

# **The Future of the Novel**

**A thesis submitted to The University of Gloucestershire  
in accordance with the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Education and  
Humanities**

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**March 2021**

## Abstract

Claims of the novel's death have arisen several times in the literary and journalistic spheres for nearly a century now, becoming an ongoing topic of debate. The main influence for this study came in the form of four articles published in *The Guardian* newspaper between May 2014 and March 2018, in which novelist and journalist Will Self revives and then develops the historic argument of the novel's death. It was Self's insistence over the novel's death that prompted a need to assess whether there was any truth in what he was saying, and more importantly if it could be believed that there is a future for the novel as a popular literary medium for both writers and readers. Self's claims prompted the formulation of this study's overarching research question, which asks whether there is any truth in his statements that the novel is dead or indeed has no future. Up until now there has not been an extensive academic study focused solely on the novel's death or possible future, and as such it seemed the right time to conduct a more in-depth study into these claims.

The three main research aims focus the attentions of the study towards the popularity of novels of a high literary standard in contemporary society, how digital technology has impacted on the novel, and making an assessment of the current health of the British novel reading public in terms of numbers of readers. This thesis aims to develop a deeper understanding of what is meant when we speak of the death of the novel, assess whether there is today any truth in these claims from a perspective of the size of its audience and levels of production, and set down informed ideas as to a likely future for the novel. The study also reports on instances that demonstrate the novel is still very much alive today, whilst

equally addressing societal changes that could potentially threaten the novel's future as a popular literary medium, something that has not been fully addressed in historic arguments of the novel's death.

The main conclusion that has come out of this research is that the novel is currently in a healthy state in terms of size of audience and sales, and there are no signposts to suggest it will not remain so for the foreseeable future. This study also concludes that modern digital technology is not necessarily having a negative impact on the novel's health in terms of numbers of readers, and rather there are more instances to demonstrate how digital technology can be a positive influence in terms of drawing a wider audience and raising the novel's profile. Adding to this, there is more specifically an argument that the literary novel, which is a particular focus of Self's arguments, is still very much alive, but with a shift towards a merging of literary with genre or popular fiction that will capture as wide an audience as possible.

## **Declaration**

This dissertation is the product of my own work and does not infringe the ethical principles set out in the University's Handbook for Research Ethics. I agree that it may be made available for reference via any and all media by any and all means known or developed in the future at the discretion of the University.

J M Everett

DOI: 10.46289/RUHJ1968

## Acknowledgements

In helping me with my research and to complete this PHD thesis, I would like to extend a special thank you to:

Each of the supervisors who have helped me over the years, Dr Hillary Weeks, Professor Shelly Saguaro and Dr Bea Hitchman; to all the administration and teaching staff at University of Gloucestershire who have introduced me to the course and helped me over the years to complete this thesis; to Russell Quinn for speaking to me regarding the production process behind *The Silent History*; for my readers, Jessica Williams-Chadwick and Alice Chadwick, for contributing their feedback to my literary analysis; to all those who took part in the focus groups; and to Fiona Sewell who offered to me her editing and proof-reading skills.

## **Table of Contents**

|                                              |             |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Chapter One: Introduction                    | P 7 - 20    |
| Chapter Two: The Death of the Novel          | P 21 - 44   |
| Chapter Three: The Novel                     | P 45 - 137  |
| Chapter Four: Against the Death of the Novel | P 138 - 216 |
| Chapter Five: The Future of the Novel        | P 217 – 240 |
| Bibliography                                 | P 241 - 250 |

## Chapter One: Introduction

A declaration being made about the death of the novel is not a recent concept. Literary critics and writers have argued this point for at least a century now, with one of the earliest recorded being José Ortega y Gasset in 1925,<sup>1</sup> and each declaration bringing to the forefront new ideas about what form this death will take. There are those, such as Bill Buford whose ideas on the novel's death will be explored in chapter two,<sup>2</sup> who believe there has over time been a marked decline in popularity for the type of novels they deem to be literary and a rise in popularity of trash fiction, thus cheapening the value of novels. However, there was something that caught my attention about claims by novelist and journalist Will Self who, as he sees it, believes the novel is truly dead, and his insistence on this point just didn't seem to ring true. His claims were set down over a period of a few years in the form of articles written for the newspaper *The Guardian* between May 2014<sup>3</sup> and March 2018<sup>4</sup>, and each time he took a new angle in arguing that there is no future for the novel.

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<sup>1</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Bill Buford, *Introduction: The End of the English Novel* (1980) <<https://granta.com/the-end-of-the-english-novel>> [accessed 23 May 2015].

<sup>3</sup> Will Self, 'The Novel is Dead (This Time it's for Real)', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>> [accessed 16 May 2014].

<sup>4</sup> Alex Clark, 'Will Self: 'The Novel is Absolutely Doomed'', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/17/will-self-the-books-interview-alex-clark-phone-memoir>> [accessed 17 March 2018]

Given the high volume of new novels even today being produced, sold and talked about, Self's articles seemed ridiculous in asserting with such vehemence that the novel could be deemed as dead in terms of a serious decline in readership. As such, the research question that sits at the heart of this thesis is as follows:

**Is there any truth in claims made by Will Self that the novel is dead, or that indeed it has no future as a popular and effective narrative medium?**

Self's claims of the novel's death focus specifically on his own views that the literary novel has largely lost its audience outside of academic study, but also he feels society no longer upholds the sort of deep, considered reading that lends itself to engaging with novels, and alongside this the rise in digital technology is a facilitator in bringing about the novel's death. Yet knowing plenty of friends and family members who were avid novel readers, as well as being aware of the continued popularity today of not just book clubs but also literary festivals and events in which novels are actively discussed, that the novel had died, or that it could cease to be written and read, seemed implausible. Indeed, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg declared in 1966 that 'for the past two centuries the dominant form of narrative literature in the West has been the novel',<sup>5</sup> and this study aims to present evidence to suggest whether or not the novel has remained today a popular narrative form.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p 3.



Equally, what arose during the early stages of research were contradictory statements from a body of writers, academics and literary critics arguing instead for a positive outlook in terms of the future of the novel. Having two sides of an argument helped to further drive a personal desire to write an extensive study on views around the future of the novel, and to present a rounded view informed by research, analysis and academic reflection, to make conclusions as to whether there is indeed a future for the novel. There have been a number of writers and academics apart from Self, such as those mentioned in chapter two of this thesis, but these works have been short essays or media articles. This study sets out to contribute to a body of academic research into a contemporary society's reception of the novel, whilst also focusing on past and current speculations centred on the novel's death. As a means to guide this study, and to help in answering the research question these three research aims have been formulated:

- **To argue for the contemporary novel as an effective form of extensive literary prose-narrative, and one that is worthy of preserving for future generations**
- **To assess the current health of the reading public in terms of numbers of readers and those who see the novel as a worthwhile form of narrative entertainment, and go on to theorise whether a future reading public will retain an interest in reading novels**
- **To analyse how digital technology has and is continuing to impact on the novel in ways that raise its profile and size of audience, or acting**

**as a draw away from the act of reading novels, and comment on how this could influence its future**

These three points will be the focus of the following four chapters, and have been formulated based upon the main arguments at the heart of Self's claims of the novel's death. These research aims will be achieved through analysis of data gathered in critical and academic sources around these topic areas, as well as close textual analysis of a selection of novels that will form the basis of supporting evidence to certain points throughout this study. This study is composed of five chapters in total, including this introduction. Each chapter chart a course from scrutinising Self's claims of the novel's death and bringing into the foreground the main points of his argument, to examining the novel form, what is meant by the term 'novel' whilst also building an understanding of what is being considered as under threat of death in this study, followed by arguments against the novel's death and towards a more positive view of the novel's future. The concluding chapter then draws together all the information gathered in the preceding chapters and proposes an informed view on a likely future of the novel. This structure seemed to be the most effective in regards to answering the research question as it simulates a journey from where the original idea came, to considering what the novel is in order to understand how it could be considered under threat of death, to then scrutinising the views of those who believe in a more positive future for the novel as a counter argument, and to finally pull together all this data in order to make conclusions as to a likely future for the novel. A more comprehensive breakdown of the structure of each chapter in greater detail follows.

The main focus of chapter two will be an evaluation of Will Self's claims of the death of the novel, highlighting the key points of his argument that go on to be the main focus of the thesis. As this topic is extensive, it was necessary from the outset to narrow down the research to key points so as to guide discussions. Equally, it seemed appropriate to begin this thesis by setting down the underlying motivations for the study, Will Self's arguments on what he felt was a certain death of the novel, as well as acting as an introduction to the ideas that guide this study. The main sources utilised in this chapter were the articles published in *The Guardian*, which include three pieces composed by Self outlining his views on the death of the novel, and a promotional interview in relation to the release of one of his own novels in which he also raises his views on the novel's death. These articles are scrutinised with a focus on the main points of his argument, but also some discussion of his position as a literary novelist may have likely influenced protestations. Also included in this chapter is some criticism as to what is absent from his argument, such as a distinct lack of figures or social data to back up certain claims, highlighting gaps and flaws that are later argued as being important indicators of the novel's current status and factors in its longevity. Finally, there is brief mention of other earlier theories of the novel's death by means of setting Self's argument within a historical and literary criticism context, which also serves as a reminder that the topic of the novel's death is a broad, and indeed ongoing, topic within the wider literary community.

Chapter three delves in to the novel's origins, form and growth as a popular narrative medium. The chapter begins, logically, with a discussion of the history and development of the novel, with a focus on academic opinions of the

novel's birth and rise, such as Doug Underwood's belief in the novel's formation through routes of journalism and tales shared by early explorers of the globe, as well as further comments of the development of the novel made by such critics as Ronald Carter and John McCrae, among others. Chapter three also builds a brief social history of the rise of the novel, drawing upon topics of growth and expansion of an audience for the novel, how the establishments of libraries and book borrowing schemes were pivotal in the development of an audience for the novel, and the importance of advancements in views towards education, retail, and production processes as contributing to the growth of the reading public. Sources from such academics as Q. D. Leavis<sup>6</sup> and Ian Watt<sup>7</sup> supply information on how an environment was created in which the novel could flourish in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but also the writings of Chris Baldick who spoke extensively on how libraries and book lending schemes were pivotal in bringing about the notion of reading for pleasure, a vital factor in building an audience for the novel. Alongside the charting of the novel's journey from its creation as a literary medium, and the establishment of a ready audience, a vital element in this third chapter are discussions on defining the main characteristics of the novel in view of explaining what sets the novel apart from other narrative or literary forms. Key speakers on this topic that are brought into discussion are Terry Eagleton with his text *The English Novel: An Introduction*, as well as definitions from the likes of Malcolm Bradbury, Jane Smiley and Jeremy Hawthorn, among others, all who have contributed to ongoing debates over setting down a true definition of the novel. This section on defining the novel is

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<sup>6</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1932)

<sup>7</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974)

also an opportunity to clarify and make clear the literary medium at the heart of this study, as well as to offer up ideas of what sets the novel apart from other literary and narrative media in terms of its structure, form and content so as to contribute towards later views on its future longevity in terms of having a place in the wider literary field. This discourse will be supported by the literary theory of narratology, which will be particularly applied as a means of explaining how reading a novel differs from other literary mediums.

Discussions on defining the novel then turn to broader analysis of different categories of novels, including textual analysis of a selection of novels that will be utilised as examples of narratives existing within those categories, and how some novels challenge the conventions of form. For example, to support a discussion on the postmodern novel and show that novels don't all appear in a standard narrative prose format, there is analysis of two contemporary postmodernist novels, *The House of Leaves*<sup>8</sup> and *S*<sup>9</sup>. At this point Possible World Theory (PWT), a branch of narratology, is brought into the discussion alongside narratology as a means of more deeply explaining how the reader builds a connection to these novels that have challenged the positioning of text and order in which the narrative is consumed. In the case of this research project, theory utilised during the process of close textual analysis will aid in pointing towards a novel's effectiveness or failings in it being a draw for readers to want to engage in the act of reading. The rationale behind drawing from PWT is that it is a useful tool in expressing how in some instances, such as when a text is composed of multiple narrative streams, there is innovation in the presentation of a novel,

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<sup>8</sup> Danielewski, Mark Z., *House of Leaves*, (London: Transworld, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Abrams, J. J., and Doug Dorst, S., (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2013).

and that this may hinder or enhance an individual's connection to the fictional universe in a number of ways.

Moving on from discussions of *House of Leaves* and *S* are analysis of some of Self's own novels, which is accompanied by discussion of what is meant by the label 'literary novel', the sorts of novels that Self believes are under threat of cultural death. It was deemed appropriate to incorporate textual analysis of some of Self's own novels given that he is the focus of this study, and they are also effective examples of what he feels are under threat of cultural death. This then leads into an exploration of genre fiction, or what might be considered as the types of writing at the opposite end of the spectrum to literary novels. This section focuses on what is meant when we think of genre novels, including analysis of examples to support this discourse by such novelists as Andy Weir and Kazuo Ishiguro. The arrangement of this discussion of literary novels transitioning into genre novels has a specific purpose, and this is that it leads into current debates arising from perceived snobbery about high art, literary fiction, compared with low art, such as popular and genre fiction, and that this view is damaging. This will lead in to discussions on what I feel is a contemporary movement towards a contemporary increase in the marketing and production of novels that straddle the category of genre and literary fiction. The purpose of this is to hypothesise an argument that there is in the past decade a drive towards a novel market built on contemporary novels that suit an audience who desire the comfort of generic story models, such as crime or science fiction, but who also appreciate something that utilises intelligent sentence structures and language, without it being heavy going to read. Accompanying this point are some examples of novels that display this straddling of genre and the literary

fiction, namely the works of Anthony Horowitz, and a contemporary cross-genre novel *Chimerica* by American author Anita Felicelli.

In chapter four we come to arguments specifically against the novel, made by such writers as China Mieville, Ben Okri and George Szirtes. All three speak extensively upon their belief that the novel form has the ability to regenerate to remain current, and as such this is certainly not the time to be writing the novel's obituary, but rather a focus should be on writers and publishers developing and refreshing the form. These writers' discussions open the fourth chapter that sets down evidence that supports a future for the novel, focusing on digital technology, the reading public, and contemporary innovations in the novel form. Included in this is an exploration of how digital technology is having a positive rather than a negative effect on the novel, and examples of how it could continue to draw an audience as well as future proof the novel form so that generations will continue to turn to the novel as a source of narrative entertainment. Into this section are drawn views offered by, for example, publisher Crystal Mahey-Morgan who spoke at the Cheltenham Literary Festival in October 2016 on ways in which the novel can work with current popular forms of digital technology, as well as an example in the form of textual analysis of *The Silent History*, a contemporary novel with a digital element to its narrative construction. Equally, to draw a rounded argument, I analyse some unsuccessful ways in which technology has been merged with the novel, including discussion on an early hypertext novel titled *253*, and discourse upon the ongoing contemporary debate around physical books vs ebooks. This is geared towards my view of the future of the reading public, and a possible need to offer diversity and choice in how novels are accessed in order to maintain an audience for the novel into the

future. Equally, included into this section are some insights into how digital technology has positively and negatively been integrated into the novel market in terms of book buying, with a focus on what can be inferred from this in terms of the future of the novel as a treasured commercial commodity and prized possession, which is vital in preserving the longevity of the novel.

The focus of chapter four then turns towards the reading public, maintaining an audience for the novel, and the role of the reader. Key texts include Helen Taylor's contemporary study *Why Women Read Fiction*, Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance*, and Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*. These three texts bring in to focus how the novel has served a purpose in offering sectors of society a much needed release from real life, highlighting a narrative device that draws together the actual and fictional worlds, and why is this important to consider in thinking about a healthy future audience for the novel. The theories drawn into these discussions centre upon a psychological response to reading, such as speech-act theory and reader response theory. These will be called upon as tools for analysing how novels affect the reader during the process of reading, and bring in suggestions of what could be lost if we reach a point in the future in which society no longer upholds a love for reading novels. Similarly, relevant theories on reading proffered by Umberto Eco, among other literary academics and critics, are brought into this section to point towards how a connection to an individual text is made or hindered depending on the effectiveness of its writing style.

As a final point on the layout of chapter four, it was felt necessary to provide some means of evidence that demonstrate how the novel could be said to be thriving in contemporary society. This evidence comes largely in the form



of analysis of bestseller lists and literary awards, both of which offer figures to demonstrate the current position of the novel as a popular narrative medium, but that are also suggestive of the types of novels that have been popular in the more recent years. In all, the aim of this analysis of bestseller lists and literary awards is to judge whether it is accurate to assert the current health of the novel is stable, but also to contribute to discourse on what could be the likely future form of the novel, which will be carried on into chapter five.

The fifth and final chapter of this thesis draws together discussions that have weaved through this thesis in an attempt to point towards a likely future for the novel from the perspective of its readership, as well as suggesting what and how a future reading public will be reading, with a focus of course on the novel. This will be an opportunity for me to consider the likely future for the novel based on the data gathered through this thesis, as well as to make a conclusive evaluation of that which Self protested. In chapter five the aim is to draw conclusions about the state of the contemporary novel, the important issues that should be considered in keeping the novel alive for future generations, and whether there is a move towards new modes of reading and writing. To lose the novel as a narrative form for future generations would mean to wipe out a unique and truly immersive manner of escaping in to a fictional universe. This is important because no other narrative form can grip the reader's imagination in the same manner, forcing them to construct the narrative in their minds, and feeling or experiencing the story as if living it through the eyes of the character(s). Contemporary topics will be incorporated into these discussions, namely modern feminism and the #Me Too movement, as well as issues around race in the twenty-first century.

The aim of this final chapter is to conclude the thesis with a comprehensive drawing-together of that which has been discussed in chapters two to four, and then go on to set down my view of the future of the novel. This will be proffered within an acknowledgement that with a subject matter as vast as this, there are gaps in the research and questioning, or rather areas that were not included in this study for valid reasons. Despite this, it is hoped the conclusion will contribute and add merit to ongoing ideas surrounding the notion of the death and future of the novel, putting on to the debate a perspective that has spanned from my starting the project in January 2015 and completion in March 2021.

One final element to this study was driven by a personal feeling that in all Self's bemoaning of the reading public losing interest in literary novels and serious reading, there was little evidence of him actually engaging with readers to support his claims that the novel's audience was in decline. It felt to be more that he was preaching to the reading public through his articles, without leaving room to offer a social view on the health of the novel from the perspective of members of the reading public. In taking on this topic as an extensive academic study, rather than as an article in a media publication, I reasoned that it would add something of merit to the study if I conducted a selection of guided conversations with small groups of members of the British reading public, gathering some anecdotal thoughts and opinions on modes of reading, the current status of the novel, and whether there could be a future for the novel. The data gathered in conversations would not form a large basis of this study, or indeed is not used in terms of deep analysis, because this in itself could have grown into a separate social studies project in its own right. Instead, the

intention was to support or dispute, or even add to, academic and critical sources with ideas that have been drawn from voices representing members of the reading public.

These guided conversations were conducted in five groups of varying size over a period of three months, September to November 2017, in which each group was asked to converse upon a range of topics based around my research criteria. These groups were composed of a mix of males and females of a range of ages, some who were known to me and all who were known to each other in their individual groups. These were members of the British reading public who took an interest in this study upon hearing about my ideas for research, and volunteered themselves to contribute. Two of the groups were book groups based here in Cheltenham, two were groups composed of members of the humanist society 'Sunday Assembly' based in Bristol, and a fifth group was collected through family members and a friend who again were based in Bristol at the time of recording. Whilst a sizeable body of data was collected, I only wanted to place within this thesis a small amount of that data which was deemed appropriate in terms of contributing to the points focused on throughout this thesis, and in particular interesting ideas which were raised in the groups that hadn't been present in the academic sources included in this study. Indeed, at times there arose from the group conversations ideas or criticisms that were not found within the critical and academic data used as research for this study, and as such it felt important to bring in to the discourse some of these non-academic, yet still valuable, views.

As a final statement, it is hoped that this thesis can bring to light the state of the contemporary novel and the reading public today, in order to set down

views on a likely future of both. Ultimately this thesis aims to contribute a lengthy and in-depth analysis of Self's arguments over the novel's death, as well as commenting on whether this should be taken as the truth, or whether it could be argued to the contrary. In short, this study is a part of a larger conversation on the current and future health of the novel, and is hopefully a provocateur in getting the wider academic community thinking about the importance of keeping the novel alive, a fictional storytelling medium that has been an important and valued part of society for centuries.

## Chapter Two: The Death of the Novel

The debate over the death of the novel is not a recent one, and indeed is still an ongoing debate. Much of these discussions have tended towards the death of the literary novel, and how a decline in readership of literary fiction is suggestive of an end of the novel as a serious work of literature, but there has also been discourse around the novel's failings as a form, and a changing cultural attitude away from the novel as a popular literary form. One of the earliest examples is in 1925, when Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset spoke about his perception of the decline of the novel from the perspective of its diminished effectiveness as a storytelling medium. As part of a series of essays, Gasset speaks passionately of a marked reduction in the sale of novels, and an increase in the sale of 'books of a theoretical character',<sup>10</sup> suggesting that at the time he felt consumers were increasingly more interested in factual rather than fictional books. For Gasset, it would appear that the death of the novel is embedded in a shifting in societal desire towards reading preferences being the driving force behind rendering the novel obsolete as a source of narrative entertainment. Equally, he spoke negatively about the construction and form of the novel, demonstrated in this excerpt below as Gasset shares his belief there is nothing more for the novel to say that hasn't already been written:

I believe that the genre of the novel, if it is not yet irretrievably exhausted, has certainly entered its last phase, the scarcity of possible

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<sup>10</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p 57.

subjects being such that writers must make up for it by the exquisite quality of other elements that compose the body of the novel.<sup>11</sup>

In this is a perspective that the novel has run its course, that its form and content have been so overused it no longer has any more use as a literary medium. There is also a sense that Gasset felt the novel offered little surprise in its content, which is reflected in him talking of 'the scarcity of possible subjects', as if the novelists of his time failed to offer the reader anything new in terms of innovative storylines.

However, his perspective was not all negative, and in his essay he did also have something positive to say about the novel's ability to tell a fictional story in an engaging way. This is seen in his commenting that 'the novel is one of the few fields that may still yield illustrious fruits',<sup>12</sup> which somehow puts the onus now on the novelist to release all the potential the novel has, which, it can be inferred, Gasset believes novelists have failed to do. As such, Gasset paints a picture of hope for the novel being able to offer more in terms of variety of form as long as novelists think in more creative ways, and the genre being able to offer up even more than it is currently doing so. He also goes on to posit a view about how he feels the 'essence' of a novel is not in the narrating of the action but in the forming of a whole fictional world and the lives of fictional people through language.<sup>13</sup> Essentially, Gasset is highlighting that the novel's purpose is world-building through language. The novelist's aim is not to dictate on what is happening through the dry reporting of facts, but to express using words to describe such things as the physical landscape and character's characteristics,

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<sup>11</sup> Gasset, p 60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p 99.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p 87.

before going on to express what happens in the story as if living in that world. In this is a statement that the novel is still an ideal narrative form because it offers up a complete world in its pages, and transcends its physical bounds to develop into much more than paper and ink. Equally, he speaks of how 'we (the reader) want the novelist to linger and to grant us good long looks at the personages, their being, and their environment till we have had our fill and feel that they are close friends whom we know thoroughly in all the wealth of their lives'.<sup>14</sup> This depicts the novel as having depth beyond the physical page, how the form can open up a whole new universe to the reader, but also that the novel can offer some sort of companionship for the reader. In Gasset's musings on the novel form is an admittance that although, for him, it has become a form that lacks innovation, its construction should to an extent be celebrated for developing a whole fictional universe in a way that no other literary form does, and there is scope for it to become innovative again provided novelists explore and experiment further with the form.

Several decades later, literary critic Bill Buford revived the debate over the novel's death in the early 1980s. Buford's argument focused more on a change in public taste, suggesting that the novel was becoming a cheap commodity rather than a revered literary study. This is apparent when he states 'it is not, in the end, the book as object which is threatened – for more are appearing (if briefly) than ever before....but the book as fiction, as an instance of literature'.<sup>15</sup> In this is a musing that books will continue being published, but the addition of the words 'if briefly' suggest a rise in literature that will come and go in waves of popularity,

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<sup>14</sup> Gasset, p 66.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Buford, *Introduction: The End of the English Novel* (1980) <<https://granta.com/the-end-of-the-english-novel>> [accessed 23 May 2015].

rather than establish themselves as works of literary merit that consumers and readers will cherish for years to come. This is further reflected in his opinion that the reading public of the early 1980s was, as he saw it, largely turning away from the kind of novels that are 'too cumbersome to consume on the run',<sup>16</sup> and rather focusing their attentions towards 'the things in the window on railway platforms'.<sup>17</sup> This conjures up a view of societal preference turning more towards light entertainment at times when there is little else to entertain, such as when on a long journey, and also a society who no longer values sitting at home working their way through a tome of a novel. It also hints towards the novel becoming increasingly a commercial product, the sort of fare that would be readily displayed on railway platforms in order to turn a profit.

Buford then goes on to place particular blame on British novelists and publishers who, he believed, were not encouraging the reading public to embrace and engage with the novel. In a similar vein to Gasset, his view is focused on publishers and novelists at the time seemingly refusing to take the novel down interesting and innovative avenues, and instead tending towards marketing the same material as had gone before. This, then, suggests a negativity felt towards the novel production market, and one that has been present for nearly a century, raised by Gasset in the 1920s and then again by Buford in the 1980s. Yet Buford takes this line of argument and widens it by also speaking out about how he feels the publishing industry is stifling creativity, and not encouraging the reading public to garner a taste for novels that differ greatly from what is already on the market. This is particularly present in him stating

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<sup>16</sup> Buford.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



‘new outlets must be must be developed if creative prose is to find its readers, let alone be supported by them’.<sup>18</sup> There are present similarities between the arguments for the death of the novel as posed by both Gasset and Buford. Both believe the publishing industry and novelists of their time were stuck in a rut in terms of developing the novel’s form and content, that the novel was declining in standard to the point it was losing its audience, and they also believed the novel’s death would be a cultural one in that it will still continue to be produced, but its numbers of readers will dramatically decline unless it is shown to keep an interested audience by offering readers something new or challenging.

Whilst this is a topic that has been revived periodically over a century or so by literary critics and writers through journalism and critical essays, the topic has not been discussed in great detail through an extended study. As such, this thesis aims to take a deeper look at the topic in contemporary Britain of the 2010s and 2020s, although much of the focus will be on the views of Will Self that arose in a series of articles written for *The Guardian* between May 2014 and March 2018. Throughout his discourse on the death of the novel, two main points are made, these being that the literary novel is becoming obsolete as a popular narrative medium within society, and the overall numbers of people reading for pleasure are in rapid decline. A basic definition of the literary novel in order to clarify what Self believes is under threat, ‘literary novel’ could be defined in terms of the category of novels in which the novelist has applied narratological devices, such as metaphors and signs, and at times an innovative layout, demonstrating an understanding of the craft of good writing utilised in telling a lengthy fictional story. Equally, literary novels tend to avoid generic or

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

formulaic writing styles and tropes, with literary novelists choosing to present to their readers a narrative that both challenges the intellect and provokes analytic contemplation. The literary novel sits within a canon of works deemed by literary critics and academics as having significant literary merit, and is often critically admired for its craft in structure and writing. Some examples of contemporary literary novelists include Ali Smith, Margaret Atwood, Colson Whitehead, Will Self, and Jonathan Franzen, among many others. Such novelists demonstrate their understanding of the craft of writing fiction in such a manner that it transports the reader from the actual world and into another reality, whilst at times challenge that which already exists on the novel market. The literary novel is not what Bakhtin terms as the 'entertainment novel', which is 'bound to nothing and based on nothing, i.e. is entirely meaningless',<sup>19</sup> or 'sub-literary' literature that could be described as escapism for the purposes of amusement over useful or instructive prose-narrative.<sup>20</sup> This is arguably a narrow-minded opinion that is derogatory to those who enjoy novels as pure entertainment, not wanting to have to read into nuances or discern hidden meanings. Non-literary novels would be a better term than 'entertainment novel', referring to novels that tends to be based upon formulaic plot devices, a one-dimensional writing style that largely does not require the reader to analyse deeply the text or uphold a certain level of scholarly and critical knowledge, and focus largely on entertainment so do not aim necessarily for the reader to come away having had a deep exploration of a particular topic or culture. It could be

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<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, M.M., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 14th edn, ed by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p 73.

<sup>20</sup> René Wellek & Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (London: Harcourt, Brace & World inc, 1956), p 30.

said that the literary novel Self is referring to as facing certain death sets itself apart from other novels, because 'there is more emphasis on character and irony over plot, and its narrative delves more deeply into serious explorations of the human condition'.<sup>21</sup> 'Literary' implies that in the end our reading efforts will be worth it,<sup>22</sup> and the reader will have gained some enlightenment or insight into a particular topic or culture different to their own. The literary novelist also aims in some ways to educate their readers on a place and subject that may be entirely new to the reader, and to do so in such a way that the language stirs empathy, the development of a fictional universe within the reader's imagination so the reader can live through the narrative as an active participant, and its intention is to explore topics and issues through a variety of viewpoints so as to provoke the reader to consider their own opinions based on the information provided through an empathic lens.

In May 2014 Will Self declared in the title to an article produced for *The Guardian* 'The novel is dead (this time it's for real)',<sup>23</sup> a statement intended to shock readers into considering that the novel could cease to exist and that we have already arrived at that event. Yet, once he had drawn readers of his article in with his punchy title, Self goes on to clarify that he means not that the novel per se is dead, but rather 'the literary novel as an art work and a narrative art form central to our culture is indeed dying before our eyes'.<sup>24</sup> He goes on to place considerable blame on the digital era and a rise in the last couple of decades in

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<sup>21</sup> Warren Adler, *What is a Literary Novel*, Huff Post, 29 May 2012, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/literary-novel\\_b\\_1388425](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/literary-novel_b_1388425) [accessed Sep 2020].

<sup>22</sup> Culler, J, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p 25.

<sup>23</sup> Will Self, 'The Novel is Dead (This Time it's for Real)', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2014 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>> [accessed 16 May 2014].

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the use of digital technology, which, he believes, is and will continue to have a negative impact on the desire of individuals to want to engage in close, considered reading. At the same time, throughout his article he also expresses personal feelings that the current reading culture is changing in such a way that future readers will not care for novels that challenge them intellectually, which is reflected in his statement that 'in the digital age, not only is the physical book in decline, but the very idea of "difficult" reading is being challenged'.<sup>25</sup> In this is a notion that the reading public's interest towards the type of reading that requires consideration and engaging intellect is dwindling. In his article he also expounds that the digital era is much to blame in turning society away from the enjoyment of reading lengthy prose-narrative for pleasure, as well as wanting to read literature that requires deep thought and analysis. The threat to the literary novel's future, Self goes on to assert, is garnered in a dwindling interest in the act of serious reading, of dedicating one's full attention to the task, a belief that throughout the article Self more often than not ascribes to the younger and emerging generations of readers.

It could be said that an argumentative thread present within Self's first article is the changing attitudes towards engaging with the novel that he feels is very much evident among the younger and emerging generations, and how future novel readers seem to be losing interest in the novel. Self even incorporates into his piece abbreviated conversations had between himself and his son, as well as conversations had with a doctoral student he is supervising in his role of university lecturer, appearing to draw upon these conversations as a means to give gravitas to his apportioning some of the blame to that sector of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

society not showing any care for the literary novel. This is expressed particularly when Self writes as if addressing his son who is having difficulty in creating an original sounding tune on the guitar: 'Sod you and your creative anxieties, what about me? How do you think it feels to have dedicated your entire adult life to an art form only to see the bloody thing dying before your eyes?'<sup>26</sup>. This speaks volumes of a novelist who is worried that his chosen career path is teetering on the edge of redundancy because the next generation is, as he sees it, rapidly losing interest in engaging with literary novels, from which he himself makes a living.

His argument that the literary novel is in decline in Self's first article from May 2014, can be summed up in this poignant statement expressing his view on the future of the literary, or serious, novel:

I believe the serious novel will continue to be written and read, but it will be an art form on par with easel painting and classical music: confined to a defined social and demographic group, requiring a degree of subsidy, a subject for historical scholarship rather than public discourse.<sup>27</sup>

In this, Self depicts a future in which a once beloved literary genre becomes of little interest to the wider public, and instead only continues to be embraced by a niche market of dedicated fans and academics. Whether this is the case or indeed not, what comes through in his statement is, arguably, a suggestion of fear for his future career as a writer of literary novels. It is worth highlighting at this point that all four of Will Self's articles that are under scrutiny in this chapter were

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<sup>26</sup> Self, 'The Novel is Dead'.

<sup>27</sup> Self, 'The Novel is Dead'.

published around the time of the publication of his latest trio of novels, *Umbrella* (2012), *Shark* (2014), and *Phone* (2017). It is not explicitly obvious, but it could certainly be construed that the dates on which his articles were published were as much about raising the profile of his novels, whilst also possibly aiming to provoke readers of *The Guardian* to consider whether there has been a change in society's admiration for the literary novel, and if so whether this change will have irreparable negative consequences so that it may one day cease to be produced because there is no audience for it.

As a means of rallying support for the notion that there will at some point in the not so distant future be little or no audience for the literary novel, Self touches upon the act of deep and close reading and how it is an integral part of appreciating and enjoying literary novels. This is expressed clearly in his statement that 'there's still no substitute for the experience of close reading as we've come to understand and appreciate it – the capacity to imagine entire worlds from parsing a few lines of text'.<sup>28</sup> This is followed by a monologue about how digital text is having an impact on this ability, or drive, for close reading by altering an individual's ability to focus on and lose themselves within the act of reading. Self partly attributed this to the way in which text is increasingly, in contemporary society, being read from a screen on a digital device, the reader being allowed to scroll through and scan the body of writing for the information that is desired rather than absorbing the text in full, as well as the number of distractions away from reading that occur when said device is connected to the Internet. Equally, in his 2014 article Self expresses a view that 'I do not mean narrative prose fiction *tout court* is dying.... nor do I mean that serious novels

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<sup>28</sup> Self, 'The Novel is Dead'.

will either cease to be written or read',<sup>29</sup> before going on to comment on the saturation of literature into the literary market due to, as he sees it, the surge of creative writing degrees that are churning out novelists who then enter a world from which they can not make a living selling novels. Self addresses in this a perspective that the future is bleak for novelists as much as for the novel. He uses as an example a student he supervised through university who, Self reports, has decided to turn to teaching once he has been awarded with his Creative Writing PHD in order to 'be paid more highly for the midwifery of stillborn novels'.<sup>30</sup> The imagery produced by Self's comment alludes to an opinion that the market for literary novels is already in such decline that producing them is seemingly pointless because they won't sell, let alone be greatly received by a wide audience, and it is becoming increasingly harder to make a living from being a writer of literary novels, so much so that emerging literary novel writers need often now to take on a second career, such as teaching, in order to ensure a stable income.

The first of the four articles, from May 2014, suggests a rising anxiety experienced by Self about the validity of his future as a novelist, a writer of literary novels, but also it has a focus towards a widespread loss of interest across the reading public in both the literary novel and the act of serious reading, particularly amongst the younger and emerging generations. Throughout his arguments, Self reiterates that in his opinion serious reading, the act of analysing the text for the hidden meaning embedded into the narrative by the novelist, is on the decline, and as a result the general interest in literary novels is in decline.

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<sup>29</sup> Self, 'The Novel is Dead'.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

This is reflected in him saying ‘the literary novel as an art work and narrative art form central to our culture is indeed dying before our eyes’,<sup>31</sup> setting something of a pleading tone to the reader of his article, asking them to consider the impact on our culture if the literary novel were indeed to die. He speaks with a level of provocation, invoking an image of the literary novel taking its last breaths before leaving a book shaped hole at the centre of our cultural identity, and rallying support for interest in engaging with the types of novels of which he is a writer. His article is in some ways a personal speech on how the state of the current and likely future reading public is calling into question the health of the literary novel, as well as the career for future novelists wanting to produce literary novels.

Returning to the journalistic scene some months later in October 2014, Self turns the focus of his arguments over the death of the literary novel again towards what he believes is a rapidly declining interest across British society for deep and serious reading. In this article he adds further gravitas to his argument that a portion of blame over the death of the novel, he believes, should be placed on the rise in use of digital technology, and throughout his argument he draws a line of reasoning that argues reading digitised text from digital devices is not conducive with deep or serious reading, partly due to the continuous alerts that distract the reader’s attention away from reading, and also the way in which the reader of digitised text’s cognition is in turn changing our approach to reading in general. This following statement from the October 2014 article is somewhat of a demonstration of his declaration that digitised text is having an impact upon society’s approach to reading at a cognitive level:

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<sup>31</sup> Self, ‘The Novel is Dead’.



One thing is absolutely clear: reading on screen is fundamentally different from reading on paper, and just as solitary, silent, focused reading is a function of the physical codex, so the digital text will bring with it new forms of reading, learning, memory and even consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

In this, Self expounds his view that the reading public is losing interest in the act of serious and focused reading, and his second article on the subject of the death of the novel continues on to voice an argument that our increasingly digitised world, in which a portion of readers are all losing touch with physical books, is having a serious negative impact on the amount that society in general reads for pleasure. For Self, 'deep, serious reading – and writing – is under threat from the digital revolution',<sup>33</sup> setting a tone that aims at making the reader of the article pay attention, using 'is' rather than 'may' or 'might be', as well as the word 'threat' to suggest this matter is in a state of peril. Self's aim in this article is to raise an argument that, as modern society has become increasingly used to reading digitised text on screens, so we are all more likely to want to speed through all text in order to get to a set point, and as such have lost the desire to savour the act of deep and considered reading. In particular, in the second paragraph of the article Self implores readers to consider how deep reading is important for cognitive function, and how on the whole it garners a connection within the readers' imagination between 'printed codices, and all the worlds they

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<sup>32</sup> Will Self, 'The Fate of our Literary Culture is Sealed', *The Guardian*, 3 October 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/03/fate-literary-culture-sealed-internet-will-self>> [accessed 24 October 2014].

<sup>33</sup> Self, 'The Fate of Our Literary Culture is Sealed'.

in turn describe'.<sup>34</sup> Through the act of deep and serious reading, Self asserts, the imagination is exercised, and the brain learns to turn words on the page into visual representations. If instead, he argues, society chooses to consume narrative solely through visual forms such as film and television, then certainly the skill of recreating a fictional universe within the imagination will be lost because the practise is not being maintained. It could be suggested that his making this point is a personal rant against the decline in the demographic of readers at whom his works are aimed, highlighting his fear that a career in writing the fiction he loves could be coming to an end.

Self also asserts that digital technology has increasingly allowed for such functions as being able to scroll through and search a body of text with relative ease, which, he suggests, has contributed to diverting society's mindset away from considered and focused reading, such as is needed for fully engaging with, for example, a literary novel. He goes on to argue that individuals are now more likely to scan, skip, and speed through texts rather than taking in all the words on the page, creating what he feels is a culture in which we are all constantly 'searching out the nuggets of information we desire',<sup>35</sup> rather than simply enjoying being fully absorbed in a lengthy narrative text. In this October 2014 article, Self encourages a view that the functions of digital technology allow its user to get to the point they want to within a body of digitised text without having to engage in the process of absorbing the surrounding narrative, and because of this there are surely fewer readers choosing to engage in 'serious' reading, which could be defined as when the reader's concentration is focused

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<sup>34</sup> Self, 'The Fate of Our Literary Culture is Sealed'.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

solely on the act of reading so as to be fully immersed in the fictional universe of the text and putting their mind to absorbing all meaning behind the words on the page. He ends the article declaring that serious writing has no future because 'such writing depends for its existence on deep readers, and in the near future such deep readers will be in very short supply',<sup>36</sup> which further highlights his notion that there may be no future for the literary novelist, particularly if he is right in asserting that the size of the literary novel reading public is in rapid decline. More so with this October 2014 article than with the first one in May 2014, Self's argument reads like something of a letter to society imploring it to prevent the decline in the reading of serious literature by re-embracing the act of deep and concentrated reading, and to not allow the increasing amount of time spent using digital devices to weaken an individual's drive to then spend time immersed in the act of reading literary prose that requires concentrated, considered reading.

In order to further reiterate his point about how digitised text is altering the way in which we choose to read, Self depicts through his October 2014 article a world in which the digital book revolution overtakes the physical book to such a degree that the physical book will in time be replaced. This opinion is expressed through such statements as 'the majority of the text currently read in the technologically advanced world is already digitised',<sup>37</sup> and 'the book is already in desperate, riffling retreat'.<sup>38</sup> What is key to point out at this juncture is that these declarations are not backed up with factual data or statistical evidence. These are not necessary statements of facts backed up with figures,

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<sup>36</sup> Self, 'The Fate of Our Literary Culture is Sealed'.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

and are aimed more towards provoking readers of the article rather than building a reasoned argument. Focusing on Self's theorising about the future of the physical book in this article, however, it would seem as if he is perturbed by the migration of books from physical to digital form by his use of powerful phrases such as 'desperate, rifling retreat'. Indeed, it is not difficult to come away from this article with the opinion that the ebook was at that time seen as the future for the book, and this is not necessarily a positive revolution.

What is also prevalent throughout this October 2014 article is a downbeat attitude concerning a societal move towards novels as commercial commodities vs the art or craft of serious novel writing. In scrutinising this second article it was felt that a further theme was emerging through Self's arguments. Alongside that of the decline of the literary novel and serious reading, and the impact of digital technology on both of these, there came across a sense of the capitalism over art. This theme focused on a notion that the face of the modern publishing industry is increasingly geared towards profit over craft, and it could be said there was a sense through Self's outpouring that contemporary capitalist British society, which it could be suggested promotes consumerism as a positive driving force for the economy, is swayed towards encouraging the production and commercialisation of literature for guaranteed profit. This is harbored through serving mass cultural taste and producing literature as cheaply and quickly as possibly, at the expense of promoting the more literary focused works, such as the novels Self writes, of which there is a seemingly smaller audience and in turn lesser profits to be made. This comes across particularly in his speaking about the abolition of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) in the 1980s, a government backed scheme that was set up to support the fair production and sale of, as well

as access to, literature. The NBA set a price for a certain work of literature, and every retailer across the board was then obliged to sell it at that set price rather than being allowed to sell for a lower amount. However, the agreement was overturned in 1997, leading to retailers setting their own prices and offering works at sometimes highly discounted rates to suit their custom. Self expresses a view in his October 2014 article that the NBA was of great support to the novel by means of ensuring 'the cultural value of reading and writing wasn't reducible to its economic worth',<sup>39</sup> suggesting that now the NBA is no longer had any real legal standing as a set of codes that must be adhered to, so literature, and more specifically the literary novel, has become yet another commercial product upon which a price can be placed to suit individual retailers, even if this means creators of such works lose out on worthy profit. It is apparent also that Self believes the abolition of the NBA, and in particular the power that retailers now have in setting their own prices, has meant that profits from the sale of books over the last few decades has lead to a situation in which the book retail market is no longer spread over a number of retailers, but is rather 'nowadays one big, thick pipeline carrying half the revenue from British retail book sales disappears deep into Jeff Bezos's pockets', Jeff Bezos being founder and CEO of retail giant Amazon. Whether this is true or not, the point Self makes is that the face of the literary market has changed for what he believes is the worse, losing a sense of individuality as one single organisation has been allowed to rise up in popularity by offering high discounts, and the novel having been 'colossally devalued in order to achieve parity with the pound'.<sup>40</sup> It could be construed to an extent that

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<sup>39</sup> Self, 'The Fate of Our Literary Culture is Sealed'.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Self aimed through this October 2014 article to raise a point about how the novel has fast become more about generating profit over producing art, and how the literary novel in contemporary society is losing its worth and 'cultural value'.<sup>41</sup>

Self spoke up for a third time in reference to the future of the novel in an article written for *The Guardian* in November 2016. This time the focus was more concentrated on the detrimental effect that technology is having, particularly amongst the younger generations, on society's desire to read not just literary novels, but fictional stories in general. Within the article he mentions neuroscientific studies to back up his arguments, referencing in particular research conducted by neuroscientist Susan Greenfield, whom he believes 'has been prominent in arguing that our new digital lives are profoundly altering the structure of our brains'.<sup>42</sup> He begins his article with a thought-provoking question: 'Are humans evolving beyond the need to tell stories?'.<sup>43</sup> The main crux of his argument is that our modern lifestyles and an over-reliance on digital technologies are eroding the part of our brains that engages with extensive narrative discourse. The third article under scrutiny in this study builds on his previous two articles, whilst also further developing his notion that digital technology is having a negative impacting on an individual's desire to engage with the act of deep and serious reading, which in turn is putting the literary novel at threat of a cultural death. Digital technology is discussed in a negative light to a greater extent in this third article from November 2016 compared to

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<sup>41</sup> Self, 'The Fate of Our Literary Culture is Sealed'.

<sup>42</sup> Will Self, 'Are Humans Evolving Beyond the Need to Tell Stories?', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2016, <[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/25/will-self-humans-evolving-need-stories?utm\\_source=esp&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=GU+Today+main+NEW+H+categories&utm\\_term=201558&subid=16897915&CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/25/will-self-humans-evolving-need-stories?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+main+NEW+H+categories&utm_term=201558&subid=16897915&CMP=EMCNEWEML6619I2)> [accessed 28 November 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Self's previous two articles, such as the way in which he draws comparisons between how satellite navigation has negated the need for people to trade narratives between themselves in order to offer up directions, and how he sees this as a sign of contemporary society's losing the need for absorbing stories. This following quote from that November 2016 article reflects Self's feelings on the matter:

It's strange, of course, to think of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Ulysses* as simple elaborations upon our biologically determined inclination to give people directions – but then it's perhaps stranger still to realise that sustained use of satellite navigation, combined with absorbing all our narrative requirements in pictorial rather [than] written form, may transform us into miserable and disorientated amnesiacs.<sup>44</sup>

In depicting a society that has been transformed into 'miserable and disorientated amnesiacs' by the invention of satellite navigation and visual narrative formats, such as cinema and TV, Self sets a tone for his views that could be taken as doom-mongering. Equally, more so with this article compared with his first two, Self makes a greater attempt to back up his views with some form of considered research. He suggests at the start of the article that he has looked into 'the number of scientific studies of narrative forms and our cognitive responses to them',<sup>45</sup> and even implores the reader of the article to take note of the changing reading habits of society as a whole in making the statement:

If we take seriously the conclusions of these recent neuroscientific studies, one fact is indisputable: whatever the figures for books

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<sup>44</sup> Self, 'Are Humans Evolving Beyond the Need to Tell Stories?'.  
<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

sales (either in print or digital form), reading for pleasure has been in serious decline for over a decade.<sup>46</sup>

Several provocative statements on the subject of reading for entertainment purposes are made by Self in this third article, such as this one above, which, whether it is or factually accurate, certainly prompts the reader of the article to consider the matter. The use of the word 'serious' sends a message that this is something to be considered as deeply troubling, an issue that needs immediate attention, and as such there is a hint of encouraging this to be taken as fact rather than speculation that a societal desire to engage in story telling is at threat because of digital technology.

Similarly, Self also makes a point in this article about how watching a narrative play out through cinema or TV is, in his view, no substitute for reading a story, largely because the imagination is not stimulated in the same way. This is summed up in his drawing on neurological reasoning:

The studies do demonstrate that the suite of cognitive aptitudes needed to decipher text and turn it into living, breathing, visible and tangible worlds seem to wither away once we stop turning the pages and start goggling at virtual tales.<sup>47</sup>

He does not specify exactly which studies have been used to draw this conclusion, but this largely does not matter in the context of the article because his aim is not academic, but rather a media style attempt to shock and provoke a response from society to take action for a certain cause, in this case the seeming need to save the act of reading for pleasure by more of us engaging in such an

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<sup>46</sup> Self, 'Are Humans Evolving Beyond the Need to Tell Stories?'.  
<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



act. It goes without saying, of course, that as a literary novelist Self would want to send out a message to society to keep reading, and there is, as has already been expressed in this chapter, no doubt a personal agenda in all of this raising the topic of the novel's death.

As a final remark on the November 2016 article, Self also returns to a point he raised in October 2014, namely that digital technology is altering the way in which we read, and he extends this point further by drawing into discussions a term he has coined: 'visualisation hypothesis'. Visualisation hypothesis, as the article explains, suggests that an individual will find it harder to absorb and remember a narrative when they have watched it compared to having read or listened to that same narrative, rather one who watches the film is less likely to remember the story than someone who has read it in book form. More so than his previous two articles, the focus is towards a battle between reading narratives, being an active agent in imagining the story playing out, and watching them on TV or in the cinema, being a passive observer. Self places, again, particular emphasis on the younger generations and the role they play in what he sees is a declining interest in the literary novel, coupled with a rising uptake in digital technology that distracts away from a want to engage in close, concentrated reading. In fact, the final two paragraphs of the November 2016 article sway towards suggesting there is a link between increasing mental health issues amongst the youth of today and a decline in printed material, something which in itself warrants a whole study, but this issue is merely touched upon and not explored to a great extent in the article. The fact that this notion is hooked in without deep analysis to bolster a view can be criticised as being unnecessary, and unguided. This third article equally appears to be aimed at

reminding society storytelling is an essential part of our lives and not just for entertainment, as well as arguing in this digital era, it could be seen that society's desire towards storytelling is placed under threat by an increased use of digital technology that replaces the need to pass information from person to person through narrative. Running through all three articles is a personal aim of Self's to provoke readers of the article into taking notice of the novel, reminding them there are other ways of absorbing lengthy stories besides TV programmes and films, and reading fiction is actually of benefit to our mental well being, it has a purpose beyond pure entertainment.

Will Self's final declarations on the death of the novel to date arose during an interview in March 2018, which was centred upon promotion of his final novel in a trilogy, entitled *Phone*. As with his first article the title of the interview draws the reader in, again using strong and provocative language: '*Will Self: 'The Novel is Absolutely Doomed'*'. When questioned within the interview about his less than optimistic view of the novel's future, Self says that he believes it to be doomed to become 'a marginal cultural form',<sup>48</sup> and goes on to opine that there hasn't been a 'water-cooler' novel since *Trainspotting*. What can be taken from the sections in the interview that focus on Self's views of the novel's current and future health, is that he believes society no longer cares about the novel as they used to, and that not a great enough proportion of the reading public are engaging with literary novels for them to be a topic of general discussion amongst, for instance, colleagues in the work place. Equally, what comes through

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<sup>48</sup> Alex Clark, 'Will Self: 'The Novel is Absolutely Doomed'', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/17/will-self-the-books-interview-alex-clark-phone-memoir>> [accessed 17 March 2018].

the answer he gives for this interview when questioned on his view of the novel's death, is a sense that he is aiming to remind readers there was a time in the not so distant past when novels were an active topic of conversation, possibly in an attempt to revive within society a desire to engage with others in active conversation about what they are currently reading, and in turn rekindle amongst readers of the interview a passion towards the idea of reading for pleasure as a shared social activity.

Self raises a number of similar points in this interview as those already highlighted in this analysis of his previous articles, such as how contemporary society, it would seem to him, is far more interested in watching than reading narrative, and how the novel, as he sees it, is no longer a desirable topic of conversation amongst groups of people. What was intriguing, however, was that when asked whether he prefers to read on paper or screen Self states 'I am completely digital',<sup>49</sup> which surely contradicts the negativity towards digital technology that came through in his previous articles, and his view proffered throughout his argument on the importance of reading in print vs reading digital text. The context of the interview is such, however, that it fails to delve deeper into this point, instead only offering a suggestion that Self has his own personal criteria for that which is acceptable in terms of modern society and its relationship with reading. For instance, he implies in the interview that those who have grown up reading in print and have then migrated into reading on screen, such as he, are acceptable members of the reading public in his view because they have nourished both skills, compared to those of a younger generation who have grown up largely engaging with digitised text. It is in his

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<sup>49</sup> Clark.

final comment that he also suggests some disparity in his past preaching of the current health of the literary market, as he declares 'I don't tend to read contemporary fiction much; I think I'm going to take a bit of a furlough from writing fiction in order to look at fiction a bit more'.<sup>50</sup> Here is a reflective response from Self, suggesting that he himself wants to gain more perspective on the current state and shape of the contemporary novel market from the perspective of a consumer rather than as a producer.

Indeed, throughout all of his articles it can certainly be said that Self has reinvigorated the debate over the health and likely future of the novel, or more specifically the literary novel, from a contemporary perspective, injecting into the conversation his views on the current state of the reading public, the publishing market, and the influences of digital technology over the desire for concentrated reading. Whilst there is, arguably, a promotional element to this doom-mongering and musing on his part, the notion that a literary medium can be expunged from society is one of interest. What now follows is a response to these views expressed by Will Self that the literary novel is dead, that society has lost its desire for close and considered reading, and that digital technology is having a detrimental effect on the way in which society engages with text. It is Self's three main points that will be reflected upon and incorporated into ongoing discussions throughout the following chapters, and is aimed at offering a focus in guiding the research and arguments expressed herein towards making a prediction of the future of the novel.

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<sup>50</sup> Clark.

### Chapter Three: The Novel

The narrative of the novel's birth, gleaned through historical and academic sources, tells us that the forging of the genre was a slow process influenced by a number of factors. A number of literary critics and scholars who have discussed this very subject over the years have set down their own theories about how the novel came to be a well established literary form, some of which are discussed at length in this chapter. However there is an overarching sentiment that the novel's routes and influences are to be found in both journalism and stories from travellers returning from explorations, which are a focus in this section of the thesis. This following dialogue on the creation of the novel, its subsequent rise in popularity, and the growth of the reading public, establishes the notion that the novel is a long-standing means of entertainment. As such, discussions over the negative impact the novel's possible death would have on future societies could be enhanced in terms of suggesting generations to come would lose touch with such a historic and unique entity in the literary canon.

Carter and McRae share their view of the novel developing over a period of time, starting with a statement that 'the novel was not a sudden innovation at the end of the seventeenth century',<sup>51</sup> before going on to suggest that lengthy accounts narrated by early sea travellers returning from uncharted territories, should be recognised as having influenced the novel form in a number of ways. For instance, it is their belief that the explorers and sailors lengthy fictionalised

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<sup>51</sup> Ronald Carter & John McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p 151.

stories that had within them truths about the real world, could be credited as developing within society a taste for sensational narratives embedded in a cloak of realism. Carter and McRae site such works as *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, published around 1375, as having had an influence over the subsequent development of the novel style. Certainly their work does much to convince a truth in believing such narratives as John Mandeville's, pointed towards a style of narrative entertainment through which the listener, or reader, could also learn something about the world through the eyes of a narrator.

Carter and McRae also speak at some length about how the early novel form and style bridged a gap between reality and fiction, turning factual news reports into a lyrical and entertaining style. Certainly there is merit in this, as even today novelists draw on current affairs and newsworthy topics in order to craft a view of such issues in a manner that the reader lives through the experience as an active observer. They observe in their study on the history of English literature, how novels of the early eighteenth-century often portrayed current issues or social comment as a bid to highlight such situations likely not experienced by the upper and middle-class reader, such as 'the conditions of the poor, the gaols (especially Newgate), the suffering of emigrants, all became subjects of concern to novelists'.<sup>52</sup> Their study also draws on several examples of early novels that depict overseas travels and adventures, placing the reader in foreign environments, whilst also drawing contemporary subjects into their fictional narratives, including Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* which can be viewed as an attack on the religious controversies and division between denominations and the current political

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<sup>52</sup> Carter & McRae, p 154.

parties of the time.<sup>53</sup> Carter and McRae recognise there is a link in the development of the early novel style, from its roots in travel and sea tales that featured social comment, and they aptly develop a well-rounded argument with supporting texts as evidence to their case. Their ideas as to how the novel rose in popularity could indeed still apply today, particularly in suggesting that the novel presents in a different manner the reporting of an incident through a media based source, taking the reader into the scenario to explore it from an empathic standpoint through the eyes of a narrator or narrators. Similarly, their suggestion of the novel being used as a means of communicating to those outside of a certain country or culture about the particulars of that country or culture.

Literary scholar and critic Doug Underwood similarly upholds a belief that some recognition needs to be given to the influence that travel writing has played in the creation of the novel style.<sup>54</sup> In one strand of his study on journalism and the novel, Underwood argues at length that accounts of voyagers returning from overseas explorations must have prompted some eighteenth century writers into starting to develop lengthy, fictional, narrative prose that then grew into what we today think of as the novel, adding to his discussion a view that the influence of travel tales can definitely be seen in some early novels that spoke of journeys to unexplored territories. Underwood also makes reference to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Graham Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, into which, Underwood argues, are embedded elements of the travelogue, the pirate tale, personal journal entries, news accounts, character

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<sup>53</sup> Carter & McRae, p 156.

<sup>54</sup> Doug Underwood, *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p 53.

sketches and suspense.<sup>55</sup> Yet Underwood compels us to also acknowledge that whilst such writers as Defoe and Swift should be awarded some of the acclaim for setting down the early novel form, it is his belief that the unnamed travellers returning with their own accounts of adventures need also to be credited as influencing the development of the novel. This is evident in him arguing that 'although Defoe and his cohorts have come to be seen by many as the founders of the novel-writing tradition in English, they weren't the first persons to market artful and invented tales to an audience with a growing appetite for being entertained by the new products of the printing press',<sup>56</sup> meaning such early novel writers should not be awarded all of the credit for setting down the craft of fictional storytelling in reference to the likes of those telling tales of exploration. Indeed his is a compelling argument and does much to further cement a truth that a part of the novel's development began with people narrating to an audience in a sensational way stories of real life, and what they had seen. There is a sense that Underwood is imploring us not to forget these early storytellers, or to suggest that those who set the earliest examples of novels in to print are the true starters of the novel's history.

However, there is another side to his argument, as Underwood equally asserts that writers of other styles of writing prevalent at the time, namely crude biographies and media based publications such as journals and newspapers, must be given credit as having contributed to the creation of the early novel style, again citing some of Daniel Defoe's novels as an examples of this, including *The Life, Adventures, and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* and *A Journal*

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<sup>55</sup> Underwood, p 53.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p 45.



*of the Plague Year*. Such novels as these, Underwood argues, point towards early writers and novelists developing a fictional style that was heavily influenced by such factual writings as found in newspapers or journals, and in turn aided in the setting down of a traditional novel style, one which reported on actual life in a way that would also be entertaining for readers. Underwood highlights, for instance, that Defoe drew upon records available in the municipal archives, including eyewitness accounts of plague survivors, when writing his novel *A Journal of the Plague Year*,<sup>57</sup> thus demonstrating that Defoe's aim with his novel was to forge a fictional storytelling style into which was embedded factual accuracy. The ability to reflect upon global events and cultural issues is integral to the novel style, and certainly there is merit in Underwood's argument of roots from factual forms, biography and journalism, to the novel form.

Underwood speaks at length about how he feels writers of the eighteenth century working within the field of journalism should also be credited as having influenced the early development of the novel form. In a bold statement he writes 'the explosive growth of periodicals in the early eighteenth century that contained news, essays, criticism, political commentary....was the "primordial soup" from which today's fiction and literary journalism emerged'.<sup>58</sup> The two main points he makes are that journalism gave novelists, such as Dickens and Johnson, a means of earning a steady wage, whilst also aiding in forging their careers as novelists, and that equally factual publications, such as newspapers and journals, offered them an opportunity through which to experiment with new forms of fiction writing to a ready audience. Indeed, he builds a credible

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<sup>57</sup> Underwood, p 45.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p 34.

argument that such publications as Johnson's newspaper *Rambler*, which ran from 1750 to 1752, gave Johnson an outlet with a ready made audience, through which he could experiment with written prose that was both factual and entertaining. Equally, Underwood suggesting that the novel may not have flourished without journalism is reflected in him reporting that all fifteen of Dickens's novels were serialised in weekly and monthly periodicals.<sup>59</sup> This fact highlights how journalistic publications made space for writers of fiction to proffer their literature to a ready audience, whilst also aiding in the reading public garnering an interest in new styles of writing. This is in a society that for those who could read there was little or no disposable income from which to buy books, and for whom reading, up until that point, had been only really been for informative or religious purposes.

The novel's early success, it could be suggested, relied in part on society building a view of the merits of reading for pleasure through such periodicals and journals offering a diverse range of writings, and it is this change in attitude, Underwood feels, that surely must have been set in motion by early media. He writes, 'in looking back on the eighteenth century as the birthplace of both the modern novel and modern journalism, one has to imagine a time when the line between the real and the imagined was very much blurred and when notions of "objectivity" and "factuality" were in a fluid and largely undefined state'.<sup>60</sup> It is within the state, of the fictional and fact coming together, that the novel fits, and so the rendering of an audience with a taste for such writings through the route

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<sup>59</sup> Underwood, p 67.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p 34.

of journalism must undoubtedly be counted as a pivotal movement in the birth of the novel.

Literary scholar Ian Watt also argues extensively on the subject of how journalism influenced development of the novel style in his 1957 publication *The Rise of the Novel*. Watt's focus is similar to Underwood's in that he writes about how he believes the essays published in periodicals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries prompted transition from journalistic narratives to novel writing, whilst also setting within the reading public of the time a taste for the novel style. He comments that 'the periodical essay did much in forming a taste that the novel, too, could cater for',<sup>61</sup> suggesting that journalistic essays played an important role in building an audience for the novel. However, Watt does also suggest that the transition from journalistic essays to fictional novels was not a simple one, remarking that journalists were often 'uninspired and failed to create a gallery of equally interesting characters'.<sup>62</sup> This suggests the development of the novel style was not a quick process, and novel writing was at the time an entirely new skill that needed to be rendered and learnt. However, whilst there may have been blocks to the development of novel writing, such as journalists having to learn new narrative skills, Watt is clear in his support an argument that essays found in early periodicals contributed to an extent the rise in the 18<sup>th</sup> century of a writing style that drew together fact in a storytelling rather than straight reporting manner. For example, below is an extract taken from edition number 18 of *Tatler*, first published in May 1709, which details the current economic and social crisis happening in France:

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<sup>61</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974), p 51.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p 51.

This day a mail arrived from Holland, by which there are advices from Paris, that the kingdom of France is in the uttermost misery and distraction. The merchants of Lyons have been at Court, to remonstrate their great sufferings by the failure of their public credit; but have received no other satisfaction, than promises of a sudden peace; and that their debts will be made good by funds out of the revenue, which will not answer, but in case of the peace which is promised. In the meantime, the cries of the common people are loud for want of bread, the gentry have lost all spirit and zeal for their country, and the king himself seems to languish under the anxiety of the pressing calamities of the nation, and retires from hearing those grievances which he hath not power to redress.<sup>63</sup>

Whilst this piece aims to outline for its readers, who will largely be removed from the situation, details of the desperate situation for the citizens of France during the period of the French Revolution, so the writer has composed his prose in such a way that it builds into a narrative, allowing the reader to imagine themselves as being there, to picture the crowds of starving people, and a King fretting under the pressure of the uprising. The use of descriptive language, such as 'the cries of the common people' and 'languish under the anxiety', bring a level of emotion and imaginative description to the piece, and as such the reader of the article can seemingly more easily engage with the subject matter on an emotional level. This, arguably, demonstrates a transition towards writers experimenting with narrating fact in an entertaining manner, developing a

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<sup>63</sup> Project Gutenberg, The Tatler, Volume 1, 1899: < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13645/13645-h/13645-h.htm#number18>>. Accessed [9<sup>th</sup> August 2020].

narrative style that provoked readers to imagine the situation, as well as supplying the facts in an empathetic manner.

Literary scholar and critic Michael Hayes offers further support towards early journalism as having played a part in the history of developing the novel form. Hayes's focus is more towards economic matters, and how journalism aided in bringing about the novel as a commercial product and popular source of entertainment. He highlights that the shortage of disposable income for vast swathes of seventeenth century society meant that 'for many working-class families it was not books that provided the main reading but newspapers',<sup>64</sup> and reminds us that for some time the novel remained out of reach of a vast proportion of the reading public, simply because it was an expensive luxury in an economy that did not afford a disposable income for vast swathes of society. He goes on to assert that a large part of widening the audience for the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was reliant on both a widespread increase in the average household income, as well as the growth of the book making process so that novels could become an affordable commodity for a sizeable portion of the reading public. Hayes goes on to speak of how at a time when the purchase of an entire book was inconceivable for a considerable proportion of the reading public, it was the more affordable publications, such as periodicals, that offered readers excerpts of novels and serialised fictional stories as a means of bringing this new novel style to a greater portion of the reading public. He reflects on this as he writes, 'the primary concern of newspaper and periodical publishing was news and miscellaneous information. Even so both forms of

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Hayes, 'Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste', in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume One: 1900–1929*, ed. by Clive Bloom (London: Longman, 1993), p.p. 76 – 99, p 79.

publishing had a place for fictions, short stories and serial publications'.<sup>65</sup> He goes on to cite Harmsworth, owner of the *Daily Mail*, who 'found room to serialize fictions that supported his own pet views',<sup>66</sup> before proceeding to suggest that such instances of owners inserting fictional narrative pieces into their newspapers and periodicals was not only a means of boosting sales, but it did much in developing within society a desire to be entertained through prose-narrative. Certainly Hayes, and Underwood, build a viable case in support of the press as creating an environment in which the novel could thrive as a commercial product, and argues effectively that early novels owe something of a debt to media publications in terms of offering a platform through which writers could develop the prose-narrative style, a style that at times merged current affairs, social comment and realism with entertaining storytelling.

There is also a point to be made about how early periodicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century bridged a gap between the sexes, and at the same time encouraged a female audience for the novel, which proved to be a real positive in terms of finding a willing audience for the lengthy narrative form. These eighteenth and nineteenth century women of the upper and middle-classes were ideal candidates for becoming novel readers because they had more free time on their hands to commit to reading for pleasure, and most were excluded from a number of leisure pursuits reserved for men, such as playing cards or attending social clubs. Underwood, Watt, Briggs and Burke all report in their studies that some periodicals were specifically marketed towards women, such as *Female Tatler*, and that this seemingly opened up the way for women

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<sup>65</sup> Hayes, p 84.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p 84.

engaging in reading for pleasure because they were being catered for with reading material tailored to them. Watt goes on to specifically report that women in the upper and middle-classes were the demographic of society who initially took to reading novels, and how in the mid eighteenth-century, reading fiction became a 'primarily feminine pursuit'.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Briggs and Burke speak of an uptake in writing specifically for women and how this marked a change in societal attitude, especially given that in the sixteenth century an attitude was garnered among men and male writers towards the dangers of women reading fiction. Briggs and Burke speak of a widely held belief in the sixteenth century that the reading of fiction amongst women would provoke strong emotions, particularly those of love for another besides their husbands, and some sectors of society felt women should remain illiterate lest they received love-letters or took up notions of improper deeds.<sup>68</sup> Despite this, and, it could be said, in the novel's favour, this is an attitude that has not remained through the centuries, and as these ideas changed so the novel's female audience could flourish.

Now that the novel had an audience, it was necessary for the development of mass production in order to grow the novel into the commercial product it is today. Chris Baldick reports on an economic block in the commercialisation of the novel production process, as well as difficulties in the establishment of a literary market for the novel during the former half of the twentieth century, when, as he reports, literacy levels reached about eighty per cent.<sup>69</sup> Although Briggs and Burke state that 'the book review was an invention of the late

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<sup>67</sup> Watt, p 43.

<sup>68</sup> Watt, p 51.

<sup>69</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 10: 1910–1940: The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p 17.

seventeenth century',<sup>70</sup> Baldick stipulates that whilst the majority of society would have been reading at least one newspaper or magazine a week, as little as two per cent would purchase a new book.<sup>71</sup> The main reason behind this, he goes on to report, was a discrepancy between the cost of books at the time, and the little money the majority of households had for disposable income. He points towards a need for both a rise in the average wage and a reform of the production process, in order for the book market to flourish. This was in part rectified by the publishing of a novel in a set of several volumes, which meant they could be sold individually at a more affordable rate, as well as their being an option to pay in instalments. That said, Baldick also states it was still at this time only those of the upper classes who could afford to purchase an entire set of volumes outright. As an example, a new novel would have cost 7s. 6d., whereas the average working-class male in his twenties would have earned around 60s. a week for manual labour, and the women would have earned about half this amount.<sup>72</sup> These economic factors initially hindered sales of books and the high profits that the mass production of novels promised to provide, but also meant that novels were only reaching the wealthier sectors of society. This, Baldick reports, was remedied to an extent with the introduction of book-borrowing schemes, which were set up through retail establishments, and also the building of public libraries run by the government. Both of these factors meant that vast sectors of society suddenly had access to a whole range of books at a considerably low cost.

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<sup>70</sup> Asa Briggs & Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p 58.

<sup>71</sup> Baldick, p 19.

<sup>72</sup> Baldick, p 19.



Literary critic Q. D. Leavis also highlights economic changes within society that positively drove the novel into a state of being more accessible to the masses. She reports 'the book-clubs and subscription libraries that existed up and down the country to serve a timid but solid taste for literature were metamorphosed into the modern circulating library',<sup>73</sup> suggesting that the establishment within Britain of an expansive library service did much to further widen a potential audience for the novel. She goes on to state that public libraries were 'the chief source for the poorer classes of reading-matter in book form',<sup>74</sup> thus highlighting, in the history of the novel, the importance of libraries. Similarly, Baldick reports that by the start of the nineteenth century the majority of books were borrowed from a variety of commercial libraries that catered to different levels of the market,<sup>75</sup> although he does also state there was a difference in what was available across Britain, such as rural libraries being poorly stocked in comparison to those in urban areas. Going by Baldick's study, there is much to support a view that libraries should be considered as a substantial contributing factor in the early rise of the novel, mainly as a means of bridging a gap between the novel and economic factors.

On top of this there were also a number of retail outlets that, in the nineteenth century, boosted the book borrowing market and helped to transform the book in to an affordable commodity through their own borrowing schemes. The two largest lending libraries, or circulating libraries as they were also known, were Mudie's Select Library (1842–1937) and W. H. Smith and Son's

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<sup>73</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1932), p 111.

<sup>74</sup> Leavis, p 21.

<sup>75</sup> Baldick, p 18.

Subscription Library (1860–1961).<sup>76</sup> Members of the public could borrow books they couldn't normally afford for a set fee, with a typical annual rate being one guinea to borrow one book at a time.<sup>77</sup> The Boots Booklovers Library, a commercial book-lending scheme that was exclusively available in Boots retailers, was also a success in the early part of the twentieth century, and retail book-borrowing services on the whole were reported to have bought in nearly a million books a year, with the majority of these being novels.<sup>78</sup> With the introduction of book lending in both government and privately run settings, it meant that 'new novels were not, as they had been until the 1890s, entirely beyond the pocket of the working population'.<sup>79</sup> This was important in eradicating a view of the novel as an exclusive rather than inclusive form of literature and narrative entertainment, whilst also shifting attitudes away from the novel being a commodity only available to the wealthy classes.

By the end of the 1800s the novel market had diversified even more so to become inclusive of all classes and incomes. As Malcolm Bradbury reports, there was also an increase in cheap books being sold at news agencies. The novel was increasingly marketed at this time as a desirable commercial product, with publishers entertaining new ideas, such as placing onto the market slimmer and more elegantly presented copies for those with a greater disposable income.<sup>80</sup> The book-rental and sales markets began to flourish, and publishers also sought to heighten their profits as well as further cement the book as a commercial

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<sup>76</sup> Troy J. Bassett, *Circulating Libraries in the Victorian Era* (2017) <<http://literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-265>> [accessed 2 August 2018].

<sup>77</sup> Bassett.

<sup>78</sup> Baldick, p 19.

<sup>79</sup> Baldick, p 19.

<sup>80</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel: 1878–2001*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2001), p 52.

commodity by introducing into their retail establishments a number of promotional schemes. For example, in 1939 publishers Chatto and Windus marketed a book token that could be given as a present, proffering a suggestion that the ideal present to give a loved one was the opportunity to choose their own book. Equally, publishers forged links with book clubs in order to boost their profits by bulk selling directly to an outfit in which there was a need to purchase books on a large scale. The first book club in Britain, the Book Society, was inaugurated at the start of the 1930s, and it was another means of setting down affordable schemes for bringing books to the masses. Publishers were reportedly keen to secure agreements with book clubs because they knew they could sell in bulk new releases for the book clubs to sell on to their clients.<sup>81</sup> What this would have meant for the novel was even greater opportunities for growing a wider and more diverse audience, with readers from all classes and backgrounds being encouraged to view the literary genre as a desirable form of entertainment.

Whatever the routes of the novel's establishment and subsequent rise in popularity throughout its early history, it is clear that the novel's success was in part about convincing society that the novel filled a need, and that it offered something in its reading experience that no other literary form at the time could. This, together with removing economic blocks, saw the novel rise in popularity over the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But what is interesting is that a literary form developed over several centuries is still left largely undefined, uncategorised, and constantly challenging the characteristics that critics, novelists and academics place upon it in an attempt to clarify what

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<sup>81</sup> Bradbury, p 52.

we mean when we speak of 'the novel'. The hope for this study was to be completely clear in what is meant by the term 'novel' for the purpose of clarification. Yet even today there is no set definition of the novel, and no absolute defining characteristics have been agreed. Instead, the novel appears to defy any definition given up to describe it, and critics have been divided in their attempts to define the novel.

Amongst the critics, scholars and novelists who have discoursed on how the novel is in many ways indefinable are Michael McKeon, Malcolm Bradbury, Terry Eagleton and Mikhail Bakhtin. Each of these individuals speak of the impossibility in setting down a true definition of the novel, and who admit everything they assert to be true in one instance is then quickly challenged in some way or another. In thinking about from where the term 'novel' first came, literary scholar Michael McKeon reports in his work on *The Origins of the Novel*, 'it is only around the middle of the eighteenth century that "the novel" becomes the dominant and standard term', <sup>82</sup> thus highlighting there was for a time uncertainty over setting down a definite label for the prose-narrative form. McKeon then goes on to state a personal belief that it is misguided for someone to say the novel was 'formed', because, in his opinion, this suggests what came before it was chaos, or a literary style without 'the ample boundaries of the great modern form'.<sup>83</sup> In his belief is a comment on how the development of a definition is as important as the final decision, and that this time of deliberation should not be viewed as disordered or unguided.

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<sup>82</sup> Michael McKeon, ed, *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), p 25.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p 25.

Rather, Bakhtin declares that the novel will never settle down into one solid pattern or form and will constantly change as the world changes.<sup>84</sup> This takes a positive tone when considering the novel's longevity, because it suggests the novel form is open enough to be adapted to move with the times, offer a new generation of writers and readers something different. Taking a positive stance to this Bakhtin builds an argument that the novel has the ability, above all other forms of literature, to survive throughout time because it is constantly transforming. This goes against some critical protestations, such as those offered up in chapter two by Buford and Gasset who profess the novel to be a stale form that has outlived its purpose. In conclusion, Bakhtin argues the novel is 'the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted',<sup>85</sup> which is uplifting in its suggestion the fictional prose literary form still has more to offer, and in turn should surely not be labelled as having no way to further develop. In fact, throughout this section on defining, or rather not defining, the novel is a great sense of positivity, which suggests the novel should be celebrated not condemned for being such an open form that defies adherence to a set of rules or definite characteristics.

Terry Eagleton is equally caught up in the discussion of the novel's form, as in *The English Novel: An Introduction* he devotes an entire chapter to attempting to define the novel form, but by the end he admits it to be a task beyond his capabilities. For Eagleton, the novel is 'the queen of literary genres'<sup>86</sup> because it is so adept at being moulded into a great many styles, and in what

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<sup>84</sup> Bakhtin, p 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p 3.

<sup>86</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p 1.

could be deemed a playful tone he refers to the novel as a 'mighty melting pot',<sup>87</sup> conjuring up a metaphor of the novel as a vessel containing a mix of literary tropes. In fact, he is rather skilful in applying to his description of the novel a number of colourful metaphors, such as believing it to be a 'mongrel among literary thoroughbreds'<sup>88</sup> in speaking of the form comprising a number of stylistic elements. Definitively, however, Eagleton also states that the novel is 'a genre that resists exact definition',<sup>89</sup> and suggests applying rules to its construction is a fruitless task due to the open nature of the form. He does, however, offer up an opinion on what could be considered the traditional, or dominant, novel form in stating 'not all novels are realist, but realism is the dominant style of the modern English novel',<sup>90</sup> and in fact realism was something that was repeatedly discussed in conjunction with critical and academic discourse on defining the novel.

For example, writer and academic Malcolm Bradbury muses in his study *The Novel Today* on what the novel of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has become, and how in the last few decades it has settled into a style that greater reflects life and history, delving further into the ambiguity between the outer and inner life.<sup>91</sup> In these last few words is recognition for how the narrative style pulls the inner-self of the reader into a carefully constructed fiction world that mimics the actual world. The statement is also reflective of what Eagleton said about realism as a dominant characteristic, and this makes sense in conjunction with the suggested roots of the novel from journalism and

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<sup>87</sup> Eagleton, p 1.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p 1.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p 1.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p 7.

<sup>91</sup> Malcolm Bradbury ed, *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p 8.

travel tales. The novel form is, arguably, above all other literary styles, most given to portraying a realistic view of the actual world in such a manner that the reader experiences the story through their imagination, as opposed to passively observing it from a distance such as with a film on a screen, or a play on stage. Equally, Bradbury reminds us of the novel's design as both a realistic and imagined depiction of life in this statement:

A novel may include reference to real places, people and events, but it cannot contain only such references and remain a novel. Even though its characters and actions are imaginary they are in some sense 'representative of real life' as the dictionary definition has it; although fictional they bear an important resemblance to the real.<sup>92</sup>

This comment focuses on the importance of developing within a novel a believable fictional universe, one that can easily be imagined by the reader because of its familiarity to the actual world, whilst also asserting that the story is a fictional account. This assertion of its fictionality could be said to highlight how the novel needs to be entertainment away from the actual world, and so must transcend the reader into a fictional universe, but a fictional universe that can be recognised as a reflection of the actual world in order that the reader can bring to mind the objects, settings and characters.

Literary critic Fredrick Jameson marks *Don Quixote* as the first realist novel, as well as the first modern novel, remarking on how realism undermined the romance genre, and how early realism was characteristic of bringing to the

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<sup>92</sup> Bradbury, *The Novel Today*, p 8.

foreground features of social reality that were absent from the romance style.<sup>93</sup> Realism remains to this day a dominant and necessary component of the novel, even when the narrative takes the reader to a completely fantastic world, with 'social realism' a further category of realism focused on representing in a realistic manner sectors of society and 'presenting some aspect of life as it is lived'.<sup>94</sup> Academic Samantha Lay lays down some key features of social realism that offer a comprehensive description of the style, such as realist narratives having embedded within them reason and logic, exploration of human truth over divine truths, and an extended range of characters occupying the fictional world of the text to include marginal or previously under-represented social groups.<sup>95</sup> With this in mind, the novel is ideally suited to realism given the depth and space a novelist has to develop an enriched fictionalised, realistic universe, in which to place their characters.

Literary scholar Jeremy Hawthorn builds on the notion of reality in the novel by pointing out that as a reader we live **with** the characters, whereas in an account of an event told, say, through a journalistic report, the reader only looks **at** that which took place.<sup>96</sup> This builds on what was said towards the beginning of this chapter about some academic and critical views of the novel having developed through a transition into storytelling as a means of reporting current affairs or issues in an entertaining or empathic manner. As such, the structure of the novel is like an empathic journey, taking the reader into a sector of life chosen by the novelist, with the aim that the reader can more fully experience

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<sup>93</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p 4.

<sup>94</sup> Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p 6.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p 8.

<sup>96</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*, 4th edn (London: Arnold, 2001) p 10.



that which may be foreign to them. Hawthorn sets out his belief that in terms of defining the novel as unique compared to other narrative styles, there are a certain set of characteristics upheld by the form. These include notions that the language may at times be poetic though not solely so, and it is a 'telling' rather than an 'enacting'.<sup>97</sup> In other words, the novelist aims to inform the reader of the facts of the narrative, as well as impart descriptive information about the fictional universe and characters, which the reader then interprets as mental images formed in their imagination. In opposition, a director of a film would enact the story in order to tell the version that he sees.

The novel *Room* by Emma Donoghue (2010) takes a first person perspective, being narrated through the eyes of a young boy, Jack, who, together with his mother, is held captive in one room by a man who pays them weekly visits. The effect this lends is that the reader is drawn into the heart of the situation, but from the more innocent perspective of a young character who has only ever known the room, and sees it as his home. The composition of the novel allows for a more personal and internalised viewpoint, a style that is set out in the format of a diary so that the reader engages with Jack's day to day retelling of the narrative, the perspective largely coming from a character that is at times shielded by his mother from the negative side of their entrapment. The novel was then adapted for the screen in a film version released in 2015, and as such the narrative perspective was altered because the viewer experienced events not just through Jack's eyes, but there were a number of visual clues highlighting that which his Mum saw and experienced, which were suggested rather than explicitly discussed in the novel. Watching large chunks of monologue or stream

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<sup>97</sup> Hawthorn, p 10.

of consciousness being read out on screen is a monotonous experience, and so in the film version the viewer is made to watch the director's interpretation of Jack's internal monologue, which means that it loses a portion of the empathy afforded from experiencing a scenario from the perspective of a character's inner thoughts. Equally, with the film version the viewer is not building their own, and therefore personalised, view of the characters and settings based on the information provided to them by the novelist through language, and thus the imagination is not being exercised. The viewers of the film are passive observers, and are arguably not able to so easily connect with Jack in an empathic way as compared with reading the novel. In reading a fictional narrative there is something of a breaking down of the fourth wall, and true immersion into the fictional universe is achieved as language is transformed into pictures in the mind, a sort of internal cinema over which the reader has control of the effects. This really highlights the importance of reading novels over watching a narrative, because it exercises mental skills and allows for a more richly empathic experience. For future generations to lose this would indeed be a travesty.

Poet and novelist Edwin Muir in his work on *The Structure of the Novel* considers a range of novel styles, and throughout his work lists a number of different types of novels that can be characterised as having similar structures and plot points, highlighting that the novel form itself comes in many genres. For instance, he speaks of the novel of character, such as *Vanity Fair* by William Thackeray, which omits from its narrative a hero and big action pieces, but

instead focuses on offering to its reader comment on life and society.<sup>98</sup> What stands out from Muir's study is that he appears to be attempting in one instance to reducing the novel to, say, three basic divisions of character novel, dramatic novel and chronicle,<sup>99</sup> but then later suggesting that the novel is boundless in its genres, as he states 'a great number of wilder experiments in form recently must have sprung from a hopeless contemplation of the mediocrity of the conventions which the novel has observed for twenty years or so'.<sup>100</sup> Speaking in 1928, his commentary on a perceived experimentation with the novel form suggests that the novel is a genre apt for adaptation to forms that have not yet been realised, and there is scope to expand that which the novel has offered up before if novelist so wishes to choose.

Muir's work was also useful for this study in terms of looking at the basic narratological structure of the novel, and understanding why it is so effective and important as a storytelling medium, thus bolstering the notion of it having a future as a narrative form that can not be easily replaced. For instance, Muir points out that a whole range of emotions, including anticipation and fear, are garnered by the novelist through the specific arrangement of happenings and action, and that the length of the novel allows for these to be drawn out over an expansive timeframe.<sup>101</sup> Whilst the novel is a commitment in terms of the time an individual dedicates to its reading because reading requires absolute concentration, Muir argues this is a part its effectiveness because with a lengthy narrative there is time for the reader to give themselves up to living within another fictional universe, and through this the reader will build up an emotional

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<sup>98</sup> Edwin Muir, *The Structure of the Novel* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1928), p 17.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p 146.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p 151.

<sup>101</sup> Muir, p 19.

connection to the characters so as they become friends or enemies, and will root for them or turn against them when the narrative prompts a reaction. In essence, there is no other narrative form that offers such immersion and connection to the text for such a length it can be enjoyed over a number of days, and that the reader lives the story.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan wrote extensively on narrative theory in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, and it is her theorising on the ways in which mimesis and diegesis operate in a text to convey information in different ways that help in thinking about how a fictional universe is created:

The polarization of diegesis and mimesis reappears under the names of 'telling' and 'showing' or 'summary' and 'scene' in the Anglo-American criticism of the end of the last century and the beginning of this. 'Showing' is the supposedly direct presentation of events and conversations, the narrator seeming to disappear (as in drama) and the reader being left to draw his own conclusions from what he 'sees' and 'hears'. 'Telling' on the other hand, is a presentation mediated by the narrator who, instead of directly and dramatically exhibiting events and conversations, talks about them, sums them up, etc.<sup>102</sup>

It is the novelist's role in creating his work to effect these points in a way that at times the reader is drawn into the universe of the novel, is allowed to imagine that which is going on around the characters, and the look of the scene. Then at times the characters or narrative voice will tell the reader what is going on, fill in

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<sup>102</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1989), p 107.

gaps of information, so that the reader can fully grasp the plot. Both elements are of great importance when thinking about the structure of a novel, a writing style in which a rich fictional universe must be created through language. Equally, the novel's narrative is created in the imagination of the reader, and so must be instructive or informative, offering to the reader linguistic cues that will stimulate the formation of a visualise image in the mind.

Alongside this, Rimmon-Kenan states that in order to achieve the creation within the mind of the fictional universe, so analepses and prolepses must be brought into play. Analepses provide information to the reader, whilst prolepses arouse a reader's expectations.<sup>103</sup> In fact, Rimmon-Kenan takes this further in detailing how a reader will utilise the information provided through the text to make hypotheses throughout their reading, drawing conclusions that develop throughout the narrative, being replaced, modified, or at times rejected.<sup>104</sup> Arguably this quality is vital in making a novel work, as the reader needs to have an invested interest in the lives and possible outcome of the characters throughout the narrative in order to keep reading. Yet equally, a twist ending must not come completely out of the blue in order to be credible and satisfying to the reader. If the conclusion is clear from the outset then there would be little motivation for the reader in reading to the end, but even a novel that starts with revealing the ending will take the reader on a journey in which their expectations and hypotheses are created and then challenged through plot twist or a character revealing something previously hidden. What is also interesting is how Rimmon-Kenan speaks of the text as having a virtual dimension, a

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p 119.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p 121.

dimension 'which calls for the reader's construction of the unwritten text'.<sup>105</sup> In this she is highlighting that in order for a text to exist in its true form, so the text must be read or else it ceases to truly exist. The process of reading locks into a virtual dimension that lies within the text, as if there are two layers to a text, its physical being as an object, a book, and its virtual depth as a story locked within that book. Thus the novel could be suggested to simultaneously exist and not exist depending on whether it is being read or waiting to be read.

In a similar vein, Jane Smiley in her work *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel* addresses the physical and philosophical view of what a novel is as she states 'a novel is an experience, but the experience takes place within the bounds of writing, prose, length, narrative and protagonist'.<sup>106</sup> This is rather a simplistic definition, characterising the novel as a written form, with a protagonist, and of a certain length. There are gaps and ambiguities in this statement. For instance, Smiley does not stipulate exactly what length, but in speaking of it as an experience she does touch upon the way in which the novel engulfs the reader into the fictional universe. For Smiley 'everything that the novel is and does...grows out of these five small facts that apply to every novel',<sup>107</sup> yet due to the vast possibilities of the form, it would appear there already exist exceptions to Smiley's rules, such as graphic novels and audiobooks. Whilst graphic novels contain some writing in captions and speech or action bubbles, not all of the narrative is communicated through writing, and there is the question of whether audiobooks fit Smiley's criteria for a novel as they have their roots in a written version but are presented in aural form. That said, Smiley does have some

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<sup>105</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p 117.

<sup>106</sup> Jane Smiley, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p 15.

<sup>107</sup> Smiley, p 14.

insightful things to say about the philosophical view of the novel, and how it comes alive through interaction with the reader, which is reflected in her saying 'the book continues to be an object. Only while the reader is reading does it become a novel'.<sup>108</sup> This is reflective of Rimmon-Kenan's point of entering another dimension whilst engaged in the act of consuming the narrative, and is certainly a factor that is attributable to all novels whether being read or listened to.

Alongside these academic notions of what constitutes a novel, comments that arose from conversations I had over a period of couple of months in the pre-selected focus group, brought to the discussions 'what is a novel?' some intriguing and original ideas. For instance, a statement was proffered of the novel that 'it's an exploration of either an idea, or a character, or a scenario. It's a mind stretcher as well; you go different places when you're reading a novel, whether that be into characters' minds or into places that you've not been'<sup>109</sup>. This depicts the novel as something both for entertainment and learning, but also to be discussed as a philosophical entity alongside its physical form. In a similar vein, another participant in the same conversation spoke of the novel as 'a way of conveying ideas', before going on to express what it is they enjoy about reading novels in saying 'I love reading a novel and thinking I can take something from it, sort of thinking there's something I've learnt'.<sup>110</sup> From both of these ideas comes through a strong sense that these individuals see the novel as a form that aims to teach, which is also considered in the critical sources utilised in this chapter. These comments also give the novel a magical quality, suggesting it as a

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p 14.

<sup>109</sup> Conversation recorded 4 October 2017.

<sup>110</sup> Conversation recorded on 4 October 2017.

form to take the reader outside of their immediate vicinity, and transport them into new realms. These comments from contemporary readers also suggest that a view of the novel is still characterised by its wanting to divulge something to the reader, and in a sense is a suggestion that reading a novel should leave the reader feeling as if they have learnt something from the narrative.

Similarly, some statements came through that support a view of the novel as an ideal literary form to offer writers an opportunity to share their view of the world and current affairs. In particular, one participant viewed the novel as ‘a marvellous vehicle for saying what you really think’,<sup>111</sup> suggesting that the novel’s form was well constructed to give a voice to those who had something to say. Equally, another suggested of the novel that ‘it’s a way of making sense of the world. What is a novel? You’re telling a story to, sometimes to convey an opinion, to convey conflicting opinions...so that the reader can make up a series of very different opinions’.<sup>112</sup> This second opinion especially points towards the novel as an unwritten contract between the novelist and the reader, in which the novelist provokes their readers into considering their status on such topics or issues represented in the text. This to an extent supports that which was said about the development of the novel as a means of reporting on real life in an empathic manner. It is particularly the participant who defined the novel as a ‘marvellous vehicle’ who projected a view of the novel’s importance in giving an individual writer a tool for expressing their opinions. This is particularly poignant when the novel form is used as a means of voicing a writer’s personal experience of a situation or event, as doing so in a manner that draws a reader

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<sup>111</sup> Conversation recorded 1 October 2017.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.



into a fictionalised version of events so that the reader can live through the writer's thoughts and experiences, as opposed to being a passive receiver of knowledge as is the case often with autobiographical writing.

There also came through the conversations some exciting ideas about the novel's design and its physicality, which brought fresh perspectives to the notion of defining the novel, and notions that were not necessarily present in the scholarly or critical works utilised in this research. One particular statement looked upon the novel's form in a philosophical manner, stating of the novel: 'it's the container, can be defined as a container. What you put in that vase in terms of content is something slightly different isn't it. So a novel can cover any amount of different ground'.<sup>113</sup> What this definition does is to pitch the novel as an open structure that can be called upon by writers wanting to tell their story, and it also embodies timelessness, insinuating that the novel as a literary medium transcends the here and now, existing instead as a narrative structure that will accommodate any content the writer chooses, which surely leans towards a positive view of the novel's future longevity. Yet the defining of the novel as a vase equally suggests it is a vessel with a specific or pre-determined purpose, such as a vase is specifically designed to contain flowers. In contrast, however, there were some more closed comments that came through, setting the novel in a definite physical structure rather than as a fluid entity, such as one participant who admitted 'I see it as a big thick book in my head',<sup>114</sup> and another who stated 'it's like a long fiction book'.<sup>115</sup> These ideas were equally valuable, because they pointed towards a contemporary cultural view of the novel as being in physical

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<sup>113</sup> Conversation recorded 4 October 2017.

<sup>114</sup> Conversation recorded 30 September 2017.

<sup>115</sup> Conversation recorded 1 October 2017.

book form, a narrative that took time over reading, and is largely fictitious in content.

One final point that came through from the focus group data that did not appear in a reading of academic sources on the novel's form, was the idea that the word 'novel' itself was viewed by some as outdated. This is particularly prevalent in one comment from a reader who felt 'I wouldn't necessarily use the word novel. I would say I'm reading a book. Oh, what book are you reading at the moment, not what novel are you reading?'.<sup>116</sup> There is a suggestion here of a possible contemporary linguistic shift away from the need to define the genre or type of text, and dropping the marker of 'novel' in favour of 'book'. Within the group session this idea was not further explored or analysed, but it is as if this participant saw a need, conscious or unconscious, to not label that which they were reading. In terms of current attitudes towards reading novels, this suggestively flippant comment opens up thought as to whether there is a decline not just in readership of the novel, but also in use of the word 'novel' to be replaced by other terms in everyday conversation. In support of this, another comment came out of the same conversation, which also raised question over contemporary use of the term 'novel', as a participant stated in relation to the label 'novel' 'I think maybe that word is a bit outdated'.<sup>117</sup> This notion was met with some agreement from others in the group, although the idea was not built upon but rather left to hang in the air.

Novelist Ali Smith believes that the novel form is 'ever-evolving, ever-communal, ever-revolutionary, and because of this ever-hopeful to work with,

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<sup>116</sup> Conversation recorded 30 September 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Conversation recorded 30 September 2017.

whatever it formally does'.<sup>118</sup> Here is positivity, but also strength, and recognition that the novel continues to be an open form. Smith speaks of the novel as a literary medium that is never still and will always offer up new approaches to extensive storytelling, which is hopeful when thinking about how the novel will continue to serve society. In an experiment that spanned four years, from 2016 – 2020, Smith utilised the novel form to narrate a quartet of stories spread over the seasons from Autumn to Summer, releasing one book a year and giving herself a short deadline in which to complete each novel because she wanted the narrative to be as close as possible to what was happening in Britain, as well as globally, at that time. She weaves into her stories, for example, perspectives on Brexit, the migrant crisis, and climate change, offering comment through her characters as they experience such current topics happening within or close to the time of the novel's release.

Smith admits of the novel form in general that she believes 'the form's named for its own newness, and for its relationship with the news, the latest thing. That's why it's called the novel',<sup>119</sup> reminding us that the novel is an open form that can be adapted, and will go stale or offer nothing more in the future. Whilst other literary forms, such as drama, poetry, and short story for instance, do also draw on contemporary issues as source material, there is something to be said in how the novel's length and immersive quality allows for a deeper exploration of such issues. Yet alongside the truth of the novel as a separate literary genre, it must be acknowledged the myriad categories that fall within the

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<sup>118</sup> Ali Smith, *Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19...Ali Smith on Writing Four Novels in Four Years*, The Guardian, 01 August 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

novel genre. In thinking about this, a quote from critic Fredric Jameson points us in the right direction:

To be sure, there has been a long-standing and desultory debate about whether the novel itself should be classified as a genre in its own right: its differentiation from the lyric, the dramatic and the epic would seem to be decisive....the novel has seemed to be a very different kind of animal from those and something peculiarly associated with modernity from which most of the earlier triad have waned. Meanwhile, however, we often speak of sub-genres of the novel, such as the letter novel or the mystery story, a usage which would seem to return us to some generic genus.<sup>120</sup>

These sub-categories of novels can determine their content, but also layout and presentation, such as novelists playing with the placement of text and packaging in order to offer something that will challenge their readers in what can be considered the traditional prose narrative format.

Tom Dowd offers a comprehensive statement about the basics of structure in saying:

The *story* is all the raw material having to do with the characters, their actions, the conflict, and the situations which fill in a full world....In some ways it is the *why* of what happens....The *plot* is how we organize, sequence, edit and present that raw material in a specific medium so that it has the most dramatic impact...It is the *how* of the story's *why*.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, (London: Verso, 2013) p 138.

<sup>121</sup> Tom Dowd, *Storytelling Across Worlds: Transmedia for Creatives and Producers* (Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2013), p 57.

If we think of the basic structure of the novel as these two elements, the story and the plot, and as such the crucial elements of the novel form, then the presentation of these elements are not bound necessarily by structure. In particular it is the 'how' of Dowd's statement that leads into analysis of two postmodernist novels that have been selected due to the ways in which they demonstrate the plot of a novel does not always have to appear in straight prose-narrative style, and the placement of the text, or multiple streams of text, can offer the reader a different reading experience away from a traditional format of one stream of text running from left to right, bottom to top on the page, whilst still remaining within the category of a novel. In turn these examples challenge earlier comments from the likes of Buford and Gasset that the novel form has been exhausted, in demonstrating that a novel can work even when presented not in the straight prose-narrative style to which readers have become accustomed. Both novels are also examples of how, in the contemporary era, the novel can remain novel, and there is no real certainty that the highly literary novel is dead.

Postmodernism arose in the mid-twentieth century in a rebellious movement against the ideals of modernism, and also looked to, as Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson inform us, 'break down conventional boundaries of discourse between fiction and history, or autobiography, realism, and fantasy in a *bricolage* of forms and genres'.<sup>122</sup> The literary movement was characterised by scepticism towards truth claims and systems of value, viewing them as products of political and cultural hierarchies and discourse. Postmodernism can be defined as containing a set of characteristics, including difference, hyperreality

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<sup>122</sup> Raman Selden & Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997), p 203.

and repetition, which work to destabilise such concepts as identity, historical progress, presence and epistemic certainty.<sup>123</sup> Selden and Widdowson in their study also look towards Jean Baudrillard, a philosopher working within the field of postmodernism, who viewed the movement in terms of ‘disappearing meaning, of inertia, exhaustion and endings’.<sup>124</sup> In this, Baudrillard felt that academic study places enforced meaning onto art and literature, and as a result that work of art loses its identity as a piece of expression in its own right. This point is reflected explicitly in the following analysis of *House of Leaves*, in which the film at the centre of the narrative is analysed and then constantly criticised for being analysed, and analysis of *S* in which the reader is presented with a university library book as both a part of the narrative and a vessel in which to house a conversation about the book’s academic credibility.

Some postmodernist novelists set out to challenge conventional plots and narratological structures through such methods as recursive structures, the nestling of worlds within worlds, or stacking layers of narratives in a format appeared much like ‘a set of Chinese boxes or Russian *babushka* dolls’.<sup>125</sup> This is a key feature of both *House of Leaves* and *S*, because of the ways in which they house chunks of text in sections on the page, melding together multiple narrative streams. Literary critic and academic Linda Hutcheon remarks that the movement is characterised by capitalist dissolution of bourgeois leadership and dominance, as well as the development of mass culture.<sup>126</sup> In this sense,

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<sup>123</sup> *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: Postmodernism*, (Feb 2015) Viewed at < <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism> > [accessed 7.09.2020].

<sup>124</sup> Raman & Widdowson, p 205.

<sup>125</sup> Brian McHale, ‘Postmodernist Fiction’, found in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed Pat Waugh, p 211 – 219, (p 212).

<sup>126</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p 6.

postmodernism is about rebellion, such as rebelling against traditional modes of an art form and demonstrating how new or different forms can be just as effective, just as Danielewski has rebelled against the traditional novel form. What Hutcheon also points out is that postmodernism did much to shake up the boundaries between artistic conventions, and more so now than ever can be seen a fluidity between, for example, the novel and the short story collection, or the novel and history, or the novel and biography. Although 'in any of these examples, the conventions of the two genres are played off against each other; there is no simple, unproblematic merging'.<sup>127</sup> What Hutcheon means by this remark, she goes on to explain, is that often the one form is undercut or mocked by the other. This is certainly prevalent in *House of Leaves*, in which academic study is constantly undermined and questioned by one character, yet upheld as a masterpiece by another.

*House of Leaves* was the debut novel of American writer Mark Z.

Danielewski, and is constructed through three layers of narration that run alongside each other simultaneously. For this study I read the paperback copy of the Random House 2000 edition, whose pages are unconventional for a novel being close in size to that of an A4 sheet of paper. The central narrative on the page is a screenplay of a film titled *The Navidson Record* written out by a character named Zampano, and this is accompanied by his own footnotes and appendixes commenting on or making asides to the screenplay. The film that the screenplay depicts, it must be said, is questioned throughout by a third character, Johnny Truant, as to whether it actually exists in the fictional universe of the novel, Truant claiming his part in this plot as having acquired from a friend

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<sup>127</sup> Hutcheon, p 9.

the collection of papers that make up the screenplay and Zampano's accompanying notes. This is the explanation, if you will, for the novel's existence, setting up the premise that it was Truant who thought to lay out Zampano's screenplay, notes and appendixes into a book form, whilst also commenting on his experiences whilst reading through the entire collection of papers. There is also a third voice, which is that of the unnamed editors, which is utilised in explaining how this has now been published as the novel the reader is now reading. The presence of the editors acts to an extent as a device in heightening a sense of reality, suggesting that what we the reader are reading is a "found" document. In this is a blurring the line between the fictional universe of the novel and the actual world in suggesting this novel is the composition of papers created by actual people. In this mode the editors are what literary critic Paul Cobley would deem the *Implied Author*, 'the guiding star responsible for the presentation of the text's material in a specific way'.<sup>128</sup> This is demonstrated in the opening foreword that is presented as being written by the editors:

The first edition of House of Leaves was privately distributed and did not contain Chapter 21, Appendix II, Appendix III, or the index. Every effort has been made to appropriate translations and accurately credit all sources. If we have failed in this endeavour, we apologize in advance and will gladly correct in subsequent printings all errors or omissions brought to our attention.<sup>129</sup>

This opens up to the reader a suggestion that the events outlined in the novel could have occurred in real life, and that should the reader wish to they can

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<sup>128</sup> Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2001), p 139.

<sup>129</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (London: Transworld, 2000), p II.



contact the editors to report any errors. Through all of this, it could be suggested that Danielewski wants his readers to engage with the novel as an agent of truth, yet at the same time truth is continually put into question throughout the narrative as Truant constantly questions the existence of *The Navidson Record*, the film at the heart of the screenplay, even at times commenting on the lack of truth in some of Zampano's footnotes that attempt to bolster the validity of the film as a piece existing in the actual world. Equally, the layers of narrative embody a Russian doll structure, with the screenplay nestling within Zampano's world, which fits within Truant's world, which is suggested to have a place within the actual world.

Upon first appearances *House of Leaves* goes against the conventions of a traditional novel in several ways. It could be said to be daunting in its size, standing out for the majority of novels as being larger in height and width to what one would expect, the footnotes and appendix giving it an academic style, and on top of the text being split, literally, into three narrative voices, there are also sections, including whole pages, in which the text is distorted and disorientated on the page, or placed within shapes. A good example of this is pages 119–145, in which there are lists within squares cut into the main body of text that appear backwards on the opposite page as if they are printed on see-through paper. There are also columns of writing that sit to one side, and chunks of text set out on the pages in a variety of orientations. These clever stylistic devices act, it would seem, as a means of Danielewski demonstrating that text within a novel can transcend its standard left to right, top to bottom on the page, straight prose-narrative style. Equally, it could be suggested that the layout is in favour of a physical book form. Currently there is not an official ebook version,

although there appears to be digitised PDFs of *House of Leaves* available for download on a couple of websites. There was also discussion in 2013 of it being made into an ebook,<sup>130</sup> but this seems to have not yet occurred, but this is no surprise given that the layout of the book does not lend itself to digitisation, particularly because the narrative order jumps from voice to voice. Similarly, the playful positioning of the words on the page added a challenge to the process of reading the novel, in physical but likely more so digitally, because it goes against what a reader expects. For instance, in parts where the text literally spirals around the page, the book must be turned to follow the stream of reading.

Western readers, it is fair to say, have become used to orientating themselves through a text by reading from left to right, top to bottom. With *House of Leaves*, however, the various narrative streams offer choice and provoke the reader into deciding in which order to read the text on any given page. It's possible even to read just the central screenplay and discount Zampano's notes or Truant's ramblings should the reader so choose, and there would still play out a coherent story in the retelling of *The Navidson Record*. The accompanying footnotes add another layer to the story, they give it a certain sense of depth by each contributing to another world outside the narrative universe of the film, whilst also gently mocking academia, but they aren't paramount to an understanding of the screenplay at the centre of the novel. Cobley uses the term palimpsest in commenting on the layout of *House of Leaves*, referring to its illusion as a manuscript upon which writing has been superimposed onto earlier writing, and he goes on to argue that 'the attendant

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<sup>130</sup> See for example an online discussion generated through Kindle Users Forum: <http://www.kuforum.co.uk/kindleusersforum/thread-11561.html> [accessed 01.03.2020].

'rupturing' effects are not as unsettling as they may have been in the early years of the Twentieth Century'.<sup>131</sup> This, Cobley asserts, is because modern society has become used through film narratives, to stories that jump back and forth in time. The contemporary screenplay narrative, he goes on to suggest, has readied a modern audience for such a disjointed style as is offered through Danielewski's experimental layout, requiring the reader to keep in their minds several narrative threads at once that ultimately converge. As such, the disjointed narrative and skips in time are a familiar concept to a contemporary audience, as Cobley suggests, and so are not a block to enjoyment or engagement with Danielewski's narrative style. In a sense, *House of Leaves* could also be termed as metafiction, in which 'meta' refers to levels of narrative that lie after, behind or outside the main narrative. Metafiction does not attempt to simply open up realist fiction to present an altered consciousness, but rather points towards the representative nature of narrative as a whole.<sup>132</sup> In the case of *House of Leaves*, Zampano's and Truant's narratives simultaneously justify and mock the academic application of *The Navidson Record*, with Zampano bolstering the film's importance by presenting it as an academic study, and Truant shunning it, and much of Zampano's study, as fiction.

As Danielewski plays with systems of truth, there is much to be said about how blurring the lines between fact and fiction appear alongside the subtle mocking of academia as an institution that brings claims into the forefront, and argues their truth through research. Every time Zampano's academic research on *The Navidson Record* is rubbished as a big fake by Truant, so Danielewski calls

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<sup>131</sup> Cobley, p 210.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p 174.

into question whether we are to blindly believe in everything that is packaged up as an educated study. There is also another layer of truth embedded in the appendices and footnotes, which are again called into question by Truant as being a complete forgery. Zampano at times refers to celebrities and scholars who have supposedly written about, commented on and reviewed *The Navidson Record*, often as a means of validating his own opinions and analytic comments. However, touching upon a postmodern theme of scepticism towards truth claims and realist representation, Truant injects a level of scepticism that cuts through Zampano's blind insistence that the film truly exists, by making snide remarks about Zampano's repeated reference to academic studies or essays commenting on *The Navidson Record*. This can be seen, for example, in this extract:

**Zampano:** Ken Burns has used this particular moment to illustrate why *The Navidson Record* is so beyond Hollywood [...]

**Truant:** As you probably guessed, not only has Ken Burns never made any such comment, he's also never heard of The Navidson Record let alone Zampano.<sup>133</sup>

The effect is self-reflective in that Truant points towards the film's, and Zampano's claims, as pure fiction, whilst Zampano speaks in what could be construed as an innocent tone when talking of *The Navidson Record* as a real documentary film, much as Danielewski is aware of his novel as a fictional work, whilst putting up a pretence of it being a factual work of people who exist in the actual world. Danielewski deftly melds together elements of documentary, academia, fantasy, and realism, all in to one work. In this sense Possible World Theory (PWT) can be applied in explaining how in a narrative, the reader can be

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<sup>133</sup> Danielewski, p 206.

grounded in a fictional universe of the story that resonates with and is representative of the actual world. PWT teaches us that 'reality models help naturalize elements by reference to some concept (or structure) which governs our perception of the world'.<sup>134</sup> Reality models are the truths that govern the actual world and that are reflected in the text to create the sense of reality, such as the fact that a baby cannot be born before its mother has become pregnant. In terms of applying these models to literature, the aim is in forging a believable fictional universe grounded within the laws and truths of the actual world, with the desired effect that the reader can be more easily immersed in the fictional world of the text because it makes sense, and because there is some familiarity in its rules or the way the characters can behave. In speaking about the mechanisms behind PWT, Ruth Ronen details how PWT explores fiction as one world that orbits the actual world, that is connected to and yet separate from the actual world.<sup>135</sup> This point could certainly be applied to *House of Leaves* in which the worlds of truth and fiction are constantly in orbit, with the reader being led to believe one minute that *The Navidson Record* is a true documentary movie existing outside the fictional universe of the novel, whilst simultaneously being told of its fictionality by an equally fictional character, Truant, and yet it could be suggested that the editors are leading the reader to believe in the overall reality of the novel. Ronen also highlights that 'within the fictional universe of discourse, truth is not determined relative to an extratextual universe, but relative to a fictional world in which only some of the textual assertions can establish

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<sup>134</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p 124.

<sup>135</sup> Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p 26.

facts'.<sup>136</sup> When thinking about Zampano's references to celebrity this is playful in a postmodernist manner, a knowing game between author and reader, which Truant then cuts through with harsh criticism that completely alters the tone by highlighting to the reader the fictionality of Zampano's study. What is interesting though, is that whilst Truant's disbelief in the existence of *The Navidson Record* is present right from the start of the novel it is not solid throughout, as at times his conviction slowly bends as a reading of *The Navidson Record* appears to be having a physical effect on his slowly crumbling mental state. And indeed the film itself, which is set out to be a documentary of a true event, is beyond the belief of anything that could occur in the actual world, presenting to the reader a reality in which a supernatural event of a portal opening up in the hallway of the house owned by documentary filmmaker Will Navidson is something to be explored without overly questioning its validity. As such, there are several layers of truth and systems of belief orbiting around each other, which provoke the reader's conviction also to waver between what is and isn't true depending on how deeply they want to absorb themselves within the narrative universe. Arguably, the novel form lends itself effectively to this in its construction. It is a lengthy fictional narrative in which there is ample space for the reader to firstly build a connection with the characters and familiarise themselves with the fictional universe, to then go on to engage with the twists and turns both figuratively in the plot, and literally on those pages in which the text layout requires the reader to physically twist the book round whilst reading. In *The House of Leaves*, the text for *The Navidson Record* script in the centre of the page is set narrated in such a manner that it can play out in the reader's imagination

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<sup>136</sup> Ronen, p 41.

as if watching the film. This means that for those readers who want to suspend their disbelief, put aside for a time Truant's ranting that the film is purely fiction even in the textual world, it is possible to believe in the film for a time as a piece of documentary film making that could be found on the internet in the actual world.

There is also innocence in Zampano's belief in the film's existence, which comes through in the effort and time he has dedicated to creating his masterpiece. This is a way of mocking academia, as is the style of postmodernism, but particularly the way in which some academic study can overblow a trivial subject into something of great worth and weight. Of course Truant's rationality in denying the truths that Zampano claims is necessary for the reality effect, because the reader knows *The Navidson Record* doesn't exist in the actual world, and if Truant's world is meant to be a reflection of the actual world, then the film surely doesn't exist in Truant's world. But at the same time the way in which the screenplay is written with such detail, means the reader is encouraged to suspend their disbelief and at times give in to the notion that out there in the actual world exists a copy of *The Navidson Record*. The novel has been described as 'an enormous, scholarly-gothic fiction around a non-existent film',<sup>137</sup> which precisely sums up all the elements of the novel. T. G. Pavel, a leading critic in the field of PWT, writes 'in a realist perspective the criterion of the truth and falsity of a literary work and of its details is based upon the notion of possibility with respect to the actual world'.<sup>138</sup> If it is suggested that *The Navidson Record* reflects the 'found-footage' horror film style, which is a genre in

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<sup>137</sup> Steven Pool, *Gothic Scholar: House of Leaves* (2000), <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jul/15/fiction.reviews>> [accessed 23 May 2015].

<sup>138</sup> T. G. Pavel, "'Possible Worlds' in Literary Semantics", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34 (1975), 165–76, p 167.

and of itself in the actual world. Danielewski even drops in names of real-life celebrities or well-known academic figures that act to ground the fictional world of his novel within the actual world of the reader. In the case of *House of Leaves*, it could be said that the heightened sense of reality the text aims for, in both its content and its composition, combined with the interplay between facts, hypotheticals, and impossibilities, builds a creeping sense of unease characteristic of horror films that want their viewers to believe this could happen or has happened in the actual world.

Yet it could equally be argued that with *The Navidson Record* at the heart of the novel, Danielewski is making a nod towards hyperreality as a feature of the postmodernist movement. As part of the postmodernist movement, hyperreality is characterised by how imitations and ‘fakes’ take precedence over and usurp the real, and if we are to take it that *The Navidson Record* never truly existed in the textual universe, that it is a fake, then it’s interesting how Zampano’s screenplay dominates the centre of the page, whilst the “truth”, i.e. Zampano’s academic notes and Truant’s conversations, are pushed to the sidelines. Similarly, through all Truant’s insistence of the film’s non-existence, it is clear throughout the narrative that he is unable to pull himself away from the manuscript, as if drawn to it. There is also possibly something else going on here, a reflection of the postmodernist attitude towards a growing digital and media era. For several centuries media has been a universal narrative through which we view our lives, but the Internet has meant that in the modern age the media is constantly on display, at times placing a lens over its representation of reality to broadcast the parts that suit the channel through which it is being broadcast. Although we as a society are aware of media’s taking of and re-packaging reality



in an endless loop through news-reels on websites, as well as unlimited access to information through the internet and social media platforms, meaning that society is drawn to it as a source of information and “truth” about the actual world. As such, there is cause to suggest a link between a despairing of 24-hour news coverage as a constant draw for its audience by being accessible on digital devices all hours of the day, and Truant’s inability to draw himself away from the reading of the manuscript. Equally, although Truant is adamant *The Navidson Record* does not exist, his obsession over the manuscript and Zampano’s work completely changes his life for the worse, as he loses weight, isolates himself and is eventually evicted from his apartment for unpaid rent. Something that Truant initially denies as trash and not important to him has become his whole truth and shaped his life, much as individuals can be drawn into obsessing over the availability of content on the Internet so that it takes their attention away from that which is important in the actual world.

In a discussion on BBC Radio 4’s *Front Row* centred upon discussion of experimental novels, featuring two novelists, Mike McCormack and Bernardine Evaristo, who themselves have produced novels that experiment with the traditional layout, the main point that came through was that however much the form is subverted, the main focus is not to draw the reader too far from their comfort zone. Evaristo made a statement that ‘I absolutely want to be readable’<sup>139</sup>, before going on to speak of a need to experiment within the bounds of what feels comfortable for readers. The presenter of the show, Stig Abel, then spoke up for the reading public in offering a suggestion of why there may be

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<sup>139</sup> ‘The Current War, How Culture Affects Relationship Expectations, Experimental Novels, Cool Culture’, *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4, 24 July 2019, 19:15

resistance towards experimental novels. This comes through in his statement: 'we may want comfort from the novel, we may want the simple solace of burying yourself in a simple story'.<sup>140</sup> Arguably, to an extent Danielewski does maintain the familiar comfort of reading a traditional novel with *House of Leaves* in that the direction of the narrative flows from one page to the next, with the text being positioned on the page to be read from left to right, and there is no need for the reader to flick back and forth through the pages, apart from when reference is made to an item in the appendix. Of course there is a level of disturbance to the narrative flow when the reader takes in a footnote, or breaks away from reading the screenplay to read a section of Truant's narrative stream. But there is little commitment required from the reader to decide where next to take the story, because the intention is to read everything on the page, a page at the time, and for the reader to follow through from the front cover to the back cover. Yet there is something playful about how Danielewski has split up the narrative streams, and his suggested intentions are arguably embedded within this quote taken directly from his novel:

The function of [a] centre was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure – but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And

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<sup>140</sup> 'The Current War, How Culture Affects Relationship Expectations, Experimental Novels, Cool Culture'.

even today the notion of a structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable itself.<sup>141</sup>

In this, Danielewski is possibly reflecting on the need to maintain some of the familiar structure of a book, which he has done so in keeping the traditional order, but there is also a playful aspect drawn into this with the presentation of the words on the page, and in this subverting what a reader would expect from a novel. It could be said then that Danielewski has found a happy medium with his narrative structure, providing originality and ingenuity in the layout, whilst also retaining enough familiarity so as to not alienating his readers to such an extent that enjoyment in reading is hindered.

Umberto Eco speaks of there being two types of readers, which in a way resonates with the construction of *House of Leaves*. He believes there are those who want to get through the story to reach the climax of the ending, and those who want to take their time discovering details hidden in the text.<sup>142</sup> In talking about discovering details, Eco is likely referring to whether a reader chooses to analyse a text for its metaphorical meanings and signs, but in the context of *House of Leaves* this could easily apply to as whether a reader chooses to navigate through the tome in its entirety, or whether to skip sections and focus solely on, for example, the screenplay at the heart of the novel. Eco goes on to say 'the reader as an active principle of interpretation is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text',<sup>143</sup> and this is certainly true of *House of Leaves*. The novel subverts the traditional format by splitting into several narrative streams, and as such the reader is an active agent in the retelling because it is

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<sup>141</sup> Danielewski, p 112.

<sup>142</sup> Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) p 27.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p 4.

they who get to choose in which order to read each section, or whether even they read everything in the novel. Similarly, this extract taken from the screenplay at the heart of *The House of Leaves* could be said to point towards the intended effect Danielewski's layout of his novel was to have on the experience of the reader:

[M]aze-treaders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion, whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its complex artistry. What you see depends on where you stand, and thus, at one and the same time, labyrinths are single (there is one physical structure) and double: they simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos. They may be perceived as a path (a linear but circuitous passage to the goal), or as a pattern (a complete symmetrical design) [...] Our perception of labyrinths is thus intrinsically unstable: change your perspective and the labyrinth seems to change.<sup>144</sup>

In this case 'maze treaders' could be referring to how some readers may blindly follow a textual pattern from top left to bottom right of a page, continuing on a familiar path led by their expectations of how books are commonly set out. In contrast, 'maze-viewers' could be suggested as readers who are willing to embrace a textual layout that takes a different course across a page, such as those reading the various narrative stream in *House of Leaves*, and are more open to altering their perspective on the

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<sup>144</sup> Danielewski, p 113–14.

presentation of a novel's text. *House of Leaves* could be said to simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, to invoke feelings of clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, and present itself as artistry and chaos, giving familiarity in its linearity of an ordered sequence of pages, whilst also playing with the expectations of the reader in the placement of text. Ultimately, however, it is a representation of how there is still scope to develop the form of the contemporary novel, and to offer readers a reading experience to challenge expectation.

Comparisons can be drawn in terms of the textual layout between *House of Leaves* and *S* by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, the second novel under discussion in this thesis. These comparisons can be seen in the way in which both novels display multiple narrative streams alongside each other, their playing with the reality effect by blurring the lines between fact and fiction, as well as both mocking academia and truth claims as is inherent in postmodernist thinking. Similarly to *House of Leaves*, *S* has a narrative text acting as central narrative, which is ultimately the discussion point of the characters present in the novel. This is in the form of a novel, *Ship of Theseus*, by author V. M. Straka, who is fictional in the actual world, but we are led to believe exists as a true entity in the fictional universe of *S*. There are then accompanying footnotes from a Straka scholar who, we are told, has also translated the novel into English, and who goes by the name of F. X. Caldeira. In addition to this, and swirled around the main body of the text, are handwritten exchanges between two university students, Jen and Eric. The concept is set up as Jen explains that she found this

copy of *Ship of Theseus* 'while I was shelving',<sup>145</sup> and so begins the exchanges of criticism of *Ship of Theseus* and Straka with another student, Eric, who shares her views on certain prophecies and mysteries surrounding both Straka and Caldeira. Jen and Eric's conversations appear in a haphazard way, being written as scrawled notes like graffiti on the page, as opposed to the more ordered sequences of Truant's asides in *House of Leaves*. The students strike up a seemingly natural exchange through their notes and annotations, which emanate a sense that these two could be inhabitants of the actual world, who happen to have struck up a conversation utilising a library book from their university library. However, their notes also build a separate narrative throughout the book away from the central novel and Caldeira's annotation, developing characters that connect in a standard exchange on everyday topics, such as the comment 'Best breakfast ever: triple americano, chocolate croissant, + a postcard from Brazil!'.<sup>146</sup> Yet, as with *House of Leaves*, Jen and Eric's interjections are bound to the central narrative of *Ship of Theseus* in that the majority of their conversation is centred around the novel and its accompanying controversy. Similarly, the central narrative, *Ship of Theseus*, can be enjoyed as a standalone story without reading any of Jen and Eric's conversations, or Caldeira's footnotes. Jen and Eric continue to use the text book to conduct a secret interchange, even leaving messages on physical objects such as postcards and napkins, sharing their theories on the mystery surrounding the novel and author Caldeira, with the premise for them doing so being explained as a safe means to communicate on a controversial topic. In fact at one point Jen asks Eric whether they could meet

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<sup>145</sup> J. J. Abrams & Doug Dorst, *S* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2013), p 1.

<sup>146</sup> Abrams & Dorst, p 112.

and have a conversation in person, to which Eric replies that to have such conversations in public would be dangerous if the wrong sort of people overheard them, and he asserts the need for them continue conversing through such a secret place as the book, which is clearly a plot device to explain the need to continue their narrative exchanges in a place where the reader can also read them. The downside to this plot device is that it made the concept feel forced, and as such removed the reader to an extent from the reality effect by pointing towards its own contrivance.

Of course, the reader knows from the outset that *Ship of Theseus* is a fictional work by a fictional author, as with *The Navidson Record* in *House of Leaves*, but the layout with Caldeira's footnotes and Jen and Eric's passion for the novel, encourages the reader to suspend their disbelief and at times give into the motion that the book exists as a real placed object in the actual world. Again PWT comes into play here, as a leading critic in that field, Marie Laure-Ryan, speaks of how 'for the duration of our immersion in a work of fiction, the realm of possibilities is thus recentered around the sphere which the narrator presents as the actual world'.<sup>147</sup> In this case, the reader is led by Jen and Eric to believe in Straka's study as truth, much as we are made to believe in *House of Leaves*, that Zampano's work is all based on fact. This following extract is an example of how the reader is encouraged to engage in Jen and Eric's discussion of *Ship of Theseus*, and buy into the mystery behind Caldeira's connection to Straka:

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<sup>147</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1991), p 22.

**Jen:** I know the footnotes are really strange – but what if they weren't supposed to be informative? What if they were signals or messages to someone – like Straka himself?

**Eric:** STRAKA WAS DEAD BY THEN

**Jen:** Just saying: I don't think we should assume Caldeira was stupid/insane. There's got to be more to it.<sup>148</sup>

With sections of Jen and Eric's discourse, such as these, the story takes on a mystery narrative structure, drawing the reader into their yearning to know the truth about the author of *Ship of Theseus*, V. M. Straka, and the Straka scholar Caldeira. Again, Ryan highlights the possibility of the reader being led down one path of truth or another, as 'there are no limits to the human imagination (or rather since the human imagination cannot conceive itself as limited), in a fictional universe everything can happen, whether at the centre or the periphery'.<sup>149</sup> Whilst true in many ways, what needs to be added to this statement is a point that the 'everything can happen' must sit within the rules that govern the actual world, in order that the imagination can fully realise it, and at the same time the reader can believe this is something that could equally occur in the actual world as much as in the fictional universe. This is reflected to an extent in the character development, as Jen and Eric very much react to each other as one would expect a heterosexual male and female university student would do when thrown together through a connecting interest or passion. For example, towards the end of the novel a seemingly budding romantic exchange is

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<sup>148</sup> Abrams & Dorst, p II.

<sup>149</sup> Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, p 31.



interjected with sarcasm, steering it away from a formulaic or generic romance conclusion:

**Eric:** IT'S FUNNY – EVERY TIME YOU COME IN HERE, I CAN READ  
YOUR FACE AND GUESS THE TONE OF THE NOTE YOU'VE JUST  
WRITTEN

**Jen:** I love you more every day we're together

**Eric:** HEY – THAT WAS YOUR I'M-BEING-A-SMARTASS FACE

**Jen:** You're not a very good reader<sup>150</sup>

In this are hints of feelings shared and not met, a recognisable actual world scenario, and at the same time a possible world is unwittingly formed through Jen's remark. This possible world is one in which Eric reads the declaration of love as holding some truth and the two meet, but in this case there would essentially be no further need for the leaving of notes, and as such the central conceit of the novel would at this point fall apart.

Ryan also reminds us that 'reality does not present itself to immediate experience in narrative form...narrative is form – and form is imposed by the mind (or in a more radical version, by language) on the referent'.<sup>151</sup> The two elements, reality and narrative, can work together simultaneously, but narrative must also be aware of its fictionality, and that certain elements must be contrived in order to work within the context of the story. One marked difference compared with *House of Leaves* in terms of the narrative construction is that the protagonists only address themselves and so the conversation is insular, whereas in *House of Leaves* Johnny Truant more often than not breaks

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<sup>150</sup> Abrams & Dorst, p 454.

<sup>151</sup> Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, p 258.

the fourth wall by directing his speech to the reader. Addressing the reader directly makes the reader feel a part of the narrative universe, rather than just a bystander,<sup>152</sup> and certainly with *S* there is a sense that the reader is a passive bystander in Jen and Eric's story, an observer of a conversation that has already occurred. The reader is effectively playing through a conversation that has already happened and is bound in time, whereas with *House of Leaves* there is a sense of timelessness, as if Truant could be speaking to anyone in any era.

In terms of the reality effect, the paratextual aspects of the novel heighten this. The book is adorned with library stamps and stickers, the pages are discoloured as if aged, and, as already mentioned, there are inserts between some of the pages, such as a napkin and a postcard, as if trinkets placed there by Eric or Jen. Although *S* can also be purchased as an ebook, the true sense of reality would largely be lost by the novel's digitisation, because the ability to interact with the book on a truly physical level is needed in order to truly engage with the presentation of the book. Just as with *House of Leaves*, *S* lends itself to being set within the bounds of a physical book, and in this is a celebration of the physical book over its digital counterpart. For instance, Jen leaves Eric a note between pages 376 and 377, which he then responds to in the margins of the book. It is possible to read the letter then the comments, which is how I imagine the ebook would be structured, but it's more pleasing to have the letter in your hand to refer back to it when reading the comments left by Eric. The look and feel of the book, the presentation jacket in which it is housed so as to keep inside all the inserts, and the inserts themselves, make the novel feel like a treasured item, not just something to read. Dorst and Abrams take *S* beyond being a

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<sup>152</sup> John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p 64.

narrative written on pages stuck between two covers, and instead present their novel as more of a statement piece that wants to be looked at, flicked through, and admired. It is also an example of why the novel of the future shouldn't be solely in digital form, because there are times when touch and physical adornments are essential to the telling of a story, and the evocation of reality.

This reality effect is then continued into the narrative structure as the reader is drawn from the start into believing in the validity of the novel as a chance exchange between two characters that takes place within the pages of a "found object", a university library book. Yet, it was this being trapped in a time, and the reality effect presented through the layout, which was commented on by someone with whom I had a personal conversation, who had also read *S*.<sup>153</sup> The most interesting feedback the reader gave was an argument that whilst the conversational structure is original in its composition, the concept doesn't entirely work in the context of a physical book because it can not be easily changed once set down, particularly in an era that has given birth to the live streaming of conversations through social media. It was this reader's belief that novels in the main describe something that has already happened, they are the retelling of events that have occurred, whereas the conversation between Eric and Jen is an on-going process that is more characteristic of a live stream. This is a valid criticism that not only calls into question the effectiveness of the layout, but it also highlights how the constant and rapid growth of technology can make something seem dated.

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<sup>153</sup> Conversation with reader (Alice Chadwick), 4<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

A further reader of *S* who I conversed with shared their opinion on the layout of the dialogue,<sup>154</sup> expressing feelings of having missed things upon a first reading of the novel because of having to navigate through several narrative streams sprawled across the page. This, however, wasn't viewed as a negative for this reader, as they went on to comment:

I know there were bits that I missed/didn't understand,  
occasionally I wasn't sure if I was meant to have remembered  
something I was told earlier and I had forgotten, but I didn't  
mind this. I enjoyed the process of reading all the stories even if I  
didn't "get" it all.

This speaks of enjoying the novelty of being presented with a non-traditional reading experience, and an expectance that there will almost certainly be a second reading because the novel has more to give. This was reflected in the second reader also commenting: 'I was left with many questions unanswered, but that's part of the experience in a way. Would like to re-read it sometime, but not for a while I think', whilst also reporting they would happily read another novel that was similar to *S* in its construction. The only real negative that the second reader put forward was that the inserts did at times dictated when the novel could or couldn't be read, mainly because of the risk of them falling out of place. In other words, this isn't a novel that can easily be tossed into a bag and dipped into when in need of some light entertainment whilst out and about. It is true that there is no real system for matching the inserts to their relevant placing within the book, which would be particularly useful if one was to fall out of sequence. But at the same time it could be argued that this would detract from

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<sup>154</sup> Email exchange with reader (Jessica Williams-Chadwick), 25<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

the reality effect by injecting a sense of order placed on the novel by an editorial interloper, rather than asserting them to be randomly placed into this “found object” by either Eric or Jen.

Whilst the layout of *S* was interesting and certainly original, there is arguably some jarring in the reading experience as the eye feels to be constantly flicking from the main body of the text to read an annotation by Eric or Jen, and the immersion into the central narrative is interrupted in order to engage with, at times, Caldeira’s footnotes. Equally, the multiple narrative streams offered a challenge as to whether to first read the novel at the centre of the page in its entirety, or break away from this at the points where a comment is made by Jen or Eric, or there is a corresponding Caldeira footnote to read. The book is constricted in layers so that a separate story is told through Jen and Eric’s conversations, whilst *Ship of Theseus* is a concept that offers a conversational point for Jen and Eric. Dorst and Abrams can be commended for creating a novel in a novel in which both parts work well as standalone pieces. However, the downside to having multiple narrative streams is that a reader will naturally lose some of that mindlessness in the act of reading, largely because the reader is required to break from their immersion in the text to that decide what to read next, or flip from a pros-narrative to conversational style of text. This is not to say that immersion into the text was impossible or did not happen, but rather the reader needs to acquire a new skill in seamlessly switching from reading an atmospheric section from *Ship of Theseus*, a gothic and ghostly novel, to a comment from Jen and Eric, or one of Caldeira’s footnotes.

Similarly, whilst the quirky effect of the inserts gave appeal to the novel as a physical object to treasure, it did appear that at times the writing on such

items didn't necessarily relate to anything that was being said on the page, giving them a sense of being a gimmick, and a distraction from the main flow of the story. This is not to say that *S* was not an enjoyable read, but there is something to be said of being able to switch off from the conscious act of reading and instead skim through lines of text placed in a familiar order as with a traditional novel. That said, the physicality of the novel was the most enjoyable aspect, the whole packaging of it to look like a university library book, the quirky nature of a note scribbled on a napkin and slipped inside. The book is a celebration of the physical, and does much to draw attention to the novel as an object that can be cherished. In fact, as a last comment on both *S* and *House of Leaves*, it can be said that both novels certainly do not stand up to Self's protestations about a loss of the physical book in the digital era, but instead demonstrate how packaging and layout can be physical tools through which a novelist can experiment in order to prove that the novel form has not yet become stale, much as Danielewski, Abrams and Dorst have done.

As well as being postmodernist in structure, both *S* and *House of Leaves* can be classed as literary novels, the type that Self is indeed arguing are in decline along with the retreating book. Yet when discussing the literary novel there is a sense of it being a set type, a category all of its own, and yet there is equally as sense that to say a novel is 'literary' is to set it within a standard in terms of its quality. As was highlighted in chapter two, Self's protestations focused specifically on the death of the literary novel, into which category it could be argued sit both *House of Leaves* and *S*, particularly in the construction of each novels' format and layout. Equally, Self's own novels, it could be said, are at the high end of the literary scale when viewed as a spectrum, particularly in

terms of the writing style and content. Certainly it could be said that his novels require the sort of deep and considered reading he believes society is losing an interest in. That said, *Umbrella*, one of the three novels in a trilogy exploring technology and the modern age, was nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 2012, also pointing towards a desire within that remains within a good portion of the contemporary reading public for a deep and analytic type of reading required to engage fully with literary novels. Having been engaged in writing novels since the 80s, and still producing novels today, it is understandable that Self would fear the death of the novel, in particular the category of novels he writes, and a decline in readership of the types of novels he wants to write. Yet, as a means of exploring exactly what constitutes a literary novel over a non-literary novel, it was felt appropriate to analyse some of Self's own literary novels as examples of the category.

One of his earliest novels *My Idea of Fun*, first published in 1993, could be said to very much set the tone of his narrative style, being laced throughout with abstract metaphor and symbolism so that the reader must focus their full attention on what they are reading, or else find themselves in a sea of confusion. Undoubtedly Self dedicated his literary knowledge to every sentence, paragraph, and phrase, as a display of Self's talent as a writer and knowledge of the craft of literary prose. For instance, he injects detail into describing one single moment or simple action, so that through his prose the ordinary is turned into the extraordinary:

As I stared at the window display, the reflections of myself and Mr Broadhurst in the plate-glass window came into focus as well, imposed over the vista. Eidesis came upon me trapping both layers

into a third internal one. Then Mr Broadhurst seemed to start towards me and I could no longer be sure where he was, in my head, on the shop window or the pavement? In all three locations at once?<sup>155</sup>

The reader is continually invited to decide what is the literal and what is the metaphorical meaning of each sentence, and how the two are connected. Equally, what I felt in my analysis of *My Idea of Fun* is that the novel felt more like comic entertainment than a chance for the reader to learn something about the world. There is certainly embedded in the narrative a dark humour, as with much of Self's works, yet the literary nature of the prose hints at Self's desire for the reader to gain a deeper understanding of his subject matter rather than simply being entertained.

Certainly there are members of the reading public who possess a certain level of education in the field of literature, and also a desire for such mind-stretching prose, who will engage wholeheartedly with this novel. However, it could be suggested that for all the novel's complexity it lacks that connection between reader and character, which is often achieved through the reader's immersion into the fictional world. Instead the prose style arguably hinders the reader creating an emotional connection to the characters, which has already been discussed in this chapter as an integral part of the novel reading experience because if you don't care about the outcome it can feel a waste of time on the reader's part. It could be argued, therefore, that *My Idea of Fun*, with its complex metaphor and dry humour, will prevent some readers from building up true feelings or a connection towards the main protagonist who is, it must be said,

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<sup>155</sup> Will Self, *My Idea of Fun* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p 74.



struggling with adolescence and possible mental health issues so was by no means one dimensional or vapid. Of course not all novels have to move their readers emotionally, but could it not also be reasoned that a part of the act of reading a novel comes from engaging emotionally with the characters, even sympathetically if not empathetically, and not just being dazzled with clever prose steeped in metaphor. The prose of *My Idea of Fun*, it could be argued, contains little explanation of how a particular character is feeling, certainly explicitly so as to be easily recognised by the reader, and there is something throughout of a distancing between reader and story. Undeniably the narrative is clever and literary in its writing and narrative construction, but it may be too focused on being esoteric in order to satisfy a wide range of readers.

Certainly this motif of the reader being kept at a distance from the emotion of the characters, and as such some readers being unable at times to truly connect with the protagonists on an emotional level, is something of a theme carried through Self's novels. What runs through much of his work is a thread of black and sarcastic humour, which is not in itself a negative, but in the way it is used can isolate the reader from forming any sympathetic or even empathic feelings towards the characters and situations, which is no more prevalent than in his 2001 novel *How the Dead Live*. The novel specifically approaches the topic of someone dying from a terminal illness, and how this may affect an individual. But rather than being able, as a reader, to learn what this could feel like, and empathise with the scenario, this topic is approached with such a dry wit that the reader could fail to make any emotional connection to the main protagonist, Lily, and for some she could even come across as inherently unlikeable. Admittedly not all novels need an immediately likeable central

protagonist, but in order for this to work and for the reader to want to invest their time in reading about said character, the reader must be offered up nuggets of empathy or understanding for the character's situation to develop a bond. It could be inferred that in the case of *How the Dead Live* Self does not offer his reader such a nugget of sympathy. Instead readers are offered up un-empathic, albeit humorous, lines given by Lilly as 'I'm being a good little cancer-ridden old lady. So easy to be like this when you don't have any legs. Legs makes men think about pussy – even old pussy; and no one has legs in bed – not unless you're in there with them'.<sup>156</sup> This is just one example of how Self constructs his character Lilly as a vulgar character with few redeeming features, but then it feels as if he neglects to counteract this by offering the reader an alternative view of Lilly, such as some insight into her fear or apprehension towards her impending doom. It could also be said of the novel that it felt throughout as if the narrative was distracting the reader away from feeling anything like compassion, particularly as there was a constant needed to grasp at meanings and read between the lines, rather than being swept up in the emotion of the piece. The result was a novel that had no obvious emotional tone, could be construed as keeping the reader from bonding with its central protagonist, and is aimed more at a class of reader who wants to be truly challenged in their reading rather than relax or be simply entertained.

A later novel by Self, *Dorian: An Imitation*, first published in 2002, is however less mentally challenging and abstract, instead delving more deeply into its characters' emotions so that a bond is more easily formed between reader and fictional world. In fact, it could be asserted that the characters seem

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<sup>156</sup> Will Self, *How the Dead Live* (London: Penguin, 2001) p 30.

more accessible compared to others of Self's novels. By the conclusion of the novel the reader can more readily experience a feeling of wanting to know that things would turn out all right for Dorian, largely because a sense of empathy has been rendered between reader and characters. As a work that borrows from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, updating the story for a contemporary audience, which already signposts it as for a literary audience with some knowledge of Wilde's original story. That said, the text was not as geared towards a highly educated, literary audience in its narrative construction, being not so saturated with heavy metaphors requiring deep analysis in order to grasp the embedded meaning. The final result is a novel that is challenging enough to not be considered a "light holiday read", but entertaining in its world and character building.

Self's 2012 Man Booker Prize nominee *Umbrella* was part of a trilogy of novels with interconnecting characters and an overarching theme of the comment on the modern and digital era. The prize nomination is certainly a testament to *Umbrella*'s literary construction, although it could also be classed as abstract in its construction, and at times esoteric. The narrative, as with *My Idea of Fun*, felt largely inaccessible, almost alienating, especially for those who are not so well versed in reading highly literary text. Early in to the narrative the reader is treated to such sentences as: 'they take a long time to reach one another – the psychiatrist and the old woman patient. To see her, to *see her* properly, Busner has to wade through a Brown Windsor of assumptions about the elderly insane'.<sup>157</sup> The reader needs to know what Self is referring to with 'Brown Windsor' in order to unpick the loaded metaphor, and then understand

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<sup>157</sup> Will Self, *Umbrella* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p 9.

what this is saying about Dr Zack Busner's attitude towards his elderly patient. The novel is padded throughout with similar loaded sentences that can result in a barrage of pretentious words, and some readers maybe manage to grasp at some meanings, whilst others just floated past. What this exacts is a feeling of being overwhelmed by language, a risk of finding oneself not fully engaging in the experience of reading as the brain is being overly mentally challenged to the point of constantly stretching out for an elusive meaning that they never truly realise. There would be nothing amiss in feeling that as a reader you could not easily see a story developing, but instead the narrative seems more a jumble of complex metaphor and impenetrable prose.

Literary critic and scholar Wolfgang Iser, in examining the role of reader response theory as a tool of analysis, spoke at the end of the 1970s of placing a greater importance on how a narrative makes its reader feel over interpreting its messages, which is reflected in him saying 'what is important to readers, critics, and authors alike is what literature *does* and not what it *means*'.<sup>158</sup> For Iser, aesthetics is about judging a piece of literature based on the response it evokes from a reader, and in doing so building a greater understanding of how literature can provoke an intellectual reaction, whether conscious or unconscious. What Iser therefore is suggesting in this is that a focus should be placed not so much on whether a work of literature has merit to be credited as upholding a certain standard in its construction, but whether it stirs an emotional reaction within the reader, or rather 'our primary concern will no longer be the *meaning* of that text....but its *effect*'.<sup>159</sup> In this, Iser is placing emphasis on viewing a text not as a

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<sup>158</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p 53.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, p 54.

work of art to be analysed for metaphor, inferred meaning, etc, but whether it stirs an emotional response from its readers, and its use as an immersive work of art. Iser is essentially arguing that a text can hold value if it moves someone, and not just if it fulfils such literary criteria as quality of writing, or depth of character development.

Iser also insists that the reader is an important part of the reading process and it is vital the writer keeps this in mind, as the reader's willingness to participate in the reading process will be affected if the text makes meaning too clear or too obscure.<sup>160</sup> Into this point Iser brings 'speech-act theory', which attempts to describe factors that condition whether linguistic communication is a success, or with written narrative whether there is successful communication between the reader and the words used to construct the text.<sup>161</sup> In a novel this is a vital characteristic because the reader will be investing free time in the act of reading, and so the writing must be effective in world and character building in order that the reader ultimately wants to spend time within that fictional universe. Also, Iser reminds us 'the reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play',<sup>162</sup> highlighting a balance that should be generated by the novelist in bringing enough narrative clues into their text so the reader can understand that which is going on, whilst also leaving gaps so the reader can use their imagination or bring in to play their own knowledge of a subject. If this is successfully rendered then the reader is more likely to want to invest their time

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<sup>160</sup> Iser, p 108.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p 54.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p 108.

on a narrative that challenges but also entertains, and allows a reader to switch off from over-thinking so that they become embroiled in their imaginations.

In reading some of Self's novels I gained a sense that his protestations of the literary novel's death are possibly linked to him wanting to see published more novels that challenge a reader's intellect such as his do. But arguably, for the novel, or indeed the literary novel, to survive, it must surely capture as large an audience as possible. Of course there is an audience for Self's novels, indeed *Umbrella's* nomination is surely a testament to that. Equally it must be noted that the majority, if not all, of his novels have received critical acclaim, not least his most recent trilogy of novels that were highly regarded by literary critics, such as *The New York Times* speaking of *Umbrella* as a novel that 'holds you fast with a weird charm',<sup>163</sup> and *The Independent* noting its complexity whilst also believing it as a testament to modernist writing.<sup>164</sup> But in a modern age in which the novel is competing with extensive storytelling forms in TV and cinema, for an individual novel to captivate a sizeable audience, it needs maybe more now than ever to provide entertaining and immersive escape over richly metaphoric scenarios dripping in big words, so that reading novels for narrative entertainment continues as a popular pastime for generations to come.

Self spoke of there not having been, in his opinion, a "water-cooler novel" since *Trainspotting*, which hinted at a world in which novels are no longer topics of conversation amongst friends or work colleagues. Whether this is or not an accurate statement today, there is merit in asserting that in order for a novel to

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<sup>163</sup> Judith Shulevitz, 'The Awakening', *The New York Times*, 22 February 2013, viewed at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/books/review/umbrella-by-will-self.html>> [accessed 23 January 2021].

<sup>164</sup> David Evans, 'Umbrella, by Will Self: While You Were Sleeping, Will Became a Modernist', *The Independent*, 25 August 2012, viewed at: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/umbrella-will-self-8081153.html>> [accessed 23 January 2021].

stick in the conscience of the collective reading public's mind and to become a talking point, it surely needs to have moved readers. Equally, it could be said that a way for the novel to remain as a popular form of narrative entertainment there needs to be coming on to the market a steady stream of novels that grab a vast portion of the reading public, who then go on to promote them on social media platforms and through conversations with friends, family and colleagues. What then, it could be argued, is a more stable future for the novel is a middle ground that captures an audience who want some of the challenging literary read, but also a relaxing familiarity of form such as could be said of genre fiction. As such is garnered in this study an argument that a solid future for the novel in terms of keeping up its profile as a popular form of entertainment, is through novels that observe a combination of the literary and the genre categories of writing.

Genre fiction, also termed popular fiction, could be described as a category of fiction that sets itself within certain generic parameters and literary characteristics, which form structured narrative layouts, such as crime thriller, science fiction (sci-fi), horror and romance. As literary critic Irene Fairley states: 'categories of genre are culturally defined and acquired; they provide readers with a mechanism of pre-reading'.<sup>165</sup> A reader of genre fiction will come to a story set within a certain genre with the comfort and knowledge that they know what to expect from the narrative. For example, a crime thriller can be loosely described as featuring a main crime with possibly smaller crimes running alongside, a detective acting as the main protagonist whose job it is to solve the crime as well as often having to deal with personal issues, the presence of a

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<sup>165</sup> Irene. R. Fairley, 'Virginia Woolfs 'Old Mrs Grey': Issues of Genre', *Twentieth Century Fiction: From Text to Context*, ed. Peter Verdonk & Jean Jacques Webber (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 165 – 180, p 166.

victim or multiple victims, clues that will rightly or wrongly lead the reader to make certain judgements, and finally a satisfactory conclusion in which the mystery behind the crime is solved and justice is served. Tzvetan Todorov, in his study on genres, outlines how the detective or mystery story is characterised by a search for knowledge, but also a relationship of two narratives: the story of the crime, which is largely missing, and the story of the investigation, which is present.<sup>166</sup> In speaking of the function of genre writing, he posits that narrative functions in two spheres, as “horizons of expectation” for the reader, but also as “models of writing” for the writer. As such, the reader comes to the genre with a set of expectations, but also the genre offers a model from which the writer can structure their narrative.<sup>167</sup>

Rimmon-Kenan also offers a coherent statement about how readers of genre fiction are drawn into expecting certain elements depending on the genre, stating that ‘its conventions establish a kind of contract between the text and the reader, so that elements which would seem strange in another context are made intelligible within the genre’,<sup>168</sup> such as the existence of dragons and beings with magical powers being accepted as a part of the fantasy fiction genre. Literary critic Scott McCracken adds to discussion on what characterises genre fiction with his comprehensive view on what genres achieve:

Genres are best understood not in terms of basic elements, but as historical and relational. They are historical in that they define a form in terms of what has gone before and what might come after. They are

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<sup>166</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p 33.

<sup>167</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, p 18.

<sup>168</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p 125.



relational in that they give a definition of a form that shows how it differs from other literary forms.<sup>169</sup>

In this is a truth that genre fiction is about playing to a reader's expectations, and acknowledging that the writing and plot must fit within a particular set of parameters in order that expectations are met. McCracken also feels that setting down the basic elements of, or indeed defining what we mean when we think of genre fiction is very much an ongoing discussion, largely because there is ambiguity and ways in which rules can be broken or challenged. What this points towards is essentially an open literary category, and one that has scope for developing in innovative ways. This could include novels that cross genres and merge together more than one genre, or indeed novels that merge categories of novels in order to present, for example, a novel in with features of genre fiction but written in a literary manner.

A contemporary example of a novel that sits within more than one genre but that could also be termed as literary fiction, is Kazuo Ishiguro's Nobel prize winning 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*.<sup>170</sup> The themes of the story straddle tropes of sci-fi, horror and dystopian fiction, whilst also displaying writing of literary merit. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Kathy, who is looking back on her seemingly idyllic life in the late twentieth century as a resident in an English boarding school called Hailsham. Fairly early into the narrative the reader is privy to the truth that these students are clones who exist as organ donors for their adult double, bringing to the forefront a sci-fi element in imagining a world in which science can defy the rules of nature. Ishiguro poses a

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<sup>169</sup> Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) p 12.

<sup>170</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005).

question to the reader of whether it is right for some to have a second being from whom they can draw fresh organs in order to prolong their lives, which it could be said slides the narrative into the horror or dystopian genre of fiction. This is particularly prevalent as the novel presents a fictional universe that accepts cloning as a means for housing fresh organs, theorising as it does so whether the Hailsham students should be viewed as having a soul, or indeed to be counted as human beings with the right of free will. Whilst all of these generic elements are pieced together in the background to present a work of genre fiction, it could be said that the writing style lends the novel also to the category of literary fiction. This is particularly so in the lyrical prose style, the building of an immersive and believable fictional universe, and the depth of narrative in challenging controversial ideas whilst also entertaining. Ishiguro is masterful at drawing on, for instance, the science behind the existence of the Hailsham students, but doing so in such a way so as not to bore the reader with facts or deep scientific reasoning. This following passage details some of the science behind the novel's premise, yet there is no detailing of how the students have been cloned. Instead the reader is presented with prose that also allows them to understand Kathy's perspective on the concept, as well as a sense of anticipation the whole operation has brought to the students of Hailsham:

The basic idea behind the possibles theory was simple, and didn't provoke much dispute. It went something like this. Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life. This meant, at least in theory, you'd be able to find the person you were modelled from. That's why, when

you were out there yourself – in the towns, shopping centres,  
transport cafés – you kept an eye out for possibles – the people  
who might have been the models for you and your friends.<sup>171</sup>

This is not a factual essay on how cloning operates, but rather an effective empathic section of prose-narrative that prompts the reader to consider how it would feel to be a clone knowing that there is another one of you somewhere out in the world. In fact, throughout his novel Ishiguro avoids a dry reporting of the facts on the science behind cloning and organ donation, and instead is masterful in drawing his readers in to a more humanist view of the concept as Kathy narrates her personal experiences and views, as well as being a voice for some of the other students. This adds to the horror element of the novel as Kathy's explanation is calmly and chillingly delivered, such as in the passage above which reads as if she is detailing looking for a lost friend or pet rather than dwelling on the fact that she only exists because there is someone out in her fictional universe to whom she is meant to give up her organs.

Similarly, a creeping sense of horror resonates through these few sentences, an explanation of the process the students will go through offered by one of the teachers at Hailsham, Miss Lucy, as she states 'your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do'.<sup>172</sup> There is no in-depth analysis of how the donation process is executed, although it could be said that the addition of the word 'created' adds a sci-fi element because it hints at the students being sub-human, or a man-made rather

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<sup>171</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p 137.

<sup>172</sup> Ishiguro, p 80.

than a product of nature. Again the horror comes through the calm manner in which is imparted the fact of these students' lives not being of their own free will, as if they are doing a job that their society has accepted as normal.

Whilst the text is well constructed, although can feel stilted at times in its construction because its needing to move back and forth through a time frame in order to offer explanations linked to the present, the narrative is easy to read, it is not saturated with complex metaphor or scientific explanations, and yet it is well-written and therefore arguably literary in its poetic prose. Ishiguro adopts the show don't tell quality that easily stimulates the reader's imagination rather than bombarding them with long explanations, and the novel's strong character development means that the reader can imagine these students as people living in the actual world, which is vital for the horror element in suggesting this could occur in real life. Similarly, Ishiguro utilises the first person narrative structure to an advantage in drawing the reader into his fictional universe, offering concepts that are both familiar and alien to the reader. For instance, when Kathy outlines what is meant by the 'Sales' that occur at Hailsham, she dictates with emotion and from the perspective of one remembering an enjoyable time from their past: 'Once every month, a big white van would come down that long road and you would feel excitement all through the house and grounds. By the time it pulled up in the courtyard there'd be a crowd waiting'.<sup>173</sup> Through these couple of sentences the reader can imagine the atmosphere of anticipation and joy felt at the coming of the van with items for the sale, particularly for a group of teenagers who have little of their own to provide them an identity.

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<sup>173</sup> Ishiguro, p 216.

As a contrast in terms of writing style, Andy Weir's 2014 sci-fi inflected novel *The Martian* is narrated in a style reminiscent of the straight reporting of the facts, being presented in a log-book style that follows scientist Mark Watney's battle to stay alive when abandoned on Mars during a mission that goes horribly wrong. It could be said that the text is tailored to attract readers regardless of their educational background in order to reach as wide an audience as possible, with simplistic and two-dimensional sentences devoid of any challenging metaphors. As an example is this following section from the text in which the main protagonist, Mark Watney, is explaining his movements:

I piled some leftover parts of the MDV into a makeshift table and ramp. Then I dragged the lander to my new outdoor workbench. Working in an EVA suit is annoying enough. Bending over the whole time would have been torture. I got my tool kit and started poking around. Opening the outer panel wasn't too hard and I identified the battery easily enough. JPL labels everything. It's a 40 amp-hour AG-ZN battery with an optimal voltage of 1.5. Wow. They really made those things run on nothin' back then.<sup>174</sup>

The writing performs a job, it informs the reader at all times what is happening, but there is little poetic flow or depth to challenge a reader's intellect by provoking them to read into what is not explicitly expressed. Unlike with Ishiguro's prose, this is more tell rather than show. Equally, there is a distinct lack of emotion to the scene, especially considering that Watney is trapped alone

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<sup>174</sup> Andy Weir, *The Martian* (London: Del Ray Publishing, 2014), p 110.

on Mars with no immediate prospect of rescue, and the reader does not gain a sense of how Watney felt being in this situation. Much of the narrative is set out in this style with Watney dictating what he is doing in not so much a poetic or emotive manner, as could be seen with *Never Let Me Go*, and the sentences are conceivably prescriptive rather than descriptive.

Whilst Weir sets out his narrative in a simplistic manner as a series of logbook entries prescriptively detailing the actions of his character Mark Watney, Ishiguro demonstrates that genre fiction can be set down in a literary manner with poetic prose following the show and don't tell rule that allows the readers to more easily live in the characters' world through stimulation of the imagination. As such, it could be asserted the literary novel Self has declared time again is dead, can be seen to have in some cases migrated into something to suit more the wider modern reading public, as well as a reader who wants to be entertained and not overly challenged when reading for pleasure. Weir's novel *The Martian* is by no means unreadable in terms of its narrative quality, but it certainly feels to be written more as pulp fiction for a wider audience, rather than as a novel to both entertain and challenge the intellect, in a manner that arguably *Never Let Me Go* achieves. Equally, if society is being drawn to pop lit and genre fiction in their selections, and it is these types of novels that are getting the British reading public reading, then surely dictating that the market needs more novels of a high literary standard is more likely to damage than save the reputation of the novel. The notion of ensuring a secure future for the novel in terms of readership and continued popularity as a consumer product or source of entertainment, should dictate that the novel continues to be seen as widely accessible. The literary genre as a whole needs to reach out to those

readers from all educational backgrounds, including those who want to be challenged in their reading but also be entertained without being overly mentally stimulated. For instance, Ishiguro spoke in 2015 of the fantasy genre that ‘the barrier between this once-disdained brand of fiction and “serious” novels is breaking down’,<sup>175</sup> suggesting a move towards a literary market and public taking a more rounded view of genre fiction. Equally, there may be others who are starting to argue that there is room in the literary market for novels that straddle categories of both popular and literary fiction, as well as a need to stamp out negative attitudes towards popular fiction.

In an interview for Radio 4’s *Book Club*, novelist Scott Turow, when speaking about his novel *Presumed Innocent*, admits that his intention was to straddle both categories of literary and genre fiction, and to put out onto the literary market a novel which aimed to break down barriers of negative attitudes towards high and low art. It was also, he explained, his aim to draw on the ‘psychological realism’ of literary fiction, whilst injecting into his novel an element of suspense that he saw as characteristic of genre fiction, thus producing a piece of literary fiction with the comforting familiarity of genre fiction but also depth and ingenuity in the writing style. What is unsurprising was to hear him express a fear he initially felt when publishing *Presumed Innocent* that it would be deemed too literary for fans of genre fiction, and too much of a mystery for those who were looking for a work of literary fiction. However, upon reflection he came to believe that actually his novel had ‘closed that gap between high and low in American fiction’,<sup>176</sup> and this is an important point in convincing current

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<sup>175</sup> John Mullen, ‘Here Be Dragons’, *The Guardian Review*, 4 April 2015, p 2.

<sup>176</sup> Scott Turow – *Presumed Innocent*, *Book Club*, BBC Radio 4, 9 July 2020, 15:30.

and future reading public that the novel is not out of reach for those not educated to a high degree within the field of English literature. With this comes a challenge to convince the reading public that there is a middle ground with art, and to prove to critics that a novel can challenge reader's expectations but also prove to be popular. Turow rallied with his novel to challenge the rigid categorisation upheld by publishers, critics and some readers, and it could be said that the positive reception from the release of such novels as *Presumed Innocent* suggests there is a ready audience for a literary novel with a twist of features that fall within the tropes of genre fiction.

In the last five years or so it could be suggested that this trend of merging the literary and genre novel has been growing in popularity across the publishing sphere, with a number of examples since the turn of the twenty-first century from novelists and literary critics writing, for example, fantasy fiction or Sci-fi fiction in a literary manner. For literary novelist John Lanchester, George RR Martin's sequence of epic fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the first in the series being *A Game of Thrones* first published in 1996, is a demonstration of complex world building, and Lanchester supports this view by stating he has 'openly invited literary snobs to cross that apparently "unbridgeable crevasse" between the readership of fantasy and "the wider literate public"'.<sup>177</sup> In other words, Lanchester suggests the time is now to break down barriers between genre and literary fiction, but also to accept that it is possible to create novels set within a fantasy world that are also considered as literary in their construction and writing. Indeed, JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series is widely accepted as both fantasy fiction and an important part of literary history, with its

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<sup>177</sup> Mullen, p 2.



popularity evident in its being awarded the nation's favourite book in a BBC backed survey carried out in 2003.<sup>178</sup> Surely such evidence points away from Self's certainty that the literary novel is dead, and instead suggests that society still holds appreciation for works of literary merit, but that there is also something to be said of combining good writing with a narrative aimed at entertainment over intellectual challenge. Indeed, George RR Martin's series was much talked about by the general populous as well as the critics, suggesting that the novel is surely nowhere near the point of death if there are still contemporary releases that capture the entire demographic of the reading public.

Literary critic Scott McCracken discourses on modern genre, or popular, fiction as being just as important in terms of literary merit as literary fiction, believing that 'popular fiction has the capacity to provide us with a workable, if temporary, sense of self'.<sup>179</sup> The overarching theme of his study on popular fiction is to defend it from being viewed as worthless or trash literature with little academic or artistic value, and instead he argues that for some readers popular fiction is a more engaging and accessible escape from the actual world, and often it acts as 'a constant reminder that a better, more fulfilling life, is a possibility'.<sup>180</sup> In this is a view that literary fiction, and included in this the novel, does still have value in modern society as an accessible form of escape. His is a positive argument in support of the accessibility that is offered through popular fiction, especially, as he points out, given that popular fiction has progressed as a term originally meaning 'of the people', and nowadays describes an easy,

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid, p 3.

<sup>179</sup> McCracken, p 2.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, p 14.

comprehensive style of writing.<sup>181</sup> What can be taken from this is a sense that formulaic and generic storylines do reach out to a vast body of readers who maybe struggle to engage with literary novels that require deep analysis of context and embedded references for example, and as such genre or popular fiction should not be looked down upon if we are to secure a healthy future for the novel. Rather popular fiction should be celebrated more readily now at a time when accessibility is an important factor if the novel is to continue to compete with cinema and TV as a form of narrative entertainment, and future reading publics are to be convinced to reach for a novel over switching on the TV. Whilst Self bemoans the decline in numbers of readers of literary novels, declaring this as a sign of the end of the novel, McCracken rather celebrates the rising popularity of non-literary novels. Could it not be said then that popular fiction, certainly in terms of keeping up an audience for the novel, should be celebrated as a sub-genre of the novel genre that is keeping the reading public reading, and be viewed as something that could be a boost for the longevity of the novel.

Indeed, academic and literary critic Bob Ashley asks ‘what then is signified by the ‘popular’ of popular fiction?’ before going on to assert that a definition for popular fiction would include its being ‘enjoyed (and probably purchased) by many readers’, but also assumptions are upheld that readers of popular fiction ‘possess little capacity for literary discrimination’.<sup>182</sup> However, Ashley then goes on to break through this assumption by pointing out that in 1961 the best-selling paperback in the UK was D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s*

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p 19 – 20.

<sup>182</sup> Bob Ashley, *The Study of Popular Fiction* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989), p 2.

*Lover*, a novel that is both popular and considered a literary classic. In fact, Ashley states of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that 'for the years of its notoriety it was a popular novel. It did not simultaneously cease to be serious fiction',<sup>183</sup> thus highlighting a historical tradition of writers seeing merit in blurring the lines between literary and popular fiction. Ashley also encourages us to think about the fact that literature does not necessarily fit comfortably within the categories and parameters in to which it is assigned. Instead he argues it is possible to see a novel as being popular in terms of its success in sales but it can also possess literary merit, and in doing so said novel is surely not fulfilling the pre-conceived notion that popular means poorly or generically written. This negative attitude towards 'popular fiction', Ashley points out, was born through the practice of literary criticism that has shaped a societal response to popular forms.<sup>184</sup> Instead, and arguably rightfully so, he believes popular fiction should be revered more as a worthy contributor to the literary canon because oftentimes popular fiction encourages vast sectors of the reading public to engage in the act of read for pleasure outside work and education, and is for some an influence in their lives as well as a vehicle for understanding the world.<sup>185</sup>

A further contemporary example of a novel that sits within the paradigm of genre fiction, and yet is perceivably composed to a literary standard, is Anthony Horowitz's *Moonflower Murders* that was first released in the middle of 2020, the latest follow-up to his crime novel *Magpie Murders*. Horowitz is well known for his novels written within the murder mystery genre, having also published a popular action adventure series featuring central protagonist Alex

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p 3.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, p 3.

<sup>185</sup> Ashley, p 3.

Ryder. This second series of novels in which the *Moonflower Murders* sits, is a display of good writing with generic tropes set under the umbrella of mystery and crime thriller. In particular *Moonflower Murders* also stands out for its ingenuity in layout, as Horowitz has skilfully crafted a piece of fiction within a piece of fiction. The novel takes on a Russian doll like structure, featuring a novel inside a novel by a fictional author featured in the story, which the reader must read in order to gain clues towards the true identity of the murderer at the heart of the story. The internal novel is suggested to have been written by a fictional novelist of Horowitz's creation called Alan Conway, and it occupies nearly 230 pages of the entire book. Horowitz has masterfully set out Conway's novel, *Atticus Pünd Takes the Case*, to look like a novel that could exist in the actual world, complete with critical praise from the likes of the *Daily Mail* on the front, a paragraph entitled 'About the Author' inside the front cover, a contents page, and even an ISBN number. This heightens the reality effect, blurring the lines between the actual and fictional world, and aids the reader in suspending their disbelief that Alan Conway is a published novelist living in the actual world, rather than a fictitious character. It is also a display of Horowitz's talent as a literary author because he has clearly applied skill combining two novels in one using two narrative voices, whilst also ensuring there is purpose to the project rather than Conway's novel appearing like a throw-away gimmick, giving each chunk of narrative a connecting purpose. Each novel is certainly different in style and tone, whilst also complementing each other to avoid any jarring of narrative flow, with the main novel being composed in a contemporary first person narrative style:

He led me round the side of the house and in through a sliding door. The interior of the house was exactly as I had imagined it. The kitchen was large and homely, with and Aga, an island for food preparation, pots hanging from the rafters and a pine kitchen table with eight chairs....The family shopped at Waitrose. There were two Bags for Life on the floor next to a row of wellington boots.<sup>186</sup>

In contrast, Conway's novel is composed from a third person perspective, and is set in the tone of traditional post-war prose:

Phyllis Chandler had been bending over the oven, but now as she straightened up she was holding a tray of freshly baked Florentines, each one a perfect golden brown disc. She took them over to the counter and, reaching for a spatula, began to transfer them onto a plate. Sometimes Eric wondered how she did it, especially with eggs and sugar still rationed almost eight years after the end of the war, but somehow she never let things get in her way.<sup>187</sup>

The change in narrative style and perspective offers a definite line of separation between the two novels, and there is something quirky about having a book inside a book because it detracts away from the traditional novel form of one straight narrative running throughout the novel. Equally, Horowitz has crafted the two narratives in such a way as to be easy and comfortable for the reader to follow as they glide from one narrative into the next, then back into the first

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<sup>186</sup> Anthony Horowitz, *Moonflower Murders* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2020), p 82.

<sup>187</sup> Horowitz, *Moonflower Murders*, p 1 of Alan Conway, *Atticus Pünd Takes the Case*.

narrative, as opposed to several narrative streams working alongside each other as with, say, *House of Leaves* or *S.* The linearity is clear and the reader can largely relax into reading in the traditional novel format, and yet *Moonflower Murders* still offers the reader something different in terms of challenging the way in which a novel can be structured to include two stories in one.

At the same time, there is certainly present a sense that *Moonflower Murders* is a celebration of the physical novel. Conway's novel within the main novel is lovingly reconstructed as a physical book, which any one of the characters that populate the fictional universe of the novel could conceivably purchase. As such, there is a nod to the physical book as a work of art above the mere housing of a story or set of information. Similarly, whilst *Moonflower Murders* would still function as an ebook, there is something attractive about seeing these two physical books set out on paper, one inside the other, which gives the overall effect of *Moonflower Murders* being an item to treasure. For instance, the inner cover of the 2020 Penguin Random House hardback edition has a black and white illustration of the seaside hotel that is the setting of the novel, and that adorns both the front and back covers as a piece of artwork that arguably stands out more in ink on paper than on a screen in the form of digital code. Similarly, Alan Conway's novel has its own front cover that also features the seaside hotel, which again is captivating as ink on paper, arguably standing out more so than it would do when viewed as digital data on a screen. On top of this, the narrative that comes before Conway's novel begins points towards the physical novel as a shareable object that again is a sensual experience. Here the narrator of the main novel describes being handed a physical copy of Conway's novel to read: 'The paperback was in front of me. I ran my fingers across the

raised letters of the title, feeling them as if they were in Braille'.<sup>188</sup> These two sentences seem to suggest Horowitz is wanting to remind his readers of the joys of reading a physical book, holding something in your hands, and also how a physical book can be left out for someone else to pick up on a whim. In many ways these sentences also speak a truth that is reflected in the time of *Moonflower Murders* release, that sales of physical books in the actual world remain strong and have not been depleted by the invention of the ebook, most likely because a sizeable number of readers still enjoy the sensuality of holding a book in their hands.

Earlier on in this chapter was analysis of some of Will Self's novels as examples by means of reinforcing his notion of what could be classed as literary novels. This analysis was at times scathing of the language Self used in his writing, which could be construed as jarringly pretentious and esoteric, abstract in its description, and for some readers too taxing on the mind to be considered relaxing entertainment. In contrast, Horowitz's narrative style in *Moonflower Murder* came across as more easily digestible in comparison, being not so steeped in metaphor or abstract description, yet it could also be classed as literary in its easy manner of show don't tell, and use of emotive description so that the reader can build an empathic response to the story with ease. For example is this passage describing the scene upon entering the lobby of the hotel, and the reader being introduced to Derek Endicott who is on the reception desk:

He was in his forties, but his face had a childlike quality,  
with plump cheeks, thick lips, the sort of skin that

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<sup>188</sup> Horowitz, *Moonflower Murders*, p 226.

suggested he never shaved. He had already taken his place behind the reception desk, tucked away in the cave form by the staircase that swung diagonally over him on its way up to the first floor. I noticed he had some food in a plastic Tupperware box as well as a Thermos and a puzzle magazine.<sup>189</sup>

From these few sentences, the reader can form an image of how Derek looks, the isolation of the environment in which he works, and also some details about his personality, such as Derek being a practical thinker who brings his lunch to work and has a puzzle book on hand for quiet periods. Also, there is a sense of loneliness about the scenario, the presence of the Tupperware box of lunch and puzzle book suggests Derek is used to eating lunch alone. The reader is able to discern myriad information from this short passage, and there is a distinct absence of complex metaphors to unpick. The reader is transported straight into the setting of the hotel lobby, but they are also allowed the freedom to build a personal image of the scene and of Derek utilising the language they are offered.

Horowitz's writing could also be termed as literary when playing with the reality effect, drawing on actual world references to which the reader can relate and divulge some deeper meaning with relative ease. He sets out parts of his story as if the characters could walk off the pages of the novel and comfortably occupy the actual world, because to a large extent their fictional universe is similar to the reader's own, as this passage demonstrates:

I remember talking it through with production, telling them how we had to avoid the simple outlines and the pastel

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<sup>189</sup> Horowitz, *Moonflower Murders*, p 65 – 66.



colours of a long-forgotten Enid Blyton England even if that was where these books were effectively set. There were plenty of publishers – the British Library Crime Classics, for example – who were already crowding out the front table of Waterstones with their vintage editions and we had to stand apart from them. Alan was an original, modern author, much more than an imitator of Dorothy L. Sayers or John Dickinson Carr.<sup>190</sup>

This easy conversational style is steeped in literary references that indicate to the reader Conway's character and writing style, and also reflects the reality at the time of release of *Moonflower Murders* in suggesting that crime fiction was a big seller in book retail. Horowitz himself said 'I think the real attraction of murder mystery, it somehow is a world contained within itself....you can forget the picture of the bigger picture of the outside world and just be sucked in and completely absorbed by the puzzle'.<sup>191</sup> There is certainly truth in this, but the key also to a crime or mystery thriller is that there is embedded into the narrative enough of a reflection of the actual world so that the reader can easily build a mental image of the characters and setting, and it avoids emotional alienation as the reader can more easily depict the characters as real human beings.

A further contemporary example of the melding together of genre and literary fiction comes from award winning American novelist Anita Felicelli's 2019 novel *Chimerica*.<sup>192</sup> Felicelli deftly draws from several genres in *Chimerica*, a combination of magical realism, courtroom drama and sci-fi, whilst also

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<sup>190</sup> Horowitz, *Moonflower Murders*, p 95.

<sup>191</sup> 'Highlights from the Hard Shoulder: Anthony Horowitz Talks to Mark Cagney', Ireland's Newstalk FM, 2 September 2020, 11:13pm.

<sup>192</sup> Anita Felicelli, *Chimerica* (California: WTAW Press, 2019),

weaving into the narrative elements of mythology. The story is based around a female lawyer, Maya, living in California, who becomes embroiled in defending a rare breed of lemur that has walked out of a mural painted on the side of a building by a graffiti artist of great standing in the fictional universe of the novel. The case sparks controversy over claims the lemur's actions have caused damage to private property, as well as reducing the value of the mural. What starts off as an absurdist notion, a two dimensional painted lemur coming to life and walking out of a painting, becomes a magical realist adventure, largely because most the characters of the novel do not seem to over-react to the absurdity of the situation, but rather quickly accept the talking lemur as part of society without really questioning how his existence is possible. For instance, in this scene in which the lemur first enters Maya's life, his existence is briefly questioned and then accepted:

I looked up. A giant lemur was leaning against the chain link fence....I thought for a moment that the lemur had escaped from the nearby zoo, but he was much too large, not quite the size of an adult human, but over four feet – far larger than your average housecat. My skin crawled – he was familiar and vulnerable as a child and yet so completely inhuman. “Took you long enough to notice my existence,” said the lemur. <sup>193</sup>

The scene then continues, and within two paragraph's Maya has established the lemur wants her help in getting back to Madagascar where he feels he belongs, and then invites him in to stay in her home. Felicelli allows the reader to enjoy

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<sup>193</sup> Felicelli, p 14.

the premise of the story without the narrative being bogged down with long explanations of how the lemur came to be, or various characters entering a panic state when faced with an over-sized talking lemur. Magical realism depicts the actual world but also injects into the narrative a sensational element that defies the laws of the actual world, and allows the reader to enter a mindset that the narrative will largely follow the rules of the actual world except with an absurdist type twist. In fact, Felicelli does much to heighten the reality effect, writing sections of text in such a way as to appear like conversations had between users on a social media site, for example pages 28 to 31 where a debate rages between several characters over whether the lemur or the artist are right in this scenario. The effect of sharing this public opinion highlights how the Internet and social media has in contemporary society become a sounding board for society to share their opinions on a global topic, and how it leaks into every aspect of our personal lives, even when we don't want it to. This adds to the narrative a depth inherent in literary fiction, provoking the reader to consider how social media can be a negative influence in the twenty-first century, whilst not explicitly pointing out this critique of the modern era. Equally, there is comment peppered throughout the narrative about the damaging effect of the media who hound Maya and the Lemur. This is suggestively Felicelli injecting into the story her personal views on the very real controversy over whether media channels can be too intrusive to the point that they provoke mental and physical health issues in those they are portraying in their reporting. As such it could be said that the novel is literary in its wanting to encourage its readers to consider real and contemporary issues from the standpoint of a range of views, and also bring to light how aspects of contemporary society, such as social

media, are at times damaging to our mental health. It has depth to the narrative, yet it also sets out to entertain by parading as a sort of realist/ fantasy story of a mythical animal feeling out of place in his current environment and wanting to get home.

Once the lemur's existence has been accepted, and the reader settles into a fictional reality which allows a talking lemur that was once a two dimensional painting to interact with others as a walking, talking character, so the courtroom drama narrative takes effect as a legal battle ensues with Maya and the lemur on one side who argue the lemur's right to journey to Madagascar, and the artist of the mural, Brian Turner, who believes the lemur's walking away is an act of vandalism and has devalued his work of art. This narrative plays out through courtroom scenes and boardroom meetings, but what is skilful about Felicelli's execution of all this is that she dips into legal terminology and set-up, but does not bog the reader down with long explanations, instead leaving it for the reader to research for themselves if a term is to them unknown. For instance, she writes: 'next, the judge limited voir dire to only one hour questioning prospective jurors',<sup>194</sup> taking care not to spoil the flow of the narrative by directly defining the process of 'voir dire', which can be inferred from her writing as a period of time for each side to question the jury for their suitability. Throughout the story there are several similar instances where legal and courtroom terminology is used and not explicitly explained, but this is never confusing for the lay reader with little knowledge of law because the text is well written, and as such the reader is clear what is happening at all times without having to have everything explained to them. Surely this is a case towards the

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<sup>194</sup> Felicelli, p 205.

literary/ genre novel, which affords readers some intellect to gather the information for themselves, whilst also offering grounding in familiar tropes, such as in this case the courtroom drama, so the reader knows to an extent what to expect.

On top of this, elements of mythology drift through the story as necessary pointers to exploring the lemur as a character, and also to give depth to the cause of his wanting to return to Madagascar. For instance, on pages 18 and 19 is a short piece titled 'The Lost Continent of Lemuria' that hypothesised there was at one time a lost continent connecting Madagascar to America, which in particular presents a short but compelling argument as to how lemurs came to settle in Madagascar, and at the same time bolsters a central conceit to the narrative of a mission to get the lemur back to his natural home. Such sections as these in *Chimerica* are often written in a different typeface to the main text and so stand out, but they also add to the realism of the story by appearing as sections taken from historical texts that exist in the actual world. The reader is led to ponder whether there is truth in them saying, for instance, that lemurs came to live in Madagascar because it was once a part of what is now the continent of America, and at the same time these sections give credibility to the overall concept of the story. In this sense Felicelli could be said to be playing with the reader's intellect, presenting a case and then asking the reader to decide what they want to believe or take as pure fiction. Equally, there is something to be said about the masterful way in which Felicelli has crafted these sections to fit into the main body of the text, much in the way Horowitz designed *Moonflower Murders* to be a novel inside a novel.

A final point is that there is a sci-fi element to *Chimerica* in a sort of side-line plot to the main narrative, as it is suggested throughout the story that Maya has a doppelganger living another life simultaneous alongside her own. At times Maya sees flashes of the doppelganger, but for the most part there are merely hints of Maya having already been somewhere that she clearly hasn't. This notion is initially entered into the story early on, and as with the magical realism element of the lemur's existence, does not cause great alarm but is seemingly calmly accepted by Maya. Although initially Maya comments: 'My heart started to seize. I was dizzy with the thought that I was hallucinating, that I was going to meet myself',<sup>195</sup> she then becomes intrigued by the notion, rather than scared of or shocked by it. A failing of the narrative, however, is that the notion of why Maya has a double is never fully realised. Indeed it at first adds an uncanny element to the story for the reader to brood over, particularly so as past halfway into the novel there comes a suggestion of time-slips and the double being a fourth-dimensional being. However, it could be said that Felicelli fails to really draw a conclusion as to why this happening, or in the least this conclusion was not an obvious one, and so what could have been a real creeping type horror, sci-fi element is somehow never truly realised.

Despite this relatively small plot failing, let it be said that in all these generic tropes and elements, Felicelli executes a literary work that draws from sci-fi, magical realism, courtroom drama and mythology, whilst also telling a feminist tale with heart about a lemur who wants to be back in the wild, and a female lawyer who wants to be accepted in a largely male dominant environment. Equally, *Chimerica* is further evidence of what could be suggested

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<sup>195</sup> Felicelli, P 37.

as the near, and possibly distant, future of the novel in terms of offering a generic/ literary style that is entertaining and intelligently written. It is largely realist and reflective of the actual world so the reader can build empathy with the characters and their story, it straddles elements of what can be classed as literary in its writing and clever construction that draws on several generic elements at once, and it comments on current topics whilst subtly weaving a number of views into the story so the reader is able to gain a rounded perspective of contemporary issues from which to make their own decisions.

Literary critic Harriet Hawkins contributes to the debate over a snobbery towards genre fiction by asking 'to what degree is 'good' or 'bad' literature an artificial category? Are there any good – or bad – reasons why most societies have given high status to certain works of art and not others?',<sup>196</sup> before going on to suggest that particularly in the classroom, now is the time to remove the labelling of certain novels as being more worthy in terms of literary merit than others. Arguably, her questions over what should be deemed as good or bad literature underpins much of Self's protestations of the death of the novel, as he made clear his view that he believes the literary novel, which would fit into a category of 'high art', is no longer valued by the everyman to the extent that such literary novels are disappearing from mass culture. Hawkins puts an alternative spin on societal need in suggesting what should and shouldn't be widely read, making a point that elitism is damaging for adult readers. She argues that if we are forced in schools to read certain texts or authors, her focus particularly on the certainty of being taught Shakespeare at some time in every British or

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<sup>196</sup> Harriet Hawkins, *Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf: 1990), p 105.

American pupil's school life, this could actively put an individual off enjoying reading into adulthood if they carry with them a memory of having to read stuff that wasn't enjoyed. This is reflected in her stating 'it is not the artistic tradition but the academic tradition that has erected barriers between 'high art' and popular genres',<sup>197</sup> suggesting that the Western education system has had much influence over a general view of the classification of literature. There is certainly something in this comment, as well as her view that possibly literary education should be more focused towards the enjoyment of reading over being told to read something because it is part of a pre approved canon of literary texts. Through much of Hawkins's piece on Shakespeare and popular genre texts there is a focus on the importance of allowing the younger generations, those particularly of school age, to enjoy rather than have to endure the experience of reading, which is an important issue if we as a society want to maintain a healthy audience for the novel for generations to come.

On a similar note, literary scholars Rene Wellek and Austin Warren speak of 'sub-literary' literature, such as pulp fiction, as a form of escape and amusement for its readers, rather than striving to be useful or instructive. On this type of pulp fiction they suggest 'it is probable that all are is 'sweet' and 'useful' to its appropriate users... that it gives them pleasure by the skill with which it articulates what they take to be something like their own reverie or reflection and by the release they experience through this articulation'.<sup>198</sup> What this is suggestive of is a sense that whilst some critics may not see such 'simplistic' writing as of any great use in terms of its imparting knowledge or

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<sup>197</sup> Hawkins, p 113.

<sup>198</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd edn (London: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p 31.



ingenuity in the craft of writing, there is a body of readers who will in fact take much away a great deal from their reading experience. In essence, it can not be suggested that popular forms of writing don't have a place in society because there is indeed an audience of readers who do turn to such literary entertainment as a means of reflecting on their own lives and the world around them. Again, this imparts a message to not determine what readers *should* be reading, but rather let individuals enjoy all types of narrative. Indeed, Wellek and Warren go on to stress that the novel has really always been about escaping the bounds of artistic snobbery in speaking of 'the widespread association of the novel with entertainment, amusement, and escape rather than serious art'.<sup>199</sup> Here is a suggestion that individual novels should not be judged for their artistic quality over the enjoyment some readers get from reading them, because the main focus of storytelling is entertainment. What also comes through in Wellek and Warren's theorisation of high art and the novel, is that focus needs to be on the reader and their enjoyment of what they are reading, and not whether they are reading the "right" type of literature. This is certainly a lesson to put into practice when considering how to preserve an audience for the novel into the future, and further points towards the novel's longevity being about catering to the needs of a variety of readers. As such, promoting and supporting the merging of literary and genre novels could certainly convince a current a future society of the novel's ability to offer fictional narrative intelligent entertainment and escapism to match anything that can be watched on a screen.

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<sup>199</sup> Wellek & Warren, p 212.

## Chapter Four: Against the Death of the Novel

To counteract the belief of Self and other critics stating that the novel can or has reached its expiry date, there are those who argue that the novel has a positive future. Similarly, as Self declares that interest in the deep and serious reading required for engaging with novels is on the decline amongst the reading public, there is certainly evidence to suggest the contrary. Also, in an era in which digital technology is playing an increasingly important role in our lives, there are ways in which such technologies have been a positive for the novel rather than having the serious negative impact on society's drive towards reading for pleasure as Self suggests. In this penultimate chapter will be explored these themes from a contemporary perspective, as well as further discussion around the importance of keeping the reading public reading now in order that the novel can thrive for generations to come.

Speaking to the audience at the Edinburgh World Writer's Conference in August 2012 at a talk on *Will the Novel Remain Writers' Favourite Narrative Form?*, novelist and poet Ben Okri speaks of 'an underlying culture of despair',<sup>200</sup> before going on to articulate a positive statement about how he believes the novel is far from dead as an art form and literary medium. Okri's view is simply that the novel is still relatively young as a literary medium, and that the novel form possesses the ability to regenerate and adapt into new forms, so as to remain current to a contemporary society. Rather than accepting there is nothing more for the novel form to offer, Okri states 'I think the real challenge is to

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<sup>200</sup> 'Will the Novel Remain Writers' Favourite Narrative Form?', The Edinburgh World Writer's Conference, (Edinburgh, UK, 22 August 2012), viewed at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTb\\_CCukdnU&app=desktop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTb_CCukdnU&app=desktop)>

change the form of the novel in terms of how we read it'.<sup>201</sup> These changes, he goes on to discuss, can be to change the order in which the novel is read, or to further explore ways in which reality can be expressed through lengthy prose. What was particularly engaging about Okri's speech was his reiteration that the novel is an ideal and open form for expressing reality. This is reflected in him saying:

I think each person in them carries a special way of perceiving reality, and I think this is what the novel does; the novel constantly challenges us to say that the way that we're told how the world is is not the way the world is; the world is much more mysterious than that....I would just like to propose that we talk about where we can go as novelists, and where we can go as writers, and whether we accept the fact that we are totally determined by the market place.<sup>202</sup>

Here Okri begins with imploring the audience to see the novel as a perfect vehicle for presenting an individual's view of the world, before going on to conclude his speech by stating that discussions should be opened up on how novelists can expand the novel, as well as challenge their allegiance to the literary market. This is an important speech in ensuring the longevity of the novel, highlighting that the literary form needs to remain alive and an active agent in offering an individual a source of entertainment during their free time because it plays a vital role in society as an important vehicle for explaining the world. As was much discussed in chapter three, the immersive and empathic

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<sup>201</sup> 'Will the Novel Remain Writers' Favourite Narrative Form?'.  
<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

nature of the novel engaging with a lengthy fictional story based on real life told through a range of characters' perspectives, offers the individual a deeper and more rounded view of an event, topic or argument. On top of this, Okri hints at the novel market being a key factor in the novelist's life, but also the novel market has a certain level of control over creativity applied to the novel.

This last point was raised again a year later, in August 2013, also at an Edinburgh World Writer's Conference, this time in a talk on *The Future of the Novel*, as novelist and academic China Miéville expressed a feeling that since the turn of the twenty-first century, the novel market has seen a loss of a sense of creative chaos in the novel, and instead there is 'quite a premium on a sense of control in the novel'.<sup>203</sup> In terms of control, he clarifies, novel writing, he feels, has come to follow rigid structures that have been proven to turn profit, which seems to be the focus of the novel market rather than writers being given freedom to explore different avenues by letting their writing go where it takes them. Whilst this is similar to what Self is concerned about in terms of a loss of literary writing in the face of commercial gain, it was optimistic that Miéville then went on to say that in recent years there is evidence that some writers have been attempting to break out of the traditional novel form, and that this is possibly linked to such global issues as the financial crisis. Although Miéville didn't deepen his exploration of this line of discussion by providing examples before the topic of conversation moved on to the role of the reader, this notion of taking control in terms of creativity in the novel was then expressed through Miéville speaking positively upon the subject of how in recent years readers have started taking control through such means as fan fiction. As a writer himself who

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<sup>203</sup> 'Will the Novel Remain Writers' Favourite Narrative Form?'

looks to radicalise our perception of 'normal' through his genre bending and postmodernist novels, there is certainly passion in his imploring the reading public and publishing market to revolutionise the novel as we know it today. Equally, there is a sense in his speech that Mieville feels writing in general, and in particular the novel, is at a point where it can hit back at those who are controlling the market in order to make as much profit as possible, suggesting that the future for the novel lies in contemporary novelists challenging what has come before.

In a similar vein, poet George Szirtes questions, in an article written in 2012 for *The Guardian*, why novelists fear the death of the novel rather than focusing on its ability to regenerate in order to remain relevant to an ever-changing society, and thus survive as a popular narrative form. He argues that the novel is 'a specific but not fixed form of storytelling',<sup>204</sup> which, he goes on to assert, is positive in that it allows for the form to be adapted in order to please a new audience. Szirtes goes on to speak of how there is certainly truth in the idea of the novel's strength as a flexible narrative form, much as Gasset did in his views on the novel's decline as outlined in chapter two of this thesis. This, Szirtes believes, is largely due to the form being open to adaptation, but also the fact that society will always desire a lengthy narrative prose form. He reiterates that the novel can certainly be saved from death and it will surely always have a place in society because 'the instinct to story does not die',<sup>205</sup> which goes against Self's protestations that storytelling is in decline because of a rise in use of digital technology. In this is a belief in the novel as an effective storytelling form that

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<sup>204</sup> George Szirtes, *The Death of the Novel will Presage a Rebirth of Writing* (2012), <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2012/aug/22/death-of-the-novel-rebirth-writing>> [accessed 12 May 2014].

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

will always be written and read as long as there are stories to be told. Szirtes, however, does offer in his article a rounded view by also admitting 'the novel may be dying – it does get to feeling a bit tired at times', suggesting that whilst it isn't necessarily dead yet, it is undeniable, in his view, that some sort of a revival of the form is needed. What Szirtes's largely hopeful view offers overall is both an admission that the novel is not immune to cultural death, as well as an assertion that some form of extensive prose fiction, such as the novel, will surely always exist in society because the format is embedded in Western culture.

Across all three of these writers' opinions on a positive view of the novel's future, is a truth that there are so many perspectives to take that it is foolish to set down with certainty a statement that the novel is dead because currently literary writing is in decline or digital technology is distracting the reading public away from the act of reading for pleasure. Rather, these comments focus on movements towards, or possibilities for, change in terms of the form of and creativity applied to the novel, but also the novel's resilience as a literary form. Okri speaks of how the novel is still an ideal genre through which reality can be presented in new forms that build on what has come before, whilst Mieville offers hope in his view that creativity is winning the war over control from those using writing more as a means of making money than the desire to use the novel as a form of expression, and Szirtes reminds us that we will always desire telling lengthy prose stories.

Also in support of a healthy future for the novel, in a public event at the 2016 The Cheltenham Times Literary Festival entitled *An Insider's Guide to the*

*Publishing World*,<sup>206</sup> Cathy Rentzenbrink, the then editor of industry source *The Bookseller*, spoke about the current state of the publishing industry to guest speakers James Daunt, MD of Waterstones, Joanna Prior, MD of Penguin General Books, Clare Alexander, literary agent at Aitken Alexander, and Crystal Mahey-Morgan, founder of publishing corporation OWN-IT. The talk drew together a range of voices from those who were keen to share their opinions on the current health of the market for fiction, with guest speakers coming from a variety of positions inside the publishing industry. Crystal Mahey-Morgan spoke openly about her publishing corporation OWN-IT, which she refers to as a 'storytelling lifestyle brand'.<sup>207</sup> The corporation works to promote and support authors attempting to break from the traditional mould of storytelling formats, and in particular offers publishing deals to writers of experimental fiction. Mahey-Morgan shared a fact with the audience at the Literary Festival talk that currently the least literate group in the Western world are UK residents aged 16–25, and it is this demographic, she goes on to argue, that should be the target audience for experimental novels. In particular she spoke of experimenting with novels that embrace technology, because it is her belief that not only will this encourage those of the younger and emerging generations, who have largely grown up engaging on a regular basis with digital technology, to take an interest in reading for pleasure. Mahey-Morgan also expresses a belief it could also help to ensure that the novel remains a stable entertainment form into the future as society increasingly learns to live alongside digital technologies.<sup>208</sup> In this is a notion that when a younger reader goes to pick up their smart phone, there is a

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<sup>206</sup> 'An Insider's Guide to the Publishing World', in *The Times Literary Festival* (Cheltenham, UK, 13 October 2016).

<sup>207</sup> Own It, <<http://www.ownit.london/about/>> [accessed 3 May 2017].

<sup>208</sup> *An Insider's Guide to the Publishing World*.

hope maybe some are encouraged to engage with a novel in the form of an app over, for example, social media sites or games. Mahey-Morgan went on to argue that novelists and publishers shouldn't fear technology, but rather they should work with it and incorporate it into their narrative process. She shared her belief that the key to a good marriage between technology and storytelling is to focus on creating a well-rounded story first and then integrate technology into the narrative, otherwise if a writer is overly focused on the technological element they will set themselves up for failure in captivating an audience with their narrative prose.<sup>209</sup> Mahey-Morgan is imploring society that in order to gain a wider younger audience, novelists should start to think about incorporating digital technology into the form, and as such it is hoped a love of reading will be kept alive amongst the younger generations, who will then hopefully go on to be novel readers into their adulthood. Cathy Rentzenbrink, however, put across a counterpoint to Mahey-Morgan's drive for more experimental novels in highlighting that currently experimental novels don't sell as well as those written in a traditional format. As a result, she goes on to argue, publishing houses would be taking a huge financial risk in publishing experimental novels,<sup>210</sup> which is certainly a challenge in radicalising the novel form. Yet Joanna Prior made a valid point that the publishing industry is the largest creative industry in terms of output,<sup>211</sup> which surely puts the novel in good stead to ensure its future survival. If writing as an industry is strong in terms of financial backing and serving a large body of creative writers, then surely the novel has a healthier chance of a

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<sup>209</sup> 'An Insider's Guide to the Publishing World'.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.



future in terms of those who want to write novels being better supported to do so, and keeping the reading public interested in the novel through promotion.

Picking up on Mahey-Morgan's point about merging the novel with new technologies, a contemporary example of a novel that has done just this is *The Silent History*, a collaborative piece between Eli Horowitz, Matthew Derby, and Kevin Moffett. *The Silent History* was first published in 2014 and began life as a digital novel told in parts, and was designed specifically to operate on Apple OS. The main synopsis of the story is that a widespread pandemic has hit which means all children are inexplicably born without the ability to speak or comprehend language. The narrative is told through a series of monologues offered by 120 different characters with varying relationships to the unfolding pandemic, such as teachers, parents, doctors, imposters, cult leaders, friends, and profiteers, and each chapter is told from a different character's perspective. The novel was first released as an app exclusively for *Apple's* iPad and iPhone at the start of 2013, redefining what is meant by the term 'novel' by transposing it into a digital format.

There are two levels to the digitised novel form that work alongside each other, with readers being able in the first instance to access a number of the character monologues to reach much as a prose narrative, whilst parts of the narrative are revealed to the reader when they are in a specific geographical location. The first element comes in the form of testimonials that are narrated by a range of characters. These appear as monologues given by the characters to describe the event like a newsreel, the event being that their society is coming to terms with the fact that children are being born without the comprehension of or ability to use language. The second element comes in the form of field reports,

which are site-specific reports written in collaboration with the characters who offer the testimonials, and are unlocked using GPS. The idea is that the novel is read on your iPad or iPhone so that when a reader is in a certain physical location in the US, the device will trigger an alert that a new field report linked to that area is available to them. This is to offer a heightened sense of reality, as if the reader is receiving a real-life news bulletin, but also there is a breaking down of the fourth wall as the report will draw into its narrative physical aspects of that area, such as mentioning a certain architectural or landscape feature that is present in the actual world, a house on that particular street with a blue door for example. Thus the novel was, in its original form, taken out of the pages of a book, and was placed into a digital platform that mirrored the way in which society today would receive news of a global pandemic through reports and accounts fed straight to a digital device.

In 2014 *The Silent History* was also released in paper book and ebook form.<sup>212</sup> It is the paperback version that I will be discussing and drawing from in this thesis, largely due to my not having a mobile Apple product on which to access the original digital release. In the paper book the testimonials are ordered into a timeline from the year 2011 to 2043, and they follow in sequence throughout the book so that the narrative builds from the start of the pandemic when it becomes apparent the children are completely silent at birth, to a point far into the future where the community of characters have reached some sort of a conclusion to the situation. Marie-Laure Ryan believes ‘a narrative text is the representation of a number of events in a time sequence’,<sup>213</sup> and in the case of

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<sup>212</sup> Eli Horowitz et al, *The Silent History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

<sup>213</sup> Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, p 109.

*The Silent History* the sequence is important in building a sense of drama as the reader accompanies the characters on a process of learning about the pandemic, before attempting to resolve the situation. The sequence also follows the reporting of a wide-spread global event or catastrophe as it would play out in the actual world, with characters initially commenting on a rising feeling that something serious is occurring in their community, scientists later on building conclusions about what was happening with the generation of children born without speech, and finally a future in which the characters make amends with the situation. In a manner, this linear timeline 'represents a chronologically ordered sequence of states and events, which captures a segment of history – the history of the textual universe',<sup>214</sup> and this is important also for the reality effect because the sequence is set out to reflect how it would play out in the actual world. As a digital novel this would feel more like the newsreel that it is intended to be, especially as acquiring news digitally through mobile phones and other portable digital devices is a growing trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The effect therefore would be as if living through an event that, although is happening in a fictional universe, feels as if it could be happening right now in the actual world.

The way in which the testimonials are set out is in a conversational style that appears as citizens being interviewed for their perspective on the events unfolding, which is how the piece as a whole is set out as the prologue introduces the reader to Hugh Purcell, an Executive Director whose job it is to 'find people who had come into contact with silents and record their testimony'.<sup>215</sup> Straight away the reader is given the set-up of the novel, and they are told that what will

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<sup>214</sup> Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, p 124.

<sup>215</sup> Eli Horowitz, p 3.

follow are a number of testimonials narrating what is happening in the fictional universe of the text. Yet even in the composition of the testimonials, Horowitz, Derby and Moffett bring into play the reality effect by setting the speech out in a natural style, as if the characters are in conversation with the reader. For example:

There was one in Newark, right next to the Jackson Street Bridge, and another off 280 where kids were living in retired school buses. There were a few in Elizabeth and a huge one in Bayonne in the old Manhattan Chocolate & Nuts building. In Jersey City there was a condemned ballpark where a small group of them made a home out of the concession area. I'm just thinking of some of the places I'd visit most frequently.<sup>216</sup>

Here the character, August Burnham, points out locations as if they would be familiar to the reader, also drawing the reader into her world and speaking as if she is a neighbour recounting her experience. By mentioning actual world fixtures, such as the 'Jackson Street Bridge', this allows any readers who are familiar with this part of Manhattan to place this fictional character in the actual world.

Similarly, there are times in which a character will mention another character, but will address the reader as if they also know this character on a personal level, drawing the reader into the illusion that they are a part of the community in the fictional universe. Here, another character, Steve Greener, deviates from his monologue into an aside that assumes the reader shares his opinion of a particular character:

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<sup>216</sup> Eli Horowitz, p 205.

When Royce's big article on phasic resistance came out –  
fucking Royce, who was if you remember the dumb shit who  
“accidentally” shot his production assistant in the shoulder in  
Uganda – how he ended up doing a cover story for *Time* is  
beyond me, but the article came out and caused a low-grade  
panic to sweep through the country.<sup>217</sup>

Again there is some breaking down of the fourth wall as Steve Greener assumes the reader knows exactly whom Royce is and what he has done. As literary critic John Mullan highlights, creating a character that represents so closely a real person means that the reader is more likely to give into the illusion that the fictional story being read is really a factual account.<sup>218</sup> Certainly this is particularly important for *The Silent History* because the plot is almost entirely character driven, and as such a rapport must develop between the reader and the characters in order to maintain the reader's interest, particularly as there is little real description of the setting to draw the reader in and make them feel a part of that fictional universe. Equally, the work as a whole relies on the reader suspending their disbelief, and allowing themselves to believe that this is a real global pandemic happening around them, in order to live within the action of the story, rather than act as a passive observer.

The concept was interesting, particularly as a reader being made to consider how different the world would be if a whole generation were born silent and resistant to learning language. However in book form the discourse came across as dry, and the lack of descriptive writing meant that at times it can

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<sup>217</sup> Eli Horowitz, p 50.

<sup>218</sup> Mullan, p 79.

often fail to draw the reader in to the action or drama of the narrative. A part of the issue also is that there are such a number of characters and their monologues are mostly 2 – 5 pages long, so as soon as you become immersed in one character's story the narrative pulls you into another, and there is little time to really sink into the flow of reading lengthy prose. Possibly if I had had access to the app the reading experience would have been entirely different, likely because the novel would feel less like a collection of monologues with an interlinking theme, and more like an unfolding true-life report or newsreel. Part of the digital element's failing is that the app is too exclusive in terms of being tied to a particular brand, and also the extra field reports are based only in locations in the US.

In a personal interview with Russell Quinn, co-creator of *The Silent History* app, he explained that a key focus with the app was not to make something gimmicky, but rather to develop a narrative experience with a realist element.<sup>219</sup> He also commented it was important that readers who did want to read the novel but didn't want to or couldn't download the app, could still enjoy the story. In terms of accessibility this is key, largely because the app is marketed towards a certain type of person who both lives in or near New York and possesses a portable Apple device such as an iPhone or iPad. This level of exclusivity means that the app doesn't necessarily have the global inclusivity of such location-based app functions as, for example, Pokémon Go. What was also interesting was that Quinn expressed trepidation over expecting the reading public to engage with a new style and an unfamiliar novel format. He spoke of

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<sup>219</sup> Russell Quinn, Personal Interview, 19 July 2016.

there being 'a block on readability and enjoyment because the form is unfamiliar', but also:

With a straight prose narrative the reader is so comfortable with the format that they don't need to put any of their concentration into navigating the text. With this app style, however, the reader needs to concentrate on navigating through the story, and so they can't fully relax into the story world.<sup>220</sup>

Although I didn't read the novel through the app, I certainly agree with this comment because the presentation of the narrative as testimonials gave a jarring feel to my reading experience when read in book form, as if the story lost its flow because as soon as I was settled into one character's voice I was thrown into another a couple of pages on.

This resonates with what Crystal Mahey-Morgan expressed in The Cheltenham Times Literature Festival talk about how it is key to ensure the technology is supported by a well-written and engaging narrative, something which it can be said was partly achieved in *The Silent History* because the monologues are certainly not poorly written, the characters are believable, and there is effective fictional world building. However, the narrative as a whole had to be cut into sections of monologues in order that it could work alongside the app, and in this it could be said to have lost the comfort and immersion of a prose narrative flow, especially as there was a distinct lack of descriptive text in-between the monologues. Marie-Laure Ryan asks not 'what should I do with

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<sup>220</sup> Quinn.

texts?', but rather 'what *can* I do with texts',<sup>221</sup> and whilst there is merit in this, it certainly felt throughout the conversation with Russell Quinn that this point should be taken with caution, so as not to risk producing a novel form that could alienate or deter readers by going outside the bounds of comfort or limiting an experience to those who have access to certain technologies. A final point that Quinn also made in terms of the production of the piece as a whole, which is equally something for consideration in thinking about merging technology and the novel, is that the project was an expensive and arduous task. In the first instance the narrative had to be set down before the creation of an app in which to house it, and at this stage it was imperative that the narrative was engaging, logical and coherent. Quinn very much expressed an opinion that future ventures such as this would require ample financial backing, as well as a sizable team with both creative writing and computer-based skills. It is understandable that a novel form such as *The Silent History* would be financially risky, because there needs to be a ready audience in order to guarantee a recouping the production costs, and although this was not a subject raised directly in conversation with Quinn, the feeling was that a creative team needs to go into such a project knowing they have an audience to which to market their novel.

Even with its failings in terms of exclusivity of the app and production costs, credit must still be given to the creators of *The Silent History*, the novel and the app, in experimenting with utilising digital technology as a platform through which to take their novel off the page and into the hands of the smartphone user, both deepening the realist element that the novel form does well to capture, and

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<sup>221</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p 99.



merging the novel with popular technology so as to remain current to the lifestyles of contemporary society. Even Quinn admitted:

The aim was to create an immersive experience so the reader would truly engage in the text if they were reading a testimonial in a certain location, and the text describes exactly where they were. For example if the narrator speaks of a house with a red door and there is one in the location that they are in.<sup>222</sup>

For those experiencing *The Silent History* through the app, it could certainly be said that on this level the novel would achieve its aim of the reader living through the experience alongside the characters, as opposed to being a passive observer as with a film or TV programme.

Literary scholar Thomas Pavel believes that a realist perspective and a reader's connection to the fictional world of the text rely on a common aesthetic intuition that things found in novels would be in some way possible if found in real life.<sup>223</sup> This is certainly heightened in *The Silent History*, and particularly in the app that draws actual world features into the fictional testimonials of the characters. Similarly, literary critic Elizabeth Deeds argues that 'the genial consensus of realistic narration implies a unity in human experience which assures us that we all inhabit the same world'<sup>224</sup>, and again this is much a feature of *The Silent History* as the narrative wants the reader to feel that they are a part of the pandemic at the heart of the narrative. Deeds also makes a valid point that

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<sup>222</sup> Quinn.

<sup>223</sup> T. G. Pavel, "'Possible Worlds' in Literary Semantics", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34 (1975), 165–76, p 167.

<sup>224</sup> Elizabeth Deeds, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p 65.

a realist narrative aims to render a continuity in time, almost so that the reader feels as if any of the fictional characters could 'walk over the threshold into the realistic world'.<sup>225</sup> This is to an extent achieved through the conversational style of the testimonials, but there was also a timeless quality, as if were the dates of the testimonials to be removed the narrative could largely transcend into any time period.

As an experiment with the novel and modern digital technology, *The Silent History* would no doubt work for some, namely those iPhone users living in the right area to take advantage of the mobile enabled content. For those readers and users it will bring the novel to life, merging the fictional with the actual world. For those that can't access the extra content, the novel as a whole stands up as a coherent narrative, but at times lacks a sense of drama, suspense and descriptive world building. Equally, when there are sections of descriptive writing in order to place the character in the scene, the tone is at times flat and sounds more like a friend telling you what happened to them that day than a piece of writing to inspire the imagination. An example of this can be seen in the following extract taken from the start of one of the testimonials:

Isabel, my niece, was diagnosed with the silence, and that was a real lightening rod for me, in that it really gave me the focus to come up with the design for Chatter. If I see a need, the first thing I'm thinking is how to fill it. That's just me. That's how I operate. Cereal takes a long time to eat. Bang: Cereal Milk. I can't see in the dark. Bang: Light Jackets.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Deeds, p 40.

<sup>226</sup> Eli Horowitz, p 58.

This sounds like it would have been a highly emotional time for the character, having a family member affected by the pandemic, yet there is arguably little emotion present in the writing, and as the character's testimonial continues it is all surface rather than the rendering between reader and character of a deeply emotive connection. Throughout much of the novel the writing is prescriptive, going through the motions of the actions taken by characters rather than letting the reader feel as if they were there, and it lacks a depth that allows the reader to experience the landscape of the novel, reading more like news reels or social media items which whilst heightens the reality effect. This arguably misses the point of a novel in building a fully-rounded fictional universe for the reader to explore. It is understandable that the testimonial style of *The Silent History* would work well as monologues read through a mobile app as if received like news reports from members of the public, but they seem monotone and unmoving, not easily allowing the reader to connect with the story when read one after another from a book.

The following year, in 2015, Eli Horowitz went on to make a similarly constructed novel called *The Pickle Index*,<sup>227</sup> which again was narrated from a first person perspective by a range of characters, and appeared initially in as a mobile app before becoming an ebook and paper book. The back page of the paperback 2015 Farr, Straus and Giroux edition states: 'For more news, snacks and citizenship, enter the Index: [www.thepickleindex.com](http://www.thepickleindex.com)', and on the website is a link to an app that supports *The Pickle Index* in a similar manner to *The Silent History*. Yet novels as apps or with digital content could be deemed more as niche and quirky rather than becoming the norm, even in our digital era where a vast

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<sup>227</sup> Eli Horowitz, *The Pickle Index* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

proportion of the British reading public own a smartphone. This may be due to them being difficult to produce, as Russell Quinn highlighted, and as such writers haven't taken to further experimenting with the merging of mobile technology and the novel, or it could be that there have not yet been enough for the reading public to garner a taste for such a digital narrative experience.

It was George Bernard Shaw who stated in the twentieth century 'the British people never know what they want until they are given it',<sup>228</sup> thus suggesting that the British reading public is as flexible as the novel form, and a sense of cultural taste is at the hands of the publishers. In this sense, it is possible that a passion for the novel, and indeed a drive towards experimentation with the novel form, can be pursued as long as new forms and formats are marketed in the correct way. Brian Hill reiterates in his book *The Making of a Bestseller* the importance for new authors to utilise social media channels as a means of raising their online profiles before publishing any works, and also rightly highlights that an author's fan-base is the key to their success.<sup>229</sup> In a digital era and a contemporary society that at times looks towards the Internet for guidance in all aspects of life, this is a key point. Whilst there is something troubling in Self's notion that mobile technology with its instant access to the World Wide Web and constant alert tones is a ready distraction away from the experience of deep and serious reading, Hill highlights that the Internet has also a positive aspect in supporting reading for pleasure. Now we are living in an era in which it has never been easier to raise the profile of a new novelist or novel, proving that not in every instance is digital and mobile technology a threat to the novel.

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<sup>228</sup> Tim Waterstone, *Swimming Against the Stream: Creating Your Business and Making Your Life* (London: Macmillan, 2006), p 12.

<sup>229</sup> Brian E. Hill, *The Making of a Bestseller* (Chicago: Dearborn, 2005), p 25.

Readers who are being introduced to a new author need a reason to trust that the author will deliver a novel that will entertain them, and this is also arguably the same for new styles of novels, that they need to be better advertised so as to raise a greater level of interest. One channel for raising the profile of new novels that break the mould could be through book reviews, which, as Hill is keen to emphasise, do impact on book sales by increasing the visibility of a title.<sup>230</sup> This is particularly so in an Internet age in which the ease of access to information has 'caused an explosion' in the level of book reviews.<sup>231</sup> Of course there are negatives as well as positives in the Internet as a tool for promotion, mainly because some sites are left unregulated and so anyone can post something damaging or offensive. That said, the Internet is still a vital medium from which to reach out to fans and it would be ignorant for publishers and novelists to not make use of blogging spheres as an effective and current promotional tool.<sup>232</sup> In fact, at The Cheltenham Times Literature Festival talk on the publishing industry, all of the speakers agreed on the importance of new authors building an online profile, particularly utilising social media and blogging pages, as a means of creating a solid fan base. This is really a way in which digital technology does have its uses, in offering itself as a global promotional tool. Equally, technology does not necessarily mean the novel has to suffer in terms of its readership, as Self suggests in his argument about concentrated and considered reading.

However, it must be said that throughout history, other experiments with merging technology and the novel have proven to be unsuccessful both in their

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<sup>230</sup> Hill, p 35.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>232</sup> Rachel Randall ed, *2015 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market* (Blue Ash: Writer's Digest Books, 2015).

form and popularity. Throughout the last 40 or so decades, from the 1980s to today, there has been a building narrative of writers experimenting with form in an attempt to merge the novel with current digital technologies. Some of the earliest examples of this happening is with the hypertext novel, a concept which started coming through in the latter half of the 1980s and, as the following critical sources suggest, was a literary experiment that failed to thrive as a popular novel form. In an article for *Wired*, a magazine publication dedicated to technology, Steven Johnson talks about the short-lived history of the hypertext, starting by informing readers of his article that writers and publishers believed there was a future in digital storytelling through hypertext novels, particularly at the birth of the Internet in the early 1990s.<sup>233</sup> With the excitement at the dawn of the home computer, and later the invention of the Internet, it is not difficult to conceive that some novelists felt this would herald a new era for the novel, and could offer innovative means for presenting their narrative. Johnson defines hypertext as a network that required readers to browse and navigate through a narrative system in order to determine their individual way of reading the information given.<sup>234</sup> On the face of it, having novelists engage with emerging computer technology seemed like it could have been an interesting and revolutionary concept, as well as a means of forging a direction for fictional storytelling that would put control of construction in the hands of the reader. However, the truth, it would appear, is that the hypertext novel largely failed to captivate the readership with whom it set out to engage given its short-lived run,

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<sup>233</sup> Steven Johnson, *Why No one Clicked on the Great Hypertext Story* (2013) <<https://www.wired.com/2013/04/hypertext/>> [accessed 22 August 2017].

<sup>234</sup> Thorsten Schreiber, *English Literatures on the Internet*, <<http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/schreiber/MA-Home.html>> [accessed 12 May 2015]<<http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/eese/schreiber/MA-Home.html>> [accessed 12 May 2015].

and it may be that the execution of the concept brought to light a format that rather distanced the reader than included them in the process of engaging with a story.

In the early 90s, Marie-Laure Ryan speaks in a positive tone in an argument for the hypertext when she says 'readers of print text are bound to an enduring structure and length which offers little or no flexibility, whereas readers of a hypertext are attributed with power and authority in what they imply is a superior textual experience'.<sup>235</sup> This is an exciting statement about how the hypertext novel removed the static state of words on a printed page, and instead offered up a structure that was not already predetermined for the reader. Ryan describes the hypertext novel as a supermarket shopping experience, believing that the hypertext mimics a display of resources or items on supermarket shelves, and whilst the reader glances through that which is on offer, it is their choice as to whether they dismiss an item or pick it up for closer examination.<sup>236</sup> Rather than being presented to the reader as a stream of continuous prose on a computer screen, the structure is like that of a spider diagram, in which there are several links that connect to clips of narrative and these are all arranged on the page in no set order. The reader clicks on a link, reads the section of narrative, and then comes back to a main page in order to click on another link to a further clip of narrative. Ryan's point on what the layout of the hypertext offers a reader emanates a sense of power and authority that the reader is offered when able to decide their own path through the novel.

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<sup>235</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p 12.

<sup>236</sup> Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p 219.

With the hypertext novel was an intention that readers would become both creator and receiver of the narrative.

Literary critic Alice Bell points towards the uses of PWT in the construction of hypertexts. Although Bell points out in the first instance that possible worlds don't physically exist and are instead mental imaginings of alternatives in the real world,<sup>237</sup> she then goes on to state that once an individual has taken a route into a possible world it then becomes reality.<sup>238</sup> These two elements are synonymous with the hypertext novel, the existence of the text as a whole consisting of a number of possible worlds depending on the route taken by the reader/ user, and myriad possible worlds becoming a fictional reality as the reader clicks on the various links to bring the story to life in their imagination. It could be said, then, that there are a number of possible worlds existing in a hypertext, especially when compared to a standard linear text, because the form is constructed in such a manner as to offer a number of different avenues for the narrative to travel down. In this, as Bell highlights, 'readers of print text are bound to an enduring structure and length which offers little or no flexibility, whereas readers of a hypertext are attributed with power and authority',<sup>239</sup> the authority to enter into one possible world or another. With all this in mind, the concept of the hypertext would seem to be an ideal move towards a radical mode of fictional storytelling, a means of revolutionising the novel structure, and an empowering reading experience for the reader.

However, at the start of the twentieth century Edwin Muir set down his philosophy that the plot of a novel is a chain of events that knit the story together

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<sup>237</sup> Alice Bell, *The Possible Worlds of Hypertext Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p 21.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, p 21.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, p 12.



and every event needs to happen in order so as to make a cohesive narrative,<sup>240</sup> which to some extent highlights the likely failing of the hypertext novel as an immersive and engaging storytelling form. A hypertext, whilst it gives power to the reader in an innovative manner, goes against Muir's concept of the reader being presented with a cohesive plot into which they can sink and escape from the actual world, because the reading process becomes a conscious act of reading a piece of narrative before being pulled out of the flow of reading in order to decide which link to click on next. The cohesive flow of one page following another is lost in a sea of digitised links, which may also for some induce anxiety in not knowing whether they have chosen the best path.

The first documented example of a hypertext novel, and possibly the most well known, was a creation of American author Michael Joyce. His hypertext novel *Afternoon*, written in 1987, was constructed through a hypertext authoring system called Storyspace. The plot centres on the protagonist Peter who witnesses a car crash that he later believes involved his wife and son. Each reading produces for the reader a different path as their choices change the plot line, and takes the reader each time brings the reader to a different conclusion. For Joyce, the hypertext is a joint creative piece between author and reader, as he states 'hypertext, only more consciously than other texts, implicates the reader in writing, at least by choosing its sequences'.<sup>241</sup> From this it can be construed that Joyce saw the hypertext as a form that would give the reader agency to decide how the story would play out, as well as engaging the reader in a game of writing their own plot from the elements provided. However, it could

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<sup>240</sup> Muir, p 16.

<sup>241</sup> Michael Joyce, *Nonce Upon Some Times, Rereading Hypertext* (1997)  
<<http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~studio/readings/joyce-nonce.html>> [accessed 13 May 2016].

be said that whilst this sounds to be an empowering experience for the reader, it also detracts away from the reader's main aim, which is to immerse themselves in a story in order to escape the world around. Instead, such a structure often results in the removal of the easy flow of reading straight narrative prose, as the reader is forced to remove themselves from the fictional universe in order to make a choice, to click on another link. On top of this, a large failing could also be down to the fact that digital technology rapidly changes, particularly it has done so in the last 40 or so years, and so the platform on which the novel is composed can in time become outdated, in some cases to the point of being rendered unusable. In the case of Joyce's novel *Afternoon*, this was designed to be accessed through a series of computer diskettes, technology that was cutting edge at the time. Now, though, diskettes are old technology, and Joyce's novel is today preserved in history, namely because our computers no longer support such technology as diskettes. This is certainly one of the perils when looking to create a digitised novel, knowing that it will continue to remain accessible in the physical sense.

An example of a more readily accessible hypertext novel comes from Canadian writer Geoff Ryman, and is titled *253*. Ryman's novel was first released as a webpage in 1996, and is still accessible today.<sup>242</sup> It was later also published as a paperback novel in February 1998, but the digitised version was how Ryman originally expected his novel to be read. The narrative centres on a group of characters on a London Underground train who are all participants in a shared event, and the story is told through 253 characters, including a pigeon. The

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<sup>242</sup> *253* can be accessed through The Online Books Page website on the URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120113034518/http://www.ryman-novel.com>.

webpage is set out as a series of links replicating carriages on an underground train, with each link taking the reader into a piece of digitised text that is written as a monologue detailing the inner-thoughts of that character. There is no indicated path or seeming set order to the links, and so the reader can dictate their own path through the narrative by clicking at random on each link. In doing so the story can occur in multiple versions, in any number of combinations, but all linked under the umbrella of an over-arching theme that is the shared event.

Whilst the webpage is still accessible today because it is supported by current Internet platforms, the composition looks undeniably dated and sterile. Similarly, the overall effect feels less of a novel and more a dry report of an un-engaging event, un-engaging because the reader has little chance through the snippets of text to build up any real connection with or emotion for the outcome of the characters. Equally, the layout removes any sense of atmosphere, drama and suspense, feeling more mechanical in nature, a process rather than a relaxing reading experience, and it could even be said to feel as if the reader is on a fact-finding mission using just one Internet page. This is particularly so as the whole narrative is devoid of a rising-tension brought on by story arcs or suspense-driven plot twists, which the form could not comfortably support as the choice in which the links are selected is completely randomised. Wolfgang Iser speaks of 'the wandering viewpoint' as a narratological device in which, as the reader navigates through a text they carry memories of what they have already read, and these memories then build on expectations of what is to come in the story.<sup>243</sup> In the case of 253, the individual monologues in which the reader

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<sup>243</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p 119.

rarely meets or hears of another character more than once, there is little viewpoint to carry through the narrative stream. As such, an emotional drama or twist is lost in the lack of connectivity between the characters, meaning there is little tension on which to build a final climax. In the hypertext novel structure, such as can be seen in *253*, there is arguably little scope to develop a wandering viewpoint because the reader moves through links that are largely devoid of any connection between them in order that they produce a coherent story no matter in which order they are read. As such, certain information cannot be carried from one to the other in case something is learnt that does not make sense because it is out of sequence. For instance, not one link must contain the answer to the murderer before a murder is committed, or allow the reader to find out that the protagonist is not as they say they are before building up a false view of them with which to fool the reader. This is not at all to suggest that Ryman's novel should not be viewed as an intriguing experimental novel form, or indeed it is not a worthy attempt to subvert the linearity of the traditional novel form whilst also utilising a popular digital platform. However, the layout and structure do little to create an engaging piece of literary fiction, and it could be argued that *253* fails to take the novel form in a revolutionary direction, largely because in its construction it has lost the immersive essence that is essential in drawing a reader into the fictional universe that is an essential element to the novel form.

As a final note on the seemingly short-lived history of the hypertext novel, Steven Johnson reports that one reason the form failed as a medium was because a hypertext novel is extremely difficult to write.<sup>244</sup> This goes without saying

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<sup>244</sup> Steven, Johnson, *Why No one Clicked on the Great Hypertext Story* (2013) <<https://www.wired.com/2013/04/hypertext/>> [accessed 22 August 2017].

because the novelist would have to acquire knowledge of how to work the computer programme they are using to compose the novel, as well as be able to create a narrative layout that would build a satisfying story no matter in which order it was read. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis perfectly sum up the short journey into exploration of the hypertext as they state 'for all the hype in hypertext, it only does what books have always done, which is to point to connections outside of a particular text'.<sup>245</sup> Indeed, it could be said that a hypertext novel presents its narrative in a manner that goes beyond the page and allows steady free flow from one chunk of text to the next, but it did not really revolutionise storytelling as an institution that connects meaning in the both the fictional and actual worlds. Similarly, Cope and Kalantzis suggest that 'the digital revolution only does many things that have been done before',<sup>246</sup> suggesting to an extent that technology should not necessarily be heralded as the thing to revolutionise and grow new methods of storytelling, but rather it is doing much the same but with different materials. Despite the hypertext novel's failings there is something to be said, however, of the novelist who re-imagines the narrative process as a series of paths for the reader to select their own route, and who took on the challenge of offering the reader ownership of their narrative journey rather than seeing them as 'passive recipients of information'.<sup>247</sup> However, the greatest issue with hypertext novels is not in their claim for originality or ingenuity, as Cope and Kalantzis argue, but with the ineffectiveness of the form as a storytelling medium, largely because the idea of

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<sup>245</sup> Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, 'New Text Technologies, Globalization and the Future of the Book', in *The Future of the Book in the Digital Age*, ed. by Bill Cope and Angus Phillips (Oxford: Chandos, 2006), pp 191–209, (p 193).

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, p 192.

<sup>247</sup> R.H. Jones and C.A. Hafner, *Understanding Digital Literacies: A Practical Introduction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

immersion into a novel is that the reader is fully absorbed in the act of reading, not constantly disturbed from the process by having to select what to next read. Jeremy Hawthorn, in discussing the novel's format, states 'it is common knowledge that people can "lose themselves" in a novel',<sup>248</sup> referring to the immersive and all-consuming nature of novels. In this sense the hypertext novel is not a natural layout into which a reader can 'lose themselves', largely due to the engagement needed with their functionality of the form, and having to keep alert the conscious brain each time a new path needs to be decided. Given all of this it is understandable that the hypertext instead found its uses in more practical than artistic and creative purposes, connecting a web of information over the Internet through web pages and document links. That is not to say that the hypertext does not have a part to play in the narrative of the novel's history, particularly its building connection with new technologies that have emerged, or that it will not again be used in some other future form.

As someone who had an eye on the future of technology, writer Douglas Adams spoke in 2001 about how he believed, among other things, the future for the book was in digital form, and yet how this fact would not necessarily damage the physical book market in terms of society's love of the physical book. In March 2015, BBC Radio 4 conducted a show hosted by Mitch Benn that looked back on predictions made in 2001 by novelist Douglas Adams about the future of technology. Within these predictions was some discussion on the form of the book, as well as possible ways in which digital technology would, Adams believed, affect the way in which we read. For instance, he spoke at the turn of the century of the book migrating away from being constructed from paper, and

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<sup>248</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*, 4th edn (London: Arnold, 2001), p 9.

the need instead of a pocket-sized device 'that is great for reading, but which gets its content seamlessly, easily, conveniently from the Internet'.<sup>249</sup> In this is a nod towards the ereader, and other mobile devices onto which ebooks can be installed. What was endearing, however, was to hear Adams also predict that even when ebooks came into being, which he asserted some technology like that would surely do and indeed be a popular format, he absolutely believed they would not replace physical books, because

The book is a shark....sharks were around before dinosaurs,  
and the reason they are still around is nothing has ever turned  
up in the ocean that is better at being a shark than a shark is,  
and a book is perfectly evolved to be a book. The physical  
object book will always be around because nothing is as good  
at being a book as a book is'.<sup>250</sup>

In many ways Douglas Adams's theorising of the paper book not disappearing has shown to be true in contemporary society, with the physical book seeing a rise in sales in more recent years.

Journalist Paul Coccozza wrote in 2017 on topic of the decline of the ebook and ereader revolution, summing up the strength of the paper book in his stating 'once upon a time, people bought books because they liked reading. Now they buy books because they like books'.<sup>251</sup> In this is a suggestion that when faced with the option of buying a book as a physical object or as digital data, there is a good proportion of the reading public that are choosing to purchase physical

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<sup>249</sup> 'Did Douglas Get it Right?', BBC Radio 4, 14 March 2015, 10:30

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Paul Coccozza, *How Ebooks Lost their Shine: Kindle's Now Look Clunky and Unhip* (2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/27/how-ebooks-lost-their-shine-kindles-look-clunky-unhip>> [accessed 28 April 2017].

books because they want the physicality of the object over the ease of use and storage offered through digital data. Amazon's ereader Kindle was first released in 2007, and could be said to have heralded an era in digital technology that promised to revolutionise the way readers read and accessed books. It also aided in further pushing the novel and literary market into the digital era, giving consumers a device dedicated to the downloading and storing of ebooks. Amazon reportedly sold more than a quarter of a million of its Kindle across the globe within the first year of production,<sup>252</sup> demonstrating its popularity amongst consumers in its early life. However, despite the release of several upgraded Kindles since coming onto the market, in 2015, just eight years after the release of the first Kindle, it was reported that major UK book retailer Waterstones had decided to completely cease sales of the brand of ereader in all stores across the UK due to a decline in sales of the devices, and a need to create more shelf space for physical books.<sup>253</sup> This represents something of a wave, from the Kindle's initially booming success to a dramatic drop in uptake by consumers in the UK. It was also reported that Waterstones had seen a 5 per cent rise in the sale of paper books during December 2014, possibly because readers and shoppers were more readily investing in physical books as Christmas presents over ereaders, and so the following year it was decided that displaying more physical books would create greater revenue over sales of Kindles in Waterstones stores UK wide. In fact, there were also reports that some independent book retailers across the UK had experienced a revival in the sale of

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<sup>252</sup> Zach Pontz, *A Year Later, Amazon's Kindle Finds a Niche* (2008)

<<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/TECH/12/03/kindle.electronic.reader/>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>253</sup> Nicola Slawson, 'Waterstones to Stop Selling Kindle as Book Sales Surge', *Guardian*, 6 October 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/06/waterstones-stop-selling-kindle-book-sales-surge>> [accessed 13 October 2015].



physical books in 2014,<sup>254</sup> suggesting that the future is strong for the physical novel, and possibly less certain for the novel as an ebook.

Journalist Mark Sweney offers his view that a further 17 per cent drop in ebook sales over 2016 was due, in part, to consumer complaints that they were suffering from 'screen fatigue',<sup>255</sup> but also that consumers seemed to be less willing to purchase yet another digital device about which they had to worry. Instead, 'a physical copy of a book is a disposable low-cost entertainment tool',<sup>256</sup> and whilst Self presented a view that 'the book is already in desperate, riffling retreat'<sup>257</sup>, the evidence present in the media rather disputes this. In 2016, profits made through physical book sales were up by £89 million compared to sales in 2015,<sup>258</sup> and all of this data does much to support novelist Neil Gaiman's view that 'there will always be a place for them (physical books)',<sup>259</sup> even when other art formats, such as film and music, are now largely being consumed in digital formats. It is not unreasonable to assert that humans have an affiliation with the physical book and the act of reading novels on paper rather than digital form, not least because, as Gaiman puts it, 'physical books are tough, hard to destroy, bath-resistant, solar-operated, feel good in your hand'<sup>260</sup>. Digital data can offer the ability to store vast libraries of books in a small or virtual space,

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<sup>254</sup> Slawson.

<sup>255</sup> Mark Sweney, *Screen Fatigue Sees UK Ebook Sales Plunge 17%* (2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/27/screen-fatigue-sees-uk-ebook-sales-plunge-17-as-readers-return-to-print>> [accessed 2 May 2017].

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Self, 'The Fate of Our Literary Culture is Sealed'.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Neil Gaiman, 'Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming?CMP=EMCBKSEML3964>> [accessed 23 October 2015].

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

compared to bookcases of physical books, and are at times a more viable option for reading on the move.

This notion of ease of use when on the move is offered most easily with the novel in audiobook form, which will no doubt continue to migrate through various digital platforms as audio technology develops. The first audiobooks came into production in 1878 as Thomas Edison realised the potential that his phonograph could offer those who suffered from visual impairment, and they were printed on wax canisters that were loaded into a phonograph,<sup>261</sup> a special machine that would read wax canisters indented with code and translate them into audio. Following on from this the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) produced a number of audiobooks on vinyl records in the 1920s that were intended to serve soldiers who were blinded in World War I, and this came out of a perceived need to extend the literary world to those who were not able to read for themselves, as well as to push literary fiction into a more inclusive form. From this, audiobooks grew to serve those who wanted to listen to rather than read a book, being available on cassette tape, CD and as an MP3, depending on the dominant technology at the time.

Professor of Modern Literature at QMUL Matthew Rubery argues that the digital revolution has changed the face of the audiobook, due to the convenience of fitting large volumes onto a single digital file, an MP3, and the attention being paid to increasing the availability of technologies that support the digital audiobook, such as mobile phone apps.<sup>262</sup> Whereas until fairly recently ebooks needed a separate device, such as a *Kindle*, in order to be accessed by the reader,

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<sup>261</sup> Matthew Rubery, 'Play It Again, Sam Weller: New Digital Audiobooks and Old Ways of Reading', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), 58–79 (p 62).

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, p 63.

audiobooks have proven to be more practical in this sense, being playable on devices that most consumers already have to hand, such as mobile phones and MP3 players. This may have largely been why their popularity has grown, and is seemingly continuing to do so over the decades, which has seemingly not been the case for ebooks. By 2009 the audiobook market was looking to be a profitable sector in its own right, as journalist Roy Blount Jr comments 'whereas e-books have yet to win mainstream enthusiasm, audio books are a billion-dollar market, and growing'.<sup>263</sup> Really this is positive to hear in thinking about the future of the novel, not least because audiobooks provide another means by which the novel can more easily fit into a busy lifestyle, consumers can choose to listen to a novel whilst on the move or engaged in another task. This is especially vital for those who find they struggle to take time out of their day, or week, to sit down and read.

Writer Howard Jacobson argued, in a calmer and more precise tone it could be said than Will Self, on the demise of the novel being orchestrated in a large part by digital technology. Speaking in an interview for *The Guardian*, Jacobson makes a considered point that 'the novel is not dead: the problem is the modern reader, who apparently lacks the attention span to enjoy the intellectual challenge of reading'.<sup>264</sup> This lack of attention span, he goes on to assert, is largely down to a heavy increase in screen usage, something that Self also raised, and it is Jacobson's belief that writers of fiction face a heavy challenge in winning back society's love for the written word. This is certainly a fear in terms of the

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<sup>263</sup> Roy Blount Jr, 'The Kindle Swindle' (2009), *New York Times*, 25 February 2009, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/opinion/25blount.html>> [accessed 3 May 2017].

<sup>264</sup> Sian Cain, 'The Problem is Not the Reader': Howard Jacobson Says the Novel is Not Dead', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/07/howard-jacobson-says-the-novel-is-not-dead>> [accessed 16 June 2019].

novel losing popularity, and something that challenges the novel's future popularity. Although, as Jacobson himself admits, the novel is certainly not yet dead in terms of its readership, he does proceed to assert that this will not always be the case, because already the numbers of serious readers and sales of literary novels are in decline. In a sorrowful tone, he admits there is little anyone can currently do to turn this situation around, questioning whether society will eventually fall out of love with screens and regain a higher level of concentration to be drawn back into reading for pleasure, whilst eventually admitting 'I don't know what will win them back to writing'. Jacobson proffers a precise if not bleak truth of how the modern age of digital technology has turned society against the written word, but as the focus group data has demonstrated, for example, this is not necessarily the case. Instead, it could be argued, society is at a point in which there is a happy medium between the physical book and its digital counterpart. This is because readers are afforded the opportunity to engage in modes of reading to suit the individual situation, whether that is reading an ebook from their phone, listening to an audiobook on a long car journey, or taking an afternoon out to read a physical book from the comfort of an armchair.

As something of a testament to this is how the ebook and audiobooks proved vital during the Coronavirus pandemic, particularly as the digital format presented libraries with a safe way in which they could continue serving the needs of their local areas in continuing to offer access to books. Library ebook borrowing across the UK was reported to have increased at a rate of 146%

between March and August 2020,<sup>265</sup> proof not just of the uses of digital books, but also the endurance of a sizeable sector of the reading public who continued their habit of borrowing library books despite not being able to visit them in person. On top of this, it was reported that UK digital book sales, including those of both ebooks and audiobooks, rose by 23% compared to 2019 in the first half of the year, whilst print book sales fell understandably by 17% compared to 2019 as book retailers were for large periods of time closed for browsing.<sup>266</sup> This is not necessarily a sign that the physical book is falling out of favour. More that they do have their place, and the future for the novel will likely remain as a physical and digital entity because there is plenty of evidence, such as this, which points towards the convenience of having both media.

However, largely it would seem, particularly through the figures provided in media sources, that a sizeable sector of the reading public continue to read physical books, and as such there is much to suggest that the novel of the future will remain as a physical entity alongside any digital counterparts. There will most likely be further experiments weaving digital elements into the novel, such as was demonstrated with *The Silent History*, but these will most likely be smaller releases rather than bestsellers or become the norm, and it could be said that the future of the novel will certainly not be entirely digital, even as our world seems to become saturated with more and more forms of digital technology year on year. In relation to this, some novelists have come together to demonstrate their belief in the enduring strength of the physical book. A project

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<sup>265</sup> Davies, Caroline, 'Library ebook lending surges as UK turns to fiction during lockdown', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/23/library-ebook-lending-surges-as-uk-turns-to-fiction-during-lockdown>> [accessed 31 January 2020].

<sup>266</sup> Mark Sweney, 'Pandemic drives ebook and audiobook sales by publishers to all-time high', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/14/pandemic-drives-ebook-and-audiobook-sales-by-uk-publishers-to-all-time-high-covid>> [accessed 31 January 2020].

emerged in 2020 involving a group of novelists, including David Mitchell and Margaret Atwood, called 'Future Library'. The project was headed by Norwegian artist Katie Paterson, and the scheme asked for writers to submit a yet unseen manuscript that will then be published in physical book form in 2114, once a set of trees planted in a designated Norwegian forest in 2014 have had a century of growth.<sup>267</sup> The idea is that such writers will invest in a scheme that will see their works published for a future generation of readers, one that they will not meet, in order that the novels to be published in an environmentally sustainable manner by actively setting aside a future forest to be turned into paper for the books. Margaret Atwood was one of the first writers to invest in the scheme, commenting 'how strange it is to think of my own voice – silent by then for a long time – suddenly being awakened, after a hundred years. What is the first thing that voice will say, as a not-yet-embodied hand draws it out of its container and opens it to the first page?'.<sup>268</sup> Atwood's words are a reminder that writers are placing trust in the physical book remaining culturally popular a century or so from now, and that not only will future readers continue to embrace the printed word, but books will still be a desirable medium through which stories are read and presented. There is no financial gain as the writers, such as Mitchell and Atwood, will not be alive to receive profits from the sales of their manuscripts, but there is satisfaction in knowing the wood used for the books will be from a sustainable source, and that some are upholding a view that the future of the novel will always be in part as a physical book.

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<sup>267</sup> Future Library, <<https://www.futurelibrary.no>>, [accessed Dec 2020].

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

In Self's musings on the evils of digital technology and the detrimental impact it is having on the novel, the story that has grown throughout this thesis does much to contradict this view. Instead there is a stronger suggestion that digital technology is more likely not to have been so damaging to the novel's readership in terms of discouraging readers away from the act of considered, concentrated reading, and equally there are a number of ways to suggest digital technology will have a positive impact on the novel's future. One of these ways is in the producing and retailing of books, a system that like with the book will, I believe, largely remain physical and digital to suit a variety of situations and consumer needs. This is particularly poignant at times when the physical exchange of books proves challenging, such as has been the case during the Coronavirus pandemic when physical retailers had to shut their doors for long periods of time and rely on digital sales to keep their businesses afloat. However, even in these exceptional circumstances, the physical retailing of books will continue when it can, with digital technology supporting the production and, at times, distribution of novels.

Let us not deny that digital technology in the production process has developed a system that allows for books to be made increasingly more easily and cheaply, and that technology in this sector will only continue to improve the method over time. The book production process has come a long way since the invention of the steam-powered printing press and the development of offset printing. Offset printing is still used in the production of novels today, but the text is now largely applied to the paper through digital printing rather than stamping ink directly onto the pages. It is the ever-expanding Internet that has been at the forefront of changes in the novel production and retail sector. We

currently live in an age of continuous development and redefinition within the technology world,<sup>269</sup> and 'the story of the last sixteen years or so has been of the Internet rising up out of the ocean like Godzilla, and just crushing and utterly transforming every industry that it touches'.<sup>270</sup> The Internet has certainly made it easier for publishers and novelists to connect with each other, as well as revolutionising the way in which books are bought and sold. This can already be seen as global retailer *Amazon* offer authors a 'Print-on-Demand' service to ensure their books will remain in constant supply however great the demand. As orders come in *Amazon* have the means to print a copy for that customer, rather than requesting a bulk lot from a printing company to store in warehouses ready for sale. Comments and reviews on the Internet that have been posted by customers show a mixed reception to the service, further demonstrating that technology can have negative as well as positive effects. Some are pleased with the quality and ready availability of a newly purchased book, whilst others have received less than satisfactory copies, suggesting that in a sense this is convenience over quality control. This is also a sign that mass consumerism can, in some circumstances, lead to a loss in attention to detail in favour of the provider making the highest profit possible. Unfortunately, however, such schemes that focus on the income of corporations over the quality of service offered, are not likely to change in terms of becoming more customer focused.

For Self, the digital era has helped to end the days of the literary novel, largely through its being a distraction away from concentrated reading, and changing the way we read through an increase in digital text saturating our lives.

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<sup>269</sup> Waterstone, p 26.

<sup>270</sup> 'Did Douglas Get it Right?'



Yet, in the production and sale of novels, the digital era has also brought about change for the better and in some ways for the worse. Since the turn of the century ‘the Internet and the dizzying rise of online shopping’<sup>271</sup> has further globalised the novel market, making it easier to sell to international markets, broadening the readership for the novel because it is more easily accessible to purchase. The future of the online bookshop is secure, which can not necessarily be said of the physical bookshop and even less so of independent retailers. It is clear that buying books online dominates far and above shopping on the highstreet because it is at times more convenient, and this could be a real threat to the future of independent bookshops if fewer and fewer consumers are choosing to go out and browse around shops. Of course there is the opportunity for such independent retailers to create an online shop, but there is something to be said for the experiencing of browsing through the physical shelves of a bookshop, and an excitement built to read your new purchase once home.

A touching report about writer Philippe Ungar and photographer Franck Bohbot who travelled around New York in 2018 visiting the last surviving independent bookshops, or indie bookselling as they are referred to in the article, shows that the imminent death of the bookshop is of global concern. What the report speaks about is how the owners of independent bookshops such as those that Bohbot and Ungar visited, have chosen to be booksellers for the love of the trade. This is demonstrated in the comment made by a reporter on the story, Hermione Hoby, as she says ‘no one is getting rich from indie

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<sup>271</sup> Oscar Williams-Grut, *What we’re Seeing is a Revolution: How the Internet is Remaking the British Highstreet* (2017), <<http://uk.businessinsider.com/future-british-high-street-internet-brexite-retail-2017-8>>, 18 August> [accessed 14 August 2018].

bookselling, yet everyone Ungar and Bohbot spoke to professed contentment'.<sup>272</sup> Hoby's overall piece speaks of a community that actively take joy from a trade of selling books, and the sadness that surrounds the very real notion that such independent bookshops face an uncertain future. The rise in physical over ebook sales suggests that reading is better enjoyed as a physical experience, and Hoby's report suggests there are some who believe that buying books is also better experienced as a physical process. Despite these individual cases, however, there is yet no strong evidence to suggest that there is no future for physical retailers of books, and in fact the threat to their future has sparked a reaction amongst some to ensure that this is indeed the case.

In June 2014 it was reported that author James Patterson donated £250,000 to help keep independent bookshops in the UK and Ireland in business because he believed this would encourage more children to keep reading,<sup>273</sup> suggesting there are those who feel strongly about keeping the bookshop as a presence on the British high street. His feelings were that as funding for libraries in schools drops, he wanted to ensure that children don't lose that vital link to browsing for books. As such he decided to financially support viable independent bookshops that have dedicated children's books sections, as a means of maintaining ready access to books outside of school for children in those areas. Whilst children won't necessarily be reading novels now, encouraging them into

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<sup>272</sup> Hermione Hoby, A Story of Survival: New York's Last Remaining Independent Bookshops, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2018, <[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/02/new-york-remaining-independent-bookshops-booksellers-ungar-bohbot?utm\\_source=esp&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=Bookmarks+-+Collections+2017&utm\\_term=276926&subid=16897915&CMP=bookmarks\\_collection](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/02/new-york-remaining-independent-bookshops-booksellers-ungar-bohbot?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Bookmarks+-+Collections+2017&utm_term=276926&subid=16897915&CMP=bookmarks_collection)> [accessed 3 June 2018].

<sup>273</sup> Liz Bury, *James Patterson Donates £250,000 to Independent Bookshops* (2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/17/james-patterson-one-million-dollars-bookshops>> [accessed 2 February 2016].

reading from an early age would do a great deal to ensure that a proportion will continue reading into adulthood, and as such aid in keeping the novel alive for generations to come. Patterson was reported to have said that he believes many children across the UK are living without regular access to books and he wants to be part of the fight to keep bookshops open in order to rectify this to some extent. Whilst the popularity of the virtual bookshop, in particular *Amazon*, remains solid, it is clear from the fundraising work conducted by Patterson, as well as Bohbot and Ungar's personal study, that there are some who fear the impact of the loss of the physical bookshop. Although it is difficult to completely demonise online bookshops because they have in a sense been a positive for the novel in terms of reaching a wide audience, particularly at times such as during the Coronavirus pandemic when using physical bookshops is prohibited, not having books available to buy when shopping in a town or city will mean that they disappear to an extent from the collective consciousness. 'Books on shelves are sandbags stacked against the floodwaters of forgetting',<sup>274</sup> and if physical shelves of books aren't present in town and city centres in the future, arguably there is a risk that emerging generations will start to care less and less for them as treasured commercial products. In all this is a sense that it is important to keep the novel on display in some shops as a means of promoting its presence and keeping the reading public reading, which is arguably the most important concern in the maintaining a future for the novel. But as closures of physical bookshops are likely only set to increase over the decades, let it be highlighted that there is surely a sector of society, and indeed the reading public, to whom a change in access to books will not so easily deter them from reading novels.

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<sup>274</sup> Tom Mole, *The Secret Life of Books* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2019), p 80.

Remaining on the topic of keeping the reading public reading, whilst Self preached about a decline in popularity of the literary novel, there is arguably a sector of the reading public for whom the death of the novel as a literary medium would no doubt be a great loss. In 2005 writer Ian McEwan stated ‘when women stop reading the novel will be dead’,<sup>275</sup> and it was he and his son who, in that same year, conducted a social experiment to reiterate this point. They took some Vintage Future Classics from their own shelves and handed them out to the lunchtime crowd near their home in London. McEwan reported that it was the women who were more than willing to take a book, and the men they approached were far less willing to take up the offer of a free novel. When it is also considered that women accounted for around 80% of all book sales in the US, UK and Canadian fiction book market in 2020,<sup>276</sup> surely the future of the novel relies a great deal on satisfying women readers in their tastes, wants and needs.

In 2019 a professor of the University of Exeter, UK, Helen Taylor conducted a contemporary study that was transposed into a book titled *Why Women Read Fiction: The Stories of Our Lives*. For her study, Taylor conducted interviews and focus group with women readers in order to draw conclusions as to why women today are still drawn to reading narrative fiction, offering an insight into this topic as she shares participants’ reading experiences. Taylor also references the experiment Ian McEwan undertook in handing out free books that were more readily taken by women than men, then going on to make a point about women readers that ‘we are the main readers of fiction, the largest market

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<sup>275</sup> Jane Sullivan, ‘Turning the Pages: What do Women Want? To Read Fiction’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 6 2020, Accessed on 19.09.20 < <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/turning-pages-what-do-women-want-to-read-fiction-20200227-p544zg.html> >

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

for novels and short stories'.<sup>277</sup>For Taylor, it is clear that women are an essential drive behind the literary market in the West, as well as a much-discussed topic over the centuries as she states:

The reading of novels by girls and women was the subject of many religious and political discourses, with warnings given from eighteenth century onwards about the possibility of excitement, indulgence, the problem of women neglecting their duties, and fiction as corruption.<sup>278</sup>

In opposition to Self's negative view about contemporary society's relationship to the novel, Taylor's work very much paints a portrait of a sector of society still enamoured with and in need of the novel, weaving into her research personal tales of conversations with active female readers that support this point. Unlike Self, Taylor backs up her analysis of the current health of the fiction market, including the novel, with facts, statistics and a great number of comments from women within the wider reading public. There is also a nod to the history of women's relationship to reading, as she highlights that this has been a topic of consideration since the seventeenth century when reading for pleasure was adopted as an accepted pastime for women of the bourgeois class.<sup>279</sup> But what Taylor essentially brings to the topic of reading for pleasure, is some real insight rendered through her interviews and discussions with women readers, drawing conclusions that are evidence of the power that reading has over society, such as reading through my hundreds of questionnaires, and talking to friends and acquaintances about their reading, I'm struck by how many of us go to fiction not

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<sup>277</sup> Helen Taylor, *Why Women Read Fiction: The Stories of Our Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p 4.

<sup>278</sup> Taylor, p 16.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, p 16.

just for entertainment and escape, but also to help us through life's daily trials and major challenges'.<sup>280</sup> To have gathered such a vast body of opinions through conversations with a sector of the current reading public is arguably a real positive in terms of the future longevity of the novel, largely because this comment suggests there is still a place for reading fiction in society, even if it is not the type of literary fiction that possibly Self would want us to be reading.

The topic of the relationship of women to reading is a subject that has been debated for several centuries, and the fact that it is still under discussion today suggests the strength of the female reader is a topic of great literary interest. In the late 1980s, American literary academic Janice Radway set down a comprehensive study focusing on the romance novel, in which she also depicted a view of the female novel reader. Radway outlines how reading romance novels offers the female reader two forms of escape; in one sense the reader is escaping from the present as they are drawn into the fictional universe of the narrative, whilst at the same time escape also denotes transcendence into the story of a heroine whose life does not resemble their own.<sup>281</sup> Here Radway highlights the draw of the romance narrative for women, and how its construction allows for the female reader to imagine herself in the story, thus escaping for a time from the anxieties and failings of her own life. As such, for the time she is reading that female transcendence from the actual world into an idealised fictional one as a means of escape. This is a part of the romance novel's effect due to its world building and extensive prose, but also Radway suggests that this concept is set up to draw on the wants and desires of the female reader. The romance novel

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<sup>280</sup> Taylor, p 227.

<sup>281</sup> Janice. A Radway, *Reading the Romance* (London: Verso, 1994, originally published 1987), p 90.

can say to the reader 'come relax into a fantasy that you desire, and live through it as if it is your own life'. In this sense, it is vital the novel is kept alive for future female novel readers to continue experiencing this level of escapism that can not so easily be replicated through other narrative forms.

Radway also makes a valid point in this following statement about by why women turn to romance as a form of escape, touching upon the psychology of how women readers are drawn into the fictional universe created by the genre:

When she [the female reader] successfully imagines herself in the heroine's position, the typical romance reader can relax momentarily and permit herself to wallow in the rapture of being the centre of a powerful and important individual's attention. This attention not only provides her with the sensations evoked by emotional nurturance and physical satisfaction, but, equally significantly, reinforces her sense of self because in offering his care and attention to the woman with whom she identifies, the hero implicitly regards that woman and, by implication, the reader, as worthy of his concern.<sup>282</sup>

What this passage above highlights is that in reading a romance narrative the female reader is so absorbed that they essentially become a part of the story, and said reader can fulfil her fantasies by imagine herself within the role of the lead female protagonist who becomes the hero's love interest. For instance, to read Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the reader can step into Bridget's place and become the flawed everywoman who eventually charms the man she really wants. Yet watching the narrative in the much edited 2001 film version, the

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<sup>282</sup> Radway, p 113.

viewer is to an extent removed from the playing out of the story as she passively watches it all happen to Renée Zellweger who, for some, may not be what they imagine Bridget Jones to look or sound like. What Radway highlights, then, is that reading a romance is a way into an often idyllic world for the reader, or rather an opportunity to 'block out the surrounding world and give consideration to other people and another time'.<sup>283</sup> Reading, over watching, a romance completely removes the reader from the present and relocates them elsewhere, which is arguably a unique experience to reading, and is hopefully something that will most certainly always be treasured by certain sectors of the reading public.

In this is the presence of an element of reader-response theory, which suggests that 'meaning can never be imagined solely by the reader or generated alone by the text but rather generated through the active process of reading'.<sup>284</sup> Rejecting new criticism that was based within a philosophy that meaning is solely generated by the text, reader-response theory recognised readers as being active agents who play a part in the creation of meaning through their own interpretation, based on an individual reader's background knowledge and experience.<sup>285</sup> Thus, it could be asserted that a novel only becomes a meaningful object when it's being read, much as Smiley suggested in defining in the novel as outlined in chapter three. Yet this is dependent on its construction in order that the reader can effectively work with the tools they are given, such as the language, so as to build the fictional world through imaginative thought. Mokaya also reminds us that 'a literary work depends upon the reader to assimilate and

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<sup>283</sup> Radway, p 91.

<sup>284</sup> V. N. Mokaya, 'Reader-Response Theory', *Academia.edu*, 2017, <  
[https://www.academia.edu/17344171/READER\\_RESPONSE\\_THEORY#:~:text=It%20is%20the%20reader's%20activities,the%20literary%20work%20into%20existence.>](https://www.academia.edu/17344171/READER_RESPONSE_THEORY#:~:text=It%20is%20the%20reader's%20activities,the%20literary%20work%20into%20existence.>) [accessed 21 September 2020], p 1.

<sup>285</sup> Mart, Cagri, 'Reader-Response Theory and Literature Discussions : a Springboard for Exploring Literary Texts', *The New Educational Review*, 56, 2 June 2019, pp 78 – 87 (p 84).



actualise the text',<sup>286</sup> but also the reader's interpretation is largely informed by their social background, and as such they need first to find a common ground between their knowledge and the text in order for a reader to validate their interpretation.<sup>287</sup> In a way, though, it could be argued that the novel is better placed at achieving this over visual narrative forms, such as cinema and TV. As the written text relies on the reader's imagination to interpret what they read, the characters, scenes and even objects in the narrative can therefore be crafted in such a way as to make sense in an individual reader's mind, as opposed to having to accept a director's interpretation of such things. Through this the reader builds a more personalised relationship with a novel because it can look how they want it to based on the knowledge they bring to the text.

Indeed, Umberto Eco highlights that the reader plays an active role in the interpretation and generative process of the text,<sup>288</sup> before going on to suggest that the novelist, through his writing, injects into his work a set of codes that he hopes to communicate to his model reader, and at the same time upholds an assumption that these codes will be understood by the reader in order to recreate the story as the novelist intended.<sup>289</sup> Therefore, it is essential for the codes Eco speaks of are clear to the reader, so that that they can be interpreted through the imagination into a fully formed fictional universe and story. This is most often achieved through connectivity between the words on the page and actual world items, such as what a character is wearing or how a room is furnished, so as the reader can draw on their knowledge of what these objects,

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<sup>286</sup> Mokaya, p 1.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, p 1.

<sup>288</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (New York: Anchor Press, 1981), p 4.

<sup>289</sup> Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, p 7.

buildings, uniforms, etc, look like in order to recreate the fictional world within their imagination. Equally, there is also an element of structuralism to how a reader interprets a text as 'no text is read independently of the reader's experience of other texts',<sup>290</sup> or rather readers use their experiences of reading other texts to manage their expectations. For example, if a novel is said to be akin to a 'Mills and Boon', the reader will know to expect a romance narrative and a simplistic writing style.

What also stood out in Janice Radway's writings on women readers and fiction, was an ease with which she viewed the importance of romance narratives in the lives of women, and the manner in which she argues against a social assumption of popular fiction, such as the romance, as stereotypical, repetitive and akin to fairy stories, instead regarding them as "'serious" considerations of pertinent human problems'.<sup>291</sup> Whatever low status some literary critics have placed over time on works within the romance genre, for some readers of romance the act of reading is a valuable means of understanding their real problems and feelings through the experiences of fictional characters, whilst also at times playing out personal fantasies. Arguably, the storylines of romance novels still have a grounding in reality no matter how fantastical the twists and turns they may take. Often they deal in real life characters and emotions, and it is the absorption into the fictional universe through reading that allows the reader to explore emotions and situations before applying them to or experiencing them in the actual world. In fact, Radway even suggests that reading romantic fiction is a positive means of reinforcing a female reader's

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<sup>290</sup> Eco *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, p 21.

<sup>291</sup> Radway, p 187.

sense of self, because that reader will experience through the heroine a sense of being desired and wanted by the hero, so she will carry through into the actual world 'the value they doubted they possessed'.<sup>292</sup>

Further, Radway goes on to speak of the romance novel as offering the reader a 'free space' away from having to perform the usual daily tasks, which is something that has undoubtedly changed considerably for women as their roles in society have shifted over the decades. A middle or upper-class woman of the eighteenth or nineteenth century, for instance, would likely have had plenty of free time to dedicate to reading, especially those with servants, and a husband as the sole earner of the household. This was an ideal environment in which the novel could thrive, as there was a ready female audience looking for their own form of entertainment and escapism. Yet modern life is arguably leaving less and less time for reading for pleasure, even for women, and maybe Radway's views of women readers reaching for a romance novel as a means of escape is less of a reality in the twenty-first century. A great decline in the largest sector of active readers, women, could be a real threat to the future of the novel. It could certainly be argued that the most important aspect of keeping the novel alive relies on maintaining a wide audience of readers, male and female, who want to have that escape into and make that connection with another fictional universe, over ensuring continual ingenuity in the form or maintaining a certain literary standard.

Several years later, in 1991, Bridget Fowler also wrote extensively on the subject of the female reader and romance literature. Just as with Radway, Fowler speaks of a snobbery felt by some critics towards such popular fiction as the

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<sup>292</sup> Radway, p 113.

romance novel, and how this form of mass culture has in her eyes been 'sternly rejected at its birth by the gatekeepers of literature'.<sup>293</sup> Fowler details a route into modern romance narratives from traditional fairy stories, with a side step through French novellas of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In fact, she speaks of modern romance as 'fairy-tales sieved through a net of realism',<sup>294</sup> depicting, as does Radway, a view of escapist fiction that also informs a view of the actual world. The main point that comes through both Fowler and Radway's studies is the need for society not to sneer at romance or similar popular fiction, and not to dismiss it as having no place in society, but rather we should be embracing it as an important route for many readers, particularly female readers, into escapism, a window into a world in which they are valued as women.

Indeed, romance as a literary category offers the perfect recipe for fulfilment and escapism for the female reader, as this statement demonstrates:

The romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream, and for that reason it has socially a curious paradoxical role. In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy...no matter how great a change may take place in society, romance will turn up again, as hungry as ever, looking for new hopes and desires to feed on.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Bridget Fowler, *The Alienated Reader: Women and Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p 30.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid*, p 12.

<sup>295</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Mythos of Summer: Romance*, in 'Modern Genre Theory', ed. by David Duff (Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000), pp. 98 – 117, p 99.

It is the format of the romance narrative that is its enduring strength, and the basic plotline of a hero overcoming the villain in order to save the heroine has resonated through every society throughout the ages. Arguably, this is a basic desire for women that has carried throughout the centuries, and as such will continue to speak to women of future generations. Thus, the romance novel is surely a narrative medium that will do much to ensure the novel has a future, and should be viewed as being just as, if not more, important as any literary novel.

Academic George Paizis in his late 90s work *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction*, outlines the generic plot of the novel, stating 'its basic ingredients are a private setting, within which a heroine is brought into conflict with a hero, an encounter out of which ensues an affective adventure that ends happily'.<sup>296</sup> When a female reader opens up a romance she has security in knowing what kind of reading experience and emotional journey she will encounter, and so can instantly relax into a setting with which she is already comfortably familiar. Paizis also suggests that during the 1990s the romance genre evolved to take into account changes to women's position in society as well as their expectations, whilst also keeping up with diversity in the reading demographic. Narratively this meant romance increasingly represented heroines exercising their right to choose and a greater balance of power between sexes, but also a greater variety in storylines across the genre.<sup>297</sup> This reflects the point made in chapter three about the importance of literature as a whole, and the novel specifically, in reflecting the current society, cultural changes and

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<sup>296</sup> George Paizis, *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), p 29.

<sup>297</sup> Paizis, p 32.

public needs, in order to remain current, and thus popular. What Paizis is suggesting here is that the romance narrative has always achieved this, proving itself to be a current mode of storytelling through the ages.

There is also something to be said of the importance of the female protagonist in the novel, especially if it is vital to keep the female reader wanting to engage in reading. At the turn of the twenty-first century, academic Janice Rossen also spoke of how romance storylines changed with society in order to reflect with a greater sense of reality a believable fantasy scenario. She highlighted how most women of the nineteenth century had only one chance to marry, and as such a prominent theme in many Victorian novels was whether the female protagonist would end up married to the right man. In the twentieth century, however, women have gained greater independence in terms of relationships and rights, being able to develop themselves professionally and socially. As such, Rosen goes on to say report the 'emotional tension' of the story had to come from a source other than a marriage plot.<sup>298</sup> Equally, 'these twentieth-century heroines want work and love, passion and intelligence, fatalism and lyrical free choice', and so the contemporary romance plot had to address these binaries in order to offer the modern reader something with depth and intelligence, as well as entertainment, that reflected how it is for women today.<sup>299</sup> At the same time, writing in a more sexually liberal twentieth century meant that women novelists could write more openly about their protagonist's sexuality, and offer their readers happy endings that didn't necessarily conclude

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<sup>298</sup> Janice Rosen, *Women Writing Modern Fiction: A Passion for Ideas* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p 83.

<sup>299</sup> Rossen, p 88.

with the heroine being married to the 'right' man.<sup>300</sup> In arguing against the novel's death, here is an avenue in which it very much remains alive in that the romance genre seems to have moved with the times to reflect the reality of its current readers. This reflects a narrative form that is very much alive, as well as open to reflecting the true desires, constructs and social laws of the society it serves.

However, as well as maintaining a strong female readership for the novel, other key sectors of society have been a recent focus for writers and academics in a bid to keep the reading public reading for pleasure. In June 2014 a group of over twenty-five authors, including Mark Haddon and A. L. Kennedy, protested in Downing Street over a government restriction on sending books into prisons. In 2013 Justice Secretary Chris Grayling added books to the list of items that could not be sent into prisons, which outraged authors who felt that reading was an essential part of rehabilitation and reducing the risks of reoffending.<sup>301</sup> A BBC Radio 4 episode of the long-running series *Book Club* was recorded amongst an audience of female prison inmates housed in Cheshire's Styal Prison, in which presenter James Naughtie asked of the inmates 'what about reading here in Styal prison, what does reading mean? [...] How much does it mean to all of you that you've got these books available?'.<sup>302</sup> One of the inmates responded that about 80 per cent of the female inmates do use the library service on a regular basis, which is evidence alone that removing books from prisons would be a harmful act. The inmate goes on to make a valid point that 'in prison you need that escape

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid, p 162.

<sup>301</sup> Alan Travis, *Ministers Defend Ban on Sending Books to Prisoners in England and Wales* (2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/mar/24/ban-books-prisoners-england-wales-authors>> [accessed 3 January 2015].

<sup>302</sup> 'Neel Mukherjee – The Lives of Others', *Book Club*, BBC Radio 4, 5 August 2018, 15:30.

[...] and to get lost in a book in some circumstances is more beneficial than a lot of things on offer'.<sup>303</sup> This comment demonstrates the importance of offering escape through literature to those who have little release from their confinement, and it is an oversight that this sector of the reading public should be denied the opportunity of engaging in an activity that would be of benefit to them. Of course it would be interesting also to hear views from inmates in a male prison and investigate whether as high a percentage would be drawn to reading as a form of escape, but even this female inmate's view alone highlights the benefits of reading as a means of escape, particularly in an environment in which other forms of entertainment are not so readily available. To allow this sector of society to read at their leisure would surely benefit not just their mental health, but also the future of the novel. Of course these readers would not be directly investing in the novel market, but the opportunity to read novels may help them to garner an ongoing passion for reading fiction that would most likely be taken into the future and passed on to the next generation. The ability to access the written word should not be denied because of an individual's situation, and it very much goes against the democratising attitude that is paramount in keeping the novel alive.

Not only must attention be paid to widening the choice of novels available in order to engage with a broader sector of the reading public, but there should also be some focus on including all sectors of society by widening the access to novels for all levels of society. The lending libraries and book-borrowing schemes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did much to bring the novel to as many willing readers as they could, and so to hear reports in the twenty-

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid.



first century such as refusing prisoners access to books is troubling. It also reflects one of Self's points that he believes the literary novel will become a high art form rather than a widely read literary medium in the future as sectors of society fall out of love with the act of reading for pleasure. With an attitude that books should be out of reach for those deemed as undeserving, there is something to be said for Self's notion that the future of the literary novel is that it may one day be appreciated only by a niche sector of society. It can only be hoped that these authors arguing against the government's move are effective in their cause so as to maintain the popularity of reading for pleasure in as many sectors of society as is possible.

On top of this comes further media reports in 2017 of writers rallying for support to keep libraries open across the UK, as an open letter headed by author Neil Gaiman called upon the then Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening, to take action in stopping the closure of school libraries.<sup>304</sup> Included in the campaign is an argument over the importance of school librarians, stating that their role is vital in encouraging and nurturing within the younger generations the pleasure of reading. The letter in question collected support from more than 150 signatories, including well-known authors such as Philip Pullman, and it argued strongly against the loss of library resources in schools, due to their importance as a means for pupils to access literature. This action came over fears that a drop in funding and provisions for school libraries would have a devastating impact on the literacy of future generations, which is a poignant point in securing a long and healthy future for the novel. What is

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<sup>304</sup> Alison Flood, 'Neil Gaiman Leads Authors Demanding Action to Halt Decline of School Libraries', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/nov/23/neil-gaiman-leads-authors-demanding-action-to-halt-decline-of-school-libraries>> [accessed 25 November 2017].

important as a means to proving the case is that included in the letter is an example of a secondary school that lost all of its librarians in 2014 due to budget cuts. A result of this, the letter goes on to say, there was a significant drop in the numbers of books that were borrowed between September and November of that year in which 1,508 books were loaned out to children, compared to over the same period of three months in 2017 when only 48 books were loaned out to children.<sup>305</sup> Losing the presence of the library in schools will no doubt be harmful to the novel's currently stable position as a popular narrative medium, because the children of today's society will become the reading public, and some of them novel readers, of the future.

However, it is not all negative as amongst the noise of library cuts and closures are reports telling positive accounts of councils putting money into turning around the public view of libraries, such as Greater Manchester Borough Council who are encouraging the use of libraries in the area by sending 'a welcome message to our residents that they will have a completely free library service'.<sup>306</sup> They also aim to drop all library fines in a bid to encourage users back by removing the stigma of facing a hefty fine for overdue or lost books, following positive reports from Bolton council who have already adopted the scheme, council leader Sean Anstee's reports a move to place trust in users that they will return books when they can so as to remove any tension over using the library service. Similarly, in August 2018 a family took on Northamptonshire

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<sup>305</sup> Flood, 'Neil Gaiman Leads Authors Demanding Action to Halt Decline of School Libraries'.

<sup>306</sup> Alison Flood, 'Trafford Becomes First UK Council to Abolish all Library Fines', *The Guardian*, 9 February 2018, < [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/09/trafford-council-library-fines?utm\\_source=esp&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=Bookmarks+-+Collections+2017&utm\\_term=263632&subid=16897915&CMP=bookmarks\\_collection](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/09/trafford-council-library-fines?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Bookmarks+-+Collections+2017&utm_term=263632&subid=16897915&CMP=bookmarks_collection) > [accessed 10 February 2018].

County Council over their plans to close twenty-one libraries in the area,<sup>307</sup> arguing that the cuts would have particularly affected the children's library services, and as such would put at a disadvantage the young and emerging generations of readers. Here are two examples, among like many others that have gone unreported, of how society is displaying a desire to continue upholding a positive stance on reading for pleasure, an environment in which the novel is likely to thrive into the future.

One of the questions that was posed to the focus groups of readers who I conversed with asked whether they felt the amount of leisure time they dedicated to reading had increased or decreased in the past ten years, and if so what did they believe had prompted this change. This question was geared towards recognising blocks or facilitators in contemporary society that could maybe suggest threats or positives in relation to the novel's future longevity. For instance, several participants revealed that technology and other forms of entertainment have increasingly replaced their desire to read in their free time, which didn't come as a surprise, but did reiterate a great threat to the novel's popularity and in some ways supported Self's protestations. One participant stated 'I've definitely noticed a decline, mostly because I spend a lot of time I used to read over watching Netflix, or browsing the Internet',<sup>308</sup> whilst another suggested that their lifestyle has sparked a decline in the amount of time they dedicate to reading when commenting 'I used to read constantly all the time when I was younger.....now I'm at work all day and I get home and I can't be

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<sup>307</sup> Flood, Alison, 'Family Claims Win in High Court Challenge to Northants Library Cuts', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2018 < [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/12/family-mounts-legal-challenge-to-northamptonshire-library-cuts?utm\\_source=esp&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=Bookmarks+-+Collections+2017&utm\\_term=271420&subid=16897915&CMP=bookmarks\\_collection](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/12/family-mounts-legal-challenge-to-northamptonshire-library-cuts?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Bookmarks+-+Collections+2017&utm_term=271420&subid=16897915&CMP=bookmarks_collection) > [accessed 12 April 2018].

<sup>308</sup> Conversation recorded 4<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

bothered to sit and read'.<sup>309</sup> In this second comment, it was the transition from childhood to adulthood that seemed to have sparked a change in attitude, hinting that changes in lifestyle as we grow into adults does have a significant impact on the decline in leisure time, or what we decide to do with having less free time as adults compared to in childhood. Further comments such as how 'phones in bed' had taken over a desire to read before going to sleep, also point towards societal changes in a digital era, and certainly highlight a real threat to the novel that Self pointed towards. This threat is reflected in a further comment from a focus group participant who opined 'it takes no time to get into reading Facebook statuses, you know, whereas you do need five or ten minutes to get into a novel before you start enjoying it',<sup>310</sup> suggesting that the instant entertainment fix offered by social media could be winning over a proportion of the appeal to dedicate time reading for pleasure. Although this is just one person in the vast literate demographic of the UK, there are likely others who would express similar sentiments today. In this sense, Self's bemoaning of how digital technology is affecting people's concentration levels and desire for deep serious reading is somewhat justified, which is doubtless why Mahey-Morgan suggested that the future for the novel is to merge with smart phones and digital technology in order to continue to appeal to the emerging generations for whom owning a smart phone is the norm.

However, something that was interesting when analysing the conversations was in some cases there was a positive rise in the amount of time some participants spent engaging with reading and books in their spare time.

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<sup>309</sup> Conversation recorded 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017.

<sup>310</sup> Conversation recorded 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017.

For example, one group discussed to a great extent audiobooks, and spoke freely of how they offer an alternative way to consuming a narrative because they can fit more easily into people's lives. One participant started off this discussion when they asked of the group 'does anybody listen to audiobooks?', <sup>311</sup>which was met with some agreement from others in that group. Another shared 'I listen to them when I'm driving', <sup>312</sup> whilst one said they found the *Audible* app on their phone of great use when travelling for work purposes. Two further participants in that same group went on to speak about the merits of listening to an audiobook whilst driving, with one in particular commenting that 'spoken word when I'm driving is always the right thing', <sup>313</sup> and what was particularly endearing was when a participant shared their experiences of listening to the *Harry Potter* series in the car whilst on holiday with their wife and children, stating 'it was a really good way of bringing the family together'.<sup>314</sup> All of these comments demonstrated how digitising the book has for some opened up possibilities of further engaging with the novel, and how having the option to listen to a book on a range of devices means that an individual does not necessarily have to set aside time to read, which is really vital in terms of keeping the reading public engaging with the novel over seeing it as an unnecessary inconvenience. Similarly, as the ability to access novels as ebooks whilst on the move has increased over the past decade or so, either through the use of an ereader or smart phone, so it seemed some participants found digital technology encouraged them to read more novels. For instance, one participant told the group 'I go to pick my daughter up from work, I've got to wait 10

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<sup>311</sup> Conversation recorded 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

minutes, I haven't got a *Kindle* on me, so I'll get my mobile phone out and read',<sup>315</sup> whilst another shared 'I find I read more since I've had a *Kindle* because it's always in your handbag. I'm going to the dentist, I don't read those stupid magazines on the table'.<sup>316</sup> It was equally endearing to hear a participant from one focus group comment 'I would love to be able to read on my phone because I have my phone everywhere',<sup>317</sup> suggesting this is something they would consider as a means of integrating reading for pleasure more easily into their life.

Time was a prevalent factor that came across in a lot of the discussions had across the focus group when sharing about whether their reading habits had changed in the last ten years. Participants in one focus group, composed largely of retired men, commented on how the amount they read had actually increased in more recent years, largely due to a change in circumstance, such as one participant who boldly stated 'increase for me because my kids have grown up and moved away. Simple as that. I have a lot more time for reading'.<sup>318</sup> This led into another participant pointing out 'I think it's a division amongst those that...between those who are still working and those who are retired. I probably read more because I've got more time',<sup>319</sup> which was met with some sounds of agreement and nodding of heads from the rest of the group. Another participant followed this up by sharing 'my main reading time is first thing in the morning. Always used to be getting up, getting the kids to school was the thing, whereas now I wake up at half past six, make a cup of tea and read for two hours'.<sup>320</sup> Age and lifestyle certainly seemed to be factors that played a part in whether

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<sup>315</sup> Conversation recorded 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Conversation recorded 4<sup>th</sup> October 2017.

<sup>318</sup> Conversation recorded 7<sup>th</sup> November 2017.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

participants tended towards spending their free time reading, especially when comparing the participant who has free time in the morning to read, to a younger participant in another focus group who worked full time and reported 'the problem I have with novels is that when you're reading them you feel you should be doing something else, because you've got so many things to do'.<sup>321</sup> This participant went on to say that they find it hard to relax enough to dedicate time to reading, largely because they feel they should be doing something more productive, even though they do actually enjoy reading once they become engrossed in a novel. Another expressed a similar sense of guilt over dedicating free time to reading, saying 'it takes a lot of time up, doesn't it, reading....even if you read a book in a couple of days, that's actually quite a lot of time'.<sup>322</sup> All these negative comments could be said to support Self's argument that society is losing a desire for close, concentrated reading, by suggesting that this is certainly true in some cases because of a change in lifestyle. Yet they are balanced out to an extent by the positive comments, pointing towards a reading public that is diverse in its habits, and that has not completely turned its back on reading for pleasure to the extent that Self suggests.

Another interesting theme that came through the focus group discussions centred on a block for some in a desire to read when going through psychological conditions and changes in mental state, such as stress and anxiety. One participant shared in a heartfelt statement that 'under periods of stress I find it more difficult to read because my concentration goes. So that's what affects my reading I think, stress levels, and that's purely because of the concentration

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<sup>321</sup> Conversation recorded 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

going'.<sup>323</sup> However, this participant's words inferred that they stop reading for a time and come back to it when their mental state is so that they can better concentrate, suggesting there is always a chance of someone coming back to reading when they've had to break away from the act due to mental incapacity. The effect of mental health issues on an individual's relationship to reading is a topic area currently being widely discussed in the media, and yet I hadn't even considered it to be a valid influence on the novel's future at the start of the study. The ways in which it is believed by some that reading can actively help calm anxiety and other mental health issues, was a feature on Radio 4's *Front Row* in October 2018.<sup>324</sup> The guests, including writer Marian Keyes, promoted reading as a means of escaping from mental ill-health symptoms, and at the same time spoke of their own experiences about how reading helped them through troubling times. There was arguably a bias on the show that promoted reading as a medicine for anxiety or depression, or rather the show wanted to push the focus towards reading as a positive escape from such mental afflictions, because it didn't really present the other side of the argument, as was demonstrated in some of the focus group discussions, that reading can be difficult for some experiencing mental health issues. What came through in the focus group data is that for some, anxiety and depression are not medicated by reading novels due to the mental commitment that is required, and in fact views expressed through the participants told a completely different story to that presented in that episode of *Front Row*. Nothing can be said with certainty about whether a rise in mental health issues across the UK will threaten the novel or not challenge its

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<sup>323</sup> Conversation recorded 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017.

<sup>324</sup> 'Reading and Mental Health', *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4, 10 October 2018, 19:15.



popularity, but this subject stood out as something that could actively affect the future size of the reading public, particularly if a number of adults who go through periods in which they can't face reading then don't ever return to it.

However, something positive can be taken away in the fact that the responses from the focus group were not all doom and gloom, and it was positive to hear there were several participants for whom reading was a solid part of their daily routine. Participants across more than one focus group said that they read daily and always have done, with some stating they use reading as a way of relaxing before going to sleep. In fact one participant commented of reading that 'it's a routine, a habit isn't it, to read?',<sup>325</sup> suggesting that for them reading is still a natural part of their day rather than a chore or distraction. They went on to say 'that's why I do it (read) at bedtime, because that's when you go to bed and think 'book's right there, I'll read a bit, switch off, go to sleep''.<sup>326</sup> It was emboldening to hear this comment that came from a participant in her early 30s, and is suggestive that a key factor in keeping the reading public reading is to instil in the emerging generations the habit of reading on a daily basis, as well as to encourage as many members of the reading public as possible to maintain a routine of reading daily, or at least regularly, into adulthood. This is particularly vital when placed against a story from another participant in that same focus group, a male in his late twenties, who revealed that they fell out of the routine of setting time aside for reading on a Sunday morning, admitting that it was difficult to keep up the routine once their life was filled with other activities, although it is worth noting that there was an undertone of sadness when he

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<sup>325</sup> Conversation recorded 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

made this statement, and a general feeling that he regretted having dropped the habit of putting aside his Sunday mornings for reading.

Social data are essential in discussing the current and future health of the reading public, but other data sets found in bestseller and award lists are an equally valid means of obtaining a sense of what the British reading public are reading, or what is currently trending in the literary sphere, to add to a sense of the current health of the novel. It could be said that recent and current bestseller lists act as a window into what contemporary readers are purchasing, and what has been popular over the year. Looking back, for instance, over the past three or so years, from 2018 to 2020, a narrative of sorts unfolds that tells of strong sales in children's and young adult fiction, as well as a strong uptake in the novel as a form of escapism, but also how the novel appears to have continued to strength its role as a medium which speaks of current affairs in a manner that detracts from the stark reality inherent in media reports. For example, sales figures provided at the close of 2018 released by *Publishers Weekly* suggested that children's literature and adult nonfiction appeared to be firm favourites in the first half of 2018.<sup>327</sup> This is arguably a vital factor in maintaining the size of the reading public into the future, even if realistically it is the case that not all of those children reading now continue to read novels into adulthood. What can also be gleaned from best seller lists of the past three years is that, at a glance, the contemporary reading public are still drawn to novels, and that Self could be deemed as being presumptuous in declaring the decline in readership of novels that could be considered as literary. Equally, whilst there

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<sup>327</sup> John Maher, 'The Bestselling Books of 2018 (So Far)', *Publishers Weekly*, 9 July 2018 <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/77459-the-bestselling-books-of-2018-so-far.html>> [accessed 29 September 2018].

were a selection of politically driven non-fiction and cookery books on the lists, as well as children's literature, novels dominated more than a third of the bestseller list for 2018, 2019, and 2020.

Top of the list at the close of 2018 was the 2017 Costa book award winner *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, by Gail Honeyman. Honeyman's novel remained in the bestseller list for 2019, as well as sparking a trend for a new genre category termed by the publishing industry as 'up-lit'. 'Up-lit' is suggestive of feel-good narratives that are rooted in realism, and which send a message to the reader all will be right in the end because positive things happen to real people, not just to fictional characters living in fantasy worlds. At the time the movement reportedly replaced 'grip lit' thrillers in the popularity stakes,<sup>328</sup> and whilst the forging of such categories of fiction can be taken as a clever marketing tool, there is something to be said about how emerging categories in literary fiction can spark the sort of 'water-cooler conversations' that Self claimed had died long ago. Arguably, these new movements create a sort of hype, a bubble in which readers want to be a part of a trend or movement, in order to feel as if they are engaging with new modes of literature and not missing out on that which is culturally popular. However, another point to highlight is that whilst Honeyman's novel was for a period a bestseller and pop fiction, it should also be credited as being well-written and literary in its skill of show don't tell narrative style, its inventive story arcs with depth and twists that are cleverly formulated, and approaches to contemporary, albeit gritty, subject matter about how

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<sup>328</sup> Danuta Kean, 'Up Lit: The New Book Trend with Kindness at its Core', *The Guardian*, 2 August 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/aug/02/up-lit-the-new-book-trend-with-kindness-at-its-core>> [accessed 4 January 2019].

loneliness appears to have spread through all corners of contemporary society, and particularly in the younger generations:

On Fridays, I don't get the bus straight after work but instead I go to the Tesco Metro around the corner from the office and buy a margherita pizza, some Chianti and two big bottles of Glen's vodka. When I get home, I eat the pizza and drink the wine. I have some vodka afterwards. I don't need much on a Friday, just a few big swigs. I usually wake up on the sofa around 3 a.m., and I stumble off to bed. I drink the rest of the vodka over the weekend, spread it throughout both days so that I'm neither drunk nor sober. Monday takes a long time to come around.<sup>329</sup>

This comes at the start of the narrative and sets not only the tone for the novel, but also of Eleanor's life at the point at which we as the reader meet her. The reader is required to read between the lines of what turns out to be an unreliable narrator, and to see in this example that her routine is born of a person who has no life outside of work, and is compensating for this by dulling their conscience with alcohol in order to survive the weekends alone. The writing is not taxing to read or embedded with deep metaphors, but the reader is mentally stimulated through the language that leaves hints for the reader to read in to, as well as presenting a personalised perspective on a contemporary social issue with the aim to provoke a meditative response within the reader. Whilst it could be suggested that the type of mind-stretching and deeply literary novels as Self produces are maybe not so much in the forefront of what is currently popular,

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<sup>329</sup> Gail Honeyman, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (London: Harper Collins, 2017), p 5.

this is not to say that supposed “bestseller” novels should be viewed instantly as not being literary or well-written, or indeed that they fail to display themes or topics of depth, because in fact it could be said that this is exactly what Honeyman achieves with her novel.

Looking further into what was most popular in 2018, there weren’t so many literary novels per se, the exceptions being Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere* and Heather Morris’s *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, both published in 2018. Rather the list is populated with genre fiction, chick-lit and detective/crime fiction, but some of it by well-established literary authors such as Val McDermid and Peter James. This is surely further proof of what was discussed at length in chapter three of this thesis about a changing attitude towards highly literary and genre fiction, and how this may be the future for the literary novel over the death that Self proposes. It was a similar story for 2019 as literary novelist Sally Rooney’s second novel *Normal People* sits comfortably near the top of the list, alongside Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*, both household names as well as revered writers of literary fiction. As was seen in 2018, it would appear that genre fiction was also a strong seller in 2019, ranging from light chick-lit such as EL James’s *The Mister*, to more literary affair from the likes of Ian Rankin and Lee Child.

In terms of gleaming a view of the current reading demographic, it was clear that the female readership for fiction is currently strong. As women readers and their relationship to the novel was much discussed earlier on in this chapter, it could be said that the bestseller lists of the past three years further highlight how vital it is in maintaining a future for the novel that female readers are well catered for. This was evidenced in part in the novel being utilised as an

increasing means of giving voice to feminist issues and proving itself to be a political platform for contemporary female concerns, not least the #Me Too movement. Arguably this feminist movement, which became a much-publicised topic of conversation in October 2017 as a black feminist stand against male misogyny, is highly prevalent in the subject matter of a number of novels today, highlighting how the novel continues to be utilised as a medium through which to explore contemporary issues as a means to giving them a global voice. As #Me Too swept across Western society, it brought with it an attitude that rallied for change to the rights of women across all strands of the media, provoking attention to the sexual harassment of women, the abusing of male dominance over women, and the gender divide and inequalities in the workplace.<sup>330</sup> In addition to this, the movement has been incorporated into contemporary novels of the past four or so years as a means of exploring the matter from an empathic viewpoint. Jessie Burton's 2019 release *The Confession*, although not on the bestseller list, is an example of how novels are effective in approaching topics of love, sex, and motherhood, featuring at its heart a feminist lesbian novelist in her seventies, and a young typist whom she employs to help her write out the stories of her life, and whose true identity she withholds in order to uncover some of the truth behind her mother's death. In this is a narrative about female identity, sexuality and power struggles. Scarlett Thomas's 2019 release *Oligarchy* is a narrative about power and privilege, but also a murder-mystery set within a girl's boarding school in which the main protagonist wants to uncover a murder that is dressed up as death through anorexia. Female empowerment in relation to the #Me Too movement can be shared through opinions as experiences of real

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women across social media channels, or through reports in the news of women rising up against masculine oppression or abuse, but the novel can go deeper into the heart of the subject through empathy, the merging of several narrative voices, and the reader living through a character's experience rather than receiving reports of a particular incident in the media.

What can also be said of recent bestseller lists as a display of the reading demographic, is there appears to be a clear importance placed upon keeping emerging generations interested in reading for pleasure, which is evident in the popularity of books aimed at younger readers. What is neglected throughout protestations of the novel's death, from Will Self to Bill Buford, is the importance of securing its future by making sure that the younger generations are treated to a range of challenging literature aimed specifically at them, and thus younger readers, who will hopefully become adult readers of novels, are encouraged to maintain a desire for reading for pleasure. For instance, 2019 saw the release of young adult fiction that touched upon contemporary, and at times hard-hitting, topics, which suggests that writers want younger readers to see that literary fiction is an ideal way of exploring serious subjects and our emotional responses to them. In a sense, there is a suggestion of such authors wanting to break down the divide between children's and adult fiction in terms of not dumbing down the gritty topics occurring in the actual world, but rather to present them to young adult readers in such a way that they can make sense of the world. A prime example is Niven Govinden's *This Brutal House*, which *The Guardian* described as 'a queer protest novel set among the drag ball community of New

York',<sup>331</sup> Govinden utilises the backdrop of drag competitions and balls to highlight the ever-current issues of disobedience and political resistance in a society that is not respected or protected by authority due to their sexual orientation and life choices. In light of the #Me Too movement there were also some 2019 releases that explored female empowerment and the struggles women face in male-dominant environments, such as *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas about a young American girl who strives to become a rapper. Rather, critics speaking upon the topic of the death of the novel have largely focused their attention on the failings of novels written for an adult audience, and are not so forward thinking in the quality of prose-fiction being written for younger readers. In this study, however, it felt important to highlight how vital it is to encourage reading from a young age if we are to support a healthy future for the novel.

Over a quarter of the bestsellers for 2018 were attributed to the sale of books aimed at younger readers, suggesting a culture that understands the importance of keeping the emerging generations reading. This also continued into 2019 and 2020, where again a solid quarter or so of the bestsellers were in the category of children and young people's literature. There is something invigorating, also, to learn that the vast majority of these books were published either that year or the previous year, highlighting that the contemporary market for children and young people's literature remains strong, or in other words it appears to be recognised within the literary market the importance of catering for children and readers of an early age. If this continues to be the case then there is likely more chance of a healthy future for the novel, particularly as the

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<sup>331</sup> Kean.



children of today will have a greater chance of seeing that reading can offer a deeper narrative experience and evoke empathy towards a subject matter in a way that TV or film cannot so readily achieve.

A further point in considering securing a future for the novel that came through the bestseller lists was how much of a draw a novel series can be. Likely used initially as a marketing tool for both novelist and publisher to drum up hype through the development of a fictional universe and the anticipation of the release of the next instalment, the bestseller lists of 2018 – 2020 demonstrate that a series is also a positive means of keeping the reading public interested in reading novels. Anticipation of the coming of a sequel creates hype and a talking point that arguably gets a sector of the reading public wanting to read in order to feel part of a craze. Top sellers in 2018 included part of the Millennium series from Swedish novelist David Lagercrantz, the first novel in the series being *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* written by Stieg Larsson and first published in English in January 2008. Ten years after the release of the first instalment the series is still proving to be a strong seller, which is also contributing to a steady audience for the novel. In 2019 the release of *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood's follow-up to *The Handmaid's Tale*, was a strong bestseller. Again, there was a sizeable gap between this new release and the first in the series, approximately thirty-four years, suggesting that a well-written and engaging novel series will draw an audience of readers no matter over how many years it spans. Yet again in 2020 was the publication of another much anticipated, and in this case final, instalment of a popular series of novels, as Hillary Mantel published *The Mirror and the Light* as an ending to her trilogy charting the rise and fall of historical figure Thomas Cromwell. By creating an interlinking series of novels and

stretching a narrative out over several instalments, the reader comes to build up relationships with the characters and invest in the fictional universe. Of course there are many series of novels that follow a set protagonist or set of characters, but what is prominent about these bestselling examples is that they can all be classed as literary novels. Whilst Self declares our modern society has no time for literary novels or deep and serious reading, so the reading public puts paid to this notion even today, and there is no reason to doubt that they will not continue to do so into the future.

Whatever the individual view on literary awards, be it that they are a means of celebrating literary writing, or as a commercialised boost to a publisher's profits by raising the profile of a new release, there is something to be said in relation to the importance in keeping the novel alive. In some cases, it could be implied that literary awards entice members of the reading public into reading for pleasure, and wanting to be part of the collective reading award winners or novels in the short-list. Equally, there is a celebration of the varied writing talent alive in Britain, for instance in 2019 there were documented more than fifteen major and minor literary awards focused on different areas of literature in the UK alone.<sup>332</sup> In order to widen the pool of novel readers, there are some who have argued that the focus should be placed on well-written fiction that obeys the laws of good literary writing without being overly complex. On top of this a prize winner should be accessible and a text that doesn't hinder the reader's enjoyment by being too taxing a read. For instance, Anna Burns's novel *Milkman* won the 2018 Man Booker Prize, and yet it stirred media tension

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<sup>332</sup> Becki Crosley et al, 'All the Major UK Book Awards 2019', *The List*, 17 March 2020, <<https://www.list.co.uk/article/107210-all-the-major-uk-book-awards-2019/>> [accessed April 2019].

as some critics criticised it for its over-complexity. The argument of critics against Burns's novel centred around a belief that it was too challenging a read to be enjoyable, and therefore *Milkman* wouldn't have appealed to as wide an audience as one would expect of a prize-winner. Descriptors such as "hard work", "challenging" and "brain kneading"<sup>333</sup> were used to criticise the novel's complex narrative style, which included the omitted all character names. Whilst journalist Sam Leith spoke against the negative criticism to share a positive view that award-winning novels should be mentally stimulating, he is clear in arguing that the complexity should be justified in terms of it being integral to the plot.<sup>334</sup> Leith draws also on an argument that has run throughout this thesis about snobbery in the literary world, believing that a contender for a literary award needs to be judged solely on whether it is well-written, rather than whether it falls into the category of high or low art. It needs to be recognised that not every reader is educated to the same level, or even wants to be intellectually challenged when reading a novel, and so the future novel market needs to maintain a range of books to suit all tastes.

In both of these notions, of awards catering to a certain sector of society or possibly alienating them, is a sense that literary awards are about being a voice for the nation as much as rewarding current writers. This can be seen in the choices made as much as for the runners up as the winners, and how these pieces of literature have been selected because they speak of the here and now.

The 2020 Booker prize went to Glaswegian novelist Douglas Stuart for his social

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<sup>333</sup> Sam Leith, 'Pretentious, Impenetrable, Hard Work ... Better? Why We Need Difficult Books', *The Guardian*, 10 November 2018, <[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/10/anna-burns-milkman-difficult-novel?utm\\_term=RWRpdG9yaWFsX0Jvb2ttYXJrcy0xODExMTE%3D&utm\\_source=esp&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=Bookmarks&CMP=bookmarks\\_email](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/10/anna-burns-milkman-difficult-novel?utm_term=RWRpdG9yaWFsX0Jvb2ttYXJrcy0xODExMTE%3D&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Bookmarks&CMP=bookmarks_email)> [accessed 10 November 2018].

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

realist novel *Shuggie Bain*. Set in Glasgow during the early 1980's, *Shuggie Bain* depicts life for one family in Scotland dealing with the political climate under Thatcher's rule, as well as poverty and issues of sexuality. This reflects very much the novel of the last decade in terms of its drive towards social realism, and using the empathic nature of the lengthy narrative prose format in order to raise topics of real life that the reader can live through from the perspective of a fictional character. It could be argued also that in the last decade or so the dominant novel form has been social realism, with a great many novelists choosing this over fantasy and escapism to depict characters overcoming universal challenges, such as addiction, sexuality and class struggles. But also much of the conflict of the story coming through social conflict in the form of dysfunctional families and work environments, or protagonists overcoming their awkward social skills. In the 2020 Booker shortlist were also Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* about a protagonist who shies away from meaningful friendships, fails to attend his father's funeral, and then, following a twist in the narrative, starts to question his past and potential future. Similarly, novelist Avni Doshi offers a love story between mother and daughter in *Burnt Sugar*, depicting in her narrative a relationship strained by past betrayals that need to be overcome due to the mother's deteriorating mental health. The prominence in the literary market of novels dealing with loaded subjects in a social realist construct suggests this is the likely future for the novel, or rather that it will continue to serve as a window on contemporary life.

Whilst the Booker Prize is selected through a panel of judges within the literary sphere, online book review and blog space *Goodreads* host their own reader's choice awards each year, asking members of the reading public to vote

for their favourites books in a range of categories such as romance, horror, non-fiction and young adult fiction. This provides users of the website a chance to have their say on what they have enjoyed reading over the past year, and is also a good indicator of the contemporary reading demographic because the votes come directly from readers. Whilst it could be suggested such awards driven by public voting have not the literary upstanding as other literary awards, it could equally argued to the contrary that the *Goodreads* choice awards are important in making reader feel part of a community, and to show that their opinions do matter, which is again a vital link in keeping the reading public reading. In fact, a look back over novel award winners of the past three years, from 2018, 2019 and 2020 are certainly of use in this study of the future of the novel, because it points towards what readers have been reading above what they should be reading according to the literary elite, such as those voting in other literary awards.

In 2019 there was a mix of bestselling and well-known authors coming through, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* that won top spot in the fiction category, and Stephen King's latest novel *The Institute* winning in the horror category. Equally, however, there were some lesser known authors coming through as American author Leigh Bardugo won the fantasy category with her novel *Ninth House*, and Blake Crouch winning the sci-fi category with *Recursion*. Although Self argues a personal belief that society no longer seems to uphold the importance of putting time aside for deep and serious reading, the *Goodreads* choice awards rather put paid to this suggestion as Bardugo received 53,000 votes to win the category, and 41,000 readers voted for Crouch to win best sci-fi category. Here a sizeable number of readers have sought out an author

who is not necessarily a bestseller or widely known, yet each reader has enjoyed reading their novels to the extent that they want to point other readers towards their works. 2018 told a similar story, as although there were two Stephen King novel winners, one that won the mystery & thriller category, and the other the horror category, as well as household name Jojo Moyes taking the best fiction category. For instance, Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone* stole the historical fiction category, whilst American fantasy author VE Schwab took the science fiction category with 49,500 votes for her novel *Vengeful*.

What came through in the 2020 *Goodreads* awards was the mix of authors not necessarily in the public eye being awarded for their writing, as well as mix of novelists from around the globe. However, something that could also be inferred, particularly in looking at the runners-up in the fiction category, was that the selections seemed to be steered more towards a female audience. Whilst *Goodreads* display the number of votes a title receives, and again the figures are pleasingly high when taken from the perspective of numbers participating in voting, they do not show the demographic. However there was a suggestion prevalent in the choices that the majority of the voting was conducted by female readers over male readers, possibly suggestive of the continued high female readership of fiction, and in particular novels. Another thing that could be said of the 2020 winners and runners-up is that there was a display of the growing awareness of the need for diversity in the characters and cultures portrayed, but also the continuing drive towards using the novel to bring to the foreground issues of gender, race, sexuality and inequality. For instance, in the runner-ups for fiction is Frances Cha's *If I Had Your Face*, set in contemporary Korea, a narrative that sets out to explore the pressures placed on modern women to look

a certain way in Korean society. In the horror category, Megan Giddings's *Lakewood*, African-American protagonist Lena is forced to join a medical experimentation programme in order to save her family from debt, it becoming clear partway through that her skin colour is being used to the advantage of the programme.

It could be said that the celebration of literature and the uptake of readers voting for their picks of the year does not speak of a modern society that has fallen out of love with close, considered reading as Self suggests. Rather, what can be seen is a continued admiration and readership for novels of all types, both literary and genre fiction, and how a celebration of reading for pleasure remains strong today. Equally suggested is the continued support for a diverse range of writers and narratives that cover myriad cultures. What the recent Booker Prize shortlist and the *Goodreads* choice awards also suggest is that the future for the novel is not necessarily for it to be completely reinvented and regenerated in style or layout as Okri and Mieville suggest, but rather the future of the novel is likely to remain in the style with which it has been predominantly presented in the last twenty to thirty years or so. No doubt there will be experimental novels from time to time, such as *S*, *Silent History* and *House of Leaves*, but these will likely be stand-alone releases than trendsetters. That said, this does not necessarily mean that the novel is dying because novelists are more often than not choosing to stick to a definite style, rather than experimenting with the form, but instead analysis of the literary awards suggests a healthy future for the novel as a prose form presenting narratives in a predominantly realist manner, at times touching on generic tropes, and written in a literary but accessible style.

In all, there is evidence to suggest that the novel is in good health in terms of readership and popularity, and that there is not necessarily such a decline as Self would want us to believe in those choosing to dedicate time and concentration to reading. Indeed, what has been demonstrated throughout this chapter is that a sizeable sector of the contemporary British reading public actively wants to be escape from their lives by reading novels because of their provoking a release from the actual world, but to also engage with novels that posses a literary quality to their writing and construction. Equally, digital technology could not necessarily be said to be having a disastrous impact on the size of the audience for the novel, but in fact has proven in a number of ways in which it can draw readers to the act of reading. On top of this, digital technology has been a boost in the production and retail of novels, especially in giving readers choice to access novels as digital ebooks or audiobooks to suit their needs, most vitally during times when physical books are out of reach or impractical. And as this study is drawing to a close, so conclusions must now be drawn about what is likely to be the future of the novel.



## Chapter Five: The Future of the Novel

This conclusion will draw together all the ideas raised in this thesis, as well as setting down some conclusions as to the likely future of the novel in terms of its longevity as a popular narrative medium and form of entertainment. The starting point of this study was Will Self's declarations that there was no future for the novel, or certainly not for the literary novel, which he believes has been declining in popularity in recent years. This notion inspired my original research question: **Is there any truth in claims made by Will Self that the novel is dead, or that indeed it has no future as a popular and effective narrative medium?**

In short, the answer I want to posit is no, and this has been examined throughout this study, guided by my three research aims, which were:

- **To argue for the contemporary novel as an effective form of extensive prose-narrative literary entertainment, and one that is worthy of preserving for future generations**
- **To assess the current health of the reading public in terms of numbers of readers and those who see the novel as a worthwhile form of narrative entertainment, and go on to theorise whether a future reading public will retain an interest in reading novels**
- **To analyse how digital technology has and is continuing to impact on the novel in ways that raise its profile and size of audience, or distracts members of the public away from reading novels, and comment on how this could influence its future**

From the current standpoint of the early 2020s, it could be said that the novel as a narrative medium is not dead in terms of its readership, choice of medium for contemporary writers, or as a commercial product, and it could be said to uphold a secure position within the literary market. The novel market is no more in decline than it has ever been. As Peter Childs points out 'the novel's obituaries had already been written on several occasions....only for them to be found premature when fiction showed itself to be full of life'.<sup>335</sup> Equally, there is nothing to suggest that the need for telling and reading fictional stories is under threat, as Self suggested in his arguments over how digital technology is wiping out a societal need for storytelling. Again, Childs makes a valid point as he states 'while the novel's future position in cultural life is uncertain, the importance of narrative and the written word is less so, even though these features, far older than the novel, may appear in new forms'.<sup>336</sup> Whilst there is a suggestion in this that the novel's future is not guaranteed, Childs sounds assured that the desire to tell lengthy stories, and particularly for these to be written down, is a solid literary form in terms of its popularity. Surely this is positive news for the novel, and indeed there is even an uplifting tone to the latter half of the sentence that suggests there will always be some form of the novel, even if not in the form it is in today.

This was particularly evidenced in recent times as there was no greater a display of the reading public's need for the novel than when the Coronavirus pandemic hit the UK, and many other countries, in March 2020, forcing people to change their routines and spend less time with those outside their household.

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<sup>335</sup> Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p 1.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid*, p 276.

Sources of entertainment out of doors, such as bars and cinemas, were closed for stretched of time during lockdowns, meaning individuals had to engage more with entertainment sources in the home. Media reports arose towards the latter half of 2020 that focused on how an uptake of reading for pleasure had greatly increased across the UK compared to previous years, and theories were banded around that a sizeable portion of the reading public were choosing to reading for pleasure as a form of escape from the realities of the pandemic, largely because of the attention demanded through reading being an effective pull away from reality. Nielsen Books conducted a survey in 2020 of 1,000 adults in the UK, and revealed that 41% of those surveyed, nearly half, reported reading more books since lockdown was imposed in March 2020.

In general the nation had increased the amount of time spent reading on average from 3.5 hours to 6 hours a week, with 35% of respondents stating that they chose reading over other activities as a means of escaping the crisis.<sup>337</sup> Of course with many on furlough and confined to their homes this was an ideal time for reading to flourish, and it would have seemed that a great number chose to dedicate their spare time to reading over other pursuits, such as watching TV or playing computer games. What was also interesting is the reporting of a marked uptake in the reading of crime fiction during the pandemic, over any other genre or narrative type. Crime novelist Louise Doughty believed that this was likely because readers weren't interested in 'light, escapist reading or heartwarming tales',<sup>338</sup> but instead needed something absorbing or attention grabbing in order that readers were readily drawn them into the story and away from the reality of

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<sup>337</sup> Alison Flood, 'Research Finds Reading Books has Surged in Lockdown', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/15/research-reading-books-surged-lockdown-thrillers-crime>> [accessed 16 May 2020].

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

the pandemic. What Doughty's comment suggests is that plot driven lengthy narratives, such as crime-fiction novels, were favoured at this time as a means of immersing oneself in a fictional universe to escape the actual world of the pandemic. In all of this, whilst critics may declare the novel dead, it could be seen that some members of the British reading public put paid to this notion by displaying a need for the escape that novels can offer.

Thinking more specifically in terms of Self's point that the literary novel in particular is under threat of cultural death, and in somewhat of a summary of the extensive argument in chapter three of a rise in the merging of literary and genre or popular fiction to possibly become the dominant novel form, my predictions for the future of the literary novel are not that it is necessarily dying, but rather it is diverging into a more widely accessible form. As opposed to thinking that the literary novel is losing favour amongst the wider reading public, I would argue instead that a view should be taken of their being a strong future for a hybrid form of novels which melds together a literary standard of writing with the comfortable setting of generic, familiar tropes. At times these novels may be experimental in their layout or presentation so as to demonstrate ingenuity in form or heighten reality, such as can be seen with Horowitz's *Moonflower Murders*, although the greater majority will likely adhere to the standard continuous prose format that readers are more accustomed too. Nevertheless, these literary and genre type novels will appeal to a wider audience who want to be entertained by fictional prose that is relaxing and not overly mentally taxing, but who also appreciate the craft of good writing as stimulating the imagination and intellect, and want to be offered the chance to approach contemporary issues or current affairs in an empathic, immersive

manner that removes them from the heightened realities of news reports. This is not to say that so called trash fiction, those that some would categorise as being easily consumed when travelling or on holiday, will disappear, or indeed neither will the deeper literary novels that require an analytic approach to decipher metaphoric and structuralist meanings embedded in the text, which is a topic touched upon to a greater extent in chapter three. Rather it could be suggested that there is in the contemporary literary market a move towards a popularity for novels that offer the comfort of, say, a classic murder-mystery, such as is characteristic of an Agatha Christie novel. At the same time as the prose being easy to digest, however, the story comes to life with ease in the reader's imagination due to the detailing of three dimensional and believable characters inhabiting a carefully constructed fictional universe that has been crafted by a novelist who understands that good writing gives the reader the tools to truly lose themselves in the text, whilst also using their prose as a means of presenting a range of perspectives on gritty contemporary issues.

In consideration of this, literary critic Peter Childs raises a valid point as he states 'popular literature is that which is ephemeral and merely contemporary, whereas good literature conveys and embodies timeless qualities and values: it is that which communicates universally and transcends its time of writing'.<sup>339</sup> In this is a perspective that speaks positively of the future of the literary novel, or rather the types of novels in which the novelist has voiced an opinion or perspective on such a historical or universal event or theme, that future generations of readers are able to absorb themselves into the fictional

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<sup>339</sup> Peter Childs, *The Essential Guide to English Studies* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), p 22.

universe of the text to transcend into that moment, to experience from the perspective of the characters how it would have been for someone living through that at the time. Although it could be argued this is not always the case, that some popular classics, such as the works of Shakespeare or Austen, fall in and out of favour for a time due to their ideas being viewed as old-fashioned. So Childs is right in a sense, but it is not the case that all good literature will transcend their time with the equal popularity through the eras. That said, Childs's point provokes thought in considering the future of the novel, that there are a number of novels being written now which will last through the generations, rather than promoting a throw-away culture of novels that aren't being cherished after the hype around their release had died down. In order to secure a future, and continued audience, for the novel, so the current generation needs to pass on to the next a message of the novel's importance as a literary medium that offers an experience not captured in the same manner through other narrative forms. That said, there were no clear signs of this being the case throughout research for this thesis, and instead it could be asserted that there is currently a strong audience for the novel. Although this may not be the esoteric, intellectually and literary challenging novels that Self would want us to be reading in droves, there is an argument that a sizeable portion of society are still reading novels of literary merit, even if they are not to the level of high art as the novels that Self produces. This, essentially, demonstrates diversity in the market, and is a key point in keeping the novel current, open to all readers, and, more importantly, alive.

As was highlighted in chapter three in reference to narratological studies from Smiley and Rimmon-Kenan, a text, such as the novel, is only fully alive

when it is read. At the forefront of these discussions upon what will be the likely future form of the novel, or how it will be distributed and read, the element that has been heralded as of greater importance throughout this thesis is whether the novel will continue to have an audience. Whilst some critics have argued a belief that the death of the novel will come in the design of its failing form and novelists losing innovative in their writing, it could be argued to the contrary that the true death of the novel would come when society is no longer interested in reading or listening to the extended prose-narrative medium, and when the market for producing new novels dies because there is no audience for the novel. This study argues for the novel's unique status as an effective form of extended fictional prose-narrative, its continued role in serving the reading public, and the novel **is** something that will be treasured for generations to come. In my thesis therefore I wanted to highlight the importance of keeping the reading public reading the novels they enjoy, whether these are highly literary or not what the literary critics and academics feel readers should be reading, because this is a more prevalent argument in keeping the novel alive than that which Self has proffered. On top of this, the novel's continued readership and popularity despite the strength of cinema and television, which are in many ways rivals offering lengthy narrative entertainment with plot and character development, but boast a more easily digestible form that does not require the individual's full attention or many hours of our time, is surely further testament to the novel's stability as an art form.

In chapter three there was textual analysis of contemporary genre novels that are literary in their construction, with the aim of contradicting a notion that genre novels are for pure entertainment purposes, and instead suggest they

should be highly regarded in thinking of a future audience for the novel. Rather, these types of novels could be suggested as garnering a healthy future for the novel in encouraging more members of the British public into reading, demonstrating that there is to be had on the market novels for narrative entertainment and escape, but that are also intelligently written and so would appeal to a wider audience. Whilst Self regards the literary novel as dead, this section on the merging of literary and genre writing offered a contradiction to this in saying the literary novel is very much alive, but it has largely migrated into a form tailored to a reading public who want the comfort of a novel that is well-written, but still retains the generic tropes with which they are familiar. As our contemporary lives are becoming increasingly busy, and free time for some is precious, so readers today maybe want to relax with a novel that does not require scrutinising over every sentence and deep analysis, or novels that can be seen as hard work rather than a relaxing escape. It is important for the future of the novel, therefore, to offer a range of novels to suit the needs and desires of a contemporary and future reading public. Maybe highly literary novel's are losing favour, but this is not necessarily to say that novels of a literary quality are not still being written, or indeed read.

The conversations had with members of the reading public offered some insight into what were important matters in preserving a future audience for the novel. When asked to comment on what they felt was the likely future of the novel, the answers given generally took two paths, one being speculation over what participants felt was likely to happen to the novel in the future, and others tending to make personal claims of what they would like for the novel in the foreseeable future. What was thought-provoking was that generally comments



and opinions steered towards the positive, such as 'I think the novel has a great future. I think so long as there are brilliant creative writers, which there are, you know, you think so long as there are these young people coming through that can write...'.<sup>340</sup> This type of comment looks forward to a novel market that has strength in the next generations of writers coming through, and also suggests this individual feels there are new novelists coming onto the contemporary novel market that display talent in their field. In short, there is no suggestion here that the novel is dead, but on the contrary is still very much alive in that it will continue to be written and sold. On top of this, some further thoughts were offered by several others on the topic of the publishing industry, with one delving into their feeling that a move towards publishing novels through crowdfunding organisations, such as *Unbound*, would be a positive for the novel. *Unbound*, they went on to explain, relies on public contributions in order to raise money to publish books, and to gain investors a novelist has the opportunity to exhibit the outline for their novel along with a sample paragraph or chapter. If a reader is interested in reading the book in its entirety they pay a contribution of their choosing to put towards publishing fees, and if the novel receives enough backers to be successfully published then all contributors will receive a special first edition copy once published. The participant who opened up this discussion reasoned that through crowdfunding, readers could contribute to putting on the market the sorts of novels in which the wider populace are interested, and if such schemes become more popular then, he believed, the reading public as a collective may seem to be having some influence over a sector of the novel market. A further point to make is that all of this is conducted online, which

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<sup>340</sup> Conversation recorded 7 November 2017.

keeps down the cost of overheads, as well as making the scheme accessible on a global scale.

On top of this was a feeling of positivity expressed at being able to support lesser known authors who may struggle to publish their works on the open market, but who instead might have a greater chance of finding an audience when given the opportunity to display a section of their work to potential readers who may then become investors. This was supported by the comment: 'instead of it being in the hands of publishers saying we're going to publish this book and put this out, we think this is what you'll like reading, it comes from a much more organic attitude, I like this, I like this'.<sup>341</sup> The use of the word 'organic' resonates as it stirs up a sense of removing the corporate sheen, and instead nurturing a novel market from humble roots. In fact, another participant in the discussion continued this point in stating that for them *Unbound* is an opportunity to see 'lots of organic novels coming from an organic place and being published'.<sup>342</sup> This discourse suggested there are some who uphold a desire to see more diversity in the market, to make choices for themselves on what novels to invest in rather than being dictated to by large publishing firms, and a desire for a novel market supporting novelists who may not be given an opportunity to publish works that go against current trends.

A topic that also came through in conversations with one group, was a warning about the need now to engage younger generations in reading for pleasure so as to ensure a future audience for the novel, which is a key concern that was not necessarily raised in any of the critical or academic sources on the

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<sup>341</sup> Conversation recorded 30 September 2017.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

death of the novel. One participant commented on the topic of lengthy narrative-prose aimed at children and nurturing their attention spans by stating 'I want kids to be reintroduced to them, because I think a lot of kids don't like long stories....No kids want to sit in home and read a book any more rather than go out socialising with their friends or be on the Internet'. This highlights an important awareness that younger generations are increasingly losing the pull of sitting and reading over other activities, which in a sense was hinted at through Self's bemoaning of a decline in interest in serious, concentrated reading, but here is housed within a context of needing to encourage this within future novel readers. Another participant similarly commented on the emerging generations of novel readers, and highlighted a further possible threat to the size of the future novel reading public, when they raised the suggestion that society, from their point of view, has become increasingly used to having stories narrated to them episodically through TV series, and as such this may be instrumental in diminishing a desire for current and future generations to consume such lengthy narratives as novels. This is reflected in them stating: 'I do think the market for longer stories will decrease as times goes on, I think I agree. I mean just looking at television, it's sort of like those little chunks. You've got to stop people from turning over'.<sup>343</sup> In a sense this does mirror some of the concern that Self was vocal about, particularly in him discussing how modern society is being coaxed away from the notion of deep and serious reading because of digital technology. Yet, as a valid counterargument, in that same group another participant believed that instead, as society became saturated with the concept of the TV show and receiving a narrative in weekly instalments, so there would surely be a sizeable

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<sup>343</sup> Conversation recorded 1 October 2017.

chunk of the reading public who will continue to read novels in order to indulge in a deeper storytelling experience, and as such the novel's future is secure in that novels will continue to offer the deeply immersive narrative experience is not so readily achieved in watching a visual narrative, such as TV. Their point is expressed in this statement:

'I'm going to throw out a contrary opinion that I think although society has got hooked on the sound-bite chunk, tiny, tiny chunk of stuff, attention flitting from here to there, I think people, as they get older, will actually realise how frustrating that is and they may say 'I want something that's a bit slower and I have to get my teeth into, is more rewarding'"<sup>344</sup>

There is nothing to say with certainty that either viewpoint is right, that TV will negate the desire to consume lengthy narratives, or a future generation will uphold novel reading as a break away from the chunks of narrative offered through TV episodes. However, there is evidence in other art forms of generations rejecting current trends and returning to past ways, such as the revival of vinyl records in 2018 and 2019 as the long replaced technology saw a rise in sales above the more modern CD and other formats.<sup>345</sup>

Further positive evidence of a healthy future for the novel in terms of its readership came through as one group rallied around the topic of the importance of novels, and reading in general, as an exercise in stimulating the imagination. This was led by a participant commenting 'what I would like is get back the importance of books to stimulate imagination',<sup>346</sup> which was met with agreement

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<sup>344</sup> Conversation recorded 1 October 2017.

<sup>345</sup> See such articles as: 'Vinyl Revival Marks the tone of our times', *Financial Times*, 8 February 2019.

<sup>346</sup> Conversation recorded 4 October 2017.

from all the other participants. This participant went on to speak on this point in relation to young-adult and child readers, suggesting that what needs to be remedied is a recent rise in book to film adaptations that are possibly killing off the stimulation of the imagination as viewers are offered a view of the characters and settings, whereas readers are required to imagine them themselves. The example this participant offered was the *Harry Potter* series, and how if young readers were to see the films before reading the books they would not need to exercise their imaginations to such a great extent, because the films have already laid down the images of the characters and their surroundings. This certainly points towards a need for adults to encourage children into reading, exercising a range of mental faculties alongside their imaginations. Of course there is a counter argument, which was proffered by another participant in the group who believed film to screen adaptations should not be completely demonised. Instead, this participant believed that a culture of books based on films, or even computer games, may help to encourage younger readers to read if they are then introduced to the source material, stating ‘if it gets them there (into reading) it gets them there, you know, and they’ll say ‘oh, books are fun. That’s a good experience I’ve not had elsewhere’’. This participant argued that even if a particular book is promoted as being based on something visual, like a film, this could be a way to encourage young-adult readers to pick up a copy of the book and read the original source material, largely because of the hype around the film or TV series will raise the book’s profile.

In all of the groups’ discussions on the future of the novel some key concepts were raised, as well as talking points not necessarily present in the academic and media sources utilised in this research. Mainly these were centred

upon securing a future audience for the novel by thinking today about how to nurture a culture of engaging with reading for pleasure in adults, young-adults and children, ways in which technology has aided in raising the profile of the novel, and how the reading public can be given the opportunity to contribute to the novel market. These three areas of discussion sit within the research points, touching upon the form of the novel as possibly returning to a serialised format in order to suit readers who want to read for pleasure but struggle to dedicate time to the act, how some sectors of the contemporary reading public are engaging with crowdfunding in order to diversify the market and widening the diversity of novels/ novelists entering the literary market, and how it is possible to see digital technology as both hindering and aiding in securing an audience for the novel through the damage that could be inflicted on the imagination with the rising trend for screen adaptations, as well as the possibilities in encouraging more to read for pleasure in their spare time by distributing a digital novel to a global audience through email.

It could be said that these conversations painted a brighter future for the novel than does Self in his articles, and a view that particularly pointed towards a novel market inflected with innovative means of keeping society enamoured with reading for pleasure, as well as demonstrating there are those who are conscious that the emerging generations are an integral part of the future audience for the novel. However, while there was discussion around changing the way novels are produced and marketed, there seemed to be little enthusiasm for formal experiments within the novel, certainly not in the way that was suggested by Mieville and Okri. Rather, the novel, I believe, will largely maintain its traditional narrative prose format that readers have become comfortable

with, but this is not necessarily a negative because its familiarity won't block audiences from reaching for a novel when wanting an immersive narrative entertainment form that can offer an enriching escape or window into current affairs or topics. This is something that encouraged the establishment of the novel, as was argued in chapter two by Baldick and Watt, and is something that will surely keep the novel alive into the future.

For instance, it could be suggested that the novel over the last few decades has been an effective tool in offering perspective on the rising wave of contemporary feminist issues, not least the #Me Too movement. In terms of thinking about maintaining a future audience for the novel, this is particularly vital because, as outlined in this thesis, the novel was originally viewed as a feminine pursuit, and the studies used in chapter four from Janice Radway and Helen Taylor demonstrate a continued strong female readership for the novel. As such, the novel is a vital tool for expressing and conveying important contemporary, feminist messages, the text speaking out in an empathic manner as the reader's perspective is drawn in to the heart of the issue by living through the experience as the characters. The text replaces the speaking 'I' and turns it into a flowing agency, so that the characters are one part of the identity of the words, but have essentially come from the author.<sup>347</sup> In this is a notion that a character stops becoming an individual and adopts universality, speaking to and of any number of individuals. The depth of this experience of reading over watching a narrative play out, the stimulation of the imagination and the personalisation as much discussed within this thesis, means the novel can be the

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<sup>347</sup> Brian Rotman, *Becoming Besides Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), p 110.

perfect voice for a marginalised sector of society, or for an issue that has previously received little attention.

The #Me Too movement was founded in 2006 by American Tarana Burke as a means to support victims of sexual violence, in particular black women, whilst working for an organisation based in Alabama that supported female victims of rape and sexual crimes.<sup>348</sup> The hashtag then went viral in 2017, linking up global stories from the perspective of actual people persecuted in a misogynist manner, or placed in a situation where they were marginalised because of their being a woman, so art has become an ideal platform to spread messages that women are an important sector in society. One might argue that as the novel has a higher ratio of female to male readers, so these messages spread through novels are likely reaching more women than men, and this is not necessarily the best platform for changing the attitudes of men. But a counterpoint is that if the novel continues as an extensive piece of fictional writing based largely on the actual world, evoking an empathic response as the reader lives the story rather than passively watches it, so a female reading a novel with a powerful feminist message can gain a sense of being listened to, and a drive to be part of a community that actively fights for equality. In 2016 Naomi Alderman published her novel on female empowerment titled *The Power*, imagining a world in which the tables have turned, and women are given the ability to rule over men as they discover they have the power to inflict pain on others by simply flicking their fingers. Alderman's novel raises the point that women are made to live in fear of men who can and do physically overpower

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<sup>348</sup> Chris Snider & Linette Lopez, 'Tarana Burke on why she created the #Me Too movement – and where it's headed', *Insider*, <<https://www.businessinsider.com/how-the-metoo-movement-started-where-its-headed-tarana-burke-time-person-of-year-women-2017-12?r=US&IR=T>> [accessed 14 March 2021].



them, and *The Power* says to its female readers 'let's imagine a world in which we rule over men'. A glance at the more recent bestseller lists and literary award lists, which were deliberated over at the end of chapter four, demonstrates that the novel today **is** continuing to give women and feminist issues a voice, and there is nothing to suggest that it won't continue to do so into the future.

On a similar note, what is equally significant in securing a future readership for the novel is its continued support towards displaying and discussing issues of race. The media of the past five years or so has become saturated with stories of uprisings against the celebration of racism and the need for authority to move away from racial stereotyping. This, it could be said, is also being reflected in the literary and novel market of recent years, as a more diverse range of translated works and authors from diverse backgrounds are being recognised for their talent. As an example of this, at the end of chapter four was discussion on the awards and bestseller lists of the past few years, in which was evident a number of newly established, non-white novelists from a range of cultural backgrounds are being celebrated, such as Avni Doshi, and Korean writer Francis Cha. This points towards a contemporary literary market that is open to a range of cultural voices, but there is certainly an ongoing need for diversity in the literary market in order to secure a healthy future for the novel with a wide readership. Whilst Mieville and Okri speak of the need to diversify the form of the novel, it could be argued that more important is diversity in content and the voices telling the stories, especially being a key factor in maintaining an audience for the novel and securing its future as a popular narrative medium. As issues of racial tension in the West, and a need to change attitudes towards ethnic minorities, are prevalent now, so the novel market

appears to be keeping with the times in supporting this movement. Industry statistics from *The Bookseller*, highlighted that of the thousands of books published in the UK in 2016, fewer than 100 of those were by British authors of non-white backgrounds.<sup>349</sup> On top of this, there was just one British author from an ethnic minority background in the top 100 books of 2016, and six in the top 500.<sup>350</sup> To see these figures in the latter half of the 2010s points towards a need now to promote authors from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, and this matters in terms of the future for the novel for two main reasons. Firstly, without a diverse range of novelists presenting to the British literary market their honest perspectives of their heritage and background, so it will likely become seen as a promoter of white-centric views in a country that year on year seems to be battling for racial equality. Secondly, the novel needs to maintain as wide an audience as possible through the generations in order to ensure its longevity, and this will be more likely guaranteed if readers from a range of backgrounds feel they have a voice in the publishing market. Surely such factors as these are more important than concerns over diversity in the form, because it is the readers who see their reality reflected in the narrative that will be the ones to keep the novel alive.

In terms of concluding on how digital technology is impacting on the novel today, Self's focus was on how a society-wide reliance on such devices as mobile phones and their constant demand for our attention, is not conducive to an individual's desire for absorbing themselves in the act of serious reading. Also, he argued that a rise in the reading of digitised text in contemporary society,

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<sup>349</sup> Sarah Shaffi, 'Publishing Seeks to Address Industrie's Lack of Diversity', *The Booksellers*, 4 November 2016, viewed at: <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/publishing-seeks-address-industry-s-lack-diversity-426031>> [accessed 12.05.17].

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

something that has increasingly become a part of our everyday lives since the turn of the century, is impacting on how we read, suggesting an individual is now more likely to scan and skip through a text in order to gain the information needed, and as such we are losing the skill to take care and attention over reading large bodies of text. In short, Self's view of digital technology largely came across as it being an evil in terms of turning society away from the novel, away from a desire for serious reading, and that it has ultimately played a considerable role in bringing about the death of the novel. However, this was not necessarily reflected in the data gathered for this thesis, and indeed can be argued as an overblown fabrication rather than the truth. For instance, of course when in certain situations an individual will scan through text to find, say, a phone number or a quote, but arguably the human mind is capable of adjusting its behaviour to suit the current situation, and when engaged in reading for pleasure the mind understands all information must be absorbed in order to engage with the text. Neither is there strong evidence to say that society is not picking up a novel and reading in their spare time because we are all glued to screens. Or, for that fact, digital technology should not be dismissed as preventing people from wanting to read, because over the last twelve months or so it has been an aid rather than a hindrance for readers wanting to access reading materials for pleasure. During the Coronavirus pandemic, for example, digital technology became valuable in terms of the novel reaching out to as wide an audience as possible, particularly at a time when vast swathes of society wanted to turn to reading for pleasure as a means of escape. With physical libraries having to shut their doors to the public, a large number of libraries quickly turned to increasing the digitising of ebooks as a means of serving their

local areas. This is not to say that this number of library users borrowing ebooks will likely drop as lockdowns ease and society is allowed to interact with others again, but this example is testament to how digital technology has at times aided in ensuring a steady audience for the novel in recent times.

Despite this, there has been much said throughout this study in support of the enduring strength of the physical book, and that digital text should not be seen as the evil that Self may purport it to be. Rather, what has been suggested throughout this study as a more real threat to the future of the novel in terms of digital technology, is the possibility of future generations losing touch with reading for pleasure and instead choosing to engage more readily with digital entertainment platforms and visual narrative forms, such as TV, film and even computer games. This should be a focus now of securing a healthy future for all novels, not just the literary novel, in terms of its readership. Society now must continue to encourage children and young-adults to embrace the merits of reading fiction as a more immersive and empathic means of escape, and a narrative experience that can not be replicated to such an extent through watching an adaptation on screen. This was even a point raised within the focus group data, with one group in particular highlighting the importance of keeping the young and emerging generations engaging their imaginations through reading fiction. Surely this is more of a prominent risk to the future of the novel than Self's complaining about readers tending to scan and skip through a text as they are likely to do with digital data. Nick Bentley stresses that even this need not be an indication of the novel's certain doom, highlighting that concern film and T.V. would replace the novel as a primary source of fictional narrative has been active throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century and yet

has not come to fruition.<sup>351</sup> Rather, Bentley speaks of how 'in many ways the novel has not been an alternative but has gone hand-in-hand with these newer forms of narrative',<sup>352</sup> and 'narrative fiction and filmic and televisual adaptations have often fed off each other, creating a cultural circularity in which readers and viewers accept the context in which both are consumed'.<sup>353</sup> This topic, the notion of novel to screen adaptations in the modern era, could in itself form the body of a separate study, and as such there is not room in this study to delve into a deeper exploration of the topic, but Bentley's comments here support a point that Self is at times overblown and presumptuous in his assertion of digital technology bringing about the demise of the novel.

In terms of thinking about how the novel may develop an increasing symbiotic relationship to digital technology, chapter four considered comments about merging the novel with digital technology, and in particular a suggestion from Crystal Mahey-Morgan that now is the time for young-adult fiction to be experimented on, and for writers to experiment with merging their works with or into forms of digital technology. When I embarked on this study I was excited to explore how the novel as we know it now can and will merge and build a relationship with digital technology, particularly after learning about such contemporary experiments as *The Silent History*, and indeed from the outset it felt inevitable that this would happen given that other art forms, such as music, TV, and cinema, have all been largely digitised. Chris Meade is director of *if:book UK*, a charitable company that specifically explores digital possibilities for writers. Meade is of the opinion that the numbers of those reading digitally will

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<sup>351</sup> Nick Bentley *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p 192.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*, p 192.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid*, p 192.

only increase in the future, although print books will become more elaborate and beautiful to compensate.<sup>354</sup> However, coming to the end of several years of study in which this very topic has been explored at length, I feel the novel is not so likely to make such a leap into radical digital forms, but rather the reading public has continued to, and will likely it could be suggested, uphold physical books, with little sign of a revolution in packaging the novel in digital forms besides the ebook and audiobook. It is understandable that Mahey-Morgan, for instance, suggests that this should be the future for the novel if younger generations are to be encouraged to read more, yet arguably there seems to be more a sense that the novel is a break away from technology. Yet, Meade makes a valid point that 'Young people will discover the joy of reading, watching and making on whatever tool they come across'.<sup>355</sup> Indeed there is no real sign of the physical book being eradicated, much as Douglas Adams suggested, and neither have there been strong signs of novels appearing in experimental digital forms and becoming bestsellers, or the dominant novel form in the future. Of course predicting the future is never certain, but it could be said that there are no definite signs such experiments as *The Silent History* will become a prominent feature of the novel market, rather than the contemporary reading public appears to want the familiarity of the traditional book format, whether in ink and paper or digital text.

From this current standpoint, given the evidence gathered for and deliberated over in this study, it could be said that whilst reading for pleasure, and indeed reading novels, may not the most favourable form of entertainment

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<sup>354</sup> Romesh Guneseckera, A. L. Kennedy, *Novel Writing: A Writer's Guide and Artists' Companion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p 178-179.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid, p 186.

in society today compared to say cinema or TV, the novel is certainly by no means dead, and it does have a future as a popular narrative medium. The novel is stable, certainly for the foreseeable future, due to its continued effectiveness in the form as a means of telling lengthy fictional narratives with a realist element, and as a desired consumerist object. More specifically, the literary novel is not dead as Self would have us believe, but rather the present and future for the novel market is to continue to sell the spectrum of novels ranging from the highly literary to the non-literary, with a sizeable group in the middle, suggestively gaining in popularity, of novels that present generic plots in a literary manner. In fact, it could be said that this is a healthy time for the literary novel, as novelists are reaching out to as wide an audience as possible in offering well-written, mentally stimulating reads that are not overly taxing or mind-bending, but still is a reputable display of the craft of effective novel writing.

Critics and writers will no doubt continue to declare and deliberate over the death of the novel, and this topic of discussion will not disappear any time soon. But currently there is nothing to suggest that the novel will not continue to thrive in terms of production, sales, and readership, for many decades to come. There are clear signs of interest in the novel through the proliferation of reviews, bestseller lists, media attention, literary awards, and festivals, which continued even through the threat of the Coronavirus pandemic. The general reading public continues to set up book clubs in order to discuss novels, or publish book blogs and review pages on the Internet so as to have their say on a global platform. Equally, solid sales of novels in physical book form suggest that the novel remains a valued work of art, and it is still being cherished as something to behold, or display that reflects to others the person you want

others to see. All of these factors are surely signs that the novel is not dead, and here at the start of the twenty-first century it is certainly not time to start composing the novel's obituary.



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