

Literary Fiction vs. Genre Fiction

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----Steven Petite

Fiction, of course, is a work that is imagined from the mind, a different world than reality.

An argument can be made that there are two types of fiction when it comes to novels: Genre Fiction and Literary Fiction. The former includes many subcategories such as Mystery/Thriller, Horror, Romance, Western, Fantasy, Science Fiction, etc. The latter is more difficult to classify or break apart into subcategories. To put it simply, Literary Fiction is anything that does not fit into a genre.

There are certainly high brow literary readers who believe that genre fiction does not deserve any merit. Then there are the types who exclusively read one or two subtypes of genre fiction and automatically classify any "serious" works of literature as pretentious or boring.

While changing opinions on reading tastes is not easily controllable, the war between Literary Fiction and Genre Fiction is one that will probably continue for years to come.

The main reason for a person to read Genre Fiction is for *entertainment*, for a riveting story, an escape from reality. Literary Fiction separates itself from Genre because it is not about escaping from reality, instead, it provides a means to better understand the world and delivers real emotional responses.

All of the most prestigious awards for fiction each year are given to works of Literary Fiction, which makes it sometimes easy to say that writers who write literary sorts of books are *better* writers.

In reality, neither of the two categories of writers necessarily deserve the distinction of being better writers. *Different* writers is a better word choice.

Yes, across the bestseller lists there are novels that contain poor writing, and those lists are normally dominated by Genre Fiction. That does not mean that all Genre Fiction writers cannot form competent and engaging prose. The works of Stephen King, Thomas Harris, Michael Crichton, Neil Gaiman, George R.R. Martin, and many others are written with great prose that shows a sound grasp on the written word. Do these types of writers sweep a reader down into their fictionalized world? Yes. But do they provide a means to stay inside reality, through the trials and tribulations of every day life, and deliver a memorable experience that will stick with you emotionally for the rest of your life? In my opinion, no. The works that are well written by genre writers are the ones that provide the best form of entertainment and escapism that fiction has to offer.

On the other hand, works by writers such as David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Haruki Murakami, Cormac McCarthy, Zadie Smith, Don DeLillo, a multitude of other modern day writers, and all of the twentieth century giants such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Joyce, touch the reader in a different way. There is a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment from finishing a "serious" book and the most important aspect in determining if the novel was indeed a remarkable escape not from reality, but *into reality*, is if a reader reflects on the words after the last page is turned. With really great pieces of Literary Fiction, this reflection can last for days, weeks, months, even years, until the novel pulls you back in to experience the magic all over again.

In essence, the best Genre Fiction contains great writing, with the goal of telling a captivating story to *escape from reality*. Literary Fiction is comprised of the heart and soul of a writer's being, and is experienced as an *emotional journey* through the symphony of words, leading to a stronger grasp of the universe and of ourselves.