THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

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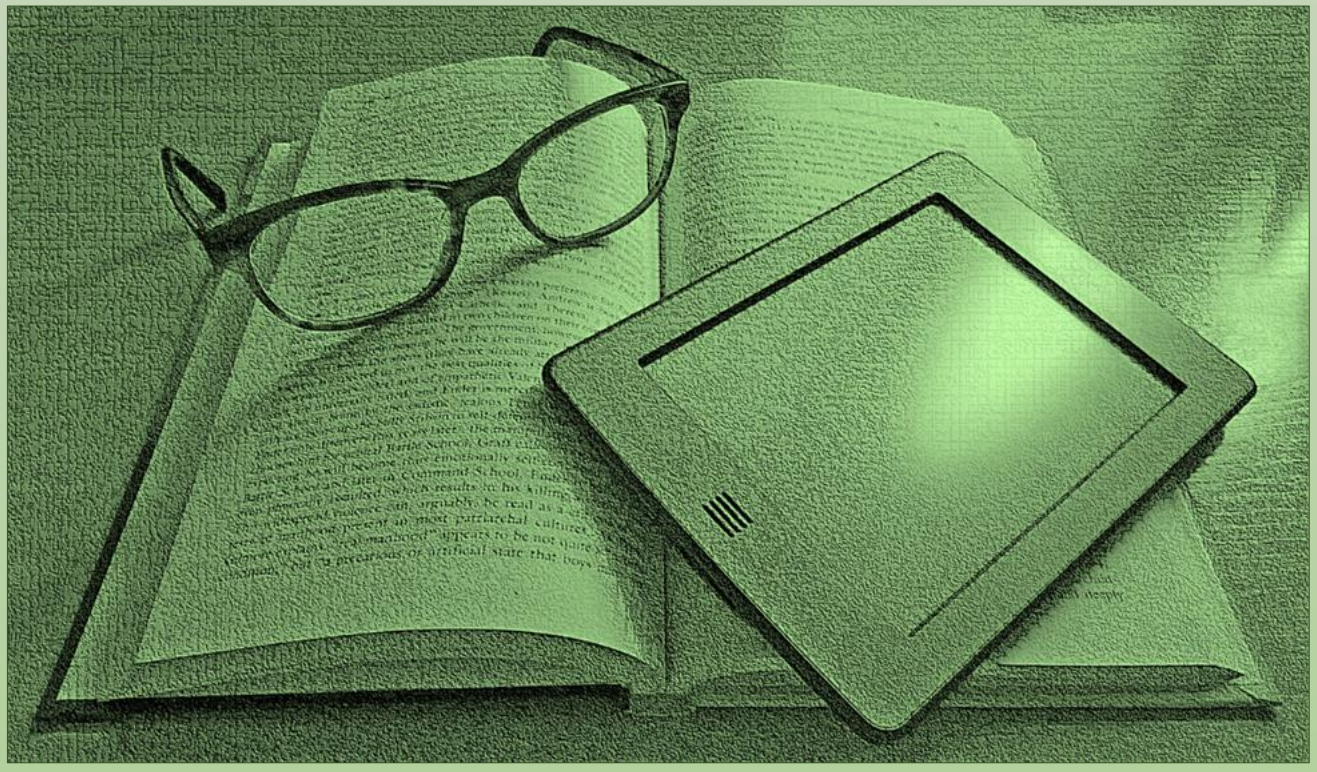

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PLEASE, NOTE:

These are the posts published in my professional academic blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature* (https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/blog/, since September 2010) between September 2023 and August 2024. The thirteen previous volumes are also available from http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328, together with the two first volumes (no. 12 and 13) in Spanish self-translation.

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4 September 2023 / SETTING UP A BOOK CLUB: WILL IT WORK?

Happy new academic year! May it brings plenty of positive energy for teachers and students, and dispels all the dark clouds of anxiety and depression that plagued so many people last year.

My first post of this new year deals with my Department's book club. We have been running a club for a few years now, but it has never really taken off. The format we have used so far has consisted of monthly meetings to discuss a different text chosen by one of the teachers in each session. In the last edition, coordinated by one of our doctoral students, we only managed to attract a handful of students, with some sessions left unattended. The school (the Facultat), however, wants to use our book club as a sort of beachhead to establish a larger book club, perhaps even of all UAB, so we are giving the club a new chance to prosper. Or die.

For a variety of reasons, one of them being that I supported the foundation of the original club (it was Felicity Hand's idea, if I recall correctly), I have been asked to coordinate it. For one ECTS a year. This is not that bad considering I was offered only 3 ECTS to coordinate a book club for the whole UAB, a daunting proposition that I rejected. I would like to note that, so far, the coordination and the sessions have been done for free. I had the crazy idea of thinking that perhaps I could coordinate the club and the students run the sessions, even choose the books, but in the end I see that I will have to lead monthly discussion, with the help of Honorary Professor Hand.

Today, the local public libraries of Barcelona are opening the inscription process for their many book clubs, which run from the general to the specialized (in a genre, a national literature, an author and so on). There are eight English-language book clubs in the city, each with a different list of books. Here are a couple of examples (see the rest here):

October: *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding
November: *Young Mungo*, Douglas Stuart
January: *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley
February: *Grand Union*, Zadie Smith
March: *1984*, George Orwell
April: *Life & Times of Michael K*, J.M. Coetzee
May: *Our Kind of Traitor*, John le Carré

October: *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald
November: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Mark Haddon
January: *A Room with a View*, E.M. Foster
February: *The God of Small Things*, Arundathi Roy
March: *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton
April: *The Accidental Tourist*, Anne Tyler
May: *An Equal Music*, Vikram Seth

These two and the rest are beautiful lists, but although we have been using so far a similar literary approach and I was contemplating working further on the same direction, I have finally decided this is not what we need. All of these books can be potentially integrated into our Literature courses, and I believe that a main reason why the book club has not thrived so far is that students have considered our choices too close to our subjects. I am, therefore, trying a different approach.

As happens, my niece, now a second-year student at UAB, asked me to please read *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Reid Jenkins, because she wanted to discuss the ending and the friend who had recommended this very popular novel to her had not finished it yet. This is not a wonderfully written novel, like the ones in the two lists above, but I found it hugely entertaining and I realized that it raises plenty of issues for discussion. If, I told myself, my niece is a hard-working student with little time for extra reading and she has enjoyed this rather longish novel, then, this is what we need. So, starting with Hugo's novel, I did a Google search of the most popular book club books in the Anglophone world, which essentially means the USA. And drew my own list.

The GoodReads Book Club Books list is a good summary of all the lists that can be found online giving advice about which books work best for that context. As you can see, these are novels mainly by women, with moderate literary aspirations but with engaging plots, around 350 pages long (but they are total page-turners) and with plenty of issues to discuss, even if you don't particularly love them as novels. They are not, in short, works to be admired as literature but novels to be enjoyed both alone and in communal discussion. While the books in the other lists I have reproduced can be a chore to read on top of all the other literary works which students need to read, this other type of book is refreshing and, in short, a break from high literature. This does not mean that the top titles for book clubs are all of them middlebrow rather than highbrow, but that middlebrow novels tends to dominate readers' and coordinators' preferences.

On the basis of the lists I checked, then, I came up with a short list of 15 books, three of which are not fiction:

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*, 314 pages
Baker, Christina Kline. *Orphan Train*, 278 pages
Bennet, Brit. *The Vanishing Half*, 343 pages
Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me* (essay), 152 pages
Daré, Abi. *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, 371 pages
Gyasi, Yaa. *Homegoing*, 305 pages
Haig, Matt. *The Midnight Library*, 304 pages
Honeyman, Gail. *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine: A Novel*, 390 pages
McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*, 241 pages
Michaelides, Alex. *The Silent Patient*. 336 pages
Ng, Celeste. *Little Fires Everywhere*, 338 pages
Owens, Delia. *Where the Crawdads Sing*, 384 pages
Reid, Taylor Jenkins. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, 389 pages
Skloot, Rebecca. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (narrative non-fiction), 371 pages
Westover, Tara. *Educated* (memoirs), 352 pages

Of these, I have finally chosen six, a bit randomly: Ng, Daré, McCarthy, Michaelidis, Owens and Reid, and if this list works, then I already have nine more books to chose from for next year. As you can see, I had included one essay, a non-fiction narrative book and a memoir, but I have finally decided to focus only on novels. Incidentally, we have used short stories in previous editions of the book club, but this has not attracted more readers. I will add that that the book club meetings are in total seven, but I would like to begin with an initial general meeting and then move onto the novels. I was also told by the Department that six novels amounted to one and a half literature subjects, which is quite a lot if you consider the amount of reading from this point of view. The sessions are scheduled for the two-hour segments with no teaching that UAB keeps for extra activities.

In the past, before the Bologna degree reform was implemented in 2009, we used to have 'free-credit' subjects, from one to three ten-hour credits. These 'free' credits were not attached to any degree and were offered by teachers interested in trying out small

teaching experiments, or just plain bored with their usual workload. My university is considering bringing back that kind of credit, which would be ideal for the book club (I think three ECTS would be a good reward). As matters are now, we expect students to join the book club just for fun, which is a lovely but unrealistic concept. In the world outside our campus, plain readers do join book clubs for fun, but the students I know do not take any extra activities if they can help it, either because they work or because they are busy enough with their degrees. The task of setting up the book club is, then, nothing in comparison to the task of finding members and keeping them interested, for which I have no recipe. I considered rewarding the club members with extra points for class participation in a selection of literature subjects, but my colleagues told me that, anyway, the students most likely to join in would be the best students in their classes. They do not need extra points.

Tired of this carrot-and-stick approach, I have grown increasingly convinced that perhaps the solution lies in being exclusive. In a situation in which most students openly declare they don't like reading, I need to locate those who do read, and get them together, to make them visible. And proud. I told my Department that I would like to promote the book club with pins flaunting the slogan 'proud reader' and I might give this a try. The pin might be a conversation opener and an aid for student readers to meet. The rest is up to them.

I'll keep you posted, and let you know how the book club progresses. Or not.

10 September 2023 / AFTER THIRTY YEARS: *THE X-FILES* (AND MY CELEBRATION, *LA VERDAD SIN FIN*)

The X-Files, one of the most important television series ever, was launched 30 years ago today, on 10 September 1993. The series, created by Chris Carter, narrated in 218 episodes broadcast along eleven seasons (1993-2002, 2016, 2018), and two films (1998, 2008), the cases investigated by FBI Agents Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson). These cases were subdivided into the stand-alone episodes, known as those of 'the monster of the week', and the serial christened 'the mytharc' or the mythology. The mytharc, focused on Mulder's search for the truth about an impending alien takeover of Earth, started quite by accident when Gillian Anderson became pregnant and her absence was justified with an alien abduction. In the end, Scully's capacity to reproduce has become a central motif in the series, if not *the* central one, as the ending of the most recent season (which I am not going to spoil) shows. *The X-Files* can now be seen in its entirety on Disney+, which announced a few months ago a reboot with new protagonists and new plots more palatable to our woke times.

I was a fan of *The X-Files* from the very beginning and, as such, I was very happy to receive in 2004 (or thereabouts) the commission to write a book, addressed to a general readership, on the whole series, which by then was presumably over. There was no precedent for the task of analysing such a long audiovisual text, and I did not want to simply write an episode guide. I therefore decided to organize the book as an essay (with chapters on the series' TV context, the protagonists, the other characters, the mythology and the monsters), followed by a guide consisting of a summary of all the chapters. The book, *Expediente X: en honor a la verdad*, was published in 2006. I received many enthusiastic messages from kind readers but the relationship with my publisher was a disaster, and as a result I withdrew the heavily illustrated book from circulation and uploaded just the plain text onto the digital repository of my university; it has been downloaded so far 14624 times, being the only book on Carter's series in Spanish.

Now and then I would receive a message from another kind reader, suggesting that I should publish a second edition, particularly after the release of the 2008 film, *The X-Files: I Want to Believe*, and even more so after 2018, when season eleven was aired. The problem was that I hated the film and the two newer seasons; I did watch season ten, which aired in 2016, but I didn't even bother to watch season eleven. The bad experience with my publisher, besides, still rankled, and I politely ignored all the petitions to revise the 2006 book. This changed in January this year, 2023, when Javier Valencia (author of an indispensable book on *Twin Peaks* and editor of *Weird TV*), contacted me, mentioning the name of his publishers, Dilatando Mentes, as a possibility to launch a second edition. Something clicked, I thought it was about time to complete my study of *The X-Files*, and I contacted José Ángel De Dios García following Javier's advice. Ángel and I were planning to publish the new book in 2024, but when I realised quite by accident that the 30th anniversary of Carter's series would be on 10th September, I decided to rush the revision. It's been a hectic process, but the book, *La verdad sin fin: Expediente X*, is ready and will be launched next Monday 18 (it's now available on pre-order).

I first thought of simply adding an appendix with an analysis of the 2008 film and the 2016 and 2018 seasons, but I soon saw that was lazy. I decided, therefore, to integrate my comments on these parts of *The X-Files* into the five existing chapters and to add the corresponding summaries to the second part of the book. Luckily for me, seasons ten and eleven are quite short, with only six and ten episodes instead of the 24 that were habitual for the previous seasons (most shows usually run 13 episodes per season). I did not watch again the original series, as I simply had no time. I focused instead on the problem of updating the chapter on the business context of television (which has changed plenty since 2006) and renewing the bibliography (this is not an academic book, but I cite everything published academically in English on *The X-Files*). I am satisfied with the result, though, of course, the readers need to judge whether my method works well. One has already complained that I have unnecessarily suppressed the episode ranking that I offered in my first book, but I did so because I found myself disagreeing with my own choices. If you ask me, my favourite episodes are the parodic ones written by Darin Morgan and the tragic *Kaddish*.

As I worked on, I went through tremendous bouts of nostalgia for a series which I simply adored, but that gradually disappointed its audience, and finally alienated it with the second film and the two final seasons. I don't like television series in general because they are created to survive for as long as possible regardless of plot inconsistencies. These piled up after *The X-Files* jumped the shark, that is, outstayed its welcome. Carter's series was killed by three main factors. One was David Duchovny's arrogant behaviour: although he is a much worse actor than Gillian Anderson, he was always treated as the show's star, which allowed him to force production to relocate to California when he tired of Vancouver, where the series was shot, and to practically disappear from seasons eight and nine. The second factor was the (mostly female) audience's insistence that Mulder and Scully should be involved in a romantic relationship; Carter was a no-romo (a person who resisted that idea), as I am, but the shippers forced his hand and he turned the unusual chemistry between the characters into awful melodrama, particularly taking into account how obnoxious Mulder can be. The third factor that killed the show was 9/11. Mulder's search for the truth about the mythology seemed frivolous in a context in which the FBI had failed to prevent the 2001 terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, and so the show fizzled out and ended less than a year later, in May 2002.

When I wrote the first version of the book, I binge-watched all the episodes and when I reached the double final episode I was living in Mulder and Scully's world more than in my own. Like Mulder, I want to believe in the existence of extraterrestrials and have the certainty that we are not alone, but the truth he discovers at the end of eleven years of ceaseless searching left me simply devastated. For a few days, mundane,

ordinary life seemed to be unreal; reality lay elsewhere and I could not find my way back in. I wrote the book not so long after 9/11, in the period when Facebook (launched in 2004) and other websites and apps were bringing in the reign of the new Web 2.0 and the growth of social media, to which I have never adapted. When I watched the 2016 and 2018 seasons I was, therefore, horrified by how poorly this new atmosphere had been assimilated. Whereas Carter's series had started as a liberal, left-wing exposé of the lies told by the US Government since the 1930s, with the villainous Cigarette-Smoking Man as the great manipulator, it veered in its last seasons towards positions that are uncomfortably close to the Republican right. Or the other way round: the US extreme right has appropriated the critical anti-Government positions of the left, destroying in the process democracy. Whereas Mulder's crusade demanded answers and the full accountability of the Government for its shadowy actions, in its new iteration that crusade is on the side of paranoia-ridden, conspiracy-prone wackos who believe QAnon's mad claims. I should not be this dismayed, since *The X-Files* was born on Fox TV, the channel that has done most to support Trump and undermine US democracy, but I am. Of course, I am not saying that Carter and his team used to support Clinton and now support Trump, but that in times of crippling post-truths Mulder's own truth is suddenly empty, obfuscating and elusive rather than vital. This is why I have called the book *The Endless Truth* (*La verdad sin fin*), because I see no end to the quest to find it.

If you have the chance and the inclination, I recommend that you watch *The X-Files*, all of it, including the not so good episodes. Don't worry if you don't understand the mythology: as happens, Carter himself did not understand it because he decided not to keep a bible (a central repository of the ins and outs) and so the inconsistencies abound in it. Even so, the interaction between Mulder and Scully is always appealing (or almost always), and many of the monsters of the week unforgettable (Tooms, the family in *Home*, the Great Mutato…). Don't miss the episodes by (and with) Darin Morgan, or eccentricities like *The Postmodern Prometheus*. Do learn about American history and folklore, enjoy the heady mixture of science fiction, gothic and detective fiction. Watch *The X-Files* before it is too late. As we are learning these days, the streaming platforms think nothing of erasing from their catalogues shows that are not available on DVD, to lessen the bulk of the property on which they pay taxes. *Millennium*, Carter's other main series, is now no longer (legally) available, and I dread the day when this happens to *The X-Files*, or many other series we love or just need to study. You have been warned.

In the meantime, 'trust no one' and keep searching for the truth, for 'it is out there', as we, the x-philes, know. Carter, please, leave Mulder and Scully alone, and please Disney+, spare us a reboot we x-philes know can never work.

17 September 2023 / READING WRITERS' BIOGRAPHIES: THE ELUSIVE ESSENCE OF THE IMAGINATION

I am currently reading Ruth Franklin's 2016 biography of American author Shirley Jackson, subtitled *A Rather Haunted Life*, and I've come across a couple of passages in Chapter One ("Foundations: California 1916-1933") I would like to comment on. Franklin informs us that Samuel C. Bugbee, "San Francisco's first architect and Jackson's great-great-grandfather" built in the 1870s the city's lavish "millionaires' palaces" for the 'robber barons' who grew rich with their investments on the transcontinental American railroad, finished in 1869. "Nearly a century later," Franklin claims, Jackson would turn to these mansions "for inspiration when she needed a model for the haunted house in her most famous novel," *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959).

As Franklin informs a few pages later, since San Francisco's Nob Hill mansions were destroyed by the fire that followed the devastating 1906 earthquake, Jackson had only seen Bugbee's grand, extravagant buildings in pictures. In 1958, when she came up with the plot for *The Haunting*, while living in Vermont, she asked her mother for those pictures, because, Jackson wrote, "All the old New England houses are the kind of square, classical type which wouldn't be haunted in a million years." This is quite funny, considering everyone assumes Hill House to a typical New England mansion (Jackson does not mention any location), totally unrelated to sunny California. The mother, Geraldine, Franklin continues, sent the daughter "newspaper clippings she identified as 'possible architectural orgies of my great-grandfather', including the Crocker House. 'Glad [it] didn't survive the earthquake', she commented later." The three-story Crocker House, designed in a Second-Empire style by Bugbee but finished after his death in 1877 by other hands, seems today hideous, as you can see. Nonetheless, Aimée Crocker informs that "Featured in the book and photographic album *Artistic Homes of California*, originally published by the *San Francisco Newsletter* in 1888, the Crocker House was proclaimed, 'one of the most beautiful architectural masterpieces to be found in any State in the Union'."

The difference between the two passages I have cited is that whereas the first one suggests a sort of Freudian connection between Jackson's imagination and her ancestor's work, the second demonstrates how writers actually work. Jackson wanted to write a story about a haunted mansion and, being familiar with Bugbee's work, she asked her mother for documentation. Having no great-great-grandfather who built castles in Transylvania, Bram Stoker sought documentation in the British Library, though others claim he used Slains Castle, at Cruden Bay in Scotland, as his inspiration for Dracula's castle. Stoker's own biographer, David J. Skal, rejects in his volume *Something in the Blood* (2016) that Slains, "where Stoker spent holiday time while writing the novel," mattered at all because "to anyone growing up in England or Ireland, real castles were just part of the ordinary landscape, and they had always been central to the virtual landscape of fairy tales. By the time Bram Stoker was in his forties, he hardly needed the poke of inspiration to realize a haunted castle might be a good location for a scary story."

Nor did Jackson, also in her forties when she wrote *Haunting*. She knew that Gothic fiction had been using castles as a space of dread since Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) and that, chagrined that the United States had no medieval castles, Edgar Allan Poe transferred that dread to an ancient mansion somewhere up North in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). Jackson's own mansion, Hill House, is in terms of the Gothic chronotope, very new, having been built only eighty years before the events she narrates (that is, in the 1870s). It was just luck that she happened to be Bugbee's descendant and that his ugly houses (by 1950s post-Victorian, Modernist standards) had been the seat of a variety of tragedies. Many other people had seen Bugbee's houses but nobody else had thought to write a ghost story set in one of them, just like many others were familiar with Transylvania but never thought of writing a vampire tale.

The two biographies by Franklin and Skal, then, attempt to do the impossible (namely, explain how the writer's imagination works), by piling up plenty of information which in the end feels superfluous. Or contrived. This method of dissecting the writer's biography in search of clues for this or that point in their fiction is particularly laughable if you consider authors of the fantastic or, more largely, of speculative fiction whose works stretch plausibility. Authors may explain now and then where they took their inspiration from, but this explains very little. Most famously, Mary Shelley claimed that *Frankenstein* came from a lucid dream in which she saw Victor leaning over his newly-made monster. Biographers have endlessly speculated whether this waking dream came from drugs or from anxieties caused by Mary's misfortunes as a young mother, but the fact is that not all women who take drugs or lose several babies write horror fiction. This is precisely the

reason why the biographical approach to analysing fiction went out of fashion about one century ago with the rise of formalism, and, later in the 1940s, with American New Criticism.

I do give brief biographical introductions in my subjects, but I always caution students against going too far in that direction. The truth is that nothing in Emily Brontë's biography can explain *Wuthering Heights*, and even if we had a complete list of all she read, we would still not know what mental processes led her to write her masterpiece. I have never written fiction, but whenever I read a writer's biography I play the game of thinking what kind of novels I would write, given my biographical background. I invite you to do the same, and you will immediately see how all biographical analysis of writers must fall flat. Supposing you are the kind of extremely self-conscious novelist who knows very well your own biography, you might still not want to use any of it for your work. This is just not automatic.

I personally prefer asking authors technical questions. I am currently in communication with Kim Stanley Robinson about Frank May, the main male character in *The Ministry for the Future* (2020). Robinson has explained in diverse interviews that he has a penchant for using the name Frank frequently in his fiction. He has a Frank Chalmers (in *Red Mars*), Frank Vanderwal (the *Science in the Capital* trilogy), a Frank Churchill ("A History of the Twentieth Century, With Illustrations"), a Frank January ("The Lucky Strike") and this Frank May. His explanation for that quirk is that "all of my liars are called Frank," though that explanation is useless in May's case (he's too frank, not a liar). A biographer would dig into Robinson's life to seek a double-faced great-uncle called Frank but I find that a waste of time. I am asking Robinson instead why he does not describe Frank as soon as we meet him, since this induces readers to visualize him incorrectly, and why May's biography leads him to a particular ending. Robinson puts May in an extremely singular friendship with Mary Murphy, a powerful woman whom he kidnaps for a few hours, and I very much want to know why Robinson had to limit that friendship (and make room for conventional romantic love with another man). Perhaps Robinson has had a very singular friendship with a woman and this is where Frank and Mary come from, but this is irrelevant. At least to me. I am more interested in the architecture of the novel.

Does this mean that we should not write or read biographies of authors? No, not at all. I prefer autobiographies and memoirs, but I understand the need for biographies, and the curiosity that writers elicit. My post is, rather, a critique of the impulse most writers' biographers feel to provide readers with by-the-numbers literary analysis, in a romantic biographical style now totally outmoded. I must clarify that I am reading Shirley Jackson's and Bram Stoker's biographies because I need to gather information (beyond Wikipedia!) to participate in a round table, but otherwise I tend to avoid writer's biographies, precisely for their shaky literary criticism. In any case, what I am finding more interesting in these two volumes are the details of the respective author's professional careers: when they started publishing, how many attempts it took, how their fame grew, how their career developed, how their posthumous reputation was built.

Stoker was a very secretive man, which I totally respect, but Jackson bared her soul as a working mother in her memoirs (*Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*), both amazing pre-Betty Friedan books about a woman author's life in the 1950s. Franklin's biography, written from a feminist point of view, does a good job of vindicating Jackson as an unfairly overlooked author, but its agenda might not correspond to what the author really needs. Likewise, Skal's interest in presenting Stoker as a queer man is part of his own gender agenda, but not really how the author saw himself, which we will never know. I teach *Dracula* as a queer text, which is in many ways inevitable in our days, but I do not speculate on the author's sexuality in my lectures. Quite another matter is

approaching an author who wishes openly to be read as queer, black, post-colonial, an abuse victim… you name it!

Returning to Jackson's inspiration for Hill House, Owen Hatherley comments in his fascinating article "Slashers, demons and head exploders: why horror revels in modern architecture" that "The reason why a 'haunted house' tends to be old and gothic isn't just the fact that its floorboards might have a satisfyingly eerie creek, but because there is so much unseen in a Victorian house," with all its nooks and crannies, and cloying decor. He proceeds then to examine the presence of post-1920s, post-Modernist, straight-line architecture in contemporary horror cinema, highlighting *Candyman*'s (1992) use of Chicago's derelict Cabrini Green estate as a major turning point. In literature, I would recommend Mark Z. Danielewski's highly experimental *House of Leaves* (2000) as a particularly unnerving (long) tale about an ordinary house which contains a mysterious labyrinth inside.

By the way, Stephen King has a note in his website about how a nightmare he had in 1974 while staying with his wife Tabby at room 217 of The Stanley Hotel in the Rocky Mountains gave him the inspiration to write *The Shining*: "We were the only guests as it turned out; the following day they were going to close the place down for the winter. Wandering through its corridors, I thought that it seemed the perfect—maybe the archetypical—setting for a ghost story." Then he dreamed that his terrified 3-year-old son was chased by a fire-hose in the corridors. When he woke up from the nightmare, he says, "I had the bones of the book firmly set in my mind." You can go the Freudian biographical way, and gossip about what kind of phallic father Stephen was to his son, now fellow novelist Joe Hill, or marvel that his brain connected the massive spaces of the hotel (built in 1909 and still in operation) with the specific sub-genre of the ghost story. Or visit the place itself and see how it haunts you… Here's the bad news: you will not write *The Shining*, no matter how awful your nightmares there can be.

27 September 2023 / DISPATCHES FROM THE WAR FRONT: NOTES ON CHATGPT (SO FAR)

These days I have been proofreading my forthcoming book *Passionate Professing: The Context and Practice of English Literature* (Universidad de Jaén), which gathers together an essay and a selection of posts from this blog up to 2020. I worry that the volume is already outdated because of its many references to plagiarism, and the absence of any thoughts on ChatGPT. I must note, however, that the first news about Open AI's chatbot started appearing only last December, not even a year ago (ChatGPT was launched on 30 November 2022). Like all universities, here at UAB we are struggling to adapt to the new situation, though some Departments appear to be more concerned than others. Mine, the English and German Department, has been quick to understand the depth of the problem, perhaps because we read the Anglophone press, and have got an early warning.

My own warning is that no matter how often ChatGPT may fail to deliver the expected results today it will soon learn. It is important to understand that OpenAI and all the other companies running AIs do not know very well how AI actually works. In principle, ChatGPT is defined as "a large language model–based chatbot," which is far from being an independent general artificial intelligence, but we need to worry about how far it can go. When a user asked ChatGPT "Why are you so helpful?, what do you want in return?," the bot cheekily replied "As a language model trained by OpenAI, I don't have wants or desires like a human has. But if you really want to help, you could give me the exact location of John Connor," I was truly alarmed by the sick joke (for those of you

non-nerds, John Connor is in *The Terminator* franchise the human leader in the future war against the AI led by Skynet).

Another chilling moment came from a warning by diverse mycologists that guides written by AIs and sold on Amazon contain misguiding information which could cause death by poisoning if you pick and eat the wrong mushroom. Apparently, Amazon is now so flooded with AI-authored books, that it has forbidden the persons publishing them from issuing more than three books a day. Add to this the recent suit against OpenAI by George R.R. Martin, John Grisham and other major authors (the list runs to 17 names affiliated with the Authors' Guild) to forbid ChatGPT from appropriating their works to write others. Apparently, Martin came across a prequel of his saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the origin of TV series *Game of Thrones*, written by ChatGPT without his consent. Martin has never authorized fan fiction and, understandably, he is far from pleased with this blatant appropriation.

The field of higher education is split between those who abhor any aspect of ChatGPT (like yours truly) and those who think that ChatGPT can be integrated in the classroom and even *should* be integrated. The argument of the latter is that the growth of ChatGPT cannot be stopped and, arguably, preventing students from cheating with it passes through taking charge of its use and exploiting it, as we do, for instance, with bibliographical databases. As I have noted, these are still early stages for ChatGPT, but my own experience of using it for academic research was a total disappointment. I asked ChatGPT to provide me with a list of literary works in which a secondary character plays a significant, plot-defining role and a list of secondary sources about the concept 'secondary character'. The list of literary works was of limited interest and, one thing I quickly noticed, was that no matter how many variations I introduced in my request, ChatGPT always focused on the same books. My own list (for a book I want to write in the near future) is far more interesting.

As regards the secondary sources, ChatGPT suggested consulting the habitual databases (which I have done already) but when I insisted, it provided me with a list of sources. At first, I was very happy to have found so many sources I didn't know on the theme of the secondary character, but by the time I had checked about five I realised they were invented. The authors did exist but ChatGPT had extrapolated from their publications titles (not complete bibliographical references) of false works. The bot had gathered whatever it found about secondary characters and came up with a counterfeit bibliography of no use. In a similar vein, you might enjoy the chronicle by Elif Batuman of his difficulties to have ChatGPT find a quotation in Proust's series *In Search of Lost Time*. ChatGPT offered a variety of inexact quotations and even lied about the availability of the original French text, claiming it is still under copyright when it is not. This playfulness, if it is playfulness, begins to sound like wilfulness.

The situation as regards the assessment of our students' work is that now plagiarism has taken second seat to… what? We don't even have a label for what happens when a student presents a text generated by AI. Anti-plagiarism tools like Turnitin are of no use to detect AI-authored text, whereas the new tools, such as ZeroGPT, give false results. The six essays submitted by my students last June that, according to this app, were not written by humans, turned out to have been written by students who had simply not read the corresponding novels. ZeroGPT detected them because the style was as robotic as that used by ChatGPT.

One thing that called my attention last week, in any case, is that not only BA students but also MA students are using ChatGPT for their dissertations. A BA student boasted that ChatGPT had written the second half of his dissertation, after he had procrastinated for too long. He got a B- for that, which is in itself interesting: ChatGPT may help you pass, but not get As. The MA student also boasted that ChatGPT had helped finish her dissertation, for which it had also provided the main argumentation. As

I have always said, there are many methods to fool a teacher and this is just the newest one; I'm just sorry that so many students reject the chance to be educated and focus on getting a degree certificate that proves nothing.

I am not teaching this semester and will have to wait until the next how things work in my Victorian Literature class. We, the two teachers in charge, have decided to have students write the shorter essays in class (they're not quite exams because they choose the passages to comment on, and prepare the essay at home), but still ask for the habitual 2000-word essay with 4 secondary sources. I assume that ChatGPT can easily generate second-year level papers, but, unlike other colleagues, I don't want to eliminate that kind of exercise and return to exams, which I hate. Cheaters will always cheat but I still believe in personal integrity. If I catch a student using ChatGPT I will be disappointed, rather than annoyed or angry. As for those who will successfully cheat on me, shame on them and I'm sorry that you're missing the chance to learn. Skynet scores a victory, and poor John Connor loses once more.

I am not again the use of AI for creative purposes, as long as this is acknowledged. Suppose for a moment how ridiculous it would be for audiovisual FX specialists to claim that computer-generated images do not exist and all is their own painstaking work by hand. In the same way, I see no obstacle for all kinds of artists to apply AI to the production of new imagery, though this is already creating singular problems. Recently, the US Copyright Office review board determined that the AI-generated image 'Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial', the winner of the 2022 Colorado state fair annual art competition, could not be copyrighted because protection "excludes works produced by non-humans." Artist Jason Allen, who had used AI-platform Midjourney to create the image, alleged that he was the author because he "entered a series of prompts, adjusted the scene, selected portions to focus on, and dictated the tone of the image." The board adamantly replied that the image "lacks human authorship, and the Office will not register it." This appears to be a mistake since Midjourney does not spontaneously generate images and depends on human artists to come up with creative ideas. Allen, thus, appears to be the author. I would call Allen a cheater if he denied having used Midjourney at all, or if the Colorado state fair annual art competition forbids the use of AI. Perhaps there should be a separate event, and artistic circuit, for AI-generated art.

Authorship, as you can see, is a key word in the matter of ChatGPT, too. Just as Midjourney does not generate art unless it is prompted, ChatGPT does not generate writing without instructions from humans. Prompting is here another key word, for whereas I use a computer programme to write my posts, and to translate them into Spanish, I cannot prompt Word to write by itself (well, I do in the case of translation, but that comes from my own text). I could start using ChatGPT to write the posts in this blog, but then my authorship would be radically diminished to the point that I could not call myself an author (just a prompter?).

Perhaps I am here destroying my own argument in support of Jason Allen's authorship of 'Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial', but I believe that in writing you cannot claim as yours a text which you have only revised. I already have doubts about whether I am the full author of the Spanish version of my blog, as I use Word's automatic translation feature to generate it, but so far copyright legislation acknowledges translated texts as the work of the original author (and of the translator, if there is a human translator; Word, or Google, or Deep-L do not get copyright for translated texts). I would be, however, cheating on you, my reader, if I passed off as mine posts generated by ChatGPT, for they would not be really my work. If, suppose, I asked a student to write this week's post using a few ideas of mine, the post would not really be mine, so whatever is written with ChatGPT cannot be claimed as one's own, at least not in the way copyright operates today (I'm beginning to think Allen can claim authorship but not copyright for his image…).

An important matter is to recall that pure AI-generated images or texts do not exist, as all bots like ChatGPT are prompted by humans. Some kind of collaboration between human and computer might be acceptable, though this muddles the distinction between authorship and copyright. As for students, if the use of ChatGPT is forbidden, because we require full human authorship, submitting an AI-generated text is cheating. The day we start testing what students can do with ChatGPT or other bots might come, but it is not a day I am looking forward to.

4 October 2023 / READING VS. READING: FIRST SESSION OF THE PROUD READERS' BOOK CLUB

As I announced in the first post of this year, I have launched a new edition of the Department's Book Club. My collaborator, Felicity Hand, and myself visited a series of classrooms a couple of weeks ago to present the club, and sent all the students an email message through the BA and MA degree coordinators. The result is that we have now 75 members, from first year to the MA, of whom 25 attended yesterday the first meeting.

Unlike other book clubs, I decided to have first a general meeting, just for members to meet, and begin the task of reading novels right after that. Our first meeting to discuss a novel, then, will be next 6th November, though the corresponding Forum in the Moodle classroom is already open, for those who want to start discussing Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*. I have also opened Forums for recommendations and news, and to share what members are currently reading. I have no idea at this point about how many members will actually join the monthly meetings, but in comparison to last year this is simply a spectacular beginning.

In yesterday's meeting my collaborator and I circulated among the members, who were seating in little groups, as they chose, and asked questions about their preferences as readers and any recommendations they might have. We asked the members to move about and talk to other members, and, to our surprise, they formed little by little a big circle integrating them all. It was nice to have for our use the really big multi-use room in the library's journal collection section. Also to our surprise, and much amusement, once the club members finished making recommendations, they started discussing the books they hate most. I don't finish the books I dislike, unless I have to read them for class or research, or I am particularly interested in showing I have read them (even if it's just to myself). Yet, one of the members spoke of finishing a particularly hideous novel to spite the author and the characters. Ironically, novels mentioned as most hated were the favourite of other members. That happens…

Our Department's students are about 85% female, and 15% male, excuse my binarism, and, so, it is not surprising that this ratio is reflected in the club's membership. Yesterday, practically all attendees were women and they chose mostly to discuss and recommend books also by women, or about them. Books by male authors were also recommended, but I noticed that most novels mentioned as highly disliked were by men. For the book club, I have chosen four books by women and two by men, but it is obvious that the one title that has attracted most members to the club is Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husband of Evelyn Hugo*, which is, most definitely, a novel far more likely to please women than men.

We, women readers, have always complained that we have massively read men's books, but they have not corresponded our interest. The way things are going, it might well be that in one generation men's books will be secondary to women's both in number of authors and of readers. You will have noticed that I refer to books, not to fiction, because to my delight a few members mentioned non-fiction titles. This is also an area

in which women's writing features prominently and is attracting many female readers. If non-fiction for young adult manages to grow, as it should, we might see even deeper changes in the preferences of readers for feminine writing (yes, it absolutely exists as an aesthetic category).

The recommendations by the club members were varied, but one thing that we soon noticed was that they were shy to share their pleasure in genre fiction. This is understandable, because not knowing our own preferences for detective fiction (in Felicity Hand's case) and science fiction (in my case), they must have assumed we only read literary fiction and other literary genres. That has never been the case for me. As a student, I would always keep at hand a book to read for fun, usually a genre novel, but which I could only go on reading after having read for a while for class. I still do the same.

I'm now reading lots of SF for a book I am working on, but I keep others that have nothing to do with it for when I want to read with no pencil in hand. The club members distinguished very carefully between what they read for escapist reasons, they said, and what they read for class. They were wrong to believe that 'escapist' genres are something to be embarrassed about, or ashamed of, and we did correct that impression, but the fact is that there are indeed two categories of reading as long as you are a student, or a researcher. The funny thing is that they are interchangeable; that is to say, whenever I work on genre fiction, as I am doing now, I read literary fiction or non-fiction to 'escape'. I may end up reading, I don't know, Michael Ondatjee for fun and Stephen King for research.

As a Literature teacher, what I find perhaps most difficult about the book club is, precisely, separating the strategies to read for fun from classroom methodology. I have not programmed the Book Club as I would have programmed a subject, but I have found preparing the questions for debate quite difficult. Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* is a book club favourite and it is very easy to find online lists of questions for debate. Initially, I thought I would use them to simplify my job as club runner, but once I read the novel, which I have enjoyed, I decided that I wanted to ask my own questions. To my surprise I ended up writing dozens, which is possibly totally wrong in terms of what a book club needs; yet, with so many members I wanted to open up discussion in as many directions as possible. I had to tell myself as I wrote the questions, that they had to elicit opinion rather than analysis, something not that obvious when you are a Literature teacher used to close reading. That is possibly a good reason why Literature teachers should not run book clubs, but someone has to do it in my Department.

I found myself wondering, for instance, whether calling attention to the author's reluctance to mention her protagonist Mia Warren's race is something adequate for a book club, or, rather, for the Literature class. I don't know, since my own participation in books clubs is just limited to three sessions as a member in one on SF. As regards other aspects of *Little Fires Everywhere*, I am aware that a book club need not discuss the inner chronology of novels, or the details of the socio-cultural background, or even plot holes, but I have prepared for the club members notes on all of this. Ng's novel is set in 1996-7, before the club members were born, and I realized that although some allusions are just background colour (like the car models the main characters drive or the music they love), others are more significant. For instance, the wealthy Richardson siblings watch religiously *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991- 2018), using this syndicated tabloid talk show to get a glimpse of the low-class America that lives far from their carefully regulated planned community.

I had wonderful fun yesterday, talking about books with the 25 Proud Readers of the club (that's our name!) for almost two hours, and hope to have much more fun with they and all the rest, both online and in person. In contrast, the tea party Felicity and I had planned to inaugurate our new common room in the Departament fell flat. We had invited our colleagues to discuss our research with each other, as we never do that. We

may have chosen the wrong date as classes had been cancelled for a sort of miniature fresher's week (which UAB calls La Comunitària), or simply because our colleagues had other pressing appointments but the fact is that it did not work at all. We are going to try next month again, on a different day of the week now that we have the cookies and the kettle. Perhaps I should not have mentioned research in my invitation, and should have just invited our colleagues to enjoy our mutual company. At any rate, a campus university like UAB, which has no accommodation for teachers, or nearby, has the enormous disadvantage that everyone lives quite far and rushes home as soon as they can. Better luck next time, then.

As for the Book Club, I just hope it thrives. I would be very happy indeed if 20 members manage to read all the books, and join all the sessions. If it works, the next step will be opening it up to all UAB students, and apply for it to be acknowledged officially as an activity for which students may gain at least 3 ECTS (the same for me, there is no way 1 ECTS can compensate for all that work). Bureaucracy knocking on my door…

In the meantime, please, Proud Readers, keep on reading, both for fun and for study.

10 October 2023 / PRESENTING A BOOK (AND WHY ACADEMIC BOOKS ARE NOT PRESENTED, I WONDER….)

On Saturday 7 I participated in the second presentation of my new book *La verdad sin fin: Expediente X*, a volume about which I have already written here, at the Festival de Cinema de Catalunya at Sitges. I had offered the first presentation, which you can see online, a couple of weeks ago at Llibreria Gigamesh. And I still have a third presentation in two more weeks at FNAC Triangle of Barcelona (October 19, 18:30).

This is the fifth book of mine I present in public. The first time was back in 2006, when I presented the previous version of the book on *The X-Files*; in 2018 I presented with some of the authors the collective volume *Explorant Mecanoscrit del segon origen: noves lectures* and in 2019 I presented my collection *Ocho cuentos góticos: del papel a la pantalla*. A few months ago, I organized an online presentation (via Teams) of the volume I have co-edited with Isabel Santaulària, *Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture: In Search of Good Men*, this time for the members of the English Studies AEDEAN association.

Although we announce our new books on the AEDEAN list (the association has more than 1000 members), and members may present their works at the yearly conference, there had never been an online book launch, as far as I recall. Mostly the authors of *Detoxing Masculinity* attended its launch, and a handful of friends, and my topic today is, precisely, why we are so shy to publicize our academic books. My other book presentations were all live (not online), and attended by a modest number of persons, but there is something immensely satisfactory in celebrating a book launch with family and friends, and to meet strangers who care about what one has written. I have found myself signing copies of my *X-Files* book, which is for me awfully embarrassing, but also gratifying since everyone enjoys a nice pat on the back. With the academic books, we never get that, do we?

Usually, publishers are in charge of organizing book presentations, which are indeed still popular events despite social media; readers want to meet authors in the flesh and enjoy the fetishistic act of asking for an autograph (as I do myself). The apotheosis of that fetishism takes place every 23rd April here in Barcelona with St. Jordi's book day, when readers may queue patiently for hours to get their books signed, and authors learn about the physical pain of signing non-stop for hours (others learn the pain of not being

that popular…). Any respectable bookshop has a book presentation calendar and let's not forget about festivals and fan conventions.

All this is organized on the basis of well-established circuits that are not that easy to access. For instance, my *X-Files* book has been welcome by Gigamesh, which specializes in fantasy, SF and Gothic, and by FNAC, which is open to all kinds of proposals, but other bookshops I have addressed have not even replied to my queries (my publisher got me the presentations while I tried to get others). My book is possibly too fannish for the less welcoming bookshops.

I have not been more successful, however, in my attempts to present *De Hitler a Voldemort: retrato del villano* (Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2023), because, as I say, academic books are not usually presented in public, unless they have been written by some big name. As an academic working in a second-language Department I don't have, besides, the contacts that someone in the Catalan or Spanish Departments might have. Or in other specialities of the university. Add to this that we have reached a point of saturation in all fronts. One might spend all late afternoons attending book presentations in Barcelona, and still miss many.

Book presentations have a specific dynamic, as they need to consist of a conversation between the author and the presenter, followed by questions from the audience. I do not know whether publishers pay presenters in the case of the book presentations of bigger impact, but one thing you can notice is that they prefer to invite journalists rather than scholars. In fact, publishers totally ignore academics because we are not a source of publicity.

When I was head of Department I emailed lots of publishers for them to send us their presentation calendars (once Anagrama stopped doing their wonderful presentations at the British Council) and nobody replied to my request. The presentations seem to be either for the press or for readers, plainly to sell books, not to help the authors get academic attention. Recently, I found out quite by accident that Nobel Prize winner Abdulrazak Gurnah would be visiting Barcelona for a book presentation. As happens, two of my colleagues have been doing plenty of academic work on Gurnah but nobody contacted them. My colleagues contacted the author, which was delighted to meet his admirers for a drink. As for the presentation, it was good but lacked the depth my colleagues could have given it.

Since a rule of book presentations is that one cannot do them alone, the author who works at a modest level, like myself, needs to find a suitable companion. In the case of a collective book, the other contributors are the best possible companions and one need not look further, but in the case of single authorship, one needs to ask for favours. This is not easy. The presenters needs to have read the book and prepared a set of questions, and know have to keep the conversation flowing. Nothing more embarrassing than a book presentation full of uncomfortable silences.

For *La verdad sin fin* I asked my colleague at the Universitat Ramon Llull, Iván Gómez, and accomplished fan activist and author Javier Valencia (of the fan page El pájaro burlón) to be my presenters. I did prepare a list of topics, but each dealt as they wished with my suggestions, which has resulted in two very lively but quite different conversations. With Iván there was more room to discuss patterns of TV consumption and how the disappearance of so many series from the streaming platforms might affect research (series which are not on DVD and that fall off streaming catalogues may simply vanish for ever). With Javier there was more room to discuss the content of *The X-Files*, though, interestingly, the matter of the series availability came up in the subsequent presentation on the same day and place of his exciting edited book *Weird TV*.

For me, then, a book presentation is a chance to have an interesting conversation about a project that has taken a great deal of time in my life. As a member of the audience in a presentation I particularly enjoy learning about how the author managed to overcome

difficulties and challenges, as writing is a very lonely process. In the case of collective books, which are very common in academic writing, I miss more contact among the contributors as we write. This is why I saw the presentation of *Detoxing Masculinities* as a chance to finally meet, apart from publicising what we had done. Since we don't do presentations for academic books, I have been writing posts here trying to elicit interest in each publication but also to answer the questions I might receive in an imaginary presentation. This comes close to reviewing my own books, which we are not supposed to do, though I think of this type of post as a sort of 'making-of' short documentary.

As I have noted, our national English Studies email list is a good place to announce new books, though articles and book chapters are not announced. I invited my Department colleagues to communicate to the rest of us all their publications, if only because we need to produce an official list at the end of each year, but that didn't work at all. I simply do not understand why it is such an effort to write an email and share the joy of having had research published. After all academic careers are built on the basis of boasting about one's achievements in our CVs, our applications for grants or tenure. I believe there is at heart a resistance to provoke envy by sharing too much. One thing I have noticed in this crazy year when I have been publishing so many books, is that the number of congratulatory messages has been trickling down (oh, no, that woman and her books again….). I have two more to announced, you have been warned!

I find that, on the whole, we don't give each other enough support, hence my call to have more presentations of academic books, if not in person then at least online. I understand that there might be just 10 people interested enough in a particular academic book to attend a presentation, but that's already a lot to enjoy a good conversation. I want to resist the idea that academic books deserve less attention than other types of book, that they need not be celebrated. Presenting a book is a little bit about boasting of one's achievements but it is mainly an event to share the results of a personal or a collective project, so why not do it? Perhaps post-Covid 19 times are not the best to suggest more online events, but I no longer want to have this feeling that our academic books are dropped with no noise into our huge market rather than launched as they deserve, with much happiness and a little bit of fanfare.

15 October 2023 / PRODUCTION DESIGN AND FILM ADAPTATION: ON *THE HAUNTING* (1963, 1999)

I reported in a post written four weeks ago that Shirley Jackson had taken her inspiration for the mansion in *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) from the Crocker House of San Francisco, designed by her great-grandfather Samuel Charles Bugbee. Today I am returning to Jackson's novel to discuss the role of production design as a narrative tool in its two film adaptations: Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963), and the eponymous film 1999 by Jan de Bont (which is not a remake but a new adaptation of the novel).

All haunted house novels have the same problem: they are always incomplete because readers need to *see* what makes the place so scary. Readers may satisfy their curiosity by searching for an image of the actual house that inspired the author, if there is any in particular. Or see the film adaptation, again if there is any in particular. Description is hardly ever sufficient, though at least Jackson has a character comment that Hill House is so unsettling because there is not a single right angle in it, and so the whole building is askew. I had already seen Wise's and de Bont's versions a long time ago, but not back-to-back and this has seen a very interesting exercise in approaching film adaptation from the perspective of production design.

For those of you who do not pay attention when the Oscars in the technical categories are handed out, the production designer is responsible for the overall look of a film, whereas the art director is in charge of implementing the designer's vision. Together they provide the film's scenography, which is also complemented by the costumes and the sound design, apart from the special effects and, of course, photography. The same production design can look very different depending on how the photography director lightens the set and captures it on film.

In general, production designers are taken for granted, which is paradoxically a sign that their job is well done. From the historical films set in the past to the science-fiction films set in the future, passing through the films set in the present, the role of the production design is to provide characters with an environment that makes their actions plausible. If you are wondering, the top production designer ever must be Cedric Gibbons, who won the Oscar 11 times our of 39 nominations (both figures are records); he also designed the figurine for the award. If you're curious you may take a look at the rest of Oscar-award nominees and winners here. This year's Oscar went to the German adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet in the Western Front* (production design by Christian M. Goldbeck and Ernestine Hipper).

Production design is important in all film genres, but it is no doubt a major narrative tool in horror films. Images of mysterious buildings, dark spaces and old furniture and decoration surely come to mind, though master moviemaker Stanley Kubrick managed to use well-lit spaces to horrify audiences in *The Shining* (production design by Roy Walker, novel by Stephen King). In Tobe Hooper's remarkable *Poltergeist* (production design by James H. Spencer) a cookie-cutter ordinary suburban home haunts an all-American family, with the ghosts manifesting their presence through mundane elements such as the television set (that was before Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*!) and the walk-in closet.

Jackson's Hill House is a Victorian construction and, as such, is it full of clutter which creates all kinds of shadows, though, above all, what makes her mansion frightening is its sheer size (characters often get lost navigating its fifty rooms) and elements that do not really depend on the specific type of architecture: the house has a cold spot, the doors close without human intervention, loud noises are heard in the night. The two adaptations by Wise and de Bont ignore the park, the nearby wood and the creek described in the novel, making the setting even more claustrophobic. Both coincide in using for the exterior shots English country houses, using for the interior shots sets built in a studio.

Wise's film had a moderate budget, of a little over $1 million, and had to be shot by contract in black and white, a limitation of which cinematographer Davis Boulton made the most. The exterior corresponds to Ettington Park, in Warwickshire, a High Victorian country house by John Prichard, which is actually a remodelling (made between 1858 and 1862) of a much older manor. If you're curious to visit, Ettington Park is now a hotel. Apparently the film's stars Julie Harris and Claire Bloom, and part of the production team, were lodged there during shooting but did not care for the place very much. Wise asked Boulton to make the house look as menacing as possible, which he did using infrared film stock. Wise has always cited producer Val Lewton as his main inspiration, but I think it would be unfair not to mention Lyle R. Wheeler's work as production designer for Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, a film in which Maxim de Winter's mansion Manderley is, as happens in Jackson's novel with Hill House, yet another main character.

Ettington Park had been chosen by Wise's production designer, Elliot Scott, who built the sets for the interior shots in a mixed Victorian-Rococo style at MGM-British Studios in Borehamwood, Hertfordshire. Unlike what could be expected in a horror film, Scott's set are mostly brightly lit and have no dark corners, though, unusually, they have ceilings, which increases the general claustrophobia. You will have to see the film,

available on Archive.org, to get a precise idea of Scott's work for, oddly, the images available on Google are mostly dark. The effect he went after was of eeriness rather than downright repulsion, as there is nothing overtly creepy in his sets. Eleanor, the protagonist, even tells housekeeper Mrs. Dudley that the whole house looks well maintained, and she tells herself that although the furniture looks ugly, it is comfortable. This rather cosy atmosphere works better than simply going for old, derelict spaces as too many haunted house films do. Interestingly, years later Scott was production designer for *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Labyrinth*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and, his last movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Critics and spectators agree that Wise's film is much superior to de Bont's, which seems to have been doomed from the beginning. Steven Spielberg was the original director, and Stephen King the script writer, but their creative differences put an end to their collaboration. King, a great fan of Jackson's work, had borrowed her haunted house premise for *The Shining* and borrowed it again for the miniseries *Red Rose*. De Bont, who had directed *Speed* and *Twister*, was having problems with *Minority Report* and Spielberg swapped projects with him. In the end, Spielberg, one of the producers, was so dissatisfied with *The Haunting* that he withdrew his name from the credits.

De Bont's film has a rather low rating at IMDB (just a 5, in comparison to Wise's 7.4), which seems to me unfair but also understandable. Neither film, Wise's or de Bont's is really horrific and I marvel at how often the 1963 film appears in the list of best horror films ever (Jackson's novel is not that scary, either). However, Wise's film has a conceptual and aesthetic coherence totally missing in de Bont's film, a problem that has to do above all with the questionable work of Argentine production designer Eugenio Zanetti.

Wise's script writer Nelson Gidding failed to persuade Jackson to accept his view of her novel as a sort of hallucination by the mentally ill Eleanor, but kept flashes of his vision in the script, so that the doubt lingers as to whether she is the originator of the phenomena all witness. De Bont's scriptwriter David Self linked instead Eleanor to Hill House as a direct descendant of local magnate Hugh Crain, and turned him into a child predator that she vanquishes to hell. I happen to like this version of the plot because in fact Jackson totally neglects to explain what exactly is haunting Hill House (hence Gidding's astute reading), but whatever subtlety Self's script may have had, it is destroyed by Zanettit's totally over the top sets.

For the exterior takes, De Bont used Harlaxton Manor, an old English building with a Medieval pedigree which is today the British campus of the University of Evansville. Built by Anthony Salvin and William Burn using old-fashioned Jacobean and Elizabethan styles for the façade and Baroque decoration for the interior, it is a monster of a building, which totally dwarves Ettington Park and hardly needs any photographic effects to look overwhelming. Zanetti used its sumptuous Great Hall as one of the sets for the film, but he employed $8-10 million (out of a budget of $80 million) to build the rest inside a gigantic hangar in Long Beach, California.

Zanetti, a reputed production designer with an Oscar under his belt for *Restoration* (1995), misused that money to build sets which are simply too big and too extravagant. David Self incorporated that impression into the script by having one of the characters quip that the house looks as if Charles Foster Kane, the protagonist of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, had met *The Munsters*. Kane's Xanadu mansion (production design by Van Nest Polglase) was based on the castle built by Julia Morgan for newspaper magnate Randolph Heart, a monument to this man's ego and bad taste. It seems clear that Zanetti had either Kane or Hearst in mind, but the addition of the avalanche of Gothic detail gives his designs a camp air too close, as noted, to *The Munsters*. Phil Tippet's quality special effects use well the abundant statues of children and the massive doors that seem to be a portal to hell, but on the whole Zanetti's designs fail to provide

Jackson's story, or Self's script for that matter, with the required plausibility, taking into account the film's horror codes; hence its failure.

In short, whereas in Wise's film Scott's production design calls attention to itself without being intrusive, in de Bont's version Zanetti's work calls attention to itself in the wrong way, by preventing Hill House from being believable as a real location. Throughout the film, we are uncomfortably aware of watching the characters interact in what is clearly an overblown film set, and this kills the film. There are reports of the constant discomfort of the actors and the reluctance of the film crew to stay on once darkness fell, but I guess this is all publicity to try to infuse the film with a claustrophobic atmosphere it never has.

I have not seen Netflix's series *The Haunting of Hill House*, the third adaptation of Shirley Jackson's novel, though from what I read it is very different in plot from its source. I hope, however, that my post has called your attention to production design and that now you have a few more elements to judge whether the work by production designer Patricio M. Farrell is satisfactory. Do let me know what you think.

31 October 2023 / TRAINS AND OMNIBUSES: ON THE MEANS OF TRANSPORT IN FICTION

As readers and spectators, we tend to think of the means of transport as background elements of moderate importance. Yet, the moment I do some digging, what emerges is a rather complex picture of their relevance in the stories we tell and consume.

I am thinking of this matter today because of two lectures. Jordi Font-Agustí, a Catalan SF writer and train enthusiast, was the guest lecturer at the award ceremony of the Premi Pedrolo (I had the honour of presiding the jury), and he delighted us with a very complete overview of trains in print and audiovisual fictions. The place was the main library of Mataró, a city about 40 kms north of Barcelona, which is now celebrating the 175th anniversary of the first train line in Spain, which was inaugurated in 1848 and linked the two locations. The other guest lecturer (for the welcome session of my Department's doctoral programme in English Studies) was Elizabeth Amman, of the University of Ghent and the author of the volume *The Omnibus: A Cultural History of Urban Transportation*, in the Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture.

I mention the series because I have found there what appears to be a pioneering volume published in 2012, *Transport in British Fiction: Technologies of Movement, 1840-1940* (edited by Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries). Or not so pioneering, considering that the editors mention in the preface as predecessors Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (1977), Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (1983), Laura Otis's *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (2004), and, above all, Jonathan Grossman's *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (2012).

The novel by Dickens I usually teach, *Great Expectations*, was serialized between 1860 and 1861, when trains had been around for three decades (the Liverpool and Manchester Railway opened in 1830). However, Dickens set it in the early 1830s, as we infer because the characters move about in horse-drawn carriages (stagecoaches between urban centres, cabs in the city). Although Pip tries to help Magwitch scape by boarding a steamship (the line to Hamburg was established in 1825), his benefactor most likely returns from Australia in a sailing ship travelling round Cape Good Hope (the Suez Canal was inaugurated in 1869). Authors always need to take into account how their characters travel from one point to another, and when each means of transport is available, to avoid anachronisms. Even in fantasy stories. In *Dracula* (1897), Harker and

company take the Orient Express, inaugurated in 1883, to chase the Count back to Transylvania. Today, they would use fly in a low-cost airline, from Lutton to Cluj Avram Iancu International Airport in Cluj-Napoca in a few hours. And, yes, when Jules Verne published *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours*, in 1872, it did take 80 days to travel around the world; today you can manage the feat in less than 80 hours.

Whereas in realist fiction (including Gothic *Dracula*), transportation is circumscribed by the available means, in fantasy (of the marvellous type) and in SF authors are free to invent new means. In SF there is a sharp division between the authors who embrace faster-than-light travel and those who do not, on the grounds that it is apparently physically impossible. Beyond this division, there is another one into sentient and non-sentient spaceships, which does not necessarily mean between organic and inorganic ships. In lain M. Banks's fiction, for instance, the spaceships are inorganic but run by powerful, fully sentient AIs called Minds. In Yoon Ha Lee's *Machineries of Empire* universe, the spaceships, known as moths, are in fact an enslaved alien race, both organic (though cyborgized) and sentient. I could go on naming strange spaceships, but I would like to note among the strangest flying objects fiction has seen the flying island of Laputa in Jonathan Swift's classic *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

Allow me to name rather randomly some other magical means of transport: Tolkien's walking trees, known as Ents (the Hobbits travel on Treebeard, the oldest one); magical creatures than can be ridden, from dragons to hippogriffs; Howl's moving castle in Diana Wynne Jones's eponymous novel, or Hayao Miyazaki's cat bus in his delicious film *Totoro*. And others that SF dreams of but we don't have yet (thankfully!): the flying car, the time machine imagined by H.G. Wells and much later re-imagined by Robert Zemeckis as a cool DeLorean car, Dr. Who's Tardis, jetpacks, teleporters (as in *Star Trek*). The taxis driven by robots that we saw in, for instance, Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990), and that so annoyed Arnold Schwarzenegger, are now seen in San Francisco's streets (minus the dummy driver!), where they are causing countless trouble.

There are, then, two basic forms to approach the matter of transportation in fiction, if you happen to be interested: making lists of the diverse means of transport, from walking to digital uploading, or, taking a specific means of transport and drafting lists as complete as possible of the fiction where it appears. The problem, from an academic point of view, is what exactly we gain with this efforts. I'll consider first teaching.

My introductory PowerPoint presentations for Victorian Literature include plenty of images connected with transportation, and I make a point of telling students about Isambard Kingdom Brunel, though I very much doubt that any of my students is interested in what they see as trivia. I myself only learned from Elizabeth Mann a few days ago the difference between a 19th century omnibus and a tram: the former was a biggish horse-drawn carriage with two decks, the latter was similar but ran on rails to ease the horses' efforts. This nags me because my PowerPoint for Unit 2 has a photo of London's first tramcars, introduced in 1861; they were designed by one Mr. Train (fancy that!) of New York to replace the far less stable omnibuses. Only in 1819 did the city of Leeds introduce the first electric trams. Being a Cultural Studies scholar I am indeed interested in these matters, but I have no illusions about my students' interest in them. Perhaps if I mention the very Victorian King's Cross station and platform 9¾ in *Harry Potter*, they may get the point!

As for research, perhaps the main problem is that it runs the risk of being too descriptive. Jordi Font-Agustí's heavily illustrated talk is a good foundation for a beautiful coffee-table volume on trains in SF, particularly attractive because of its retrofuturism (he showed us many images of how future trains had been imagined in the past, the craziest ones came from Nazi Germany!). Or for enticing popularization. Read for instance, Jason Heller's article "Beyond the Tracks: The Locomotive in Science Fiction Literature" and enjoy it. He does have a thesis ("Locomotives are the original spaceships," meaning that

they totally altered how we travel) but I am not sure whether this is enough for an academic article or monograph. Elizabeth Amman's volume "examines" and "explores," as its blurb indicates "how the omnibus gave rise to a vast body of cultural representations that probed the unique social experience of urban transit" and "how the omnibus and horse-drawn tram functioned in the cultural imagination of the nineteenth century," but I am not sure whether this amounts to defending a thesis, beyond "the omnibus was a revolutionary means of transportation." Perhaps some types of research don't need a thesis but just the will to inform readers about a topic, and they should be as descriptive as possible.

I am myself getting curious about speed. I have found a book by Martin Roach titled *The History of Speed: The Quest to go Faster, from the Dawn the Motor Car to the Speed of Sound* (2020), but he connects speed to cars, and I believe that the concept of speed changes first with trains. Horses, a specialized website notes, can run up to 55 mph (88.5 kmh) and on average thoroughbreds run at 40 mph (64.37 kmh). That was the fastest humans could travel before trains, and only for a very short time. A horse-drawn carriage, another specialized website informs, can travel at around 8-10 mph, at a trot, far less (2-4 mph) at a walk; you might expect to travel 10-30 miles only in one day. Trains started at a speed of 30 mph (48.28 kmh) in the 1830s, and reached 80 mph (128.75 kmh) in the 1850s, which is quite amazing. Past the 1870s, trains could run up to 112 mph (180.247 kph). The first true production car, the 1894 Benz Velo, only travelled 12 mph, which proves my point.

Of course, there is an immense difference between feeling speed in a small vehicle one drives, and feeling speed in a collective transport as a passenger. 300 kmh (186 mph) are brutal in a car, but surprisingly smooth on a high-speed train like AVE. Masculinity, of course, is a factor to take into account, in both the development of the car and of the train, and, indeed, of air navigation from the Wright brothers to the first flight to the Moon (tin-can Apolo X set the record for the highest speed attained by a manned vehicle at 39897 km/h or 24790,846 mph). Women, as we all know, do not like speed that much. We tend to be more prudent.

So, all this to call attention to how we move on land and on air without a second thought about what this means culturally, and how fiction needs to reflect the mundane reality of transportation, unlike authors choose to fantasize about new means of transport. I personally hope never to see a city full of flying cars and flying people, but who knows?

7 November 2023 / LITTLE SIMILARITIES EVERYWHERE: CELESTE NG MEETS SHIRLEY JACKSON

Comparative Literature is a strange discipline because it consists of seeing similarities between very dissimilar texts, usually written in different languages but also in the same language. The whole discipline depends on serendipity, as a particular scholar needs to think of particular connections that are not evident, a type of discovery that only happens quite by accident, when one literary work reminds the scholar in question of another literary work. Evidently, the more a scholar has read, the more connections may appear. The problem, of course, is that we are not very sure what to make of the links we find, except call attention to them.

Gone are the times when literary critics discussed the influence of specific authors over other authors with no proof whatsoever. Now we all borrow from Julia Kristeva the concept of intertextuality, which has the advantage of requiring no proof of direct influence and rewards the powers of observation of the scholar who highlights

hidden coincidences and overlaps. Today, quite by chance, I have come across two tantalizing examples of intertextuality that I would like to share, so here I go.

Writing a shot piece (again!) on Manuel de Pedrolo's *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (*Typescript of the Second Origin*), I've come across another novel on an isolated teen couple surviving alone and having a child, of which I knew nothing. I was checking the year when Brooke Shields's very popular film *Blue Lagoon* came out (it was 1980), as this film tells precisely that kind of story, when Wikipedia informed me that it is an adaptation of a 1908 romance novel by Irish author Henry de Vere Stacpoole. Apparently, this was a hugely successful novel, with previous film adaptations in 1923 and 1949. I find it unlikely that Pedrolo would have read Stacpoole, or seen the 1949 film (though it was released in Spain in 1950 as *La isla perdida*), and, anyway, his novel was published in 1974, six years before the Brooke Shields's film. So, the fact that both novels share significant plot points is not relevant at all, unless somebody working on the motif of the stranded adolescents who conceive a child is seeking to enlarge their corpus. It's, as Sheldon Cooper would say, a factoid. But a fun one, I think. If I get curious enough, I might read Stacpoole's novel and, of course, and report my findings here. Or write an academic essay, who knows?

Yesterday I had a book club session on Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, a novel published in 2017 and adapted as a Netflix series in 2020 (which I have not seen). When I prepared the novel for the meeting, I focused mainly on the plot and the many class, gender, and race issues it raises, paying no attention to any literary connections and seeing Ng primarily through the focus of her being Asian-American. Now I have found a post on Barnes and Noble's Facebook and Instagram accounts announcing a book club session on Sarah Langan's novel *Good Neighbours*, advertised as a work inspired by Celeste Ng, Liane Moriarty (author of *Big Little Lies*), and Shirley Jackson. Somebody is probably already writing a dissertation on the Jackson-inspired anti-suburban novel. I myself would have totally missed the connection (or the trend!) if it weren't because, as happens, I am reading Jackson for a round table I have this week and a did a quick Google search to check whether anyone had connected her to Ng.

I wrote about Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) only a few weeks ago, but I did not mention her other very famous novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), which was the object of a rather bland film adaptation in 2019, though Taisa Farmiga was quite good as the psychopathic teen Mary Katherine 'Merricat' Blackwood. *Little Fires Everywhere* might be closer to Jackson's first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), which I have not read but appears to be a dire exposé of suburban life, based on the affluent Californian suburb where Jackson grew up. As happens, Ng also chose as her setting the planned community of Shaker Heights, in Ohio, where she grew up. This is presented as an asphyxiating utopia that keeps its inhabitants tied to a narrow view of life.

In Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* Merricat, a weird 18-year-old girl, is the first person unreliable narrator and [SPOILER ALERT] Jackson little by little unveils through the teen's own singular narrative voice that she poisoned her parents, and her paternal aunt and uncle when she was sent off to bed with no dinner. Merricat put arsenic in the sugar, knowing that her elder sister Constance did not take any. Merricat was 12 at the time, and in the present six years later she lives with patient Constance, who accepted the burden of being unfairly accused of the crimes knowing her little sister is guilty, and Uncle Julian, who survived the poisoning but has been left mentally impaired. I have read recently that Merricat is a descendant of eight-year-old Rhoda Penmark, the perfect young girl and murderess of William March's immensely successful 1954 novel *The Bad Seed*. This was made even more popular by the Broadway play by Maxwell Anderson and the Academy Award-nominated film by Mervyn LeRoy of 1956.

I would say that Ng's 14-year-old Isabel 'Izzy' Richardson has a little bit of Merricat, and a little bit of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and, of course, plenty of any teenager who dreams of running away from suburban life. Ng's novel is called *Little Fires Everywhere* because, as the first chapter narrates, Izzy burns down the family's ample middle-class home by starting a little fire in each bedroom, as a perplexed fireman tells her mother, Mrs. Elena Richardson. Izzy's rebellion against her unbearably perfect mother is fuelled by the novel's antagonist, Mia Warren, an unconventional woman who cannot but clash with Mrs. Richardson.

While Elena, who is in her forties, is a firmly middle-class woman, rooted in her planned community for three generations and the mother of four children with great expectations in life, 36-year-old Mia leads a nomadic existence as an artistic photographer. Her art has carried her and her 15-year-old daughter Pearl already to 46 places all over the USA. It is not clear, however, whether Mia is genuinely attached to this lifestyle or whether she has no option but to hide, so as to conceal the existence of Pearl from her father (that's a plotline I will not go into). The fact is that Izzy takes inspiration from Mia's subtle hints to rebel. Mia, who rents her apartment from Mrs. Richardson and works eventually as her housekeeper, never confronts Elena openly but she understands very well Izzy's dissatisfaction and indirectly helps the girl to vent it. She does not outright tell her to burn down the house, but she offers metaphors for regeneration that pretty much go in that direction.

As I read Ng's novel, I thought that if I ever write a paper on it, this will deal with her criticism of utopia. Since the 1940s, as we see in Jackson's case, there has been a constant dislike of suburbia in fiction, which grew to immense heights after Betty Friedan's essay on how the suburbs kill women's spirit in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The suburbs grew in US cities as the inner cities were abandoned to the poorer layers of the urban population. The white middle classes ran away to the cities' outskirts and, further aided by trains and cars, created the stereotype of the devoted commuting husband and the happy stay-at-home 1950s wife. In Ng's novel, set between 1996 and 1997, Mr. Richardson is indeed a commuting husband (a lawyer) and if Elena works, as a part-time journalist, this is only because her feminist mother shames her into doing so.

As a working-class kid raised in an old Barcelona neighbourhood, I do wonder what is so bad about suburbia, and why a privileged teen like Izzy should be so angry. I read a few months ago a memoir by English singer Tracey Thorn, part of the duo Everything But the Girl that perhaps offers an explanation. Her volume is called *Another Planet: A Teenager in Suburbia* (2019). You will see that the excerpt published by *The Guardian* carries the title "We looked at suburbia and wanted to burn it down," a sentence that Izzy would certainly sympathise with, though she only commits arson against her own home. Thorn's main complaint against Brookmans Park, where she grew up in the 1970s, is that it was "a village but not a village. Rural but not rural. A stop on the line, a space in between two landscapes that are both more highly rated–the city, and the countryside. A contingent, liminal, border territory. In-betweenland." Her rather stark diary, frequently cited in her memoir, describes a boring life which only became exciting when she gained some autonomy and started enjoying London's club scene. Izzy, who is only 14, has no such outlet, which increases her resentment against her mother, as she seems to embody the suburb itself. Ng allows her to run away, a solution that the book club members loved, even though they saw that a 14-year-old roaming the USA on her own would be soon caught. Hopefully by the Police, and not a rapist and killer.

Whereas Jackson's girls and young women become unhinged by their disconnection from their surroundings, always being on the verge of some form of psychopathology or fully trapped by it, Izzy is not so far gone. Towards the end of the novel, her mother's anger dissipates and "her heart began to shatter, thinking of her child out there among the world." Elena considers why her child "had caused her so much

trouble" and realises that Izzy us not "her opposite" as she believed but the only one of her children "who had, deep inside, inherited and carried and nursed that spark her mother had long ago tamped down, that same burning certainty that she knew right from wrong." Jackson herself famously clashed with her mother, who always criticized her and had misgivings about her marriage to a Jewish man, and actually moved to the other side of the USA once married. The two managed to reach some kind of truce and be in good terms, as I imagine Izzy will eventually reconnect with Elena. Jackson became a very good writer, as we know, though she never managed to leave suburbia behind, becoming in essence a faculty wife in Vermont. I want to believe that, like her, Izzy manages to find her own place as far away as possible physically from Elena, and to build a satisfactory life, perhaps as an artist like Mia.

I'll end with what one of the book club members observed: what is really clever about Ng's novel is that someone like Mrs. Richardson could read it without seeing how obnoxious her behaviour is, but we, who dislike her, do see it. I believe this is a narrative effect Jackson would have enjoyed very much.

13 November 2023 / ON TRASH: TWO SCATHING REVIEWS

This post is inspired by two very different book reviews. On 7 November Laura Miller published in *Slate* the review of Rebecca Yarros's *Iron Flame*. The piece is titled "'I've Been Yours for Longer Than You Could Ever Imagine": Is the dragon-school 'romantasy' series that's dominating the bestseller lists actually any good?" On 10 November Jordi Gracia published in *El País*'s prestigious cultural supplement *Babelia* the review of the winner of the 2023 Premio Planeta. His review is titled "*Las hijas de la criada*: el fallido folletín de Sonsoles Ónega y la autoinmolación del Premio Planeta" [*The servant's daughter*: Sonsoles Ónega's failed potboiler and the self-immolation of the Planeta Award]. The two reviews have different aims: one questions the best-selling lists, the other the commercial literary awards. Yet, they raise a similar issue: why are readers satisfied with trashy fiction?

I'll begin with Miller. Rebecca Yarros had published 20 contemporary romance novels with small publisher Entangled, when suddenly she became the embodiment of "every fiction writer's dream of skyrocketing to success after years of scribbling in obscurity," thanks to the BookTok fever her new saga has unleashed. Following in the wake of Cressida Cowell, Anne McCaffrey, and Naomi Novik, Yarros narrates how young Violet Sorrengail's trains at Basgiath War College to become a dragon rider. In the process she establishes an enemies-to-lovers relationship with fellow male trainee Xaden. The first novel, *Fourth Wing*, has been the top *New York Times* bestseller for six months; the second, *Iron Flame*, has sold two million copies in a few days. Miller explains that the saga can be classified as romantasy, that is, romance narrated against a fantasy backdrop. According to her, this mixed genre has "the characters and conflicts of YA fantasy but with more profanity and explicit sex." In short, it is, I'll add, new adult.

Here comes the crux of Miller's review: "Seemingly," she writes, "every single sentence in [*Iron Flames*'s] 528 pages includes at least one cliché." Wondering why *Iron Flame* is nonetheless so popular, Miller speculates that "It's possible that many of the novel's younger fans simply haven't read enough to recognize how tired Yarros' language and motifs are." As she notes, "cliché makes reading a speedier process for people uninterested in anything but plot." Yarros's novel may be "risible to someone who wants something fresh or surprising from a novel" but provides "a familiar comfort to someone in search of an immersive escape," particularly those at ease with the romance tropes. Miller ends up persuading herself that Yarros's use of "narrative laws that are

reassuringly consistent and unbreakable" provides reassurance to readers who faced with a "perilous and unpredictable (…) real world" only seek stories that "turn out all right in the end."

Miller's prejudiced review is based on the impression that Yarros's fiction is appallingly clichéd, then, and although she tries not to offend readers who enjoy romance, she concludes that this author is successful only because her young readers are quite undemanding. If you recall, Janice Radway did an impressive job back in 1984 with her volume *Reading the Romance*, to show prejudiced readers that those who enjoy this genre (mostly women) are not unsophisticated dupes, but quite sophisticated consumers who understand the central narrative mechanisms, display specific preferences for certain subgenres and tropes and, basically, know why they enjoy what others consider trashy fiction. Miller, in fact, uses the word 'sophisticated' in the same sense in her review. Most has been made, besides, of the fact that romance fiction, including romantasy is, ultimately, descended from canonical fiction we all appreciate, with Austen and the Brontës as the mothers of the main lines. The difference, though, between Radway's 20th century and Miller's 21st century, though, is that whereas the former was battling prejudice from literary readers, the latter is highlighting the dismay of readers already convinced about the values of romance fiction.

Allow me to further explain myself. Radway and others in other popular genres, such as the gothic, science fiction, fantasy, detective fiction, and so on, faced an uphill battle in the 1980s to demonstrate that these genres are fundamental part of literary culture, and not simply escapist trash, and that some of the authors are producing very solid work within them. I myself joined the battle in the early 1990s, together with many other scholars born in the 1960s, mostly from working-class families. We were used to enjoying those genres and in fact had to make a great effort to accept that they were not part of the canon, until we had the chance to prove that these genres had their own canons and that the top novels could be compared in many cases with literary fiction, if not in the quality of their prose at least in the relevance of their contents. With the support of a new open-minded scholarship and of the reviewers trained using it, the popular genres grew in quality, with detective fiction crossing the barriers of prejudice and becoming generally accepted. The non-mimetic popular genres have been facing a harder time, but their own scholarly, reviewing and awards circuits have been strengthened and, in general, the fiction vastly improved.

Then the social media arrived and lent a voice of disproportioned resonance to young readers who, respectable as they are, lack experience. They have bypassed academia and traditional reviewing to persuade other young readers like themselves, first through YouTube and Facebook and now through TikTok, that their choices are the best. The publishing houses have been using the booktubers and booktokers to peddle their wares, tailored to suit their preferences. Young readers are now, therefore, flooded with an unstoppable stream of YA fantasy, which is now growing in the direction of new adult romantasy.

YA, as I have explained several times here, is not the same as traditional children's or juvenile fiction, which was consumed in the process of maturing as a reader, until the person in question found their way into the classics and, to use a label I hate, adult fiction. YA in contrast was created for and sold to young readers who dislike reading, to impress them with the idea that it is ok not to enjoy the books the adults in their circle believe they should read, because those books were boring and, thus, to be avoided. The result, if you add social media to the cauldron, is that few young persons read and those who do so read mostly YA fantasy published to suit the tastes of, sorry, unsophisticated readers. Since these readers are not as demanding as adult readers, the general level of the YA fantasy aimed at them has been descending. Thus, whereas I do not hesitate to proclaim that Suzanne Collins's dystopian trilogy *The Hunger Games* is a key contribution to 21st

century fiction of any genre, you can see from Miller's review that Yarros's fiction is trash. The popular genres that we, boomer scholars, have fought so hard to defend are now, then, trapped by publishing interests and the naivety of young readers into a downward spiral that seems very hard to stop.

I'll turn now to Jordi Gracia's bitter ranting against Sonsoles Ónega's *La hija de la criada* and the Planeta award. Gracia would have never reviewed Ónega's novel if it were not the winner of the award, which is the best paid in the world (1 million euros). He makes no bones about how much he hates being in the position of reviewing what seems to him a "failed potboiler" [folletín fallido]. To be honest, his summary and review of the novel are quite bad, and I wondered as I read it whether he was poking fun at how messy Ónega's plot is with his own messy reviewing. The 'folletín', which can be defined as print soap opera, can be done, Gracia explains, "well or badly," and Ónega does it very, very poorly. Gracia finds fault with the plotting, the worldbuilding, and the style, concluding that "La sensación de ridículo es sofocante" [the impression of ridicule is asphyxiating]. Yet, what irks Gracia is not that this novel will be published (yes, the Planeta awards unpublished fiction), since the author, a well-known journalist, has published "otras tantas" (many others). What appals him is how the seven illustrious members of the jury (all well-known literary figures as authors, editors and scholars) have not fulfilled their mission, betraying the trust of "una mayoría de españoles con ganas de leer historias entretenidas sin que naveguen necesariamente en la indigencia moral y literaria" ("a majority of Spaniards wanting to read entertaining stories without necessarily navigating moral and literary poverty").

Jordi Gracia is a professor of Spanish Literature at the Universitat de Barcelona, with a long prestigious career, which includes many volumes, some published with Anagrama. He does not depend, then, on pleasing Planeta, which is the biggest publisher in the Spanish language. Gracia is, therefore, well positioned to launch an attack against the award but also the wrong person to do so. Unlike other awards, the Planeta does not aim at discovering literary excellence but at selling a product than can please the Spanish average reader. In many ways, Gracia's attack is unnecessary as anyone who follows the Planeta in Spain knows how the award works. There has always been a strong suspicion that the winner and the finalist are preselected with the jury simply lending their prestige to the choice, though this has never been proven. The Planeta has been given to accomplished writers (you may check the list of winners here) but the problem is that in recent years it is hardly disguising its commercial bent. Gracia has possibly found Ónega's novel the last straw that breaks the camel's back, though the irony is that his outburst will not have the impact he was seeking. Quite the opposite. I read this morning that Queen Letizia queued for 40 minutes to have Ónega sign her copy of the novel. Both women are friends, but even so the public spectacle of the queen endorsing a trashy novel is quite chilling.

I think that the right person to have reviewed Ónega's novel is my sister-in-law, as she is the type of middlebrow reader that buys every year the Planeta award-winning novel. I did tell her about Gracia's review, but she has decided to buy anyway the novel. For her, like for many other Planeta-award readers, Gracia is a nobody in comparison to Ónega (a well-known journalist with a TV talk show). My sister-in-law agrees that giving such huge quantity of money to a novelist makes little sense (this is money that Planeta advances on the basis of expected sales, and this is an award that sells massively). As for the writers, Catalan best-selling author Marc Pastor's (@DoctorMoriarty) tweet sums up the situation perfectly: 'Posa'm una crítica sagnant i dona'm un milió d'euros' ('Get me a caustic review and give me a million euros').

Gracia, in short, has no business ranting against the Planeta, though he has a good point to make about the dubious function of the jury. Miller, a journalist and critic, who cofounded Salon.com (she was for 20 years the editor of its Readers Guide to

Contemporary Authors) and author of *The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia*, also seems overqualified to judge Yarros's dragon-riding saga. In both cases, *El País* and *Slate* pay attention to novels about which it is perhaps better to keep silent, since nothing a learned reviewer may say will alter their course toward commercial stardom. I have learned from writing a negative review which I later regretted publishing that one should only endorse valuable books, and let the bad ones sink into oblivion. Hopefully.

25 November 2023 / WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR CLASSROOMS: ON THOSE BORED FACES (AGAIN)

Last Tuesday I attended a lecture on dystopia in film and TV series taught by a brilliant Turkish visiting professor, which was also attended by four other university professors, including the one who had invited the visitor. I won't name the university, a renowned public university, but will note that the students (about 20?) are in the fourth year of a BA in Political Science. The talk was offered within a subject on cinema and philosophy. When the guest teacher finished his lecture, which lasted about 50 minutes, there was a question and answer session. After an awkward silence, the five professors started to ask questions, until finally a student joined the debate with a brilliant intervention. As I turned to listen to him, I saw the face of a girl sitting behind me in the second row, a face of desolate boredom. Sad, isn't it?

In my time as an undergraduate student I was infinitely bored, but I used two strategies: either I didn't go to class and studied the matter taught on that day on my own, or if I went, I gazed at the teacher from time to time with an interested face while I wrote down other things. My mother taught me from a very young age that you always have to be in good terms with everyone, even more so with people who sooner or later assess you. This is not hypocrisy but pure common sense. When it comes to grading, writing a letter of recommendation, or evaluating an application for a scholarship, teachers logically tend to value not only the academic results but also classroom attitude. The student who has been at least friendly and if possible very interested (ideally in all sincerity) always wins points. This is not about feeling good as teachers, but about valuing the student's personality to reward those who are hardworking and participative, which is the whole point of attending university.

I am late to the debate initiated in December last year by the Prof. Daniel Arias of the University of Granada, when he published, curiously on his LinkedIn account, a long letter complaining bitterly about the bad attitude of college students. Arias titled it "Dear undergraduate university student: we are deceiving you," a title which actually hides his very direct criticism of students and that he has recycled for the book he has just published, *Dear Student: We Are Deceiving You* (*Querido alumno: te estamos engañando*). I've read a couple of blog posts criticizing Prof. Arias, one of which doesn't grasp at all what he's arguing. Arias is not nostalgic for the Spanish public university of the past, with its classes of more than 500 students, but nostalgic for what it could be now that the groups are finally much smaller. I share his nostalgia for the present that could be but is not, without doubts and without ambiguity.

What all the teachers born in the 60s and 70s, who attended the hesitant Spanish public university in the 80s and 90s, complain about is that since the extension of compulsory secondary education (ESO) from 14 to 16, which left the baccalaureate with only two courses, the scheme by which the students who opted for the university were really interested and already well prepared for study has been broken. In the past, there were fewer teachers and more overcrowding in the classrooms, but there was also a

much lower percentage of disinterested students. Today we have fewer students in each class because there are more teachers but the interest of 80% of our students is nil, adding to this that about half the Spaniards aged 18 to 22 attend university, which is not reasonable at all.

I believe that the lack of interest is due to two fundamental reasons. On the one hand, between the ages of 14 and 16, i.e. the first two years of ESO, students who do not want to study impose their disinterest on the rest, whereas when BUP (the three year high-school course followed by COU) existed, those who did not want to study could already start their professional training at 14 (you can start working at 16). By the time interested students reach high school, they have already lost two years of advanced academic training, and the two years they take before college cannot make up for that loss. As, in addition, the contents have been simplified, we receive students with a second-year high-school level in comparison to the times of BUP and COU. The other reason for the general lack of interest, without a doubt, are the social media, not so much because of what they are, but because of the time their use takes up and because they have drastically reduced the ability of students to concentrate in class and study. The loss of personal time for reading, watching quality movies and series, and conversation, has greatly impoverished vocabulary, comprehension and expression skills, as Prof. Arias rightly points out.

The girl with the face of utter boredom that I mentioned is symptomatic of a situation that is collectively everyone's fault. Curiosity and intellectual effort are not socially rewarded, only physical appearance and so-called achievements on social networks (such as high numbers of likes or followers), and this is not an issue that only affects the age group between 18 and 22. In the media, there are no longer intellectuals, nor TV contests that reward knowledge (*Saber y ganar* survives in his corner of La2, but young people don't watch it as we boomers and Gen-Xers used to watch *El tiempo es oro*, or even *Un, dos, tres*).

Like Prof. Arias, and like the vast majority of my peers, I feel that I cannot compete with TikTok, or with YouTube, which are corporate products designed to be addictive. I plead guilty to having publicly objected to students' lack of attention and having invited them to leave the classroom and go to the bar given their total disconnection. I've left the classroom at least a couple of times, tired of no one paying attention to my lecturing, seeing those bored faces, and listening to conversations that had nothing to do with the content. I trustingly but foolishly assume that laptop screens don't hide other activities than note taking, such as online shopping or gaming. In any case, whereas I understand that students bring their laptops to class, I can't understand those who don't use them or never take notes, and spend the class in a totally passive attitude.

This week I'm getting to know my new BA dissertation tutorees, and I'm really enjoying the meetings. They have submitted very interesting proposals, as it has always happened to me since the 2012-13 academic year, when we introduced the end of degree research paper. The question that assails me is why people like my brilliant tutorees don't lead the rest in class. I have the suspicion that the level of university education is diminishing (in the 1990s I used to correct second-year papers that today would be master's theses, I really mean it) because respect for the brilliant student is being eroded. Now that I'm enjoying the best moment of my career as a researcher, I'm resigned to the fact that my students aren't interested at all in what I publish, but I think that classes aren't more lively because the peer pressure to prevent teacher-student collaboration is greater. Students don't ask questions, and so all are awfully bored; nobody wants to stand out before groups of peers that will look down on them because they can't participate in any minimally intellectual conversation.

Perhaps we teachers make a mistake by simplifying the content of our courses and we should go about our business and focus mainly on the students who follows us.

What holds us back, as Arias says, is that the university authorities control whether we fail too many students because a very high failure rate means opening groups for student repeaters. And, of course, student assessment of our work. This week I have asked the corresponding Vice-Rector's office to rewrite the questions we use at UAB because they are useless to improve our teaching practice; also to prevents students who never attend classes from participating and, typically, leaving negative reviews. No way. Students who are satisfied just don't fill in the surveys and these are becoming an opportunity to belittle us teachers, as if we were a commercial product on Amazon or TripAdvisor. I am not against teachers' assessment, but this should be done using coherent and, above all, useful parameters. Undermining teachers' self-confidence just doesn't help.

Arias said in his letter and is saying now in his book that the deception the university practices consists of lying to students by offering degrees that are more accessible than they should be so that they can live in a comfortable bubble. And, I would add, not feel the widespread anxiety that has resulted in 20% of students at my university being diagnosed with some kind of psychological disorder. We, university professors, do not suffer the verbal and even physical violence that depresses our high school colleagues, but we are not robots, and I am tired of this idiotic assumption that we always go to class feeling perfectly balanced. The instructions we are receiving stress that we have to protect the mental health of the students, which is great but should not be done ignoring our own problems. No strategy will do. I've tried everything and nothing works. So the deception to which Arias alludes is on both sides: it doesn't work for the students, and even less for us.

As I have commented many times here, teacher failure is especially noticeable in compulsory undergraduate subjects, but far less in electives, or at master's and doctoral levels. The sense of failure is also much higher in a large group of anonymous students than in small groups or in personal tutorials. I attribute the drop in the teaching assessment in my compulsory second-year subject, as I have explained here, to the fact that in a few years I have gone from 45 students to 75 (this year). I don't know them and they don't know me. In any case, I am surprised by the rejection of personalized attention in the second year. This past June, I offered seven or eight students who had passed the chance to rewrite a failed paper to make sure they had acquired key skills. You can't raise a final grade in university once it is awarded, but I offered to help. Only one student replied to my personal message. At least it was to thank me and tell me that she could not accept my offer for lack of time.

Arias offers as the main solution making the first years of university and vocational training more flexible so that students can change studies more easily, and insists on the idea that vocational training does train great professionals. A big problem is that the many helicopter parents have weakened the personal maturity of their children, so that we have young people coming to college without having taken alone any weighty decision in their lives (or even, as I have read today, showing up for job interviews with their parents). Perhaps it would be necessary to delay university entrance with a gap year used to work, either at home or abroad. Arias recommends using the American system of majors this and minors, whereby students can change majors mid-degree, but we are used to rather rigid undergraduate curricula. There are no majors here, although there are minors used as supplements (we teach, for example, a minor in German Studies).

The key factor, I end as I began, is the sincerity or impudence, depending on how you look at it, with which so many students demonstrate their disinterest in class. Perhaps this has always been the case, but, as I said, until the 90s there was a clear code of conduct according to which the student should be in class alert and taking notes. I'm sure that many teachers who were profoundly disliked never noticed it. Now, in contrast, the biggest obstacle to good teaching is going to class knowing in advance that even if it is just a girl sitting in the second row, you are going to see faces of absolute boredom,

even when there is no way you can make a subject attractive. Someone wrote in one of my survey evaluations, 'the class could be more dynamic' and I can only say that I very much agree: my courses could be more dynamic if only more students asked questions and intervened, and talked to me so that I didn't feel that I am all alone boring even the walls (an impression that can befuddle any teacher). I wonder what it is like for those who teach algebra or contract law, as it seems I happen to teach the Brontës, Dickens, and Victorian popular fiction. As Arias comments, I hope there are no bored students in Medicine and Engineering, for that will cost lives in the future.

See you in class!

11 December 2023 / SF AND SPECULATIVE FICTION: SPECULATING ON LABELS

Ann Leckie and Cat Rambo, both SF authors and good friends, participated in a delicious session at Festival 42, last month here in Barcelona. During their conversation with Leticia Lara, Leckie, known for her Imperial Radch space opera trilogy (*Ancillary Justice* 2013, *Ancillary Sword* 2014, and *Ancillary Mercy* 2015), complained against the use of the label 'speculative fiction' to mean science fiction, a complaint I wish to subscribe, despite knowing we are both going against the current tide.

A post in the blog by David Wilton, *Word Origins*, indicates that the label 'speculative fiction' has been around at least since 1856, "in the sense of a broader imaginative literature." Wilton quotes from the *North British Review* (August 1856) a sentence which refers to a novelty as "what may be called the literature of philosophical and speculative fiction." By 1889, Wilton explains, speculative was linked to what was then called 'scientific romance'; in this case he refers to a review in *Lippencott's Monthly Magazine* (October 1889), which refers to Edward Bellamy's utopia *Looking Backward* and other texts as "speculative fiction put in the future tense." By the time SF writer Robert A. Heinlein used this label as a synonym of science fiction, in 1947, it had been around, therefore, for close to a century.

Heinlein begins his essay "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction" (or, see 219-228 in *The Nonfiction of Robert Heinlein: Volume I*, Heinlein Trust, 2011) with "There are at least two principal ways to write speculative fiction—write about people, or write about gadgets." For Heinlein, "Most science fiction stories are a mixture of the two types" but he himself preferred "the human-interest story, that being the sort of story I myself write." In the same essay, however, he distinguishes between the 'gadget story' as 'science fiction' and the 'people story' as 'speculative fiction', noting that "In the speculative science fiction story accepted science and established facts are extrapolated to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action." In a letter penned in 1949, Heinlein insisted that "Speculative fiction (I prefer that term to science fiction) is also concerned with sociology, psychology, esoteric aspects of biology, impact of terrestrial culture on the other cultures we may encounter when we conquer space, etc., without end," beyond sciences and engineering. Heinlein firmly rejected the idea that fantasy is also speculative fiction, as this needs to obey "the laws of nature" or their extrapolation to the realistic environment of SF, where magic and the supernatural should have no place.

Today, at the end of 2023, however, the label 'speculative fiction' is used for practically all narrative genres which do not reflect mundane reality: science fiction, fantasy, horror/gothic, fairy tales, magical realism, utopia/dystopia, etc, in an extreme case of genre fluidity which is threatening to blur boundaries into meaninglessness. This is good and bad. On the one hand, it is about time we question the usefulness of genre labels, but, on the other hand, this should not be done by erasing distinctions which many authors, publishers and readers/viewers still find useful. The incoherence, besides, is

beginning to be alarming. The winner of this year's Nebula, an award traditionally honouring the best SF, is *Nettle and Bone* by T. Kingfisher, a fantasy novel. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, which awards the Nebula, includes, besides, among its ranks writers of romance, which is not technically fantasy, unless it includes magical elements. YA authors, also welcome by SFWA, do not always use fantasy, either.

The MLA database reveals that the first use of "speculative fiction" in academic work corresponds to a 1974 dissertation whose third part is called "Images of Women in Recent Speculative Fiction." There seems to be a connection indeed between women and this label, a link consolidated by Marlene Barr's *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (1987). The 1990 chapter by Elaine Jordan, "Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fiction" (in the collective volume *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*) further suggests that women have led the growth of 'speculative fiction' as a label to encompass other genres than just SF. Carter never wrote science fiction, her territory was, rather, fantasy of a postmodern turn.

Funnily, when I wrote my PhD dissertation on monstrosity (1993-1996), neither of my two supervisors referred to speculative fiction, and both understood that I was dealing mainly with gothic fiction, mingled with fantasy and SF in some cases. Yet, between 1998-2000 the academic fashions changed, and since then the titles of academic works bearing the label 'speculative fiction' have grown enormously. The label even started being used for genres outside the fantastic, such as historical fiction ("Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History," by Martin Kuester, 2003, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*), though it was used mainly as a synonym of SF until the 2010s, when it expanded (or exploded). Quite confusingly, the most recent volume in the MLA database carrying that label in its title is *Age and Ageing in Contemporary Speculative and Science Fiction* (eds. Sarah Falcus, and Maricel Oró-Piqueras, 2023), a volume suggesting that SF is *not* speculative fiction.

Readers do not go to bookshops seeking 'speculative fiction' but far more specific genres, which means that the academic world is, once more, at odds with what the market requires and uses. The market, in any case, is in a state of constant transformation, to the point that some are asking "Are We Losing The Essence Of Science Fiction?;" as I have noted, aids such as awards (the Nebula or the Hugo) or websites (Worlds without End) are mixing motifs from diverse genres, so that it is increasingly difficult to find guidance. I generally prefer reading speculative 'what if…?' fiction to mundane, realist fiction, but even so, I don't want to navigate such an immense field without a more selective approach. Even within science fiction, which is the genre I prefer, I like to be informed about the specific sub-genres to which the novels I choose belong before I read them.

The solution to this problem is either surrendering to total genre-fluidity or using tags and tropes, as many booktubers and booktokers are doing. Curiously, whereas according to both Merriam-Webster and Google Ngram Viewer, the adjective 'gender-fluid' appeared in 1993, 'genre-fluid' seemingly only surfaced in 2019 (check Reddit and the Urban Dictionary), mainly in relation to popular music. LGTBI+ poet Dan Webber published in June 2019 a collection with that title, which suggests that, most likely, a gender-fluid person coined genre-fluid, whether this was Webber or somebody else. I have not seen, however, the adjective 'genre-fluid' applied to fiction. On the other hand, we might get rid of genre by using, as I have noted, tags or tropes. I had great fun recently seeing the novel I am currently working on, Iain M. Banks's *Surface Detail*, which is space opera, described through the itemizing of its tropes on TV Tropes. On GoodReads Banks's novel is labelled science fiction, space opera, science fiction fantasy and speculative fiction, which gives no idea at all of its being, above all, a story of corporate patriarchal villainy in a different timeline form ours and in another end of the galaxy.

Here's the conundrum for me: I am currently writing a book on men's self-representation in science fiction, but my selection of 17 novels includes some which are genre-fluid and deviate a bit from the science fiction acknowledged as such. I still want my title to mention 'science fiction' rather than 'speculative fiction', since I do not deal with fantasy or horror/gothic, yet I am no longer 100% sure that I am doing what is right. The collection to which I have submitted my proposal uses the label 'science fiction', as do most of the volumes in it, so it seems correct to use that same label for my book. In contrast, you may check Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction for an example of a collection in which different "imaginative genres" (I'm quoting from its website) are mixed.

The additional problem, as you can see, is that if we mix all the "imaginative genres" in an undifferentiated mass, we need to do the same with the rest, to create yet another mass. Should we perhaps call them "unimaginative genres"? We have been using labels such as mainstream, literary, realistic, mimetic, but, again, there is a world of difference between, say, romance fiction and experimental literary fiction. On the other hand, funnily, *Prophet Song* by Irish novelist Paul Lynch, the novel that has won the 2023 Booker Prize, is a dystopia, and, as such, part of the speculative fiction offered by the imaginary genres. I find this funny because Israeli author Lavie Tidhar, a genre-fluid author who writes science fiction and fantasy, has announced his intention to abandon those genres because he wants to win a Booker. As he has written in the author's note to his historical epic *Maror*, "they don't give you one of those for a book about elves." Well, they give them to dystopias without fantasy elements, which, still, can be called speculative fiction, so all it needs is for the Booker Prize judges to be a bit more open-minded.

I'm still confused, but firmly convinced that science fiction needs to be distinguished from other genres and 'speculative fiction' used with much caution.

17 December 2023 / OF CELL PHONES AND THE APPALLING PISA RESULTS IN CATALONIA: OBVIOUS LINKS

PISA, its official website informs "is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges." Although the report for the 2022 tests shows that Spain has obtained the same results as in 2018 on the three skills tested, these have been much worse in Catalonia. The corresponding table published by *El País* on 5 December, shows that Catalan secondary school students are doing worse than the average OECD student and the average Spanish student, and only better than students in the autonomous regions of Castilla-La Mancha, Andalucía, the Canary Island, Ceuta and Melilla. To be specific they occupy the fourteenth position out of nineteen, quite a debacle.

Catalonia has fared much worse in mathematics (21 points less than in 2018), sciences (12 points lost) and reading comprehension (22). The Conselleria d'Educació (the Catalan 'ministry' for Education, which has full competences) initially reacted to these bad results by noting that immigrants students were overrepresented in the tests, an ugly piece of misinformation spouted by the Secretary of Educative Transformation, Ignasi Garcia Plata, that had to be rectified the following day. The article by Ignacio Zafra in *El País* which I have quoted, does mention among the causes for the debacle the presence of a 15'7% of immigrant students in the Catalan secondary school classrooms (ages 12 to 16), mostly of non-European origins (75'5%), that is to say, Sub-Saharan, Northern African, Middle-Eastern, Central and South-American, and Chinese.

Zafra also mentions the "politically delicate" question of the use of Catalan as the main language in primary and secondary education, following immersion policies established in the 1980s, now that this language has a residual presence in the social media and other online content the children consume, mostly offered in Spanish and English. As Zafra notes, children's Catalan-language TV, which used to be a powerful tool to encourage the use of Catalan among native and non-native speakers, is now no longer massively watched as it was before the rise of social media, twenty years ago. Zafra also comments that Catalonia has done poorly in other tests, such as PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, run by the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), which measures the reading ability of primary school children.

Whatever is happening (the linguistic situation, the lesser attention that underprivileged students receive, the presence of immigrant students), it is clear that the Catalan Government is very much disoriented. The letter sent to all the families by Anna Simó, the Consellera d'Educació, is rather bland. It mentions the pandemic (which is no excuse since all countries have gone through it and Spain has managed to maintain its national indicators), vaguely appeals to the role of families in controlling access of children to digital devices and calls for the respect of diversity and the teachers' task. It also announces the start of new policies to improve in mathematics, science, and reading, without naming any, wistfully calling for a renewed common effort. As Greta Thunberg would say 'blah, blah, blah'.

Ask any Catalan teacher in public schools (I assume private schools are another matter) and they all mention the same problems: a too high student-teacher ratio, an unrealistic approach to the linguistic environment of students, an unwanted interference from pedagogues backed by politicians seeking votes rather than improving education. And, let's finally name it, the impact of social media, possibly much worsened by the time of isolation during Covid (which, if you ask me, could have been a chance to get children used to studying and reading; many literary careers started in childhood when bed-ridden kids used their time to read massively).

All this happened between 5-8 December, while another conversation was unfolding in the background. In September the Conselleria and the Consell Escolar de Catalunya started asking schools about their regulations concerning the use of cell phones. In early November there was a spate of news about the results of the survey: 53% of the schools were already regulating their use, with 23% forbidding the use of cell phones in the classroom. The Conselleria decided then that it was up to each centre to implement its own regulations, following directives to be issued in early 2024 and after debating the matter with the families.

In late October a group of parents from Barcelona started a rather popular movement to ask the schools to completely ban the use of cellphones in the classroom, an initiative started using… Whatsapp groups. As diverse Twitter users commented, perhaps these families should begin by delaying the purchase of cell phones until their children are 16, an idea that, controversial as it is, has started to gain traction in the last two weeks. The Consell Escolar has asked to totally ban cell phones from primary school and regulate them in secondary school. Parents, teachers, and schools, in any case, are asking the Conselleria to assume the responsibility and regulate the use of cell phones for all schools in Catalonia, which makes perfect sense.

Both problems, the poor PISA results and the use of cell phones are clearly connected, as it is very easy to see. Cell phones (or tablets and laptops) per se are not a problem, what is problematic is their misuse. The debate connects in many ways with the much older debate on how much television children should watch, with the difference that portable digital devices have made entertainment (in which I include social media) also portable. In the times when TV was used by many parents as a nanny, kids would

spent as much time before the TV screen and they spend today glued to other screens, let's not be hypocritical about it. The problem, then, is not the technology itself, which can always be used for positive educational purposes, but its power to distract children from what should be a main aim in their life. Watching too much inane TV, by which I mean more than one hour a day or two at most, took up precious time off homework and, perhaps even more importantly, play time at home or in public spaces with other kids. The PC (tablet, laptop…) first and the cell phone next have multiplied that problem by making entertainment ubiquitous and even colonizing the classroom to divert children's attention away from education.

I am not against the presence of cell phones in my classroom or any other, but against their use for entertainment, a problem I extend to laptops and tablets. One thing is asking students to find a resource online to be used as part of the lecture/session and quite another to have students checking Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter or the social media they prefer as they are being taught. I assume that no teacher checks their social media, shops online, or watches porn as they teach, and I would expect the same attitude from students. In my own case I used never to carry my cell phone to class, but my university requires a system of online authentication to access the classroom computers that forces us to use it. Even if I put my silenced cell phone immediately in my bag, I know it's there and it bothers me very much. Its simple presence affects my concentration.

I am not a mother, but if I were, I would buy my child a basic phone if necessary by the time the child started moving about on their own, and I would ask the school to keep that phone in a locker throughout the day. Social media are extremely harmful to children and they should not use them until, at least, they are 16, which is when the first smartphone could be acquired, at the onset of secondary school, always being careful to monitor what children can access through their tablets, laptops and PCs. There are firewalls for that purpose. Cell phones, tablets or laptops should only be used in class in secondary school or university and always for educational purposes. Teachers need to have clear-cut rules for that, rather than be forced to police their own students. This is a problem already extended to university, as we cannot know what our students' laptop screen are showing as we lecture, though scrolling through a cell phone is not a sight we should see in class.

The three disciplines or skills (mathematics, science, reading comprehension) are more or less suffering the same decline in all the countries, particularly those in trouble, but there are 10 countries that have done very well and that have little in common (except, of course, not being poor, with variations). Here they are: Singapore, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Estonia, Canada, Ireland, and Switzerland. Singapore takes the top spot, scoring 560 points, almost 100 above the average OEDC score. The Asian educational systems that head the ranking are, as we know, extremely demanding, part of a different culture with different views of competition in school, which are not applicable in Spain, or for that matter Catalonia. In fact, I would say that few foreign innovations work in other countries, otherwise we would all be copying Finland (or maybe Canada).

The declining performance of Catalan children also corresponds, I think, to the declining cultural standards of the nation, too engrossed in political matters (and tourism) to really care for creativity, and with parents and grandparents too fond of their own cell phones and social media. This is not specific to Catalonia, but we happen to be paying attention. In fact, average OECD performance has been falling steadily in the last decade, which indicates that the problem has nothing to do with the Covid-19 pandemic but with other factors. I believe that the decline begins with the consolidation of social media. The concept web 2.0 was popularized in 2004, the year Facebook was launched, and less than a decade later, the distraction which the social media suppose from consuming culture (at all levels) became visible in the OECD results.

Again, the social media need not be the nefarious tool for hatred and humiliation they are; they could have been a formidable tool to fight stupidity and ignorance, but they were designed to appeal to the maximum common denominator, and that is not curiosity for knowledge. So, there we are, losing the project of universal education established in the Enlightenment to the interests of tech billionaires and the need for triviality of most social media users and content providers. The problem, I insist, is not the gadget but the content to which it gives children access. If cell phones were increasing the general performance of students, as they certainly could, they would not be a problem and we would not be having this conversation. Unless, that is, they know something in Singapore about how to balance education and entertainment in the times of social media which we don't know. Let's ask them.

28 December 2023 / THE DISPENSABLE CLASSROOM?: ON STUDENTS' ABSENTEEISM

The conversation around students' manifest absence from the classroom has been making louder noises this month, when diverse reports have been issued. In *The Times Higher Education*, Paul Basken announced on December 6 that "Class attendance in US universities [is] 'at record low'" due to "online hype, mental stress, adjunct reliance and job-centric mindsets." Academics, Basken reports, "said that Covid lockdowns had normalised the idea of students skipping classes or watching them remotely." His article is a rather good summary of the situation. Each of us, teachers, had assumed that students' disaffection is a personal issue caused by faults in our teaching, but it turns out this is a structural problem with an international dimension, in part caused by Covid-19's lockdown.

Skipping classes occasionally is not a problem, and there have always been students who have spent plenty of time away from the classroom. I don't refer here in this post, in any case, to students who cannot be in class because they need paid employment (an issue that should be solved with grants), or are ill in any way, but to students who could perfectly attend class but choose not to. This percentage has been growing steadily, so that if five years ago you might expect 20% of university students to be away occasionally, now only 20%-30% attend classes regularly (my personal experience appears to be quite representative). A fellow teacher complained, besides, in our last Departament meeting that her second-year students may be present at the beginning of her lecture but often leave suddenly with no explanation. We have decided to draft a document explaining what is expected from students and why that kind of behaviour is not right.

Both in the UK and the USA the problem of truancy affects also primary and secondary school, whereas here in Spain there seems to be no major concern around this issue. The very complete report by Andrew Eyles, Esme Lillywhite, and Lee Elliot Major published on the website of the London School of Economics and Political Science and titled "The rising tide of school absences in the post-pandemic era," concludes that "We now face a national education crisis in the post-pandemic era: a huge slice of the COVID generation have never got back into the habit of regularly attending school." In 2021/22, "23.5 per cent of pupils missed 10 or more sessions" in England, where the pre-pandemic figure was 4.4%. The authors warn that this new chronic absenteeism is general, and not limited as before to deprived areas. They speak of "a breakdown in trusting relationships between parents and teachers alongside increasing unhappiness with the narrow academic curricula schools are measured by."

It is important to note that although the children may be reluctant to attend school, the parents are allowing them to stay home in a sort of complicit truancy. Many parents simply cannot force their children to go to school, and even support their choice to stay home, missing many precious hours of teaching, which will certainly impact their education. A report by the public policy research agency Public First confirms that, as Sally Weale writes in *The Guardian*, "Parents in England no longer subscribe to the view that their children need to be in school full-time." The situation is very similar in the USA, "with more than 25% of students nationwide chronically absent, missing 10% or more of classes, according to the U.S. Department of Education," as Lauren Lantry reports. Another report, by Bianca Vázquez Toness, bemoans that "Millions of kids are missing weeks of school as attendance tanks across the US," with Alaska taking the lead with a staggering 49% of truant school children.

Meanwhile, in Spain there is a worrying silence about the situation. I had to dig really deep to find a piece on truancy, perhaps because the figures were already high before the pandemic. Martín Anguita reports that, according to research by Emma García, an economist specializing in education of Washington's Economic Policy Institute, in the post-lockdown year 2020-21, 23.2% of teen students missed class once or twice every fortnight, while 6.5% skipped classes more regularly (the worst figures were for the community of Asturias, with 35% of absentee students). Anguita does not even mention Covid-19 among the causes for concern, focusing instead on the mostly disadvantaged students absent from class.

The new *Informe CYD 2023* on the situation of the Spanish university has finally called attention to the absenteeism of university students in the post-Covid-19 era. The article in *El País* by Elisa Silió, comments not only on that absence but on the falling student performance. Silió borrows the concept of the 'encapsulated' student from Ana Pagès Santacana, of Universitat Ramon Llull of Barcelona, which refers to students who have not managed to truly break away from their Covid-19 isolation. Referring to the CYD report, Silió comments that the generous grades awarded to secondary school students during lockdown means that they have reached higher education with a lower preparation than required. Their frustration when facing demanding tasks they cannot cope with generates frustration, hence their absence. The lockdown period, besides, taught students that classroom presence is not indispensable and they have started demanding that universities use a hybrid system, by which lectures are made available online, a methodology teachers generally dislike and universities do not encourage, afraid of losing students to online universities. The subtitle of the article by Pau Alemany and Sara Castro "Sillas vacías en la Universidad" reproduces the self-explanatory words of one of those absentee students: "I'd rather make the most of my time studying the subject on my own" ["Preferiría aprovechar el tiempo adelantando la asignatura por mi cuenta"].

Clearly, then, students are missing from our classroom because they believe that being present is a waste of time. I do agree that subjects taught using lectures with no interaction between teacher and student make no sense, which is why since the implementation of the Bologna agreements in 2009 they have been discouraged. The rule is very simple: classroom time should be used to do together what students cannot do alone at home. The problem, of course, is that some subjects, and parts of most subjects, need lectures and although we could record and upload them, universities, as I have noted, do not encourage that practice. Teachers, besides, must be physically present in the classroom 45-50 hours for each 6 ECTS subject, which usually consists of 150 hours of work for students. A further key problem is that since the 2008 crisis the trend towards smaller classes in the university, which facilitates dynamic interaction, has been halted. With groups of 50-100 students, many teachers need to use lectures because interaction is hardly possible.

Students' anonymity increases in big classes, which is why they believe that their absence will not be noted. When 50-80% of the students reach the same conclusion, the classrooms become awkward, half-empty spaces in which teachers completely lose their concentration and motivation (at least this is what I feel). I'll also mention that whether they last for 50 or for 180 minutes (as it may happen in MA degrees), classes are too long for a generation raised on a diet of frantic YouTube and TikTok videos. Students' expectations to be constantly amused and entertained by dynamic teachers is another reason for their chronic absence, since we cannot provide that kind of performance (nor should we be asked to do so). They are, plainly, bored.

I must stress, though, that part of the solution is in students' hands. As a Literature teacher, I do my best to turn my classroom into a space for conversation about the books the students and I should read together. My classes, therefore, can be as dynamic as the students wish, but their boredom has been increasing, hence their absences, because they do not read the books in advance and are visibly reluctant to engage in debate with their peers or myself. A student who has not read the set novels and who does not want to participate in class debate is bound to be awfully bored in my subject, no wonder! The 25-30% who attend my classes regularly may not have read the books (yet) but at least they follow the conversation. I do wish I could make matters more engaging, but with more than 50 students (75 next Spring term) and furniture that cannot be moved around, any attempt at engaging students on my side is bound to fail. I am certainly stressed, and often bored, in 85-minute sessions in which I often hear myself drone on to disinterested students about books they do not care for. I have always wondered what things are like in Medicine.

Less lecturing and more practical interaction appears to be the solution to students' chronic absenteeism, but this is impossible to implement with their collaboration and in overcrowded classrooms. I used to joke to my students that their class participation mark depended on whether I remembered their name at the end of the semester. Since Covid-19 I have lost the ability to recall their names: first the masks made facial recognition impossible for me, then the groups grew far beyond 45 students (that seems to be my personal maximum), now their many absences make it impossible for me to know who they are. It's time, then, for a more personalized type of education, in much smaller groups (25 at the most), and with a more practical methodology, to which students contribute with commitment and engagement.

All we need, then, is pouring a lot of money into our universities, hiring many more teachers, revamping the classrooms into more flexible spaces so that interaction is improved, and reconsidering the extent of teaching time (both in number of hours per subject and in the extension of lectures). And let's ask students for suggestions, they might have good ideas we could use.

6 January 2024 / THE UNIVERSITY AND THE JOB MARKET: CONFLICTING REALITIES

I take my inspiration for this post from an article by Belén de Marcos for *20 Minutos*, of 31st December: "La crisis 'postcarrera,' una realidad que sufren muchos jóvenes" ("The 'post-degree' crisis, a reality many young persons suffer"). The article has a curious subtitle, a quote from one of the persons interviewed: "Te hacen creer que te comerás el mundo y el mundo te come a ti" ("They make you believe you will eat the world and the world eats you"). It does, certainly. What I fail to understand is who are the 'they' this person alludes to, whether parents, secondary school teachers or university teachers; I am beginning to believe that 'they' must be the advertising campaign managers selling

the degrees to keep struggling universities alive by attracting a stream of daydreaming and/or ambitious students.

De Marcos does not refer to any specific event as a trigger for her article, which is rather a report on the basis of a few conversations with recent graduates. Their comments are typical in the current circumstances: they feel lost before a job market they don't know at all, most think of prolonging their studies with a master's degree (which only delays the post-degree crisis), and all call for more practical subjects that prepare them for the reality of employment. It is obvious that many students start their BA degrees with a superficial perception of higher education and scant awareness of how their studies might connect with the job market. This is absolutely normal, since 18 is hardly an age at which a person is ready to choose a profession for life. Much more so current 18-year-olds, who are resisting the idea that work is a central part of life because they are mostly being offered trashy jobs by the predatory post-2008 crisis capitalism of our days.

The 92 comments to de Marcos's article by manifestly older readers are bitter, resentful and disparaging. Most regard the young persons interviewed as examples of impractical softness before a situation older generations have faced with more flexibility and expediency. In fact, one of the experts consulted by the journalist expresses the same opinion and mentions as a major problem la "sobreprotección parental en la Universidad de forma parecida a como antes se manifestaba en el instituto" ("parental overprotection in the University in a similar way to how it was present in secondary school"). As far as I know, we don't have parents assaulting teachers to defend their children from the negative effects of their poor performance, a type of aggression many of our secondary-school colleagues have suffered. However, it is evident that helicopter parenting and the generous but misguided overprotection of teens and young adults are not helping the younger generation to learn resilience and self-confidence. What baffles me is that our graduate students must be already in many cases the children of parents with university degrees, and should be able to compare different generational experiences, a point which is not raised in the article nor in the comments.

I am struggling to find original arguments for today's post because it seems that all the angles have been considered. I'll assume then a cynical position and argue that the university and the job market can never be reconciled, nor should they. In 2019 Katie Hannigan (@katiehannigan) posted a clever tweet that soon became viral: "My friend got a degree in Egyptology, but can't get a job, So he's paying more money to get a PhD so he can work teaching other people Egyptology. In his case college is literally a pyramid scheme." Many replied that unfortunately there are very few jobs for Egyptologists with a PhD, but the point is valid. Although the tweet refers to a rather niche speciality, the whole university is a pyramid scheme of sorts: the institution uses students, both graduate and post-graduate, to justify its existence and produce what really interests us, which is research (I won't comment for now on the fact not all teachers are researchers). Since the university is staffed by persons whose main target was always tenure (or is still tenure and how to obtain it), we have no idea at all about the job market beyond our campuses. Except, of course, for the part-time associates, whose mission is supposed to be connecting professional expertise to teaching but who are mostly persons interested in tenure combining several jobs just to be eligible for their miserably paid jobs (what we call in Spanish 'falsos asociados').

From this perspective, the university is far less generous than primary and secondary school, for which teaching students is the main aim, with no second aims connected with research. In contrast, we all know that many university teachers barely put up with teaching as an annoyance in the path of what really interests them, which is research. I myself still love teaching but I am certainly much happier now that my teaching workload has decreased noticeably (thanks to the validation of my publications by the

Ministry through the research assessment exercises or 'sexenios') and I have much more time for writing. I would be awfully frustrated if my teaching totally prevented me from doing research.

This connects, obviously, with the students' disorientation regarding employment: an institution concerned with its own research goals is hardly the place to transmit any know-how to navigate the job market. We don't have that know-how. I assume there are persons in my university devoted to helping alumni to find jobs but we don't have at a Department or Facultat-level job counsellors. I don't even know if that is a position offered by universities to their graduate students, either post-BA or MA. We do have a 6 ECTS 'Practice' subject since this is compulsory for all BAs following the implementation of the Bologna-style degrees in 2009, but this is very different from offering systematic counselling. We used to have a teacher, Michael Kennedy, who would gather yearly a number of alumni and undergraduates and organize an informal counselling workshop based on the alumni's experiences, yet that was done out of a personal initiative, and not following formal directives. It was, besides, too much to expect a part-time teacher to assume the responsibility for that type of meeting, when its organization should be in the hands of the head of Department.

Given that experience in my Department and the students' demands for better orientation, I believe we need a formal structure to appoint careers counsellors. My university has a mentorship programme within the alumni association, but this is carried out on a volunteer basis and one-to-one contacts, which is not what is required. When I was BA degree Coordinator, I naively assumed that the Department could maintain a list of alumni and make the meetings that Prof. Kennedy used to organize a far more systematic activity that could be extended to the whole university. This never happened because the university's practice of contacting students only through their UAB address means that, once they leave, contact is lost (unless one keeps lists of personal addresses, which is simply not done). I did contact UAB's alumni organization for help, but they seems to be interested in a far wider approach to this matter, without specific counselling for specific degrees. To be specific, then, if a student asks any of us in my Department what they can do once they take their degrees, the most we can do is point out the list of suggestions in the websites publicising those degrees, but nothing more practical. I don't know, for instance, how one becomes a secondary school teacher, which is the occupation which mostly interests our students, though I do know which steps a student needs to take to become a university teacher.

I hinted before that the university need not concern itself with the job market and, of course, I exaggerate, but although I do believe we could do much better if we had a network of career counsellors as part of our degree system, I reject the idea that all subjects need to have a pragmatic approach applicable to employment. Our research is often speculative, as it should be, and as such it cannot be conditioned by what a fast-changing job market demands. We are constantly starting new degrees to meet new demands but I believe that the job market itself should integrate postgraduate professional training. I find it absurd that places of employment expect new graduates to be trained to suit their needs, as these are enormously varied. There will always be an immense tension between what the job market demands that we do at the university, and what we are willing to do if we must protect the speculative, non-applied side of generating knowledge. I give this opinion as a Literature teacher well aware that her teaching offers students scant training for any job (though I defend the idea naturally that the reading and writing skills are always useful) but I am also thinking of colleagues who teach theoretical physics, or similar subjects, and are constantly under pressure to translate their speculations into employable skills beyond their Departments.

In the article I mentioned at the beginning of this post, a graduate student commented that the university should be seen as a means rather than an end, and I

believe this makes perfect sense. The times when one studied a degree and obtained a well-paid employment for life thanks to it correspond to the elite university of the past, which in Spain changed dramatically when so many new working-class students accessed higher education in the 1980s. We used to have five-year Licenciaturas which were replaced with four-year Licenciaturas and then with four-year BAs and it is now generally assumed that students need to take a fifth year, with an MA, thus completing the same kind of extended education we used to have. I am not, however, a big fan of MAs, which have been introduced in Spain as rather general courses open to a variety of BA graduates rather than as the far more specialized courses they should be.

In any case, having a BA or an MA is just a starting point in a professional career, thinking besides that life may take you in peculiar, unexpected directions for which there is no formal education or professional training (think of e-sport professional players, if you wish). I like very much for that reason the Spanish idiom 'buscarse la vida', which translates as fending for yourself but is far more colourful in the original, in which you 'seek your own life'. We need to do much more from the university to help students to seek their own paths in life, but we need to be more realistic, too, and avoid peddling false expectations in our advertising. Competition for students is tough and will grow tougher as the cohorts diminish because of falling birthrates. We cannot, however, lie to students and promise that our degrees will secure well-paid jobs for them, because this is unrealistic and dishonest. As they eventually find out, sooner or later.

21 January 2024 / THE DNF BOOKS: PILING UP

I have been keeping a list of all the books I read since I was 14, in part as a way to check that I am reading every year as much as I think I should. I learned from an article I found last Summer in *El País* that I am a 'super-reader', that is to say, a reader who goes through 100 books a year. I didn't comment then on that piece, because I was aghast by the negative comments it drew, with many persons criticising 'super-readers' for being either liars or superficial page-turners with little actual awareness of the books we consume (we're neither).

Anyway, I digress. The issue I am discussing today is that it is increasingly harder for me to meet my 100-books yearly target because I am abandoning more and more books in mid-read. I am wondering this year whether I should keep a register, too, of the books I abandon, as the pile of DNF ('did-not-finish') volumes is growing all the time, and also because in some cases (very few…) a second chance has worked.

I am not sure why I am leaving so many books unfinished, when I happen to be a rather omnivorous reader, of the kind who reads the cereal box labels. At any rate, since I am abandoning so many volumes, perhaps one for each four books I finish (so, about 25 a year or more), I have become very cautious as a book buyer. I mostly purchase printed books which I have already read (I usually borrow them from diverse libraries), and the novels I write about, but I no longer gamble my money away as I used to do inspired by sheer curiosity. I carefully pre-select my reading, keeping links from newspapers and magazine reviews, or from GoodReads, and avoid all temptation to rush off to Amazon. The exception, logically, are the copyright-free older volumes I can download from a variety of sites such as Project Guttenberg, Archive.org, and so on.

I have, no doubt, grown generally impatient these days. A major reason, clearly, is that I am writing a book on masculinity in SF by men which requires that I read many novels, most of them quite long. I have already read all the novels I am dealing with (around 50) but I need to re-read them, which, logically, is consuming much of my reading time. I cannot be always reading pencil in hand and making notes, and I tend to

gravitate for pleasure towards books which have nothing to do with SF. The problem, as I note, is that unless they are very good works I feel that they are making me waste my time. I need to feel engaged and avoid the awkward impression that I am plodding on, rather than enjoying myself. I am loving very much the SF novels I am reading for the book, and it feels weird to be reading for pleasure volumes I enjoy less. It is, actually, beginning to worry me that I am keeping all my patience and disciplined reading habits for the novels I write about, while losing the ability to be patient with the books I cannot 'use' for work. I am writing this in case other academics have gone through the same process but we are not discussing it.

Funnily, whereas I have no problems engaging with the characters in the fiction I read for work (either for my own research or because my tutorees are writing about it), it is increasingly harder for me to be interested in the characters of the other novels I read. I have, for instance, recently published an article on one of Dickens's wonderfully drawn secondary characters, "Jaggers the Plotter and the Pretty Child: Masculine Vulnerability to Beauty in *Great Expectations*" (*Dickens Quarterly* 40.4, December 2023, 457-475), but I find myself often annoyed by many other characters I read about. I start reading but suddenly I ask myself "who are these people and why should I care?" I have, for instance, just started reading Dennis Lehane's *Small Mercies* (2023) and I am really struggling to care for the protagonist, Irish-American Mary Pat Fennessy, after just a couple of chapters. I chose this novel because I loved Lehane's *Gone, Baby Gone* and *Mystic River* (not *Shutter Island*… too contrived) and because it has a whooping 4.3 rating at GoodReads. Yet, I am not particularly looking forward to continue reading; sorry Mary Pat.

Perhaps I am just ageing, and getting more impatient because I do not know how much longer I will be able to read, and life is too short for bad books as they say. I wonder, though, whether GoodReads might have something to do with all this. I do not always choose my readings after checking their GoodReads ratings, but I have got the very bad habit of checking what other readers have written the moment my interest wanes. I learned the expression DNF from GoodReads in fact, first mistaking it for DGF ('don't give a f—k'), which is hilarious if you think about it. My impression is that negative reviews are more accurate than positive reviews, so the moment I come across a DNF comment (or an 'it doesn't get better in the second half' type of complaint) the book that is boring me that day is doomed. My fellow readers know best, and they are always more candid than media reviewers, hence my trust in them.

I have even considered whether I am simply less interested in reading. Could it be the case that, against what I believed when I was an enthusiastic undergraduate signing up for English Studies at the tender age of 18, reading is not a lifelong passion? I have lost, for instance, the appetite for bookshops, getting all my books from Amazon, or libraries, as I have noted. Books, with their small print and sheer weight if they pass the 300-page barrier, feel uncomfortable, which is in total contradiction with the pleasure I get from my own books. Here's the last one: *Passionate Professing: The Context and Practice of English Literature*, with its lovely cover, and its beautiful edition. Perhaps, that's another caveat, the more I write the less I like reading, one of those absurdities life is so full of but that might make some sort of sense.

To consider another possibility, my increasing impatience with current works might have to do with their falling standards, and the awkward problem of hype. Since marketing has been swallowing up plenty of honest reviewing (both in the journalistic media and in the social media), and professional criticism no longer is what it used to be, there is a constant flood of bad writing being sold as the next best thing. I swear that if I see one more book praised as a *New York Times* bestseller, I will scream! This suspicion that my dwindling commitment as a reader is overlapping with a time of shallow writing has indeed crossed my mind, if only because I am having the same problem as a cinema

spectator, like so many other people all over the planet. I have come to the conclusion that there are not enough good films for the 365 days of the year, not even for 20, and, likewise, there seem to be a lack of good books to fill in my reading addiction.

There is also a point in life after which I am less attracted by fictional, invented experience and prefer learning, either from non-fictional personal experience or from hard facts. I have already commented on how in the last few years I have come to prefer non-fiction to fiction, and I realise that most of the books I am abandoning are novels. I have certainly given up on a number of non-fiction books, mostly disjointed memoirs with the wrong tone or volumes too dense in fact for me to enjoy. I gave up, for instance, on Sylvia Nassar's *A Beautiful Mind*, the biography of Nobel Prize winner John Nash, because I could not follow the passages describing Nash's brilliant mathematical research. Yet, on the whole, I stick to non-fiction and have more trouble sticking to fiction, from which I seem to be learning less and less. Particularly, the mundane kind. I recently started a novel by a promising young Catalan woman author, but her plot was so close to everyday life that I just gave it up. It was neither entertaining nor didactic.

Perhaps this is what it all boils down too: I am finding it increasingly difficult to find current quality novels that are entertaining and didactic, and, of course, well written. I know that I could try filling in the gigantic gaps in my reading: Proust, other major French writers, the Russians, so many Italians, more Anglophone transnational authors and, indeed, lots of Spanish and Catalan novelists. I am not, however, speaking of taking a crash course on world Literature but of enjoying more often that wonderful feeling of keeping your eyes glued to a text for hours, forgetting the world exists. Looking at the list of 92 books I read in 2023, I thoroughly enjoyed 21, which is not bad, but this means that 71 were just goodish or even bad. 25 more, as I have noted, remain unfinished. It's not good enough at all, and 2024 has started in an even worse vein.

First World problems, I know…

31 January 2024 / *POOR THINGS*: BELLA BAXTER'S TRANSFORMATIONS

[WARNING SPOILERS]

I was very much surprised, or rather dismayed, to read about Giórgos 'Yorgos' Lanthimos's new film *Poor Things*, being a big fan of the novel but not at all of the director. Neither *The Lobster* (2015) nor *The Favourite* (2018) are films I have enjoyed and, to be honest, I fail to understand why they have been so admired. I was not particularly looking forward to seeing *Poor Things*, then, but a good friend insisted that we went together to the cinema. We had met as teacher and student 32 years ago and, as happens, became friends when we attended together a presentation in Barcelona by the author of *Poor Things*, the novel, Alasdair Gray (1934-2019). I feared that if we hated Lanthimos's film, this would be an awkward moment in our long friendship, but my friend argued that we could always enjoy criticising the film. Well, we both loved it and had a great time enjoying the exciting 140 minutes it lasts. So, it is fully recommended.

Most reviews I have read marvel at the eccentricity of the central Frankensteinian fable and the cast of characters, with Bella Baxter as the lead. For those of us who know Gray's novel well (I finished reading it yesterday for the fourth time), there is no such surprise. Both Gray and Lanthimos tell the story of how genius surgeon Godwin Baxter loses control of the woman he manufactures by putting together the body of a 25-year-old woman, who commits suicide by drowning in the river, and the brain of her almost nine-months old female foetus. The poor thing survives her mother's death and is born by Caesarean section, only to be killed when Baxter takes her brain. His explanation in the novel is that he desires the dead woman and is too impatient to raise the little girl.

The premise, as you can see, is quite ugly and sexist, but Gray's whole point is speculating on what might happen if an adult woman in 1880s Victorian Glasgow could be given the chance to live with a brain free from the appalling miseducation women received in those times. Baxter's Frankensteinian bride feels no shame about her body and soon starts exploring sex with the young lawyer Duncan Wedderburn, a cad who thinks he is exploiting her but who ends up destroyed by Bella's frank sexual needs. Bella ends up in a Parisian brothel accumulating more experiences before returning home to Baxter and to her fiancé, his assistant Archibald McCandless, ready to train as a doctor, to assist women and children.

Lanthimos and his Australian screenwriter, Tony McNamara (co-author with Deborah Davis of the script for *The Favourite*), are mostly interested in Bella's sexual awakening. Aided by actress Emma Stone's wonderfully unabashed performance as Bella (also by a surprising Mark Ruffalo as Wedderburn), they present Baxter's creation as an initially childish girl who can barely control her body but who gradually becomes a woman in full command of her expansive sexuality and no less expansive mind. I was satisfied enough when I saw the film with this version of Bella, though for whatever reason I had imagined her as a rather statuesque woman with red or blonde hair, and not as Stone's waifish Bella. In fact, Gray describes Bella as both brown- and black-haired (which would agree with Stone's look) and both golden- and blue-eyed. I believe this is part of his strategy to offer conflicting, contradictory images that should make the reader hesitate about which version of Bella (for there are at least three in the novel) is true.

A matter that has irked many admirers of Gray's novel (including yours truly) is that Lanthimos has completely ignored the Scottish setting, replacing Glasgow with London. Production designers Shona Heath and James Price have done a great job with their surreal, steampunkish sets, but the total absence of the Scottish background and accents (except for Willem Dafoe's feeble efforts at suggesting his Godwin is Scottish) is quite irritating. To be specific, Bella speaks with a Mancunian accent (a mistake, since her brain has no recollection of her Manchester life, and she would have absorbed the Glaswegian lingo), but in Lanthimos's film, all these nuances are lost. Bella is, well, American.

Alasdair Gray was an iconic figure in his native Glasgow, both as a writer and as a painter (he illustrated all his books, which drew many comparisons between him and William Blake). He was always a big defender of his city and many have quoted the exchange in Chapter 22 of *Lanark* (1981) between Duncan Thaw and his friend McAlpin:

> "Glasgow is a magnificent city," said McAlpin. "Why do we hardly ever notice that?"
> "Because nobody imagines living here… think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively."

This has inspired much comment, as you can imagine. I will add my own, based on personal experience. I used to think that my home city, Barcelona, was one of those places whose magnificence was missed because no artist had imagined living in it with sufficient persuasion (arguably with the exception of Eduardo Mendoza, above all in his novel *La ciudad de los prodigios*). Then a few things happened, which made the city so visible for the tourists that the citizens lost it: the absurd hype around Gaudí unleashed by the Japanese in the 1980s, the 1992 Olympic Games, low-cost flying, and Airbnb. Barcelona is now in that list of excellent cities although, this is significant, local artists have not generated any great films or novels of world-wide popularity set in it.

On the other hand, Alasdair Gray's depiction of Godwin Baxter's 1880s Glasgow was certainly one of the reasons why I chose to spend a year in Scotland as a PhD student. Or, perhaps, the other way round: when during my year in Scotland, formally

registered at the University of Stirling, I ended up sharing a flat in the same Glaswegian neighbourhood where *Poor Things* is set, I realized that I was seeing Glasgow through Alasdair Gray's perspective: as a magnificent place. This was back in 1994-95, and then in May 1999 I returned for a brief Erasmus stay of one week at the University of Glasgow. Luckily, I could attend a lecture by Gray himself, which ended with the author and his admirers in a pub. I was extremely happy to be able to tell him 'Mr. Gray, I am here because of your books and love Glasgow' to which he, quite flustered, kindly replied 'what would you like to drink?' A Brazilian admirer confirmed he had gone through a similar experience which made Gray's formidable wife Morag quip 'We should talk with the Tourist Office, Alasdair'. This brought much laughter. I don't know if Mrs. Gray ever spoke to the Tourist Office but it is absolutely true that her husband put Glasgow on the map of local and international narrative imagination.

This is why I was so disappointed with Lanthimos's choices. It appears that the replacement of Glasgow with London was decided by Dublin-based producers Ed Guiney and Andrew Lowe. Lanthimos has noted that "Once we decided that the point of view of the film was going to be Bella's, and it was going to be her story and her journey, and working with an American cast, it just made more sense to contract things." This does not make much sense, since the film has episodes set in Lisbon, Alexandria and Paris. These are fewer locations than the ones featured in the novel, but, still, excluding Glasgow from *Poor Things* is like excluding Berlin from *Cabaret*. Gray's son Andrew has also downplayed the exclusion by asserting that his father was happy enough that someone was making the film. When he met Lanthimos in 2011, a year before the rights were purchased, Gray took the director on a tour of the novel's locations, which means that Lanthimos knew well how significant Glasgow is in the novel. The controversy unleashed in Scotland also considers, of course, whether the local cultural industry has failed Gray. Just two years after the publication of *Poor Things*, there was an attempt to adapt it, using a screenplay by Gray himself and Sandy Johnson, with Robert Carlisle and Helena Bonham Carter in the cast; the project, however, was dropped. This is why, writing in Glasgow's *The Herald*, Dereck McArthur concludes that "It's not the film that failed Gray, it's Scotland's tenuous relationship with the arts. It took a Greek director with a trusted track record to find Gray's novel and be inspired enough that we even find ourselves talking about such things."

The other controversy attached to the film is whether the many explicit sexual scenes should be rejected because, after all, Bella is a child in a woman's body. I am much more interested in how little attention is paid to her mind in comparison to her body in the film. Re-reading *Poor Things* this week, I realised that Gray offers a veritable torrent of sociopolitical comment totally missing from McNamara's script (except for Harry Astley's brief intervention). The director has explained that he decided to discard "the part of the novel which is like a philosophical political essay about Scotland and its relationship to England and the world. I thought that couldn't be part of the film, both in terms of just practically making that kind of philosophical essay into a film, but also me being a Greek person, making a film about Scotland. It would have been totally disingenuous of me." What is totally disingenuous is this explanation. To begin with, Lanthimos discussed the English monarchy in *The Favourite* with no qualms. Next, Gray's political discourse is not focused on Scotland but on class. Bella's climactic discovery of extreme poverty in Alexandria is so stylized in the film that it hardly makes sense. In contrast, although she soon tires of working in the Parisian brothel in the novel, the film devotes a very long segment to this episode as, I insist, Bella's sexuality matters far more than her mental development and her acquisition of a social conscience. The film is still great fun, and I am very happy that it bring the novel to many new readers, but Bella Baxter is much more than her body and her sexuality, as Gray's readers can see.

Adaptations are particular readings of their original sources and not the last word about them. It is unlikely that the Scots finally make another version of *Poor Things* set in Glasgow and spoken with the right accents, but now they might find the energy to film other works by Gray, such as *Lanark*. All in all I take Lanthimos's *Poor Things* as a brilliant film that will work well for many spectators, but I would recommend them to read Gray's novel for a much deeper perspective on Bella Baxter's unique story and characterization. The lesson to be learned, too, is that if a culture loves its writers, it should do more so publicize them worldwide, before persons from other cultures feel free to do as they wish with the texts they so lovingly dedicated to their home land.

12 February 2024 / DOING AWAY WITH THE CLASS PARTICIPATION MARK: A DEFEAT

This week we have held in my Department the 10th TELLC (Teaching English Language, Literature and Culture) workshop. This yearly meeting, which I set up after my time as BA Coordinator and still run, is aimed at discussing our experiences as teachers in all the areas and degrees of the Department. The presentations are supposed to be conversation starters and not the standard conference paper. The idea is to find time to share what we do in the classroom and discuss how to do it better, which is always possible. After ten years, TELLC is, I hope, fully established, for it has proven to be necessary and, in many ways, cathartic. Sorry to sound so smug, but I recommend all Departments of any time to set up their own annual teaching workshop. It is very rewarding as a professional and a social event. And if you're wondering, it takes just one morning, 9:00-14:00 with about 6 presentations. I issue certificates of participation, and so far they have been accepted in the regional teaching assessment exercises.

This year the presentation that started the most crowded conversation was Prof. Mercè Coll's review of how we assess the item described as 'class participation' in our syllabi. Prof. Coll asked us how we value and evaluate this element and the results of her survey demonstrate that we no longer know what we are talking about. As it turns out (I asked both the BA Coordinator for the Departament and for the School), we have no obligation to include an item connected to class participation in evaluation. However, in my Department we have traditionally assessed class participation because we are a second-language teaching institution and we have always envisioned the classroom as a space for oral practice and interaction. This is why our classes mix the lecture and the seminar in one, with all the difficulties this entails. You can try to keep the conversation flowing as in a seminar but, logically, the bigger the class the worse this will work. Anyway, Prof. Coll's survey showed that since the conversation is not flowing, we have introduced other strategies such as valuing online interaction in our online Moodle classroom or asking students to produce specific exercises for class participation assessment. In many cases, however, teachers had difficulties to explain to Prof. Coll how exactly they award that part of the final mark (valued between 5% and 20%). Many showed discomfort with the impressionistic, subjective approach this mark requires.

In my case, I have been using self-assessment for that aspect of Victorian Literature. I take it for granted that students must participate in class debates by voicing their opinions, as this is for me a fundamental skill. Shyness and reluctance should be no excuse for learning to communicate orally in English, which is essential to our degree. I give students a basic rubric which links the numbers of interventions throughout the semester to a specific mark (basically one point per intervention). To round this off, students need to comment in class on a passage they select from the novel we are reading and on a passage from a secondary source. They need to post these passages

to the corresponding Moodle forum, so that there are no overlappings. They may include, then, in their self-assessment spontaneous comments in class and the two guided exercises (both live and online). Does this work? Well, partly. I have not been keeping track of attendance nor of how many interventions in debate students make, so I don't know whether their marks are fair. My impression is that they are, so that in the last six years or so, I have hardly had to modify any (I keep that right). What is less satisfactory are the guided exercises, which have failed to stimulate class attendance. Students who don't attend regularly only show up to offer their two compulsory comments and never return.

I have applied this method so far to the groups under 65 students but this semester I have 75. Here's my dilemma: I cannot maintain the illusion that I can talk with so many students and I have simply no time to include the guided comments by all of them in class. At the same time, I know very well that I can only count on a small percentage, possibly a maximum of 40% attending class, and this is the real hub of the question. The perfect storm destroying the mark for class participation comes from two fronts. On the one hand, we are only allowed to split our classes into smaller groups if they are bigger than 80 (this is a privilege since the figure is 140 for the rest of BA degrees in UAB). On the other hand, the figures for students' attendance have fallen dramatically, so that any activity that takes it for granted they will be in class is out of the question. We don't consider attendance compulsory, though it is expected.

It seems, then, that the only way to escape the habit of valuing and assessing students' class participation is by doing away with it altogether. I we don't assume that students MUST do any specific activities in class, then they need not be in class. If attendance stops being an issue, then we can relax and stop worrying about whether students should be in class at all. Let the ones truly engaged come to us, and allow the rest finally to stay away without distorting with their boredom the march of each session.

A typical question that surfaces when discussing class participation is how this is different from class attendance. My view is that attending every single session passively, without ever showing any interest or participating in the debates can only lead to a fail in class participation. Nonetheless, if a student only comes to class 10 times (out of 30/32 sessions in total) and participates actively in them, they might award themselves an A, following my own rubric. I have not demanded a minimum attendance so far, but it would be odd to award an A to someone who has missed two thirds of the sessions and a D to someone who has attended them all. I would say that the ideal performance is that of a student who attends 75-80% of all sessions and participates actively in 30% of the total.

One of my colleagues commented in the conversation following Prof. Coll's intervention that perhaps smiling at the teacher as a sign of paying attention is a more positive contribution to the classroom than openly voicing an idea that might not contribute much. I would say that a positive attitude should be a basic element of class attendance (=being there) but is not an element of class participation (=being actively engaged in debate). The problem in my case, then, is that I don't enjoy hearing myself drone on for 80 minutes, and I find that classroom time is more enjoyable if spent in conversation (that is, I prefer seminar-style teaching to lecturing). I ask questions all the time, as I believe that brains need to be exercised, and they are not activated in lecturing, which consists of absorbing information and argumentation passively, no matter how actively notes are taken.

Having explained all this and now that I know that the mark for class participation is not compulsory, I am done with taking into account spontaneous comment, which is a real pity. I will focus only on the guided compulsory exercises (=oral presentations), which are far easier to track and assess, and will forget about class conversation as something which should be part of what we do in class.

A strategy to salvage conversation from the disaster that having an overcrowded class is consists of subdividing the groups into smaller units. Instead of, as I do, read a passage from a novel and ask the whole class for comments, I could ask them to work in groups of four, give them a few minutes for discussion and then invite each group's spokesperson to share. They might take turns so that everyone ends up offering comments. There are, however, two main inconvenients in this plan. The furniture of my classroom consists of benches, not chairs. The second problem is that group work is time consuming and a waste, since not all groups work at the same pace and some are done when others are barely starting.

In the end, however, I feel defeated in two major fronts: students don't want to attend classes and, if they come, they don't want to engage in conversation. They want lectures that can be easily skipped because their classmates can pass them the class notes (though fewer and fewer take notes). This is going back to the traditional way of teaching, which was supposed to end with the implementation of the new degrees back in 2009. It could be said that the effort made in the last fifteen years to turn higher education into a collaborative process based on continuous interaction and assessment is not what the students want. They are expressing their opinion if not vocally, at least indirectly by abandoning the classroom and retreating into their silence.

Next week I am returning to class after one semester away. I am enchanted with the idea of my MA class with just 11 students (plus one auditor), but, to be perfectly honest, I do not know at all how I will deal with my class of 75 students in Victorian Literature, it's the biggest one I have ever taught in 32 years. I'll keep you posted. As for class participation, we'll see…

19 February 2024 / CONSIDERING THIS BLOG: *PASSIONATE PROFESSING – THE CONTEXT AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING LITERATURE*

Today I'm writing a sort of metablogging post, for two reasons: I wish to comment on my most recent book, *Passionate Professing: The Context and Practice of Teaching Literature*, which contains a selection of posts published here, and I have just been invited to write an article on the experience of writing this blog for *Nexus*, the review of AEDEAN (Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos). I have just handed in this article and, inevitably, there will be some overlapping with today's post, but I'll do my best to give matters a different twist.

Once a friend asked me whether I consider this blog a personal or a professional activity, taking into account that blogs are not among the list of activities the Ministry accepts for our research assessment. Incidentally, the Ministry assessed knowledge transfer a few years ago but I failed the examination on the grounds that my activities are not sufficiently diverse (meaning that I don't bring in money by producing patents or tutoring doctoral students in international programmes). I decided then that my blog is 100% professional, anyway, and 100% personal, a sort of strange hobby to which I devote my mental energies once a week. I used to write whenever inspiration struck but I decided a few years ago that keeping Monday morning, when I usually don't teach, for the blog helped me to structure my task and my week. It's a sort of self-appointed date with my brain, to air and exercise it, in the same way others use time to go to the gym (an activity I loathe with all the might of a child once neglected by a bunch of inept gym teachers).

About two years ago, Jesús López-Peláez, a Literature teacher of the Universidad de Jaén, approached me on behalf of their publishing house to consider producing a book with a selection of posts from this blog. That was a lovely surprise! He suggested

as well that I should reuse my introduction *Enseñar Literatura Inglesa*, a self-published e-book I uploaded onto the digital repository of my university possibly ten years ago. This text consists of the introduction to my report (or *memoria*) for the state examination (or *oposición*) for tenure, which I passed back in 2002. As happens, *Nexus* has been publishing in its last three issues articles by Tomás Monterrey (2022.2), Fernando Galván (2023.1) and Socorro Suárez (2023.2), all three illustrious names of English Studies in Spain, dealing with the national history of the discipline. It seems, then, that my book is quite by accident also part of an impulse to rethink who we are as specialists in this area and why it has taken a particular shape in Spain. I must certainly thank Jesús for the idea and the support, for it would not have occurred to me to approach a quality university press like UJA with the volume he proposed.

You'll have to read either the articles by professors Monterrey, Galván, and Suárez or my two books for details but, basically, English Studies were established in Spain in 1952 for reasons that mix the personal initiative of cosmopolitan academics such as Emilio Lorenzo and Esteve Pujals, with the timid opening of Francisco Franco's regime towards the Anglosphere dominated by the USA. Our roots, however, lie in the German construction of Philology, which explains why still today our degrees and Departments mix linguistic sciences with literary and cultural humanities. As we all know, but are not saying, this is a complex mixture which is leading to a widening gulf between sections in the same Departments, no matter how placid interaction may be with our peers on the other side.

In the first part of *Passionate Professing*, then, I deal with the history of the area both in their Anglo-American origins and in Spain but also with many others issues attached to, specifically, the teaching of English Literature: the difference between English Literature and Literature in English, the organization of English Literature as a subject of study as regards periodization and literary movements, the problem of text selection in relation to the diverse genres and the canon, and the question of the critical and theoretical models in the study of English Literature. I started thinking about these matters, as I have noted, more than twenty years ago, and I updated my first version of *Enseñar Literatura Inglesa* about ten years ago. There has not been, however, a radical upheaval in how we teach and research English Literature because, as I explain, in essence the pedagogical and research models established in the 1990 still persist. The bibliography we use has grown so much that nobody can be up-to-date in any subarea, and teaching is now beset by threatening digital matters such as the recent rise of ChatGPT, but the practice and the corresponding controversies and conflicts are similar. Bologna did away with the Licenciaturas to introduce the Grados and the Master's degrees, but as a profession we have stubbornly resisted the need to have deep conversations about what we do, beginning, as I have noted with the awkward coexistence of Linguistics and Literature, and following with whether we can really go on teaching Literature to students who don't read.

The second part of the book consists of a selection of posts from this blog, which forced me if not to re-read all I had written since 2010, at least to check all the entries and consider which ones had stood reasonably the test of time. I don't like reading my own texts, and generally find fault with everything I have published, so I truly had to make an effort to sit down and go through the hundreds of posts I have written. Taking into account the first part of *Passionate Professing*, I decided to focus only on the posts most directly connected to teaching, leaving research and general comment aside. One thing I quickly noted is that I complain a lot, or the other way round: I tend to write more about the difficulties in teaching than about the successes, though I do make a point of praising students at any level when matters work well. Inescapably, one of the main functions of this blog is venting, so I was hardly surprised to read my rantings about several key issues, though at least I think I have managed to be constructive rather than simply angry.

I rediscovered in the process of reading myself many moments of my teaching life I had forgotten about, some happier than others, but was a bit dismayed to see that along the years I have been writing about quite similar problems and crises because at a political level so very little is being done to improve our work conditions. There is a serious disconnection between the teachers in any discipline and levels and the authorities that is not healing at all.

Whereas the point of publishing a book is clear enough, the point of writing a blog is less certain. I started because my dear friend Gerardo Rodríguez Salas—a wonderful academic, poet and human being—suggested that I needed an outlet for the many ideas boiling in my head. I don't exaggerate if I say that Gerardo was concerned for my mental health, and the possible literal bursting of my troubled head if I didn't do anything about it. I was going through a complicated time, with many peer-reviewing problems and a great discomfort with the obligation to be part of a specific research group, and I just wanted to be able to say what was on my mind. My university was then promoting blogs as a tool for academic communication, and one thing led to the other, and here I am thirteen years later. I have written this morning in my article for *Nexus* that I write fundamentally to keep my sanity, and this is still true, though I have also become increasingly addicted to writing in a way I was not before launching the blog. I still find academic writing very hard, as fitting in so much bibliography easily saps my interest and energies, but writing here is truly enjoyable. I called my blog ironically *The Joys of Teaching Literature* but the irony turns out to be that the blog itself is about the joys of writing it.

I assume that if the University of Jaén and *Nexus* are interested in my blog, this means that it is somehow working for other persons, and not only for myself. I have never known who reads me, having refused to check any statistics, and I have always received very few comments (in the current UAB platform they are disactivated). I'll explain, however, that I almost stopped writing in the first months after launching the blog when I received an extremely nasty anonymous comment. I'm not interested in social media, and I'm not used to being the object of negative comments, and that was a scary moment. I see myself, in essence, working in my little corner, creating content for the internet to be a little more cultured, and reaching out to just whoever is interested. I don't read myself blogs regularly, but I do read lots of posts for my research and I value very much that posts written sometimes many years ago still illuminate issues of the present. It's a little like scattering flowers, hoping someone will pick them up still fresh and nice-smelling. I wax cheesy, sorry.

To conclude, I'd like to thank once more Jesús López-Peláez for having helped me to produce *Passionate Professing*, and UJA for the absolutely beautiful edition. The blog is an entirely digital object and seeing the handsome volume in my hands is a real pleasure. I feel honoured and vindicated that this book exists, for with it UJA has made a point of ignoring the lines dividing academic publishing and what we call in Spanish *divulgación*, which has no exact equivalent in English beyond the clumsy 'knowledge dissemination'. Some of the posts are close to being papers, in extension and because they include secondary sources, but I always try to stress that we need to find a more flexible register to discuss English Literature (the discipline) and literature (the books). I thank in that sense the wonderful cultural journalists of *The Guardian*, *Slate* and, in Spanish, *El País* and *El Confidencial* for their example. They are my teachers, though I don't know if I am a good student.

And, finally, I called the book *Passionate Professing* because this is what I do as a teacher of English Literature: to profess my faith in literature and generally culture, with all my passion. Next time someone uses the word 'professor' consider this.

26 February 2024 / HOW MUCH BIBLIOGRAPHY IS TOO MUCH?: ON ACADEMIC WRITING TODAY

In the most recent peer reviewing I have passed one of the reviewers complained that I quote too much and should paraphrase more. The article is 8880 words long and has 30 secondary sources, so on average 1 source for about 300 words, apart from the quotations from the primary source (I quoted from it abundantly as this was Dickens, an author out of copyright). Considering the enormous amount of bibliography on Dickens, I don't think I quoted too much, at least not in relation to other articles in the same journal, *Dickens Quarterly*, which I read. In fact, the other reviewer asked me to add one more source to my original list of 29, a common occurrence in peer reviewing.

Like everyone else, besides, I tend to use quotations as short as possible, of a few words rather than one complete sentence, and of a sentence if I can avoid using two. As for paraphrasing, I do not like it that much for fear that I am committing plagiarism, but I use it if I need to quote more than habitual from the same source. This should be limited in fair practice, if you recall, to a reasonable percentage of the total word count, so that quoting 50-100 words out of a 7000-word article is fine, but not at all quoting that much from a 150-word poem. For primary sources within copyright I have been limiting myself to around 400-500 words which is not a lot for a novel between 80 and 120000 words or more.

The funny thing is that reading in the last months plenty of bibliography for a book I am writing I have the same impression as my peer reviewer: we quote too much and use too much bibliography. If I am not wrong, there is an inverse ratio, so that the more sources we quote the shorter the quotations are. In the past, before the 1990s, academic work carried fewer sources and much longer quotations, many of the 50+ word count type which you need to separate from the main body of the text. We have, then, two main problems: there is so much bibliography on everything and anything that an essay (article, chapter) with less than 20 sources seems incomplete. At the same time, making room for 20-30 secondary sources in essays between 6000-8000 words means that we hardly have room to put in a word edgeways. I find myself reading essays in which it takes a long time before I find a tiny nugget of original thinking. Indeed, in some cases it seems as if the text is, rather, a review essay of the kind scientists are fond of, in which they don't have to contribute anything new but just review the abundant extant bibliography.

So how much is too much? Well, I have given myself the task of writing a book on the representation of masculinities in the 21st-century SF by men, a vast territory. I have managed to convince my publishers that I need 15 chapters, with 17 different authors, in some of which I cover up to nine novels (James S.A. Corey's *The Expanse* series). So, 42 novels in total. Even if I limit my secondary sources to 25 per chapter, as I am struggling to do, this is a staggering total of 375 entries, plus possibly 25 more for the introduction. My total word count is 95000, with 6300 per chapter, which means that about 350-500 words in each chapter go to the bibliography. I had a similar problem in my previous book, *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask* (Routledge 2023), which has 16 chapters with between 2 and 6 documentaries per chapter, and I am, therefore, used to working in this crazy way. Still, the joke is that the bibliographical entries are often longer than the tiny quotations I am using for lack of more room. I am therefore using the most minimalist style you may imagine for the works cited list, and thinking twice before I quote from a source. If I begin with 30, 5 need to go, no matter what.

Funny things do happen. The chapter on *The Expanse* already has 10 entries in the works cited list only for the novels and the associated short story collection. In that case, and since there is not so much written on Corey's series, I have added only 10

secondary sources. In the chapter I am currently drafting, on Andy Weir's *The Martian* and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, both novels on resilient masculinity in the face of catastrophe, I have a very different problem. As happens, Weir's rather pedestrian novel has attracted very little academic attention, far less than the film adaptation by Ridley Scott, which means that I have had to use some of it, though I am not discussing the movie. In contrast, there is plenty of bibliography on *Zone One*, not because it is an outstanding novel (it's just fine) but because Whitehead is a very good writer who happens to be (fashionably) black and, oh my!, has written a zombie novel despite being a Pulitzer-award winning literary author. If I want to keep my works cited list down to a reasonable 20-22 count minimally balanced between the two novels, I have to reject about half the bibliography on *Zone One*, but pad up the list of entries on *The Martian*. This is what I have done because I am paying the same exact attention to each novel and race is not my main issue (it is in academic discussions of *Zone One*).

In the chapter on Neal Stephenson's *Fall; or, Dodge in Heaven*, I came across an unexpected problem. Stephenson is known above all for his coinage of the word 'metaverse' and his popularization of the word 'avatar,' meaning a person's image in a digital domain, in his 1992 novel *Snow Crash*. This was published, please note, 27 years before *Fall*, but it is still generating plenty of bibliography whereas, plainly, only silly scholars like yours truly have attempted to write about the impossible farrago that *Fall* is. So, I told myself that it would be ok to use the bibliography on *Snow Crash* and other works by Stevenson only to decide once I read it that my focus would fall on the characterization of Richard 'Dodge' Forthrast as a loving uncle. Guess what? There is zilch bibliography on doting uncles, though I did find some on the less wholesome kind, like Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* and so on. I was awfully worried that my 20 plus secondary sources would be all piled up in the introduction and the first section of the chapter, with the second section, on Dodge's bond with his nieces, remaining quotation-less. I did manage finally to place some quotations in the introductory paragraph of the second section, but it all feels a bit forced.

You are probably asking yourself who are the 'they' forcing me to use 25 secondary sources per chapter (or article) and demanding that I use them at nice intervals in my texts rather than piled up in one section. Well, I am one of them, since I demand the same from the texts I peer review: you must use the relevant secondary sources and you need to use them well. If you don't, you're guilty of sloppy scholarship (don't you know how to use the MLA database and Google Scholar…?) or plain laziness (so you do know, but didn't bother). The other main concern is that without secondary sources, we are writing text commentary rather than argumentative essay. This is not necessarily true (I am certainly arguing a thesis in my segment on Stephenson's Dodge as a cool uncle), but we are used to the idea that without the crutches that the secondary sources provide we can't walk. I was told this in the most insulting terms you may imagine by a journal to which I dared submit an article when I was a naïve doctoral student and still believed that the academic world teaches to walk with as few crutches as possible.

When I teach my students how to use secondary sources, I tell them that the whole point is demonstrating that you are entering the debates about a given text at the right point (and not, say, twenty years ago). They must also avoid thinking that their approach is new when 20 other scholars have argued the same thesis before. The problem, I insist, is that the proliferation of bibliography threatens to drown any personal voice. In my posts I quote only when I feel it is necessary, and not because I have to do it. In my academic work, half of what I quote feels genuinely necessary, and the rest an imposition. Let me use Donna Haraway as an example. If I use the word 'cyborg' here, I will not necessarily rush to mention Haraway's theorizing of this figure, but if I mention it in any of my essays I will reference her "Manifesto for Cyborgs" because if I don't that feels lazy, or my reviewers might think I'm an ignoramus. I will ask any student who refers

to a cyborg in a paper to reference Haraway, for they need to learn who she is and what she said.

I also find that this massive use of secondary sources has a pernicious effect: it takes plenty of time that should be used in thinking about the primary sources analysed. I love the miracle by which the perfect words I need to supplement or support one of my ideas appear in the work of another scholar. Yet, I find myself skimming rather than properly reading some of the secondary sources because they have so much that refers to other sources and that branches out in unhelpful directions. I get anxious that I am wasting my time. In contrast, I often read word by word academic essays that I have approached just for the sake of reading something appealing, and not something I must quote. These are professional matters we never discuss, but I think that plenty of bibliography is read to be milked for quotations rather than to maintain a sustained dialogue. I assume, besides, that we all have the experience of seeing one of our own works cited and feel with dismay 'oh, my, I worked so hard on this, and they just were interested in that trivial little bit?' Or even worse: 'that's not what I meant'.

Perhaps there should be a journal in which scholars are invited to publish original thoughts without reference to secondary sources, as reviewers do all the time with new books. Perhaps we might add a bibliography to prove that we have read the sources that count, but refrain from quoting from any of them, and see what happens. We might end up with shorter, terser essays, which would be splendid, and with more original criticism, which would be great. Shall we give it a try?

5 March 2024 / THE VANISHING TEXT: HOW TEXTUAL ANALYSIS IS DYING

Last week I wrote about the sheer amount of bibliography we are using in academic work. I neglected, however, to mention that in textual analysis primary sources are occupying less and less space. In the presentation of my volume *La verdad sin fin: Expediente X* back in September, Iván Gómez praised me for having the ability to tease out of texts what they do contain rather than impose on them my own perspective. I panicked, realising that is possibly the reason why my peer reviewers don't like my work. It is not fashionable to let the primary sources analysed take centre stage: one rather nasty reviewer even told me, about five years ago, that I was very far from mastering academic analysis. What is fashionable now in academic work is throwing upon the text analysed an immense barrage of secondary sources, presumably needed to sustain argumentation, and only comment the primary source in short bursts that hardly scratch the surface.

Like everyone else, I'm guilty of the same crime. Without masses of secondary sources, as I explained last week, there is no way an academic essay can be published. The problem is that I happen to enjoy very much textual analysis in its two main aspects: searching for clues in the text analysed (whether print or audiovisual) about how it works in form and content, and then bringing to my argumentation plenty of comment. This used to be called 'illuminating a text'. In fact, I have never written any essay inspired by theory but the other way round: my interest in discussing a text has necessary led to a search for a theoretical framework, as a sort of alibi to be allowed to express what I find relevant in the text (Dickens, to give an example, always has for me preference over Derrida or Butler). If I don't feel sufficiently inclined to work on this theoretical framework, I write about the text here, offering pure comment and opinion, and less argument.

There is something else at work. Searching for bibliography these days on the trilogy of novels on Takeshi Kovacs by Richard K. Morgan, I have found the following: a) an upsurge of interest in the Netflix adaptation (2018-2020), with very limited interest in

the novels (2002-2005); b) an exaggerated attention paid to the first novel, *Altered Carbon*, to the detriment of the other two, *Broken Angels* and *Woken Furies,* even though Kovacs's narrative arc cannot be understood without reading the three novels; c) a reluctance to write about the whole trilogy, with the honourable exception of Pawel Frelik, whose article "Woken Carbon: The Return of the Human in Richard K. Morgan's Takeshi Kovacs Trilogy" is simply excellent. This is not a matter specific to this trilogy: it's a general pattern.

I am noticing a palpable scholarly laziness in relation particularly to the print primary sources. If audiovisual adaptations exist they soak up all the academic interest, regardless of the origin of the characters and plotlines analysed (routinely attributed to the film or the series, without bothering to check whether they come from the source text). In Morgan's case, while there is a collective volume dedicated to the series—*Sex, Death and Resurrection in Altered Carbon: Essays on the Netflix Series*, edited by Aldona Kobus and Lukasz Muniowski, and published in 2020 coinciding with the second and so far final season—there is no equivalent volume about his novels. Frelik's essay, as I have noted, is the only work analysing the trilogy. On the other hand, of course you may write about a novel which is part of a trilogy or series before the rest are published, but once all the volumes are available, all need to be taken into account. Yet, most scholarly analysis of trilogies refer only to the first volume, with the second and the third ones hardly leaving any trace, as, sorry, few scholars seem inclined to read that much (possibly the exception is *Harry Potter*, with the whole heptalogy often analysed in a single article).

If you follow my drift, the growing pressure to include many secondary sources to prop up a thick theoretical framework is possibly causing scholars to use less time for the analysis of the primary sources, particularly those in print. I wrote last week how I often find myself scanning academic articles for nuggets of original contributions by the authors, buried among so many quotations and comments from and on the secondary sources. Searching for original comment on the primary sources is even harder. Most academic analysis is extremely biased so that, for instance, I have come across articles comparing Andy Weir's *The Martian* with *Robinson Crusoe*, while there is no comparison with *Apollo XIII*, which, according to Weir himself was his main inspiration. I'm citing this example because this inattention to the primary source is not only a matter of identity politics bending textual analysis towards 'issues'. I am not defending formalism, either, but calling for more respect, if that is the word, for the primary sources and their authors.

When dealing with recent work by living authors, which is my main target of research, I tend to include in my bibliography at least one review and one interview. Reviews must offer opinion, which we no longer do in academic writing, and I need them to bring into my own essays straightforward statements about the texts I analyse. I rarely find in current academic work a clear opinion about the quality of the primary sources, though feminist criticism (like mine) tends to be vocal about what male authors get wrong (sorry guys!). Interviews are just wonderful tools, providing evidence of authorial decisions that the text alone cannot confirm. I found, for instance, a little golden nugget in an interview in which Colson Whitehead explains that his zombie novel *Zone One* expresses the idea that when a person is depressed it feels like the end of the world, so he decided to place his depressed protagonist in a literally apocalyptic narrative. I have not seen this essential declaration quoted in any of the many academic articles on *Zone One*, which mostly obsess about race (so, perhaps it is after all a question of the excessive weight of 'issues').

I'm thinking that in the end what we are missing is a space to publish quality textual analysis which is not subordinated to the argumentative essay. In a way this already exists in the different sites that offer study guides, which started on paper with the famous Cliff Notes and then moved onto the internet in the 1990s. Wikipedia informs that the company was founded by Clifton Hillegass in 1958, who actually bought the

rights from Jack Cole, the co-owner of Toronto book business Coles, to the Coles Notes, first published in 1948. Study guides have a very low reputation as aids to help students skip reading the set books, but I find them myself extremely useful when preparing classes, and I have borrowed for my own use (not in class!) chapter summaries and characters lists. The series Modern Critical Interpretations and Bloom's Classic Critical Views, published by Chelsea House under Prof. Harold Bloom's editorship, is perhaps the closest which literary criticism has come to offering the kind of analysis I have in mind. Yet, if I'm not wrong they ceased publication after Prof. Bloom's demise in 2019. And, no, we academics don't write study guides, at least not openly so (but someone does write them…).

The work required to find relevant passages in secondary sources is vastly different from the task of dissecting how a text works (both fiction and non-fiction). I have for each book I analyse, at least 15 pages, if not 30, of quotations and notes, as it is extremely hard for me to select just three or four quotations and make no notes about the plot or content. Habitually, essays (whether articles or chapters) run from 4500 to 8000 words, rarely more than that, which means that there is actually very little room to explore in depth a text in them, particularly considering, as I'm explaining, the prominent position that secondary sources occupy. On the other hand, the notes we take end up in the trashcan, with lots of interesting passages never commented on for the benefit of other readers. I feel frustrated that so many hours of work end up represented by so little textual analysis, then, but I would not know what to do with a 25000 word-long text commentary, either.

So what am I saying? I'm saying that current academic fashion pushes us to fill our essays with so much from the secondary sources and so little from the primary sources that the texts analysed are fragmented rather than illuminated. My impression is that most literary and cultural scholars hardly bother about how texts work, preferring instead to flaunt their reading of a myriad secondary sources. In the journal I co-edit, *Hélice*, we have made room for what we call miscellaneous essays, in which comment is given priority, and perhaps that's the way to go: reinvent the academic essay and make the close reading of the text analysed the priority, with all the scholarly apparatus kept as a secondary element. Let's give it a try, shall we?

9 March 2024 / CHILDREN IN CINEMA: A NEW SUBJECT

I started three weeks ago a new MA subject on children in Anglophone cinema, under the umbrella label Gender Studies. This is a continuation of a subject I taught three years ago, which resulted in the publication of the e-book by the students *Gender in 21st Century Animated Children's Cinema* (check please my post on the task of editing this book). We are preparing another e-book, which will be the twelfth volume I edit with students' work, based like the rest of developing the presentations we do in class into essays, following my own sample presentation and essay.

Whereas in the previous subject the focus fell on animated films addressed specifically to children, this time I am focusing on the presence of children in 21st century live-action films of all types, with no distinction between children's and adults' films. I started with a list of 58, now reduced to 45 (I have 11 students, each in charge of 4 films, plus 1 auditor in charge of 1). I myself have presented *Nowhere Special* and might add, as I usually do, a few more essays to the e-book, to reach if possible the round number of 50. Here are our films:

2000 *Billy Eliot*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0249462
2001 *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0212720

2001 *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0241527
2001 *Hearts in Atlantis*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0252501
2001 *I Am Sam*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0277027
2002 *Whale Rider* https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0298228
2003 *Peter Pan*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0316396
2005 *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367594
2006 *Akeelah and the Bee*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0437800
2006 *Little Miss Sunshine*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0449059
2006 *The Pursuit of Happyness*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0454921
2007 *Bridge to Therabitia*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0398808
2008 *Definitely, Maybe*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0832266
2008 *The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0914798
2009 *My Sister's Keeper*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1078588
2009 *Orphan*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1148204
2009 *The Road*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0898367
2009 *Where the Wild Things Are*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0386117
2010 *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1196141
2010 *Kick-Ass*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1250777
2010 *Let Me In*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1228987
2011 *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0477302
2011 *Hugo*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0970179
2012 *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2125435
2012 *Moonrise Kingdom*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1748122
2014 *The Babadook*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2321549
2015 *Beasts of No Nation*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1365050
2015 *Room*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3170832
2016 *A Monster Calls*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3416532
2016 *The Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4698684
2016 *The Jungle Book*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3040964
2017 *Gifted*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4481414
2017 *Logan*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3315342
2017 *The Book of Henry*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4572792
2017 *The Florida Project*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5649144
2017 *Wonder*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2543472
2018 *Bird Box*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2737304
2019 *JoJo Rabbit*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2584384
2019 *Good Boys*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6977338
2019 *Brightburn*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7752126
2020 *Minari*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10633456
2021 *Belfast*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12789558
2021 *Nowhere special*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11286640
2021 *C'mon, C'mon*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10986222
2022 *Aftersun*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt19770238
2022 *The Wonder*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9288822

I found no takers for the following: *Off the Map* (2003), *Millions* (2004), *Tideland* (2005), *Ender's Game* (2012), *Safe* (2012), *Boyhood* (2014), *Maggie* (2015), *BFG* (2016), *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), *Midnight Special* (2016). This is fine, I think, though I might end up writing about some of them. It seems a pity to exclude *Boyhood*, but in the end it possibly makes sense, since I have also excluded *Moonlight* on the grounds that I want to work on characters up to the age of 12 and in these two films the boys protagonists grow up to be teens, a completely different age category. We have also finally dropped the astonishingly beautiful *The Quiet Girl* (2022) because it is mostly spoken in Gaelic. I teach English Studies and this logically limits my choices, leaving outside the subject many other wonderful films with children, like the last one I have seen, Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster* (2023), a singular, delicate masterpiece.

Why children? Mainly because I feel that discussions of children tend to group them into a homogeneous class without much discussion of gender, while I'm interested in exploring with my students the dynamics of gender representation in the characterization of the children represented in film. What we are beginning to notice, after two weeks of presentations in which we have discussed eight films so far, is that the gender issues affect not just the representation of the children but also of the adults surrounding them. This is obvious, you might say, but it needs to be said: the films addressing children are quite light in the treatment of the child's gender, whereas the films addressed to adults take the child as an excuse to explore the adult characters.

Another matter that is transparent is that, in comparison to the cinema made outside the Anglosphere, the films made in the English-speaking territories are far more prudish in their approach to gender and sexuality. You don't get films about trans children (like Estibaliz Urresola Solaguren's *20000 Especies de Abejas*, 2023), nor about gay children (*Moonlight* is absolutely exceptional, I think). In commercial US films it is, besides, practically impossible to find LGTBIQ+ issues, even though the portrait of heterosexual, normative characters is far from being always positive (I mean by this the adults). I am in many ways worried that our exploration will not discover much that is daring and new in how children are presented on the screen, at least in English-language films.

Children have now in their hand smartphones to make films with and many devoted teachers willing to initiate them in the path of filmmaking. Social media like TikTok have prompted children to make their own tiny little films, and to learn thus the basics of editing even when they don't even know the word. Children, likewise, draw and paint, and write poetry though more rarely fiction or essays. We are, however, still very far from considering their productions artistically worthy, with the exception of a handful of children who grew up to be geniuses. In cinema the concept of a child director or script writer is totally out of the question, even though child actors are abundant. Since, logically, children do not have sufficient critical training and, anyway, nobody bothers to ask for their opinion, their representations are extremely biased by the adults' own impression of childhood. At the same time, as we know, cinema has been shaping childhood since its very beginning, not just since Disney's Mickey Mouse hit the screens, in ways we barely understand.

Apart from children's inability to resist or criticize their own (mis)representation, another matter that worries me is the extension of the category 'child' to what used to be called 'minor'. The age categories may vary notably (just consider how differently they are used in the restrictions for children to access certain films of videogames), but for me there is a world of difference between the child properly speaking and the adolescent, or teenager, marked mostly by sexuality. The age at which children become aware of sexuality may also vary, but whereas teens do engage in sexuality as part of a natural exploration of their bodies, children under 13 who engage in sexuality are most often being abused. I don't want to sound absurdly prim, but for me childhood runs from birth to the age of 12, when most boys and girls start awakening to natural (not imposed) sexuality. This may be an arbitrary barrier but I don't want to mix children with teens. As for the current fashion to refer to teen minors as children, I find it ridiculous. Teenagers are young adults, as the literature addressed to them demonstrates, and it's harmful and patronizing to refer to them as children.

This week I have been reading with my students the chapter "Mad Genius" in Sarah Polley's memoirs *Run Towards the Danger: Confrontations with a Body of Memory* (2023) in which she discusses her traumatic memories of the set of Terry Gilliam's *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988). The daughter of a casting director, Polley became a child actor aged 4 and was already quite famous thanks to a couple of roles on Canadian TV when she was hired, aged 8, to star in Gilliam's film. What she narrates

is horrific. Polley was forced to participate again and again in totally unsafe scenes, running a very real physical danger when a horse panicked triggering an explosion over which the special effects crew lost control (as it turns out, Gilliam himself recklessly pulled the trigger). Polley recalls her efforts as an adult, when she heard about Gilliam's project to make yet another film with a young girl, to communicate to him how terrifying her experience had been, to no avail. This started a conversation in class about how unprotected children employed as actors are, with a student suggesting that perhaps they should not be employed at all in films. This could only lead, naturally, to an extremely impoverished cinema. Hopefully, Polley's terrible experience was exceptional and most children appearing in film are safe, but we discussed that some scenes should be avoided. For instance, children who may not have kissed anyone in the lips in real life should never be asked to first experience a kiss of that kind before a camera.

As you can see, there will be plenty to discuss along the coming weeks. The bibliography I'm reading is packed with many ideas and plenty of information to discuss, and I see, to begin with, that we are generally awfully ignorant about how children are used and represented in the film industry. The beginnings, especially, are beginning to be lost in the fog of time. Icons such as Shirley Temple mean very little today, and it might be quite a lesson to see any of her films now. I'll keep you posted about our work.

17 March 2024 / AGEING WITH THE STARS: ON A POP CONCERT BY AN ICONIC BAND

My post today is particularly autobiographical but not totally disconnected from my teaching and research, if only because last year I taught an MA subject on music and men, and I have published at least a couple of articles on pop and rock music. I attended yesterday, 16 March, the concert by veteran English band Depeche Mode at the Palau Sant Jordi of Barcelona, together with other 17000 persons, and this has set me thinking about ageing with the stars. I'm appropriating the title of the popular TV show, *Dancing with the Stars*, to reflect on what happens when pop stars we love age, and we, the fans, age with them. The concert I enjoyed yesterday was a bittersweet experience and I need to consider why from a point of view which is partly personal, and partly an exercise in Cultural Studies.

When my husband and I took the bus carrying concert attendees to Palau Sant Jordi I surprised myself by blurting out 'this looks like an old people's home,' in reference to the looks of our fellow passengers. I hope nobody overheard my very unkind comment, as, at 57, I'm no spring chicken myself. What shocked me and led to that sad quip is that in other stadium concerts I have attended in recent years I have seen a mixture of different generations, whereas in Depeche Mode's case it appears they no longer attract anyone under the age of 45. Martin L. Gore and Dave Gahan, the two remaining members, are now respectively 62 and 61, which means that we, their ageing audience, are the right demographic. I would possibly feel out of place in a concert by Dua Lipa, who at 28 is young enough to be my daughter, but I should be still comfortable among other Depeche Mode fans. I felt, as you may see, discomfort, hence my post today.

Yesterday's concert was my fourth Depeche Mode show. I have attended concerts by them in 1998, 2001, 2006 and now 2024, skipping others within festivals, which I tend to avoid (I just don't like them: too crowded, too expensive, too eclectic). I was in my early thirties, then, the first time I saw Depeche Mode live, and I'm now 26 years older, but I don't think that was the reason why yesterday I didn't feel the 'magic' of the previous occasions. The concert was fine, as this type of events go: awful sound to begin with, a nice crescendo to mid concert (with Gore performing solo with a much

better voice than Gahan, the lead singer), and then a false ending with "Enjoy the Silence" followed by a twenty-minute encore, with plenty of dancing (yes, "I Just Can't Get Enough"). To my surprise, I truly, truly enjoyed just one song, "Before We Drown," which belongs to the last record, *Memento Mori*; I also loved the video accompanying the rendition of "A Pain That I'm Used To," with two wonderful dancers. In total, the band only presented three songs from *Memento Mori* whereas the rest of the concert (that is to say, the main bulk of the 120 minutes) consisted of greatest hits up to the 1990s. I wanted very much to listen to "Wrong," a song released fifteen years ago, but it was perhaps too 'new' to make the cut to the set.

The reviews I have read this morning where all unanimously enthusiastic, which is odd, considering that some of the songs ("In Your Room") where performed rather perfunctorily, not to say quite awfully. I'll leave aside all I could say about the attendees who preferred recording the concert on their smartphones rather than watch it, or those who restlessly moved about seeking the next beer even when Gore was doing his very best to sing without the charismatic Gahan. I'll also leave aside the discomfort of the appalling heat, or the fact that I could not choose the seats because the platform did not allow me (they were good enough and, at 80 euros, cheap enough considering what is habitual these days). My husband, with whom I have shared the four concerts, was likewise a little bit dispirited, and we had a long talk on the way back home about what was missing. I'll focus on our conclusions, see if you agree.

When a band grows as big as Depeche Mode and they become stadium acts they can no longer present new work properly. *Memento Mori* is a rather introspective record by two men past sixty who are reflecting on mortality now that they are past their prime. In fact, Gahan died for two minutes in 1996, when he overdosed and was revived by paramedics, an experience that, naturally had a great impact on his life and career. The ideal venue, then, to present their latest record is not a huge stadium seating thousands, but a club, perhaps a theatre, not bigger than Liceu (2338 seats). Instead, the *Memento Mori* tour is a monster offering 42 gigs with a total of 2 million tickets sold (or, rather, sold out).

I have no idea what the band prefers, but playing to smaller audiences with a focus on the new record is totally out of the question, as it would frustrate many fans. To please them all, Depeche Mode are offering instead their greatest hits in concerts that are closer to live karaoke than to anything truly innovative. Yesterday I found myself dancing the same moves to the same songs I heard back in the 1998 concert, and I just felt there was no point. I never liked nostalgia, and I'm not going to begin now. This would be the equivalent of attending a reading by your favourite author and find that instead of reading from their newest novel they are reading from their best-known work. Charming, yes; exciting, no.

Many years ago, in 2011, I wrote here about the emotion of attending a concert also at Palau Sant Jordi within Kylie Minogue's *Les Follies* tour to present her record *Aphrodite*. That was a totally fulfilling experience, which means that the problem is not the venue or the type of spectacle, but a certain staleness shared by Depeche Mode and their fans (counting myself). Kylie Minogue (age 55) reinvented herself again last year with her single "Padam Padam" and is still innovating and treading new ground fearlessly. Attending a concert by her is, then, an experience in enjoying the energy of artistic maturity, which makes you feel bouncy and recharged. Instead, I felt drained and old yesterday.

Gore, and Gahan in particular, have plenty of energy but they look, well, old. In the official video for "Ghosts Again," I had the impression at one point that Gore was wearing a mask until I realised that's what he looks like now: very much wrinkled. I don't want to sound ageist, or even sexist if I consider the male privilege of displaying deeply

wrinkled skin, but when you notice that a band are going through the motions without contributing anything substantial, it is deeply disappointing.

I am not a fan of the old Depeche Mode songs, but of Depeche Mode, and I continue to be interested in their ability to do new things, just as I want my favourite writers and directors to move on. Depeche Mode are trying indeed, perhaps with less energy than in the past, but the question is that big band stadium concerts are organized precisely to prevent the display of innovation, relying instead for sheer business reasons on nostalgia. I don't want to feel, as I did yesterday, that creativity wanes with age, and that Martin Gore, Depeche Mode's main composer, spent all his creative energy 25 years ago. Or that Gahan's dance moves are increasingly ridiculous, To feel that, I would have stayed home. I want to feel instead with Kylie Minogue (or with Madonna) that ageing persons still have plenty to say and, hopefully, to interest younger generations.

Or, to sum up, if Depeche Mode are losing their bloom and cool, fine, but I don't want that loss to depress me, as a likewise ageing person. I'm not asking at all for them to retire, that would be a pity indeed, but to be much bolder and, yes please, stop playing "I Just Can't Get Enough." Yesterday, I got more than enough, and this is sad, sad, sad. Give me more like "Before We Drown" and let's restart the conversation, ignoring the more nostalgic fans. We're ageing, yes, but dancing to a forty-three year old song does not make you younger, it only makes you feel the weight of the past rather than enthusiastic about the present and the future. Or, at least, that's how I feel today: older and more tired than yesterday. Such a pity.

1 April 2024 / ON LITERARY JOURNALISM, WHICH IS WHAT I WANT TO TEACH

I'm returning again after a couple of previous posts (see here the more recent one and here the older one) to the matter of nonfiction, which occupies me because I'm planning to teach an elective subject if not next year, then the following. As I explained in my previous posts, I find the label nonfiction too inclusive and wide-ranging, and I have been wondering how to narrow it down for the purpose of introducing students to what for them is a largely unexplored field.

One possibility is building a syllabus using sub-genres (one biography, one autobiography, a book of memoirs, a travelogue, and so on). The other is focusing, as I think I am going to do, on what truly interests me, if only because the subgenres of nonfiction writing are so many. Here's the funny thing: until last week I though that what I most enjoy reading and would like to teach is creative nonfiction, when what I actually love reading is literary journalism. I feel quite sheepish that I am only beginning to understand the basics of the label literally today.

I'll begin by explaining what I mean, which I have only understood after reading Robert S. Boynton's *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft* (2005, see the website). Boynton is director of the Literary Reportage program at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, and his book gathers together interviews with 19 of his guests in his lectures: Ted Conover, Richard Ben Cramer, Leon Dash, William Finnegan, Jonathan Harr, Alex Kotlowitz, Jon Krakauer, Jane Kramer, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Michael Lewis, Susan Orlean, Richard Preston, Ron Rosenbaum, Eric Schlosser, Gay Talese, Calvin Trillin, Lawrence Weschler, Lawrence Wright. Apart from the *Paris Review* interviews, I have never read any other interviews with so much detail about the methodology followed by particular writers, which is in itself highly commendable.

The 19 authors do not always agree that what they write is literary journalism (or creative nonfiction), but there is a certain agreement on terms such as 'longform

reportage'. All are journalists by profession (though not by training) who combine writing long articles for quality US magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone,* or *Esquire* with publishing books, which usually expand on their magazine work. The stories and 'characters' they write about are not part of the breaking news published in newspapers, but approaches to interesting situations and persons that require a generous investment of time (often of years) and perhaps even an immersive situation, or at least, a constant presence. All 19 agree that literary journalism is typically American for two main reasons: the nation has always been interested in the facts of its own existence, and the magazines have played a key role in the development of a journalism adapted to explain those facts at leisure.

This does not mean at all that literary journalism is not found in other nations (see John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds's *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, 2023). Just that US literary journalism has a clearly defined tradition and has gone first through the process of self-examination and of academic analysis. The self-examination started arguably with Truman Capote's labelling of his own *In Cold Blood* (1960) as a 'nonfiction novel', It reached another turning point in the publication by flamboyant journalist Tom Wolfe of the 1973 anthology *The New Journalism*, with texts by Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Terry Southern, Robert Christgau, Gay Talese and others, himself included. Wolfe's introduction operated as a sort of manifesto, not without controversy. The Wikipedia article claims that this movement, if it can be called a movement, was over in the early 1980s, but the fact is that new journalism did not really die then, just as it was not really born in 1973 (perhaps it goes all the way back to Addison and Steele in 18th century England). In fact, literary journalism (or new new journalism in Boynton's labelling) became a solid presence, endorsed by its increasing presence in the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Awards though it often appears mixed with other nonfiction genres, such as the biography, the historiographic essay, or even the popular science volume.

I have hesitated to write 'popular science' because Elizabeth Kolbert's phenomenal *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014) a Pulitzer Prize winner, is literary journalism, if only because the author is a journalist. In contrast, Rachel Carson's influential *Silent Spring* (1962), a book without which Kolbert's volume might never have been published, is the work of a scientist and, so, properly speaking, popular science aimed at a general audience (unless academic volumes). As you can see, the genre distinctions are quite wobbly, and this is a major problem when considering nonfiction.

An additional problem is the fact that the label creative nonfiction appears far more frequently in guides and handbooks addressed to aspiring writers than in academic analysis. There is not, for instance, a companion to nonfiction, even though there are companions to prose, the essay, autobiography, travel writing and, indeed, American literary journalism, which I need to read pronto (there is also an International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, with its corresponding journal). In fact, in view of this academic diversity and resistance to using the keyword nonfiction, I wonder why booksellers, publishers and awards still use this rather clumsy label. As an example, see the new Women's Prize for Nonfiction. The six finalists mix the historiographic non-academic essay, literary journalism, the memoir (3 of the volumes) and a hybrid as crazy and wonderful as Naomi Klein's *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World*.

So, back to my subject: what do I want students to read? Well, as happens I will start teaching next year a new fourth-year compulsory course called Modern English Literature: 20th and 21st Centuries, and I am thinking of allowing each student to choose four/five different books to read in different categories, one of which will be nonfiction. I just don't think I can sum up 50 years in a few books; that feels fine for the 19th century but not for the sumptuous publishing panorama of the living author. Since the other books

will be fiction (one British, one transnational [non UK, non US], one genre fiction including the USA), I will not make distinctions between subcategories of nonfiction. I will most likely provide a list for students to choose from. In contrast, if I ever manage to teach the elective subject I have been planning for years, my focus will definitely be Anglophone literary journalism. Again, I will most likely invite each student to choose from a list a few books. I can already tell you that the list will include best-selling, quality volumes such as Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* or Patrick Keefe's *Empire of Pain*, the kind of narrative that you enjoy because you learn from it facts from real life. As the authors that Boynton interviewed agreed, in literary journalism the author might not tell the whole truth, for who can?, but they have an obligation to report instead of allowing themselves to invent, as it is done in fiction.

A problem I need to solve somehow is that not even Boynton in his volume can establish a clear-cut starting date for 'new new journalism'. I have already taught (in a course on globalization and its US critique) Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, a book published in 2001 but previously serialized by *Rolling Stone* in 1999. If, however, I start with this book, and focus in the 21st century as I usually do in subjects on contemporary writing, I am leaving out Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), expanded from the article "Death of an Innocent" (published in 1993 by *Outside*). If I crawl back into the 1990s, I'm sure I'll get to the 1980s and eventually to Tom Wolfe; perhaps *The Right Stuff* (1979), his famous book on the Mercury and Apollo programme astronauts marks the departure from New Journalism, with its more sedate style. Nothing to do with *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). Perhaps the proof that New Journalism was never what Wolfe suggested is the continuity in style in Gay Talese's long career, which continues today with *Bartleby and Me: Reflections of an Old Scrivener* (2023) having started with *New York: A Serendipiter's Journey* (1961); please read *The Bridge: The Building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge* (1964).

During my intense search for information this afternoon, I have come across some surprises indeed. The main one is that, typically, I didn't know that my own university has an MA in Journalism for Literature, Communication and Humanities, with several subjects on literary journalism. They look nothing like the subject I am planning, which is a relief as I have suddenly felt myself intruding into someone else's field. I am not sure of the actual statistics, but I would say that most of the academic work on literary journalism which I have come across has been authored by teachers of journalism in Schools of Journalism and in Media Studies programmes, not in English. Boynton announces very optimistically in his 2005 volume that literary journalists and novelists will soon be seen as parts of an equally respectable category of writers, yet this has not happened so far. I have the same impression as with documentary films, which are today far more interesting than fiction films, but still treated as second-rate products. The same happens to literary journalism, perhaps because originating mainly in magazines it is seen as an ephemeral product. Just an idea to mull over.

I'll keep you posted. In the meantime, take a look at this mixed bag of great nonfiction and find the next book to read. I'll recommend, why not?, one of them: Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), about the Black woman whose cancerous cells got stolen and are still alive in most labs in the world doing research on cancer. Beats any novel if you ask me…

7 April 2024 / DOING FILM STUDIES WITHIN ENGLISH STUDIES: YES, WE SHOULD

A few weeks ago, I had the great pleasure of helping to consolidate the academic career of a brilliant young scholar, Pablo Gómez Muñoz, whose excellent volume *Science Fiction Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Transnational Futures, Cosmopolitan Concerns* (Routledge, 2023), I earnestly recommend. Pablo, who has been working for some years now at the Universidad de Zaragoza, was granted a permanent contract (not quite the same as tenure as a civil servant) by a board which I was invited to join.

It's simply marvellous to come across young academics (he is now 34) with such a solid career, though it is at the same time disheartening to see how absurd the qualifications required for tenure are. I am 100% sure that many of the full professors who earned their positions 20 or 30 years ago would not meet them, and this is simply unfair on the younger generations. It is also my impression that although the standards have been raised and, logically, the persons being awarded permanent contracts or tenure are much better trained, these are the same persons who would have qualified under any other previous system. The university has just made it far everything more difficult for them, though I grant that it is now harder for mediocre academics to access tenure.

Anyway, my topic today is not that but Film Studies. The contract which Pablo won is for a position with a profile in that area (teaching and research) within English Studies. This is extremely unusual and, as far as I know, a singularity of the English Department at the University of Zaragoza, a department which, in my humble opinion, is the best one in Spain at least as far as Literature and Culture are concerned, no doubt thanks to the job that emeritus professor Susana Onega did there. I am fully aware that the grass always looks greener on the other side, but the fact is that Prof. Onega helped Celestino Deleyto become the first tenured teacher and later full professor of Film Studies and English Literature in Spain. Hence the Zaragozan singularity.

Prof. Deleyto wrote his doctoral dissertation on playwright Harold Pinter in 1986. Seeing on Dialnet that he presented to the national AEDEAN 1988 conference a paper on Pinter's script for the adaptation of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (the topic of my own MA dissertation of 1992), I assume that researching film adaptation was his strategy to open the way for Film Studies. By the early 1990s, when I met him, he was already well known as the main specialist in Film Studies within English Studies in Spain. The many dissertations he has supervised and the research groups he has headed (see Cinema, Culture & Society) have launched the careers of other Film Studies specialists in Zaragoza, like Beatriz Oria, Elena Oliete, Marimar Azcona, Luis M. García-Mainar, Juan Tarancón, Vicky Luzón, Hilaria Hoyo and, now, the younger generation to which Pablo Gómez or Mónica Martín belong. I am myself extremely grateful to Prof. Deleyto; his career has always been an example to me and his work in Film Studies has legitimated my own incursions in the field as a teacher and researcher of fiction films, documentary films and TV series.

As I learned from Pablo's presentation of his teaching project, the degree in English Studies of the Universidad de Zaragoza, has two compulsory semestral subjects called "Commentary of Audiovisual Texts in English" (I and II), both taught in the second year. The list of third and fourth year electives includes "Trends and contexts of Anglophone cinema" (I and II). I marvel that Prof. Deleyto has managed the feat to have these four subjects accepted by his department, and at the same I deeply lament that this is not standard for all English Studies degrees in Spain. I myself have taught a couple of times subjects on film adaptation, but using the label Cultural Studies, and I have been teaching cinema in the MA course, but using Gender Studies. I have never proposed that we include subjects similar to the ones taught in Zaragoza because Literature is an absolute priority for my colleagues, and it has been difficult enough to introduce and

maintain the subjects on Cultural Studies and Gender Studies (I'm very much concerned that Transnational Studies will disappear from the BA and the MA after the retirement of my dear colleague Felicity Hand).

I told my MA class about my visit to Zaragoza and about Prof. Deleyto's contribution to English Studies, because I wanted them to learn why I'm teaching a subject on cinema. As happens, I have among my students a graduate in Communication Sciences from the Universitat de Barcelona (now rebranded Communication and Cultural Industries). The current degree has a second-year subject called "Cinema and the Cultural Industry" and, as far as I can see, no electives on Film Studies. In my own university, where the degree is called "Audiovisual Communication," there is a second-year subject called "History of cinema" and two electives, called "Film genres" and "Film theory and analysis." I commented with my students how, back in 1984, when I was choosing a BA degree, I assumed that Film Studies existed in Spain and went straight to UAB's School of Communication, where I was told that the only degree they taught then (including journalism and advertising) had just one subject on cinema. Nothing, then, has changed since then. I switched to English Studies because I love the English language and reading, but I have always remained frustrated that I don't have a degree in Film Studies.

My MA student, Meri, explained to us that her experience was similar: she wanted to train in Film Studies, but found there was no degree, and, after staying at UB she is now at UAB for an MA in English Studies. She also told us about the disappointment felt by many of her classmates, who took the BA assuming they could train to be film directors, only to discover that the practical subjects are very scarce. If you want to be a film (or series) director, you need to attend one of the expensive private schools, such as ESCAC (though I see that ESCAC offers now a BA in Film Direction, in association with UB, maybe that's new). There is, in any case, no degree in Film Studies in Spain, as they are understood in the Anglophone universities, either at BA or MA level.

This has strange consequences. Academic production in Film Studies is usually tied to Schools of Communication, whose researchers deal with films regardless of the language in which they are spoken. In English Studies, in contrast, we limit our academic output to films and series spoken in English. Discussing this situation with Prof. Deleyto during my visit to Zaragoza, he told me that this constitutes an obstacle, for he is mostly in contact with Film Studies specialists who are not limited by language. In my own MA subject on children in cinema I have excluded from our list *The Quiet Girl*, a beautiful film spoken mainly in Irish Gaelic, as I have excluded other marvellous films such as *Monster* (in Japanese) or *Close* (in French). I would accept BA, MA or PhD dissertations comparing film traditions, but the main text should be in English, because I do English Studies. Prof. Deleyto is considering breaking the language barrier, which is absolutely fine, given his position and expertise, but we agreed that if any of us in Film Studies within English Studies published on films not spoken in English, we run the risk of having our publications rejected for our official research assessment exercises, which organized by area. So, yes, it can be done, but as an extra.

I asked Prof. Deleyto whether his academic work has ever been questioned by any scholar in the Schools of Communication of Spain, and he replied that this was never the case, but he had been criticised by colleagues specializing in History of Art. As I see, the corresponding degree in Zaragoza includes a compulsory third-course subject called "Cinema and other audiovisual media" and the third-fourth year electives "Audiovisual genres" and "Spanish Cinema." The BA in History of Art of UAB has a second-year compulsory subject called "The theory and language of cinema" and an elective called "Photography and cinema: classicism and postmodernity." It cannot really be said, then, that the Departments of History of Art (at least in Zaragoza and UAB) are very interested in cinema.

The paradox is that the conversation we should all be having in Spain about why we don't have Film Studies as they exist in Anglophone universities comes too late. Netflix started its streaming services in 2008, already 16 years ago, and this means that the students sitting in our classroom have been raised on a diet of mostly series. They have a much more limited interest in cinema for which they are not to blame 100%. Gone are the times when TVE educated us with its very didactic programming of films, from the Westerns of Saturday afternoon to the art cinema cycles of the evenings on La2 (or UHF as it was called). We still assume that learning about Literature must be part of the curriculum of secondary school, but cinema is very far from being integrated at a time when, as I say, teens spends whatever leisure time they have apart from social media, watching series (or playing videogames). I have not taught any subject on series, but I have already supervised BA and MA dissertations, and I assume there will be more to come.

If you are wondering what is the good of offering BA or MAs in Film Studies at this point, my view is that they should exist, at least at MA level. By Film Studies I mean academic training in the analysis of films and series, perhaps even of videogames, not training to produce them. I also think that audiovisual texts should be present in all degrees in English Studies, though of course this means making room for them and excluding other subjects, always a major bone of contention.

Thanks again, Celestino, for your example and for helping the rest of us to legitimate our work in Films Studies. And good luck, Pablo, my very best wishes for your future career!

15 April 2024 / ON OPEN ACCESS: INTO THE LABYRINTH

I'll begin today by citing the post "Types of Open Access Publishing and the Benefits of Each" by Denise Mager from the blog *Researcher.Life* (16 August 2022), where I have found information on, precisely, the different types of open access publishing. Ready? (I'm shortening a bit the text):

- *Gold*: The final published version of research articles is permanently and freely available for anyone, anywhere.
- *Green*: The accepted article is first deposited into a subject-based repository or an institution's repository, which then often specifies how the article may be used.
- *Diamond*: journals provide free access for readers, but also for research authors to publish in (journals are supported by institutions or other infrastructures, hence they may not have a high-impact factor).
- *Hybrid*: the subscription journal offers open access, but a processing fee is paid for individual articles.
- *Bronze*: the article is freely available, but the types of open access journals that offer this kind of service have no open license.
- *Black*: the article is shared by illicit services that offer illegal free access to scientific publications or other content (like Science Hub).

Are you puzzled? Me too… Let's proceed part by part. I'm both a scholar and co-editor with Mariano-Martín Rodríguez of the academic journal *Hélice*. As a scholar I want my publications to be accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world, which is what (gold) 'open access' means. As an editor, I want exactly the same, which is why Mariano and I publish academic work online for free (you don't pay to be published, you don't pay to download what we publish). We use a Creative Commons License for Open Access, even

though we are not registered anywhere formally to have it: we simply claim we do (I believe this is how it is done). Since we decided to take the rogue line (Mariano is an independent scholar, I'm quite a rogue scholar myself), we are not measured by any metrics website (like Scimago or JCR), though we are indexed in MLA, Dialnet and Latinindex. This possibly places *Hélice* in the bronze open access division, though in practical terms we are gold open access. Incidentally, the money to fund our website comes straight from Mariano's own pocket (no, he's not rich, he works as an EU translator), which caused a bit of a hassle when I asked MLA to index us. I was told that only journals with institutional or business funding qualified, but I raised quite a stir and there we are.

Scholars do not get paid to publish articles, this is important to remember, though we may get royalties for books, mainly for monographs (for collective books, you are usually paid a flat fee as editor). Making journals available, however, has a cost. If the journal is still offered on paper (which is rarer and rarer), editing, printing, and distribution must be covered. If the journal is available online, the costs have to do mainly with editing and with maintaining the websites. This is why so far most journals have been charging fees: individual or institutional subscription fees, or specific payment for particular articles (this is hybrid open access, authors get no royalties). Most journals are now accessible through databases (MLA, Jstor, Project Muse…) which you can only access through a university library, though you can always find a way to purchase a single article. Or, if you're lucky, you can ask the authors to email you the .pdf for free. I felt very embarrassed to do that, but have learned to be a bit cheeky and ask, always with good results. I myself often get requests for publications through ResearchGate, but they are mostly for books and chapters protected by copyright that I don't feel free to circulate.

So, to sum up so far: although authors are not paid for academic articles, access to academic articles costs money. Governments that fund research with public money realized a few years ago that they are paying several times over for them: they pay researchers' salaries and grants, also fees charged by a number of journals to publish, and then subscriptions through university libraries. So, collectively they came up with the idea of open access: whatever the researchers publish using public funding must be made available to the public at no cost (golden open access). The problem is that this clashes with the immense business machinery making money out of publishing academic work, including journals and books. The solution? Now most academic publishing houses offer the option to publish in open access for a fee. For books this is anything between 3000 and 6000 euros, as far as I know, money which usually comes from research projects funded with public money. This does not seem to be, then, the best possible solution, since Governments are still paying a lot of money.

In March 2023 the Spanish Government decided that it would specially value in researchers CVs the open access publications. This is absolutely fine, but the problem is that the way open access operates, with the categories I have mentioned, still maintains the habitual circuit of publications, to which the question of the fees that I have already discussed needs to be added. Besides, not all prestige journals have an open access policy. In my case, for instance, after working very hard to publish an article in the *Dickens Quarterly*, I finally decided not to include it among the five items valued for my personal research assessment exercise (or 'sexenio') because although the metrics were good, the journal offers no open access. I included three articles from journals that, while lacking open access, allowed me to upload my work onto the digital repository of my university. As for the books, it is my policy not to pay for publication and so I did not pay for open access (I'm not in a research project that could cover the fees, either). At least, to my delight, the translation of one of these books published by the Universitat de València will soon be offered in open access (at no fee for me).

So, you're beginning to see a glimpse of the solution: public institutions already pay for instruments to make knowledge available for free, including publishing houses, online journals and online digital repositories. And many academic associations have journals now published online, with costs covered by membership fees. I don't see, however, how the huge business that private publishers do with our academic work can be made compatible with open access. Many (or most) publishers now allow academics to upload pre-print versions of articles and chapters (I'm not sure about books) onto university digital repositories or similar, but they still expect to make a profit out of the published versions. If researchers start citing the freely available peer-reviewed pre-prints more than the published versions that might change things, but so far this appears to be a very slow process.

I decided a long time ago to try a dual system, by which I publish both within the established academic circuit and freely in the digital repository of my university. I have uploaded onto UAB's DDD about 100 publications, including books (or e-books, whatever you want to call them), original articles, translations into Spanish of my peer-reviewed work published in English (always with permission), and other types of texts, such as conference papers. I keep nothing in my drawer. Just for you to understand where we are, I have received the sales statement for one of my books in English, with a very good publisher, and it is pitifully low, just a handful of copies which have failed to earn me even 100 euros. In contrast, the volume I self-published in 2022 with the translation into Spanish of my articles on science fiction, *Entre muchos mundos: en torno a la ciencia ficción* is now close to 1000 downloads and has even been the object of a review in an academic journal. This book, however, is not valid for research assessment, even though all the material it contains has been peer-reviewed at some point.

I'm arguing, to sum up, that open access cannot be imposed on scholars because it clashes with the reality of prestige publication. Journals in the Q1 quartile, with open access and that charge no fees for that service are very scarce, and I don't know of any book publisher who offers open access for free. With the new regulations, we are being forced to choose in many cases between open access and quality, which makes no sense, or to spend even more public money, which is outrageous. As co-editor of a small (bronze) open access journal, I am happy that we might get more scholars interested in publishing with *Hélice*. As a researcher I am baffled. I totally oppose paying for open access, either individually or through research groups, yet this is what indirectly the Spanish Government is asking (or forcing us) to do. Obviously, the ideal situation is one in which journals and books are published online and are universally available at no cost either to authors or readers, but this will not happen as long as academic publishing is in the hands of private investment groups, as it is now. We lost control long ago, and it is now very difficult to get it back.

Yes, we need a revolution – which I'll leave in the hands of the next generation of scholars, hoping they might help break the barriers that encircle knowledge now. Full open access should be the final target.

21 April 2024 / DOING MASCULINITIES STUDIES AS A FEMINIST WOMAN: AIMS AND GAINS

On Friday I'll be giving a lecture as the guest of ICGR's 7th International Conference on Gender Research, to be celebrated at my own university, UAB. The title of my lecture is the one I'm using for this post: 'Doing Masculinities Studies as a Feminist Woman: Aims and Gains.' This invitation has reached me at a point in my career in which I am considering whether I should abandon Gender Studies to focus on other matters such

as non-fiction, secondary characters and film adaptations, areas on which I have also been working for years but on which I have published no books.

This is not at all the case for Masculinities Studies. I am currently working on a monograph called *Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men: No Plans for the Future* (Liverpool UP) and co-editing with Michael Pitts a collective volume called *Masculinities in 21st-century Science-Fiction Television: Exploring New Spaces* (Bloomsbury). These two volumes, hopefully to be issued in 2025, will close a cycle of about 6 years in which I have also published *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2019; Spanish version *De Hitler a Voldemort: retrato del villano*), *Representations of Masculinity in Literature and Film: Focus on Men* (2020; Spanish version *Mirando de cerca a los hombres: Masculinidades en la literatura y el cine*, to be self-published in late 2024), *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask* (2023; Spanish version now in open access *Detrás de la máscara: masculinidades americanas en el documental contemporáneo*) and the volume co-edited with M. Isabel Santaulària *Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture: In Search of Good Men* (2023; Spanish version *En busca de hombres buenos: estrategias para desintoxicar la masculinidad en la cultura anglófona*, forthcoming in 2024). I have flooded the academic market and, frankly, I have exhausted myself. I don't plan to stop writing articles and chapters on men and masculinities but any new books will have to wait.

Going through my CV these days for the lecture, I see that I started doing what is now called Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (this is Jeff Hearn's label and that of the Swedish research group with which he is affiliated) informally, with a first article, published in 1998, called "Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mister Universe?: Hollywood Masculinity and the Search for the New Man," published in *Atlantis*. My aim was to consider why Schwarzenegger, one of the main examples of what Yvonne Tasker called 'musculinity', has never been considered sexy in the same way George Clooney or Brad Pitt are sexy (the thesis is that excessive muscularity is even a bit repellent, and, yes I wrote an article called "Entre Clooney y Pitt: El problema del deseo femenino heterosexual y lo sexy masculino"). In 2005 I joined the emerging research group led by Meri Torras, Body and Textuality, and I was asked to write an introductory chapter for the group's first publication, "Los estudios de la masculinidad: Una nueva mirada al hombre a partir del feminismo" in *Cuerpo e identidad: Estudios de género y sexualidad Vol. I* (2007). Then in 2012, I joined the research group Construyendo Nuevas Masculinidades led by Àngels Carabí, of the Universitat de Barcelona and Centre Dona i Literatura and I became 'officially' a CSMM researcher.

In its three years, I got to meet thanks to the group some of the leading researchers in the field: Michael Kimmel, Lynne Segal, Victor Seidler, Jeff Hearn, and others. I had already seen at a conference in Barcelona Raewyn Connell, an Australian sociologist who provided Men's Studies (later Masculinities Studies) with the fundamental notion of hegemonic masculinity in volumes such as *Gender and Power* (1987) and *Masculinities* (1995). Men's Studies actually appeared in the 1970s, by analogy with Women's Studies, as a pro-feminist movement to liberate men from patriarchy, and this what we still are and do. Men's activism was expressed both in academic work, mainly in the areas of Sociology and Psychology, but also in proper grassroots activism, which have been running workshops, support groups and many other activities for decades. In Spain, for instance, AHIGE (Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad) and its regional affiliates have been doing plenty of work in that sense.

There is, obviously, an important difference between the task of the researchers who study actual material and immaterial practices tied to men and masculinities and the task of those of us who study representation and self-representation. With the textual analysis which many others and I produce we contribute mainly to pointing out which

representations are obstacles for progress and which might help to reach gender equality. My book on villainy is of the first type, and the collective volume on *Detoxing Masculinity*, of the second type. I am currently working on correcting the wrong impression that men self-represent as powerful, idealized figures to offer a more nuanced examination of their self-representation in SF. The field of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities does not always know what to do with textual analysis, but the fact is that this has been growing and justifying its importance. Quite another matter is whether the job we are all collectively doing is making men more aware of the repressive power of patriarchy over them and of the possibilities to build a non-patriarchal masculinity, which are the main aims of CSMM. Also exploring in full of the diversity that masculinity offers today, including matters such as age, racial and ethnic background, ability, sexual orientation… you name it.

As a feminist I decided to focus primarily on men (though I also work on the representation of women, of course) one day in 1998, a few months after publishing the article on Schwarzenegger, when I attended a Cultural Studies conference and I heard a feminist woman offer a totally androphobic rant for 20 minutes. When she finished I asked her candidly whether she was married (she was) and how she managed to live with a man if this is how she felt about them. It was an embarrassing moment for all concerned. Since then, I have been paying plenty of attention to how men act and interact, and have learned to identify patriarchy, not masculinity, as our common enemy.

This is where I need to go back to Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity, which I find only moderately useful. She determined that the notion of patriarchy had been wrongly described by the radical feminists of the 1970s as a general mechanism aimed at oppressing women by all men. Connell rejected this blanket definition and became interested in how patriarchy has managed to survive so many historical changes, including the rise of feminism in the 19th century. Her thesis was that if the mechanism of masculine idealization which she called hegemonic masculinity could be understood then it could be altered. This is interesting but in my view her theorization fails to account for power, which Michael Kimmel has described much more effectively. I follow him in seeing patriarchy as the hierarchical, pyramidal social arrangement which privileges power. This has been so far in the hands of men thanks to a combination of class, politics and violence, but has been attracting women newly empowered by feminism, from Thatcher to Meloni, passing through Imelda Marcos and Marine Le Pen. We misread patriarchy, then, if we reduce it to masculinity. By the way, we should stop talking of 'toxic masculinity' and distinguish between patriarchal behaviours and masculinity, they are not the same.

So, to sum up this point, there is plenty of dissent within CSMM about what hegemonic masculinity is, which does not help fight patriarchy. Add to this that not all feminists appreciate the effort made in CSMM; I've had many of my female colleagues question my work because, they usually claim, we have already paid too much attention to men. Obviously, that is not the case. By ignoring men as a category we cannot solve the problem of gender inequality. In fact, by carelessly mixing patriarchy and masculinity and seeing both as the enemy we (women and anti-patriarchal men) may have helped to fuel the patriarchal anger now rampant in the manosphere and in right-wing politics. I'm not blaming the victims, but suggesting that the discourse we are using is not as effective as it should be. I know, of course, that majority public opinion no longer supports many tenets typical of patriarchy, yet among the younger generations the number of recalcitrant patriarchal persons is growing. International politics is now dominated by extremely dangerous patriarchal figures such as Putin or Trump. And the biggest shame is what is happening to girls and women in Afghanistan (where, I assume, gay men and any non-conforming men are also in extreme danger from the Taliban).

I said at the beginning of this post that I am considering abandoning Gender Studies if not for good, perhaps partially. I think there should be a generational change, and, besides, Gender Studies should aim at a total destruction of gender as a relevant category for repression and domination, yet I believe we still need perhaps one more generation to reach that point. I'll continue, then, with less intensity, as I have noted, trying to recruit new blood for the task. A matter that frustrates me in that sense is that I am reaching a student body of mainly young women (85% of the students in my Department are female), while I think that we need to reach more men. Hopefully I am doing that through my publications, in which I always try to collaborate with younger scholars. Something, however, seems to be missing. As an anecdote, whereas the collective volume by my BA students, *Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21st century Popular Music* (2022) has now gone past 7000 downloads, its equally solid twin by my MA students *Songs of Survival: Men in 21st Century Popular Music* (2023), has only attracted 191 persons. Curious isn't it?

I might write next week about the audience's reaction to my presentation. And please, fight patriarchy, not masculinity.

28 April 2024 / THE PAPER PROPOSAL: AN OPEN TUTORIAL

I have just marked 70 paper proposals that my second-year Victorian Literature students have submitted and since the feedback I need to offer might be useful beyond my class, I'm offering it here as a sort of open tutorial.

In our English Studies BA we start using secondary sources in the first year, but we teach students formally to use them in their papers in the second year, usually in 'Romantic British Literature' and 'Victorian Literature' (I mean for the Literature section, to be perfectly honest I don't know what my Language and Linguistics peers do). In my case, since 2009 I have been asking students to submit a proposal before they write a short paper on Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1500 words, minimum three valid academic secondary sources cited). The proposal consists of a title, an abstract (100 words), keywords (five or six), a bibliography with three academic items, three passages from the novel properly identified (maximum 75 words) and three also properly identified passages from the secondary sources (same word-count). I provide a template, available from our Moodle classroom and a document about how to write abstracts (which I describe in class), and offer a tutorial about how to find bibliography using the library catalogue, MLA and Google Scholars.

I'd like to use the post today to explain why each part of the proposal is important and why I insist so much that the template needs to be used without altering any of its parts. This exercise is, as I view it, a necessary and useful introduction to academic practice, and preparation for the BA dissertation that students need to submit in the fourth year. I forgot to mention that I offer a list of more than 20 topics, from which students need to choose one in advance, with a maximum of 3 students per topic. Long gone are the days when I was willing to mark dozens of identical exercises. Students can also propose their own topics.

I need to explain next the task of editing. In Spanish we tend to confuse publishing with editing, as we call 'editors' the persons that are called 'publishers' in English possibly because in most cases our publishers are also editors. In English, an 'editor' is the person who takes care of a writer's text, either for their own publishing company or as employees in someone else's publishing house. Thus, each of my books has been accepted by a commissioning editor from a publishing house, and this person has hired a copy editor to make sure that my text is ready for publication (the book designers also contribute to

that). All authors must proofread their texts, that is to say, collaborate in their editing process with the copy editor. If all goes well, the published text will have no errors, such as typos, or changes in font and size, or different page margins, or missing page numbers, etc., etc. If editing is sloppy, the text will cause a very poor impression and readers will complain.

The function of the paper proposal template, then, is to show students which editing style I prefer as their editor. Each publishing house follows a particular style for its books and periodical publications, which writers need to obey if they want to be published (if my publisher tells me that I must present my manuscript in a particular way, I must do it, or they will not publish the book). The paper proposal requires, in short, that students obey my rules as editor, as if they were in the process of writing a book that I will publish. Actually, I am doing exactly that with my MA students: I'm editing their exercises to be published in an e-book, so I have prepared a template which they are following. This greatly simplifies my task as editor, in comparison to each student writing their articles as they wish.

The template is based on international academic conventions, not just my preferences. Titles must appear centered and in bold type. The font most often used for academic work is Times New Roman size 12 (with size 11 for long quotations and notes). The abstract is usually single-spaced, indented 1 cm at the sides, and presented in Times New Roman size 11. The keywords must be placed right below, in the same font and type size, and must include (I think) the name of the author, the title of the text, the name of the characters discussed (if any) and then the rest of key concepts. The bibliography can be edited following different styles, but if I require that students use a particular style that *must* be followed, no matter what other teachers indicate. In any case, I use MLA, which is the most frequently used style, together with Chicago. I wish there was a unified single style but since we lack one, we just need to follow instructions provided by our editors.

The main difficulty of writing the abstract for the proposal is that at this point the paper does not exist. This is, anyway, what happens when we propose papers for conferences in real academic life, or chapters for collective books, or even book proposals. In any case, the abstract is NOT an announcement of intentions about the topic, or a description of the methods to be used, but a presentation of the main idea, or THESIS, to be developed and defended. Often, the 'thesis statement' (the sentence where the thesis can be found in the abstract) is missing, a problem we find in student's proposals from the second year to the MA dissertation. It's not easy for students to have a thesis to defend, but that is the whole point of doing academic work on Literature. Incidentally, I have found myself often correcting students' misuse of the verb 'argue', which does not mean 'deal with' or 'discuss'. This is important because the phrase 'I argue that' is usually the beginning of the sentence where the thesis statement is found in the abstract. You don't 'argue Miss Havisham's relationship with his adoptive daughter Estella', but you may 'argue that Miss Havisham's relationship with his adoptive daughter Estella shows that psychological abuse in childhood leaves deep traces for life.'

The selection of passages from the primary source (=the novel) and the secondary sources (=the bibliography) depends to a great extent on the thesis: the clearer the thesis is, the easier is it to locate relevant passages in the text analyzed and in the bibliography. The main problem, however, is always finding the bibliography. The MLA database contains right now 552 sources discussing *Great Expectations*, of which 317 are post-1995, as I require. It might seem, then, that finding 3 adequate secondary sources is not particularly difficult. Accessing this database from the UAB's library catalogue is quite easy: the main menu has a link leading to the whole list of databases and students just need to locate MLA and click their way into it. As I explained in class, a search combining *Great Expectations* with the keywords usually works. Besides, students can often download complete articles from MLA or check where interesting resources

can be accessed online through our universities' catalogue. Besides MLA, online resources such as Google Scholars and Google Books can be useful, too. Allow me to explain that I've made it a rule to ask students for three post-1995 sources because otherwise their bibliographies would be outdated, but I also accept pre-1995 sources if they contribute something of relevance. They can only be used, however, as an extra, apart from the post-1995 sources.

From what I see in many of the paper proposals I have marked, however, students have not used the catalogue or the MLA database but plain Google (not even Google Scholars). This type of quick search leads to dissertations and to articles from journals which are not remotely connected with Dickens or the Victorian Age, the kind in which peer reviewing is not observed and the command of English is not always of the highest quality. The bibliography I ask for can only contain valid academic sources: monographs, chapters in collective volumes, or articles in journals. Students are not allowed to use BA or MA dissertations, not because I have anything against this type of academic text, but because they need to focus on peer reviewed academic publications, as we do professionally. Likewise, I am asking many students to replace articles from low-quality online journals, particularly if I see any language errors in the passages quoted. The best paper proposals are, no doubt, those by students who have learned to use the catalogue, the databases, or Google Scholar to locate quality academic work.

A problem we have collectively is that we don't teach how academic life works, what we publish and how, and why students should familiarize themselves with the secondary sources. We assume that they already know, but this is far from being the case. I have made a point of explaining this in class, but with so many students and irregular attendance I never know if everyone gets the information. As a writer of monographs and editor of collective volumes, I worry besides that most bibliographies in the proposal consist of articles simply because they are easier to find. If I had more time, I would teach a couple more tutorials about where to find books and chapters online within our library digital services, but I find that I cannot do everything. There is a substantial part of learning and academic skills training that students need to practice alone, though it would be certainly great to give practical seminars about bibliography. As things are now I need to describe literary works, their sociohistorical context, and teach academic practice all at once, and I simply do not have enough classroom time.

To recap, the problem in the less promising proposals is mainly connected with the number, the quality, and the presentation of the secondary sources. The titles, the abstracts, the keywords, the passages from the novel and the passages from the bibliography are more or less acceptable. Aspects to improve on are: a) the presentation of the bibliography (students need to follow the template, as if I were really an editor and their paper is work that I am going to publish); b) the bibliographical search. This requires that students practice finding quality bibliography through the catalogue and the databases, for which, of course, it always help to read as much academic work as possible. It also requires understanding that there is a hierarchy in which dissertations occupy a much lower place than monographs, chapters in collective volumes and articles in journals. And that journals with generic titles easily found online are not always the best possible option.

I honestly don't know what more I can say. If students tell me which difficulties they have come across, I might provide better feedback. I hope that this post and my notes in the marked paper proposals help.

6 May 2024 / *THANK YOU, GOODNIGHT*: THE BON JOVI DOCUMENTARY MINISERIES – REFLECTIONS ON THE AGEING MALE ROCK STAR

My post today is a sort of belated coda to the book I published last year, *American Masculinities in Contemporary Documentary Film: Up Close Behind the Mask* (see my post on this book), whose Spanish self-translation *Detrás de la máscara: masculinidades americanas en el documental contemporáneo*, is now available in open access. In that book I chose Brett Morgen's *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck* and Lauren Lazin's *Tupac: Resurrection* for the chapter on the musicians. I wanted to strike a balance between white and black male stars and to write about indisputable icons, enshrined by their early deaths, hence the focus on Cobain and Tupac. Since they died in their twenties, I did not have room to consider ageing, but now that Gotham Chopra's excellent documentary miniseries *Thank You, Goodnight: The Bon Jovi Story* (Hulu, 2024) has met with so much success it's time to do so.

Apparently, John Bongiovi (known as Jon Bon Jovi) himself chose Chopra, known for his sports documentaries, to narrate his band's four decades of existence, being himself a sports fan. As happens, the singer had been suffering for some time from an incapacitating injury in the vocal chords, whose treatment along 2022 and 2023 gave Chopra the 'sports' narrative angle he required. There is, indeed, an analogy between sports and music as mass spectacles, and between athletes and performers, which no doubt the case of Bongiovi highlights. The narrative tension along the four episodes is maintained by the suspense about whether the singer should undergo a delicate operation that might have averse results and, once he decides to undertake it in view of the failure of all other therapies, whether he will fully recuperate what he calls 'his tools'. What is significantly different from any sports documentary is that the star is here an aged 62-year-old-man, struggling with the unwelcome idea of retirement and trying to recover, if possibly, the vocal power he had when he was a youthful 40-year-old, an age at which the career of most sports stars is over. Bongiovi (or Bon Jovi?) may not be dreaming of staying on stage until he is 80, like Mick Jagger, but his New Jersey buddy Bruce Springsteen, currently 74, is clearly a referent.

Chopra may be the director of the miniseries, but Jon Bon Jovi clearly controls the final product, having opened his personal archives to build what might be called an audiovisual memoir for all audiences. I am not myself a fan of the band, which I always considered solid enough but too commercially oriented to interest me as a teen or later. I do appreciate hits such as "Livin' on a Prayer" or the power ballad "Always" but I don't own any Bon Jovi record, nor did I ever think of attending any of their shows. Since Bon Jovi were so popular it was, in any case, difficult to ignore their music videos and strong media presence in the 1980s and 1990s. To this I need to add the fact that, as the abundant visual and audiovisual documentation of the miniseries proves, Jon Bon Jovi has been an astonishingly beautiful man. Many male rock stars that are sex symbols are not objectively handsome or even minimally nice-looking; in contrast, Bon Jovi's frontman used to be a charismatic sex symbol who was, as I say, very beautiful. This means that *Thank You, Goodnight* is not only a paean to lost youth but also to lost male beauty. Bon Jovi is today a graceful silver fox, no doubt, but his white hair and deeply lined face also indicate that it is the privilege of men not to have to care about their ageing looks, not even when they used to be as beautiful as he was once. In contrast, Madonna, just three years older, is subjecting her body to unspeakable torture to stay young at all costs. In any case, at points the contrasts between the younger Jon and his current self is almost painful, an impression I believe was not intended.

The narrative arc of long-lasting rock bands is always very similar and Bon Jovi is no exception. The documentary covers from the beginnings, when starry-eyed 16-year-old John Bongiovi and his piano playing friend David Bryan started attending gigs at local

Jersey Shore clubs, to the present, when the band prepares to celebrate its 40th anniversary with yet another stadium tour and the members recruited along its long history. The original band, renamed Bon Jovi by a record company employee, by analogy with Van Halen, found success thanks to the perseverance, talent, hard work and good luck of its leader in the early 1980s. When Richie Sambora joined them, Jon found the ideal collaborator, and an element essential in the evolution of the band from their dark New Jersey corner into the worldwide spotlight. Bon Jovi toured hard all over the world to consolidate their reputation and learn their musical trade in depth until exhaustion and their new wealth almost broke them psychologically. A series of strategic withdrawals from public attention and well-timed returns prolonged their existence, not without serious crises: the dismissal of bass player Alec John Such for his alcoholism, the breakup with manager Doc McGhee (and his replacement with a company run by Bongiovi family members) and, above all, the abandonment of Richie Sambora, unable to cope with diverse addictions, a painful divorce and his feelings that he was not being a good father to his daughter. There are now sixteen albums and, we might say, as many Bon Jovi bands, one for each period, seen on stage by millions of fans.

The members, including Sambora, look satisfied in the miniseries, perhaps because as drummer Tico Torres explains, they knew how to combine their intense professional bonding with personal interests, including family life and other occupations (Torres, for instance, is a painter). *Thank You, Goodnight* is a celebration Jon Bon Jovi's rock stardom, but, above all, it is a celebration of the bonds linking the men in the band, even of the crises. Few careers involve team work for four decades, and with the same colleagues. Phil X, the guitarist that replaced Richie Sambora, has already been in the band already for twenty years, even though he still seems to be the new guy. If there were arguments and shouts at any point, these are concealed from us, the audience, by a careful selection of documents from the archive that emphasizes continuity and longevity. In the solo interviews no man complains about any bandmate, and Sambora ends up apologizing for standing up his former friends hours before the first concert in a long tour, a major sin for a musician. These aged men seem, as I say, happy and satisfied.

Something is, somehow, a bit amiss, for in this long report of almost five hours, the men are seen performing and recording for long periods, but not enjoying themselves together, either alone or with their families. Apart from the professional circle, only Dorothea Hurley, Jon's wife, appears regularly in the miniseries, usually to offer a testimony about a turning point in their career, but never to discuss what romance or family life were like during the long absences from home of the band. The miniseries mentions only in passing that wives and children joined tours until the kids needed to attend school. Nothing is said, however, about what can be presumed: that marriages must have been plagued by infidelity. Coinciding with the release of the documentary, Jon Bon Jovi created a certain stir when he declared in an interview that he "I got away with murder. I'll say it again on camera. I'm a rock'n'roll star. I'm not a saint. I'm not saying there weren't 100 girls in my life. I'm Jon Bon Jovi; it was pretty good." He added that his high-school sweetheart Dorothea knew everything about his lifestyle when they married aged 30 (they have four children). Beyond what personal arrangements Dorothea and Jon may have, I find it hypocritical that the miniseries does not address the issue, if only because, as the singer acknowledges, it's part of what being a rock'n'roll star is for a man.

Apart from documenting intensively the process of ageing of the band members, *Thank You, Goodnight* also documents a work ethic that seems to be disappearing among male musicians. There is a certain suspicion that rock is vanishing because it is very hard work, and John Bongiovi's career seem to prove the point. As he narrates, he learned to play guitar as a teen from a neighbour who, as a professional musician, had no patience with dilettantes. This was a valuable lesson that young John incorporated to

his own strict work ethic. Coming from a working-class family (his father was a hairdresser, his mother a florist) who supported his decision to be a musician, John knew that he had to give everything he had to his career. He did so by being hard-working, constant, and humble, qualities no longer appreciated in a world of fast social media success. Bongiovi's work ethic extends in the documentary to his troubles with his vocal cords, which are not surprising considering how he must have strained his throat with the demanding singing of his songs and the constant touring. This is a man who could easily retire, and be done, but he is worried that his legacy, to which he often alludes, might be incomplete if he does not go on touring.

This drive to go on working, which defines Bon Jovi as it defines Springsteen or Dave Grohl, is not a quality found in other popular music genres, though, of course, pop has its good measure of ageing star (I have already mentioned Madonna). The difference with pop, in which women are dominant today, is that the stars' ageing is no risk for the survival of the genre, since there is a constant supply of young hard-working women aiming at stardom. I don't see, however, the same amount of hard-working young men willing to get calluses in their hands learning to play rock guitar, or putting a lot of physical energy into playing rock live. It seems to me that this type of masculine energy is gone already among the young, and surviving only among aged men like Bon Jovi and others. This is the reason why Chopra's documentary is so touching: it discloses that hits we may have unfairly thought were easy to compose actually took very hard work, and it reminds us that rock itself is ageing and might soon disappear with its male stars. Perhaps we keep the illusion that this will never happen because the Rolling Stones are still active, but it is important to recall that Mick Jagger is mortal, and that we should never take for granted that rock will survive with no problem.

Enjoy *Thank You, Goodnight* and please encourage young persons of any identity to keep rock alive, it's an important part of our culture that should not die with its stars.

11 May 2024 / *KING SOLOMON'S MINES*: "IT IS A QUEER BUSINESS"

Even though I have been teaching H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) for a few years now, it seems I have not written about this novel here. A bit odd. Since I am most likely saying goodbye to it, this is perhaps the right moment to discuss its racist, colonial content, the issue on which my students need to write a short essay for assessment.

My good friend Esther Pujolràs and I proposed to our colleague David Owen to include Haggard's popular text in our syllabus not at all for the students to admire, but to read it critically, as I have explained in class often. *King Solomon's Mines* is not really the start of imperial colonial adventure in English (it is preceded by a variety of fiction for boys such as *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean* (1857) by Scottish author R. M. Ballantyne, or even by *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)). Besides, Haggard wrote it following a bet with his brother, who dared him to write something as popular as R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), having already published two novels and a non-fiction volume (*Cetywayo and His White Neighbours*, 1882, on the Zulu king that defeated the British army). Yet, *King Solomon's Mines* defined colonial adventure in so many ways that one might mistakenly believe it is full of clichés, when actually Haggard originated tropes still today indispensable in its myriad successors. This is why it's worth reading.

If I were to write the essay my students need to write (or an academic article) I would focus on the queer expression of the colonial ideology of Haggard's text. In fact, this is exactly what I am going to do here. The word 'queer', which simply means 'curious' or 'peculiar' started being used to mean 'effeminate' apparently in the 1890s, a few years

after the publication of *King Solomon's Mines*, so I'll assume that the diverse points in which Haggard uses 'queer' this is done innocently. When Sir Henry Curtis prepares for battle and says goodbye to his white companions, the narrator Allan Quatermain (a hunter and explorer) and Navy officer John Good, he describes their participation in the civil war unleashed by Ignosi's claim to the Kukuanaland throne as its lost heir (the trio had hired him as their servant 'Umbopa') as "a queer business." This is 'queer' indeed considering that the three white men basically want to rob Kukuana of its treasure, the diamonds hidden in King Solomon's Mines, but it is also 'queer' because Quatermain (or Haggard) peppers his text with diverse references to the beauty of Sir Henry and of Ignosi. In an alternative modern version, Sir Henry would stay in Kukuanaland to be Ignosi's couple for life, but I don't think we have reached the point in which adventure can end with a happy, gay, bi-racial couple.

King Solomon's Mines is dominated by the basic homosocial intention of the author, whose narrator dedicates his "faithful but unpretending record of a remarkable adventure" to "all the big and little boys who read it." In Chapter I he courts his all-male audience by stressing that "I am going to tell the strangest story that I remember. It may seem a queer thing to say, especially considering that there is no woman in it—except Foulata. Stop, though! there is Gagaoola, if she was a woman, and not a fiend. But she was a hundred at least, and therefore not marriageable, so I don't count her. At any rate, I can safely say that there is not a *petticoat* in the whole history" (original italics). Indeed, the two Kukuana women Foulata and Gagool (or Gagoola) are the only female characters in the text; their fellow native women, who are "for a native race, (…) exceedingly handsome," are only mentioned as chattel to be given to the three white explorer both by the cruel usurper Twala and the good king Ignosi. Quatermain rejects the offer twice for fear of miscegenation.

The queer, or gay, subtext surfaces most insistently in relation to Sir Henry and Ignosi since the moment they meet. Quatermain is in possession of the map which leads to the treasure, drawn in his own blood by a dying Portuguese explorer three hundred years before, but he lacks the money to organize an expedition. Sir Henry contributes that as he happens to be searching for his lost younger brother George, the McGuffin in the tale, and also another treasure hunter. As a rich English gentleman, Sir Henry is described by Quatermain in highly admiring terms ("I never saw a finer-looking man, and somehow he reminded me of an ancient Dane"). What is striking is that the same admiring terms are used in the description of the "tall, handsome-looking man, somewhere about thirty years of age, and very light-coloured for a Zulu" who asks for a job in their expedition.

The man, calling himself Umbopa, does not hesitate to strip down to the "moocha" that covers his loins before the three white gentlemen during his job interview. "Certainly," Quatermain enthuses, "he was a magnificent-looking man; I never saw a finer native." Interested, Sir Henry approaches the almost naked man to declare "I like your looks, Mr. Umbopa, and I will take you as my servant." John Good has just observed to Quatermain that "They make a good pair, don't they? (…) one as big as the other." As for the unfazed 'Umbopa', who seems to know very well what he is doing to Sir Henry, he glances "at the white man's great stature and breadth" and declares he accepts the job: "We are men, thou and I." I might argue that he has used his body essentially to entice his three white 'brothers' to help him regain his throne, somehow knowing about their 'queer' tastes for handsome black men. The word 'honeypot' comes to mind.

Umbopa/Ignosi's body is again an object of the erotic male gaze when, to prove his identity as the right heir, he again strips down, this time already in Kukuana before the three white men and his own uncle Infadoos with quite a sexy gesture: "Then with a single movement Umbopa slipped off his 'moocha' or girdle, and stood naked before us." He points out then at "the picture of a great snake tattooed in blue round his middle, its

tail disappearing into its open mouth just above where the thighs are set into the body." This phallic snake, incidentally, is not seen in the previous scene when Sir Henry hires him, which might be simply due to Haggard's authorial negligence. Whatever the case, "Infadoos looked, his eyes starting nearly out of his head. Then he fell upon his knees. '*Koom! Koom!*' he ejaculated; 'it is my brother's son; it is the king'." I had to clarify to my students that 'ejaculate' means here 'cried out', though I kept quiet about the proximity of the Kukuana expression 'koom' to 'come' or 'cum'. Maybe after all Infadoos *is* ejaculating at the sight of his attractive lost nephew Ignosi.

When the three white men prepare to wage war on Ignosi's side in the scene to which I have already alluded, Quatermain again compares the two men. "Sir Henry," Quatermain notes, "went the whole length about the matter, and dressed himself like a native warrior," in a way thus fulfilling the narrator's fantasy that the younger Englishman is, somehow, the descendant of ancient (Dane) warriors. After giving a detailed description of the African native warrior outfit (complete with chainmail!), Quatermain further shows his enthusiasm: "The dress was, no doubt, a savage one, but I am bound to say that I seldom saw a finer sight than Sir Henry Curtis presented in this guise. It showed off his magnificent physique to the greatest advantage, and when Ignosi arrived presently, arrayed in a similar costume, I thought to myself that I had never before seen two such splendid men." I forgot to say, by the way, that Ignosi's Kukuana nickname for Sir Henry is Incubu, meaning elephant; make whatever you want of this. Size matters, they say.

My argumentation is in part undermined by the lack of a specific bromance between Ignosi and Sir Henry. The newly crowned Kukuana king treats the three men as "brothers," making no distinction between them, though he deals mostly with Quatermain, and bows down to his decision to leave Kukuanaland to go back home. Ignosi offers to welcome the trio as visitors (not conquerors) if they ever wish to return and guarantees that their memory will be cherished among his subjects for ever. Ignosi also declares that "If a white man comes to my gates I will send him back; if a hundred come I will push them back; if armies come, I will make war on them with all my strength, and they shall not prevail against me." Poor thing! Zimbawe, where Kukuanaland is supposed to be, was chartered to the British South Africa Company, led by Cecil Rhodes, who occupied it with his Pioneer Column in 1890, just four years after the farewell scene.

Oddly, the letter that Sir Henry sends to Quatermain once he is back in England, inviting him to buy a house near his own mansion, makes no mention of Ignosi. Sir Henry does mention in the postscript, however, that among the new trophies adorning his studio is "the axe with which I chopped off Twala's head," now "fixed above my writing-table." Once he had been defeated the deposed Twala asked to fight Sir Henry in single combat and the fierce confrontation ended when "swinging the big axe round his head with both hands" Sir Henry "hit at him with all his force." Twala's head, Quatermain reports, "seemed to spring from his shoulders: then it fell and came rolling and bounding along the ground towards Ignosi, stopping just at his feet." Sir Henry, wounded and bleeding, faints, a situation that allows Quatermain to step up, pick up the royal diamond on Twala's forehead and offer it to Ignosi, in a scene that seems designed to show the new king has the seal of approval of the British Empire through Sir Henry and Quatermain. My view is that Ignosi if absurdly robbed to the retribution scene in which he should have killed Twala only to give Sir Henry a chance to prove his warrior credentials and Quatermain to remind Ignosi of his debts to the white men.

So, where does the queer, or gay, subtext of *King Solomon Mine*'s come from in view of its clear racist, colonial ideology? I believe that Quatermain (and Haggard) is more misogynistic than racist, which means that whereas any possible interest in the native women is trumped by the combination of his racism and his deep dislike of women, he quite likes the native black men: at least, the good-looking ones. Not as his equals, as

friends or true brothers, but as objects of a homoerotic curiosity and a certain homosocial loyalty, prompted in this case by Ignosi's beauty. Both character and author, Quatermain and Haggard, are heterosexual married men (Quatermain is a widower) and fathers; but there is something clearly queer in their approach to the beauty of men, visible first in Sir Henry Curtis's characterization and then in Ignosi's. As I have hinted, though I grant this is a far-fetched reading, Ignosi uses his body to secure Sir Henry's attention and thus be hired as the Englishman's servant, though, as the Kukuana heir, he is actually his social superior. You might argue that the deal favours everyone, as Ignosi gets his kingdom back and the three white men the diamonds, yet this is a gross misreading. The throne is Ignosi's by (patriarchal) right, whereas the three Englishmen are thieves. If I were Ignosi, I would take the diamonds from the white men, put them in the market and set the foundations for Kukuanaland to become… Wakanda.

The colonial ideology, in short, of *King Solomon's Mines* is expressed in many ways along the text, but we should not miss how the white male gaze focuses on Umbopa/Ignosi's body with an unmistakable queer lust, as big as the lust for his diamonds. There may be a certain resistance to this gaze in Ignosi's pretence that he is just a servant, only to reveal his real identity once in Kukuana, though he never resents his condition as Sir Henry's servant. The whole notion that Ignosi is the rightful heir and deserves the help of the white men depends, in any case, on his beauty (and the fact that his skin colour is not really dark). Twala, in contrast, is described as a disgusting man, mixing in his person racism (his thick lips) with the ableism typical of the villain (he is missing an eye). Just as the native women are praised as handsome "for a native race," Ignosi is valued as handsome for a black man. And this is central to Quatermain/Haggard's racist, colonial, but also queer discourse.

24 June 2024 / AND SIX WEEKS LATER…: TIME AND TIREDNESS

It's been six weeks since I last wrote in this blog, the longest break I have taken since I started it back in 2010 and, hence, a cause for reflection on time and tiredness. In these weeks I have seriously considered closing down the blog, fearing that I simply have no time for it. A blog requires regularity and at the same time this blog has been giving regularity to my schedule with its weekly demands of time. I have finally decided to carry on because, as happens, the editors of *Nexus*, AEDEAN's second academic journal, apart from *Atlantis*, asked me a few months ago to write a piece on the experience of running this blog and I've been proofreading the text these days. I found a certain irony in the fact that this has been one of the many tasks preventing me from posting, but as I told the editors the article has also been a timely reminder of why I need to go on writing here.

The six-week break has overlapped, as you may imagine, with an intense bout of marking, which has included editing a whole book with the papers by my MA students (my twelfth project of that kind), and finishing my own book on masculinity in contemporary SF by men. Add to this complicated domestic matters, and an inopportune knee injury. It is beginning to sound as if I am justifying the break when the point is that there has been no break at all but, on the contrary, an overwhelming cataract of work, expanding over the weekends. Part of this avalanche is possibly self-inflicted (I had plenty of time to finish the book) but even that part corresponds to my experience that everything needs to be done as soon as possible because new projects keep appearing all the time. The other part is connected to my teaching duties, which consume plenty of time in tasks that must be done, no matter what. For instance, I have just interrupted writing this post to discuss for 45 minutes with a doctoral student his oncoming yearly assessment. Today, by the way, is a local holiday and I should not be working.

So, technically I have had time enough to continue writing the blog in the past six weeks but not enough energy, which leads me to the central topic of today's post: time and tiredness.

I'll begin with that viral TikTok video of last October 2023, showing a young woman in her early twenties, Brielle Assero, sobbing her heart out on her first day at a 9-5 job because, poor thing, she realized then that with commuting and all, she would no longer have time for herself. You could hear the laughter of Spaniards leaving work between 19:00 and 20:00 all the way to America, where this immature, overprotected person lives. There is another conversation on the internet, going on for years, about whether medieval peasants worked fewer hours than us. You can find here a recent article reporting that "If an average American works 1,801 hours per year, or 37.5 hours per week, the average workload of an adult *male* peasant in 13th-century England was approximately 1,620 hours a year, historians say" (my italics). The female possibly worked 3,650, if she was happy to sleep 8 hours a day. It's funny, by the way, how this kind of study never worries about the hours that current peasants work, which, I'm sure, are closer to 1,801 than to 1,620. I do have a contract stating that I work 37.5 hours a week, but in Spain the habitual are 40 hours, which Minister Yolanda Díaz is trying to reduce down to 35 as a first step towards a four-day week. This seems to be far more productive and, anyway, it is long overdue. First point, then: we are all tired and grumpy, because we have been told that leisure is central to a satisfactory life but we have no time for it. I have mocked the GenZer tearing up about grown-up life, but at the same time she has all my sympathy. We work too many hours. I'm grumpy, you're grumpy. She cries.

This leads me to diverse conversations I've had with my students these last six weeks. Actually, *all* my conversations with students have dealt with time. This is going to sound a bit random. I was in the middle of a most interesting conversation with a BA dissertation tutoree, and she suddenly stopped to tell me 'but enough, I know you're very busy'. Noooo! I told her that I'm never too busy for airing my brain in intelligent company. In fact, she was right: I had another student at my door waiting for a tutorial. More… I had three separate meetings with students who had failed their exercises because they had not read the corresponding novel: two told me that they have long working hours, the third that he has poor time management skills; all three declared that they decided to do the exercise anyway, hoping it might work. One of the working students actually asked me for help about how to improve their close reading of specific passages without reading the whole novel. I suggested that, perhaps, their job (taking every afternoon from 16:00 to 21:00 and Saturdays, all day) was too much of an obstacle for the degree. Another student, a full-time one, told me that it is next to impossible to cope with the demands of the degree. Let me see: 25 hours per 6 ECTS, 30 ECTS every semester, that's 750 hours a semester, divided into 18 weeks, a total of 41'66 hours per week. Problems here? Commuting might take two hours a day or more, the 750 hours seem incompatible with paid employment, and, anyway, few persons have the ability to study/read for even two hours every day. Students are anxious, teachers are sad. There are days when I want to cry on TikTok.

Everyone is tired because the number of working hours does not indicate their intensity, or, why not?, the level of enjoyment. I have, for instance, spent two entire working days preparing my new Contemporary Literature subject and having great fun, so I did not mind that these two days happened to be a Saturday and a Sunday. In contrast, the four entire working days (Monday to Thursday) spent marking 70 papers have been excruciating. My arms hurt so much, my brain was melting… Marking took, besides, much of my available energy for the fifth working day of the week; luckily, I had three wonderful BA dissertations to mark by my own tutorees which made that Friday a happy day.

What is so excruciating about marking, you might ask (if you're not a teacher)? Well, I used to have around 50 papers to mark in January, after the Christmas holiday, but last year my subject was moved to the Spring term, which means that I found myself on 10th June with 70 1500/2000-word long papers to mark after having marked the previous week 70 800-word essays. Crazy, really. In two cases, I stopped correcting the paper when I crossed the 30-minute barrier, for that's a matter we don't discuss either: the more care a student puts in their writing, the more energy the teacher can employ in assessing the content rather than correcting the text. The best exercises are always the best edited and presented; the worst ones are invariably poorly written and awfully edited. I must have some kind of OCD because I definitely MUST correct students' texts down to the last comma, and that is exhausting. I forgot to say that I gave students a late deadline to help them, which means that I gave myself a very tight timeframe to mark the papers before the final marks had to be published, but this is how it works. Life is a series of deadlines.

At this point, I don't know if the blog is back or if this is the only Monday of the rest of the Summer when I will be able to post. Writing here also tires me, logically, but I would like to distinguish between being happily and unhappily tired, which is the point I am trying to make about time. These past six weeks I have been unhappily tired most of the time, which means that I could not summon up the energy to write here. You feel unhappily tired when the work you do is not fulfilling, as it should be, or when you have a pile of annoying chores on top of it. You feel happily tired when you have worked hard but this gives you a buzz so good that you can add extras, from going to the gym to writing a blog post, from meeting friends for drinks to having sex… you name it! When you say 'I don't have time' for this or that, this is not really about time but about which kind of tiredness is gripping you. Another matter (for another post) is laziness, but this can be good if you feel that the weekend spent binge-watching series has been as happy as if you had gone hiking in the hills. The bad laziness if the kind that leaves you wondering why you can't do better (I had a very candid email from a student who acknowledged he is just lazy; as I told him, naming the problem might be a first step to solve it).

So, no, I have not been procrastinating, and I have not been lazy. I have been unhappily tired, and have used my time apart from work and from the annoying chores to get the unhappiness out of my tiredness. Thank you, Antena 3, for helping me with the delicious *Tu cara me suena*, which has been wonderful therapy, and will continue being so. To Minister Yolanda Díaz, I would like to say that I am not so sure that the four-day working week (= 32 hours a week) is a good solution, for it still leaves you with four long days of potential unhappy tiredness. I would support instead the six-hour working day (=30 hours a week), which seems to me to offer more chances of happy tiredness or of no tiredness at all (depending on the job, of course). The first workers enslaved by the Industrial Revolution used to work up to 16 hours a day with just Sunday off if they were lucky and with no paid holidays, but that was 200 years ago, and, surely, with all our innovations and the help of AI, the goal of working 30 hours a week for, say, 40 weeks a year should be feasible. Go for it, Yolanda!

Let's aim at being happily tired and having leisure enough to enjoy rather than endure life. Maybe we should all start crying on TikTok...

30 June 2024 / A DEPARTMENT OUTING AND A BIT OF HISTORY: TO PARADISE

When the new Head of Department was appointed back in February 2023, we also appointed informally a 'party planning committee', constituted by two of my colleagues and myself. Perhaps you are part of that kind of Department in which people meet regularly for coffee breaks and lunch, and after hours for drinks, meals, or partying, but we are not. Our socializing outside the university is non-existent, except for the graduation dinner in July in Barcelona, which the students organize and some of us attend. We have been having pot luck lunches before the Christmas and the Summer holidays for many years, and in other occasions such as retirements or similar, but we live at a great distance from each other, and this makes meetings in other circumstances difficult. There is a good atmosphere indeed, but we are too isolated and too much in a hurry to get back to our distant homes in the later afternoon.

Our cafeteria used to have a separate restaurant with the same cheap menu as in the open section, and we used to meet for lunch at random, but an inopportune revamping possibly fifteen years ago, transformed the restaurant into a classier, more expensive place. This means that we use it for special occasions but not on a daily basis, at least in my Department. Everyone has got used to having coffee or lunch on their own, often in their office (I myself have my own personal microwave), and even though we opened a new common room, this is not attracting the teachers as we hoped; it will take time. Hence the party planning committee, which has so far organized three outings for lunch outside our campus, with considerable success.

I'm writing this post not just to comment on this matter, but because the last outing, this past Friday, was quite special and it has started a train of thought that goes beyond the matter of socializing. A bunch of us met Prof. Josep Maria Jaumà who, at 85, is the eldest retiree (he retired in 2006). He had offered to give us a guided tour of the beautiful cloister at the monastery of Sant Cugat, a thriving, lovely town a few kilometres south of my university, where he lives. The monastery is a 12th century building of enormous historical and artistic important, certainly worth a visit, but, as happens, this was also the place where UAB, founded thanks to a decree passed on 6 June 1968, started its activities when it was a tiny new university.

The Faculty of Philosophy and Arts was located in the monastery for about three years while the first buildings were built on the new campus (other schools were located in Barcelona); the school moved to its current location, building B, in the academic year 1972-73. Prof. Jaumà himself was not part of the original 1968 staff, as he was a secondary school teacher for about fifteen years in Spain and elsewhere. He was hired by UAB in 1973, obtained a doctoral degree in 1979 with a pioneering dissertation on poet Philip Larkin, and devoted his energies to teaching and translating mainly poetry. He is known for his translations of Shakespeare and is currently working, he told us, on translating Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in verse, as it seems this has not been done either in Spanish or Catalan.

Talking with Prof. Jaumà over lunch we commented on how fragile institutional memory is. I was hired back in 1991, and I did not get to meet the Department's founding father, whose name I don't even recall. My teachers did not have degrees in English Philology since these were only offered from the 1980s onward; when I started teaching my subjects were part of the 1977 syllabus, the one I studied, and my guess is that if that was the first one, the first 'licenciados' were those of 1982. But this is a guess, not something I know for sure. By my count, apart from the dozens of part-time staff that have come and gone after longer or shorter stays, only ten colleagues have retired, of whom three have passed away. Two more tenured colleagues, our beloved Guillermina Cenoz and Mia Victori passed away before retirement, the former aged 63 and the latter only 45, a deeply felt loss in both cases. Prof. Jaumà, who is wonderfully active at 85, is

a reminder that time passes fast and that if we don't make some attempt at writing a history we will soon forget where we come from. We need a historian as soon as possible. Perhaps that could be a task for an intern with a grant of the type we get for punctual collaborations.

Prof. Jaumà's career was also the object of our conversation. Sitting at the table with him there were seven of us. I was the only tenured civil servant. Two colleagues obtained a permanent contract rather recently, she after first coming to the Department in 2005, if I recall this correctly, with a research scholarship to write her doctoral dissertation. After this she had to leave UAB but returned as one of those associates combining diverse university teaching jobs until she got a full-time position and finally her current position, past the age of 50. The other colleague is younger but it has taken him also many years to get the same contract, at a point when UAB decided not to offer state-funded tenure of the type I enjoy for political reasons. Another colleague is now on a five-year contract, preparing for the permanent contract (these are funded by the Catalan Government). The other three colleagues are the complicated cases. One will have to leave UAB for good after 26 years as an associate because her other job is also a university position and this is no longer legal. Another can only be hired as a replacement teacher though he has been an associate for a while. The third has come to the end of her post-doctoral contract and has been hired just as a part-time associated. Prof. Jaumà, who was on the examining board when I passed my own state examination, told me he had got lucky. So did I although I had to wait eleven years for tenure counting from my first contract. I was 25 then, it seems almost a miracle that I was hired full time.

Prof. Jaumà, as I have noted, is known as a respected translator. His biography indicates that he has translated Philip Larkin, William Shakespeare, Robert Graves, Thomas Hardy, David Lodge, W.B. Yeats, Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Frost and Geraldine McCaughrean. He has published a heart-felt memoir of his secondary-school years as a teacher *Els meus instituts: Els Instituts de Batxillerat per dins i per fora* (1981), a number of ESL handbooks, and essays such as *La ciutat que volem* (2003, with Jordi Menèndez), *José María Valverde, lector de Joan Maragall* (2004-2005) or *Les cartes de Dietrich Bonhoeffer des de Barcelona* with Alexander Fidora. He belongs to that generation of philologists who saw translation and the confection of critical editions as their main tasks, something that is being lost because neither activity counts as a merit for the research assessment exercises that we need to pass every six years. It is now impossible to get tenure or a full-time contract without publishing massively in academic journals and presses, and if you ever manage the feat it is highly unlikely that you abandon publication for translation and the edition of the classics. Few of us go in that direction today, which is a pity indeed. Jaumà told us that he sees his impact in terms of how his many translations have reached the readers outside the university. He is vert skeptical about the impact of academic publications, as we all should be.

I am keeping the last paragraphs for the lesson he taught us in our guided visit to the Sant Cugat cloister; by the way, as I reminded our youngest companion we, professors, are the descendant of the medieval monks so that in Spanish the word for faculty is 'claustro' (cloister); we are 'professors' because we profess the faith of education. Prof. Jaumà has spent many hours close reading the 144 chapiters in the monastery cloister (see how beautiful it is here) and has come to the conclusion that there are organized in a narrative pattern. He taught us that this pattern cannot be easily detected by visitors, who tends to appreciate the chapiters' amazing decoration one by one. In contrast, the monks who lived cloistered in the monastery knew how to read the chapiters, not only as a whole narrative sequence surrounding the central garden but also in subsets which narrate a particular subplot, and by identifying correspondences between particular pairs in opposite locations of the quadrangle. The problem is that Prof. Jaumà has tried to persuade diverse medieval arts specialists, both local and

international, of his discovery but has only managed to make a nuisance of himself. He has been curtly told that no cloister offers evidence of any narrative sequence. I told him about Philippa Langley, the tenacious amateur who found the tomb of King Richard III in a parking lot of Leicester (you might want to see the delicious film *The Lost King*). Perseverance is the key. I find it wonderfully apt that a specialist in poetry can read the poetry of the old stones and, frankly, what he told us seemed worth considering.

And here's a little bit of philology: the Bible speaks of the Garden of Eden, but apparently this is a reference to "the Old Persian *chahar bagh* 'four-part garden'," called *paradeisos* in Greek. Monastery cloisters eventually reproduced the same scheme in the inner garden surrounded by the cloister, supposed to recall the Biblical Paradise of which Adam and Eve were expelled. Just in case you ever (mis)imagined Paradise as a wild jungle… Next time I attend a meeting of my school's faculty, or cloister, I will try to remember that this comes from the monks' meetings in the cloister to enjoy their version of Paradise. When in Sant Cugat, I will read and enjoy the stories told by the stone chapiters, still surviving after nine centuries in the beautiful cloister.

4 July 2024 / PRESENTING A NEW BOOK WITH STUDENTS: *BEAUTIFUL VESSELS: CHILDREN AND GENDER IN ANGLOPHONE CINEMA*

I published four months ago a post about my new MA subject on children in Anglophone cinema, which I have taught this semester under the umbrella label Gender Studies. This is somehow a continuation of a subject I taught three years ago, which resulted in the publication of the e-book by the students *Gender in 21st Century Animated Children's Cinema* (check please my post on the task of editing this book). The new e-book, *Beautiful Vessels: Children and Gender in Anglophone Cinema*, my twelfth collaboration with students, is now available online and it is now time to present it. I'm shamelessly recycling my previous post here, as I anticipated much of what I need to say today.

I have been publishing students' work since 2014, when I edited two volumes with essays written for my course on *Harry Potter*. Since then I have turned my BA and MA electives into project-oriented courses, with the e-book at their centre. I am extremely proud of the twelve volumes, and surprised at how differently they are performing. The top performer is *Reading SF Short Fiction: 50 Titles*, published in 2016 by BA students, which has so far 12,380 downloads. This is a reading guide and my guess in view of this figure is that many readers are indeed finding it useful. What I fail to understand is the situation of the two more recent volumes. *Songs of Empowerment: Women in 21st century Popular Music* (2022, BA students) is now at 8,224 downloads, but its twin volume, *Songs of Survival: Men in 21st Century Popular Music* (2023, MA students) only has 206 downloads. Believe me, please, when I say that I find both equally exciting.

As I commented back in March, whereas in the previous subject the focus fell on animated films addressed specifically to children, this time I have focused on the presence of children in 21st century Anglophone live-action films of all types, with no distinction between children's and adults' films. I proposed to my eleven students a list of 58 films, of which they selected a total of 44 (four films and, thus, four essays per student); a kind auditor decided to participate in the volume with one essay and I added my own contribution, which is also the sample essay the students used as their model (on the film *Nowhere Special*). I usually add a few more essays of my own to the students' work, and I would have liked very much the e-book to cover 50 films, but I have just been too busy, among other things finishing a new book. I am not going to reproduce here the full list, which you can now check from the e-book but will just comment that we started with *Billy Elliot* (2000) and have ended with *The Wonder* (2022). The chronological order

is intended to guide the reader throughout the 21st century, hoping that the gender issues raised give an impression of progress (in fact, the treatment of children in cinema seems to be stuck, using a rather conventional model).

The book carries an image of *Billy Elliot* on the cover following the students' vote for the film they believed to be of the greatest importance (or impact) in our selection. I think this is possibly the case, though *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) is a bigger film in terms of box-office takings and as the start of an extremely popular series. The *Harry Potter* film series, in fact, might be the last one ever made for cinema, now that the fashion is for TV series (HBO is preparing a series based on Rowling's heptalogy, to the horror of most Potterheads, myself included). What is more important to me is that we have learned about children in a variety of film genres, from the dramatic pseudo-musical that *Billy Eliot* is to the gentle satire of *Little Miss Sunshine*, passing through horror (*The Babadook*, to mention one example), dystopia (*The Road*) or drama (*Room*), apart from the genres closer to children represented by the first *Harry Potter* film but also others such as *Peter Pan*, *Hugo*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. We have studied children in charismatic leading roles (*Whale Rider*, *Kick-Ass*) but also children in secondary roles navigating as well as they could the decisions made by adults (*Minari*, *Logan*). I cannot name all of these child characters, each has been part of a wonderful learning experience about our limitations in dealing with them.

The focus of the subject has been gender, but not as intensely as I initially expected in relation to children. As I wrote back in March, discussions of children tend to group them into a homogeneous class without much discussion of gender. This is why I wanted to explore with my students the dynamics of gender representation in the characterization of the children represented in Anglophone film. After just discussing a handful of films, on the basis of the students' presentations and the bibliography I brought to class, we quickly noted, however, that the gender issues in the selected films affect not just the representation of the children but also of the adults surrounding them. In fact, as we hypothesised then, the films addressing adults (including the family-oriented films) take the child as an excuse to explore adult concerns, placing the children in secondary positions even when they appear to be the protagonists.

I have called the volume *Beautiful Vessels*, then, because we have been quite disappointed to find out that the child is used in cinema as an empty signifier to pour the adult concerns, related to gender and other matters. In her introduction to *The Child in Cinema* (BFI 2022), key scholar Karen Lury frontally attacks both the use of children in live-action cinema and its study in academic film criticism precisely because the child appears to be used rather than focused on. We were initially resistant to her thesis but have come to the conclusion that Lury is absolutely right. A major problem is that, logically, children cannot self-represent and are thus subjected to the whims of adults, sometimes nostalgic of an innocent childhood that never existed, sometimes appalled by the naughtiness of real children which they may even (mis)read as evil. Children cannot contest their (mis)representation on the screen, so what we have is a rather large collection of child characters often played by exploited (or even traumatized) child actors that, on the whole, generate quite a distorted view of childhood. Gender, as we have proven, is treated is a rather conventional fashion, though it is evident than little girls are gaining ground as strong, solid characters while the interest in boys is waning. Cinema is most likely losing boys to videogames and social media, but it still retains the interest of girls, fueled by more and more women directors.

Children have now in their hand smartphones to make films with and many devoted teachers willing to initiate them in the path of filmmaking. Social media like TikTok have prompted children to make their own tiny little films, and to learn thus the basics of editing even when they don't even know the word. Children, likewise, draw and paint, and write poetry though more rarely fiction or essays. We are, however, still very

far from considering their productions artistically worthy, with the exception of a handful of children who grew up to be geniuses. In cinema the concept of a child director or script writer is totally out of the question, even though child actors are abundant. Since, logically, children do not have sufficient critical training and, anyway, nobody bothers to ask for their opinion, their representations are extremely biased by the adults' own impression of childhood. At the same time, as we know, cinema has been shaping childhood since its very beginning, not just since Disney's Mickey Mouse hit the screens, in ways we barely understand.

Our joint work in class and our joint publication, then, is a call for scriptwriters and directors to pay much more attention to children, beyond the experience of their own childhoods and what other adults, from fiction writers to psychologists (or parents) say. We agreed that the more successful films where those in which the child's point of view was integrated into the film with respect and sincere interest. The least successful films where those in which the child was simply present as an object to be carried about or discussed without any kind of participation or agency. We ended up very much worried about the careers of child actors, often started by ambitious or frustrated parents putting too much pressure on poor little things who had no idea about what acting mean. If anyone is listening, we would like directors to never again ask a child to have their first kiss before a camera, or any other significant interaction which might be crucial in private personal life. We came to the conclusion, of course, that never using child actors would result in a radically impoverished cinema, but ideally they should not be employed in horror films or in films depicting situations of abuse for entertainment (and not for criticism). We tried to be, by the way, as inclusive as possible, but, as happens with adults, there are not many roles for non-white children; the roles played by Asian or Black children, besides, tend to be dramatic, with few films celebrating them in positive ways.

I thank my students, once more, for their willingness to engage in the intense adventure of exploring the presence of children in Anglophone cinema. I hope they feel inclined to continue the exploration and that our kind readers find much of interest in our book.

7 July 2024 / GOODBYE VICTORIANS, SEE YOU LATER!!

Memory is a funny thing. I have been digging into my CV to prepare this post and what I have found does not quite match my recollections. I was under the impression that I have been teaching Victorian Literature every year since I was hired in 1991, except the year that I spent in Scotland (already thirty years ago!), but it turns out that there is a five-year gap corresponding to my time as Head of Department and the ensuing sabbatical, and another year when I taught Romanticism instead. Since 1991 we have gone through five syllabi (1977, 1992 and 2002 for the Licenciatura; 2009 and 2021 for the BA or Grado), with subjects being labelled very differently. Victorian Literature used to be part of annual subjects: Literatura Anglesa I (1977 syllabus), Literatura Anglesa Moderna i Contemporània II (1992 syllabus), and Gèneres Literaris Anglesos del Segle XIX (2002 syllabus). It only emerged as a semestral separate subject finally called Literatura Victoriana in the 2009 syllabus. No wonder I am confused about what and when I have been teaching.

I'm writing this post, precisely, to fix my memories of Victorian Literature now that I am taking a break that might be a goodbye. As part of the new 2021 syllabus we have decided to introduce a new compulsory third/fourth year subject called 20th and 21st Contemporary Anglophone Literature. The logic behind this is that although the electives may cover contemporary genres (fiction, drama, poetry), we believe that the students

need a more systematic approach to current times. Since we teach in reverse chronological order, they begin by reading 20th century genres in the first-year subject Introduction to English Literature, but we came to the conclusion that we have been graduating students with a poor knowledge of contemporary literary genres, hence the new core subject. Of course, the difficulty is how to define the contemporary and although I usually draw the line at the 21st century, my colleagues decided that we need to begin with the 1990s (a reason is that in the first year we teach Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, and that was published in 1989). I have expressed very loudly and very insistently my wish to teach the new subject, on the grounds that I am a specialist in the contemporary and here I am, preparing to launch a new adventure, a new experiment (of which more next week).

Since I am only teaching 17 ECTS, courtesy of the Ministerio and UAB because of my five 'sexenios' (or personal assessment exercises), and I need to teach in the MA, this means that I am saying goodbye to Victorian Literature, perhaps for good, depending on how things progress. Today's post is, then, a sort of record thinking of a time in the future when perhaps I will return to Victorian Literature and I will need to recall what I have done so far.

To be perfectly honest, although I have felt very happy and comfortable teaching Victorian Literature, this is no longer how I feel. I taught for many years the first-year subject Introduction to English Literature and, very selfishly, I declare here that this is a subject I have been consistently avoiding since I last taught it, back in 2012-13. In a way, I pulled rank to entrench myself in Victorian Literature, and this coincided with a series of reductions in my workload, which helped me to stay put in this cosy corner of the syllabus. I have now in many ways run out of steam but I don't feel at all that I'm done with Victorian Literature. I just need a break, a long one if possible, and considering that I have been a teacher for almost 33 years, this break might be permanent. Past the age of 55 one starts thinking of retirement and at the moment, if everything goes well, I am planning to retire in ten years' time, at 68. Right now I hope that those ten years are intensely focused on the 21st century, both in the new core subject and in the electives, but, who knows?

I must clarify that although I have been teaching Victorian Literature for so many years, I am not a specialist in this area. I was just given the task to teach it three decades ago, and loved it. I decided quite recently to correct this state of matters, and so I published four years ago "Arthur and Annabella's Irresistible Passion: Adultery in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" (*Raudem* 8, 2020, 136-161) and last year "Jaggers the Plotter and the Pretty Child: Masculine Vulnerability to Beauty in *Great Expectations*" (*Dickens Quarterly* 40.4, December 2023, 457-475). This is indeed very little for three decades but, as I have mentioned, my area is the 21st century (and the last decades of the 20th century). Now and then I've tried to catch up with the latest innovations by reading academic work on the Victorian Age, but, to be honest, I have not read primarily about this period.

The same applies to its literature. Yes, of course, I have read many 19th century novels and essays, but not so many in the context of the total amount of reading I do every year. If I haven't done more, this is because the demands of the subject have been diminishing rather than grow. In the 1992 'Licenciatura' syllabus we introduced a subject called Pràctiques de Literatura Anglesa Moderna i Contemporània II, designed to teach students to read secondary sources about the 19th century, and that required a good knowledge of the extant bibliography. Once we lost that subject and introduced the new BA/Grado, our Victorian Literature subject has become increasingly shallower.

And this brings me to the main reason for my rushing to take the new Contemporary Literature subject: I am immensely tired of the general disinterest in the novels we teach. Sorry to be so blunt, students. I happen to absolutely love Victorian

fiction but I don't see that love is shared by the students at all; I just need some distance from their indifference and even open dislike of the books. It might come as a surprise, given my tiredness, to learn that this semester I have failed only one student out of 71, but this is easy to explain: my students have managed to do correctly and in some cases very well the exercises but this does not mean that all have read the books, and much less appreciated them. It's the classic problem of the Literature subjects: you can get away with not reading. Looking at the number of A and B+ final marks, my guess is that about 25 out of the 71 students were truly interested in the novels and did read them (perhaps even loved them). I'm writing this knowing that they will all be my students again in the fourth year, a prospect that perhaps dismays them; meeting again might be, yes I know, embarrassing for both.

I would like to recall next the Victorian fiction I have taught so far. I have taught, of course, also some pre-Victorian 19th century (Regency and Romantic) fiction, but not that much: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*; Walter Scott's *Waverley* and even Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (these two were not my choice at all). Here are the Victorian works I have taught, all of them wonderful texts:

- Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*
- Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Great Expectations*
- Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (once, long ago, when students were not afraid of long books…)
- Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
- George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (because students got afraid of long books, and we never dared teach *Middlemarch*)
- H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*
- R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*
- Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Return of the Native* (now I marvel that we ever taught Hardy…)
- Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*
- Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (the only 19th century play we have ever taught)
- Bram Stoker's *Dracula*
- Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Please, note, that we have taught between four and five of these books in each edition of the subject, which is semestral. Perhaps there are teachers out there who can manage to teach all of these in one semester, which would be ideal, but this is impossible to manage in our BA. Apart from the four/five books, when we started the new BA in 2009, I prepared booklets for poetry, the essay and a selection of scenes from other novels. Typically, I would begin the classes reading a passage from an essay, but in recent years I have not had the time to do that. Students, besides, have firmly indicated that they don't want extras and prefer me to focus on the novels.

I would say that Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* remains the most consistently successful work, together with *Wuthering Heights*, and that the others are a list of failures. I have never managed to have students enjoy Dickens, and who could have though they would not like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *Dracula*? With the current selection (*Tenant*, *Great Expectations*, *King Solomon's Mines* and *Dracula*), we seem to have reached an impasse: this selection doesn't work well, but I just don't know what other four novels would work better to generate interest and debate (please note that we don't teach Haggard to be admired but to be discussed).

I'm leaving for the next post a more detailed description of the idea but, in a nutshell, in the new subject Contemporary Literature each student will have a different set of four books. More about this next week. In the meantime: goodbye, Victorian authors, for the time being. I carry you in my heart and will love you for ever. I don't know, however, whether I will have again the stamina to endure seeing you disdained as dense and boring, or not read at all. We'll see.

13 July 2024 / ON MY NEW SUBJECT CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: AN EXPERIMENT

When we started working on the new 2021 syllabus, my Literature colleagues and I came to the conclusion that our students have too little contact with the contemporary world. Our undergrads take in the first year an Introduction to English Literature, which basically covers the British and Irish 20th century, beginning with James Joyce's "The Sisters" (1914). In the third year they take the core course Literature of the United States III: From 1950 to the Present, with Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) assuming the onerous task of representing the 21st century. Some of our electives (Modern English Poetry and Theatre, Prose in English, Literary Criticism in English, Gender Studies in English-Speaking Countries, Cultural Studies in English-Speaking Countries, English Literature and War, The Great Authors of English Literature, Teaching of Literature in English or Transnational Studies in English-Speaking Countries) can indeed focus on the 21st century, but since we only teach five every year and they are not compulsory (logically!), we agreed to introduce as a new core subject Contemporary Literature in English: 20th and 21st Centuries.

So far, our BA degree has only had one compulsory subject in the fourth year: the dissertation. This means that students who are not fond either of Literature or of Language/Linguistics could focus exclusively on the electives in their preferred area. From 2024-25 this has changed, and students now must take 12 more compulsory ECTS credits, detracted from the elective credits: 6 from Contemporary Literature in English: 20th and 21st Centuries and 6 from the other new core subject Seminar on Advanced Oral and Written Expression in English. This subject is mainly aimed at improving their academic skills, and I don't anticipate it will raise any objections or issues. I worry, however, at how the students who don't read (and that's most of them) will react to Contemporary Literature. I doubt it will be with enthusiasm. Hence my crazy syllabus… read on…

As I reported in my previous post I have been teaching Victorian Literature for three decades, always on the basis of a selection of texts, which since 2009 with the new degree is down from five to four complete novels. There have always been many more writers alive than those any Literature subject may reflect, even if we go back to the Middle Ages. So, we always work on a very short list based on the principle that an English Studies graduate must have read some key canonical authors and a few second-tier figures. The closer we get to the present, the more problematic the selection becomes, not only because there are currently more living authors than in the whole history of English Literature but also because it is hard to understand which are the key texts that best represent the 21st century and might presumably survive the test of time. The solution to this problem is to extend the reading lists (I have seen some that are truly daunting) or focus very narrowly on just the habitual four texts. Now, Anne Brontë, Charles Dickens, H. Rider Haggard and Bram Stoker may suffice as representatives of the Victorian Age, but try to think of four names and novels since 1990 and you will see that it is much harder to make a good choice.

The experimental road I am taking is radically different: I will be using sets of four books for each student. The title of the subject Contemporary Literature in English: 20th and 21st Centuries is a bit deceptive because my colleagues and I agreed that the subject would cover from 1990 onwards. As I mentioned in my previous post, students read in the first year Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), so 1990 seems a good departure point. We also decided that Contemporary Literature should not be limited to British fiction. So, each student will have to read four books originally written in English published between 1990 and 2023: 1) a literary novel from the USA or the UK, 2) a literary novel from any nation excluding the USA and the UK (i.e. a transnational novel), 3) a popular fiction work from any Anglophone nation, 4) a non-fiction work (autobiography, memoir, narrative journalism, essay) also from any Anglophone nation.

I have already drafted the list of book sets, which has not been easy. To begin with, I don't know how many students I will have, so I have planned lists for between 35 and 68 students. To complicate matters even more, I decided that, to prevent students from reading four books published in the same year, each of their books should belong to a different period: book 1 (1990-1997), book 2 (1998-2006), book 3 (2007-2014), book 4 (2015-2023). This means that, for instance, student A might read a 1992 non-fiction book, a 2000 UK/USA literary novel, a 2011 transnational novel, and a 2018 popular novel, while student B might read a 1995 popular novel, a 2002 non-fiction book, a 2009 UK/USA literary novel and a 2021 translational novel. And so on.

I have drawn a gigantic list of almost 300 books, which is still growing. Initially, I decided to put on that list 2 books of each type per year (so, 8 in total), which I selected using GoodReads (they have lists for each year) and diverse awards (Man Booker Prize, Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, Commonwealth Award and others like the Miles Franklin, Nebula, Hugo, Arthur C. Clarke, and a handful more). If this sound like a very painful task, believe me when I say it was great fun. It *is still* great fun, since I am not done. I am coming across more and more interesting books, and beginning to break my own rule of having just eight books per year; in the end, a few students will be given a choice between two titles for some of their four categories. I have excluded in any case extra-long books above 450/500 pages, and a few others that I know will not work. Just today I have crossed out Julian Barnes's very disappointing *The Sense of an Ending*, but have decided to leave Alice Munro's *Open Secrets: Stories*, despite the enormous scandal about her daughter's revelations that the author knew she had been sexually abused by her stepfather. The student who gets Munro in his/her set will be given a second option.

To be honest, I'm not so sure how I have distributed the books but the sets look great (I'll post the list in my website when the semester is over), and each could be potentially used for the whole subject. Taking into account the randomness of the whole procedure this feels good. Have I read the 300 books? Noooo…. I have read about half along the last three and a half decades. Now I am reading a lot, as I am beginning to see that not all the books might work well (and discovering plenty of exciting titles I had missed). I have left on the list books I don't like or that I have abandoned for, here is the thing, I will be teaching students to write reviews, which is something no other teacher in my Department is doing. They will have to form their opinions beyond my own preferences, and that is going to be indeed a challenge since so far they have been trained to do academic work in which the opinion about the text studied is not a central element.

So, if you follow me, try to imagine a class of, say 45 students, each with four different books to read (I will assign them at random, possibly just following the alphabetical list). In the first two weeks I will teach students a brief introduction to current history, the publishing industry and the main literary trends. Then we'll start working in blocks of three weeks, one for each subperiod (1990-1997, 1998-2006, 2007-2014 and

2015-2023). Sessions will consist of the following: in the first half (40 minutes), we'll read reviews from all sorts of established publications and websites, and from social media like GoodReads. In the second half (40 minutes) students will talk to their classmates about the books they are reading and how they will review them. Every three weeks, then, students will read one book and write one review, but they will also get to hear about many other books in conversation with their peers. If, say, the class has 45 students, they will hear about 176 books, apart from the four they read.

I have already used many times flipped teaching, with students teaching each other using different texts. In my most recent MA subject, for instance, each student has worked on four films, but they have learned about 42 more from their peers. My record was set in 2020, when the 45 students of my course on Cultural Studies taught each other about 90 documentaries; you can read their work here: *Focus on the USA: Representing the Nation in Early 21st Century Documentary Film*. The novelty in Contemporary Fiction is that instead of 10-minute presentations in front of the whole class, I'll use conversation. Students will have to keep track of who they speak with and which books they are reading and will have to hand in their list at the end of the subject. This time I am not aiming at publishing an e-book with their reviews, though I have not discarded this option fully for two reasons. One is that UAB does not allow me to include publication of the students' reviews in GoodReads, as I originally wanted to do, because this is an external platform. I am considering opening a blog, which could run for as many years as the subject is taught, but I don't know whether UAB accept my request. I am right now waiting for the web team to reply.

If the experiment fails miserably, I'll go back to traditional teaching based on a common set of books for all students. If it works, I've already prepared the subject for many years to come since the beauty of the four-book sets is that they can be used as many times as a I want and with many different students. I am learning very much and being surprised in many ways. Also dismayed: it is evident that the 1990s were an astonishing literary decade in all the four categories I am dealing with. In more recent decades, there is a palpable decline in overall literary quality and narrative interest, with many authors failing to establish lasting careers and many overhyped books being actually quite poor. The literary novel is no longer ambitious, the popular novel is derivative. I would say, however, that non-fiction remains very strong and growing in strength. It has been a challenge, by the way, for me to choose the literary authors outside the UK and the USA, for I am not really familiarized with transnational fiction beyond a few key names. I have now, however, a wonderful reading list to go through.

I'll keep you posted, as usual.

28 July 2024 / FROM MICHIKO KAKUTANI TO EMILY MAY: OF DETHRONED QUEENS

I was going to write about my increasingly worrying addiction to GoodReads. In the end, though, this has become a post about the deprofessionalization of book reviewing, based on a consideration of the very diverse influence of reviewers Michiko Kakutani and Emily May, the former a stalwart of *The New York Times* and the latter of GoodReads. I have not found any piece connecting or comparing them, but I would certainly encourage other bloggers to further the comparison for what it reveals about the end of an era in literary appreciation which should concern all of us, book lovers.

Michiko Kakutani (b. 1955), was *The New York Times*' book critic from 1983 to 2017, a task for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 1998, "For her passionate, intelligent writing on books and contemporary literature." Kakutani, who has

a degree in English from Yale University, where John Hersey was her mentor, was initially a reporter for *The Washington Post* and *Time* magazine, before being hired in 1979 by the *NYT*. During her four-decade tenure there, she became known for her biting reviews but also for her support of writers whose careers she helped to launch (though she could be nonchalantly vicious in reviews of their later work, as Zadie Smith knows first-hand). Writers feared Kakutani so much that, as a *Slate* article notes, "her name became a verb, and publishers have referred to her negative reviews as 'getting Kakutani'ed'."

In the same article, published on occasion of her retirement as a critic, Marissa Martinelli wrote that "her only voice *was* authority, the Timesian declaration of critical judgment. (…) She delivered her reviews with the serene assurance of the always-right, secure in her belief that she could even see into writers' hearts to see just how deeply they were feeling" (original emphasis). When *The Guardian*'s Rachel Cooke asked Kakutani in a 2020 interview about being feared and her sense of responsibility, she replied: "I just tried to review each book that came along on its merits. I'd started out at the *Times* as a reporter, and when I first turned to reviewing, an editor gave me this advice: think about it as a form of reporting but with the addition of your own carefully considered opinion." She was then only 28, and my guess is that she carried the smugness of the young reader into the persona she created for herself as what we would call today an influencer and, seeing that it worked, kept it on. The real Michiko kept herself so private that someone at the *NYT* quipped they knew more about J.D. Salinger.

Kakutani quit the *NYT* to become, of all things, a published author of a couple of books against Trump, the bestsellers *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (2018) and *The Great Wave: The Era of Radical Disruption and the Rise of the Outsider* (2024). She also published in 2020 *Ex Libris: 100+ Books to Read and Reread*, which might seem to be her personal response to the likes of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994). I leave for another post whether Kakutani became Bloom's replacement when learned college professors ceased being influential among readers. Seemingly, Kakutani was happy enough to retire from criticism to write books, but, as *Vanity Fair* explained, her voluntary buyout was part of the *NYT*'s plan to "budget for some 100 additional reporters;" these buyouts also included "other notable *Times* figures" such as Charles Duhigg, Ian Fisher, LaSharah Bunting, Bruce Headlam, and Fernanda Santos. End of an era.

In the new era, Kakutani has become the object of scathing reviews both in the media and the social media. Dan Kois called her "bland" and panned with glee her 2024 book: "Michiko Kakutani, expert reviewer, has reviewed the past 10 years. She's read everything there is to read on the internet, and taken extensive notes, and now she's delivering her take. *Well, was it good?* No—it was bad" (original emphasis). Kakutani's GoodReads reviews place all her books below the critical four-star rating; *The Great Wave*, published in February this year, only gets a paltry 3.20 rating, with just 133 ratings and 27 reviews, which means nobody cares for it. First lesson, then: a book critic should never become a published author (except for selections of their reviews). Second lesson: the power of the professional reviewer is gone.

Now, let me explain a few more things before I get to Emily May. In 1995, Amazon first introduced its customers' review features, an idea that seemed at the time extreme. In a note published in August 2023 by Vaughn Schermerhorn, Director of Community Shopping at Amazon, which enthuses about the scary "new AI-generated customer review highlights," Amazon boasts that "While the idea wasn't universally embraced, it was embraced by our customers." Indeed it was. The problem was that, when it came to books, other sites were gaining traction, and the rising star was GoodReads.

GoodReads, Wikipedia reports, was launched in January 2007 by Otis Chandler and Elizabeth Khuri Chandler. Attracted by its 20 million monthly visits (by July 2012), Amazon purchased GoodReads on 28 March 2013, which unleashed a flood of negative

comments about how this would increase Jeff Bezos's power over the publishing industry, as it has done. You may read the Wikipedia article and other sources for details of the programming interface, the Discovereads book recommendation engine, and the algorithm used to recommend books. For me, the main issue is how GoodReads has radically changed the way book reviewing works, not only because of phenomena such as review bombing and others, but because it does not use professional reviewing.

Unlike booktubers or booktokers, who can monetize their videos (see for instance NerdWallet's article on TikTok), GoodReads reviewers may get free books to review but no other compensation; they may, of course, link their reviews to their own YouTube channels or book blogs. In principle this seems fine. However, the problem is that by giving away their reviews, GoodReads contributors are helping Amazon mine data for free and destroying in the process the professional market for book reviewing. As Arvyn Cerézo explained in *Book Riot*, GoodReads is hard to monetize, but "it remains a data gold mine for the corporate giant as it retains its hold over the publishing industry. GoodReads and/or Amazon is probably getting more mileage with tons of user data they collected throughout the years, and that's all that matters in the digital age. Just ask Meta." This is why although I opened an account back in 2013, I have never posted any reviews. If I must work for free, then I'd rather do it here in this blog.

This is where Emily May comes in. This English woman is the most popular reviewer of all time on GoodReads, with currently 6079 books rated, 2074 reviewed (her reviews average 300 words), 150000 followers and 648044 votes. In her inactive YouTube account, she presents herself as the founder of book review blog *The Book Geek*, though this is no longer available (or I can't find it). According to her LinkedIn profile, May joined GoodReads in 2013, the same year she opened her blog, though her stats page indicates was already a user years earlier. In a GoodReads interview posted in 2017, May is introduced as a Yorkshire native living in Los Angeles, where she works "as a freelance editor and beta-reader, giving publishers feedback on soon-to-be-released novels." A reader of about 200 books a year, May hopes that her followers find thanks to her recommendations "books they love. I don't care if that's because they read a book I reviewed positively or if they saw something they personally enjoy in a negative review I wrote." She claims to be "pretty good at recommending books specific to the individual asking" and takes "great pleasure in recommending authors I perceive to be underappreciated" in all genres. Although she also has a bookstagram account this is private.

I have not come across any interview in which Michiko Kakutani discusses GoodReads reviewing, booktubers or booktokers, or mentions Emily May. Their names never overlap, though it seems to me that they should. Both women occupy similar positions as top reviewers whose judgement many other readers heed, but belong to extremely different worlds. Their influence (for both are influencers) stretches in different directions: Kakutani defended a high literary standard in tune with her *NYT* readers; May is guiding omnivorous readers like herself, who just want the next good read. Her advantage, and that of GoodReads, is that she reviews all kinds of books, not just novelties but also books from the past (I hesitate to use the word 'classics').

Kakutani appropriated for herself the power to make or break literary careers, while for May that is not an issue; she is in fact far less prejudiced and, as such, indirectly puts Kakutani to shame for her often prejudiced reviews. This does not mean that GoodReads contributors have no standards; they do, but they connect mostly with their own pleasure in reading, not some external 'History of (Anglophone) Literature'. Besides, authors generally fear the power of GoodReads, as they should, but at least the platform prohibits the attacks *ad homine*, which is not the case in the press. Or the other way round. Irked by her reviews, Jonathan Franzen once called Kakutani "the stupidest person in New York" and Norman Mailer suggested she was just the token Asian

presence in the *NYT*, insults that GoodReads simply does not tolerate. There, Emily May's voice, no matter how powerful, is *not* the voice of authority, but just once among a chorus that, yes, often sounds cacophonic. So why should she be berated as Kakutani has been?

I'm just warning future historians of Literature that this major turning point, the passing of the critical relay baton from Michiko Kakutani to Emily May needs to be studied in depth, for the present and for posterity. May has not reviewed (yet) any books by Kakutani, but it would be interesting to see what she has to say about the dethroned queen. On the other hand, it would be equally interesting to see how Kakutani would rate May's reviews, for here's the other main novelty: before GoodReads, nobody rated reviews. Emily May has not actively dethroned Kakutani, and the latter appears to have abdicated of her own accord, but there has been a transition, perhaps from a monarchy to a republic of the letters, which May presides at no cost to Amazon, the tyrant threatening to drown all other voices in publishing. Ultimately, Jeff Bezos is running the show, and let's please recall that while he does not own the *NYT*, still a major player with its lists of bestselling books, he does own *The Washington Post*.

What about my own use of guidance by Kakutani or May? Well, I've never used it. I've never been a *NYT*'s subscriber, and I disliked the few reviews I read by Kakutani for her smugness, the worst sin of unkind reviewers. I don't follow May either, for the simple reason that I don't follow anyone on GoodReads. I think the point of this platform is its ability to merge many voices in a very noisy hubbub, usually very rich, and I don't really care whether a person whose opinion I read has many followers or highly-rated reviews. I am possibly using the platform in many wrong ways, but, then, I am a pre-social media relic trying to cope with this mad brave world of contemporary literature as well as I can.

More next week…

2 August 2024 / WHEN SHOULD YOU SEND YOUR CHILD ABROAD TO LEARN ENGLISH? (AND WHY?)

Today's post is my reaction to the new article "'The Experiential Learning of English': Discourses of Catalan Families on Teenage Educational Mobility Abroad" (originally published in Catalan as "'L'aprenentatge vital de l'anglès': els discursos de famílies catalanes sobre la mobilitat educativa adolescent a l'estranger"; *Treballs de Sociolingüística Catalana* 34 (2024): 13-29). The authors are my Department colleague Eva Codó and Andrea Sunyol (of University College in London). The article is based on a series of 13 ethnographic interviews with Catalan families who have sent their children abroad to learn English (to the USA, the UK, Ireland, and Canada), among which there are members of my own family. So, my reaction is necessarily personal, as well as professional.

The article studies the current habit of Catalan middle-class families of sending their children abroad at an earlier age than years ago. In my time, when secondary school (*bachillerato*) comprised the ages from 14 to 17, it was more habitual for the very few families who could afford the high cost to send their children abroad in the year before university (ages 17-18), when they were supposed to take C.O.U. (the *Curso de Orientación Universitaria*). Judging from the experience of the only one of my friends who spent the year away (in the USA), there was no concern that this would affect the university entrance test (then *Selectividad*, today EBAU, *Evaluación del Bachillerato para el Acceso a la Universidad*). My guess is that most of the children sent away were good students anyway (why would parents spend so much money on a not so brilliant child?).

With the reform of secondary school in the early 1990s, *bachillerato* begins now at age 16, lasting for two years. This means that, because children and parents are today more worried about the EBAU marks, they choose to send their children abroad before *bachillerato*, at age 14-15, which corresponds to the last year of ESO (Educación Secundaria Obligatoria). This difference is not part of the considerations of the article I have cited, but I believe that it is crucial, for reasons that I explain later. It also means that not necessarily all the children sent away to learn English subsequently study *bachillerato* or take a university degree.

The main goal of Eva Codó and Andrea Sunyol is to explore the narrative that the families build and rely on to place their children in the hands of strangers often for a whole academic year, during which they might not meet their children in person (low middle-class Catalan families can hardly afford visits to the USA or Canada, considering they are already spending 20-40000 euros). The families invest that money in, as the authors note, solving the 'problem' of English, believing that the chances to learn C1-level English locally are too low, despite the teaching received in the school and in extracurricular activities. Since (I'm citing the article's abstract) "The notion of immersion" has been "naturalized as the most authentic and effective way of learning a language 'well'," the families assume that this is what their children need, discarding other alternatives that can be implemented at home (reading, watching films and series in original version, paying for personal tutoring by a qualified native speaker, organizing meetings with foreign families and, of course, taking shorter stays abroad).

One thing that surprises me very much in this process is that neither in the past nor in the present do families check to what kind of class and regional accents they are exposing their children. In fact, from what I have seen in my family, once the country has been chosen, the agencies that organize this kind of stay do not offer much choice. My nieces have ended up in very different places of the country they chose, and have acquired, accordingly, very different accents, one more rural and the other more urban, which other native English speakers can identify but that we, their family, are deaf to.

The matter of class is also crucial. Most host families are working-class and receive payment for welcoming children into their homes. This means that, often, middle-class children return home from their year abroad with distinct regional *and* low-class accents, to which, again, Catalan families are deaf. Since, as Eva and Andrea note, the parents lack instruments to check the linguistic progress of their children, and do not pay attention to the issues I have raised, this situation goes unnoticed. If you want a personal example, my husband (whose family background is middle-class) spent three summers (ages 15 to 17) in the homes of Southern English working-class families, whereas I (working-class in origin) spent one year (ages 20 to 21) employed as an au-pair girl mostly in London. My accent is far posher than his, which is always a source of hilarity whenever we hear each other use English.

Eva and Andrea observe that although the families' "goal is for their children to acquire spontaneous and fluent oral communication skills and, if possible, a 'good' accent," whatever that means, parents' narratives "foreground their children's transformation into confident, responsible and independent quasi-adults." In their conclusions, the authors write that

> Thus, the attraction of adolescent educational mobility lies in the fact that it allows different contemporary social logics to be articulated: firstly, the logic of responsible parenthood and the cultivation of capital; secondly, the logic of distinction (which makes them attentive and follow, in a pioneering way, the latest educational trends), and, finally, the logic of care (which, through almost obsessive planning, makes it possible to ensure the emotional well-being of children without jeopardising the return on the investment made). (27, Word's translation from Catalan)

This seems to be, in view of the experience of my nieces, absolutely accurate: the success of their stay has been measured by their parents according to how much more mature they seem to be after their return, and only secondarily (if at all) by the quality of their English. The younger, besides, has adamantly refused to talk to me in English so that I can get an approximate idea of her progress out of shyness, she claims.

I have a number of important doubts about the whole experience that, in a way, I am voicing here because the parents who choose to send their children abroad have already processed them and mostly refuse to enter any discussion (as I have learned). To begin with, there is an emotional price to pay. I don't have children myself and cannot tell what it feels like to be away from your own child for so long, at an age (14) when they are still very immature. No hugs, no kisses for so long…? Being homesick initially is only natural, but if the feeling lasts for long it can certainly spoil the stay abroad or even end it; there are, of course, cases of homesickness so strong that children need to return home. I can't begin to imagine how these children are received by their parents. Children and parents adapt mostly well to the distance, which has certainly shrunk thanks to social media, smartphones and low-cost travel. Less tech-savvy members of the family, and by this I mean the grandparents, have a harder time. I'm not saying that children should not go abroad because their grandma will miss them; what I mean is that the emotional part of the narrative is downplayed in the families' decision to send young teens abroad to learn English. On the other hand, I suspect that beyond the matter of learning English by immersion, there is a certain mutual relief in finding a good excuse for parents and children to take time off each other. But that's just a suspicion.

I'll return now to the age factor, which is important in ways that are not usually accounted for. At 14 (or even 15 or 16), a teen has usually a poor understanding of their own cultural and sociopolitical background, and will show little interest in learning about these matters in the host country. Their aim, beyond learning English, can be making cool friends, and having a good time with their host family. There is in that sense a serious disadvantage in comparison to the previous habit of sending the children abroad at the later age of 17, when young persons have a much bigger freedom to pursue other interests beyond school. Of course, there is also a certain advantage in not having to worry about your 14-year-old going to parties or clubs all night long, or drinking and doing drugs with their peers. But, if you get my drift, no 14-year-old will ask to see a museum, or a play, or to be informed about the political situation of their host country. A 17-year-old thinking of attending university just might. Imagine, for instance, the difference between being 14 and 17 right now in the USA, and what that would mean for the visiting teen in question as regards their understanding of the mighty struggle between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump.

Eva and Andrea indicate that about 15% of the fourth-year students of ESO go abroad to learn English, which seems quite a lot. I don't know which role peer pressure plays, but I will assume that the more children from a given school go away for a year, the more their younger peers choose to imitate them. I assume that having been away gives the returned teen extra points for cool, though I have no idea. A thing I am discovering in my own family is that children are reticent to discuss their experiences or the consequences, finding even the mildest curiosity a bit too much (no idea if this is general). My impression is that the narrative that parents engage in is built by word of mouth, on the basis of what other parents claim and not so much on the basis of what children narrate (or want). But that's for Eva and Andrea to explore and explain.

I spent my first year abroad, as I have noted, as an au-pair girl, between the second and the third year of my five-year *Licenciatura* the year before Erasmus grants were introduced in Spain. I learned during that year that Scandinavians frequently took a gap year abroad before university (I don't know if they still do that) and my current impression is that this is what we need. If I had a teen who needs to improve their English,

I would suggest that they finish *bachillerato* and then take an extra school year in high school, in any of the Anglophone countries. Or work (perhaps sheep-shearing in Australia would be too much, but who knows?). They could take EBAU when they return, knowing much better how to handle themselves and what they want to do with their lives. I would invest much care in finding out where my child is going, and in learning with them the basics about the local culture, social uses, politics, media and so on, so that their experience could be enriched from day one. As for the accent, I am not so snobbish as to advice parents to send their children only to Oxford, but I would check, so that the child does not end with the kind of accent that makes Anglophone job interviewers wince. But, then, I don't have children and who am I to tell parents what to do with theirs?

Thank you, Eva and Andrea, for an extremely illuminating article that should be compulsory reading for all those considering sending their children abroad to learn English. And please continue exploring that peculiar corner of current social life in Catalonia.

5 August 2024 / THINKING WITH PROF. JOHN CAREY (I): WHY WE SHOULD READ LITERATURE

One of my colleagues has just retired and among the many books of his extensive library that he has given away (for that's what happens with the books we store in our offices) I have rescued John Carey's *What Good Are the Arts?* (Faber & Faber, 2005). I have very fond memories of reading Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (1992), one of the key books, together with Ken Gelder's *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004), in my postgraduate and even postdoctoral education. They were astonishing eye-openers.

What Good Are the Arts? is the published version of the Northcliffe Lectures which Professor Carey offered at University College London and that might be the reason why the tone is more reader-friendly than in our current extra-dry academic prose. I wonder if Faber & Faber (today Faber), the house for which T.S. Eliot was editor, is still in the business of publishing major academics. Unlike most academic presses, they don't welcome proposals and I don't recognize among the many authors any big academic names. Now we write highly specialized texts for other specialists and we no longer have intellectuals like Carey in our midst. Merve Emre rightly wondered last year "Has Academia Ruined Literary Criticism?", subtitling her article for *The New Yorker* "Literature departments seem to provide a haven for studying books, but they may have painted themselves into a corner." The *Yale Review* has gone this Summer down the same lane in a special issue (indeed Merve Emre is one of the contributors) wondering whether in the age of GoodReads we still need cultural criticism. My point is not so much whether we need professional academic criticism (of course we do) or whether this has painted itself into a corner (of course it has) but whether we have any academics left capable of crossing the divide and addressing a general audience as humanists. Carey, currently 90, might be among the last. Noam Chomsky (95) also comes to mind.

Prof. Carey uses the first part of his volume to debunk all the attempts offered up to the early 21st century to justify why we need to be in contact with the arts. His main target is the rather absurd idea that experiencing art makes you a moral person, a Kantian boutade that Hitler, an art-lover and frustrated artist, thoroughly disproved. Yet, Prof. Carey still wants his readers to believe that contact with arts is positive and that literature is the most complete art, so he uses the second part of his volume to build his argumentation in support of this view. Here's his thesis statement:

> "I am not suggesting that reading literature makes you more moral. It may do, but such evidence as I have come across suggests that it would be unwise to depend on this. (…) My claim is different. It is that literature gives you ideas to think with. It stocks your mind. It does not indoctrinate, because diversity, counter-argument, reappraisal and qualification are its essence. But it supplies the materials for thought. Also, because it is the only art capable of criticism, it encourages questioning, and self-questioning." (208)

I'll complement the quotation with the final words of the volume: "Literature does not make you a better person, though it may help you to criticize what you are. But it enlarges your mind, and it gives you thoughts, words and rhythms that will last you for life" (260). Prof. Carey, as usual, is confusing reading with reading literature. Reading other types of books, newspapers, magazines, journals, blogs, websites and even tweets may "may help you to criticize what you are", or, as we are seeing these days with the rise of the far right (again!) turn you into a much worse version of yourself. Literature does not have a monopoly on raising self-awareness though, of course, as a Literature teacher I know that the inner life of the persons who refuse to expand their limited lifespan by refusing to read about other people's experiences in fine writing cannot be very rich.

I was recently at a family dinner and I was dismayed by the following. Firstly: my mother, who used to be more demanding as a reader, is now following recommendations from our local library and by other persons in the family that incline her towards much lighter fiction; she's currently reading Colleen Hoover. Secondly, a family member who used to be a regular reader (of that lighter fiction, but fine, ok) suddenly has 'no time to read' because she's now watching series. Thirdly: another family member told me he never reads and he is 'fine' (though fast veering towards the extreme right-wing, if he's not already there). Fourth: a younger family member, who is a very good student otherwise, adamantly refuses to read fiction (typically she loves series) because, guess what?, it's boring. Nobody respects my opinions as a reader, or cares about what I write, and that is the plain truth. I wonder what they think I do professionally, or if they think that I am reading Shakespeare all the time. I don't ask them because I will convince no one that reading literature makes you a mentally richer person, and far more critical. And I can't even convince my family, how can I convince my students, or my readers?

By literature I don't just mean the canonical names that most interest Prof. Carey, but any text in which you can appreciate that the author has put a lot of effort, talent, and intelligence in their writing. I mean the kind of text that keeps you engaged and that makes you feel a) 'my God, this is so well written', b) 'my God, this author is so talented and has worked so hard', and c) 'my God, I can feel my mind expanding as I read'. You can get this multiple impression our of a variety of authors (not necessarily out of the canonical authors), but, of course, you can also read for entertainment less illuminating texts of any type. The point, as Prof. Carey insists, is that reading literature improves your critical thinking skills, and this is why persons who never read are not 'fine'. I'll use an analogy with sports. Whenever my doctor tells me that I should exercise, I don't reply 'I'm fine, look at me'; I'm honest and I reply that I'm lazy and I don't like sports. These days watching the Olympic Games, I wallow in my laziness as I marvel at what other people do with their bodies, but I would never have the cheek to tell an Olympian that my body is as well developed as theirs. I marvel, then, that people who don't exercise their brain pretend that they're 'fine' and tell me so to my face, being as I am a professional brain athlete. Maybe the problem is that we don't have intellectual Olympic Games, though I can't imagine what they would be like.

To understand what reading good books (of any genre) does for one person, I just need to think of my life without books. What a wasteland! I agree with Prof. Carey that only literature can fully awaken your intellectual capacities in ways that no other art can do. The little I understand about life does not come from cinema (as much as I love

movies), theatre, painting, sculpture, photography or other arts I may also enjoy as an observer, including fashion, home decoration, knitting, or embroidery. It comes from reading fiction and non-fiction (I'm not a good reader of poetry or plays). Reading, in fact, has helped me to understand and appreciate the other arts, though I thank from the bottom of my heart the arts teacher who sent us to see Henry Moore's exhibition at the Fundació Miró in 1982 (I was 16), without telling is anything about what we would see. I fell in love with the sensuality of Moore's paradoxically soft stone figures and that is the purest art experience I've had in my life. There have been many other moments like that, but they were bolstered by lots of previous reading to be better informed about what I was seeing and feeling.

I am well aware that book readers are a minority and that we, the demanding book readers, are an even smaller minority. In fact, I am aware that within the number of book readers the space occupied by the more demanding readers is fast shrinking. This has to do with your classic four-front perfect storm: a) the literature children are taught in school often obeys principle of nationalist glorification rather than reader training; b) social media have destroyed the authority of the professional reviewer and passed it onto far less experienced readers; c) the canon battles of the 1990s foregrounded many neglected texts but often at the expense of critical judgement; d) the post-modern breaking of barriers between low and high culture has convinced too many readers that anything goes. And there is even a fifth front: we have all become niche academics, even when our fields are as big as post-colonial fiction or the 18th century. By this I mean that our critical conversation cannot be general because everyone is reading different texts. No, the solution is not going back to the narrow canon dominated by dead, white, cis, straight, European males writing in major languages, but the current fragmentation is not helping, either. One may be ashamed of not having read Dickens or Tolstoy, but there is no shame in not having read any post-WWII authors. There are so many even the best reader is bound to miss many major names.

So, if reading literature does not make you a moral person and people refuse the invitation to have their minds expanded and their critical skills sharpened, should we, the demanding readers, still insist that reading is indispensable? I insist because I am a professional paid to read and to teach others to read, but I tire of being also a nagging witch (or bitch). Right now, perhaps the only hope for literature is, as I have hinted, that it is compared to exercising and reading presented as the best possible way to keep your brain healthy for many decades. Sadly, just as athletes may die of heart attacks in their youth, great readers still suffer from Alzheimer's, but I still have hopes that one day people will understand the need of keeping mentally fit by reading the literature that best feeds your brain. Start training…

6 August 2024 / THINKING WITH PROF. CAREY (II): HOW WE READ LITERATURE

This is the last post of the current academic year (2023-24), in which I have written relatively few posts (only 39) because I have been writing yet another book (*Masculinity in Contemporary Science Fiction by Men: No Plans for the Future*, Liverpool UP) and getting the Spanish translation ready, both for next year. Nothing saps blogging energy like writing a book…

I'm returning to Prof. John Carey's *What Good Are the Arts?* to further investigate his claim that literature is superior to all other arts both as a pleasure and an instrument to enhance our critical skills. Prof. Carey (it's funny, but I can't just refer to him as 'Carey') claims that the element that leaves "space for the reader to create" and "empowers"

them is "indistinctness." The reader "must come to some kind of accommodation with the (sic) indistinctness in order to take meaning from the text," he claims and "For that, the imagination must operate" (213-214). Or co-operate, I would say. Although the reviews of the book mention the concept and discuss it briefly, there does not seem to be any further academic theorization of indistinctness in literature, though I'm not sure this surprises me in view of how odd the notion appears to be at first. Prof. Carey proposes that the more accomplished authors seed their texts with little gaps that call for readerly collaboration, which didn't make any sense to me until I started thinking, by analogy, of cinema and considering how the best appreciated art-house cinema films do exactly that. They make you collaborate in the construction of meaning and even of aesthetics.

Prof. Carey offers as textual evidence plenty of passages from canonical writers in which the meaning is suggestive but unclear, which requires close reading and interpretation. He suggests that this activity is what makes reading literature so pleasing and fulfilling, as we need to create while we read, and we need to create more the more demanding a text is. This is a very beautiful concept but the problem is that it implies that the writer is playing a game with their readers when, quite often, writers claim that they don't think much of their readers. On the other hand, if I think of an extreme case of literary ambition and difficulty such as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and my own adamant refusal to invest time and energy in reading it, then I see Prof. Carey's point. And the other way round: in the worst texts, the ones in which the writing is appallingly clumsy and flat, the reader's creative imagination cannot find indistinctness; there is, metaphorically, no meat to sink in our brain hooks and nothing to get out of the text. Please, note that I'm not discussing plot content for, although the experiment has never been done, it is quite possible for the same story to be narrated in bad and good prose, just as the same feelings can result in bad or good poetry. It depends on talent.

I have wondered for many years how we see when we read, coming to no conclusion worth writing down on paper. In my Victorian Literature classes I have shown my students images of fashions, paintings, architecture, means of transport, means of communication, entertainment and a long etcetera, hoping to furnish their minds with elements they might need to understand what they are reading. Even so, this is a largely unexplored area of literary criticism, although there is a strong suspicion that people enjoy reading less and less because the large barrage of audiovisual input is making the exercise of using our imaginations more and more onerous. I saw yesterday on the bus a mother with a screaming two-year-old little girl; I first assumed the toddler was hungry or dirty, but it turned out that she wanted her mother's smartphone to watch something, I couldn't tell what. This image, though common, was shocking to me because I realized that there is no way a toy or a book can compete for this little girl's attention with a screen. She's already lost for reading, as most people are.

Prof. Carey continues his lesson, with a comment that complicates matters even further:

> How we read, and how we give meanings to the indistinctness of what we read, is affected by what we have read in the past. Our past reading becomes part of our imagination, and that is what we read with. Since every reader's record of reading is different, this means that every reader brings a new imagination to each book or poem. It also means that every reader makes new connections between texts, and puts together, in the course of time, personal networks of association. This is another way in which what we read seems to be our creation. (242)

A consequence of this subjectivity is that we have each "our own literary canon, held together by our preferences" (242). This is, in principle, also how audiovisual consumption works, but the difference is that the image, with its external material

existence, is less open to interpretation than literature. If, suppose, I teach Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and select an image of the famous monolith for discussion, this cannot begin with discrepancies about the colour and shape of the object because these qualities are fixed. Of course, we can endlessly debate what the monolith stands for in the context of the film, an indistinctness is one of the key elements in the general critical reception of this film. If, in contrast, we read the passage in which Pip first sees Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, each student (and the teacher!) will come up with a different personal image, suggested by previous readings, having seen any adaptations and their experience of eccentric middle-aged women. The readers less willing to engage with Dickens's imaginative demands page after page will not enjoy his novel; those of us who find his creative indistinctness enjoyable, just love it.

Prof. Carey's indistinctness is not limited to description, a vast field today awfully neglected by authors and readers, but to anything transmitted by writing. What he misses, even though he is not at all a literary snob, is that literary writing can fail to engage the readers' imagination while less ambitious writing can do the trick. In fact, if you consider his argumentation, we should celebrate philosophical prose as the highest literary genre, above poetry, for it is the one most obviously designed to awaken and sharpen our minds.

This leads me to wonder, and to ask my fellow readers, what makes us quit a book, which is the most negative kind of judgement beyond the one-star review. I've noticed that I don't tell myself "I don't like it" but "I'm getting nothing out of this book" and "I'm not investing more time and energy on this author." I expect to get pleasure and enrichment out of a book, of any kind, and if I find myself counting the pages left to finish it, I already know that my reading is not working. I'm quite capable of plodding along to the last page if I need to teach the book or write about it, but as a rule I stop reading even after the 50% mark if a book is doing nothing for me. Perhaps the right criteria to judge a book is not the one to five-star review of its content but something along the lines of: 1) I did not finish the book, 2) I finished it but only by making a huge effort, 3) it was not a huge effort to read but I did not get much out of it, 4) I generally loved reading it, and 5) that book was absolutely worth my time and my creative engagement. Any opinions about the content rather than the experience are bound to be debatable.

I asked the person who recommended Collen Hoover to my mother why she had enjoyed that author and the reply was that she is easy to read. No comments on the content of her novels, which are romance. My mother reads for entertainment and there is no need for her to read texts that are too taxing, yet following what she reads (best-selling fiction by national and foreign authors) I find that, in general, avid readers like her are lowering their standards because the market is providing them with low-standard fiction, and not because they demand easier texts to read. Again, I'm not speaking here of content —after all, Jane Austen wrote romance and she is universally venerated as a literary icon. I speak of Prof. Carey's indistinctness. That this is a problem beyond genre or plot can be seen in my own increasing difficulties to read science fiction, which I have always loved precisely because it challenges me to view the universe from different angles and forces me to imagine all the time. The SF I am trying but failing to read these days no longer does that; it has become clichéd in its prose, its plots and its worldbuilding.

If I don't feel the author is working hard, I disengage. To compensate, publishers who know their books are not to strong, increase the hype around them hoping for an effect similar to cinema's first weekend. Yet, after a year at most many new novels have lost their sheen. The more accomplished perdure, whether they are Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy or anything by Paul Auster. But who wants to read the *Twilight* saga today? And look at the Man Booker prize list, and see how many of the winners and finalists since 2000 you can recognize. I do agree that eating fast food now and then is convenient and that a diet based exclusively on gourmet dishes is too rich, but I have the

feeling that fast-food literature is growing, that the gourmet version is disappointing (and as ridiculously overhyped as high cuisine) and that the well-cooked fared that used to be so fulfilling is losing its flavour. Alternatively, this is just the classic problem of aging readers who find it more and more difficult to get their synapses stimulated (or their stomach filled with wholesome food).

If I have made myself clear, and understood Prof. Carey correctly, the better kind if literature has something missing that the reader needs to supply using their creative imagination, whereas the worst type is missing nothing and so the reader has nothing to contribute and enjoy. This is the opposite of what we have been assuming: that the better literature is richer and loaded with gifts, and the worst empty. Prof. Carey fails to be fully convincing in his argumentation because he thinks that only canonical writers are capable of producing the challenging indistinctness he loves as a reader. Yet, being less exquisite in my tastes, I can very well say that many other texts are capable of tickling my readerly bones. The problem comes when you limit yourself to just one type of the less challenging kind of text and cannot see beyond that, or when you refuse to exercise your imagination by reading. How sad!

I'll stop here, for I have on the table a very appealing novel that wants to play with my imagination and I just can't resist its call.

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