

LEWIS LAPHAM: STEVE FORBES'S GIFT TO THE NATION

HARPER'S

HARPER'S MAGAZINE/APRIL 1996 \$3.95



PERCHANCE TO DREAM

In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels

By Jonathan Franzen

OUR NEXT RACE QUESTION

The Uneasiness Between Blacks and Latinos

A colloquy with Cornel West, Jorge Klor de Alva, and Earl Shorris

NO CANADA?

After the Referendum, a Chill Descends on Montreal

By Guy Lawson

THE SWEET SMELL OF SUBSIDIES

A sky-high look at farm policy by Richard Manning

Also: Lê Thi Diem Thúy, Bob Arnot, Jamaica Kincaid



PERCHANCE TO DREAM

IN THE AGE OF IMAGES,
A REASON TO WRITE NOVELS

By Jonathan Franzen

My despair about the American novel began in the winter of 1991, when I fled to Yaddo, the artists colony in upstate New York, to write the last two chapters of my second book. I had been leading a life of self-enforced solitude in New York City—long days of writing in a small white room, evening walks on streets where Hindi, Russian, Korean, and Colombian Spanish were spoken in equal measure. Even deep in my Queens neighborhood, however, ugly news had reached me through the twin portals of my TV set and my *New York Times* subscription. The country was preparing for war ecstatically, whipped on by William Safire (for whom Saddam Hussein was “this generation’s Hitler”) and George Bush (“Vital issues of principle are at stake”), whose approval rating stood at 89 percent. In the righteousness

of the nation’s hatred of a man who until recently had been our close petropolitical ally, as in the near-total absence of public skepticism about the war, the United States seemed to me as terminally out of touch with reality as Austria had been in 1916, when it managed to celebrate the romantic “heroism” of mechanized slaughter in the trenches. I saw a country dreaming of infinite oil for its hour-long commutes, of glory in the massacre of faceless Iraqis, of eternal exemption from the rules of history. But in my own way I, too, was dreaming of escape, and when I realized that Yaddo was no haven—the *Times* came there daily, and the talk at every meal was of Patriot missiles and yellow ribbons—

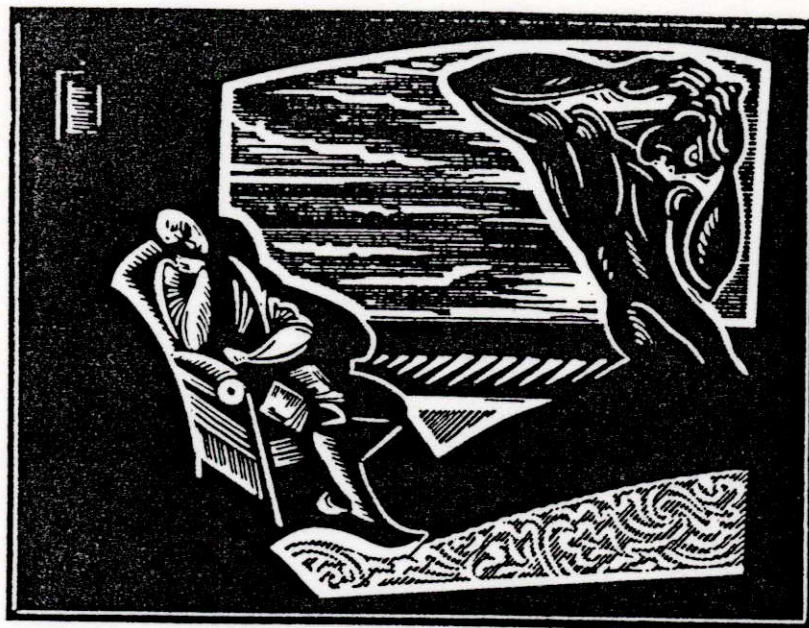
I began to think that the most reasonable thing for a citizen to do might be to enter a monastery and pray for humanity.



Jonathan Franzen is the author of two novels, The Twenty-Seventh City and Strong Motion, and is writing a third.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHEN ALCORN

Such was my state when I discovered, in the modest Yaddo library, Paula Fox's classic short novel *Desperate Characters*. "She was going to get away with everything!" is the hope that seizes Sophie Bentwood, a woman who possibly has rabies, in *Desperate Characters*. Sophie is a literate, childless Brooklynite, unhappily married to a conservative lawyer named Otto. She used to translate French novels; now she's too depressed to do more than intermittently read them. Against Otto's advice, she has given milk to a homeless cat, and the cat has repaid the kindness by biting her hand. Sophie immediately feels "vitally wounded"—she's been bitten for "no reason," just as Josef K. is arrested for "no



reason" in Kafka's *The Trial*—but when the swelling in her hand subsides, she becomes giddy with the hope of being spared rabies shots.

The "everything" Sophie wants to get away with, however, is more than her liberal self-indulgence with the cat. She wants to get away with reading Goncourt novels and eating omelettes aux fines herbes on a street where derelicts lie sprawled in their own vomit and in a country that's fighting a dirty war in Vietnam. She wants to be spared the pain of confronting a future beyond her life with Otto. She wants to keep dreaming. But the novel's logic won't let her. She's compelled, instead, to this equation of the personal and the social:

"God, if I am rabid I am equal to what is outside," she said out loud, and felt an extraordinary relief as though, at last, she'd discovered what it was that could create a balance between the quiet, rather vacant progression of the days she spent in

this house, and those portents that lit up the dark at the edge of her own existence.

Desperate Characters, which was first published in 1970, ends with an act of prophetic violence. Breaking under the strain of his collapsing marriage, Otto Bentwood grabs a bottle of ink from Sophie's escritoire and smashes it against their bedroom wall. The ink in which his law books and Sophie's translations have been printed now forms an unreadable blot—a symbolic precursor of the blood that, a generation later, more literal-minded books and movies will freely splash. But the black lines on the wall aren't simply a mark of doom. They point as well toward an extraordinary relief, the end to a fevered isolation. By daring to equate a crumbling marriage with a crumbling social order, Fox goes to the heart of an ambiguity that even now I experience almost daily: does the distress I feel derive from some internal sickness of the soul, or is it imposed on me by the sickness of society? That someone besides me had suffered from this ambiguity and had seen light on its far side—that a book like *Desperate Characters* had been published and preserved; that I could find company and consolation and hope in a novel pulled almost at random from a bookshelf—felt akin to an instance of religious grace. I don't think there's a more pure gratitude than the one I felt toward a stranger who twenty years earlier had cared enough about herself and about her art to produce such a perfectly realized book.

Yet even while I was feeling saved as a reader by *Desperate Characters* I was succumbing, as a novelist, to despair about the possibility of connecting the personal and the social. The reader who happens on *Desperate Characters* in a library today will be as struck by the foreignness of the Bentwoods' world as by its familiarity. A quarter century has only broadened and confirmed the sense of cultural crisis that Fox was registering. But what now feels like the locus of that crisis—the banal ascendancy of television, the electronic fragmentation of public discourse—is nowhere to be seen in the novel. Communication, for the Bentwoods, meant books, a telephone, and letters. Portents didn't stream uninterruptedly through a cable converter or a modem; they were glimpsed only dimly, on the margins of existence. An ink bottle, which now seems impossibly quaint, was still imaginable as a symbol in 1970.

In a winter when every house in the nation was haunted by the ghostly telepresences of Peter Arnett in Baghdad and Tom Brokaw in Saudi Arabia—a winter when the inhabitants of those houses seemed less like individuals than a collective algorithm for the conversion of media jingoism into an 89 percent approval rating—I was tempted to think that if a contemporary Otto Bentwood were breaking down, he would kick in the screen of his bedroom TV. But this would have missed the point. Otto Bentwood, if he existed in the Nineties, would not break down, because the world would no longer even bear on him. As an unashamed elitist, an avatar of the printed word, and a genuinely solitary man, he belongs to a species so endangered as to be all but irrelevant in an age of electronic democracy. For centuries, ink in the form of printed novels has fixed discrete, subjective individuals within significant narratives. What Sophie and Otto were glimpsing, in the vatic black mess on their bedroom wall, was the disintegration of the very notion of a literary character. Small wonder they were desperate. It was still the Sixties, and they had no idea what had hit them.

There was a siege going on: it had been going on for a long time, but the besieged themselves were the last to take it seriously.

—from *Desperate Characters*

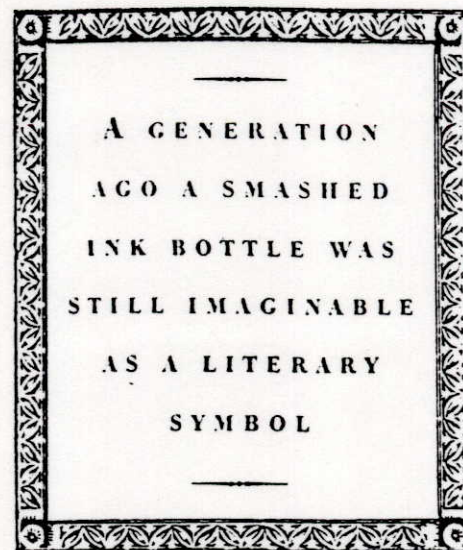
When I got out of college in 1981, I hadn't heard the news about the death of the social novel. I didn't know that Philip Roth, twenty years earlier, had already performed the autopsy, describing "American reality" as a thing that "stupefies . . . sickens . . . infuriates, and finally . . . is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents. . . ." I was in love with literature and with a woman to whom I'd been attracted in part because she was a brilliant reader. I found a weekend job that enabled both of us to write full time, and almost every night we read for hours, swallowing whole the oeuvres of Dickens and Proust, Stead and Austen, Coover and DeLillo.

In retrospect it seems ominous that although I had plenty of models for the kind of uncompromising book I wanted to write, I had only one model for the kind of audience I hoped that book might find: Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Heller had figured out a way of outdoing the actuality, employing the illogic of modern warfare as a metaphor for the more general denaturing of American reality. His novel had infiltrated the national imagination so thoroughly that my *Webster's Ninth Collegiate* gave no fewer than five

shades of meaning for the title. That no challenging novel since *Catch-22* had affected the culture anywhere near as deeply, just as no issue since the Vietnam War had galvanized so many alienated young Americans, was easily overlooked. In college my head had been turned by Marxism, and I believed that "monopoly capitalism" (as we called it) abounded with "negative moments" (as we called them) that a novelist could trick Americans into confronting if only he could package his subversive bombs in a sufficiently seductive narrative.

I began my first novel as a twenty-two-year-old dreaming of changing the world. I finished it six years older. The one tiny world-historical hope I still clung to was to appear on KMOX Radio, "the Voice of St. Louis," whose long, thoughtful author interviews I had grown up listening to in my mother's kitchen. My novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, was about the innocence of a Midwestern city—about the poignancy of St. Louis's municipal ambitions in an age of apathy and distraction—and I looked forward to forty-five minutes with one of KMOX's afternoon talk-show hosts, whom I imagined teasing out of me the themes that I'd left latent in the book itself. To the angry callers demanding to know why I hated St. Louis I would explain, in the brave voice of someone who had lost his innocence, that what looked to them like hate was in fact tough love. In the listening audience would be my family: my mother, who wished that I would come to my senses and quit writing, and my father, who hoped that one day he would pick up *Time* magazine and find me reviewed in it.

It wasn't until *The Twenty-Seventh City* was published, in 1988, that I discovered how innocent I still was. The media's obsessive interest in my youthfulness surprised me. So did the money. Boosted by the optimism of publishers who imagined that an essentially dark, contrarian entertainment might somehow sell a zillion copies, I made enough to fund the writing of my next book. But the biggest surprise—the true measure of how little I'd heeded my own warning in *The Twenty-Seventh City*—was the failure of my culturally engaged novel to engage with



the culture. I'd intended to provoke; what I got instead was sixty reviews in a vacuum.

My appearance on KMOX was indicative. The announcer was a journeyman with a whiskey sunburn and a heartrending comb-over who clearly hadn't read past Chapter 2. Beneath his boom mike he brushed at the novel's pages as though he hoped to absorb the plot transdermally. He asked me the questions that everybody asked me: How did it feel to get such good reviews? It felt great, I said. Was the novel autobiographical? It was not, I said. How did it feel to be a local kid returning to St. Louis on a fancy book tour? It felt obscurely disappointing. But I didn't say this. I had already realized that the money, the hype, the limo ride to a *Vogue* shoot weren't simply fringe benefits. They were the main prize, the consolation for no longer mattering to the culture.

Exactly how much less novels now matter to the American mainstream than they did when *Catch-22* was published is anybody's guess. Certainly there are very few American milieus today in which having

read the latest work of Joyce Carol Oates or Richard Ford is more valuable, as social currency, than having caught the latest John Travolta movie or knowing how to navigate the Web. The only mainstream American household I know well is the one I grew up in, and I can report that my father, who was not a reader, nevertheless had some acquaintance with James Baldwin and John Cheever, because *Time* maga-

zine put them on its cover, and *Time*, for my father, was the ultimate cultural authority. In the last decade the magazine whose red border twice enclosed the face of James Joyce has devoted covers to Scott Turow and Stephen King. These are honorable writers, but no one doubts it was the size of their contracts that won them covers. The dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority, and an organ like *Time*, which not long ago aspired to shape the national taste, now serves mainly to reflect it.

The situation is no different at other national publications. *The New Yorker* has ban-

ished its fiction to the back pages and reduced its frequency; *The New York Times Book Review* now reviews as few as two fiction titles a week (fifty years ago, the fiction to nonfiction ratio was 1:1); and magazines like *The Saturday Review*, which in the Sixties still vetted novels by the bushel, have entirely disappeared. "Our space for books has been shrinking for several years," says an editor I know at *Newsweek*. "To understand why, you only have to look at what that space is now devoted to: stories relating to technology, cyberanything; stories relating to money in any fashion; and stories relating to all areas of youth culture. It's the print media that are leading the way in pushing books off the map."

Anthony Lane, in a pair of recent essays in *The New Yorker*, has demonstrated that while most of the novels on the contemporary best-seller list are vapid, predictable, and badly written, the best-sellers of fifty years ago were also vapid, predictable, and badly written. Lane's essays usefully destroy the notion of a golden pre-television age when the American masses had their noses stuck in literary masterworks; he makes it clear that this country's popular tastes have gotten no worse in half a century. What has changed is the economics of book publishing. The number-one best-seller of 1955, *Margorie Morningstar*, sold 191,000 copies in bookstores; in 1994, in a country less than twice as populous, John Grisham's *The Chamber* sold 3.2 million. American publishing is now a subsidiary of Hollywood,¹ and the blockbuster novel is a mass-marketable commodity, a portable substitute for TV. Nonfiction sells even better, since we live in an Information Age and books remain the most convenient source of information. That Americans bought a record 2.19 billion books in 1995, therefore, says no more about the place of the literary imagination in American life than the long run of *Cats* says about the health of legitimate theater.

Indeed, it verges on the bizarre that the cornering of the retail book market by Barnes & Noble's discount superstores should be cited, by various hopeful commentators, as a sign of literary health. Behind these superstores' pleasing facade of plenitude are unknowledgeable sales staffs and a Kmart-like system in which stock for every store is ordered by a central office in the Midwest. When I tried to find Apsley Cherry-Garrard's memoir of Antarctic exploration, *The Worst Journey in the World*, at four different Barnes & Noble behemoths in Man-

¹ Certain novelists now regularly receive calls from movie-industry scouts asking about the progress of their book; when the manuscript is completed, often one copy will go to Manhattan and another to Los Angeles.

THE DEPRESSED
LITERARY INNER
CITY IS HOME TO
SOLITARY ARTISTS
ATTRACTED TO ITS
GRITTY DIVERSITY

hattan, I was told that the book was "probably" not in stock and then sent to Science & Nature or World History. ("It might be under Africa," one clerk told me.) I finally found the book at Brentano's on Fifth Avenue, which, despite its relatively tiny stock, had a section dedicated to Adventure & Exploration. Less than a month later, Brentano's went out of business.

The institution of writing and reading serious novels is like a grand old Middle American city gutted and drained by superhighways. Ringing the depressed inner city of serious work are prosperous clonal suburbs of mass entertainments: techno and legal thrillers, novels of sex and vampires, of murder and mysticism. The last fifty years have seen a lot of white male flight to the suburbs and to the coastal power centers of television, journalism, and film. What remain, mostly, are ethnic and cultural enclaves. Much of contemporary fiction's vitality now resides in the black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, and women's communities, which have moved into the structures left behind by the departing straight white male. The depressed literary inner city also remains home to solitary artists who are attracted to the diversity and grittiness that only a city can offer, and to a few still-vital cultural monuments (the opera of Toni Morrison, the orchestra of John Updike, the museum of Edith Wharton) to which suburban readers continue to pay polite Sunday visits.

By 1993 I was as depressed as the inner city of fiction. I had begun to make unhelpful calculations, multiplying the number of books I'd read in the previous year by the number of years I might reasonably be expected to live, and perceiving in the three-digit product not so much an intimation of mortality as a measure of the incompatibility of the slow work of reading and the hyperkinesis of modern life. All of a sudden it seemed as if the friends of mine who used to read no longer even apologized for having stopped. When I asked a young acquaintance who had been an English major what she was reading, she replied: "You mean *linear* reading? Like when you read a book from start to finish?" The day after she said this, I began to write an essay called "My Obsolescence."

There has never been much love lost between the world of art and the "value-neutral" ideology of the market economy. In the wake

of the Cold War, this ideology has set about consolidating its gains, enlarging its markets, securing its profits, and demoralizing its few remaining critics. In 1993 I saw signs of the consolidation everywhere. I saw it in the swollen



minivans and broad-beamed trucks that had replaced the automobile as the suburban vehicle of choice—these Rangers and Land Cruisers and Voyagers that were the true spoils of a war waged in order to keep American gasoline cheaper than dirt, a war that had played like a 1,000-hour infomercial for high technology, a consumer's war dispensed through commercial television. I saw leaf-blowers replacing rakes. I saw CNN and its many, many commercial sponsors holding hostage the travelers in airport lounges and the shoppers in supermarket checkout lines. I saw the 486 chip replacing the 386 and being replaced in turn by the Pentium so that, despite new economies of scale, the price of entry-level notebook computers never fell below \$1,000. I saw Penn State lose the Blockbuster Bowl.

The consumer economy loves a product that sells at a premium, wears out quickly or is susceptible to regular improvement, and offers with each improvement some marginal gain in usefulness. To an economy like this, news that stays news is not merely an inferior product; it's an *antithetical* product. A classic work of literature is inexpensive, infinitely reusable, and, worst of all, unimprovable. It makes sense, then, that as the free market on which journalists have modeled their own "neutrality" comes

increasingly to be seen as the only paradigm plausible in the public sphere, even as earnest a paper as the *New York Times* can no longer trust itself to report on books without reference to "objective" standards—in other words, to sales figures. As the associate publisher of the *Orange County Register* said to a *Times* reporter in 1994: "Why do we keep deceiving ourselves about what a newspaper really is? Why do we keep deceiving ourselves about the role of editor as marketer?"

It seemed clear to me that if anybody who mattered in business or government believed there was a future in books, we would not have been witnessing such a frenzy in Washington and on Wall Street to raise half a trillion dollars for an Infobahn whose proponents paid lip service to the devastation it would wreak on reading ("You have to get used to reading on a screen") but could not conceal their indifference to the prospect. It was also clear to me why these ruling interests were indifferent: When you hold a book in your hand, nothing will happen unless you work to make it happen. When you hold a book, the power and the responsibility are entirely yours.

The irony is that even as I was sanctifying the reading of literature, I was becoming so depressed that I could do little after dinner but flop in front of the TV. Even without cable, I could always find something delicious: *Phillies* and *Padres*, *Eagles* and *Bengals*, *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*, *Homicide*. Broadcast TV breaks pleasure into comforting little units—half-innings, twelve-minute acts—the way my father, when I was very young, would cut my French toast into

tiny bites. But of course the more TV I watched the worse I felt about myself. If you're a novelist and even *you* don't feel like reading, how can you expect anybody else to read your books? I believed I *ought* to be reading, as I believed I *ought* to be writing a third novel. And not just any third novel. It had always been a prejudice of mine that putting a novel's characters in a dynamic social setting enriched the story that was being told; that the glory of the genre consisted in its spanning of the expanse between private experience and public context. What more vital context could there be than television's short-circuiting of that expanse?

Yet I was absolutely paralyzed with the third book. My second novel, *Strong Motion*, was a long, complicated story about a Midwestern family in a world of moral upheaval, and this time instead of sending my bombs in a Jiffy-Pak mailer of irony and understatement, as I had with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, I'd come out throwing rhetorical Molotov cocktails. But the result was the same: another report card with A's and B's from the reviewers who had replaced the teachers whose approval, when I was younger, I had both craved and taken no satisfaction from; decent sales; and the deafening silence of irrelevance. After *Strong Motion* was published, I took a year off to gather material. When I got back to writing fiction I thought my problem might be that I hadn't gathered enough. But the problem manifested itself as just the opposite: an overload. I was torturing the story, stretching it to accommodate ever more of those things-in-the-world that impinge on the enterprise of fiction writing.

The work of transparency and beauty and obliqueness that I wanted to write was getting bloated with issues. I'd already worked in contemporary pharmacology and TV and race and prison life and a dozen other vocabularies; how was I going to satirize Internet boosterism and the Dow Jones as well while leaving room for the complexities of character and locale? Panic grows in the gap between the increasing length of the project and the shrinking time-increments of cultural change: how to design a craft that can float on history for as long as it takes to build it? The novelist has more and more to say to readers who have less and less time to read: where to find the energy to engage with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists in the impossibility of engaging with the culture? These were unhappy days. I began to think that there was some-



thing wrong with the whole model of the novel as a form of "cultural engagement."

A century ago, the novel was the preeminent medium of social instruction. A new book by William Dean Howells was anticipated with the kind of fever that today a new Pearl Jam release inspires. The big, obvious reason that the social novel has become so scarce is that modern technologies do a better job of social instruction. Television, radio, and photographs are vivid, instantaneous media. Print journalism, too, in the wake of *In Cold Blood*, has become a viable creative alternative to the novel. Because they command large audiences, TV and magazines can afford to gather vast quantities of information quickly. Few serious novelists can pay for a quick trip to Singapore, or for the mass of expert consulting that gives serial TV dramas like *E.R.* and *NYPD Blue* their veneer of authenticity.

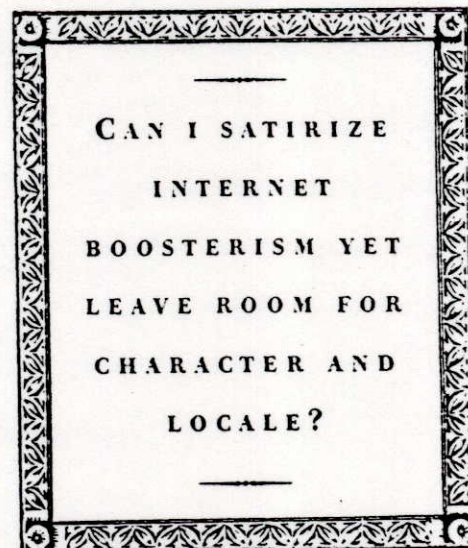
Instead of an age in which Dickens, Darwin, and Disraeli all read one another's work, therefore, we live in an age in which our presidents, if they read fiction at all, read Louis L'Amour or Walter Mosley, and vital social news comes to us mainly via pollsters. A recent *USA Today* survey of twenty-four hours in the life of American culture contained twenty-three references to television, six to film, six to popular music, three to radio, and one to fiction (*The Bridges of Madison County*). The writer of average talent who wants to report on, say, the plight of illegal aliens would be foolish to choose the novel as a vehicle. Ditto the writer who wants to offend prevailing sensibilities. Portnoy's *Complaint*, which even my mother once heard enough about to disapprove of, was probably the last American novel that could have appeared on Bob Dole's radar as a nightmare of depravity. When the Ayatollah Khomeini placed a bounty on Salman Rushdie's head, what seemed archaic to Americans was not his Muslim fanaticism but the simple fact that he'd become so exercised about a *book*.

In the season when I began "My Obsolescence" and then abandoned it in midsentence, I let myself become involved with Hollywood. I had naively supposed that a person with a gift for story structure might be able, by writing screenplays, to support his private fiction habit and simultaneously take the edge off his hunger for a large audience. My Hollywood agent, whom I'll call Dicky, had told me that I could sell a treatment, not even a finished script, if the concept were sufficiently high. He was enthusiastic about the treatment I submitted six months later (I had the concept down to five words, one of which was "sex"),

but unfortunately, he said, the market had changed, and I would need to produce a complete script. This I managed to do in fifteen days. I was feeling very smart, and Dicky was nearly apoplectic with enthusiasm. Just a few small changes, he said, and we were looking at a very hot property.

The next six months were the most hellish of my life. I now needed money, and despite a growing sense of throwing good work after bad ("Enthusiasm is free," a friend warned me), I produced a second draft, a third draft, and a fourth-and-absolutely-final draft. Dicky's enthusiasm was unabated when he reported to me that my fourth draft had finally shown him the light: we needed to keep the three main characters and the opening sequence, and then completely recast the remaining 115 pages. I said I didn't think I was up to the job. He replied, "You've done wonderful work in developing the characters, so now let's find another writer and offer him a fifty percent stake."

When I got off the phone, I couldn't stop laughing. I felt peculiarly restored to myself. The people who succeed in Hollywood are the ones who want it badly enough, and I not only didn't want it badly enough, I didn't want it at all. When I refused to let another writer take over, I ensured that I would never see a penny for my work; Dicky, understandably, dropped me like medical waste. But I couldn't imagine not owning what I'd written. I would have no problem with seeing one of my novels butchered onscreen, provided I was paid, because the book itself would always belong to me. But to let another person "do creative" on an unfinished text of mine was unthinkable. Solitary work—the work of writing, the work of reading—is the essence of fiction, and what distinguishes the novel from more visual entertainments is the interior collaboration of writer and reader in building and peopling an imagined world. I'm able to know Sophie Bentwood intimately, and to refer to her as casually as if she were a good friend, because I poured my own feelings of fear and estrangement into my construction of her. If I knew her only through



a video of *Desperate Characters* (Shirley MacLaine made the movie in 1971, as a vehicle for herself), Sophie would remain an Other, divided from me by the screen on which I viewed her, by the ineluctable superficiality of film, and by MacLaine's star presence. At most, I might feel I knew MacLaine a little better.

Knowing MacLaine a little better, however, is what the country seems to want. We live

under a tyranny of the literal. The daily unfolding stories of Steve Forbes, Magic Johnson, Timothy McVeigh, and Hillary Clinton have an intense, iconic presence that relegates to a subordinate shadow-world our own untelevised lives. In order to justify their claim on our attention, the organs of mass culture and information are compelled to offer something "new" on a daily, indeed hourly, basis. The resulting

ephemerality of every story or trend or fashion or issue is a form of planned obsolescence more impressive than a Detroit car's problems after 60,000 miles, since it generally takes a driver four or five years to reach that limit and, after all, a car actually has some use.

Although good novelists don't deliberately seek out trends, they do feel a responsibility to dramatize important issues of the day, and they now confront a culture in which almost all of the issues are burned out almost all of the time. The writer who wants to tell a story about society that's true not just in 1996 but in 1997 as well finds herself at a loss for solid cultural referents. I'm not advancing some hoary notion of literary "timelessness" here. But since art offers no objective standards by which to validate itself, it follows that the only practical standard—the only means of distinguishing yourself from the schlock that is your enemy—is whether anybody is willing to put effort into reading you ten years down the line. This test of time has become a test of the times, and it's a test the times are failing. How can you achieve topical "relevance" without drawing on an up-to-the-minute vocabulary of icons and attitudes and thereby, far from challenging the hegemony of overnight obsolescence, confirming and furthering it?

ARE WE AS
NOVELISTS UP
AGAINST THE
OBSCURITY OF
SERIOUS ART IN
GENERAL?

Since even in the Nineties cultural commentators persist in blaming novelists for their retreat from public affairs, it's worth saying one more time: Just as the camera drove a stake through the heart of serious portraiture and landscape painting, television has killed the novel of social reportage.² Truly committed social novelists may still find cracks in the monolith to sink their pitons into. But they do so with the understanding that they can no longer depend on their material, as William Dean Howells and Upton Sinclair and Harriet Beecher Stowe did, but only on their own sensibilities, and with the expectation that no one will be reading them for news.

This much, at least, was visible to Philip Roth in 1961. Noting that "for a writer of fiction to feel that he does not really live in his own country—as represented by *Life* or by what he experiences when he steps out the front door—must seem a serious occupational impediment," he rather plaintively asked: "what will his subject be? His landscape?" In the intervening years, however, the screw has taken another turn. Our obsolescence now goes further than television's usurpation of the role as news-bringer, and deeper than its displacement of the imagined with the literal. Flannery O'Connor, writing around the time that Roth made his remarks, insisted that the "business of fiction" is "to embody mystery through manners." Like the poetics that Poe derived from his "Raven," O'Connor's formulation particularly flatters her own work, but there's little question that "mystery" (how human beings avoid or confront the meaning of existence) and "manners" (the nuts and bolts of how human beings behave) have always been primary concerns of fiction writers. What's frightening for a novelist today is how the technological consumerism that rules our world specifically aims to render both of these concerns moot.

O'Connor's response to the problem Roth articulated, to the sense that there is little in the national mediascape that novelists can feel they own, was to insist that the best American fiction has always been regional. This was somewhat awkward, since her hero was the cosmopolitan Henry James. But what she meant

² Tom Wolfe's manifesto for the "New Social Novel" (Harper's, November 1989) was probably the high-water mark of sublime incomprehension. What was most striking about Wolfe's essay—more than his uncannily perfect ignorance of the many excellent socially engaged novels published between 1960 and 1989, more, even, than his colossal self-regard—was his failure to explain why his ideal New Social Novelist should not be writing scripts for Hollywood.

was that fiction feeds on specificity, and that the manners of a particular region have always provided especially fertile ground for its practitioners. Superficially, at least, regionalism is still thriving. In fact it's fashionable on college campuses nowadays to say that there is no America anymore, only Americas; that the only things a Black lesbian New Yorker and a Southern Baptist Georgian have in common are the English language and the federal income tax. The likelihood, however, is that both the New Yorker and the Georgian watch *Letterman* every night, both are struggling to find health insurance, both have jobs that are threatened by the migration of employment overseas, both go to discount super-stores to purchase Pampers tie-in products for their children, both are being pummeled into cynicism by commercial advertising, both play Lotto, both dream of fifteen minutes of fame, both are taking a serotonin reuptake inhibitor, and both have a guilty crush on Uma Thurman. The world of the present is a world in which the rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a commercial generality. The American writer today faces a totalitarianism analogous to the one with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine...

Equally discouraging is the fate of "manners" in the word's more common sense. Rudeness, irresponsibility, duplicity, and stupidity are hallmarks of real human interaction: the stuff of conversation, the stuff of sleepless nights. But in the world of consumer advertising and consumer purchasing, no evil is moral. The evils consist of high prices, inconvenience, lack of choice, lack of privacy, heartburn, hair loss, slippery roads. This is no surprise, since the only problems worth advertising solutions for are problems treatable through the spending of money. But money cannot solve the problem of bad manners—the chatterer in the darkened movie theater, the patronizing sister-in-law, the selfish sex partner—except by offering refuge in an atomized privacy. And such privacy is exactly what the American Century has tended toward. First there was mass suburbanization, then the perfection of at-home entertainment, and finally the creation of vir-

tual communities whose most striking feature is that interaction within them is entirely optional—terminable the instant the experience ceases to gratify the user.

That all these trends are infantilizing has been widely noted. Less often remarked is the way in which they are changing both our expectations of entertainment (the book must bring something to us, rather than our bringing something to the book) and the very content of that entertainment. What story is there to tell, Sven Birkerts asks in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, about the average American whose day consists of sleeping, working at a computer screen, watching TV, and talking on the phone? The problem for the novelist is not



just that the average man or woman spends so little time F2F with his or her fellows; there is, after all, a rich tradition of epistolary novels, and Robinson Crusoe's condition approximates the solitude of today's suburban bachelor. The real problem is that the average man or woman's entire life is increasingly structured to avoid precisely the kinds of conflicts on which fiction, preoccupied with manners, has always thrived.

Here, indeed, we are up against what truly seems like the obsolescence of serious art in general. Imagine that human existence is defined by an Ache: the Ache of our not being, each of us, the center of the universe; of our desires forever outnumbering our means of satisfying them. If we see religion and art as the historically preferred methods of coming to terms with this Ache, then what happens to art

when our technological and economic systems and even our commercialized religions become sufficiently sophisticated to make each of us the center of our own universe of choices and gratifications? Fiction's response to the sting of poor manners, for example, is to render them comic. The reader laughs with the writer, feels less alone with the sting. This is a delicate transaction, and it takes some work. How can it compete with a system that spares you the sting in the first place?

In the long run, the breakdown of communitarianism is likely to have all sorts of nasty consequences. In the short run, however, in this century of amazing prosperity and health, the breakdown displaces the ancient methods of dealing with the Ache. As for the sense of loneliness and pointlessness and loss that social atomization may produce—stuff that can be lumped under O'Connor's general heading of mystery—it's already enough to label it a disease. A disease has causes: abnormal brain chemistry, childhood sexual abuse, welfare queens, the patriarchy, social dysfunction. It also has cures: Zoloft, recovered-memory therapy, the Contract with America, multiculturalism, virtual reality.³ A partial cure or, better yet, an endless succession of partial cures, but failing that, even just the consolation of knowing you have a disease—anything is better than mystery. Science attacked religious mystery a long time ago. But it was not until applied science, in the form of technology, changed both the demand for fiction and the social context in which fiction is written that we novelists fully felt its effects.

Even now, even when I carefully locate my despair in the past tense, it's difficult for me to confess to all these doubts. In publishing circles, confessions of doubt are commonly referred to as "whining"—the idea being that cultural complaint is pathetic and self-serving in writers who don't sell, ungracious in writers who do. For people as protective of their privacy and as fiercely competitive as writers are, mute suffering would seem to be the safest course. However sick with foreboding you feel inside, it's best to radiate confidence and to hope that it's infectious. When a writer says publicly that the novel is doomed, it's a sure bet his new book isn't going well; in terms of his reputation, it's like bleeding in shark-infested waters.

³ Here is cyberphilosopher Brenda Laurel, speaking to the Times: "In the V.R. field, there's kind of a naive belief that once we're able to do . . . what Tim Leary calls screen each other's mind, we'll suddenly get a whole lot better at understanding each other. I know this sounds squishy, but I really believe it."

Even harder to admit is how depressed I was. As the social stigma of depression disappears, the aesthetic stigma increases. It's not just that depression has become fashionable to the point of banality. It's the sense that we live in a reductively binary culture: you're either healthy or you're sick, you either function or you don't. And if that flattening of the field of possibilities is precisely what's depressing you, you're inclined to resist participating in the flattening by calling yourself depressed. You decide that it's the world that's sick, and that the resistance of refusing to function in such a world is healthy. You embrace what clinicians call "depressive realism." It's what the chorus in *Oedipus Rex* sings: "Alas, ye generations of men, how mere a shadow do I count your life! Where, where is the mortal who wins more of happiness than just the seeming, and, after the semblance, a falling away?" You are, after all, just protoplasm, and some day you'll be dead. The invitation to leave your depression behind, whether through medication or therapy or effort of will, seems like an invitation to turn your back on all your dark insights into the corruption and infantilism and self-delusion of the brave new McWorld. And these insights are the sole legacy of the social novelist, who desires to represent the world not simply in its detail but in its essence, to shine light on the morally blind eye of the virtual whirlwind, and who believes that human beings deserve better than the future of attractively priced electronic panderings that is even now being conspired for them. Instead of saying *I am depressed*, you want to say *I am right!*

But all the available evidence suggests that you have become a person who's impossible to live with and no fun to talk to. And as you increasingly feel, as a novelist, that you are one of the last remaining repositories of depressive realism and of the radical critique of the therapeutic society that it represents, the burden of newsbringing that is placed on your art becomes overwhelming. You ask yourself, why am I bothering to write these books? I can't pretend the mainstream will listen to the news I have to bring. I can't pretend I'm subverting anything, because any reader capable of decoding my subversive messages does not need to hear them (and the contemporary art scene is a constant reminder of how silly things get when artists start preaching to the choir). I can't stomach any kind of notion that serious fiction is *good for us*, because I don't believe that everything that's wrong with the world has a cure, and even if I did, what business would I, who feel like the sick one, have in offering it? It's hard to consider literature a medicine, in any case, when reading it serves mainly to deepen your

depressing estrangement from the mainstream; sooner or later the therapeutically minded reader will end up fingering reading itself as the sickness. Sophie Bentwood, for instance, has "candidate for Prozac" written all over her. No matter how gorgeous and comic her torments are, and no matter how profoundly human she appears in light of those torments, a reader who loves her can't help wondering whether perhaps treatment by a mental-health-care provider wouldn't be the best course all around.

I resist, finally, the notion of literature as a noble higher calling, because elitism doesn't sit well with my American nature, and because even if my belief in mystery didn't incline me to distrust feelings of superiority, my belief in manners would make it difficult for me to explain to my brother, who is a fan of Michael Crichton, that the work I'm doing is simply *better* than Crichton's. Not even the French poststructuralists, with their philosophically unassailable celebration of the "pleasure of the text," can help me out here, because I know that no matter how metaphorically rich and linguistically sophisticated *Desperate Characters* is, what I experienced when I first read it was not some erotically joyous lateral slide of endless associations but something coherent and deadly pertinent. I know there's a reason I loved reading and loved writing. But every apology and every defense seems to dissolve in the sugar water of contemporary culture, and before long it becomes difficult indeed to get out of bed in the morning.

Two quick generalizations about novelists: we don't like to poke too deeply into the question of audience, and we don't like the social sciences. How awkward, then, that for me the beacon in the murk—the person who inadvertently did the most to get me back on track as a writer—should have been a social scientist who was studying the audience for serious fiction in America.

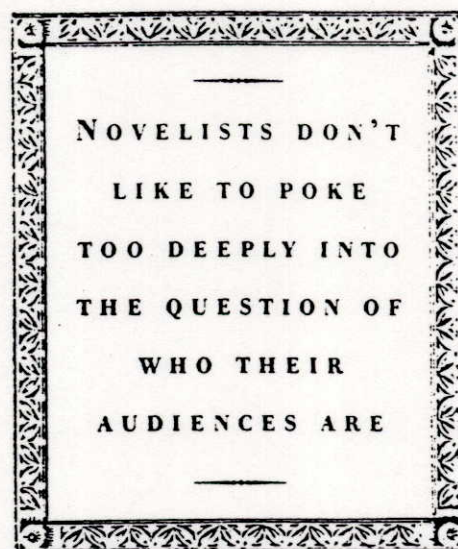
Shirley Brice Heath is a former MacArthur Fellow, a linguistic anthropologist, and a professor of English and linguistics at Stanford; she's a stylish, twiggly, white-haired lady with no discernible tolerance for small talk. Throughout the Eighties, Heath haunted what she calls "enforced transition zones"—places where people are held captive without recourse to television or other comforting pursuits. She rode public transportation in twenty-seven different cities. She lurked in airports (at least before the arrival of CNN). She took her notebook into bookstores and seaside resorts. Whenever she saw people reading or buying "substantive works of fiction" (meaning, roughly, trade-paperback fiction), she asked for a few minutes of their time. She visited summer writ-

ers conferences and creative-writing programs to grill ephebes. She interviewed novelists. Three years ago she interviewed me, and last summer I had lunch with her in Palo Alto.

To the extent that novelists think about audience at all, we like to imagine a "general audience"—a large, eclectic pool of decently educated people who can be induced, by strong enough reviews or aggressive enough marketing, to treat themselves to a good, serious book. We do our best not to notice that among adults with similar educations and similarly complicated lives some read a lot of novels while others read few or none.

Heath has noticed this circumstance, and although she emphasized to me that she has not polled everybody in America, her research effectively demolishes the myth of the general audience. For a person to sustain an interest in literature, she told me, two things have to be in place. First, the habit of reading works of substance must have been "heavily modeled" when he or she was very young. In other words, one or both of the parents must have been reading serious books and must have encouraged the child to do the same. On the East Coast, Heath found a strong element of class in this. Parents in the privileged classes encourage reading out of a sense of what Louis Auchincloss calls "entitlement": just as the civilized person ought to be able to appreciate caviar and a good Burgundy, she ought to be able to enjoy Henry James. Class matters less in other parts of the country, especially in the Protestant Midwest, where literature is seen as a way to exercise the mind. As Heath put it, "Part of the exercise of being a good person is not using your free time frivolously. You have to be able to account for yourself through the work ethic and through the wise use of your leisure time." For a century after the Civil War, the Midwest was home to thousands of small-town literary societies in which, Heath found, the wife of a janitor was as likely to be active as the wife of a doctor.

Simply having a parent who reads is not enough, however, to produce a lifelong dedicated reader. According to Heath, young readers also need to find a person with whom they



can share their interest. "A child who's got the habit will start reading under the covers with a flashlight," she said. "If the parents are smart, they'll forbid the child to do this, and thereby encourage her. Otherwise she'll find a peer who also has the habit, and the two of them will keep it a secret between them. Finding a peer can take place as late as college. In high school, especially, there's a social penalty to be paid for being a reader. Lots of kids who have been lone readers get to college and suddenly discover, 'Oh my God, there are other people here who read.'"

As Heath unpacked her findings for me, I was remembering the joy with which I'd discovered two friends in junior high with whom

I could talk about J.R.R. Tolkien. I was also considering that for me, today, there is nothing sexier than a reader. But then it occurred to me that I didn't even meet Heath's first precondition. I told her I didn't remember either of my parents ever reading a book when I was a child, except aloud to me.

Without missing a beat Heath replied: "Yes, but there's a second kind of reader.

There's the social isolate—the child who from an early age felt very different from everyone around him. This is very, very difficult to uncover in an interview. People don't like to admit that they were social isolates as children. What happens is you take that sense of being different into an imaginary world. But that world, then, is a world you can't share with the people around you—because it's imaginary. And so the important dialogue in your life is with the authors of the books you read. Though they aren't present, they become your community."

Pride compels me, here, to draw a distinction between young fiction readers and young nerds. The classic nerd, who finds a home in facts or technology or numbers, is marked not by a displaced sociability but by an antisociability. Reading does resemble more nerdy pursuits in that it's a habit that both feeds on a sense of isolation and aggravates it. Simply being a "social isolate" as a child does not, however, doom you to bad breath and poor party skills as an adult. In fact,

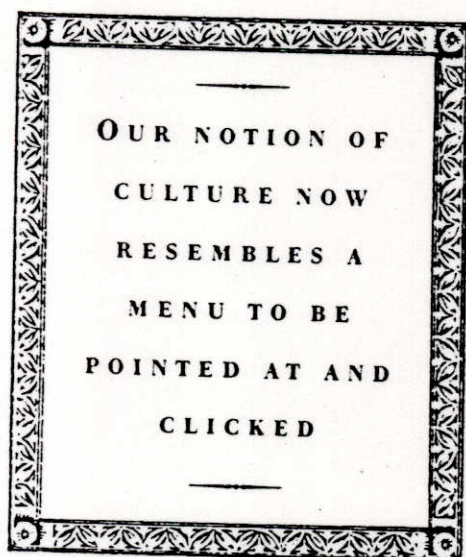
it can make you hypersocial. It's just that at some point you'll begin to feel a gnawing, almost remorseful need to be alone and do some reading—to reconnect to that community.

According to Heath, readers of the social-isolate variety are much more likely to become writers than those of the modeled-habit variety. If writing was the medium of communication within the community of childhood, it makes sense that when writers grow up they continue to find writing vital to their sense of connectedness. What's perceived as the antisocial nature of "substantive" authors, whether it's James Joyce's exile or J. D. Salinger's reclusion, derives in large part from the social isolation that's necessary for inhabiting an imagined world. Looking me in the eye, Heath said: "You are a socially isolated individual who desperately wants to communicate with a substantive imaginary world."

I knew she was using the word "you" in its impersonal sense. Nevertheless, I felt as if she were looking straight into my soul. And the exhilaration I felt at her accidental description of me, in unpoetic polysyllables, was my confirmation of that description's truth. Simply to be recognized for what I was, simply not to be misunderstood: these had revealed themselves, suddenly, as reasons to write.

By the spring of 1994 I was a socially isolated individual whose desperate wish was mainly to make some money. I took a job teaching undergraduate fiction-writing at a small liberal arts college, and although I spent way too much time on it, I loved the work. I was heartened by the skill and ambition of my students, who had not even been born when Rowan and Martin's *Laugh-In* first aired. I was depressed, however, to learn that several of my best writers, repelled by the violence done to their personal experience of reading, had vowed never to take a literature class again. One evening a student reported that his contemporary fiction class had been encouraged to spend an entire hour debating whether the novelist Leslie Marmon Silko was a homophobe. Another evening when I came to class three women students were hooting with laughter at the patently awful utopian-feminist novel they were being forced to read for an honors seminar in Women and Fiction.

It goes without saying that a book as dark as *Desperate Characters* would never be taught in such a seminar, however demonstrably female its author may be. Sophie and Otto Bentwood treat each other both badly and tenderly; there's no way to fit such three-dimensionality into the procrustean beds of victim and victimizer. But



the therapeutic optimism now raging in English literature departments insists that novels be sorted into two boxes: Symptoms of Disease (canonical work from the Dark Ages before 1950), and Medicine for a Happier and Healthier World (the work of women and of people from non-white or non-hetero cultures). That you can now easily get a B.A. in English literature without reading Shakespeare—that students are encouraged to read the literature that is most “meaningful” to them personally, and even if they do read Shakespeare to read him as they “choose” (say, for his (mis)representations of the Other)—reflects a notion of culture that resembles nothing so much as a menu to be pointed at and clicked.

It does seem strange that with all the Marxists on college campuses, more is not made of the resemblance that multiculturalism and the new politics of identity bear to corporate specialty-marketing—to the national sales apparatus that can target your tastes by your zip code and supply you with products appropriate to your demographics. Strange, too, that post-modernism, which is multiculturalism’s counterpart among the tenured creative-writing avant-garde, should celebrate as “subversive” the same blending of Hi and Lo culture that *The New York Times Magazine* performs every Sunday between ads for Tiffany’s and Lancôme.⁴ Stranger yet that all these academic Che Guevaras have targeted as “monolithic” and “repressive” certain traditional modes of serious fiction that in fact are fighting television and therapy for their very life. Strangest of all, perhaps, that such heroic subversives, lecturing on the patriarchal evil *du jour* while their TIAA-CREF accounts grow fat on Wall Street, manage to keep a straight face.

Then again, there has always been a gulf between ideologues, whose ideas abound with implicit optimism, and novelists, whose pessimism reflects their helplessness to ignore the human beings behind ideas. The contemporary fiction writers whose work is being put to such optimistic use in the academy are seldom, themselves, to blame. To the extent that the American novel still has cultural authority—an appeal beyond the academy, a presence in household conversations—it’s largely the work of women. Knowledgeable booksellers estimate that 70 percent of all fiction is bought by women, and so perhaps it’s no surprise that in recent years so many crossover novels, the good books that find an audience, have been written by women: fictional mothers turning a sober eye on their chil-

dren in the work of Jane Smiley and Rosellen Brown; fictional daughters listening to their Chinese mothers (Amy Tan) or Sioux grandmothers (Louise Erdrich); a fictional freed-woman conversing with the spirit of the daughter she killed to save her from slavery (Toni Morrison). The darkness of these novels is not a political darkness, banishable by the enlightenment of contemporary critical theory; it’s the darkness of sorrows that have no easy cure.

The current flourishing of novels by women and cultural minorities may in part represent a movement, in the face of a hyperkinetic televised reality, to anchor fiction in the only ground that doesn’t shift every six months: the author’s membership in a tribe. If nothing else, the new cultural diversity of fiction shows the chauvinism of judging the vitality of American letters by the fortunes of the traditional social novel. It’s often argued, in fact, that the country’s literary culture is *healthier* for having disconnected from mainstream culture; that a universal “American” culture was little more than an instrument for the perpetuation of a white, male, heterosexual elite, and that its decline is the just desert of an exhausted tradition. (Joseph Heller’s depiction of women in *Catch-22* is so embarrassing, certainly, that I hesitated to recommend the book to my students.) There’s little doubt that many of the new novels are at some level dramas of assimilation, which are broadening our conception of the national culture just as Roth’s novels of Jewish-American life did a generation ago.



⁴ Last fall the word “literature” appeared twice on the magazine’s cover: “The Roseanne of Literature” (profile of Dorothy Allison) and “Want Literature? Stay tuned!” (“The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel”).

Unfortunately, there's also evidence that young writers today feel ghettoized in their ethnic or gender identities—discouraged from speaking across boundaries by a culture that has been conditioned by television to accept only the literal testimony of the Self.⁵ The problem is aggravated, or so it's frequently argued, by the degree to which fiction writers, both successful ones and ephes, have taken refuge from a hostile culture in university creative-writing programs. Any given issue of the typical small literary magazine, edited by MFA candidates aware that the MFA candidates submitting manuscripts need to publish in order to obtain or hold on to teaching jobs, reliably contains variations on three generic short stories: "My Interesting Childhood," "My Interesting Life in a College Town," and "My Interesting Year Abroad." Of all the arts, fiction writing would seem to be the least suited to the monotony of academic sequestration. Poets draw their material from their own subjectivities, composers from God knows where. Even painters, though they inhale at their own risk the theoretical miasma emanating from art history and English departments (and the only thing more harmful to a working artist than neglect is idiotic encouragement), do not depend on manners, on eavesdropped conversations and surmounted quotidian obstacles, the way novelists do. For a long time, I rationalized my own gut aversion to the university with the idea that a novelist has a responsibility to stay close to life in the mainstream, to walk the streets, rub shoulders with the teeming masses, etc.—the better to be able, in Sven Birkerts's words, to bring readers "meaningful news about what it means to live in the world of the present."

Now, however, I think my gut aversion is just that: a gut aversion. Novelists within the academy serve the important function of teaching literature for its own sake; some of them also produce interesting work while teaching. As for the much greater volume of impeccably competent work that's manufactured in and around the workshops, no one is forcing me to read it. The competitor in me, in fact, is glad that so many of my peers have chosen not to rough it in the free-market world. I happen to enjoy living within subway distance of Wall Street and keeping close tabs on the country's shadow gov-

⁵ The popularity of role-playing in on-line MUDs (multiple-user dialogues) and chat rooms, which enthusiastic theorists extol for their liberating diffractions of selfhood, in fact merely confirms how obsessed we all are with a superficially defined "identity." Identity as a mystery (the continuity of a conscious I-ness from your childhood through the present) or as manners (how kind you are, how direct, how funny, how snobbish, how self-deceptive, how ironic; how you behave) is evidently weightless in comparison to the assertion: "I am a twenty-five-year-old bi female in fishnet stockings."

ernment. But the world of the present is accessible to anyone with cable TV, a modem, and transportation to a mall; and as far as I'm concerned, any writer who wants to revel in that life is welcome to it. Although the rise of identity-based fiction has coincided with the American novel's retreat from the mainstream, Shirley Heath's observations have reinforced my conviction that bringing "meaningful news" is no longer so much a defining function of the novel as an accidental by-product.

The value of Heath's work, and the reason I'm citing her so liberally, is that she has bothered to study empirically what nobody else has, and that she has brought to bear on the problem of reading a vocabulary that is neutral enough to survive in our value-free cultural environment. Readers aren't "better" or "healthier" or, conversely, "sicker" than non-readers. We just happen to belong to a rather strange kind of community.

For Heath, a defining feature of "substantive works of fiction" is *unpredictability*. She arrived at this definition after discovering that most of the hundreds of serious readers she interviewed have had to deal, one way or another, with personal unpredictability. Therapists and ministers who counsel troubled people tend to read the hard stuff. So do people whose lives have not followed the course they were expected to: merchant-caste Koreans who don't become merchants, ghetto kids who go to college, men from conservative families who lead openly gay lives, and women whose lives have turned out to be radically different from their mothers'. This last group is particularly large. There are, today, millions of American women whose lives do not resemble the lives they might have projected from their mothers', and all of them, in Heath's model, are potentially susceptible to substantive fiction.⁶

In her interviews, Heath uncovered a "wide unanimity" among serious readers that literature "makes me a better person." She has-

⁶ If the rolls of nineteenth-century literary societies are any indication, women have always done the bulk of fiction reading. But in a society where a majority of women both work and take care of their families, it's significant that, even today, two out of every three novels purchased are purchased by women. The vastly increased presence of women in serious American writing probably has explanations on both the supply side and the demand side. An expanded pool of readers with unexpected lives inevitably produces an expanded pool of writers. And sometime around 1973, when American women entered the workplace in earnest, they began to demand fiction that wasn't written from a male perspective. Writers like Jane Smiley and Amy Tan today seem conscious and confident of an attentive audience. Whereas all the male novelists I know, including myself, are clueless as to who could possibly be buying our books.

tened to assure me that, rather than straightening them out in a self-help way, "reading serious literature impinges on the embedded circumstances in people's lives in such a way that they have to deal with them. And, in so dealing, they come to see themselves as deeper and more capable of handling their inability to have a totally predictable life." Again and again, readers told Heath the same thing: "Reading enables me to maintain a sense of something *substantive*—my ethical integrity, my intellectual integrity. 'Substance' is more than 'this weighty book.' Reading that book gives me substance." This substance, Heath added, is most often transmitted verbally, and is felt to have permanence. "Which is why," she said, "computers won't do it for readers."

With near unanimity, Heath's respondents described substantive works of fiction as "the only places where there was some civic, public hope of coming to grips with the ethical, philosophical, and sociopolitical dimensions of life that were elsewhere treated so simplistically. From Agamemnon forward, for example, we've been having to deal with the conflict between loyalty to one's family and loyalty to the state. And strong works of fiction are what refuse to give easy answers to the conflict, to paint things as black and white, good guys versus bad guys. They're everything that pop psychology is not."

"And religions themselves are substantive works of fiction," I said.

She nodded. "This is precisely what readers are saying: that reading good fiction is like reading a particularly rich section of a religious text. What religion and good fiction have in common is that the answers aren't there, there isn't closure. The language of literary works gives forth something different with each reading. But unpredictability doesn't mean total relativism. Instead it highlights the persistence with which writers keep coming back to fundamental problems. Your family versus your country, your wife versus your girlfriend."

"Being alive versus having to die," I said.

"Exactly," Heath said. "Of course, there is a certain predictability to literature's unpredictability. It's the one thing that all substantive works have in common. And that predictability is what readers tell me they hang on to—a sense of having company in this great human enterprise, in the continuity, in the persistence, of the great conflicts."

Flying back from Palo Alto in an enforced transition zone crewed by the employee-owners of TWA, I declined the headphones for *The Brady Bunch Movie* and a special one-hour segment on the E! channel, but I found myself watching any-

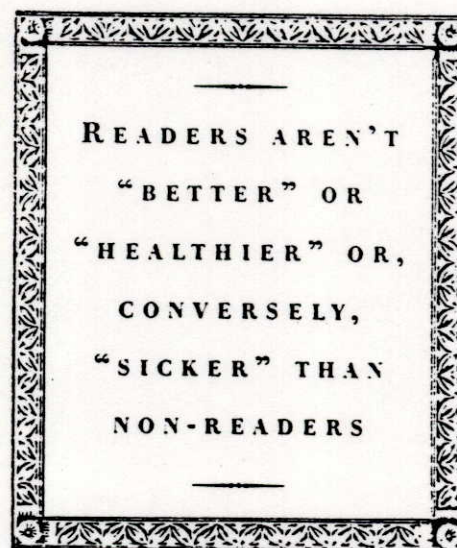
way. Without sound, the segment on E! became an exposé of the hydraulics of insincere smiles. It brought me an epiphany of inauthenticity, made me hunger for the unforced emotion of a literature that isn't trying to sell me anything. I had open on my lap Janet Frame's novel of a mental hospital, *Faces in the Water*: uningratiating but strangely pertinent sentences on which my eyes would not stick until, after two and a half hours, the silent screen in front of me finally went blank.

Poor Noeline, who was waiting for Dr. Howell to propose to her although the only words he had ever spoken to her were How are you? Do you know where you are? Do you know why you are here?—phrases which ordinarily would be hard to interpret as evidence of affection. But when you are sick you find in yourself a new field of perception where you make a harvest of interpretations which then provides you with your daily bread, your only food. So that when Dr. Howell finally married the occupational therapist, Noeline was taken to the disturbed ward.

Expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society—to help solve our contemporary problems—seems to me a peculiarly American delusion. To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?

As recently as forty years ago, when the publication of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* was a national event, movies and radio were still considered "low" entertainments. In the Fifties and Sixties, when movies became "film" and demanded to be taken seriously, TV became the new low entertainment. Finally, in the Seventies, with the Watergate hearings and *All in the Family*, television, too, made itself an essential part of cultural literacy. The educated single New Yorker who in 1945 read twenty-five serious novels in a year today has time for maybe five. As the modeled-habit layer of the novel's audience peels away, what's left is mainly the hard core of resistant readers, who read because they must.

That hard core is a very small prize to be divided among a very large number of working novelists. To make a sustainable living, a



writer must also be on the five-book lists of a whole lot of modeled-habit readers. Every year, in expectation of this jackpot, a handful of good novelists get six- and even seven-figure advances (thus providing ammunition for cheery souls of the "American literature is

booming!" variety), and a few of them actually hit the charts. E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* has sold nearly a million copies in the last two years; the hardcover 1994 literary best-seller *The Crossing*, by Cormac McCarthy, came in at number 51 on the *Publishers Weekly* annual best-seller list. (Number 50 was *Star Trek: All Good Things*.)

The persistence of a market for literary fiction exerts a useful discipline

on writers, reminding us of our duty to entertain. But if the academy is a rock to ambitious novelists, then the nature of the modern American market—its triage of artists into Superstars, Stars, and Nobodies; its clear-eyed recognition that nothing moves a product like a personality—is a hard place indeed. Amy Tan, the young novelist, sings backup in the Rock Bottom Remainers, the pro-literacy rock-and-roll group. Michael Chabon, an even younger novelist, gives readers his e-mail address on the dust jacket of *Wonder Boys*, his novel of a novelist in the academy. Donna Tartt (whose first book was likewise set in the academy) dons a suit of armor and poses as Joan of Arc in the *New York Times* for Halloween. The subject of Mark Leyner's fiction is the self-promotion of Mark Leyner, the young writer; he's been on *Letterman* twice. Rick Moody, the young author of *The Ice Storm*, has written a comic strip for *Details* magazine in which a young author named Rick Moody hires a body double to do his bookstore readings for him. In the strip, Moody is making art of the torment that many young novelists feel at the pressure to market the innately private experience of reading by means of a public persona—on book tours, on radio talk shows, on Barnes & Noble shopping bags and coffee mugs.

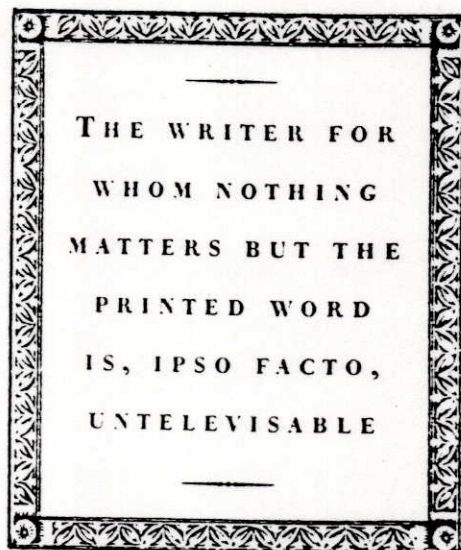
The writer for whom nothing matters but the printed word is, ipso facto, an untelevisable per-

sonality, and it's instructive to recall how many of our critically esteemed older novelists have chosen, in a country where publicity is otherwise sought like the Grail, to guard their privacy. Roth, McCarthy, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Anne Tyler, J. D. Salinger, Thomas Pynchon, Cynthia Ozick, and Denis Johnson all give few or no interviews, do little if any teaching or touring, and in some cases decline even to be photographed. Various Heathian dramas of social isolation are no doubt being played out here. But for some of these writers, reticence is integral to their artistic creed.

In Gaddis's first novel, *The Recognitions* (1955), a stand-in for the author cries: "What is it they want from a man that they didn't get from his work? What do they expect? What is there left of him when he's done his work? What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? the human shambles that follows it around." Postwar novelists like Gaddis and Pynchon and postwar artists like Robert Frank answered these questions very differently than Norman Mailer and Andy Warhol did. In 1955, before television had even supplanted radio as the regnant medium, Gaddis recognized that no matter how attractively subversive self-promotion may seem in the short run, the artist who's really serious about resisting a culture of inauthentic mass-marketed image must resist becoming an image himself, even at the price of certain obscurity.

For a long time, trying to follow Gaddis's example, I took a hard line on letting my work speak for itself. I refused to teach, to review for the *Times*, to write about writing, to go to pub-industry parties. To speak extranovelistically in an age of personalities seemed to me a betrayal; it implied a lack of faith in fiction's adequacy as communication and self-expression, and so helped, I believed, to accelerate the public flight from the imagined to the literal. I had a cosmology of silent heroes and gregarious traitors.

Silence, however, is a useful statement only if someone, somewhere, expects your voice to be loud. Silence in the Nineties seemed only to guarantee that I would be alone. And eventually it dawned on me that the despair I felt about the novel was less the result of my obsolescence than of my isolation. Depression presents itself as a realism regarding the rottenness of the world in general and the rottenness of your life in particular. But the realism is merely a mask for depression's actual essence, which is an overwhelming estrangement from humanity. The more persuaded you are of your unique access to the rottenness, the more afraid you become of engaging with the world; and the less you engage with the world, the more per-



fidiously happy-faced the rest of humanity seems for continuing to engage with it.

Writers and readers have always been prone to this estrangement. Communion with the virtual community of print requires solitude, after all. But the estrangement becomes much more profound, urgent, and dangerous when that virtual community is no longer densely populated and heavily trafficked; when the saving continuity of literature itself is under electronic and academic assault; when your alienation becomes generic, rather than individual, and the business pages seem to report on the world's conspiracy to grandfather not only you but all your kind, and the price of silence seems no longer to be obscurity but outright oblivion.

I recognize that a person writing confessionally for a national magazine may have less than triple-A credibility in asserting that genuine reclusiveness is simply not an option, either psychologically or financially, for writers born after Sputnik. It may be that I've become a gregarious traitor. But in belatedly following my books out of the house, doing some journalism and even hitting a few parties, I've felt less as if I'm introducing myself to the world than as if I'm introducing the world to myself. Once I stepped outside my bubble of despair I found that almost everyone I met shared many of my fears, and that other writers shared *all* of them.

In the past, when the life of letters was synonymous with culture, solitude was possible the way it was in cities, where you could always, day and night, find the comfort of crowds outside your door. In a suburban age, when the rising waters of electronic culture have made each reader and each writer an island, it may be that we need to be more active in assuring ourselves that a community still exists. I used to distrust creative-writing departments for what seemed to me their artificial safety, just as I distrusted book clubs for treating literature like a cruciferous vegetable that could be choked down only with a spoonful of socializing. As I grope for my own sense of community, I distrust both a little less now. I see the authority of the novel in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an accident of history—of having no competitors. Now the distance between author and reader is shrinking. Instead of Olympian figures speaking to the masses below, we have matching diasporas. Readers and writers are united in their need for solitude, in their pur-

suit of substance in a time of ever-increasing evanescence: in their reach inward, via print, for a way out of loneliness.

That this marginalized community nevertheless lives in history and feels, if anything, more attuned to it than the great majority of non-readers, and that it's often our least visible writers who produce the most trenchantly engaged renderings of the culture, is a paradox that I recently spent a long evening trying to get to the bottom of with David Foster Wallace. "A contemporary culture of mass-marketed image and atomized self-interest is going to be one without any real sort of felt community," Wallace wrote to me afterwards. "Just about everybody with any sensitivity feels like there's a party going on that they haven't been invited to—we're *all* alienated. I think the guys who write directly about and at the present culture tend to be writers who find their artistic invalidation especially



painful. I mean it's not just something to bitch about at wine-and-cheese parties: it really *hurts* them. It makes them *angry*. And it's not an accident that so many of the writers 'in the shadows' are straight white males. Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture and can write to and for their subculture about how the mainstream culture's alienated them. White males *are* the mainstream culture. So why shouldn't we angry, confused, lonely white males write *at* and *against* the culture? This is the only way to come up with what we want: what we want is

to know what happened, why things are this way—we want the story.”

White men are a tribe, too, of course. But what makes our tribe frustrating to novelists, even beyond our dominance in the culture, is that we are so much more susceptible to technological addictions than women are. The adolescents who spend day-sized chunks of time on-line are mainly boys, not girls. And it tends to be men, not women, who are the aggressive wielders of the TV remote control, who stay up until one in the morning watching reruns and beach volleyball. The flip side of cultural dominance is a nagging sense of responsibility for the status quo, and there's something sweetly regressive, something surrogate-maternal, in the gratifications of technology. How tempting it is to shun responsibility and forever be boys with toys. And so we reach for the channel flipper, for the techno-thriller, for the mouse. We plug into the grid and take comfort in the crowd. The writers who might remind us that a crowd can be a very lonely place are all too “difficult.”

One of the cherished notions of cybervisionaries is that literary culture is anti-democratic—that the reading of good books is primarily a pursuit of the leisured white male—and that our republic will therefore be healthier for abandoning itself to computers. As Shirley Heath's research (or even a casual visit to a bookstore) makes clear, the cybervisionaries are lying. Reading is an ethnically diverse, socially skeptical activity. The wealthy white men who today have powerful notebook computers are the ones who form this country's most salient elite. The word “elitist” is the club with which they bash those for whom purchasing technology fails to constitute a life.

That a distrust or an outright hatred of what we now call “literature” has always been a mark of social visionaries, whether Plato or Stalin or today's free-market technocrats, can lead us to think that literature has a function, beyond entertainment, as a form of social opposition. Novels, after all, do sometimes ignite political debates or become embroiled in them. And since the one modest favor that any writer asks of a society is freedom of expression, a country's poets and novelists are often the ones obliged to serve as voices of conscience in times of religious or political fanaticism. Literature's aura of oppositionality is especially intense in America, where the low status of art has a way of turning resistant child readers into supremely alienated grown-up writers. What's more, since the making of money has always been of absolute centrality to the culture, and since the people who make a lot of it are seldom very interesting, the most

memorable characters in U.S. fiction have tended to be socially marginal: Twain's Huck Finn and Hurston's Janie Crawford, O'Connor's Hazel Mores and Pynchon's Tyrone Slothrop. Finally, the feeling of oppositionality is compounded in an age when simply picking up a novel after dinner represents a kind of cultural *Je refuse!*

It's all too easy, therefore, to forget how frequently good artists through the ages have insisted, as W. H. Auden put it, that “art makes nothing happen.” It's all too easy to jump from the knowledge that the novel can have agency to the conviction that it must have agency. Nabokov pretty well summed up the political platform that every novelist can endorse: no censorship, good universal education, no portraits of heads of state larger than a postage stamp. If we go any further than that, our agendas begin to diverge radically. What emerges as the belief that unifies us is not that a novel can change anything but that it can preserve something. The thing being preserved depends on the writer; it may be as private as “My Interesting Childhood.” But as the country grows ever more distracted and mesmerized by popular culture, the stakes rise even for authors whose primary ambition is to land a teaching job. Whether they think about it or not, novelists are preserving a tradition of precise, expressive language; a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors; maybe an understanding of private experience and public context as distinct but interpenetrating; maybe mystery, maybe manners. Above all, they are preserving a community of readers and writers, and the way in which members of this community recognize each other is that nothing in the world seems simple to them.

Shirley Heath uses the bland word “unpredictability” to describe this conviction of complexity; Flannery O'Connor called it “mystery.” In *Desperate Characters*, Fox captures it like this: “Ticking away inside the carapace of ordinary life and its sketchy agreements was anarchy.” For me, the word that best describes the novelist's view of the world is “tragic.” In Nietzsche's account of the “birth of tragedy,” which remains pretty much unbeatable as a theory of why people enjoy sad narratives, an anarchic “Dionysian” insight into the darkness and unpredictability of life is wedded to an “Apollonian” clarity and beauty of form to produce an experience that's religious in its intensity. Even for people who don't believe in anything that they can't see with their own two eyes, the formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight can be (though I'm afraid we novelists are rightly mocked for overusing the word) redemptive.

It's possible to locate various morals in *Oedipus Rex*—“Heed oracles,” say, or “Expect the unexpected,” or “Marry in haste, repent at

leisure"—and their existence confirms in us a sense of the universe's underlying orderliness. But what makes Oedipus human is that of course he doesn't heed the Oracle. And though Sophie Bentwood, 2,500 years later, "shouldn't" try to insulate herself from the rabid society around her, of course she tries to anyway. But then, as Fox writes: "How quickly the husk of adult life, its importance, was shattered by the thrust of what was, all at once, real and imperative and absurd."

The most reliable indicator of a tragic perspective in a work of fiction is comedy. I think there's very little good fiction that isn't funny. I'm still waiting for the non-German-speaking world to get the news that Kafka, for example, is a comic writer. Truer words were never spoken than when Clarence Thomas responded to Anita Hill's accusations by intoning: "This is Kafkaesque." A man who probably is guilty—a man whose twisted private problems with women have become public property—indignantly protesting his innocence? If Kafka had been alive, he would have been laughing. Given the prospect of Thomas on the bench for another thirty years, what else is there to do?

I hope it's clear that by "tragic" I mean just about any fiction that raises more questions than it answers: anything in which conflict doesn't resolve into cant. The point of calling serious fiction tragic is simply to highlight its distance from the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture. The necessary lie of every successful regime, including the upbeat techno-corporatism under which we now live, is that the regime has made the world a better place. Tragic realism preserves the recognition that improvement always comes at a cost; that nothing lasts forever; that if the good in the world outweighs the bad, it's by the slimmest of margins. I suspect that art has always had a particularly tenuous purchase on the American imagination because ours is a country to which hardly anything really terrible has ever happened. The only genuine tragedies to befall us were slavery and the Civil War, and it's probably no accident that the tradition of Southern literature has been strikingly rich and productive of geniuses. (Compare the literature of the sunny, fertile, peaceful West Coast.) Superficially at least, for the great white majority, the history of this country has consisted of success and more success. Tragic realism preserves access to the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness—to the human difficulty beneath the technological ease, to the sorrow behind the pop-cultural narcosis: to all those portents on the margins of our existence.

People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them. They don't take long looks at anything, be-

cause they lack the courage. The way to despair is to refuse to have any kind of experience, and the novel, of course, is a way to have experience.

—Flannery O'Connor

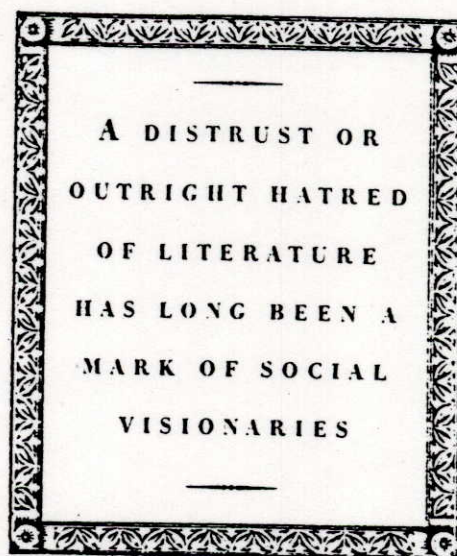
Depression, when it's clinical, is not a metaphor. It runs in families, and it's known to respond to medication and to counseling. However truly you believe there's a sickness to existence that can never be cured, if you're depressed you will sooner or later surrender and say: I just don't want to feel bad anymore. The shift from depressive realism to tragic realism, from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it, thus strangely seems to require believing in the possibility of a cure, though this "cure" is anything but straightforward.

I spent the early Nineties trapped in a double singularity. Not only did I feel different from everyone around me, but the age I lived in felt utterly different from any age that had come before. For me the work of regaining a tragic perspective has therefore involved a dual kind of reaching-out:

both the reconnection with a community of readers and writers, and the reclamation of a sense of history.

It's possible to have a general sense of history's darkness, a mystical Dionysian conviction that the game ain't over till it's over, without having enough of an Apollonian grasp of the details to appreciate its consolations. Until a year ago, for example, it would never have occurred to me to assert that this country has always been dominated by commerce.⁷ I saw only the ugliness of the commercial present, and naturally I raged at the betrayal of an earlier America that I presumed to have been truer, less venal, less hostile to the enterprise of fiction. But how ridiculous the self-pity of the writer in the late twentieth century can seem in light, say, of Herman Melville's life. How familiar his life is:

⁷ I realize that this is a dismal confession, and that my managing to slip through college without ever taking a course in either American history or American literature is hardly an excuse.



the first novel that makes his reputation, the painful discovery of how little his vision appeals to prevailing popular tastes, the growing sense of having no place in a sentimental republic, the horrible money troubles, the abandonment by his publisher, the disastrous commercial failure of his finest and most ambitious work, the reputed mental illness (his melancholy, his depression), and finally the retreat into writing purely for his own satisfaction.

Reading Melville's biography, I wish that he'd been granted the example of someone like himself, from an earlier century, to make him feel less singularly cursed. I wish, too, that he'd been able to say to himself, when he was struggling to support Lizzie and their kids: hey, if worst comes to worst, I can always teach writing. In his lifetime, Melville made about \$10,500 from his books. Even today, he can't catch a break. On its first printing, the title page of the second Library of America volume of Melville's collected works bore the name, in 24-point display type, HERMAN MEVILLE.

Last summer, as I began to acquaint myself with American history, and as I talked to readers and writers and pondered the Heathian "social isolate," there was growing inside me a realization that my condition was not a disease but a nature. How could I not feel estranged? I was a reader. My nature had been waiting for me all along, and now it welcomed me. All of a sudden I became aware of how starved I was to construct and inhabit an imagined world. The hunger felt like a loneliness of which I'd been dying. How could I have thought that I needed to cure myself in order to fit into the "real" world? I didn't need curing, and the world didn't, either; the only thing that did need curing was my understanding of my place in it. Without that understanding—without a sense of belonging to the real world—it was impossible to thrive in an imagined one.

At the heart of my despair about the novel had been a conflict between my feeling that I should Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream, and my desire to write about the things closest to me, to lose myself in the characters and locales I loved. Writing, and reading too, had become a grim duty, and considering the poor pay, there is seriously no point in doing either if you're not having fun. As soon as I jettisoned my perceived obligation to the chimerical mainstream, my third book began to move again. I'm amazed, now, that I'd trusted myself so little for so long, that I'd felt such a crushing imperative to engage explicitly with all the forces impinging on the pleasure of reading and writing: as if, in peopling and arranging my own little alternate world, I could ignore the bigger social picture even if I wanted to.

As I was figuring all this out, I got a letter from Don DeLillo, to whom I'd written in distress. This, in part, is what he said:

The novel is whatever novelists are doing at a given time. If we're not doing the big social novel fifteen years from now, it'll probably mean our sensibilities have changed in ways that make such work less compelling to us—we won't stop because the market dried up. The writer leads, he doesn't follow. The dynamic lives in the writer's mind, not in the size of the audience. And if the social novel lives, but only barely, surviving in the cracks and ruts of the culture, maybe it will be taken more seriously, as an endangered spectacle. A reduced context but a more intense one.

Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals.

DeLillo added a postscript: "If serious reading dwindles to near nothingness, it will probably mean that the thing we're talking about when we use the word 'identity' has reached an end."

The strange thing about this postscript is that I can't read it without experiencing a surge of hope. Tragic realism has the perverse effect of making its adherents into qualified optimists. "I am very much afraid," O'Connor once wrote, "that to the fiction writer the fact that we shall always have the poor with us is a source of satisfaction, for it means, essentially, that he will always be able to find someone like himself. His concern with poverty is with a poverty fundamental to man." Even if Silicon Valley manages to plant a virtual-reality helmet in every American household, even if serious reading dwindles to near nothingness, there remains a hungry world beyond our borders, a national debt that government-by-television can do little more than wring its hands over, and the good old apocalyptic horsemen of war, disease, and environmental degradation. If real wages keep falling, the suburbs of "My Interesting Childhood" won't offer much protection. And if multiculturalism succeeds in making us a nation of independently empowered tribes, each tribe will be deprived of the comfort of victimhood and be forced to confront human limitation for what it is: a fixture of life. History is the rabid thing from which we all, like Sophie Bentwood, would like to hide. But there's no bubble that can stay unburst. On whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, tragic realists offer no opinion. They simply represent it. A generation ago, by paying close attention, Paula Fox could discern in a broken ink bottle both perdition and salvation. The world was ending then, it's ending still, and I'm happy to belong to it again.