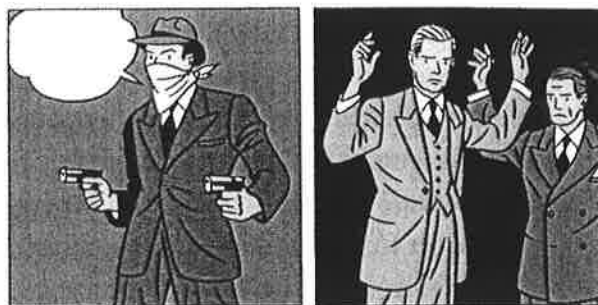


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It's Genre. Not That There's Anything Wrong With It!

---ARTHUR KRYSTAL



Last May, a piece I wrote for the magazine about genre fiction's new-found respectability caused the digital highway to buckle ever so slightly. Despite my professed admiration for many genre writers, I was blasted for thinking that literary fiction is superior to genre fiction, and for not noticing that the zeitgeist had come and gone while I was presumably immersed in "The Golden Bowl." Apparently, the dichotomy between genre fiction and literary fiction isn't just old news—it's no news, it's *finis*, or so the critics on Slate's Culture Gabfest and the folks who run other literary Web sites informed me. The science-fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin, for instance, announced that literature "is the extant body of written art. All novels belong to it." Is that so? A novel by definition is "written art"? You know, I wrote a novel once, and I'm pretty sure that Le Guin would change her mind if she read it.

Le Guin isn't alone in her generous estimate of literature's estate. *Timemagazine's* book critic Lev Grossman also rushed to genre fiction's defense with an agile piece, "Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle: Genre Fiction Is Disruptive Technology," which I heartily recommend, even if he disagrees with much of what I said. Unlike Le Guin, Grossman sees a qualitative difference between certain kinds of fiction while also insisting that good genre fiction is by any literary standard no worse than so-called straight fiction. Literature, Grossman believes, is undergoing a revolution: high-voltage plotting is replacing the more refined intellection associated with modernism. Modernism and postmodernism, in fact, are *ausgespielt*, and the next new thing in fiction isn't issuing from an elitist perch but, rather, is geysering upward from the supermarket shelves. In short, there's a new literary sheriff in town, able to bend time, jump universes, solve crime, fight zombies, perform magic, and generally save mankind from itself. Grossman invites us to survey "a vast blurry middle ground in between genre fiction and literary fiction" inhabited by the likes of Cormac McCarthy, Kazuo Ishiguro, Kate Atkinson, and Jennifer Egan, whose books don't so much transcend genres as simply collapse them. He argues persuasively that Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, Donna Tartt, and Neil Gaiman have succeeded in "grafting the sophisticated, intensely aware literary language of Modernism onto the sturdy narrative roots of genre fiction ... They're forging connections between literary spheres that have been hermetically sealed off from one another for a century."

There's no question that genre enthusiasts have found an eloquent spokesman in Lev Grossman, whose own novel "The Magicians" was hailed as "a postadolescent Harry Potter." Like many readers, Grossman is fed up with benighted critics who seem unaware that contemporary fiction has bloomed into "a new breed of novel" in which "plot and literary intelligence aren't mutually exclusive." He's quite rhapsodic on the subject, declaiming that "plot is an extraordinarily powerful tool for creating emotion in readers ... capable of fine nuance and even intellectual power." Apparently, we're returning to the good old days of good old-fashioned story-telling, disdained by the modernists (who Grossman grants were "the single greatest crop of writers the novel has ever seen"), who had more high-falutin concerns. A quick side note: Graduate-school wonks may see Grossman's admiring but grudging view of modernism as a neat reversal of Dryden's poem to Mr. Congreve, in which the poet contends, "The present age of wit obscures the past... Our age was cultivated thus at length; / But what we gained in skill we lost in strength."

If Grossman is correct, strength in the form of story has returned to the novel. And, in truth, a few of the writers he mentions have constructed broad canvases, crowded with colorful characters engaged on meaningful quests and journeys. But I have to disagree with Grossman: it's not plotting that distinguishes literary from genre fiction. After all, literary fiction can be plotted just as vigorously as genre fiction (though it doesn't have to be). There's no narrative energy lacking in Richard Russo, Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, David Mitchell, Denis Johnson, Annie Proulx, Gish Jen, Jhumpa Lahiri, and so on. A good mystery or thriller isn't set off from an accomplished literary novel by plotting, but by the writer's sensibility, his purpose in writing, and the choices he makes to communicate that purpose. There may be a struggle to express what's difficult to convey, and perhaps we'll struggle a bit to understand what we're reading.

No such difficulty informs true genre fiction; and the fact that some genre writers write better than some of their literary counterparts doesn't automatically consecrate their books. Although a simile by Raymond Chandler and one by the legion of his imitators is the difference between a live wire and a wet noodle, Chandler's novels are not quite literature. The assessment is Chandler's own, tendered precisely because he was literary: "To accept a mediocre form and make something like literature out of it is in itself rather an accomplishment." So it is. And there are any number of such accomplishments by the likes of Patricia Highsmith, Charles McCarry, Ruth Rendell, P. D. James, Donald Westlake, Lawrence Sanders, and dozens of others.

Genre, served straight up, has its limitations, and there's no reason to pretend otherwise. Indeed, it's these very limitations that attract us. When we open a mystery, we expect certain themes to be addressed and we enjoy intelligent variations on these themes. But one of the things we don't expect is excellence in writing, although if you believe, as Grossman does, that the opening of

Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Orient Express" is an example of "masterly" writing, then you and I are not splashing in the same shoals of language. Grossman's more powerful point derives from an article he wrote three years ago for the *Wall Street Journal*, in which he argued: "Genres are hybridizing.... Lyricism is on the wane, and suspense and humor and pacing are shedding their stigmas and taking their place as the core literary technologies of the 21st century." Fair enough, but how does this reify the claims of genre-loving people everywhere? It seems to me that Chabon, Egan, and Ishiguro don't so much work in genre as with genre. "All the Pretty Horses" is no more a western than "1984" is science fiction. Nor can we in good conscience call John Le Carré's "The Honorable Schoolboy" or Richard Price's "Lush Life" genre novels. Hybridization has been around since Shakespeare, and doesn't really erase the line between genre and literary fiction. Nor should it. Ain't nothing wrong with genre, and when literary novelists take a stab at it, they relish its conventions and their ability to modulate them. Cecil Day-Lewis, the Poet Laureate of Great Britain, happened to write mystery stories as Nicholas Blake, and the Booker Prize-winner John Banville doubles as the mystery writer Benjamin Black. Sure, their books are escapist, but their plots don't excuse or cover for bad prose. In fact, their books can actually be better than much of what passes for literary fiction, and yet still not qualify as great literature.

Quality comes in different forms: there is Cole Porter and there is Prokofiev; the Beatles and Bach; Savion Glover and Mikhail Baryshnikov—the difference between them is not one of talent or proficiency but of sensibility. When I pick up a novel with a semi-lupine protagonist, like Glen Duncan's "The Last Werewolf," I'm expecting darkness, but not "Heart of Darkness." And I'm not disappointed. Matter of fact, Duncan's foray into horror is so intelligently and exuberantly rendered that the snootiest of readers might forgive himself for letting Robert Musil and W. G. Sebald languish on the shelves.

What I'm trying to say is that "genre" is not a bad word, although perhaps the better word for novels that taxonomically register as genre is simply "commercial." Born to sell, these novels stick to the trite-and-true, relying on stock characters whose thoughts spool out in Lifetime platitudes. There will be exceptions, as there are in every field, but, for the most part, the standard genre or commercial novel isn't going to break the sea frozen inside us. If this sounds condescending, so be it. Commercial novels, in general, whether they're thrillers or romance or science fiction, employ language that is at best undistinguished and at worst characterized by a jejune mentality and a tendency to state the obvious. Which is not to say that some literary novels, as more than a few readers pointed out to me, do not contain a surfeit of decorative description, elaborate psychologizing, and gleams of self-conscious irony. To which I say: so what?

One reads Conrad and James and Joyce not simply for their way with words but for the amount of felt life in their books. Great writers hit us over the head because they present characters whose imaginary lives have real consequences (at least while we're reading about them), and because they see the world in much the way we do: complicated by surface and subterranean feelings, by ambiguity and misapprehension, and by the misalliance of consciousness and perception. Writers who want to understand why the heart has reasons that reason cannot know are not going to write horror tales or police procedurals. Why say otherwise? Elmore Leonard, Ross Thomas, and the wonderful George MacDonald Fraser craft stories that every discerning reader can enjoy to the hilt—but make no mistake: good commercial fiction is inferior to good literary fiction in the same way that Santa Claus is inferior to Wotan. One brings us fun or frightening gifts, the other requires—and repays—observance.

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