from works of literary interest and towards works that are easily marketable to the largest possible audience, i.e. commercial fiction. Let us not forget that the real threat of Hollywood and television is not just a matter of crass marketing, but that these mediums require precious leisure time to enjoy – time that might otherwise be spent reading. Since 1980, video games, cell phones, and the Internet have only further encroached on that time. These new forms of entertainment provide a kind of instantaneous gratification better suited to the quickening pace of modern life. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2010, Americans spent half their leisure time watching TV – approximately 2.7 hours a day. Leisure reading occurred mostly on weekends, with the elderly spending as much as an hour per weekend day reading and young adults spending as little as six minutes (“American Time Use”).

Novelist Nick Hornby, in his collection of literature-related essays, writes:

A survey conducted by WHSmith in 2000 found that 43 percent of adults questioned were unable to name a favorite book, and 45 percent failed to come up with a favorite author. [...] Forty percent of Britons and 43 percent of Americans never read any books at all, of any kind. Over the past twenty years, the proportion of Americans aged 18-34 who read literature (and literature is defined as poems, plays, or narrative fiction) has fallen by 28 percent. The 18-34 age group, incidentally, used to be the most likely to read a novel; it has now become the least likely. (43)

And then when the average American does read, it is unlikely that he or she will be picking up a work of literary fiction. Sensational novels about vampires, zombies, and

crime dominate the bestseller list. A waning population of literary readers provides a great source of anxiety for the novel and we will see that anxiety expressed in a number of ways throughout our case studies.

One of Hornby's concerns about why people do not read is that "the world of books seems to be getting more bookish" (43). He recalls a list of novels published within a year of each other in which the plots either revolve around the lives of writers, famous or otherwise, or hinge upon an understanding of classic literature – Anita Brookner's *Leaving Home*; David Lodge's *Author, Author*; Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. And these are not isolated titles. As the world seems to be moving away from print media, those within the medium seem to be withdrawing inward, producing more books about books. It is a move that, Hornby argues, actually alienates readers. He writes, "I don't want bright people who don't happen to have a degree in literature to give up on the contemporary novel; I want them to believe there's a point to it all, that fiction has a purpose visible to anyone capable of reading a book for grown-ups" (43). Hornby's concerns are valid. A recent Amazon.com customer review (the quintessential layman's forum) for Jeffrey Eugenides's new novel, *The Marriage Plot*, reads, "I consider myself fairly intelligent and with at least an average knowledge of books and authors. But reading *The Marriage Plot* [sic] made me realize how dumb I really am. Every other sentence contains an obscure literary or philosophical reference of which I have never heard" (Mom of Sons). It bears mentioning that Eugenides's novel is about an English major writing her senior thesis, not exactly the kind of experience shared by the masses. This authorial maneuver of withdrawing inward makes sense if you consider that for years, the print world was a given. A novelist did not have to consider a world without novels. But as the industry declines and the public reads less, novelists of

literary fiction are likely starting to feel like they are members of an exclusive club, albeit a dying one.

In the interest of providing evidence by sheer volume, the chart below lists twenty-two notable literary novels published since 2000 that exhibit an acute self-awareness about the novel form.

Novel Title	Author	Year Published	How the Novel Applies
<i>Ahab's Wife</i>	Sena Jeter Naslund	2000	Purports to be a biography of the wife of the fictional Captain Ahab from Melville's <i>Moby-Dick</i> .
<i>The Hours</i>	Michael Cunningham	2000	Three linked novellas that directly or indirectly concern Virginia Woolf.
<i>Everything is Illuminated</i>	Jonathan Safran Foer	2002	The novel is split into three narrative arcs. In one, we read fragments of a Foer novel. In another, his character Alex Perchov records his thoughts (as if it were a memoir) at Foer's insistence. The third narrative consists of letters from Alex to Foer, discussing the progress of their novels.
<i>Felony</i>	Emma Tennant	2003	A fictionalized account of Henry James's time in Florence where we wrote "The Aspern Papers."
<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime</i>	Mark Haddon	2003	The title is an allusion to <i>The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes</i> . The protagonist Christopher records his detective work as if he were writing a murder mystery novel. His decisions are informed by Arthur Conan Doyle's work.
<i>The Master</i>	Colm Toibin	2005	A fictionalized account of Henry James's time in London.

<i>The Line of Beauty</i>	Allen Hollinghurst	2005	Protagonist Nick Guest is a Henry James scholar.
<i>U.S.!</i>	Chris Bachelder	2006	A satirical novel about Upton Sinclair repeatedly rising from the grave.
<i>Saturday</i>	Ian McEwan	2006	The protagonist's father-in-law and daughter are both published poets and past winners of the Newdigate prize.
<i>History of Love</i>	Nicole Krauss	2006	Protagonist's Leo Gursky's lost novel is published in Chile another name. Leo sends his newest manuscript to his lost son.
<i>Leaving Home</i>	Anita Brookner	2007	Novel title and protagonist Emma are an overt allusion to Austen's <i>Emma</i> .
<i>Special Topics in Calamity Physics</i>	Marissa Pessl	2007	Novel is arranged as a "great books" course with each chapter named after a canonical work. Numerous literary allusions require a background in literature.
<i>The Invention of Everything Else</i>	Samantha Hunt	2008	Mark Twain is a character. <i>Tristram Shandy</i> is discussed.
<i>Wild Nights!</i>	Joyce Carol Oats	2008	Fictional death scenes about Poe, Twain, Dickenson, James, and Hemingway.
<i>The Monsters of Templeton</i>	Lauren Groff	2008	Appropriates characters and other details from the work of James Fennimore Cooper.
<i>An Arsonist's Guide to Writer's Homes in New England</i>	Brock Clarke	2008	About a character who accidentally burns down the Emily Dickenson House.
<i>Author, Author</i>	David Lodge	2008	A fictionalized account of Henry James's life.
<i>The Passages of H.M.</i>	Jay Parini	2010	A fictionalized account of Herman Melville's life.
<i>Exley</i>	Brock Clarke	2010	Trying to track down his father, a nine-year-old boy

			becomes obsessed with his father's favorite book, Frederick Exley's <i>A Fan's Notes: A Fictional Memoir</i> .
<i>The Paris Wife</i>	Paula McLain	2011	Narrated by Ernest Hemmingway's first wife.
<i>Super Sad True Love Story</i>	Gary Shteyngart	2011	A dystopian novel about a world dominated by consumerism and media. Novels are regarded as smelly and old.
<i>The Marriage Plot</i>	Jeffrey Eugenides	2011	A novel about three well-read college seniors at Brown. Filled with literary allusions, the title suggests the failing of novels as guidebooks.

In light of exploring the anxieties of the contemporary novel, writing books about books, I argue, satisfies a fantasy within the writer, to live in a fictitious world in which fiction matters. From this angle we find books that bring dead authors back to life or revise canonical works of literature. Curiously, there are several trends within commercial fiction that do just this. Independent publisher Quirk Books has published a series of satirical novels in which works of literature in the public domain are revised to include zombies, vampires, or other B-movie monsters. These titles include *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, *Android Karenina*, and *The Meowmorphosis*. Enjoyment of these books is predicated on knowledge of the originals, indicating that they are a joke for the erudite, perhaps a comment on the popularity of commercial vampire novels. The decision to begin this series with two Austen titles may have come from the overall trend to revise and revisit her work both in cinema and in commercial fiction. A recent walk through the aisles of a national chain bookstore revealed nearly thirty titles based on the work of Jane Austen, titles like *Mr.*

Darcy Takes a Wife, Mr. Darcy's Diary, In the Arms of Mr. Darcy, The Darcys and the Bingleys, Austentatious, and more. These are a curious strain of novels as they are niche commercial fiction, a breed of metanovels written by dozens of different authors. It is doubtful that these novels pay homage to the literary prowess of Austen, but rather, indulge in an anachronistic fantasy of Austen's England. They are essentially romances, a safe bet for publishing houses that expose the watering-down of the novel's literary history.

Writing books about books also acts as a kind of propaganda, reminding the reader that fiction has the power to tell a larger truth. This may be achieved in subtle ways such as characters finding redemption through reading, writing, or storytelling. If we choose to see the novel as living, breathing organism, something larger than the novelists who write them, then this is the novel struggling to live, justifying its existence to a dwindling readership. Jonathan Safran Foer's 2002 debut, *Everything Is Illuminated* offers three alternating narratives, each serving to illustrate the function of storytelling in our lives. The main narrative, written by a character named Jonathan Safran Foer (whom I'll refer to simply as Jonathan from here on), tells the story of his great-grandfather's escape from Trachimbrod, a Ukraine village that was invaded by the Nazis. Its companion narrative is a memoir written by a character named Alex Perchov, the Ukrainian tour guide who took Jonathan through Trachimbrod to do research for his novel. The final narrative is a series of letters that Alex writes to Jonathan, chronicling the writing process. While Jonathan's narrative brings the past to life, Alex's narrative reveals that Trachimbrod no longer exists; all that remains is an empty field – and of course stories. Through this discovery, and the death of Alex's reticent grandfather, Safran Foer emphasizes the tenuousness of life itself. The writing of stories is an act of

preservation. But Alex's letters to Jonathan reveal anxieties about truth in the narrative form. He writes, "We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred?" (179). Alex acknowledges that their authorial choices don't always improve the past, but rather, "make ourselves appear as though we are foolish people" (179). He argues that if they are going to rewrite the past, why are they not improving it? He ends his letter with, "I do not think there are any limits to how excellent we can make life seem" (180). It is a particularly poignant line as it reveals a profound misunderstanding of fiction's allegiance to a greater truth about the human condition, an allegiance steeped in sorrow and loss. It also suggests that fiction that matters (read: literature) is something quite different from escapist fantasy (read: commercial fiction), rather, it is about confronting tragic truths. Besides being a device to talk about writing, Alex's letters also reveal the transformative properties of writing, chronicling Alex's journey from a superficial showboat to a thoughtful author who ultimately comes to learn that, "With writing, we have second chances" (144).

Lauren Groff's *The Monsters of Templeton* is another recent novel about books and the power of storytelling. The novel opens with an author's note, explaining why she has decided to resurrect some of James Fenimore Cooper's characters and cast her novel in Templeton – Cooper's reimagined version of Cooperstown. Groff writes, "In the end, fiction is the craft of telling truth through lies" (x). The novel follows Willie Upton's quest of self-discovery as she uncovers her family's true history through reading diaries, letters, and, yes, fiction. Willie is related to Jacob Franklin Temple, a thinly veiled doppelganger for James Fenimore Cooper. Willie's friend Clarissa instructs her to read Temple's novels in order to learn more about her family: "Amazing thing, fiction. Tells

you more, sometimes, about the writer than the writer can tell you about himself in any memoir” (241). This moment of self-awareness – a novel that tells us that novels reveal the truth about the writer – also seems a mild dig at the current popularity of memoirs. *The Monster of Templeton* is a novel of interest not only because it stresses the importance of documenting the stories of our lives for future generations, but for other reasons as well. It is a book about books, reliant on prerequisite knowledge of James Fenimore Cooper (Chingachgook and Unca are characters). Finally, it is told in piecemeal, partly narrated, partly through letters and journal entries, evoking the faux-realism of the early novel.

While it is not explicitly about writing, 2001’s *Life of Pi* comes to mind as yet another example of a recent novel that serves as novel propaganda, reminding readers of the importance of fiction at the novel’s conclusion. After spending several hundred pages with protagonist Pi on a boat with a Bengal tiger, the final section of the novel shifts narrative perspectives and we are suddenly faced with a dilemma; should we believe the fantastical story about a boy on a boat with a deadly animal, or should we believe the more plausible truth – that Pi Patel watched his family die at the hands of the ship’s chef? While I have found that readers curiously differ on which story is the truth, it is telling that the Japanese maritime workers in the novel choose to document the former story as the truth.

These examples not only illustrate the power of stories – to captivate, to preserve, to redeem – but also confirms Tim O’Brien’s sentiment (found in his own meta-novel, *The Things They Carried*) that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179). As anxious as the novel may be about its own ability to uphold greater truths, it is no match for factual truths. Memoirs, biographies, histories, and other non-fictions have

historically been a commercial threat to the novel. It is a threat that manifests itself throughout the novel's history. We will see in the next section just how much of a threat it has become and how the novel has responded.

III. Truth Is Better-Selling Than Fiction

One of the reasons non-readers of fiction often cite for not appreciating the novel lies in the leap of faith readers must make when entering a novel, or in other words, they want to know why anyone would want to spend so much time with made-up characters in a made-up story. This is a major source of the novel's anxiety and we see it expressed in several ways. As mentioned in section one, many early novel writers chose to publish their novels in form of memoirs, journal entries, or letters, this being an easy way to circumvent the high suspension of disbelief required when approaching a novel with an omniscient third-person narrator. But then there are the blatant claims of truth or factuality found on title pages of early novels. The title page of William Hill Brown's 1789 *Power of Sympathy* reads: "The Power of Sympathy: or, the Triumph of Nature. *Founded in Truth*" (emphasis added). Compare this to Hannah Webster Foster's 1797 *The Coquette* which reads: "The Coquette; or, the History of Eliza Wharton; a Novel; *Founded on Fact*" (emphasis added). Not only did both authors publish anonymously, but they both felt the need to assure readers that their work was worth reading because, though it was a manufactured story, it was founded in truth. This is not an anomaly relegated to just these two authors, but a phenomenon of the early novel. Daniel Defoe published *Moll Flanders* as if it were written by the fictitious Moll Flanders herself. Admitting the word fiction was nearly forbidden, and only came with disclaimers that promised some basis in truth.

Fast forward to 2006. Investigative website *The Smoking Gun* publishes "A Million Little Lies," a muckraking article about James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, his best-selling memoir that recalled his years as an alcoholic and drug user. The website, in

failing to uncover Frey's mug shots and criminal records, came to the conclusion that Frey's memoir included some falsehoods regarding his criminal record, calling the factuality of the entire memoir into question. The article spawned a controversy that resulted in Random House offering a refund to purchasers of the book who felt defrauded. The controversy is significant to my argument because it reveals contemporary attitudes about fiction. The press surrounding the controversy revealed that Frey's memoir was first pitched to publishers as a novel, turned down even by Random House who went on to publish it as a memoir. That every major publisher turned down a novel that went on to become a best-seller (repackaged as a memoir) speaks to the negative attitude surrounding fiction within the publishing world; the quality of a work does not matter – if it is fiction, and if it is written by first-time author, it will not sell and therefore it is not worthy of publication.

This is not an isolated incident. The 1990s and 2000s saw a number of supposed memoirs revealed to be fictions in disguise. There was Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995) and Misha Defonseca's *Misha* (1997), two Holocaust memoirs, and Margaret B. Jones's *Love and Consequences* (2008), a gang memoir. And then there was JT LeRoy, the transgender literary persona of author Laura Albert whose novels about transgender prostitution likely sold because readers believed that they were informed by the (fictitious) author's life. Each of these texts reveal something crucial about the expectations of many readers, that is, they want their stories to be true. Rachel Donadio, in an article for the *New York Times* Book Blog entitled "Stranger Than Truthiness," reports that memoirs regularly outsell fiction, going on to suggest that "Memoirs are seen as more authentic than novels. And we earnest Americans, raised to value hard work and plain talk, will always choose faux authenticity

over real artifice” (Donadio). It is a sentiment echoed in contemporary television. The rise in reality television shows in the last ten years indicates a yearning for authenticity in entertainment. Even many popular scripted shows such as *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Modern Family* are shot in faux-documentary style to create the illusion of reality.

And so how does the contemporary novelist resolve his or her work with this public need for authenticity in the absence of a memoir to sell? One way is to intentionally blur the lines between fact and fiction in order to distort the reader’s perception of the novel. J.M. Coetzee’s recent novel *Summertime* has the phrase “Fiction by the author of *Disgrace*” boldly printed on the front cover, as if to be forthright about the genre. And yet, without presumption, the text delivers nothing but unfinished notes and interview transcripts purportedly written by a young writer attempting to publish a biography on the late J.M. Coetzee. It is not the first time that Coetzee has intentionally created an indistinct line between memoir and novel. *Boyhood* and *Youth* similarly use the memoir genre as a template for fiction, generously appropriating details from the author’s life in the text. Where *Summertime* is of particular interest to us is that we see Coetzee negotiating the terms of fiction through a life spent writing it. One of the characters, Julia Frankl, tells the fictitious biographer that, in recounting the details of her past with Coetzee, she is making up the dialog, “Which I presume is permitted, since we are talking about a writer. What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit, be assured of that” (Coetzee 32). This is again a case of a novel defending truth in fiction. Later, another character reads back a constructed narrative based on an interview with her. The interviewer’s prompts have been cut out and the prose manipulated to read in her first-person voice – leaving the resulting text to read much like

a novel. Upset with the changes, the character (Coetzee's cousin Margot) says, "*When I spoke to you, I was under the impression that you were simply going to transcribe our interview and leave it at that. I had no idea you were going to rewrite it completely,*" to which the biographer replies, "That's not entirely fair. I have not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as a narrative. Changing the form should have no effect on the content" (Coetzee 91). From this it is clear that Coetzee sees no delineation between truth in memoir/biography and truth in fiction. And yet, he has explicitly chosen not to publish a memoir, but, rather, a series of novels that masquerade as memoirs. It is difficult to know if Coetzee's decision to couch his memoir in fiction is a method of self-preservation or if it is a novelist's appeal to a larger reading audience, one that wants authenticity.

One final way we see novelist's resolving this tension between truth and fiction is by publishing historical novels, or non-fiction novels as they coming to be known. Indeed, the popularity of the historical novel is on the rise, but like the Austen sequels, the bulk of bestselling historical novels in the last ten years are largely commercial ventures. Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*, a period piece about life during the Depression, was been on *The New York Times* Bestseller list for 153 weeks as a trade paperback with a long, 100-plus week run as a hardcover ("Best Sellers" 29 Jan 2012). Other historical novels currently on the list include *The Help* (Kathryn Stockett), *Sarah's Key* (Tatiana de Rosnay), and *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* (Jamie Ford). These titles follow a string of immensely popular historical titles of recent years that include *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), *The Book Thief* (2005), *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), *The Red Tent* (1997), *The Kite Runner* (2003), *Atonement* (2001), *Cold Mountain* (2006), and Philippa Gregory's six-title Tudor series. Ultimately we see that, over 200 years after the first novels were published, the stigma surrounding fiction continues. In a

2009 book review in *The Atlantic*, novelist Jay Parini argues that “historical fiction has become our primary form of fiction. In our high-velocity, high-volume world, the present can seem just too bright, too close. We need the filter of memory to pull reality into focus.” In the same article, Parini quotes novelist and biographer Peter Ackroyd as saying, “In biographies you can make things up. In novels you are obliged to tell the truth” (Parini). The popularity of these novels tells us that the average contemporary reader wants some prevalent element of truth, a piece of known factuality that she can ground her fictitious story in. The novel, as we have already established, evolved from poorly researched histories, and so besides the contemporary historical novel being a compromise, a way of telling timeless truths by fictionalizing historical truths, it is also a step backwards for the novel, a regression. Ultimately, it is clear that readers are still suspicious of pure fiction.

Chapter Three: Case Studies

Having outlined the major anxieties of both the early and contemporary novel, I want to close my thesis with several case studies that illustrate the anxieties of the contemporary novel in context. I have chosen to focus on up and coming writers who explicitly aspire to write literary fiction. The decision to exclude established, canonized authors (such as, say, Joyce Carol Oats or Salman Rushdie) is based on their level of critical and cultural acceptance. Having already been validated as authors of merit whose works are read at the university level, I would argue that these authors produce less anxious works. Their novels will always find a major publisher, will always be reviewed in *The New York Times*, will always be read by a loyal following. Here, it is worth noting that, on their rise to fame, these authors enjoyed more prosperous times for the publishing industry. A young writer today trying follow in the footsteps of Rushdie will find that many of the doors Rushdie passed through are now forever shut.

Much of the literary fiction written today comes out of smaller, independent presses, the most prominent being McSweeney's. Because it best represents the volatile, self-aware state of the novel today, it bears dedicating some space to discussing McSweeney's.

Founded in 1998 by journalist Dave Eggers (whose own literary rise to fame is owed to a successful memoir), much of what McSweeney's produces is shrouded in ironic humor and self-consciousness. Its quarterly literary publication, *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, often employs outlandish packaging gimmicks, such as an issue in which all the stories are printed on individual cards and pamphlets enclosed in an elaborately designed cigar box. Citing an issue where a short story by David Foster Wallace was printed in impossibly small letters on the spine of the hardcover journal, *The*

New York Times called McSweeney's "tail-biting self referentiality" a "parody" of literary journals (Shulevitz). Its website, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, publishes highly literate, but esoteric lists, open letters, and essays, most of which are absurdist in nature. (A recently published piece by John Rodzvilla is called "Notes on the Video Game of My Next Novel.") The McSweeney's visual aesthetic often romanticizes the ornate flourishes of early-twentieth century publications, and yet nothing it touches is without some small reminder of twenty-first century popular culture, willfully indulging in anachronisms for an unsettling or humorous effect. I argue that the elaborate and often impractical packaging speaks to the perceived role of the arts in the twenty-first century – a luxurious and unnecessary indulgence. Its use of antiquated ornate typography to publish contemporary slang and vulgarities encourages the reader to consider the divide between high and low culture. To typecast, the average McSweeney's reader simultaneously possesses a nostalgia for the simple past and, owing to an inherent progressivism, embraces the aloofness of post-modernism. Nearly everything McSweeney's produces is intended to perplex those not "in the know." Even its name is of apocryphal origin. Timothy McSweeney is supposedly an institutionalized man who sent cryptic letters to the Eggers household and is in no way associated with the organization. Eggers chose the name as a joke because "the journal consisted of work that didn't fit in mainstream publishing" (Eggers). For McSweeney's, the line between sincerity and satire has been blurred so that it is often difficult to differentiate between the two.

In the end, McSweeney's has created an exclusive (and some would argue elitist) literary club for both author and reader to find solace. There is a painful awareness and even celebration of obsolescence. The extended use of irony and absurdism is nearly

hostile to outsiders. This is the house that the contemporary novelist built and it seems to speak volumes about the state of the contemporary novel. Like many contemporary literary novels, the marketing tactics employed by McSweeney's seem to acknowledge the waning readership of literary fiction by doing little to court a mainstream audience, instead rewarding its small group of erudite readers with academic humor and literary in-jokes. These tactics are the language of self-defense and self-preservation. It is the language of an outcast who uses its marginalized status to alienate the populist majority. And considering the current dire state of the publishing industry, the opulent self-indulgence of both McSweeney's and the contemporary literary novel is the language of denial.

I. *After the Workshop*, John McNally (2010)

Published in 2010, *After the Workshop* perhaps best expresses many of the anxieties mentioned in chapter two of this study. It follows the humorous exploits of John Hercules Sheahan, a graduate of the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop who, after publishing one short story in *The New Yorker* (which also gets anthologized by *Best American Short Stories*) is unable to finish his novel. Sheahan lands a job as a media escort, chauffeuring visiting authors (on book tours) around Iowa. It is somewhat debasing work for a failed writer, dealing with eccentric published authors and demanding New York agents who assume that Sheahan is an Iowa townie. Further, he is forced to operate on the periphery of the Writers' Workshop, dealing with pretentious MFA students and former professors. Thus, Sheahan is suspended between two incongruous worlds, too educated to be a townie and too crippled by a decade-long case of writer's block to be a writer. He is a character that the Village Voice calls "the special kind of elite failure that only the Iowa Writers' Workshop can breed" (Baron).

Like an eighteenth century novel, each part of *After the Workshop* (there are seven) is preceded by an epigraph. The first epigraph is the famous “no second acts” quote from Fitzgerald, a quote that is disproven by McNally’s characters. The second epigraph is a rather straightforward quote about writing from John Gardner. These first two epigraphs may indeed be elevating the text, associating McNally’s text with esteemed American novelists, but the tide shifts at the third epigraph, offered by Flannery O’Connor: “Everywhere I go, I’m asked if the universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don’t stifle enough of them” (87). Yes, O’Connor is an esteemed American novelist, thereby elevating the text by association, but the sentiment expressed disparages the somewhat recent phenomena of the MFA in creative writing. Here we see just how far the novel has come, from being criticized as lowbrow, to being a sanctioned cultural institution worthy of a degree at major universities.

The third epigraph comes from Writers’ Workshop graduate, T.C. Boyle:

The Writers’ Workshop gave me the time to become a writer. I learned to spend less time at Gabe & Walker’s Bar and more time at my typewriter. I learned the fanaticism of art. I learned how to see cornfields as nature. I learned that all writers are madmen and madwomen and to be strenuously avoided at all cost. (143)

At this point in the novel, McNally’s characters validate Boyle’s quote. There is Vince Belecheck, Sheahan’s trust-funded nemesis, a former Workshop classmate who masquerades as a blue-collar worker, wearing expensive steel toe boots and plaid work shirts, his shtick: rewriting canonical texts set in modern times; there is Vanessa Roberts, an insufferable memoirist who goes AWOL after it is learned that her best-selling memoir – *The Outhouse*, a tempered tale about an incestuous childhood encounter with

her brother – is found to be completely fabricated (“She totally James Frey’ed everyone’s ass” [219]); there is Tate Rinehart, an egotistical New York hipster whose fashion shoot for *Esquire*’s literary issue shows him locating a book with the aid of two scantily dressed librarians; and there is S.S. Pitzer, a mischievous and heavy-drinking best-selling author who makes a Salinger-like disappearing act only to mysteriously show up at Sheahan’s door with intentions of stealing his unfinished novel. Lauren the pushy literary publicist who calls Vanessa Roberts’s memoir “one of the most important books of this decade” (53) just before admitting that she has not even read it. *After the Workshop* reads as a satire of nearly aspect of the publishing industry, from agents, to writers, to academia, to media escorts, to the types of books that are published.

The contemporary romance novel, a strictly commercial product with no literary aspirations, is represented by the extremely prolific Lucy Rogan. When Sheahan is hired to escort Rogan to a reading at a bookstore outside of Iowa City, he notes that at literary events, a non-best-selling author might be lucky to attract an audience of twenty-five people, but Rogan attracted a line of women trailing outside the bookstore with mountains of her books available for sale inside. Sheahan finds Lucy so charming and beguiling that he reads one of her books only to be disappointed:

Her novel was full of clichés and plot contrivances, and the characters were all paper-thin. I read two chapters before tossing it aside. It wasn’t so much that I was an elitist (though I probably was); it was just that my expectations had been higher, and though I knew that the romance genre was formulaic and that its main point was to fulfill its readers’ expectations and not to subvert them, I had hoped, after all the talk about

her own struggles, to find something, anything, in her writing that would suggest a deeper connection between us. (57)

Sheahan goes on to admit that the poor quality of her novel only served to fuel his resentment towards her success. This is one of the many passages in *After the Workshop* that speaks directly to the acrimonious literary fiction writer, reveling in contempt for commercial fiction. The irony of the novel is that after S.S. Pitzer steals Sheahan's novel, he hires Lucy to coach Sheahan into writing a new novel. Sheahan not only accepts Lucy's help, but also becomes romantically involved with her. One could not help but presume that this is McNally's truce to commercial fiction. Literary fiction and literary fiction writers, after all, are consistently portrayed as elitist, pretentious, alienating, and highly dysfunctional.

The commercial threat of memoirs appears throughout the text as well. The sixth epigraph is from James Frey: "There isn't a great difference between fact and fiction, it's just how you choose to tell a story" (243). This epigraph represents the novel's anxiety regarding truth, an anxiety, we have seen, that stems back to its inception. When Larry McFeeley, a working class Iowan, causes a stir by reading his highly literate poetry at an Iowa Writers Workshop reading, Lauren the publicist confronts him about publishing a book – not of poems, but a memoir. "Good God, nobody reads poetry," she says (278). Later, McNally takes a shot at Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, a highly successful memoir that remained on *The New York Times* Best Seller List for 220 weeks ("Best Sellers" 08 May 2011):

"Jack," Lauren said. "Don't you know *anything*? We sold it on the basis of a proposal. Well, in this case, a pitch; we didn't even have time to actually

type something up. You think what's-her-name, that *Eat Love Fuck* chick, actually wrote her book first and *then* sold it? Think again. (253-254)

In another scene, two MFA students, Sally and Helga, are talking in a bar. Helga reveals that her maternal grandfather was a Nazi soldier in a concentration camp.

Sally said, "You're so lucky, bitch."

"I know, I know," Helga said.

"You write that memoir and throw in all that Nazi stuff," said Sally, "and I bet you'll get a six-figure advance." (165)

The students go on to have a superficial conversation about marketing, emphasizing the purely commercial aim of the memoirist. And as previously mentioned, the character Vanessa Roberts is a highly successful memoirist whose work is found to be fraudulent. The term memoirist, it seems, is a matter of semantics. Vanessa is a novelist who only sells because she purports her work to be true. Truth, as we have already seen, is better selling than fiction, and the rhetoric of *After the Workshop* is that the modern day memoir is crass marketing racket.

McNally's text captures the cultural tension between commercial and literary fiction as well as it does the tension between the working class of Iowa and the elitist Writers' Workshop students and faculty. Having been out of the Workshop for twelve years, Sheahan has become friends with many of the locals who frequent a bar called the Foxhead, or as he puts it:

...non-writers who grudgingly suffered the Workshop students whenever they burst through the front door and talked loudly of (always loudly) about Jonathan Franzen or Mary Gaitskill or drunkenly scribbled Barry Hannah quotes on the bathroom wall. (McNally 11)

One regular at the Foxhead, a carpet installer named Bobby T., tells Sheahan and a woman with whom he had been arguing with (about audaciously titling her novel *The World According to Garp*), narrows his eyes at them and says, “Writers [...] I wish you’d all just die” (McNally 41). The feeling we get is that writers are outside the realm of the real world and therefore despised by those who have to endure it. At the same time, he notes that “nearly everyone in town had an MFA or a PhD, and yet most were related to jobs that paid barely above minimum wage” (25). And so while McNally’s text is somewhat self-hating, it also somewhat self-pitying, a response to the large number of overeducated unpublished writers all struggling to succeed in a dying industry.

The basic premise of the novel evokes Nick Hornby’s assertion that many contemporary novels are too bookish. In an interview with *The Huffington Post*, McNally offered this:

One recurring reason why my book was rejected, even when it was being championed by editors at various publishing houses, was that it was too insider-ey. Who, except other writers, would want to read the book? Ironically, the only people who've posed that question to me have been other writers and editors. I've gotten plenty of emails from people who aren't writers or editors who've read the book and responded positively to it. After all, the book is really about a guy with a shitty job who's come to a critical point in his life. To my mind, that's universal. If I'd written about a postman at the crossroads of his life, would only postal workers have been interested in it? (Shivani)

McNally’s final point is a good one, but with lines like, “Playing Raymond Carver to S.S.’s Cheever, I pulled up in front of John’s Grocer [...],” it is difficult argue that he is

not alienating readers. McNally also seems rather defensive. And why shouldn't he be? Despite having published three novels, two short story collections, edited six literature anthologies, and written reviews and essays in esteemed publications, his name is virtually unknown. All of his works have been published on small independent presses. It is no wonder that his most recent published work is not a novel at all, but a work of non-fiction: *The Creative Writer's Survival Guide: Advice from an Unrepentant Novelist*.

II. *US!*, Chris Bachelder (2006)

Before we look at the content of *US!*, allow me to first discuss the novel's form. Chris Bachelder's debut novel *Bear v. Shark* is written in the style of a scrapbook, a pastiche of fragmented conversations and narratives. It is a detached way of writing that keeps the reader at a distance, never allowing intimacy with any one character. Part one of *US!*, (titled "Resurrection Scrapbook") is written in this manner. The narrative of unfolds through lyrics, phone transcripts, letters, journals, a course syllabus, an Amazon-style listing of books, a chapter of haiku, a chapter of jokes, a talk show transcript, a map, and occasionally, traditional storytelling. Part two of the novel is a fairly straightforward narrative that could easily stand alone as a novella and part three is a two-page faux-Ebay auction listing. The unorthodox form of *US!* echoes the practice of early novels that disguised the novel in other, more believable formats. As if to trick the reluctant novel reader, the story unfolds as one reads non-fiction miscellany, items read every day on Internet searches. Early editions of the novel were even published with the subtitle "Stories and Songs," while the most recent edition fails to advise that the book is a novel.

Bachelder's reluctance to adhere to the traditional conventions of the novel can be interpreted in several ways. One could see this as a daring advancement of the genre. But just as soon as I write this, the possibility is almost immediately discounted. Didn't *Moby-Dick*, with its long chapters on whalebones, whales in literature, whaling industry and whale etymology, do nearly the same thing? A counter argument against the term "experimental novel" is that there is no such thing as a *traditional* novel. A novel could be told in letters, could have multiple narrators, could even have images and manipulate the typography. The genre has always been generous with its title. The only thing essential to a novel is a fictionalized story. And so is Bachelder, as I earlier suggested,

disguising his novels to combat a waning population of novel readers? Perhaps. But there is another more plausible interpretation; this is what the novel looks like coming apart at the seams, the result of an over-stimulated culture too bored to bother with one single narrator, one single medium, for 300 pages. Akin to the work of Don DeLillo, Bachelder allows his novels to reflect the discordance of popular culture with knowing winks and straight-faced ironic gestures. The Don DeLillo effect – allowing mass-market consumer culture to commandeer the writing aesthetic – presents yet another anxiety of the contemporary novel. For if novels imitate reality, how do we resolve the influence of faceless, corporate marketing which has become so ubiquitous in late-twentieth century America? Novelists like DeLillo and Bachelder choose to include this faceless voice, and so it becomes a character that looms over their characters, influencing thought and action.

This brings to the plot of *US!*. Political writer Upton Sinclair, through mechanisms unexplained, is continuously resurrected from death by left-wing idealists and invariably assassinated by right-wing extremists. During his brief but frequent reappearances to the world of the living, the prolific Sinclair continues to write novels and make public appearances for left-wing causes. Meanwhile, the repeated Sinclair assassinations cultivate a culture of its own, catapulting his assassins to national fame and producing cultural institutes such as the Museum of Upton Sinclair Assassination. Sinclair is finally more famous for being assassinated than he is for being an author. At first glance, the novel appears to rely on one joke in which Upton Sinclair is at the butt end, but Bachelder manages to use the preposterous storyline to explore the antagonistic relationship between politics and art as well as the role of both in interpersonal relationships.

The most obvious thing we can say about *US!* is that it is yet another book about books, nearly cannibalizing itself. The real life Upton Sinclair published nearly one hundred books in his lifetime, most of them advocating social change with only one of them having any major impact. The recurring joke of *US!* is based on Sinclair's hopeless idealism, but it is an extension of its core anxiety – the ineffectuality of the political novel. One character chides another for thinking that writing makes a difference:

The books don't matter. I'm sorry. Not *The Jungle*, not *The Octopus*. Not *The Grapes of Wrath*. Have you noticed? The poor are still with us. We still have tainted meat. We still have layoffs. We still have an economic system that eats people to get stronger. Nobody reads. We have hundreds of TV channels. Nobody gives a shit. This has not been a century of progress. (57)

This passage not only expresses an anxiety about the role of the novel within society, but it also acknowledges a non-literate majority. A regular contributor to McSweeney's, Bachelder subscribes to the impossibly clever and erudite ethos of the contemporary literary empire that endears it to a small, educated population while willfully alienating everyone else. There is something self-defeating about this. The above quote acknowledges that nobody reads, and yet Bachelder presses on, writing about books that nobody has read.

The second chapter gives us a scathing review for Sinclair's latest novel *Pharmaceutical!*, an expose on the pharmaceutical industry. The critic mocks Sinclair's predictable plots, two-dimensional characters, and pathetically simplistic political views. Indeed, the novel sounds dreadful. The critic's voice is Bachelder's when he writes, "Novels are not tracts or pamphlets; they do not serve to convince readers of anything. A

novel may ask questions, but a good one never supplies an answer” (14). Such criticism can easily destabilize the greater purpose of novels. The novel distinguished itself from the romance by purporting to reveal some greater truth about the human condition. The political novel is an extension of this mission. If we deny the novel the ability to answer its own questions, novels simply become empty philosophical exercises. The chapter “America is Hard to See” begins with an epigraph by Donald Barthelme: “We are all Upton Sinclairs” (85). What Barthelme likely means is that all novels aim to reform and to change. Bachelder’s inclusion of this quote affirms his refusal to take sides, but it also starts to feel like he is having an argument with himself regarding the role of the novel.

The greater irony is that, though it is a satire of the political novel, *US!* is ultimately a political novel. Bachelder allows Sinclair a small victory at the novel’s end; Stephen Rudkin, a young conservative adolescent who was supposed to lead a Sinclair book burning, ends up reading Sinclair’s latest book and reforming his political views. Bachelder treats the scene where Stephen is about to read the Sinclair novel fated for burning with reverence:

Years later [Stephen] would vividly remember this night, sitting in his white underwear on the floor of his room, holding *A Moveable Jungle!*, perched at the edge of something vast. He would say, later, that he had intended to build a miniature model of the book pile in his room. He would say he had intended to practice his burning technique, and this may have been true. It probably was. But instead of building the model pile, Stephen held the book in his hands, turning it over and over. He felt the sharp corners of the cover with his index finger and he flipped the crisp pages with his thumb. He lifted the book to his nose and inhaled as deeply

as his anxious breathing allowed. He opened to the middle, closed his eyes, and buried his face in the crease, inhaling. The smell of the novel! Beneath the mild sweetness of the pages he detected the medicinal, antiseptic scent of the ink, the chemical tang of the glue. [...] Stephen, it should be said, had never held a new book. Instead of building his miniature pile in preparation for the GASL book burning, he opened the novel to the first page and began reading, and he did not stop until he had finished it. By that time the sun was coming up on the Fourth of July and for Stephen the world was a very different place. (248-249)

The description of the young man's intimate examination of the novel is rife with sexual overtones – he is, after all, in his underwear. It is a life-changing experience for Stephen, not unlike a religious awakening. Later, Stephen tries to free his school librarian, Sinclair, and Sinclair's secretary from a basement whose door is symbolically blocked with a bookcase. While removing the books from the shelf to make it easier to move, Bachelder writes, "He was trying to memorize the titles and authors. He wanted all these books to be inside of him. He wanted to be that big on the inside" (283). It is clear at this point that Stephen's chance encounter with the novel has unequivocally changed him. Stephen frees Sinclair and his librarian, but is not able to thwart the book burning, nor Sinclair's assassination. This ending warms the reader to the idea that, although limited, novels can be medium for social change. More importantly, it suggests that novels are an effective vehicle for personal reform. And so what are we left with? Noncommittal statements. Novels can ask questions, but should not answer them. Political novels are *mostly* ineffectual. Such questioning of the novel – within a novel – ultimately renders Bachelder's text immobile with self-consciousness.

Like *After the Workshop* and *Super Sad Love Story*, *US!* expresses anxiety over the state of the publishing industry. One chapter is comprised of an Amazon.com-style list of recent books written by Upton Sinclair. Each preposterous title is followed by the phrase, “Be the first to review this book!” Of the forty books, only four customer reviews were submitted. One five star review is likely from his (fictitious) son, a folk-singer who leaves only a verse about his father. Another is from a teenager who complains that Sinclair came to her school and that he was old and gross. The longest review is from the Genetically Modified Corn Growers Association, refuting the charges in *The Devil’s Ears!*, Sinclair’s expose on genetic engineering. The final review is a glowing review intended for genetically modified corn and erroneously left under *The Devil’s Ears!* (78-84). As previously mentioned, Sinclair’s books are poorly reviewed by critics, and according to this chapter, they sell just as poorly. In a chapter that lists items overheard in the Museum of Upton Sinclair Assassination ticket line, one person says, “I didn’t realize he wrote books too. I just thought he got shot” (167). The small independent press that publishes Sinclair’s novels (Red Shovel Press) continuously expresses concern over money and the commercial potential of his latest submissions. (It is implied that Upton himself is financing the publishing costs.) Just as it seems that the publishing house will not be able to continue to afford publishing Sinclair’s poor selling novels (their offices were firebombed twice in recent months), an order for five hundred copies is received for a Fourth of July celebration in Greenville. What Red Shovel Press does not know is that the small, conservative town intends to burn the books. The organization that placed the order is the Greenville Anti-Socialist League. The joke here is that the GASL has far more money than Red Shovel Press, and that Red Shovel Press stands to make more money sending its books to a fire than it does sending its books to retail.

Bachelor's novel also addresses the growing popularity of memoirs over fiction. One of Sinclair's assassins, Joe Huntley, publishes his diary after he is imprisoned, which goes on to become a bestseller. After his release from prison, Huntley's agent tries to persuade Huntley to attempt another assassination with a huge advance so that he can secure another bestselling memoir. What Huntley does not know is that his agent has a simultaneous deal with an up and coming assassin, Francis Scott Billings – who not only plans on assassinating Sinclair, but also taking down Billings. This thread not only speaks to the threat that memoirs pose to the novel, but also to the crooked state of large publishers, literally villainizing Huntley's literary agent.

And so we see that Bachelor's text expresses deep anxiety about the role of literature and anxiety about the disappearance of literature. But it is not merely an analytical, postmodern exercise. The novel equally develops a poignant narrative arc about Sinclair and his compromised relationship to his son Albert. In the novel's final act, Sinclair and his secretary read a series of hate-mail letters regarding his forthcoming novel, *A Moveable Jungle!* Sinclair is titillated by the death threats, feeling that he has struck a nerve with the public, until he reads a letter that threatens to kill Albert if Sinclair publishes the novel. Throughout the novel we see that Sinclair has already sacrificed his relationship with Albert for his art, continuously cancelling meetings and occasionally sending impersonal and somewhat self-absorbed letters. While Sinclair seems troubled by the threat to Albert's life, he decides to publish the novel anyway, sending Albert a letter that only warns him to be careful in these "dangerous times" (239). Without any sufficient warning from his father, Albert is murdered. Throughout the novel, Albert's thankless devotion to his estranged father is heartbreaking, but this final, selfish gesture is more than the reader can forgive Sinclair for. As Sinclair is assassinated for the final

time, he has a conversation with the dying Albert in his head. It is awkward and absurd and sad. Albert tells his father, even as he is dying himself, that his new book is good. Sinclair can only offer that he is “not by nature very personal” and that he “just couldn’t do everything” (292). While Albert may have been a fool for his blind devotion to his father, Sinclair is clearly the bigger fool for his blind devotion to art. Here, Bachelder breaks from the detached irony of postmodernism and takes a surprising sentimental turn, choosing to lament the loss of love over the loss of artistic vision. It is a gesture that ultimately seems to accept the fall of the novel.

III. *Super Sad True Love Story*, Gary Shteyngart (2010)

In a *New York Magazine* piece about the end of the publishing industry, Bloomsbury's Peter Miller acknowledges that book trailers – short videos made to advertise the publication of a book in the vein of movie trailers – are “all the rage,” but follows this by saying, “I would love to see an example of one video that really did generate a lot of sales. There's a sense of desperation” (Kachka). Book trailers range from modest productions that show edited interview clips with the author to dramatically produced cinematic short films, complete with soundtracks and actors. The desperation Miller speaks of is likely in response to the fact that there is no real venue for the book trailer, save for YouTube. Book trailers may be a desperate marketing attempt to re-brand books – as if they were antiquated relics – to appear fresh and relevant to a young, YouTube-watching audience.

It's particularly fitting that Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* has a book trailer as it's largely a novel about the end of the novel as we know it, expressing deep anxieties about an illiterate, technology-based youth culture that will one day lead our world into a fast-paced, highly-sexualized, and decidedly not-intellectually friendly future – in a sense, YouTube culture taken to the next level. Shteyngart's novels regularly employ a self-deprecating humor; his previous novel *Absurdistan* features a character comically named Jerry Shteynfarb, the self-absorbed author of *The Russian Arriviste's Hand Job*, a novel whose title is a thinly-veiled mockery of Shteyngart's own debut novel, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. The book trailer for *Super Sad True Love Story* follows this self-mocking tradition, proudly announcing in the first twenty-five seconds that Shteyngart does not know how to read. Shot in a documentary style, writers Mary Gaitskill, Jeffrey Eugenides, Edmund White, and Jay McInerney appear to speak

about Shteyngart's remarkable literary achievements given his inability to read. Meanwhile, Shteyngart portrays himself as an idiot savant, affecting a thick Russian accent and making vapid expressions. Editor David Ebershoff remarks that working with Gary is a "singular experience" because "he demands his advance be paid entirely in smoked meat, pickled tomatoes, and three recently graduated debutantes from Mount Holyoke." While the humor is silly, it is also aimed at learned audience. Jeffrey Eugenides is shown saying, "Gary has managed to escape the anxiety of influence by the sheer fact that he has never read a word." Meanwhile, Shteyngart is shown romping around with a dachshund; when Eugenides says that he's like the woman in the Chekov story, Shteyngart incredulously replies, "Guy from Star Trek writes stories?" ("SUPER SAD"). Like the epigraphs of the early novel, Shteyngart, a relative literary newcomer, has populated his book trailer with a cast of literary heavyweights, as if to stake his claim at literary greatness. But it seems as if his deep-seated anxieties regarding the future of the novel won't allow for a sense of importance.

Our previous two case studies both exhibited anxieties about the function of the novel and dwindling novel readership, but *Super Sad True Love Story*, largely an epistolary novel (perhaps a nod to the novel's origins), overtly expresses anxiety over the future of the novel, exaggerating contemporary trends into a projected future where the novel no longer exists. Supporting the release of *Super Sad True Love Story*, Shteyngart said the following on The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour:

I think what worries me, and I think one of the main preoccupations of the book is, what happens when people stop reading? What happens when the long-form text goes out of business, and all we're dealt – all we have are little tiny bits of information that are constantly being thrown against our

retinas? This is sort of the problem that I see. Nobody is talking about books at the water cooler. People want to talk about “Mad Men” or “The Sopranos” or “The Wire,” shows that have novelist elements and shows that I love very much. But it's almost as if we're too tired after a long day's work of constantly dealing with information, our iPhones going off, all these different things happening, that we don't want to retreat to our home and read a 400-page book. (“Author Shteyngart”)

And indeed, the future Shteyngart depicts in his novel is one that is wholly reliant on short bursts of text – emails, text messages and social media. But the novel additionally expresses anxieties about American culture and economy. The novel takes place in the future, after a major economic meltdown. Massive corporate mergers have resulted in companies with names like LandO’LakesGMFordCredit. Hyper-capitalist government agencies produce banners with glaring typos (“America Celebrates It’s [sic] Spenders” (208) and “America is back! Grrrr...Don’t write us of [sic]” (179)). Our language has been reduced to vulgar acronyms and abbreviations (the term JBF – as in “just butt-fucking you” – has become an accepted replacement for saying “just kidding”). It’s difficult to ascertain what caused what; either our increasingly crass capitalist culture snuffed out the novel or our culture grew exponentially crude and unrefined at loss of the novel. Early in the novel, a sculptor complaining of America’s degenerated state at a party alludes to *1984*, saying, “Not that you would get the reference. Maybe our bookish friend Lenny here could enlighten us” (19). This allusion to *1984* so early in the novel is no accident. *Super Sad True Love Story* is a dystopian novel in the tradition of *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*, but unlike those novels, wherein literature is lost to a totalitarian

government, here, literature is lost to the impatience, lust, and general ignorance of a consumer-based society.

The novel's protagonist, Lenny Abramov, seems to be among the last people on earth who read books, and for this, he suffers. On a flight home, returning from Rome to America as part of a post-meltdown re-entry program, he notes, "I noticed some of the first-class people were staring me down for having an open book. 'Duder, that thing smells like wet socks,' said the young jock next to me" (37). When he returns to his apartment, one of the first things he does is celebrate his Wall of Books:

I counted the volumes on my twenty-foot-long modernist bookshelf to make sure none had been misplaced or used as kindling by my subtenant. 'You're my sacred ones,' I told the books. 'No one but me still cares about you. But I'm going to keep you with me forever. And one day I'll make you important again.' I thought about the terrible calumny of the new generation: that books *smell*. (52)

His best friend Vishnu warns him, "All those doorstops are going to drag down your PERSONALITY rankings" (90), a reference to some Facebook-style social media ranking system. His love interest, a younger woman named Eunice, emails the following to her best friend, known to us only as GRILLBITCH (a social media username):

Anyway, what kind of freaked me out was that I saw Lenny reading a book. (no, it didn't SMELL. He uses Pine-sol on them.) And I don't mean scanning a text like we did in Euro Classics with that Chatterhouse of Parma I mean seriously READING. He had this ruler out and he was moving it down the page very slowly and just like whispering little things to himself, like trying to understand every little part of it. I was going to

teen my sister but I was so embarrassed I just stood there and watched him read which lasted for like HALF AN HOUR, and finally he put the book down and I pretended like nothing happened. And then I snuck a peek and it was that Russian guy Tolstoy he was reading (I guess it figures, cause Lenny's parents are from Russia). I thought Ben was really brain-smart because I saw him streaming Chronicles of Narnia in that café in Rome, but this Tolstoy was a thousand pages long BOOK, not a stream, and Lenny was on page 930, almost finished.” (144)

Lenny's love for books is one of the major impediments in his relationship to Eunice, trumping even his unattractiveness and out-of-shape middle-aged body. In another email to her friend, Eunice complains, “his head is all caught up in these texts,” pointing out that novels have tainted his outlook to believe that “niceness and smartness always wins” (198). It is in passages like this that Shteyngart is addressing the isolated and erudite reader, for certainly this novel largely appeals to the young and highly educated, a demographic that very likely understands what it is like to value literature in a generation that barely reads. Also, like Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot*, *Super Sad True Love Stories* this passage seems to suggest that the novel has failed as a moral guide.

As the novel progresses, America's redevelopment program fails, resulting in riots, civilian deaths, and military occupation. It is through this fall of American society that Shteyngart engages himself in a debate about the role of the novel. One on hand, a materialistic life based on sex and social ranking seems meaningless and empty. In a diary entry, Lenny reports a wave of suicides as a result of lost Internet connections:

One [suicide victim] wrote, quite eloquently, about how he “reached out to life,” but found there only “walls and thoughts and faces,” which weren't

enough. He needed to be ranked, to know his place in the world. And that may sound ridiculous, but I can understand him. We are all bored out of our fucking minds. My hands are itching for connection [...] But all I have is Eunice and my Wall of Books. (270)

Here, books may be a source of salvation, a way to connect with people when a society does not make good on its promises to fulfill. On the other hand, the novel is found to be largely ineffectual, an outdated relic unable to provide the sense of connection Lenny seeks. Later, in the same diary entry quoted above, Lenny tells of an evening he tried to read to Eunice as a romantic gesture. He chooses *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, first regarding the quotes of praise on the dust jacket, all written by publications that have now gone out of business – *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*. When he starts to read, he feels a sense of anxiety, finding the text difficult and esoteric.

In the first few pages, Kundera discusses several abstract historical figures: Robespierre, Nietzsche. Hitler. For Eunice's sake, I wanted him to get to the plot, to introduce actual "living" characters – I recalled this was a love story – and to leave the world of ideas behind. Here we were, two people lying in bed, Eunice's worried head propped on my collarbone, and I wanted us to feel something in common. I wanted this complex language, this surge of intellect, to be processed into love. Isn't that how they used to do it a century ago, people reading poetry to one another? (275)

It is interesting that Shteyngart chooses to illustrate the failure of the novel by comparing it to poetry, as we have already discussed how the novel supplanted poetry as the highest form of literary achievement in the twentieth century. And while this passage targets a

text that, at publication date, is twenty-seven years old, it just as easily could be targeting the cerebral prose of contemporary literary fiction writers like Zadie Smith or David Foster Wallace.

After an uncomfortable exchange about the difficulty of Kundera's text, Lenny finally stops reading, promising to never do it again. He announces to Eunice that reading is a "stupid luxury" (277) when there are people in need. The two spend the next three hours packing Lenny's books into boxes, presumably to get rid of them. When they are finished, Lenny observes:

I felt the weaknesses of these books, their immateriality, how they had failed to change the world, and I didn't want to sully myself with their weakness anymore. I wanted to invest my energies in something more fruitful and conducive to a life that mattered. (311-312)

There is something unnerving about a character in a novel proclaiming the immateriality of the novel, and the passage feels sincere. Lenny earlier remarks that it took many years after the fall of Rome for Dante to appear (277). The implication is that there may be eras in history when literature is not relevant, that perhaps it has failed a society, and perhaps we are entering one of those eras.

But the novel does not end on this pessimistic note. The final chapter is comprised of notes on the "'People's Literature Publishing House' Edition of the Lenny Abramov Diaries" (324). Here we see that Lenny's diaries are later discovered and published, starting a movement in literature consisting of diaristic writers. The note's author cites The People's Capitalist Party manifesto, which proudly proclaims, "To write text is glorious" (327), only a handful of years after books were considered odoriferous. In this

sense, Lenny becomes the Dante who appears after the fall of the United States, the catalyst for literature's rebirth. On his McNeil/Lehrer appearance, Shteyngart said:

One thing I hope for is that things come in waves, you know, and we are not just an empire in decline; we're a country that's taking a slight detour into relative poverty. And we'll be back, and culture will be back, and literature will be back. ("Author Shteyngart")

And so while *Super Sad True Love Story* ends optimistically, mirroring Shteyngart's own hope for the novel, it also expresses a full range of anxieties about the novel, anxieties that trace back to its inception. From its epistolary form, to its mindfulness of the tension between high and low culture, to its acute awareness of its own existence, *Super Sad True Love Story* reads as a fitting chapter in the long and somewhat tentative history of the novel.

Conclusion

A piece by Garth Hallberg recently appeared in Riff section of *The New York Times* Sunday Magazine entitled, “Why Write Novels at All?” It begins by recognizing a school of contemporary literary fiction writers – Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace – who are attempting to find, through their novels and essays, “the novel’s way forward.” Hallberg acknowledges the bookishness of contemporary literary fiction and the inherent class tension that surrounds the novel. He also notes that, “Writers since at least the heyday of Gore Vidal have bemoaned their audience’s defection to other forms of entertainment.” Many of the ideas studied here at length are found in microcosm in Hallberg’s article. I mention this article not only to validate much of what I have argued here, but also to provide his assertion that this school of writers, this new literati that I earlier called “an impossibly clever and erudite group that speaks to a small, educated population while willfully alienating everyone else,” adhere to the basic treatise that “the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness” and that this basic idea is “ascendant trope of and about literature today” (Hallberg). Though the high ideals of the work itself may limit the size of the literary novel’s audience, I think Hallberg is essentially correct. I would add that the novel often argues that this connection occurs when reading novels. It is the pro-novel propaganda that I spoke of in part II of Chapter two. We see it occurring in each of my case studies. In *After the Workshop*, Sheahan’s contempt for commercial fiction and the publishing world, in conjunction with his constant high brow literary allusions, reward the bookish reader into feeling less alienated in a world that seems to be edging out literary fiction. In *U.S.!* Stephen Rudkin finds his true self the first time he reads a novel, reminding readers that literature has the power to

transform people. In *Super Sad True Love Stories*, when Lenny fails to find that sense of connectedness in literature, it takes a new literary movement to restore this connectedness, perhaps suggesting that the contemporary literary novel is too steeped in bookish literary nostalgia to offer solace on a grand scale. All signs seem to suggest that perhaps the memoir or the non-fiction novel is best suited to provide connection to the masses.

In his acknowledgments for *Super Sad True Love Story*, Shteyngart writes, “Writing a book is real hard and lonely, let me tell you.” Historical context and theory aside, this admittance is my best short answer for why the novel is so anxious. I must return to my introduction. The novelist spends long hours in solitude, creating something that he or she knows will be consumed in solitary hours. There is an inherent insularity to both the acts of writing and reading. The novelist presumably reads more than average reader, and in a much different capacity. The novelist reads for craft, collecting what works and what does not. Francine Prose, author of *Reading Like a Writer*, likens her focus on language to the way a musician reads notation, confessing, “I read closely, word by word, sentence by sentence, pondering each deceptively minor decision that the writer had made” (3). This heightened awareness haunts each writer who attempts to draft a novel of his or her own. But unlike other mediums, which unquestionably require just as much time and solitude, the novelist works with language, our shared symbols and signifiers that mysteriously allow for thought. How can the novel not reflect the work of a mind preoccupied with literature, framed by so many hours thinking about books? And so for as much as I’d like to study the novel independent of novelists, I ultimately cannot ignore the fact that novels are symbols, the product of a very specialized human minds, minds acutely aware of the past and anxious about the novel’s very uncertain future. The

novelist is never an average reader, and the average reader, at least not during this era, will never know as much about literature as a novelist does.

Returning to the idea of profiling the psychiatric health of the novel, we can see that it has suffered constant concerns about its sustainability, whether because it stood in the shadow of poetry, memoirs, cinema, television, or the Internet. Its regular invocation of the redemptive powers of storytelling is its best defense mechanism against its competing signifiers. But even in the best of times, the novel has expressed anxiety over its societal function, an existential struggle, if you will. The anxious condition of the novel is more than just a form of postmodern irony. It is not just “playing with the pieces” (Best 128) as Baudrillard puts it. It is also not about authors engaging in an intellectual exercise. Rather, the self-consciousness of the novel tells a story of its own. It is the neurotic child of human thought, a struggling string of symbols striving to instruct and entertain, inadvertently adding to a larger discourse about the place of storytelling in the human narrative.

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