Bring on the Books for Everybody

Collins, Jim

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Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture.


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Part III

POPULAR
LITERARY
FICTION
SEXT AND THE
POST-LITERARY CITY

“What on earth were you talking to Comstock Dibble about?”
Selden asked in the limo on the way home. Janey shrugged,
“Movies, what else. I was telling him that he should make Edith
Wharton’s *The Custom in the Country* into a movie. It’s never been
done before and he’d be good at it.”

“You wrote that. You wrote that.”
It’s a statement, not a question. Daisy stares at him, waiting.
He says again, “You wrote that.” And then hurriedly, “It’s beautiful.
You know that, don’t you. It’s beautiful. And you wrote it.”

In earlier chapters I explored how a popular literary culture began to emerge
in the nineties because of changes in delivery systems and connoisseurship.
The advent of chain store and Web site bookshops, high-concept literary
adaptation films, and television book clubs have all changed where and
how a literary experience occurs. They have also changed the ways in which
one talks the talk of literary appreciation with a high degree of authority,
largely by making reading a process of self-empowerment that no longer
depends on acquiring the right sort of pedigree or professional training.
Novels by Tolstoy, Forster, Woolf, and Austen have acquired a high de-
gree of visibility because reading pleasure itself has been so thoroughly
redefined. They are different novels now, because readers are encouraged to
read them as primers or guidebooks rather than expressions of transcendent
literary genius—it’s all about how you *read* them.
But it is also a matter of how you write them, and the sort of people you write them about, especially when the novels in question are written for and about that popular literary culture. The first epigraph to this chapter comes from Bushnell’s novel about Janey Wilcox, a Victoria’s Secret model who circulates through many of the key locations of Bushnell’s *Sex and the City*, drifting from Manhattan to the Hamptons, as the narrator details meticulously the social scene she encounters every step of the way until she comes to rest in Hollywood. The parade of celebrities she encounters does indeed seem to be, as the book jacket claims, “like characters who could have come from the pages of *Vanity Fair*.” But which *Vanity Fair*? The celebrity lifestyle magazine whose Academy Awards party Janey is attending in the last chapter, or the novel of manners by Thackeray? The answer is clearly meant to be either, or better yet, both, since the same jacket assures us of two things—“Not since Candace Bushnell created Carrie Bradshaw and *Sex and the City* has there been a heroine like Janey Wilcox,” and “Like Jane Austen or Edith Wharton, Bushnell lovingly skewers a society she knows well.” This comparison, however, was not simply invented by the marketing department at Hyperion Books in an attempt to tart up a chick-lit book by accessorizing it with a literary status brooch. The entire novel is very self-consciously modeled on Wharton’s *The Custom in the Country* (1914), a point made explicitly in the exchange, quoted in the epigraph, between Janey and Selden, her media mogul husband.

Why is this particular incarnation of Carrie Bradshaw writing a screenplay about her life modeled after a Wharton novel? And for a studio head obviously meant to be recognized as the former Miramax head Harvey Weinstein, since he is characterized as an overweight, New York–based mogul, head of Parador Pictures, acknowledged to be a genius in the movie business but “equally known for his irrational displays of temper” (34)? And why, when she tires of her boring movie producer husband, does she begin to lust after Craig Edgers, a literary novelist who has just published a five-hundred-page literary bestseller to great media acclaim, a character who is based just as obviously on Jonathan Franzen? It’s one thing for Bridget Jones to be in love with Charles Darcy, but when Carrie Bradshaw has the hots for Jonathan Franzen, and counts Harvey Weinstein among her former lovers, we clearly have a hybrid phenomenon that is as central to understanding popular literary culture as *The Corrections* or *Shakespeare in Love*. Here, yet again, literary, film, and television cultures are intertwined within a book that, even before it is adapted, is always already an HBO television
series, or an article in *Vanity Fair*, or, just as insistently, an Edith Wharton novel for the early twenty-first century.

Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* would seem, at first blush, to come from not just another country but another planet. It is, after all, composed by a novelist that even *Entertainment Weekly* recognizes as the most important English writer, someone whose novels seem to be listed automatically for the Man Booker Prize upon publication. And the narrative circumstances would seem even further removed from the world of *Trading Up*. The main character, Henry Perowne, is a neurosurgeon who, in the course of his day, has a fender-bender with thugs who track him to his home that evening. They have his family captive and are about to brutalize his daughter until she recites Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” at which point, their leader is stunned by the beauty of the words (“You wrote that”) and abandons his evil plan.

Why does Bushnell need Wharton? And why are McEwan’s thugs mesmerized by Arnold? And why have both Bushnell and McEwan been referred to as the contemporary Jane Austen? The dust jacket for *Trading Up* makes this claim, and on my copy of *Saturday* the back-cover blurb from *Esquire* insists, “McEwan could be the most psychologically astute writer working today, our era’s Jane Austen.” Can they both be our Jane Austen? Or are we talking about very different “ours” here?

What constitutes a literary experience has been transformed by high-concept adaptation films but also by novels that either instrumentalize or sanctify quality reading for those readers who hang out at superstores, make lists at Amazon, go to their book club, watch Oprah’s Book Club, or do their literary classics in the Miramax, Focus Features, or Weinstein pictures versions at the closest multiplex. Popular literary culture has been consolidated by those shared modes of consumption, but it has also been exuberantly celebrated by novels that have transformed that culture into narrative universes in novels as diverse as Melissa Bank’s *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999) and *The Wonder Spot* (2005), Kate Christensen’s *In the Drink* (1999), Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), Suzanne Finnamore’s *Otherwise Engaged* (1999), Karen Jay Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004), Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity* (1995) and *A Long Way Down* (2005); Diane Johnson’s *Le Divorce* (1997), *Le Marriage* (2000), *L’Affaire* (2003); Jennifer Kaufman’s and Karen Black’s *Literacy and Longing in L.A.* (2006), Emma McLaughlin’s and Nicola Kraus’s *The Nanny Diaries* (2002), Elizabeth Noble’s *The Reading Group* (2004), Tom Perrotta’s
Little Children (2004), Irina Reyn’s What Happened to Anna K: A Novel (2008), Cathleen Schine’s She Is Me (2003), Curtis Sittenfeld’s Prep (2005), Katharine Weber’s The Little Women (2004), Alex Michel’s Me Times Three (2002), and Hilma Wolitzer’s Summer Reading (2008). While these novels may differ quite dramatically in terms of their literary aspirations, they all have two things in common—first, they offer lessons in self-cultivation, now defined as an informed consumerism about love, culture, and material goods, and second, they make extensive use of canonical novels by Trollope, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Austen, James, Wharton, Forster, Alcott, and Charlotte Brontë as they very self-consciously reinvent the novel of manners for contemporary audiences. These authors and their characters may be driven to find meaningful sex and make the right purchases, but they’ve read books, by God, and they’re determined not to let you forget it. But why won’t they let you forget it?

The list of titles I’ve assembled above may seem like a wildly, even perversely, disparate grouping, since it includes everything from the greatest hits of chick-lit to arch-literary bestsellers. My grouping of these titles is not pure invention on my part, a product of a feverish critical imagination determined to identify a genre of fiction that I have “discovered.” I got a lot of help, from Target superstores, Vogue magazine, Amazon.com, and Barnes & Noble, all of who make these sorts of groupings and connections on a regular basis. When I began writing this chapter, I went to my local Target superstore to see what I’d find in the Target’s Recommended Reading section (a subsection within the Media department across the aisle from Best-Sellers). There I found a remarkably similar array of titles: Trading Up, Fashionista, and The Devil Wears Prada, intermixed with The Jane Austen Book Club, Atonement, and Life of Pi. The June issue of Vogue (2005) featured a similar grouping in its “People Are Talking About: Books” department (“Vogue picks summer’s most provocative reads”), which included The Wonder Spot and A Long Way Down, along with Michael Cunningham’s Specimen Days and Umberto Eco’s The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana. I went to Amazon to see if similar arrays were being assembled, and when I checked The Wonder Spot home page, the “Customers Who Bought This Book Also Bought” list included A Long Way Down, along with The History of Love by Nicole Krauss, Prep by Curtis Sittenfeld, and Gigi Levangie Grazers’s The Starter Wife. I then clicked directly to A Long Way Down, where the “Customers Who Bought This Book Also Bought” list included The Wonder Spot, along with McEwan’s Saturday and Cunningham’s Specimen Days. At the Saturday
home page, the “Customers Who Bought This Book Also Bought” began with Roth’s *Plot against America*, which was paired with *Saturday* as a “better together” package deal, but it also included *A Long Way Down*. Hornby was coupled with Bank and McEwan, and McEwan was coupled alternately, but simultaneously, with Hornby and Roth. And Barnes & Noble made the identification of these titles as a particular type of book even more pointedly—*The Wonder Spot, A Long Way Down, Saturday,* and *Specimen Days* were all “stepladder” titles featured during the week of their release on the stepladder display just inside the front door; the Hornby and Cunningham novels, enjoying the privilege the same week, sat side by side as featured novels of the week.

The point of this exercise is not to play a kind of literary version of the Kevin Bacon movie trivia game, in which I prove that I can get from Levangie Grazers’s chick-lit to Roth’s important literary novel in just two clicks. Nor am I just trying to show what an amorphous category “Recommended Fiction” has become. Important distinctions can, and indeed need, to be made within that range of titles if we hope to gain a better understanding of popular literary culture and the very different needs it serves for divergent audiences. In his benchmark study of the Booker Prize and the impact it has had on British fiction, *Consuming Fictions* (1996), Richard Todd delineates the ways in which prize-winning novels have almost automatically become literary bestsellers. While this chapter owes a great debt to his work, here I want to explore the spectrum of quality fiction rather than make categorical distinctions about what is, and isn’t, a literary bestseller, because it is the fluidity of this continuum that is most significant. In this chapter, I provide a kind of tracking shot across popular literary culture, a scene filled with masses of readers who read quality fiction passionately, a publishing industry who caters to them just as lustily, and legions of novelists who are determined to prove the value of their novels for audiences in search of quality reading that will provide useful information.

My goal in these last two chapters is to delineate two adjacent, often overlapping types of bestselling fiction within this range—the Post-Literary Novel and the Devoutly Literary Novel. I use the term “post-literary” to characterize novels such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary, The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing, The Wonder Spot, The Nanny Diaries, Little Children, Trading Up,* and *A Long Way Down*, because they all make elaborate use of canonical literary fiction as they turn the traditional novel of manners into a guide
to romantic consumerism, yet, at the same time, they distance themselves from contemporary Serious Fiction that is thought to be of no help at all in negotiating the complexities of contemporary desire. The Devoutly Literary novels I will discussing in detail in the next chapter—Author, Author, as well as The Jane Austen Book Club, Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, Literacy and Longing in L.A., The Master, Saturday, and The Thirteenth Tale—insist on the transformative power of reading as an explicitly aesthetic experience within, but also somehow apart, from mere consumerism. In the former, books are relentlessly referred to by characters that also reference, with equal frequency and fluency, movies, television programs, rock bands, and fashion designers. In the latter, Henry James, E. M. Forster, T. S. Eliot, and Balzac circulate as central figures and copies of books take on a magical, transformative power. Both reject the traditional distinctions between popular and literary fiction. The post-literary novel dismisses the avowedly literary in pursuit of a new kind of quality fiction, while the devoutly literary sanctifies the reading experience, but in doing so turns the most “bookish” sorts of pleasures into the stuff of literary bestsellers. Both take for granted readers with a literary education of varying degrees; both appear on the same stepladders at Barnes & Noble. Both are all about love—of books, material goods and significant others. They all take self-cultivation as a given, and then blur the line between self-cultivation and self-help. Both feature characters who define themselves through their obsession with making taste distinctions and having firsthand experiences with beauty. Consequently, each reimagines, at the most fundamental level, the use value of reading fiction. If we hope to gain a better understanding of why people who read contemporary fiction passionately continue to do so, we need to look very closely at the novels that are providing them with the reasons to read with such enthusiasm.

Girls’ and Boys’ Guides to Romantic Consumerism:
The Post-Literary as iPod in Novel Form

The notion of self that takes shape only through the exercise of taste distinctions, rather than as the repository of inner qualities or spiritual values has been widely attributed to life within consumer capitalism, but this chapter will complicate any such easy explanations. Acquiring and demonstrating taste is as essential to these novels as finding the right love relationship, but
this particular taste crisis is in many ways unprecedented. Taste anxiety of one sort or another obviously has a long history in literary fiction, and one could argue that the novels of manners would not exist in either its traditional or its contemporary incarnations without a broad readership overwhelmed by such anxiety. The anxious American aristocrats who flocked to England in the nineteenth century, and the equally anxious British upper classes who felt the need to go on the Grand Tour through “the Continent” in search of the requisite taste, have been stable figures in literary fiction for well over a century. Bourdieu’s often-invoked distinction between different forms of capital is especially useful in this regard, since, more often than not, the taste crisis boiled down to a conflict between financial and intellectual capital, and how the two could be traded with the greatest degree of sophistication, toward the greatest effect. That conflict between these two currencies of value remains solidly in place in the post-literary novel of manners, but the currency exchanges have become more complicated than ever before, due to the excess of advanced degrees and the wildly varying levels of disposable income. The books I discuss in this chapter are products of a pre-downturn consumer culture, but I read these novels not just as symptomatic of the excesses of a particular period. They are ultimately about the transactions between cultural and financial capital, not the giddy infatuation with brand names. They signal the need for a new kind of fiction that might serve as a guide for behavior when those exchanges are now, more than ever, in a constant state of flux. The price points then might be lower, but the appeal of fictions that address the complex interplay among love relationships, consumerism, and the value of reading fiction only continues to intensify.

The characters in these novels realize that a college education is a necessary, but insufficient, component of the contemporary self-cultivation project, because there is another kind of cultural knowledge out there that must be acquired as soon as possible. This is exemplified neatly by Amy Hawkins, the freshly minted dotcom millionaire who is the main character in Diane Johnson’s L’Affaire (2003): “Eventually, she supposed, she would learn to be rich, but for now she hoped to grow from a corporate drone into being a better, more aware human being. . . . Above all, her resolutions concerned the acquisition of knowledge, or rather, culture, in its broadest sense, though she was under no illusion that she could do anything more than a crash course” (30). What causes this “sudden consciousness” is a re-
mark she overhears in an antiques store about dotcommers like herself: “No one has taught them anything. If it weren’t for Martha Stewart the whole culture would be down the drain. They don’t know what they don’t know, so they don’t think of asking” (31). Amy, at least, seems to know what she needed to know:

But it was interesting to wonder what these blue-haired ladies knew, or felt they knew, that she didn’t, things about antique furniture, yes, but their tone, and the reference to housework guru Martha Stewart, implied a wider store of lore usually purveyed by mothers, equated with culture itself, endangered at that. And Amy didn’t know any of it. From then on, daily, the world brought her new evidence of her lack of culture. (32)

Despite herself, she knew about corporate buy-outs. What did she know about poetry, about meter and stanza form, music, tradition, masterpieces? The white wine glass, the red wine glass? . . . What is a godet? What was the line between despair and cynicism, between taste and vulgarity—a word she had so often heard used about the houses her friends were building? (71)

In certain ways, Hawkins’s desire for the right sort of cultural knowledge is remarkably similar to the woman who wrote into the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1908 in search of good books (first mentioned in chapter 2). She is eager to self-improve and has even more disposable capital to accomplish her goals. But while the letter writer was convinced that the road to self-cultivation was paved with the right books, Hawkins knows that cultural knowledge also has to include vital information about a host of other associated tastes, in clothing, interior design, and what used to be called “domestic arts.” As such, the reader of the *Ladies Home Journal* and Johnson’s heroine are in inverse relationship to each other; the former can’t afford to go to college and wants to read books, but appears to have no anxiety about her knowledge of more domestic tastes because that isn’t cultural knowledge; the latter has gone to college, already knows more or less what the good books are, but is also fully aware of the fact that those books are insufficient for a thorough program in self-cultivation at the turn of the twenty-first century. The letter writer does not express any need for taste, just knowledge of the right books, which will automatically make her tasteful. For Johnson’s heroine and her readers, no such automatic assumptions can be made. Yet perhaps the most significant difference between them is that the letter writer to the *Ladies
Home Journal in 1908 couldn’t walk into Barnes & Noble and find tables full of novels all about characters exactly like herself, characters whose pursuit of the right sort of cultural knowledge has acquired enormous entertainment value unto itself.

Making such taste distinctions, and demonstrating just how essential they are in developing a sense of identity and finding the appropriate love object is the central project of the post-literary novel of manners. One thing is certain—when Austen, James, Wharton, and Forster were sending their characters out in search of cultural knowledge, no one within those fictional universes was questioning the value of the contemporary literary novel as a key source of that knowledge. The post-literary novels of manners I will be focusing on in this chapter all position themselves in a popular literary culture of their own creation, solidly ensconced between the realms of vulgar bestsellers and irrelevant serious fiction. The dismissal of contemporary literary culture, combined with equally explicit affiliation with nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novels of manners, was inaugurated by Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary in 1996. The interdependency of this disaffiliation and reaffiliation, combined with an ambivalent invocation of self-help books, is set in motion before the story even begins. Bridget prefaces her diary with a list of resolutions designed to improve her behavior in the coming year. Under the heading “I Will Not,” Bridget promises not to “waste money on: pasta-makers, ice-cream machines or other culinary devices which I will never use, books by unreadable literary authors to put impressively on shelves” (2). Literary authors may be impressive in some abstract sense within another taste culture, but they are unreadable, because they have no direct application in terms of offering advice about herself or her relationships. Like the pasta machine and the ice-cream maker, books by literary authors are specialty items that signal seriousness of intent on the part of those who buy them, but they don’t have actual use value. They remain “objets” to be admired but since they just sit there, they are a waste of money. Bridget’s new year’s resolution acknowledges the residual prestige that unreadable literary books have for some people, somewhere, but at the same time, it devalues any cultural capital they might have by making their prestige factor a form of counterfeit currency.

But Bridget Jones’s Diary is just as valueless without Jane Austen. It lays claim to being a contemporary novel of manners that is a cut above mere romance fiction and vapid self-help books, because it insists on a direct kinship with Pride and Prejudice consistently reiterated through an extended
inter textual conceit. Fielding’s novel incorporates the central plot of Austen’s novel, most specifically in her search for a Mr. Right who will be her Mr. Darcy, her ideal love object, based on her repeated viewing of the BBC television adaptation of Pride and Prejudice. By naming the boyfriend Mark Darcy, Fielding could hardly have made the parallel more explicit, at least until the film adaptation of Bridget appeared and the Mr. Darcy of the BBC program actually became the Mr. Darcy of Bridget Jones through the casting of the same actor, Colin Firth. The use of Firth is emblematic of how completely the narrative universe of Bridget Jones’s Diary depends on Pride and Prejudice: Firth functions as a character in one narrative universe, but he is simultaneously the living vestige of Austen’s novel within it, without which the fictional universe collapses. But even when the intertextual meshing together is less overt, Austen’s novel pervades Bridget Jones like Colin Firth’s Darcy, because it functions as a free-floating pedigree. This is more than a self-help novel, because it takes so clearly for granted that all concerned—the novelist, filmmakers, characters, imagined readers, and viewers—have all at least seen the BBC adaptation even if they haven’t read the novel. This is a shared cine-literary experience of a very particular variety that suggests a taste community that is both aware of the status of Austen’s novels but delighted to see them undergo a radical makeover. Within this community of readers/viewers, Jane Austen is most assuredly not a pasta machine.

What follows Bridget’s list of new year’s resolutions may be an assemblage of newspaper columns deeply inflected by self-help books and women’s magazines, but the consistent reiteration of Austen’s presence in one form or another within this mix of authorities represents one of the chief distinguishing features of the post-literary novel of manners—the explicit self-positioning within a cultural landscape where forms of high and low culture, and visual and literary culture, are all omnipresent and completely intertwined. These novels envision narrative universes and a popular literary culture where they insist on fulfilling a function once performed by far more genteel authors now considered canonical. In his book Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition (1999), Richard Keller Simon argues that “if you watch television, go to the movies, read popular magazines, and look at advertisements, you are exposed to many of the same kinds of stories as someone who studies the great books of Western civilization. You have simply been encouraged to look at them differently” (i). As an example of what we might see, if we looked differently, he offers Cosmopolitan magazine as
a contemporary female bildungsroman . . . a novel of manners, devoted to the translation of social gesture, dress, look, and public behavior into explicit meaning and concerned with the individual’s relationship to social convention. . . . [T]he result is something akin to Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* in the age of mechanical reproduction, a text now without any literary aura, repeated every month with minor variations, that takes the characters, issues, and plot of the Austen novel, and of related stories in the genres—Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* are important precursors as well—and transforms them into Dadaist collage. . . . Appropriately the traditional author has disappeared into this modernist mass-cultural collage and in her place is the commercial marketplace, all the advertisers, editors, writers, and readers that make up a collective enterprise of completely inartistic intention. (117)

While this argument is convincing in regard to *Cosmopolitan*, post-literary novels of manners represent a more complicated phenomenon, because they don’t depend on a literary critic to uncover their hidden connections to the traditional novel of manners; the last thing the author does is disappear into completely inartistic intention. Throughout the novels of Fielding, Banks, Johnson, and Fowler, traditional literary authors are repeatedly cited, and their novels incorporated through a variety of elaborate intertextual strategies in a concerted effort to make use of that literary aura, as the entire category of artistic intention is itself being redefined with the commercial marketplace of *books*. These novels insist on foregrounding their affiliations with Austen, Wharton, and Flaubert in no uncertain terms: they are the contemporary novel of manners. This is exactly the sort of novel Wharton would be writing about if she were describing the relationship between love and money in contemporary New York—just ask Candace Bushnell.

Or Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus, who might insist that Charlotte Brontë is the more useful guide for life in that same New York. Establishing the differences between those with and without genuine taste, is the central project of their novel *The Nanny Diaries*. The book’s post-literary credentials are presented before the action even commences: the opening quotation from *Jane Eyre* makes the reader well aware of its status as an inheritor of the governess novel. But here “Nanny” functions as taste arbiter in terms of what proper child care should be (she is writing a thesis at New York University on Jean Piaget’s theory of egocentrism) and in terms of
what constitutes a genuine education in tasteful living. The chief villain in the novel is the nouveau-riche mother, Mrs. X. She is not some glitz-loving monster from Long Island who whiles away her days reading Judith Krantz novels and ordering anything she wants from the Shopping Channel. Nanny zeros in on Mrs. X’s obsession with acquiring cultural capital at all costs. Her coffee table features a massive book devoted to villas of Tuscany, and she labors mightily to get her child Grayer into kindergarten at the right private school. Rather than being deprived of it, Grayer is force-fed “culture” throughout the day; for example, “Mommy’s exhausted Grayer. Get into bed and I’ll read you one verse from your Shakespeare reader and then it’s lights out” (220). All of this cultural information turns counterfeit, because it is so overtly instrumentalized—the Shakespeare reader is in the same library as guidebooks with titles such as *How to Package Your Child: The Preschool Interview* and *Make It or Break It: Navigating Preschool Admission*. The crassness of these transactions between cultural and financial capital becomes most apparent when Grayer is rejected by the school (aptly named Collegiate), and Nanny and Mrs. X meet with the “Long Term Development Consultant,” who coaches parents and caregivers about enhancing their child’s candidacy. After giving the wrong answers to too many questions (Nanny doesn’t make him use an apparel chart when he gets dressed in the morning, and no, she doesn’t have him translate the colors and sizes into Latin), the consultant tells her:

“I have to question whether you’re leveraging your assets to escalate Grayer’s performance.” Having let the cat out of the bag, she leans back and rests her hands in her lap. I sense that I should feel insulted. “Leverage my assets?” Hmm, anyone? “Nanny, I understand you are getting your degree in arts-in-education so frankly I’m surprised by the lack of depth surrounding your knowledge base here.” (179)

This leveraging of the knowledge base that is predicated on direct exchange of cultural capital into financial capital renders Grayer’s entire “education” invalid. Within the world of *The Nanny Diaries*, Shakespeare readers for children are as much a part of the new glitz as Chanel Bébé SPF 64 and signed first-edition *Babar* prints. While this scene obviously involves a certain degree of satirical exaggeration, the phrasing is especially deft, because this leveraging of the assets in one’s knowledge base reveals one of the principal causes of this all-pervasive taste anxiety—the relationship between financial and cultural capital has never been more volatile, because so many
different brokers of cultural value are setting such wildly varying exchange rates. What is the ultimate value of a college education in such matters? How does one cash it in? Or should it be cashed in at all? Does it remain most valuable as a kind of countervalue system that allows for instant superiority, at least in terms of self-image.

_The Nanny Diaries_ offers at least a glimmer of an alternative world where genuine taste, and genuine sense of identity, may still be found. Nanny’s grandmother’s apartment is set in stark contrast to Mrs. X’s mausoleum. Her grandmother functions as the resident paragon of taste, not because she presumes to be an authority on décor or clothing, but because she surrounds herself with her own choices, she inhabits her individual taste. On her first visit to her grandmother’s home, Nanny is offered breakfast but declines because she’s worried about missing her appointment with the financial aid office at the university. She says, seemingly in passing: “I glance up at the old Nelson clock. ‘I wish I had time, but I’ve gotta get down town before the line at the Registrar is around the block’” (21). This may seem like a quick transitional moment in the novel, but Nanny’s passing remark about her grandmother’s kitchen clock reveals the complexity of taste cartography in the novel. Her grandmother’s apartment, decorated in mid-century modernist classics like George Nelson wall clocks, punctuated with black-and-white family photos, and accompanied by the vintage Sinatra recording of “The Lady Is a Tramp” (another masterpiece from the mid-fifties), is an organic extension of who she is, because she has lived through that period and her sensibilities were forged during that golden age of sophisticated urbanity in New York. Her Nelson clock might be just the old clock in the kitchen, but in this novel, Nelson and Sinatra make Tuscany and Shakespeare seem like just so much Lavender Linen Water from L’Occitane, because they resonate as authentic expressions of intensely individual taste, which cannot be simply purchased. Mrs. X’s apartment, on the other hand, is described by Nanny as a “hotel suite—immaculate, but impersonal. Even the lone finger painting I will later find taped to the fridge looks as if it were ordered from a catalogue. (Sub Zeros with a custom colored panels aren’t magnetized.)” (2). The key distinction here is not old wealth versus new wealth, or mere wealth versus cultural capital. Nanny’s ability to stand in judgment over the people who employ her as a servant depends on a hybridized value system consisting of equal measures of the intellectual capital she is acquiring via her degree at New York University, and a handed-down cultural heritage whose gold-standard status depends not on family estates or titled lineage.
but direct, lived connection to the lost age of genuine sophistication set in opposition to the vulgarity of contemporary New York.

There is, however, a taken-for-grantedness about the names of the right universities, designers, and brandnames—the reader already knows them, or is more than eager to acquire the knowledge, either from this novel, or shelter magazines, or catalogues. Granny’s Nelson clock, or a version of it, actually is available for purchase, specifically from good-design catalogues like Design within Reach, which sells its own reproductions of the Nelson Spindle clock, the Noguchi coffeeable, and Eames chairs, thereby allowing customers (and readers of The Nanny Diaries) to recreate in their own homes the mid-century modernist mise-en-scène that is endlessly celebrated in shelter magazines such as Dwell and Elle Décor (which regularly feature articles about how to find modernist antiques that are deemed “timeless classics”). And for that audience, the real Nelson clock in the kitchen registers instantly as radioactively hip.

The Nanny Diaries offers a very particular kind of knowledge to its readers by insisting on its ability to deliver the vital ethnography along with narrative entertainment. This ethnographic dimension is visualized explicitly in the film version of The Nanny Diaries (2007). In the opening scene, we meet Scarlett Johansson as Nanny Annie Braddock, operating as a tour guide in the American Museum of Natural History. She identifies herself in the voice-over as a former anthropology major as the camera glides by the usual dioramas devoted to the world’s peoples until it comes to rest on a display case devoted to the peoples of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, at which point her narration begins to detail their rituals as the camera takes us into “real” New York. From this point onward, the entire film functions as an extension of the tour guide’s account. The viewer learns something about this tribe, but here the distinctions between the raw and the cooked, between the tasteless and tasteful, are no longer a matter of those who have knowledge (and a comfortable income) and those who have just money. The contemporary counterparts of the Schlegels and Wilcoxes have all been to college, and they have all acquired elite knowledge about taste, but not taste itself. In a culture where the acquisition of knowledge is placed at such a premium, and the dispensing of crucial information about making the right choices has become an industry unto itself, with taste mavens becoming media celebrities, knowledge about things tasteful is only a click away on the remote control or the keyboard. Consequently, the tasteless know as much as the tasteful about fine Bordeaux (if they’ve read their Wine Advocate
or *Wine Spectator*), and the most vulgar-of-the-vulgar are as enthralled by Tuscany as the Honeychurches and Emersons. In Alex Wichel’s novel *Me Times Three*, for example, the narrator describes “the guys in the Armani suits” who form the bulk of the eligible dates for the novel’s heroine in the following way: “Their staggering bonuses had already purchased new duplexes with marble bathrooms and climate-controlled wine closets, where they could store their requisite cases of Chateau Margaux. One guy I knew liked to make a ceremony of opening a prize bottle, then chugging it as his friends cheered him on. You could just imagine what he’d be like in bed” (6). Within the ethnography of the contemporary novel of manners, it’s all in how you use that knowledge, where you get it, and how you demonstrate it that really counts, and this requires a new taste cartography to get the lay of the land, especially since the expression of taste, and the expression of love, appear to be such thoroughly interdependent rituals.

In his masterful study *Literature and the Taste for Knowledge* (2005), Michael Wood argues eloquently about the different sorts of “knowledge” literature can provide. I will look closely at his analysis on Henry James in my next chapter, but in his introduction he makes a key point about the taste for knowledge that literary fiction offers: it can teach us certain things about the “complexity of the world” in terms of ambiguities and “obliquity” not available in other forms of discourse. The contemporary novels of manners shift the terms of this relationship through their insistence that they offer reliable knowledge about taste that is not available elsewhere. For Wood, Barthes’s formulation is pivotal: “La science est grossière, la vie est subtile, et c’est pour corriger cette distance que la littérature nous importe—Knowledge is coarse, life is subtle, and literature matters to us because it corrects the difference” (35). Wood uses this as his point of departure to explore the intricacies of novels by James, Kafka, and others, but I think it may also be used to explain the phenomenal popularity of these post-literary novels, if we revise Barthes’s formulation somewhat: knowledge in the form of guidebooks and Web sites is coarse, contemporary social life is too bafflingly subtle to be accounted for by mere guidebooks, and this novel corrects the difference by teaching you something those guidebooks can’t deliver.

Melissa Bank’s *Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999) is another post-literary novel that delivers a knowledge that can’t just be leveraged or cashed in, but nonetheless depends on the discourse of the guidebook. The heroine, Jane Rosenthal, is a young writer-in-the-making trying to crack the literary scene in New York, only this time she is an Oberlin graduate, instead of a
Victoria’s Secret model. Late in the novel she goes book shopping: “I don’t want to admit to myself what I’m doing when I put my bike helmet on and head over to the Barnes & Noble a few blocks away. I pretend that maybe I’m just getting another Edith Wharton novel. But I by-pass Fiction and find Self-Help. . . . [T]here are stacks and stacks of How to Marry Mr. Right, the terrible book Donna told me about, terrible because it works. I take my copy up to the counter as furtively as I would a girdle or a vibrator” (240).

This is a complicated, but highly representative moment in terms of understanding the interplay between canonical fiction and self-help guides within this taste culture. Why would an Oberlin graduate, a would-be literary figure, even consider passing up Fiction for Self-Help? And at Barnes & Noble? But, conversely, why does Wharton even enter the picture here, if Self-Help is now the reading material of choice? That there has been a vast gulf between Serious Fiction and Self-Help books until quite recently hardly needs proving, since the latter have exemplified all that the former never could be. As easy-to-read, even easier-to-understand advice stated in thoroughly conversational prose that reduces emotional problems to a series of bulleted “tips” for improving behavior, nothing could be further from the Serious Fiction that has been predicated on sophisticated usages of language in pursuit of the complexities of human behavior. What is it about the nature of romance in consumer cultures that calls out for both self-help discourse and canonical literary masterpieces?

While working as a manuscript reader, Jane becomes involved with Archie Knox, an older, literary editor well established in the New York publishing world. Their love affair quickly becomes a master-apprentice relationship. They evaluate manuscripts together, and Archie takes her to literati receptions where they hobnob with other writers and editors. She tells him, “I feel like Helen Keller and you’re Annie Sullivan.” He reminds her regularly that her generation is “culturally bankrupt,” and he undertakes her education, dispensing the much-needed cultural knowledge about classic Hollywood films and vintage jazz albums, and, of course, great novels. When they go to the country for the weekend, he reads her Washington Square by flashlight. As such, Archie represents traditional New York literary culture, the pre–Tina Brown New Yorker incarnate, ideally played by Jason Robards in his middle-aged prime. But the relationship collapses, due to one insurmountable problem, which speaks volumes about the use value of his kind of literary authority—Mr. New York Literary World is . . . impotent,
a pasta machine without a crank, so to speak. Just as tellingly, the other voices of authority that Jane listens to are authors of the self-help book *How to Meet and Marry Mr. Right* that she buys when she stops by Barnes & Noble. Upon returning to her apartment with this vibrator of a book, the authors, Faith Kurtz-Abrowitz and Bonnie Merrill, move in with her, speaking to her directly in boldface self-helpese (“Don’t Be Funny! Be Mysterious!”). She attempts to follow their advice, until she realizes it won’t work if she wants to land her a Mr. Right from her own taste culture. Since the object of her affection is another Oberlin alum, their brand of self-help advice is as useless as Archie’s—neither gives the cultural knowledge she needs to hook up successfully in a taste culture that is so explicitly post-literary, and at the same time, so overtly post-collegiate. She finds happiness when she learns to just be herself. So, even though the voices of traditional self-help are thoroughly discredited, the novel itself becomes a post-collegiate self-help novel, a point driven home by the book’s dust jacket:

*The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* reflects the quest of our time: how to love and understand one another better than we do and how to love in ways that allow us to be more fully ourselves. Its heroine, crackling with life, energy, and spirit, is a vivid and wise guide to these lessons. It’s no wonder that a growing number of readers from the Midwest to midtown Manhattan, have come to Melissa Bank’s work with a sense of instant recognition and gratitude for what she has given us all.

The discourse here is unashamedly therapeutic—the novel’s value is measured in terms of self-actualization: reading it makes us more fully ourselves. No mention is made of any sort of stylistic achievement, nor is it even referred to at any point as a novel—its brilliance is in the lessons it gives to us, a reading community/target audience that knows its own tastes (and just as important, whom to trust). Archie gives no credibility to Jane’s culturally bankrupt perspectives, but Faith and Bonnie fail to appreciate the game of love as played by graduates of the better liberal arts colleges and universities. Intellectual class distinctions are resoundingly reaffirmed by the end of the novel; just being yourself gets you the right Mr. Right if he comes from the alma mater, because when he’s just being himself, his self looks an awfully lot like yours. The success of *Girls’ Guide* was due in large measure to its ability to fill a vacuum in terms of cultural authority for this us of college-educated readers for whom mere self-help guides are guilty
pleasures or simply beneath contempt, but who are no longer in thrall to traditional notions of what Serious Fiction should try to accomplish or what quality reading should be about.

That a shared taste culture (expressed in the shorthand of favorite books) is the bedrock for successful relationships is reiterated in Bank’s next collection of linked stories, The Wonder Spot (2005). Its heroine, Sophie Applebaum, again works in publishing and has the same sort of literary/antiliterary conversations with various boyfriends. Her favorite novel comes, once again, from the Austen-Wharton-James-Forster stable—James’s Washington Square, the same novel Archie read to Jane in Girls’ Guide. And, once again, her search for Mr. Right has everything to do with identifying a shared taste in books; loving boyfriends and loving the same books go hand in hand:

He’d just finished reading a new collection of short stories that he loved and I loved, and I told him about other collections I thought he might love. We loved the same dead writers, too—Hemingway and Fitzgerald but not Faulkner; neither of us had read Ulysses, and I said, “Let’s never read it,” and we swore that no matter what happened between us, we never would.

After our dishes were cleared, he said, “I feel so great with you.”

After port, he leaned over and kissed me on the lips.

After he’d paid the check, he led me out to the sidewalk and pulled me against him. (264)

After all that book talk, what else could have happened? (Mercifully, they did not move on to discuss their mutual admiration for Washington Square—spontaneous public sex acts would have been inevitable.) The therapeutic dimension of the “lessons” offered by this book depends on a knowledge base that cannot be leveraged in the same way that it was by the misguided nouveau-riche mother in The Nanny Diaries. Because there is no suggestion that the intellectual capital acquired in college needs to be cashed in as soon as possible for financial gain, the knowledge of books remains transcendent. Nothing can diminish its value. Yet there is another sort of transaction occurring in this scene between the economies of knowledge and love. Knowing certain authors, insisting on distinctions between them, and expounding on which ones you love passionately remains an essential process of self-definition and, therefore, a vital courtship ritual.

That the books these characters buy can be as much of an expression of innermost self as the books their favorite novelists write epitomizes what the
sociologist Colin Campbell has referred to as “Romantic consumerism” (*The Romantic Ethic*, 1987). He argues compellingly that modern consumerism depends to a very great extent on the Romantic conception of artistic creation, expanded to include audience as well as artist. While he acknowledges the traditional wisdom—that it was the Romantics who laid the foundation for the modernist dismissal of consumer culture through their insistence on the singularity of artistic genius as prerequisite of genuine culture—he is also struck by the fact that this theory of artistic creation “places almost as much emphasis upon the ‘re-creative’ abilities of the reader as upon the original creative faculties of the poet. . . . The reader is also, in that sense, assumed to be a creative artist, capable of conjuring up images which have the power to ‘move’ him. . . . Romanticism provided that philosophy of ‘recreation’ necessary for a dynamic consumerism: a philosophy that legitimizes the search for pleasure as good in itself” (189).

The Romantic consumer as recreative artist, whose favorite medium of personal expression is selective acquisition, has recently become a central feature of the critical discourse devoted to the iPod. In his book *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness* (2006), Steven Levy argues that the contents of one’s iPod have come to embody the singularity of self: “Playlist is character. . . . It’s not just what you like, it’s who you are” (26). Just how ubiquitous this figure of the Romantic recreative consumer has become is thrown into sharp relief in his observation that “iTunes surfing is not merely a revelation of character but a means to a rich personal narrative, navigated by a click wheel. At one point the universal goal of the literate was to write the Great American Novel. Then it moved to the Great American Screenplay. And now, the Great American iTunes Library” (41).

When the Great American Author becomes the Great American Curator/Consumer, taste distinctions must be recorded time and time again, because they are, in effect, where the action is in terms of self-definition. In this regard, post-literary novels are more than just the contemporary version of the novel of manners—they are iPods in novelistic form. The relentless cataloguing of books read, movies watched, music listened to, and clothing purchased represents the articulation of the recreative self in a world where the value of any knowledge, particularly the knowledge furnished by a college education and literary fiction, is undergoing perpetual revaluation. There is no better example of this sort of iPod novel than Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity* (1995), since it celebrates a Romantic consumerism in which acquisition and display become the bedrock of identity formation.
When offering advice about finding the appropriate significant other, the narrator Rob insists that “what really matters is what you like, not what you are like.” While he thinks that his friend Barry’s suggestion, that one needs to hand out a questionnaire to prospective partners covering all the “music/film/tv/book bases,” may be a bit extreme, he nevertheless concludes that there is “an essential truth contained within the idea, and the truth was that these things matter and there’s no good pretending that any relationship has a future if your record collections disagree violently, or if your favorite films wouldn’t even speak to each other if they met at a party” (17). The phrasing here is particularly revealing, because collections as expressions of taste appear to take on a life of their own, having conversations and going off to parties together. As taste-knowledge incarnate they become the tangible expression of self, a point made even more extensively when Rob talks about his record collection:

Tuesday night I reorganize my record collection; I often do this at periods of emotional stress. There are some people who would find this a pretty dull way to spend an evening, but I’m not one of them. This is my life, and it’s nice to be able to wade in, immerse yourself in it, touch it. When Laura was here I had the records arranged alphabetically; before that I had them filed in chronological order. Beginning with Robert Johnson, and ending with, I don’t know somebody African, or whatever else I was listening to when Laura and I met. Tonight, though, I fancy something different, so I try to remember the order I bought them in; that way I hope to write my own autobiography, without having to pick up a pen. I pull the records off the shelves, put them in piles all over the sitting room floor, look for Revolver and go from there; and when I’ve finished, I’m flushed with a sense of self, because this, after all, is who I am. (55)

This might be a dull way to spend an evening, but not for anyone in a post-literary iPod novel, because one can just as easily imagine Jane Rosenthal or Sophie Applebaum getting the same thrill reorganizing their record or book libraries in the form of tangible autobiography. Two things are especially significant here. “All the music/film/tv/book bases” suggests that the connoisseurship that defines the self is no longer limited to just books. Autobiography, formerly done with a pen, is now a matter of constructing a sense of self out of diverse but thoroughly integrated libraries of popular culture, where there are no hard-and-fast distinctions between literary and nonliterary in terms of making the definitive taste distinctions.
that define who you really are. The model may still be literary—the library, the autobiography—but the exercise now involves more than just books. Just as important, this process is driven by emotional need. To paraphrase Levy, if playlist is character, then playlist is also self-help. The ultimate value of the library is not the accumulation of cultural knowledge for its own sake, because he engages in this archival work only during periods of emotional stress. For Rob, the library is most satisfying when it has therapeutic value, and it can perform that function only if he refuses to let contemporary literary fiction anywhere near that personal archive.

*Make That Quality Fiction, Not Literary Fiction: Is Self-Help Such a Long Way Down?*

In his recent novels and book reviews, Nick Hornby has continued to clear a space for the post-literary self-help novel, but the realization of its therapeutic potential appears to depend on the outright rejection of the officially literary. Once again, the battle lines are drawn not between literary fiction and entertaining fiction, as such, but between literary fiction and quality popular fiction that will “change your life and therefore deserves to be considered literary once we chuck antiquated notions of what it actually means to be literary.” In other words, it is most decidedly not fueled by a “read anything you want” populism but by the desire to make distinctions between different types of quality reading. Celebrating reading while rejecting the self-consciously literary, in pursuit of a certain sort of underappreciated popular fiction, involves a complicated set of moves. Hornby pursues this project relentlessly, but most entertainingly, throughout *The Polysyllabic Spree* (2005), a collection of his book reviews that appeared in the literary magazine *The Believer*. He explains why he took the job as book reviewer:

I assumed that the cultural highlight of my month would arrive in book form, and that’s true, for probably eleven months out of the year. Books are, let’s face it, better than everything else. If we played Cultural Fantasy Boxing League, and made books go fifteen rounds in the ring against the best that any other art form had to offer, then books would win pretty much every time. Go on, try it, “The Magic Flute” v. *Middlemarch*? *Middlemarch* in six. “The Last Supper” v. *Crime and Punishment*? Fyodor on points. See? I mean I don’t know how scientific this is, but it feels like the novels are walking in. You might get the occasional exception, “Blonde
on Blonde” might mash up The Old Curiosity Shop, say, and I wouldn’t give much for Pale Fire’s chances against Citizen Kane. And every now and then you’d get a shock because that happens in sport, so Back to the Future III might land a lucky punch on Rabbit, Run; but I’m still backing literature twenty-nine times out of thirty. Even if you love movies and music as much as you do books, it’s still, in any given four-week period, way, way more likely you’ll find a great book you haven’t read than a great movie you haven’t seen, or a great album you haven’t heard. (58)

The conversational tone, the humor, and the sports analogy all clearly indicate that this is not your average literary criticism—even as it celebrates the joys of reading so exuberantly. Notice the choice of words in terms of characterizing those pleasures—it’s a matter of books and literature, not anything literary. While the National Endowment for the Arts’ Report on Reading may use one all-embracing category for what it calls literary reading, Hornby is determined to draw distinctions within that broad category. He distances himself ironically from the magazine’s editorial board, whom he positions as card-carrying members of literary culture: “their idea of a good time is to book tickets to a literary event” (86). Throughout his monthly columns, Hornby draws comparisons between books he loves and the literary fiction he’s supposed to be reading:

Why hasn’t anyone told me that Mystic River is right up there with Presumed Innocent and Red Dragon? Because I don’t know the right kind of people, that’s why. In the last three weeks, about five different people have told me that Alan Hollinghurst’s The Line of Beauty is a work of genius, and I’m sure it is; I intend to read it soonest. I’m equally sure, however, that I won’t walk into a lamp-post while reading it, like I did with Presumed Innocent all those years ago; you don’t walk into lamp-posts when you’re reading literary novels do you? . . . I’m happy to have friends who recommend Alan Hollinghurst, really I am. They’re all nice, bright people. I just wish I had friends who recommended books like Mystic River, too. Are you that person? Do you have any vacancies for a pal? (106)

Hornby is most definitely that person in these columns, only he’s the sort of friend who feels it’s essential to trash the literary in order to champion the really good books. He is taken by Mystic River because it “seems like an encapsulation of the very best and most exciting kind of creative process and from the outside, the craft involved in the creation of Mystic River looks
as if it involved the same stretch. . . . Lehane has ended up making it look so effortless that no one I’ve ever met seems to have noticed that he’s done very much at all. But then, the lesson of literature over the last eighty years has been the old math teacher’s admonishment: “show your workings!” Otherwise how is anyone to know that there are any?” (107). His attack on self-conscious craft as chief distinguisher of the truly literary becomes even more vehement in his appreciation of Chris Coake’s short-story collection *We’re in Trouble*:

Sometimes, when you’re reading these stories, you forget to breathe, which probably means that you’re reading them with more speed than the writer intended. Are they literary? They’re beautifully written, and they have bottom, but they’re never dull. And they all contain striking and dramatic narrative ideas. And Coake never draws attention to his own art and language; he wants you to look at his people, not to listen to his voice. So they’re literary in the sense that they’re serious, and will probably be nominated for prizes, but they’re unliterary in the sense that they could end up mattering to people. (116)

Interestingly, even though books punch-out movies and music on a regular basis, the model for the sort of novel Hornby thinks really matters to people is a cinematic one—namely the quality high-concept blockbuster in the hands of a someone like Lucas or Spielberg. He quotes Tom Shone’s appreciation of Spielberg’s *Jaws* in his book *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Summer* (2005). According to Shone, the golden age of American art cinema in the seventies (defined by the auteurist masterpieces produced by Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Francis Ford Coppola, and Peter Bogdanovich) was brought to a close not because of the drug-fueled hubris of those auteurs, combined with the move to conglomerate-driven film production for hyperactive teenagers (the central thesis of Peter Biskind’s *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (1998), but because the films of Spielberg and Lucas represented a new era in quality, popular filmmaking. For Shone, this transitional period represents not the end of the halcyon days of American art cinema but a victory for common viewers, exemplified by himself and his friends in their youth:

So if anyone killed the American film industry, let’s be clear about this: it was me and Lethem, and millions of other kids just like us, who gathered together in the summer of 1977, seized our chance, and staged a coup
d’etat of our local movie theaters, thus launching Hollywood, in Biskind’s words, on its course toward “infantalizing the audience, overwhelming him and her with sound and spectacle, obliterating irony, aesthetic self-consciousness, and critical reflection.” Believe me, this took some work. Those suckers don’t go down overnight. (Quoted by Hornby, *The Polysyllabic Spree*, 10)

This gleeful victory of popular film over aesthetic self-consciousness is the cinematic version of Hornby’s dismissal of the literary, and here again one finds the celebration of a quality popular storytelling that, however roundly vilified as mere mass culture, still needs to be championed as a particular form of the popular that is superior to the literary or cinematic. When Hornby quotes Shone’s appreciation of *Jaws*, the similarities between their respective positions could hardly be more explicit. According to Shone, what stays with you are less the big action sequences than small moments of characterization, like Brody’s son copying his finger steepling at the dinner table.

“To get anything like resembling such filets of improvised characterization, you normally had to watch something far more boring—some chamber piece about marital disintegration by John Castanets, say—and yet here were such things, popping up in a movie starring a scary rubber shark in the same movie. This seemed like important information. Why had no one told us before?”

Hornby comments:

If this column has anything like an aesthetic, it’s there: you can get finger steepling and sharks in the same book. And you really need the shark part, because a whole novel about finger steepling—and that’s a fair synopsis of both the Abandoned Literary Novel and several thousand others like it—can be on the sleepy side. You don’t have to have a shark, of course; the shark could be replaced by a plot, or, say, thirty decent jokes. (114)

Or to put it another way—in terms of the Cultural Fantasy Boxing League—when it comes to Hornby’s own aesthetic, it’s Hollywood Blockbuster vs. Literary Novel and the latter gets knocked out of the ring in the first round. This may, at first, seem difficult to reconcile with his “books are better twenty-nine times out of thirty” claim, but it’s actually a thoroughly
consistent argument, because for Hornby the best books are the ones that audiences actually enjoy—the sort of books that are closer to Hollywood films than literary novels. He drives this point home when he sums up how he feels about Shone’s book: “This may be a strange thing to say about a book that embraces the evil empire of Hollywood so warmly, but Blockbuster is humane: it prizes entertainment over boredom, and audiences over critics, and yet it’s a work of great critical intelligence. It wouldn’t kill me, I suppose, to say I’m proud of the boy” (115).

This insistence that the pleasures “real” audiences experience while reading can be truly appreciated only by first knocking literary novels out of the ring ultimately boils down to what one is supposed to learn from reading fiction and what sort of intelligence comes into play. In his literary guidebook How to Read a Novel: A User’s Guide, John Sutherland (chairman of the Man Booker Prize selection committee in 2005) argues: “A clever engagement with the novel is, in my opinion, one of the most noble functions of human intelligence. Reading novels is not a spectator sport but a participatory activity. Done well, a good reading is as creditable as a 10-scoring high dive. It is, I would maintain, almost as difficult to read a novel well as write one well” (12). Participating successfully in such a difficult sport, really “sticking” this reading business, depends on observing the protocols of close reading, which requires a certain kind of intelligence; even choosing the right title depends on “intelligent browsing.” This would seem, on the face of it, to be a relatively uncontroversial assertion to make. But when Sutherland’s book was reviewed in the New York Times Book Review (December 17, 2005), the reviewer was none other than the same Tom Shone that Hornby was so proud of, and Shone’s flat-out attack on the book reveals just how completely the literary culture that Sutherland represents is being rejected. He zeros in on the just-quoted passage about novel reading and human intelligence:

Does anyone go near the word “intelligent” without an armed escort these days? Until properly defined, it’s a word of use only to those in the business of spreading fear, and indeed Sutherland’s book is curiously fretful and anxious, rising to a ringing endorsement of actual novels only in its final pages. . . . Anyone interested in the way people really read novels ought to turn to Nick Hornby’s “Stuff I’ve Been Reading” column for The Believer magazine: They’re a real-time, on-the-ground accounts of one man’s monthly battle to square the number of books he
buys with the books he actually reads, while fighting off the demands of TV, kids and soccer.

The one-two punch Shone employs here exemplifies the differences between traditional literary culture and this emergent quality fiction culture—intelligence, used the way that Sutherland wields it, as an unquestioned transcendent value, only forecloses the number of possible players. And since there are vast numbers of actual readers out there who are “really” reading and buying books compulsively without worrying at all about applying for club membership, Sutherland’s reading as “clever engagement” can safely be dismissed as irrelevant, a vestige of a literary culture based on fear, rather than reading that is deeply immersed in the actuality of daily life, and all the more passionate because of that immersion.

But what sort of intelligence is asked for, and provided by, this quality fiction? The wildly divergent reviews of Hornby’s novel *A Long Way Down* exemplify just how contested this question of “intelligence” has become, particularly in terms of how that intelligence relates to self-help discourse. The novel features four main characters, who all meet up on the top of a London building (Topper’s House), planning to commit suicide the same night: Martin (a disgraced television celebrity), Maureen (a middle-aged single-mother caring for her invalid son), JJ (a failed American rock musician), and Jess (the alienated daughter of Labour minister of education). Upon meeting each other, and learning of each other’s intentions, they form an ad hoc self-help group. There is no better example of how popular literary culture has been transformed into narrative universe, or how audience can become character, than in this novel, especially when this group decides to form their own book club. JJ, who is responsible for their “cultural program,” because he is obsessed with reading, says: “I read the fuck out of every book I can get my hands on. I like Faulkner and Dickens and Vonnegut and Brendan Behan and Dylan Thomas” (29). He is the consummate self-cultivator, reading books to make up for the college education he missed. He is also what Shirley Brice Heath would call a social isolate reader:

I’ve spent my entire life with people who don’t read—my folks, my sister, most of the band, especially the rhythm section—and it really makes you really defensive after a while. How many times can you be called a fag before you snap . . .? Why does reading freak people out so much? Sure. I could be pretty anti-social when we were on the road, but if I was playing Game Boy hour after hour, no one would be on my case. In my
social circle, blowing up fucking space monsters is socially acceptable, in a way that *American Pastoral* isn’t.” (193)

His advocacy of reading meets with resistance within the group. Martin is skeptical because his ex-wife was a member of “one of those dreadful reading groups, where unhappy repressed middle-class lesbians talk for five minutes about some novel they don’t understand and then spend the rest of the evening moaning about how dreadful men are” (93). Another one of the four, Jess, the hyperobnoxious teenager, completely rejects the reading group, as well as the literary self-help titles JJ has in mind for the group, particularly the ones that are supposed to have a therapeutic effect—namely, books by authors who have committed suicide.

You should read the stuff by people who killed themselves! We started off with Virginia Woolf, and I only read like two pages of this book about a lighthouse, but I read enough to know why she killed herself: She killed herself because she couldn’t make herself understood. You only have to read one sentence to see that. I sort of identify with her a bit, because I suffer from that sometimes, but her misfortune was to go public with it. And she had some bad luck too, if you think about it, because in the olden days anyone could get a book published because there wasn’t so much competition. So you could walk into a publisher’s office and they’d go, Oh, OK, then. Whereas now they’d go, No, dear, go away, no one will understand you. Try Pilates or salsa dancing instead.

While she is a less than perceptive reader of Woolf, she does zero in on why JJ is so drawn to books: “Is it because you didn’t go to school? Is that why you think all books are great even when they’re shit. Because some people are like that, aren’t they? You’re not allowed to say anything about books because they’re books, and books are, you know, god” (189). As such, Jess incarnates the perfect antithesis of Michael Cunningham’s Laura Brown in *The Hours*, the social isolate reader intending to commit suicide but who reads Woolf, and finds her such a kindred spirit that she has an out-of-the-body experience (on reading *Mrs. Dalloway*: “I am Virginia Woolf and I am not Virginia Woolf”). Jess wants none if it—she rejects not just Woolf, but reading as any kind of self-cultivation. There is no identification, and therefore no therapeutic rapport is possible. Woolf and Jess are anything but common readers.

At this point, where do we locate Hornby? In his “books win twenty-nine
times out of thirty” mode, he sounds remarkably like JJ, the rock-obsessed passionate reader. But one can also hear echoes of his intense skepticism toward the literary channeling through Jess, particularly in her rejection of the sanctity of books and those readers who are taken in by an ideology of reading as pure transcendence. The answer, of course, is that both positions are endorsed and critiqued within the polyphonic spree that is A Long Way Down. Hornby creates a fascinating ambivalence about reading, alternately endorsing its potential to be truly transformative and rejecting the ideological baggage called literary culture that only appears to encumber it.

One finds exactly the same sort of structured ambivalence toward self-help discourse throughout A Long Way Down. Just as Bank incorporates the self-help book within The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing, only to reject it in its pure form and then reinvent it on her own terms, Hornby as master ironist creates a remarkably similar hybrid, using that polyphonic narrative structure and an ever-shifting ironic voice to create a space for his own version of the quality self-help novel. Two of the four characters (Jess and Martin) express contempt for self-help anything, but JJ and Maureen are convinced that therapeutic exchanges can indeed help ease their pain. Late in the novel, Jess organizes an “intervention” for the families of the four central characters in her role as agent provocateur, and the resulting disaster is a brilliant burlesque of touchy-feely, self-help discourse.

Jess clapped her hands together and stepped into the center of the room. “I read about this on the Internet,” she said. “It’s called an intervention. They do it all the time in America.”

“All the time,” JJ shouted. “It’s all we do.”

“See if someone is fucked . . . messed up on drugs or drink or whatever, then the, like, friends and family and whatever all gather together and confront him and go, you know, Fucking pack it in . . . This one’s sort of different. In America they have a skilled . . . Oh shit, I’ve forgotten the name. On the web site he was called Steve.”

She fumbled in the pocket of her jacket and pulled out a piece of paper.

“A facilitator. You’re supposed to have a skilled facilitator and we haven’t got one. I didn’t know how to ask. I don’t know anyone with skills.” (268)

Martin is appalled by the prospect: “I rubbed my hands together, as if I were relishing the prospect of all the delicious and nutritious self-
knowledge I was about to tuck into” (271). But JJ refuses an offer of a plane ticket home in order to get a band together. “I got one here.” He wants to stay, “just until everyone’s okay.” Maureen’s last speech in the novel is even more unequivocal about the benefits of the self-help experience she’s had with the other three: “Do you remember Psalm 50? Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. I went to Topper’s House because I had called and called and called and there was no delivery and my days of trouble seemed to have lasted too long, and showed no signs of ending. But then He did hear me, in the end, and He sent me Martin and JJ and Jess” (312). Most tellingly, Martin’s last sentence in the novel reveals a far less dismissive attitude toward self-knowledge: “Hard is trying to rebuild yourself, piece by piece, with no instruction book and no clue as to where all the important bits are supposed to go” (322). By the end of the novel, Hornby is clearly engaged in two parallel rescue operations that are completely intertwined—saving reading from literary culture, and saving self-understanding from the self-help industry.

The critical reception of A Long Way Down and Bank’s The Wonder Spot, which hit bookstores within a week of each other in the summer of 2005, provoked a kind of national referendum among book reviewers on the post-literary self-help novel. Hornby’s novel was hailed either as a triumph, or practically unreadable, depending on the individual critic’s perspective on the self-help potential of fiction. In his Publisher’s Weekly review, reprinted as the main review of the book at its Amazon homepage, Tom Perrotta could hardly be more enthusiastic about the novel. He is particularly appreciative of Hornby’s desire to hybridize the subject matter of the literary novel with narrative machinery drawn from high-concept filmmaking, the sort of films that Shone praises and Hornby refers to as his aesthetic (or, to put it another way, what I’ve been referring to as post-literary fiction, or what Hornby might refer to as the Finger-Steepling, High-Concept, Quality Popular novel):

If Camus had written a grown-up version of The Breakfast Club, the result might have had more than a little in common with Hornby’s grimly comic, oddly moving fourth novel. . . . It’s a bold set-up and perilously high-concept, but Hornby pulls it off with understated ease. . . . Hornby takes a Dickensian risk in creating a character as saintly and pathetic as Maureen, but it pays off. In her quiet way, she’s an unforgettable figure, the moral and emotional center of the novel. This is a brave and absorb-
ing book. It’s a thrill to watch a writer as talented as Hornby take on the grimmest of subjects without flinching and somehow make it funny and surprising at the same time. And if the characters occasionally seem a little more eloquent or self-aware than they really have a right to be, or if the novel turns the tiniest bit sentimental at the end, all you can really fault Hornby for is an act of excessive generosity, an authorial embrace bestowed upon some characters who are sorely in need of a hug.

Here Perrotta is as supportive of the novel’s self-help ambitions as he is of the hybridizing of literary fiction and Hollywood film. Michiko Kakutani, on the other hand, in her review of *A Long Way Down* in the *New York Times*, has only contempt for both ambitions. She dismisses the book as a “maudlin bit of tripe” but reserves special scorn for its post-literary and self-help dimensions. Where Perrotta saw real possibilities in the coupling of Albert Camus and John Hughes, and found these characters huggable, Kakutani rejects both:

The premise of *A Long Way Down* feels like a formulaic idea for a cheesy made-for-television movie. . . . But as the book progresses, even the pretense of trying to write idiosyncratic characters falls away, as each member of the “Quitters Club” begins to spouting the same brand of inane platitudes and self-help truisms. Needless to say, *A Long Way Down* ends—and this is hardly giving away the book’s conclusion, as the reader can see coming from several miles away—with each of the characters undergoing a personal transformation of sorts and rediscovering his or her will to live. A sappy and utterly predictable ending to a sappy and utterly predictable novel.

Perrotta’s and Kakutani’s reviews, taken together with Hornby’s monthly columns for *The Believer*, exemplify the ongoing turf battle over what constitutes literary fiction. Where Perrotta and Hornby contend that the quality fiction that matters to real readers can occur only when it moves away from the literary, Kakutani believes that certain distinctions need to remain in force, and the move to television genres and self-help discourse trigger the trip wires that mark the literary off from the nonliterary at the most fundamental level. For Kakutani, this is, finally, “a cringe-making excuse for a novel.”

I don’t want to suggest any kind of easy bifurcation of literary cultures here, that is, Populist Amazon vs. Elitist *New York Times*, because their re-
spective arenas overlap far too extensively. Perrotta himself reviews for the Times, and his novels regularly receive glowing reviews there. That being said, Perrotta’s endorsement of Hornby’s novel undoubtedly has a great deal to do with the comparability of their respective projects. Perrotta has written a post-literary novel of manners of his own, Little Children (2004), in which his transposition of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary is as overt as Fielding’s appropriation of Austen or Bushnell’s invocation of Wharton. The main story arc concerning infidelity in the suburbs and the character of Sarah, the bored housewife married to a dolt, but determined to find passion one way or another, make the parallels between the novels apparent, but the transposition becomes overt when Sarah is invited to join a book club and the selection that night happens to be, you guessed it, Madame Bovary. Perrotta, however, gives a great deal of integrity to the group, which consists of women who are insightful, informed readers, a point made vividly clear when Sarah is told to make sure she reads the “Steegmuller translation.” For Perrotta, this club apparently represents all that is good about amateur readers and popular literary culture. For these characters, it represents an oasis within their suburban existence, a point that is spelled out explicitly when Sarah experiences a kind of revelation during their discussion of the novel:

All at once, it came to Sarah. It was like being back at the Women’s Center. For the first time since she graduated from college, she’d managed to find her way into a community of smart, independent, supportive women who enjoyed each other’s company and didn’t need to compete with one another or define themselves in relation to the men in their lives. It was precisely what she’d been missing, the oasis she’d been unable to find in graduate school, at work, or even at the playground. She’d searched for it so long that she’d even come to suspect that it hadn’t actually existed in the first place, at least not the way she remembered it, that it was more than the product of her romantic undergraduate imagination than anything real in the world. But it had been real. It felt like this, and it was a huge relief to be back inside the circle again. (191)

Perrotta values that community of women reading together, but the reviews of Bank’s The Wonder Spot, which appeared within a week of A Long Way Down, were similarly polarized, only in this case, the evaluation of Bank’s novel was tied to a larger referendum on the fate of “chick-lit” as something that might have had a degree of literary credibility at some point but had
Popular literary fiction since plummeted to the realms of mere genre fiction. One finds a remarkably similar split between the critics who are themselves practitioners of the popular literary, and those who labor to distance themselves from it, even if they are perceived to be fellow travelers. As for the former, Jennifer Weiner, author of *Good in Bed* (2001) and *In Her Shoes* (2003), gave Bank’s novel a rave review while serving as guest critic for *Entertainment Weekly*:

Melissa Bank is one lucky lady. Her first book, *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, was published in 1999, when a girl could turn a witty, rueful tale about a single girl looking for love without being instantly cast into the pale pink purgatory known as “chick lit.” Back in those heady days, just after Bridget Jones and prior to the explosion of sexy, sassy tales packaged in Easter egg pastels, you could be a young, urban female writer exploring the life and times of a young urban heroine and still have the critics take you seriously. You didn’t have to gild your manuscript with McSweeney’s-esque footnotes or name check your Grandpa’s shtetl: nor did you have to invite autobiographical comparisons by touting your time working for Anna Wintour. (88)

Weiner makes a crucial point about the evolution of chick-lit—as it has grown in popularity it has been rejected by critics as subliterary genre fiction. She doesn’t pin this all on the critics, since her comment about the “Easter egg pastels” acknowledges the role that the publishing industry has played in diminishing its legitimacy as quality fiction, as the industry has turned what might have been considered Women’s Fiction into mass-market chick-lit. Her choice of words reveals a host of interdependent presuppositions about the relationship between the poplar literary and the officially literary. Writing chick-lit is a kind of “purgatory” because, while it sells, it gets no respect from “the critics,” and getting critical respect is still something she obviously believes it deserves, because this is not mere genre fiction but a form of quality fiction written by women, about women, for women. Her reference to “McSweeney’s-esque footnotes” is significant here, because the category of literary fiction is apparently still in the hands of literary magazines, a realm where literary taste depends on ironic erudition, not identification with character, which for Weiner distinguishes the fiction that really matters to readers. Weiner’s privileging of this identification sounds a lot like Hornby’s rejection of the literary as self-conscious craft. And like Hornby, while she rejects the literary establishment, she still insists on making critical distinctions that install popular literary novels
above both the merely popular and the irrelevant literary: “So The Wonder Spot isn’t just a great read. It’s a wake-up call, alerting the literary establishment that stories about young women coming of age can still be enthralling, engaging and deserving of notice. . . . Sophie Applebaum’s story might end while she’s still groping toward her place in the world. Lucky for fans of smart, identifiable heroines who feel like our best friends, only better, Melissa Bank has definitely found hers” (88).

In her review of The Wonder Spot in the New York Times, Curtis Sittenfeld also uses the novel as an occasion to weigh in on the fate of chick-lit, but she is as fiercely critical of the novel as Weiner is laudatory, and for many of the same reasons. Her diatribe against the book is in some ways surprising, since her own novel, Prep (2005), was circulated within the same orbit and read by the same audiences; the homepage for Bank’s novel at Amazon, for example, lists Prep along with A Long Way Down under the heading “Customers Who Bought This Book Also Bought.” The only critical blurb on the cover of Prep comes from none other than Tom Perrotta (“One of the most impressive debuts novels in recent memory”). And when asked by Entertainment Weekly what she was reading now, Bank responded: “Curtis Sittenfeld’s Prep.” Yet in her review in the Times, Sittenfeld distances herself from both Bank and the entire category of chick-lit.

To suggest that another woman’s ostensibly literary novel is chick-lit feels catty, not unlike calling another woman a slut—doesn’t the term basically bring down all of us? And yet, with The Wonder Spot, it’s hard to resist. A chronicle of the search for personal equilibrium and Mr. Right, Melissa Bank’s novel is highly readable, sometimes funny and entirely unchallenging: you’re not a lot smarter after finishing it. I’m as resistant as anyone else to the assumption that because a book’s author is female and because that book’s protagonist is a woman who actually cares about her romantic future, the book must fall into the chick-lit genre. So it’s not that Bank’s topic is lightweight; it’s that she writes about it in a lightweight way. (9)

By beginning with “ostensibly literary” this critique makes it quite clear that Sittenfeld knows full well that there is a category of fiction out there that makes claims for literary status but she doesn’t think it’s warranted. She shares certain premises with Weiner: that there is indeed a vast difference between what is considered truly literary and mere chick-lit, and that to assume that women writing about women in love automatically puts a novel in
the latter category is offensive, but critics keep doing it anyway. But Sittenfeld parts company with Weiner and Bank by saying, in effect, that this disdain is merited because most chick-lit is just bad writing; so, ultimately, the fault is with the people who write it, not the people who review it. Craft is reasserted here as the key distinguisher of literary fiction, and Bank is on the other side of the divide because her writing is lightweight. The key difference between Weiner and Sittenfeld, then, is a matter of evaluative criteria. Where Weiner makes identification the all-important factor in her argument for its status as quality fiction, Sittenfeld sees that identification factor as the principal reason it remains chick-lit:

Undeniably, there were times when I laughed or winced in recognition as I read; I understood exactly what Sophie meant, and that’s when I liked the book best. But this, ultimately, is the reason I know *The Wonder Spot* is chick-lit: because its appeal relies so much on how closely readers relate to its protagonist. Good novels allow us to feel what the characters feel, no matter how dissimilar their circumstances and ours. *The Wonder Spot* contains real meaning only if we identify with Sophie enough to infuse it with meaning of our own. (9)

The fact that Sittenfeld doesn’t learn much from this novel, that the reader is not a lot smarter after having read it, suggests that she is also determined to reassert the value of self-cultivation as a process distinct from self-help, because the latter is just empathetic reading. Here Sittenfeld, high school English teacher sworn to initiating AP English students into the mysteries of great literature, comes shining through—self-improvement occurs by appreciating good writing, not by merely identifying with the main character. Good books give us knowledge, not just emotional connection. What she means by “real meaning” we will allow her to sort out with her students, but it probably has something to do with her reaffirmation of the most traditional notions of aesthetic value.

These oppositions between craft and identification, between reading as knowledge acquisition and reading as quality self-actualization, are at the center of the turf war over literary fiction, and the battle lines drawn by these novelists are remarkably similar to the debates about Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club detailed earlier in this book. Sittenfeld’s dismissal of *The Wonder Spot* on the grounds of craft are not that different from my students’ reservations about Oprah’s presentation of *Anna Karenina*—sure it’s great to identify with Anna, but what about Tolstoy’s writing? Of course, it’s a great tragic ro-
mance, but in formal terms, it ain’t exactly a made-for-television movie, so there should be some consideration of the differences, right? Yet the passionate reading that fuels the popular literary and allegedly sets it apart from the professionalized reading of academics and literary critics depends on more than the savoring of distinctive prose styles. That being said, passionate reading of the wrong books (only “ostensibly literary” books, for example) disqualifies all that passionate reading. But when is that passion not misspent? When does a popular literary novel become acceptable reading material according to the taste ideology mobilized by Sittenfeld?

In order to answer that question, I want to introduce another novel here as a kind of test case for these conflicting accounts of what really makes for a literary reading experience—Diane Johnson’s *Le Divorce* (1997). In many ways, this novel fits the post-literary formula perfectly. It very self-consciously invokes both Jane Austen and Henry James as it tells the story of two sisters: Roxey, who is too romantic, and Isabel, who is too analytical. The novel begins when Isabel, the naïve American, comes to Paris in search of cultural information, hoping, in her words, “to get some of my rough edges buffed off that the University of Southern California failed to efface” (5). Just in case the reader has missed the parallels to *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, the novel is larded with literary quotations, and each chapter begins with an epigraph drawn from James, Emerson, Constant, or Voltaire. An American expatriate writer is a major character, and passages like this one sprinkled throughout make the connections hard to miss: “There are, also, certain ghosts of Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein, Janet Flanner, Fitzgerald, Edith Wharton, James Baldwin, James Jones—all of them here for something they could not find back home, possessed of an idea about culture and their intellectual heritage, conscious of a connection to Europe. Europe, repository of something they wish to know, and feel they are entitled to by ancestry to know” (5).

The redundancy of this literariness, the endless guarantees of guarantees that this is a genuinely literary experience, obviously works, at least for some critics. In his review of the novel in the *New York Times*, Malcolm Bradbury says, “Johnson treads—very consciously and cleverly—across the ancient and hallowed turf of the international novel.” But this is a “post-modern rendering” for Bradbury, because “the Isabel Archer character is our lively first-person narrator Isabel Walker, who has just dropped out of film school.” He concludes, “*Le Divorce* is a refreshing and critical variant on the old myth, as well as being, in its best passages, that much rarer thing: a
genuinely wise and humane novel, by a very good writer.” The literariness of all this good writing is also attested to repeatedly in the critical blurbs printed in the opening pages of the paperback edition of the novel: “One savors each page. . . . If one were to cross Jane Austen and Henry James, the result would be Diane Johnson” (San Francisco Chronicle); “Wickedly skillful. An adventurous work of art, and one that makes the delicate point that a novel (like the French food it gently mocks) can be delicious and serious at the same time” (Philadelphia Inquirer).

But what sort of delicious literary experience does one find in this adventurous work of art? What makes for the good writing? As for the status of the narrator Isabel Walker as film school dropout, Le Divorce begins with a promising prologue: “I suppose because I went to film school, I think of my story as a sort of film. In a film, this part would be under the credits, opening with an establishing shot from a high angle, perhaps the Eiffel Tower, panning tiny scenes below” (i). All sorts of intriguing premises are established in the opening pages, which suggest that Johnson may indeed be updating the novel of manners by situating it in a world where literary and visual cultures have become thoroughly intertwined—Isabel is a product of the University of Southern California film school, and her sister Roxey a product of the University of Iowa’s Writers Workshop. In this coupling of graduate school pedigrees, one might expect a sophisticated interplay between the literary and the cinematic. Unfortunately, this does not come to fruition, because Isabel as first-person narrator is saddled with an arch-literary narrative voice, given to saying such things about film as:

I think of life as being like film because of what I learned at the film school at USC. Film, with its fluid changefulness, its arbitrary notions of coherence, contrasting with the static solemnity of painting, might also be a more appropriate medium for rendering what seems to be happening, and emblematic too perhaps of our natures, Roxey’s and mine, and the nature of the two societies, American and French. The New World and the Old, however, is too facile a juxtaposition, and I do not draw the conclusions I began with. If you can begin with conclusions. But I suppose we all do.

Now if one considers good writing—genuinely literary writing—to be a matter of witty phrasing and a relatively complicated prose style, then this would be indeed a pure delight. This, most assuredly, does not sound like Bridget Jones or Jane Rosenthal out on a shopping spree. Yet if one
conceives of genuinely good writing as the skillful articulation of character through the subtle variations in narrative voice, cut to the measure of that character’s psychology, then Isabel’s reflections on film are something else—stunningly bad writing. This is not the voice of a twenty-something film student just off the plane from L.A. Speaking as a former film graduate student, who used to live in Paris, no less, who knew and worked with other film grad students from places like USC, the University of Iowa, the University of California, Los Angeles, and New York University, I can say with utmost certainty: Isabel Walker, you’re no film graduate student. The only way this voice could be emanating from this character is if the ghost of a demonic Henry James, desperate to return to the land of the living, decided to take possession of a beautiful young woman’s body but, hélas, nothing that intéressant is gonna happen in this book, chérie. The narrative voice in this passage is not a contemporary film student but the Austen-Wharton-James third-person narrator at its most precious. Isabel didn’t learn any of this at USC film school, but Johnson learned how to write like this from reading James. She can, of course, channel those voices all she wants, but when she presumes to push it through Isabel’s consciousness, the end result is a kind of literary theme-park, the novelistic equivalent of the Great Authors mural at the Starbucks café at my local Barnes & Noble. Or another analogy may be even more appropriate. In its presentation of a hermetically sealed world where the action takes place in locations used in James novels, rendered in the voices of literary icons past, Le Divorce is the literary equivalent of Jack Rabbit Slim’s, the retro diner in Pulp Fiction—a world where everything, from the décor, to the waiters, to the names of the items on the menu, are all invocations and citations of a lost but still fetishized textual universe. At Jack Rabbit Henry’s, this literary wax museum with a pulse, Isabel Archer-Walker replaces Buddy Holly as your server, and one can only imagine the menu: “Do you want that 5-Dollar Chai, Daisy Miller, or Fleda Vetch?”

A genuinely literary experience in this case—one that may be recognized as such by critics and passionate readers—depends on time travel to the appropriate era, but not necessarily in terms of historical setting. Johnson’s novels focus on what is ostensibly contemporary transatlantic society, yet that rendering of the contemporary depends on a historical literariness in which good writing depends on more tone and art direction than stylistic refinement. In other words, the good writing that separates the literary wheat from the chick-lit chaff is a matter of confirming shared sensibilities. The book as best friend is every bit as essential for the Devoutly Literary
novel and its readership as it is for chick-lit and its devoted readers. *Le Divorce* is an especially useful novel in terms of understanding the continuum between the two, because it is all about finding the appropriate significant other in stylish locations, and the interplay between romantic love and literary love is all over the map. But this channeling of James and Austen is given greater critical respect than the appropriation of canonical novels of manners by Fielding, Bushnell, Bank, and company because it so relentlessly celebrates the best-friend factor for another taste culture. *Le Divorce* was, not surprisingly, nominated for the National Book Award. Nor is it coincidental that Johnson’s novel was the only contemporary novel of manners that was adapted by Merchant and Ivory—it was always already a Merchant and Ivory project waiting to be filmed. The brief description of the film at the Amazon home page for the DVD begins by asserting that Merchant and Ivory have “left the corsets behind” in this adaptation, but only in terms of actual costumes—the sensibility that underwrites the entire narrative is resolutely of another era, where the spirit of literariness still somehow hovers, waiting to be recalled.

That which is called literary, then, is “ostensibly” a matter of good writing, but also really dependent upon the promise of certain pleasures, the right cultural mise-en scène, formed by a relatively stable set of recurring locations and characters animated by the same desires, as well as a remarkably similar set of sensibilities shared by novelists, characters, and avid readers—in other words, a kind of category fiction called Lit-lit, which is the subject of chapter 6.