Literary Criticism Is Dead [1]

February 17, 2014 Media Debate [2]
Critics [3]

Theme Essay by Ron MacLean

Who Wants Lima Beans When You Can Eat 24/7 Cheetos?



I love literature and believe it has a future. I hope serious criticism does, too. But we'll only be able to attain that future by accepting the reality of the present.

The study of literature is dying, partly because of self-inflicted wounds. I'm happy to debate all the reasons why: the dominance of an elite school of mostly white, male academics; increased theoretical abstraction; easy-to-mock "littray" pronouncements.

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But my focus here is more basic: Literary criticism has become irrelevant—the neglected lima beans on the cultural dinner plate. In order for criticism to matter, literature has to matter. It doesn't, and it won't again soon, at least not in the same way it did for a hundred-plus years of its history. As critic Louis Bayard succinctly put it as far back as 2008 in "Who Killed the Literary Critic?" on *Salon*, critics "can only survive when their host organisms [authors] thrive…. If we want to bring the critic back to life, we first have to resuscitate the novelist."

Indeed.

In this historical moment, books rank, at best, a distant fourth behind television, video games, and movies as the preferred form for telling stories. Some numbers: The top video game in 2013, *Grand Theft Auto V*, sold 26.75 million copies. In contrast, Jeff Kinney's *Hard Luck*, a children's title and the eighth installment of the "Wimpy Kid" series, was the bestselling book of 2013—with a little over 1.8 million copies.



After that, according to *Publisher's Weekly* and Nielsen BookScan data, the book numbers plummet: *The Great Gatsby* came in sixteenth last year, selling 560,000 copies. Very few books do even this well. In 2012, only 156 trade paperbacks sold more than 100,000 copies. In 2013, overall print book sales went down.

Meanwhile, middling TV dramas average 10 million viewers a week (network) or 3 million a week (cable). And based on box office results from *Variety* magazine, 2.5 million people saw the movie *Ride Along* the week of January 24 to 30. Even the more "literary" offering, *August: Osage County*, drew 710,000 viewers that same *week.*

People still read books, and they'll always love stories. What's changed is the cultural status of books and the critics who hold forth about which ones are "the best." The democratization of popular culture has contributed to this shift. Everyone distrusts experts. Instead, everyone has a voice—an opinion—and, at least online, every opinion matters equally.

This democratization of culture is a mixed blessing: It sets the bar low for quality. Literary diarrhea results from the absence of gatekeepers. If anyone can publish a book, how do we know which are worth reading? I confess I'm often

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overwhelmed and lost amid the continual deluge.

And yet, I prefer the diarrhea, at least for now. It means each of us has to seek out what matters to us and to figure out why. That's a necessary step, because doing so will help us articulate what sort of guidance we want in the new literary landscape. When critical scolding and the enforcement of predigested parameters get turned off, the door opens for new and hybrid forms—for the evolution of form itself.

The online reading public has made clear that it does not want tastemakers telling them what to like. Psychologist and essayist Adam Waytz puts it this way:

> I now count on my social network to enlighten me on albums and films that, as a Midwestern teenager, I feared I could only find in the most selective, coastal-elite magazines. And I count on the hive-mind to give me consumer reports far superior to *Consumer Reports.*

I'm not quite so sold on the superiority of the hive-mind. Beyond my love for literature and literary criticism, I also think they are good for the culture, in the way that eating peas and carrots—two of my favorite vegetables—is good. I'm a writer and a teacher, and I will forever shake my fist at the unthinking morons grabbing cyber airtime to debate the latest reality show.

But we fist shakers need to change the "eat your veggies" argument, not just to grab more new media eyeballs, but because we live in a radically changed world, and our stories should reflect that. For stories to remain relevant, they must feel alive in the world *as it is today*. If people experience the world in shorter bursts, in rapid-fire fragments, we can either argue that they should read today's equivalent of Proust, or we can engage these readers by finding the places where this new reality touches, challenges, wounds, or offends them.



Anton Chekhov wrote stories that reflected his experience of the nineteenth-century Russian world he walked in; Flannery O'Connor did the same for her Jim Crow American South.

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You and I live in a very different world, yet the stories we read and tell often hew too faithfully—in both content and form—to a reality more familiar to Chekhov or O'Connor.

As the fiction writer (and sometime critic) Jeanette Winterson said in the late 1990s, "the job of the artist in any medium is to make it new." It's happening in spots: Brian Wood and Ryan Kelly's graphic story collection *Local* is one of the most inventive and satisfying books I read in 2008. Marisha Pessl's fascinating 2013 book *Night Film* takes the noir novel into hypermedia.

Alison Bechdel's terrific 2006 graphic novel *Fun Home* landed on the NYT bestseller list that July and is on its way to becoming a canonical work in American Studies curricula. It's also now in development as a Broadway musical.

I'm taking the need to "make it new" seriously in my own writing as well. Even as my first story collection was described as "alternative" or "experimental," I was determined to not repeat myself last year when I sat down to write new stories.

Now, I start with what I see and experience that's particular to being alive at this moment. I stop myself any time I lean on mere ingrained habit or old form as reflex. In my 2013 short story "River Song," for instance, a fictional community tries to understand a gruesome event, based on a real news story from 2011—the abduction and murder of a nine-year-old girl drowned in the Ohio River. I was interested in the way we make sense of such horrible acts. I began with a "straight" telling: Here's what happened, and here are the ramifications.

Yet, this initial draft didn't reflect the way I and others around me tend to process such news. I cobble together TV and radio coverage, online reporting, even overhead bits of conversation—always incomplete, nearly always contradictory. My "River Song" ultimately became seven different perspectives on this fictional tragedy—each fragmented, many contradictory, adding up in some ways, decidedly not in others:

> What she would want you to know:
> we are more than the parts we're made of;
> the world still doesn't know where its house is.
> Follow this like the current:
> the story rings true even as the narrator
> becomes increasingly unreliable.

Literary criticism needs to take new forms, too. Consider the *Morning News Tournament of Books,* one harbinger of things to come. The *Morning News* recently announced its tenth anniversary edition, describing it as "a March Madness-style battle royale." The seventeen selected 2013 books have been seeded in NCAA basketball tournament-like brackets, with a judge evaluating each pairing and picking a winner until a final round "champion" will be declared.

These book tournaments are both self-consciously silly and deeply serious—and people are into them. Learning theory junkies would say it's because the *Morning News* uses "gamification" to get readers interested. The editors say they've found a fun way to do something they love. I say they're alive in 2014, and their work reflects that. Here, they unveil the 2013 field:

> Today we are merely pulling the tarp off a group of books that we hope are representative of the outstanding fiction that was published in 2013, and we hope it is a mix interesting enough to provoke a discussion about why we still read—why it is necessary for us to read—even when we are constantly being told that no one does.

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Letting go of literature's relevance is a hard idea to swallow for those of us engaged in the profession. I'm not saying we all have to become well versed in the exploits of Chris Brown-Rihanna/Gaga/Amanda Bynes or whatever the pop-cultural train wreck of the moment is. I'm not arguing that we should stop writing or analyzing what we read. I am saying that now, more than ever, literature has to be a labor of love, the rewards of which may be tenuous and fleeting.

Still, conveying that love directly, to new audiences, is vital work. And it's far more satisfying than trying to force cultural lima beans down readers' throats. The conversation about literature will happen in a meaningful way only if readers crave it. And if they crave guidance and the other useful things literary criticism has historically provided, they'll let us know—loudly, often obscenely, and clearly. That's the democratic power of the Internet. If we pay attention, we'll recognize the demand and start to meet it.

Then and only then can criticism emerge in a new, relevant form. In the meantime, let's participate. Write and read. Rave to friends on Goodreads about what we love, and (as simply as possible) why we love it. Otherwise, we risk the whole enterprise turning into a museum piece, visited only by a few students of dead things.

The New Criticism

For a glimpse of lit crit's future, see the combination of reviews and graphics in *HTML Giant* (dubbed "The Internet Literature Magazine Blog of the Future"), including the recent post "ALL THE TEXTS I'D SEND YOU IF YOU WANTED TO GO TO A SERGIO DE LA PAVA TALK WITH ME ON DEAD RUSSIANS" [4] by Elias Tezapsidis.

Or take this "Zombie Round" excerpt from "*The Sisters Brothers* v. *Lightning Rods*," [5] reviewed ("judged") by E. Lockhart in the 2012 *Morning News Tournament of Books*:

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> The death count is massive. There's a lot of boozing, whoring, vomiting, blistering, bleeding, suffering, blindness, amputation, and surprisingly, tooth-brushing. (A motif! Just like the [how-to] books want you to have! But an effective and light-handed one.) Despite the gore, *The Sisters Brothers* is ultimately the story of a guy trying to figure out how to be a good brother, a good son, and a good friend; how to deal with the evil inside him, and reconcile with the evil he has done.
>
> That is all of us, I think.
>
> Chekhov said, 'Cut a good story anywhere, and it will bleed.' It's a quotation I think about often.... *The Sisters Brothers* bleeds its guts out on every page.

Note: *The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick DeWitt (HarperCollins, 2011) won that round.

Publishing Information

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- "The 10 Bestselling Video Games of 2013" [7] (slideshow), *Fiscal Times*, December 13, 2013.
- "The Bestselling Books of 2013" [8] by Clare Swanson, *Publisher's Weekly*, January 3, 2014.
- "Sales of Print Units Slipped in 2013" [9] by Jim Milliot, *Publisher's Weekly*, January 3, 2014.
- *Variety* "Domestic Box Office" numbers [10] (current).
- "Whither Cultural Critics?" [11] by Adam Waytz, *Pacific Standard: The Science of Society*, July 11, 2013.
- *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* [12] by Jeanette Winterson (Knopf/Random House, 1995).
- "River Song" [13] by Ron MacLean, *Narrative,* Fall 2013.
- "Announcing the Morning News Tournament of Books X," [14] January 7, 2014.

Art Information

- Images from the "Walls" photo collection © Sarah Katharina Kayß [15]; used with permission.



Ron MacLean is author of the novels *Headlong* and *Blue Winnetka Skies* and the story collection *Why the Long Face?* His fiction has appeared in *GQ, Narrative, Fiction International, Best Online Fiction 2010*, and elsewhere.

Learn more at Ron MacLean's website [16].

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