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Picketing the Zeitgeist: Bad Writing

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Bad Writing by Clay Reynolds

In an article published in *The Guardian*, novelist Edward Docx complains about the general public's taste for "bad" writing. He bemoans the observable popularity of writers like Dan Brown and Stieg Larsson, when so much acknowledged literature languishes ignored, unread. Laura Miller responded in her *Salon* column and defends the guilty pleasure of popular fiction, however pedestrian, on the grounds that, ultimately, taste trumps quality.

It is, of course, an old debate. The antebellum "literary establishment" centered in Boston, and the writers who routinely discussed literary matters there despaired over the "literary rubbish" being widely published. Their attitude has long been shared by any number of highbrow intellectuals, but no form would so excite such vituperation from the aesthetically minded as did the dime novel.

The dime novel (so-called; there were many forms sold for varying prices) was introduced in 1860, although pulpy serial fiction had been widely available since the early 1830s. These were formulaic stories, sensational adventure often patterned on the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Romances and melodrama were part of the mix. Nathaniel Hawthorne's complaint to his publisher about that "damned mob of scribbling women" reflected the frustration that he and his circle of "serious writers" felt as they competed against cheaply produced fiction that they utterly disparaged. To their further chagrin, when the dime novel emerged in 1860, it was a phenomenal success. Although few sophisticates would admit that they read them, it's now been well documented that almost every literate person in the country was reading them and with enthusiasm.

Initially, these "yellowbacks" were marketed to the working class, sailors, soldiers, and laborers desperate for inexpensive, accessible entertainment. One reliable estimate is that more than 11,000,000 titles were produced before 1900. Written by contracted writers who were generating an average of one a month, they were paper-wrapped, cheaply printed, and sometimes sold by the bale. Most of the writers' names are forgotten, as are most of the actual works, but they were more popular than any other form of literature ever produced. Only the Bible outsold them.

On the whole, dime novels lacked originality in content or style. Implausible, incredible, inaccurate in factual detail, they were riddled with cliché and stereotypes. They were heavily edited, often expurgated if the content seemed too salacious or excitable. But they established plot structures, character archetypes, iconic clichés, and dialogue patterns that continue to appear today. *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) owes a heavier debt to these potboiled yellowbacks than most would like to admit.

Now, as then, the "literary establishment" denigrates fiction that falls short of higher literary expectations. But perhaps such judgment betrays a misplacement of priorities. As a friend of mine remarked when a colleague complained of a student's "wasting his time" reading a John Grisham thriller, "At least, he's reading *something*."

Certainly, popularity is often a harbinger of poor quality. But even a cursory inspection of the "best" of today's literary fiction reveals work that is often self-conscious, overwritten, pretentious, derivative, imitative, and artistically banal. Much of

it is unnecessarily obtuse and just plain boring, not in the least bit entertaining.

The tendency to rush to a judgment about a book's artistic worth may be unfair. Much popular fiction, however badly written and (these days) badly edited, is at least sincere, genuinely composed to provide a good read. If they plan to remain in print, most novelists want popularity more than canonization. And they always have. Even Hawthorne understood that most great literature is written by dead people who don't have rent to pay. "None but a blockhead ever wrote but for money," Samuel Johnson said. I would say that only the most egocentric sort of blockhead would try to write for posterity.

Once, about forty years ago, I attended an Edward Albee lecture about the value of art. He said, "Samuel Beckett makes about \$10,000 a month in royalties from all of his work put together. Neil Simon, though, makes about \$10,000 a day from any one of his plays." During the Q&A, a student asked, "You told us what Beckett and Simon make a month. What do you make?" Albee, shocked, replied, "That's none of your business." The student asked, "Why is it fair to talk about their earnings without talking about yours?" Albee stalked off the stage in a huff. But the question lingered.

I have little patience with those who lament the reading public's tendency to reach for lower-brow, less carefully written, more pedestrian prose.

Sometimes, the worth of a piece of writing must be assessed in purely aesthetic terms, but overall, the measure of a novel's value lies in how many people buy it and find it worthwhile to read. After all, why else does one write, but to be read? Of course, pandering to the lowest common denominator isn't a wise practice if what's wanted is respect. It's a conundrum.

One of the bestselling books of the eighties was Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). I don't know how many copies it sold, but it was a sensational hit. I bought it and read it, and I had trouble understanding it. Had I not been well educated in Aristotle and the history of the Inquisition, I doubt I would have understood any of it. I wonder how many people bought that book on the recommendation of enthusiastic reviews, took it home, made a cup of hot cocoa, and snuggled up by the fire to be so frustrated by the first fifty pages that they consigned it to the flames in disgust?

Alternatively, the hands-down bestseller of the nineties was *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992). Once again, only the Bible sold more copies. I doubt that any customer found any page of that book impenetrable. I am equally sure that millions found it trite, formulaic, and boring. But it outsold Eco's novel by a huge margin. It also outsold Cormac McCarthy and any volume by Stephen King.

Does this mean that our intellectual level is so low that our cultural expectations are bankrupt? Possibly, but if money is the measure, one has to consider that when the first dime novel appeared and sold 300,000 copies—in a nation of 20,000,000 where only about 11 percent were literate—that may tell us something else, particularly when one takes

into account the fact that Herman Melville died broke.

The point is that a lot of erudite, intellectually sophisticated individuals of that day bought and read dime novels. They may have hidden themselves away in their studies when they indulged in such "rubbish," but they still read them. Previous generations have had their Dashiell Hammetts, their Mickey Spillanes and Ayn Rands, have spent hours and days with James A. Michener's *Hawaii* (1959) and couldn't get enough of *The Valley of the Dolls* (1966). I am certain that today, just as many intellectuals plowed through *The DaVinci Code* (2003) or *The Hunt for Red October* (1984) or even *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), too. Some went back for more. They recognized the flaws, squirmed over the stylistic mistakes and mechanical errors, writhed over clichés, grumbled over the inaccuracies and implausibilities, and recognized that the work was no match for high standards of taste and mental acumen; but on some level, they enjoyed them.

At a conference a few years back, I ran into a couple I knew returning to the hotel from dinner. I knew them to be self-styled, persnickety gourmands. They said they'd eaten at a mundane national chain restaurant specializing in greasy Mexican dishes. I asked them how they could lower themselves to that level of dining, and the woman winked at me and said, "Sometimes, you don't want the *best* Mexican food."

I somehow doubt that most well-read people curl up with a hefty literary volume every night. I doubt that Edmund Spenser and John Milton top their favored reading lists at the beach, or that William Makepeace Thackeray and Emily Brönte are their regular poolside companions. Somehow, I suspect that when they travel, Henry James and James Joyce are left behind, and that Gustave Flaubert and Leo Tolstoy are rarely packed alongside clean underwear and socks, that Thomas Hardy and Theodore Dreiser are stuffed into their backpacks next to Vladimir Nabokov and J. D. Salinger. But a ripping yarn of international intrigue by John le Carré, or a suspenseful thriller by Dean Koontz, or a love story by whatever romance writer just came out with a new volume, or a Western, or a crime novel, or a—well, that's the point. Sometimes, you just don't want the *best* Mexican food.

So I have little patience with those who lament the reading public's tendency to reach for lower-brow, less carefully written, more pedestrian prose. And if that's *all* they read, at least, they're reading *something*. If such reading keeps books alive and eventually becomes stale in its sameness and lack of imagination, maybe they will reach for an Ernest Hemingway or William Faulkner, a Salman Rushdie or a Simone de Beauvoir, a Mikhail Lermontov or an Anton Chekhov or a Marcel Proust. Then, their hands may miss those and hit a D. H. Lawrence, a Henry Miller, a Hugh Selby, or an Aníás Nin. Then their worlds are truly going to expand and so will their taste in recreational reading.

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