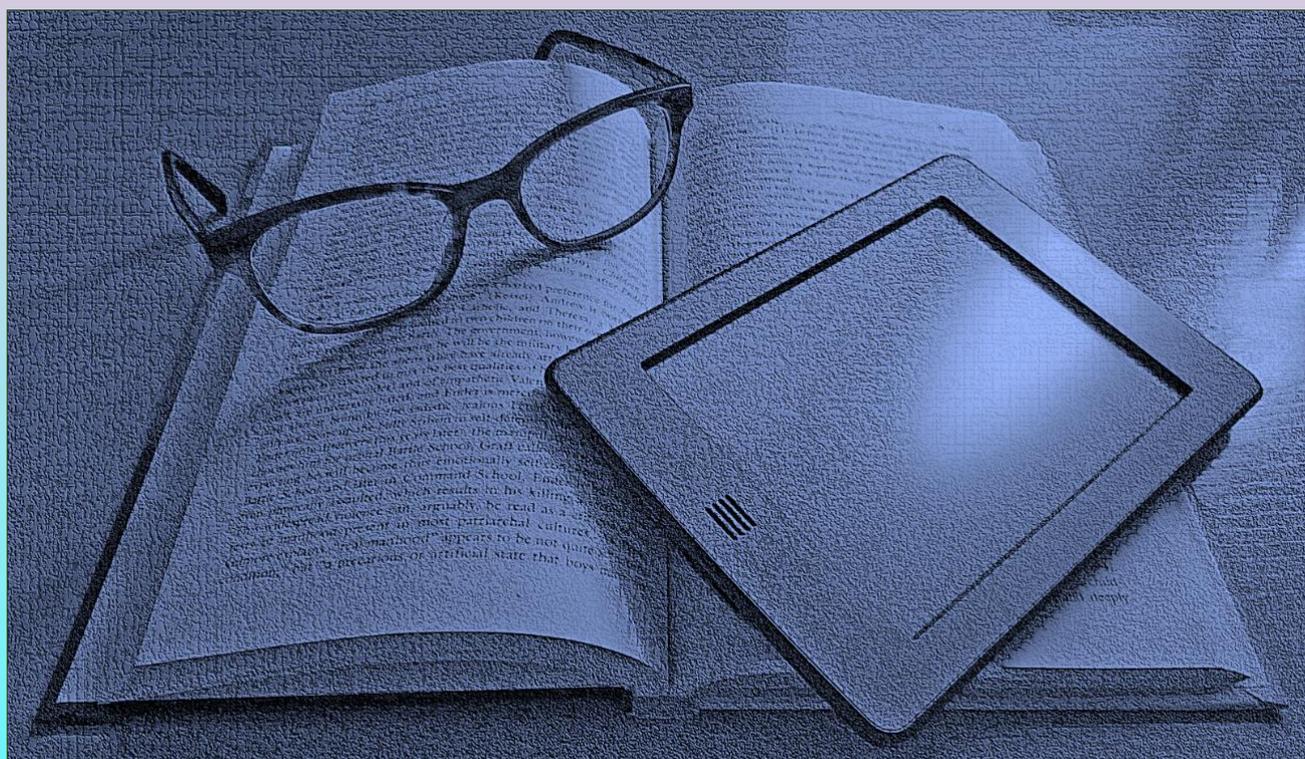


THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

VOLUME 15: September 2024-August 2025

Sara Martín



UAB

Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona

2025

CONTENTS

3 September 2024 / RETHINKING CULTURE, AVOIDING MERE CONSUMPTION	1
10 September 2024 / RECOMENDATIONS AND REVIEWS: IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES	4
16 September 2024 / HOW BOOK REVIEWS WORK: SOME EXAMPLES	6
27 September 2024 / THE LAYERS OF THE CONTEMPORARY	9
1 October 2024 / TOWARDS A BOOKLESS SOCIETY?: MUSINGS FROM JURASSIC PARK	11
18 October 2024 / CAN WE ADMIRE WRITERS A LITTLE BIT MORE, PLEASE? (THANK YOU!)	13
26 October 2024 / PATRIARCHY MADE ME DO IT AND THE 24 GENDERS	16
30 October 2024 / ABOUT MY FATHER (AND WHY I'M WORKING ON MASCULINITIES STUDIES)	19
17 November 2024 / WILL I EVER WRITE A NOVEL? (I DON'T THINK SO)	21
1 December 2024 / THE OTHERS (YES, THE WRITERS) AND MY PARASITICAL SYNDROME	24
8 December 2024 / THE GOODREADS CHOICE AWARDS 2024: SOME NOTES	26
18 December 2024 / RETHINKING INTRODUCTIONS (AGAIN)	29
3 January 2025 / SWAMPED BY NOVELTY: 2025 BEGINS	32
12 January 2025 / A KIND OF MAGIC: ON AUTHORS' RELUCTANCE TO DISCUSS IMAGINATION	34
24 January 2025 / THE ONSLAUGHT: THE WEEK IN THE US PATRIARCHY	37
1 February 2025 / SEX ON THE SCREEN: ENOUGH IS ENOUGH?	40
8 February 2025 / TWO PROJECTS WITH STUDENTS: MINISERIES AND REVIEWS ..	42
14 February 2025 / VILLAINOUS WOMEN IN FICTION: A BOOK SOMEONE OUGHT TO WRITE	45
20 February 2025 / POLITICS IN CLASS: PRO-HUMAN RIGHTS	49
2 March 2025 / SOME THOUGHTS ON MISOGYNISTIC AGEISM: FROM GREY HAIR TO DEMI MOORE	51
13 March 2025 / FIVE YEARS AGO: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION	54
24 March 2025 / THE LOST SOUL OF THE TEXT (ON <i>HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY</i>)	57
31 March 2025 / <i>ADOLESCENCE</i> : A LIMITED CONVERSATION	60
7 April 2025 / FIRST THOUGHTS ON MY NEW SUBJECT: ON MEMOIRS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES	63
27 April 2025 / THIS GLARING MEDIOCRITIY: AWARDS, OVERHYPE AND THE STATE OF STORYTELLING TODAY	66
5 May 2025 / I DON'T LIKE YOUR LIFE: JUDGING MEMOIRS	69
11 May 2025 / WHAT LIES BEHIND LITERARY THEORY: NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION OF CHARACTER	71

19 May 2025 / IN HOW MANY LEVELS DO CHARACTERS IN NOVELS OPERATE?: A PRACTICAL PROPOSAL.....	75
27 May 2025 / USING BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND ATTENDING CONFERENCES: WHEN CONVENTIONS WERE ESTABLISHED.....	77
31 May 2025 / WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE USA AND WHAT CAN BE DONE FROM ABROAD (WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THAT!).....	80
11 June 2025 / MORE ON SECONDARY CHARACTERS: TANCREDO, THE ITALIAN APOLLO, IN EÇA DE QUEIROZ'S OS MAIAS (1888).....	83
20 June 2025 / A MUCH DEEPER DAMAGE: LOSING ACADEMIC LIFE TO AI.....	86
2 July 2025 / LEGAL FICTIONS OF THE 19 TH CENTURY: THE CASE OF ANNA KARENINA.....	89
6 July 2025 / THE MEANING OF 'WORK': REFLECTIONS ON LABOUR.....	92
13 July 2025/ (DON) JUANITO SANTA CRUZ: THE SEDUCER AS MINOR CHARACTER IN FORTUNATA Y JACINTA.....	95
22 July 2025 / WHY VICTORIAN NOVELS ARE SO LONG (AND WHY WE LACK PATIENCE TO READ THEM).....	98
28 July 2025 / OMINOUS PROPOSALS: AI-DEPENDENT STUDENTS CANNOT BE OUR EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS.....	101
4 August 2025 / VISION AND SUPPORT: WHAT PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS CAN DO TO SUPPORT ACADEMIC FREEDOM.....	104
11 August 2025 / THE MATTER OF THE LENGTH OF CLASSES: SOME THOUGHTS.....	107
CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE/LICENCIA.....	110

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 2024 and August 2025. The fourteen previous volumes are also available from <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328>, together with the three first volumes (no. 12, 13, and 14) in Spanish self-translation.

Sara Martín,
Barcelona, August 2025

Sara.Martin@uab.cat

<https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/>

THE JOYS OF TEACHING LITERATURE, VOL. 15

3 September 2024 / RETHINKING CULTURE, AVOIDING MERE CONSUMPTION

Happy new academic year! May it brings plenty of positive energy for teachers and students, and the thorough defeat of patriarchal darkness in all fronts and nations. I'll begin my fifteenth year as a blogger (yes, time passes!!), with a reminder that the all the yearly volumes can be found [here](#), including the Spanish-language volumes of the translated version that I started publishing in 2021. I have considered taking a break, but finally decided against it for fear that this would end the habit of writing a weekly post for good, so here I am!

This post is inspired by Sergio Fanjul's controversial [article](#) for *El País*, published two days ago, "Ser cultureta cada vez mola menos: las alucinantes metamorfosis del capital cultural" ["Being a hipster is becoming less and less cool: the mind-boggling metamorphoses of cultural capital"]. As you can see, the colloquial 'cultureta' does not translate well into English, requiring something as clumsy as 'culture nerd' (or hipster...). Perhaps it is typically Spanish to diminish 'being cultured' to 'ser cultureta'. Fanjul's main argument is that whereas in the past (a time between the 1980s and 2014...) the persons who saw themselves as intellectually attractive flaunted their credentials, name-dropping like crazy from Faulkner to Kaurismäki, today nobody conceals their ignorance or their preference for products that lack cultural prestige (um... reggaeton).

Fanjul's main argument, based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, is that today subcultural capital, based on popular culture and social media, dominates. Nothing new, then, but still something relevant, worth reconsidering. As social anthropologist Carles Feixa explains in the article, young people, feeling excluded, discredit official culture, mistrusting education and all the cultural institutions. Class distinctions have been, besides, erased long ago with the upper classes consumption of both high and low culture, though indeed the same product can be consumed differently depending on class.

Fanjul's interviewees also comment on the lost figure of the intellectual and the media's general disinterest in culture. Fanjul cites Víctor Lenore's essay [Indies, hipsters y gafapastas, crónica de una dominación cultural](#) (Capitán Swing, 2014), as a referent to understand when the need to be 'moderno' started waning. Cultured persons who enjoy minority tastes have always been seen as snobs (since the 18th century, when the word was first used), but at some point ten years ago the prestige they used to enjoy collapsed under the weight of the more democratic impulses unleashed by the social media (Instagram, for instance, was launched in 2012). As music sociologist Fernán del Val explains in Fanjul's article, there is far less room for the underground: every artist wants to be mainstream and audiences want to participate in that aspiration, which explains Rosalía's quick transition to worldwide fame and Taylor Swift's dominance.

Fanjul's article, of course, is designed to provoke. Hipólito Ledesma rushed to publish the following day in [Jot Down](#) "La cultura según Fanjul: esnobismo reciclado para las masas modernas," a piece in which he criticizes the author for too easily dismissing the creativity of current high culture, overlooking the many compartments of youth

subcultures and reducing cultural snobbery to recent times. This seems spot on. You might also want to take a look at the 100 comments by readers of Fanjul. I'll quote some. Alejandro González writes that "Confundir consumir cultura con ser culto, como hace el autor del artículo, demuestra su nivel cultural" ["Mistaking consuming culture with being cultured, as the article's author does, only shows his cultural level"]. Jesús Lobato replies that "La cultura es la ausencia de ignorancia, sí, pero con el añadido de desarrollar un espíritu crítico" ["Culture is the absence of ignorance, yes, with the addition of developing a critical spirit"]. Possibly the best observation belongs to Jose C: "La cultura, la de verdad, no es ostentación. En realidad, ni siquiera es conocimiento (ése es sólo el camino): es sabiduría, madurez y hondura espiritual. Lo otro está bien para quien quiere eso, lucirse, ante quien se deje. Pero, la frase es muy vieja, dime de lo que presumes, y te diré de lo que careces" ["Culture, the real one, is not ostentation. In reality, it is not even knowledge (that is only the way): it is wisdom, maturity and spiritual depth. The other thing is fine for those who want that, to show off, to whoever they want. But, the phrase is very old, tell me what you boast about, and I'll tell you what you lack"].

My impression is that to judge more accurately the situation we need more personal testimonials from persons in all classes and of all ages. More cultural memoirs, so to speak. Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018) is a good example of the story of declassing that today many are narrating. I have just read Berta Collado Cabrera's autofiction *Yeguas exhaustas* (Pepitas de calabaza, 2023) and was left with a need for more texts closer to our own Spanish reality. Collado narrates how she (or her main character) progresses from her working-class rural environment to a university career (in Spanish Literature) only to be expelled and end up teaching in secondary school. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being a secondary school teacher, part of a collective that is key in guaranteeing that culture survives and upward social mobility is maintained. Yet, the protagonist is frustrated in her aspirations. I don't know what happened to the real Berta, but the academic career of the fictional character is stopped by her abusive partner, a snobbish, misogynistic associate teacher in the same university who represents all the faults of the Spanish academic system. That is not, however, the main point I want to rise but the protagonist's realization that despite her PhD she has not managed to belong to the same social group whose culture she is sharing and studying.

This leads me to an idea I should further develop, perhaps in a memoir of my own: culture, as we understand it today, is a dream that some of us in the uneducated working classes once had but failed to fulfil. I am going to enormously simplify what I mean, but I think that authors as different as Matthew Arnold and José Ortega y Gasset describe in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and *La rebelión de las masas* (1922) miss the constant social exclusion of those who want to be persons of culture starting from an uneducated position. Collado includes in her book an anecdote that perhaps explains everything. Her protagonist, then an undergrad, lends a male classmate she fancies (who, unlike her, has been educated in an exclusive private school) her class notes. He returns them and she is mortified to see that he has corrected her 'Fuco' to 'Foucault'. Their relationship does not progress. I think this is an example of what has failed spectacularly in the expansion of education, and hence of high culture, to the middle and the working classes. Many of us, unlike what Collado narrates, are part of the official cultural system (as academics, authors, artists, managers of cultural institutions) but we have not been integrated into the social classes from which the culture we spread and study originates.

Part of our unease translated back in the 1990s into a staunch defense of popular culture (or subculture, a word I hate), aided by the work of intellectuals such as Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall, and the establishment of Cultural Studies. Culture, Williams explained, is the sum total of all cultural manifestations in a society, and we should not distinguish between high and low because everything is valuable. I had in that sense an epiphanic moment visiting the [Museo del Encaje](#) of Camariñas, in A Coruña, when I saw that the working women who had woven all that marvellous lace were great artists, equal if not superior, to the painters and sculptors canonised by high culture.

The problem is that the academic legitimisation of popular culture did not take into account this social rejection I have mentioned. The dictum that all cultural manifestations are valuable intended to expand the idea of culture so that, complementing the Enlightenment's belief in education, all individuals would learn to appreciate all types of culture. Ideally, education would enable all persons to appreciate value in all manifestations, but this has not happened. Actually, the upper classes have benefited, for they have become more omnivorous culturally. In contrast, feeling excluded by the false promise that learning higher culture was a path to a higher social standing, many working-class people or middle-class people of working-class origins have retrenched, defending their own cultural manifestations as signs of identity. I am not speaking here, of course, of the beautiful lace displayed in Camariñas, but of other cultural manifestation such as, yes, reggaeton.

Reggaeton, like jazz or rock in the past, occupies a liminal position in that it is not yet officially 'culture' but might soon be. It is the cultural manifestation most often mentioned by the readers of Fanjul's article as an example of a subculture whose defence outs any person as uncultured. This is complicated. I don't want to discuss the age factor but, logically, the younger a person is the more likely they are to defend a cultural manifestation they see as their own. And the other way round: an older person with a wider cultural experience is less likely to defend new cultural manifestations, as they can compare them to others. If you have seen 3000 films in your 50 years of life, for instance, most of them art-house, you are less likely to be charmed by superhero films.

What worries me in all this conversation around culture, then, is the inexistent conversation among persons of different cultural experiences and the lack of openness, particularly among the uneducated. I was once uneducated, gave myself an education, decided this was too narrow, widened it to include popular culture and here I am, a little bit wiser and far more critical for all my efforts. I am also capable of enjoying many more cultural manifestations, from ballet to comic books. I still don't like reggaeton (or, for that matter, classical music), but this is to a great extent because I see it as a culture that excludes me as a woman and an older person.

In any case, as this is an issue Fanjul does not raise, I am worried above all by the increasing lack of culture of the culture creators, manifested, for instance, in the low quality of the film scripts written by persons who don't know about past cinema. Or, the complaint of that creative writing student who does not want to read other persons' books but wants everyone to read her books. A young reader who comments on Fanjul's article protests that if the young are less cultured, this is the fault of the older generation. I myself stopped reading *El País's* cultural supplement, Babelia, tired of the insistence on fame and success and the constant urge to find the 'next best thing', so maybe this young reader has a point. Culture cannot be something based on constant novelty, but a far

more reposed combination of the old and the new, otherwise we're just speaking of consumption. And that demeans all of us.

I'll stop here... more next week.

10 September 2024 / RECOMENDATIONS AND REVIEWS: IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES

I have finally started teaching my new subject Contemporary Literature in English after months of preparation and this is my first post directly connected to the issues raised in class. The subject, as I explained to the students, has two main purposes: familiarizing them with the most relevant fiction and non-fiction published between 1990 and 2023, and teaching them to write 800-word formal reviews (which I intend to publish in a book reviewing blog that will remain open for as long as the subject, a core fourth-year one, lasts).

I don't know what is the first important lesson they have learned—possibly, that there is a significant difference between living memory and history based on each person's age, which conditions how we understand the contemporary. Only I and a student who was then seven saw live on TV the 9/11 attacks of 2001; most students were not even born then, so that world-altering event is for them history and for us two living memory.

The main lesson I have learned is that I might be teaching the students an obsolete skill by training them as reviewers. I realized this when I asked them how they choose their next book. The replies I got were: recommendations from friends, getting interested in the source of a film adaptation, following an author they already liked, Twitter, Tik-Tok, Instagram, YouTube and, yes, GoodReads, though this social network is only used by about 25% of the class. What is missing from this list? The elephant in the room: professional reviews published in traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and academic journals. In contrast, when I later met a colleague, who is from Argentina, and I told her how much I had enjoyed the non-fiction volume *La llamada* by Argentinian journalist Leila Guerrero, she told me that she had just bought the book because of the excellent reviews she had read. I myself got to know about this book also through the reviews (*El País*) and through the weekly newsletter of its publisher, Anagrama.

As I explained, perhaps too briefly, one thing is a recommendation and another a review. The comments that friends and book influencers offer tend to be brief and laudatory, and not really analytical. Their intention is that you read the book they recommend because they believe it will give you pleasure, though book influencers often benefit in more direct ways by getting other books to recommend for free or even a fee. Friends and social network commentary is usually brief, and in the case of friends it is usually followed by an offer of conversation (“read it, and then we can talk about it”). It would be quite surprising if a friend, or a social network user, offered a lengthy dissection of a book, though of course that might happen. The review, and not the mere recommendation offers the dissection.

The book review is a central staple of the literary magazine, which has the aim of presenting novelties to the reading public and guiding it. Wikipedia informs that the first literary magazine was *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (1684). In Britain, the

newspapers came first, with *The Oxford Gazette* started in 1665 and *The Times* in 1785 (I mention the newspapers because most carry book reviews in their culture section, I don't know if they did that originally). The first great British literary magazine was Francis Jeffrey, Henry Brougham and Sydney Smith's *The Edinburgh Review* (1802). *The North American Review* (1815), as Wikipedia informs "the oldest American literary magazine. However, it had its publication suspended during World War II, and the *Yale Review* (founded in 1819) did not; thus the Yale journal is the oldest literary magazine in continuous publication." I am not going to summarize here the long history of the literary magazine but merely to observe that until the advent of social media 20 years ago (Facebook was launched in 2004), most readers got their recommendations from reviews in print media (apart from friends and family, and let's not forget librarians) until recommendations and reviews became separate types of text.

When I was an undergraduate, in the 1980s, I would read religiously the reviews in the newspaper *El País*, and follow the literary magazine [Quimera](#) (founded in 1980). Of course, I also asked my teachers for guidance and read academic publications (mainly books) to navigate my way into the classics and books from the recent past which were already literary history. For popular fiction, I followed mostly friends' recommendations until the first websites started appearing (mid to late 1990s) and other sources of information came up (also lighter literary magazines such as [Qué Leer](#)). The main point I'm raising is that before social media, recommendations and reviews were offered with no expectation of any reply from the persons receiving them. Print media offer unilateral communication and if you didn't like a review, there was no way you could make that public.

Then the like button was invented for the new social networks (in 2005) and most print publications went online, allowing a space for readers' comments. Please, note that Amazon had already offered customers' reviews in 1995, a year before the internet was first commercialized in Spain. Since books are one of the main products Amazon originally offered (now you can buy anything), it can be said that their portal is the first unofficial social network in which readers interacted offering book ratings and book recommendations, sometimes extended enough to qualify as book reviews. GoodReads, launched in 2007, presented itself as a social network focused on offering opinions on books, an idea shared by other networks but that worked particularly well for this one. In 2013 Amazon purchased GoodReads, seeing that its own network (Shelfari) could not compete with it. Many protested then that GoodReads would be dominated by Amazon's commercial interests and in many ways this is what has happened.

I took to class a [review](#) of the last book I have read, Olivia Laing's *The Garden against Time*, published in *The Observer*. At 880 words, this is similar in extension to what students need to write but, of course, as I read it aloud to them we all saw how far this exquisite, literary review by Rachel Cooke is from what a beginner can manage. A student commented that it seemed to have been written for academics, but I think she meant for highly educated people. And this is main question with reviews: whether they deal with fine literature like Laing's book or with Amazon's new series *The Rings of Power* they do aim at readers who are if not highly educated at least highly knowledgeable. The reviewers themselves need to be knowledgeable. Imagine writing a review of *The Rings of Power* with no idea about who Tolkien is and no familiarity with his work.

The problem with recommendations is that you don't have to be highly knowledgeable to make them: you just offer them. Nobody would hire a poorly trained

person to write professional reviews for a newspaper or magazine, for it would be quickly obvious that this person lacks the knowledge of the field that reviewing requires (this applies to book reviewing but also to any other type of review, including music or videogames). Yet, social media have no filters and anyone can post their opinions. In social media like GoodReads the border between recommendation and review is blurred, as many users offer very lengthy texts, often reproduced from their blogs. No serious publication, however, would hire any top GoodReads reviewer, for they are good at recommending but not so much at reviewing. What GoodReads does very well is to offer an overview of how readers (or at least the readers who use GoodReads) like a book. Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* has a staggering 4.15 rating, with 3.8 million votes and 278.000 'reviews' (that is, readers' opinions), but it is not the object of serious reviewing in *The Guardian* or *The New York Times* (curiously, both review the film adaptation). Why not? Because it cannot pass any minimally serious critical filter (this has nothing to do with its genre but with its confection and content).

So, although originally I considered asking students to post their reviews to GoodReads (UAB told me I could not do that because this is an external platform), I see now that their training in writing reviews needs to aim higher, not with recommendation in view (or a star rating) but with opinion and analysis. Of course, posting an opinion online in any social media is easy, even if that opinion is abusive and written in colourful language. What is far more difficult is aiming at publications controlled by a demanding editor, for which you need quite specific skills. And possibly contacts. I have myself published quite a few academic book reviews, but I have no idea how one manages to publish a review in prestige newspapers or literary magazines. I'll have to ask!

16 September 2024 / HOW BOOK REVIEWS WORK: SOME EXAMPLES

It turns out I have published 30 reviews, all of them of academic books, and I have two more about to be issued, which amounts more or less to one per year on average in the 33 years I have been an academic.

For me, the most memorable for me is, no doubt, my review of Michael Pitts' [*Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Speculative Fiction: A New Man*](#) (Lexington Books, 2021). I got annoyed by the author's leniency with the women writers, whose male characters are far from perfect and I'm afraid that I wrote a negative review, though not a nasty one. This was for *Extrapolation*. As happens, Michael Pitts became shortly after I penned the review the editor of a symposium on masculinities for the *SFRA Review*, in which I very much wanted to participate, being a specialist in SF and masculinities. So, I swallowed my pride and embarrassment and emailed Michael explaining the situation. Now that I call him my friend, I can tell you that he is an extremely kind man. I showed him the review, which I offered to withdraw, and we finally agreed that I would go ahead with it but with more emphasis on the positive aspects of his book, which are many. To my infinite surprise, Michael not only accepted my piece on Blake Crouch and Matt Haig for the [symposium](#), published in 2022, but also proposed that we worked together co-editing a book (on masculinities and SF series) that we're now about to hand in to Bloomsbury Academic. The darned review was published in *Extrapolation* in 2023, but please skip it. Or read it as the strange beginning of a beautiful friendship. I have learned the lesson, and I have made a point now of only reviewing books I truly like.

Michael is currently the review editor of the *SFRA Review* for fiction, so after telling my students our story, I have introduced them to the journal as an example of academic reviewing. We have read from the most recent issue the non-fiction [review](#) by Sarah Nolan-Brueck of Debra Benita Shaw's *Women, Science and Fiction Revisited* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). As I have explained to my students, it is common for academics to start reviewing as doctoral candidates, which is what Nolan-Brueck is, when you are minimally knowledgeable and can review with confidence major scholars like Shaw. I wrote my first review in those circumstances, feeling that it was very wrong for me to give an opinion on a book edited by Susana Onega, one of the most relevant Spanish scholars in English Studies. My good colleague and friend Felicity Hand gently pushed me to write the review (one of my first publications) and guided me in how to do it. As a general rule, you need to be extremely diplomatic when criticizing other people's work, much more so when they are your seniors, but you should never flatter so much that you sound hypocritical. In the case of my not so positive review of Michael's book I acted as an obnoxious senior scholar, as I grant and I'm sorry for.

Nobody really teaches how to write academic reviews: we just learn from example. This is a genre that is deceptively simple but that really involves a lot of hard work. You need to show your reader, another academic, that you have understood well the text, can highlight the main arguments, and are able to offer valuable criticism at the level the text deserves. You're tested as a reviewer as much as the author is tested. Nolan-Brueck's review of Shaw's volume includes the usual ingredients: a presentation of the volume (as it happens, it is a revised edition of a previous volume), the enumeration of the contents chapter by chapter, a sustained analysis of the main arguments, a description of the strong points, a criticism of the weaker points and a conclusion, stressing the pleasure (or displeasure) the book reviewed provides. Nolan-Brueck's review is positive, and I found it interesting that she only has a negative comment to make, concerning whether Shaw is right to use a novel by N.K. Jemisin, as this author tends to write fantasy rather than SF. My impression is that Nolan-Brueck had more to say in that regard but has been cautious. On the other hand, given the laudatory tone of the review, one can imagine her and Shaw discussing Jemisin over coffee.

To introduce students to fiction reviewing, I have chosen from the same issue of the *SFRA Review* Kristin Larsen's [critique](#) of John Scalzi's entertaining SF novel *The Kaiju Preservation Society* (2022). Larsen, a professor of astronomy at Central Connecticut State University has published a variety of non-fiction volumes, including *Science, Technology and Magic in The Witcher: A Medievalist Spin on Modern Monsters*. The tone she uses is not as formal as that of Nolan-Brueck's review of Shaw's volume, but she is clearly addressing peer readers of SF, which is why the focus falls on the rather good quality of Scalzi's worldbuilding. Since Larsen is not part of Scalzi's professional circle, she feels free to complain that the description of the kaiju is not nuanced enough. Curiously, though she generally praises Scalzi's novel, finding it above what could be expected from pure entertainment written during Covid-19's lockdown, Larsen ends her review forecasting that Scalzi's novel will not pass the test of time and will have been forgotten in five years' time unlike more solid SF productions, including the author's other novels. I assume that Scalzi, who makes no bones of presenting himself as a blatantly commercial author, will be satisfied enough.

Fearing that my students might find it too difficult to imitate Larsen's review or others of similar high standard, I have shown them Luchia Houghton's [review](#) of the same

novel by Scalzi, published in her own book reviewing book. The structure is necessarily similar (presentation, plot summary, positive aspects, negative aspects, conclusion) but Houghton separates each part into sections and tends to be much more informal, frequently using exclamation marks and bullet points. Tellingly, whereas Larsen recommends Scalzi's novel for first-year college readers, particularly in science degrees, Houghton enthuses about her own identification with the characters. As I have told my students, you're not supposed to make personal commentaries of this kind in a serious review, though you can indeed be present in the text, voicing opinions and, most importantly, tracing intertextual connections. To be perfectly fair, Houghton's review does a very good job of telling other readers why Scalzi's novel could be fun to read if they are the kind of reader attracted by monster stories, but her analysis is shallower than Larsen's. I have also warned students that one needs to be careful about the inclusion of diversity in texts. As happens, Scalzi never discloses the gender of his protagonist Jamie, an authorial decision which Larsen is not too happy about, as she finds it gimmicky. Houghton is much more pleased, though she unwittingly discloses that this might just be Scalzi's strategy to attract young readers rather than heartfelt support for diversity.

I ran out of time to share a third [review](#), by professional author Paul Di Filippo for *Locus Magazine*. This is closer to what I would like the students to produce, but still quite sophisticated for, let us not forget, ideally reviews should make a point beyond the book reviewed. Thus, Di Filippo notes that Scalzi's novel, "like those of Ernest Cline, is what I have come to think of as 'self-aware science fiction.' That would be science fiction where everyone in the book is steeped in the actual literature and acknowledges the existence of past classics," such as *Jurassic Park* or *Godzilla* (though we found in class none of the three reviewers seemed aware of Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim*). This self-awareness, Di Filippo further argues, consists of "conveying a pop-culture sensibility. Too much of this can, I think, throw the reader out of the dream, reminding them of the fictiveness of it all. But on balance, Scalzi handles it well." This means that SF is now solid enough for authors to expect characters and readers to recognize allusions to previous SF, as literary readers may recognize allusions to Dickens or Joyce. I would say that this post-modern approach to writing SF started back in the 1990s, but Scalzi, who loves Robert H. Heinlein, has always been upfront about his many borrowings (or homages) from the past. It's interesting that his characters have joined the author in this.

So, apart from the ability to structure opinion in the sequence that all reviews require, the better kind of reviewer can drop names and even come up with new theoretical concepts. The three reviews, by the way, make a point of citing the author himself, which I find a very good idea. The citations come from interviews and the author's note included in the novel, so that the reviewers can simply reproduce the author's claims about the origins and purpose of the novel. It is, besides, particularly difficult to find enough substance to review an unambitious novel like *The Kaiju Preservation Society*. It is always easier to comment on a denser book. The three reviews, in any case, judge the novel according to the author's purpose (writing light entertainment) rather than apply a general literary standard. In comparison to the novels by any Nobel or Pulitzer prize winners, Scalzi's bubbly adventure story is scarcely worth paying attention. But if it is reviewed from such different angles by a variety of reviewers this is because within the genre he practices, SF, Scalzi is quite good (though he is not the best, far from it).

Having read the three reviews, another main issue that needs to be highlighted is how precise the plot summary needs to be to avoid giving too much away. The reviewer needs to go beyond the one-liner (“this is a novel about a young person stumbling into another dimension with giant monsters”) but also carefully avoid spoilers (“in the end...”). As a general rule, the more formal reviews published in academic publications might contain spoilers, but the less formal reviews do not. In GoodReads, warnings are included so that if, like me, you don’t mind spoilers, you can be better informed about the books you plan to read. More next week!

27 September 2024 / THE LAYERS OF THE CONTEMPORARY

I’m writing today in the hopes of better developing an idea I didn’t have time to expand on in class yesterday. I have been thinking about the meaning of the ‘contemporary’, both in the sense of how we consume books and which layers (I will explain) compose the totality of books at our disposal.

How we access books is the easier issue to consider, so I’ll get it out of the way quickly. We purchase books (in person or online); we borrow books (from family, friends, or the library, either in paper or digital); and we steal books. Readers have always stolen books, mostly the ones that once borrowed proved to be too attractive to be returned. The novelty that the 1990s brought, with their world wide web and the internet, is the chance to steal the digital files of e-books. Before that, readers would often go through the time-consuming process of photocopying books, a practice, I was told, so extended in South America that it caused the bankruptcy of well-known publishers such as the much missed Bruguera.

Scanners helped next to digitalize books, which made stealing them easier. Today we have websites I will not name where every book (or almost) can be found. As the author of several very expensive academic books I see the need for piracy and illegal downloading, though precisely because I’m a published author I also see how frustrating it is to have one’s books stolen. Since, however, e-book readers are not as popular as expected and because reading on other screens (smartphone, tablet, laptop, PC) is not that comfortable, the sale of books printed on paper remains stable. Poor trees!! This does not mean that books necessarily survive in print format. My students were surprised to learn that unsold books are routinely pulped, often after being granted just a few weeks of shelf life in bookshops.

What concerns me next is what we find when we walk into a bookshop or a library, that is to say, how the book offer of each particular period is constituted.

Whether you read book reviews or scholarly introductions to a certain period, it seems that novelties constitute the core of what is available to readers at a given time. This is a distorted view of reality. If you look at the most popular choices in libraries, they reveal a certain time gap so that the books published last year or two years ago turn out to be the most demanded; apparently, this is how long it takes for word of mouth to circulate. I find it very hard to believe that there are readers only interested in novelties who limit their reading to what is issued in the last few months. Only professional reviewers or keen amateur reviewers read in that way, which means that they probably swallow quite a lot of trash that won’t even survive for a year in the bookshops.

There is, however, much more to the contemporary than the pure novelty and the relatively recent book. In that sense, libraries are different from bookshops since they need not retire as quickly the older books from the shelves. A new book may survive for as little as one month in a bookshop, before being remaindered (sold at a reduced price) or pulped, but very old books survive in libraries. I once wrote a [post](#) called “A visit to the library: the sad look of yellowing books” in which I bemoaned how forlorn most books in our Humanities library look. I love the smell of new books but I’m totally put off by the smell of ageing paper, which no doubt explains my mood in that post. To be honest, I don’t visit our library often enough because I use all the time its digital resources (no problem with smell!!!) but you can see that a library is outdated if the number of new volumes is small. Also if, as happens occasionally in ours, the very old paperbacks are barely held together with cellotape.

The question is that the contemporary extends its realm into the past, necessarily. Readers may be interested in the classics, in the books recently liberated from copyright (you can find them in Project Gutenberg or Many Books) or in the rather miscellaneous long-sellers (a category that covers the literary and the popular classics but also plucky survivors). Readers can be also attracted to second-hand books they have come across or ‘discovered’ and, indeed, in translations, which may insert into the contemporary a book from the past of another culture. Adaptations also have an impact. Recently, *El País* [reported](#) that the Japanese are now going crazy for Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967) because of a new Netflix [series](#), with the Japanese translation “selling some 290,000 copies in eight weeks... almost the same as the total number of the three hardcover versions printed in the past 52 years.”

So, all this means that for the reader what constitutes the contemporary is different than for the writer or the historian of Literature. Writers are also readers, which means that they are influenced by all the books that came before them. The admired Prof. Harold Bloom came up with the concept of the ‘anxiety of influence’ to name what overwhelmed writers may feel before such an imponent legacy, particularly if they wish to be at the same level as an admired predecessor. I have already narrated here how I once heard the late Martin Amis, one of the most admired British novelists, declare in public that he never read his contemporaries. When I approached him for an autograph and asked him why should I read him since he was my contemporary, he told me sheepishly that I looked like a “gambler.” I found that very interesting, for what he was saying is that reading books from the past is a safe bet, and who knows what one will find in the books from the present.

The ones who distort everything, I think, are the historians of Literature. In principle, historians work trying to make sense of the past, producing as Hayden White famously said “an agreed upon fiction.” History aims at the truth, but, as we know, this has many layers, hence the need to agree on some basic narrative (rather than ‘fiction’). To name a classic example, we know that the Holocaust caused the death of 6 million Jews, but a more nuanced approach reveals that there were many other types of victims, from Roma persons to Jehovah witnesses, and that concentration camps were first used by the British (copied from the Spanish) during the Boer war. The problem comes with the historians who works on the very recent past or the present, for the data that they must handle is massive which makes it very hard to focus on the main trends with certainty.

So what is happening now is that because of the urgency and hyper-productivity of academia, and also because of the reviewers' passion for discovering the next big thing, and other factors such as awards, we are getting a very distorted view of our own contemporary time. I showed to my students the list of Nobel Prize winner between 1990 and 1997 (this is our Unit 1) and they could only recognize Toni Morrison; this was because one of my colleagues has included her in his Modern US subject. As one of the students noted, awards and prestige are useless if they are not accompanied by popularity. Historians of Literature, however, focus on prestige, ignoring popularity, which is why the books culled from the past by them are not necessarily the ones most appreciated in their own time. Likewise, the view that scholars are giving of contemporary Literature is missing a lot in so many ways that it is bound to be extremely sketchy. You might think this is only normal and logical but it needs to be pointed out that looking at the present with a focus on what might survive in the future is a rather futile exercise.

So, to sum up, I would distinguish between the 'contemporary' in the sense of all that is available to a curious reader today, and the 'contemporary' in the sense of what academic historians of Literature are selecting from each year's novelties as the most likely texts to survive our time. This creates a strange tension, with plenty of books collapsing under the weight of excessive hype – a matter perhaps for another post...

Sorry I could not explain myself better in class...

1 October 2024 / TOWARDS A BOOKLESS SOCIETY?: MUSINGS FROM JURASSIC PARK

I have shared in class with my students the article by Gaby Hinsliff's "I Fear Books Are Going the Way of Vinyl Records – A Rarefied Pursuit for Hobbyists" [published](#) in *The Guardian* a couple of months ago. This article begins as the typical piece on summer reading to take then a turn towards the also classic essay bemoaning that people don't read books anymore.

The key circumstance is an observation by the poolside: a person keeps scrolling on their smartphone rather than read the paperback that lies abandoned (perhaps that's the author herself?). Hinsliff's main thesis is that we humans need narratives but we're beginning to prefer the short fixes provided by Instagram Stories or similar rather than the long read that a book provides. For her, this is like stopping your hunger pangs with junk food snacks when, she claims, hunger can only be satisfied with a proper meal. Please, note, that when Hinsliff refers to book reading she actually means fiction, that is to say, novels. Please, also note that by summertime reading she means just what you can cram in a two-week break, which is not much. Her article also includes a barrage of citations from diverse statistics claiming that the adults who read for pleasure are abandoning that pursuit and so are children. Booktubers and booktokers, and their circles, appear to be an anomaly in an otherwise declining panorama.

Perhaps I was wrong to expect that this article would arise debate, for it is not really a piece with a for-and-against argumentation but a warning that book reading is in danger. As an avid book reader and productive book author myself, I must worry but matters look obviously different for the younger generation, for whom the book is not as essential. I must say that I am enjoying enormously the second part of my classes, in which students interact telling each other about the books they are reading, a different

set of four for each of them. The sight of young people discussing books and moving all over the classroom to meet other students is, frankly, refreshing and rewarding. Mine is not, clearly, a class of students who don't read, but this does not mean they are interested in books as my generation was. Or were we?? Recently, my former poetry teacher, Prof. Josep Maria Jaumà, who retired eighteen years ago, came to deliver the MA programme's inaugural lecture. This was a heartwarming summary of his experiences as a translator of modern poetry from English: Yeats, Larkin, Graves, Frost and so on. Now he is translating into verse a selection of *The Canterbury Tales*. Over lunch we had the classic 'students-don't-read' conversation and he told me that this was the case too in the time when he was my teacher. Few students read then and now, he claims.

I think I am beginning to understand the problem. Those of us who became Literature teachers were the small minority of constant readers in the classroom. To be honest, I lack a clear idea of whether my peers read much or not, though my impression is that they disguised better their non-reading habits, if they had them. If you get a small group of people with the same passion, it seems that everyone must necessarily enjoy it, too, though this might not be the case at all. It is not normal, if you think about it, to be surrounded professionally by so many persons with doctoral degrees in Literature. In fact, we, the Literature staff, are a statistical anomaly, since we all read many books per year. We have assumed that our statistical anomaly extends to all the students that come to us for a degree, and, clearly, this cannot be the case, though it should be. We, professional teachers of Literature and constant readers, live in a bubble that might burst at any time.

The article by Hinsliff was received, I think, with a shrug of the shoulders, perhaps because I insisted too much that books are the way to learning, which for me is part of what the Victorians called self-improvement. What my students claimed, and in particular one of them, is that learning comes from other sources than books and, anyway, not all books provide knowledge. That is absolutely right, of course. I never meant that *only* books provide us with knowledge and, clearly, avoiding awful books is more useful than reading them. My concern is that whatever these other sources of learning are they may lack the depth that a sustained argumentation or narrative can provide in hundreds of pages. Extended audiovisual products (fiction and non-fiction films and series) come close to being as fulfilling, or the shorter texts you may find online (short fiction, essays, articles), but as a boomer I have a deep distrust of what social media can offer.

So, suppose for the sake of argumentation, that Hinsliff's warning materialises and that reading books becomes a pursuit as rare as it was centuries ago, with, I should think, the exception of the Bible in Protestant countries (which explains their much higher degree of literacy than in the Catholic countries). Perhaps I should rephrase the supposition since Hinsliff refers in particular to reading for pleasure, taking it for granted that books will still be necessary for educational and professional training purposes (will they?). What if, as one of the students suggested, parents stop reading to their children or never take them to a bookshop or a library? Can reading for pleasure be lost in just one generation? How can the enthusiasm of booktubers and booktokers halt this trend? Many questions, I know.

I have been investing most of my professional energies in the last years on writing and editing academic books, and perhaps I am projecting onto Hinsliff's article the frustration of the writer who knows that her audience is diminishing. Prof. Fredric Jameson passed away ten days ago, at the age of 90, and I believe that something else

died with him, not just because he was a major intellectual, but because he communicated through books. Both things go together: intellectuals publish book-length essays as novelists publish novels. Perhaps those of us who as students admired authors like Jameson and wanted to produce books, not as immensely influential, but at least satisfactory, are now seeing the rug pulled under our feet. Do I ever wonder why I write books? Yes I do, all the time. This is why, fearing that I have no audience, I write books I would like to read. I assume it is the same for novelists.

I would like to finish with an idea I have already presented here but that might get traction, and that Hinsliff also mentions: diverse studies suggest that reading might work to prevent Alzheimer, and so reading a book would be the equivalent of a dozen hours at the gym toning your muscles. Again, I'm facing the same snag in my argumentation: reading does not necessarily mean reading books; though I doubt that reading tweets does much to stimulate the brain, perhaps reading short stories or magazine articles does.

I'm not done yet, it seems. I told my class that I feel like a Jurassic dinosaur though unlike the poor beasts I see the asteroid coming my way. Coincidentally, my niece asked me yesterday for my copy of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the novel which best captures the fear that books may one day disappear. In the dystopian society Bradbury imagined books are forbidden and firemen have been given the task of locating the hidden caches some book lovers still keep and light a fire with the doomed volumes. The solution Bradbury offers is a return to orality, with readers learning by heart the contents of their beloved books and transmitting them in this way. This is a very pretty idea, which François Truffaut illustrated beautifully in his film adaptation, but I doubt that human memory can hold so much text; this is why we invented writing eventually after using verse for epic poetry.

So, signing off from Jurassic park, long live books and those who love them!

**18 October 2024 / CAN WE ADMIRE WRITERS A LITTLE BIT MORE, PLEASE?
(THANK YOU!)**

The experiment I am running in the fourth-year core subject Contemporary Fiction in English is progressing well, but there are some snags that I'd like to address here. Here we go, then.

We have now finished Unit 1 (1990-1997) and have started Unit 2 (1998-2006) and even though most students have finished reading the first book out of four assigned to them (they had three weeks to do so), some are still struggling. In one case at least this is my fault, as I assigned a student Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* (1991), the first in her series, without realizing it is 800 pages long. The student in question is coping reasonably well, as she tells me that the book is easy enough to read, but I may have made a mistake here.

In other cases I'm sharing the struggle with the students. I have not read the 152 books that the 38 students will read in the subject (four different volumes each student, if you recall) so I'm making a point of reading as many as I can as the units progress. I have read recently some very good books, others less so, but I've got hopelessly stuck with two: Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* and Alice Munro's short story collection *Open Secrets*. Worse than that, these two books have dragged me down so much that I have

stopped reading altogether for a couple of weeks, which is unusual with me. I have spent my evenings instead reading lots of articles from newspapers and magazines (some of which I have used in class), and endlessly poring over Bored Panda's enticing threads.

I managed to read 40% of *Cloudstreet*, a very well-known novel in Winton's native Australia, but its fragmentary nature, the lack of punctuation indicating dialogue and its rather disperse chronology finally put me off. I could finish it in other circumstances, but I see in the end no enticement to do so now. The case of *Open Secrets* is much, much worse. I was about to eliminate Munro from our reading list following the scandal regarding her cold failure to protect her own daughter from her stepfather's sexual abuse. Yet, in the end I decided that as a Nobel Prize winner she deserved some credit. I marvel now that she won this award, for I found the few short stories I managed to read from her book rambling to the point of meaninglessness.

The student reading *Cloudstreet* has loudly complained throughout the three weeks of Unit 1 that he could not cope with it. The student reading Munro has shared with me his puzzlement at her stories; we both have sought in online comment help to grasp what Munro is trying to communicate. So we face now this singular problem: the two students need to write a review of their respective books, but might not be able to finish them. I have given students permission to write negative reviews no matter how illustrious the writer they have been reading may be, but it is really hard to convince them to finish books I myself don't like at all. My approach is that they must act like professional reviewers and finish the books as if they were paid for it; of course, the student in charge of Winton argued back that in real journalistic work reviewers negotiate what to review. He might have a point... I suggested that he cheats by writing the review as well as he can since I have no way to check that everyone has read their books. I know of a film critic, an habitual of the Sitges Film Festival, who regularly wrote reviews of films he never saw. And, yes, I know I should not encourage any student to cheat, but it's a sort of desperate measure.

On average, along the six sessions of Unit 1 students have spoken with 20 to 22 of their classmates. I initially imagined that we could use a sort of speed-dating system, with very brief exchanges so that students would speak to all of their classmates. This has turned out to be unrealistic and in some sessions conversations have been limited to 3 partners (I use 40 minutes for this part of class). Students seem happy to have met and interacted with so many people, some of them classmates they had never spoken to along the years of the degree. In fact, it is clear to me that they very much prefer this part of the class to my own minilectures (lasting the other 40 minutes). I enjoy very much the excitement and the noise; above all, the chance to talk to students individually as I move around the classroom.

So, yes, the classes are lively and apart from their own assigned book, students have learned about 20-22 other books of the 1990-1997 period, which is what I was aiming at. I don't think I am succeeding, however, at convincing students that most of the books in our reading list are indeed worth reading. I don't know what the reviews will be like, but I anticipate that about one third will be positive, one third negative and the rest mixed. I assigned the books randomly and each set contains four very different volumes so the chances that some students have books not suited to their tastes are high. I do have students who grant they have been positively surprised by the first book assigned to them, but I don't see very enthusiastic responses. I am particularly worried by the

impression that very few, if any, will read any of the books their classmates have described to them, now or at some later point.

The book that is pulling me out of the slog of despondency into which Winton and Munro have pushed me is John Carey's *The Unexpected Professor* (2014), a memoir with delicious humouristic touches that deals mainly with his literary education. Carey grants candidly that he did not enjoy any of the compulsory readings as a young scholar who very much preferred popular narratives. Yet, something clicked when he entered grammar school at age eleven, and he started absorbing like a sponge the classics taught to him (apparently nothing published after 1832 was part of the syllabus, on the grounds that Victorian and contemporary literature required no specific training). Although Carey reports the difficulties of other illustrious readers with some classics, he shows great admiration for works as diverse as *Beowulf* and the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Reading him this week I finally realised what I'm missing in class: the centrality of the writer and more admiration for their task. Allow me to explain.

We, readers, are a narcissistic bunch with a poor understanding of the effort it takes to write a (good) book—with the exception of those of us who are also writers. In Carey's memoir, the writer stands above the reader, in this case a young man who has the good luck to get a scholarship to study at Oxford's St. John's college and thus start his own brilliant academic career. He is well aware of the beauties of good literature before he enters St. John's and wishes to take a degree to be able to enjoy them even better. There is never a suggestion that it is the writers' job to please him; the other way round, he wants to acquire an education that will enable him to rise to a level high enough to better understand the art of writing. Carey reads from a position of constant admiration which I don't see that in class, if I have ever seen it. The general position seems to be, rather, focused on the reader's impressions and sensations, with notable disregard for the writer, who is only seldom found to be admirable. I grant that few contemporary writers can be admired with the passion that Shakespeare or Tolstoy may awaken, but even so I am quite amazed at how quick students can be to judge a well-known work as just passable or worse.

As I joked the other day it's sobering to see books I love debunked by my students as politically incorrect (Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is sexist) or a total borefest. One of my most brilliant students has got in her four-book set Susan Orleans' *The Orchid Thief* (1998), which was made into that very crazy film called *Adaptation* (2002), with a script by the one and only Charlie Kaufman. This student has been positively surprised by her first book, Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), even though she doesn't like science fiction, but is struggling with Orleans' book, which for me stands out among the non-fiction books of the whole period that our subject covers. I tried to explain that what makes the book so attractive is the contrast between the poor manners of hillbilly John Laroche and his deep knowledge of the exquisite world of orchids, a contrast that Orleans portrays superbly. Yet, although I could establish this much more forcefully in a conventional subject on non-fiction in which all students were forced to admire this book, I cannot force a student whom I am training to express opinion to accept my own, or the general consensus of the many reviewers who praised to Orleans' book. For her, this is not an admirable book.

This is nothing, however, in comparison to the shock I got when another student told me she had found no appealing book among the 22 she had discussed with her classmates because they had been published long ago. That was in the period 1990-

1997, when she was not born, but still not that long ago. She expects to find more attractive material among the more recent books. In contrast, I offered a student who is now reading Sally Rooney's new novel with great interest the chance to write the corresponding review instead of reviewing her first book (Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*) but she declined because she did like her assigned book. I'm happy about this.

So, to sum up, I wish students were more enthusiastic about their assigned books and the books other students describe to them, and that they valued a little bit more the effort it takes to write. I am nonetheless having a lot of fun in class, and my impression is that the experiment is working reasonably well. I am 100% sure that they are learning far more about contemporary fiction in English than if we were close-reading the same four books together. Still, my decision to teach them to express opinion is offering unexpected challenges that I hope I can face appropriately as the subject advances.

26 October 2024 / PATRIARCHY MADE ME DO IT AND THE 24 GENDERS

This has turned out to be a weird week in terms of gender, particularly in Scotland and in Spain. I'm writing this specially for my international MA class in the subject 'Body and Gender in Narrative' as they might miss either one of the two events I wish to discuss here: the complete withdrawal from politics of Spanish MP Íñigo Errejón after very serious accusations of sexual misconduct and the leaking of the gender guidance documentation issued by the Scottish Government headed by SNP's new leader John Swinney, claiming that there are 24 genders.

Errejón, aged 40, the official spokesperson of the left-wing coalition Sumar (he still is the president of the Más País party, an offspring of Podemos), has been accused by a dozen women so far of subjecting his sexual partners to highly humiliating psychological and physical abuse. Typically, it turns out that his misconduct was known in Madrid's left-wing political circles but nothing was done to stop him until journalist and feminist activist Cristina Fallarás welcomed in her Instagram account the anonymous testimonials of his victims. One of the women, actor Elisa Mouliá, has been the first to report Errejón to the Police. This morning Loreto Arenillas, Errejón's chief of staff and MP in the local Madrid Parliament, has resigned after disclosures indicating she had silenced other victims to protect her boss, something she strenuously denies.

This is not the first politician accused of misogynistic crimes following the 2017 #MeToo campaign, but the shock is nonetheless enormous because of Errejón's seemingly solid feminist, left-wing credentials. Also, why not mention it?, because of his often mocked baby-face looks suggesting a caring, vulnerable masculinity far from toxic patriarchal models. The bizarre letter that Errejón published in his X account accompanying the announcement of his resignation as MP and his complete withdrawal from politics, however, suggests that he has been compensating for poorly understood deficiencies in his own patriarchal masculinity. He has been abusing the many women that he managed to attract thanks, precisely, to his sanitized public profile, women he forced into demeaning submission as soon as they learned who he really is: a monster, as one of his victims explained.

The letter, which you can read [here](#), is no doubt a historical document in the history of gender and masculinity in Spain and an astonishing self-portrait of a man unable to show empathy for his victims. The [heading](#) of the article by the satirical

newspaper *El Mundo Today* summarizes it very well: “Íñigo Errejón deja la política tras ser víctima de unos abusos sexuales cometidos por él” [Íñigo Errejón abandons politics after falling victim to sexual abuses he himself committed]. I’m indeed tempted to offer a close reading of this extremely hypocritical text, but I’ll just go through the main points.

Errejón shows that he has delayed his resignation for as long as possible, until mounting pressure has forced him to take a stand. The explanation he offers is that in the decade of his intense political career his celebrity and public exposure have negatively affected his physical and mental health and destroyed his “estructura afectiva y emocional” [affective and emotional structure], as would happen to anyone. In the two central paragraphs he acknowledges, using extremely abstruse newspeak, that in order to cope with his demanding political activities he has excluded caring and empathy from his life, which has resulted in a “subjetividad tóxica que en el caso de los hombres el patriarcado multiplica” [a toxic subjectivity which in the case of men patriarchy multiplies] employed in his dealings with colleagues, romantic partners, and even himself.

Errejón, as it can be seen, presents his case as an inevitable consequence of his daily contact with patriarchal political power, a sort of unwanted contamination that has led to an unsolvable contradiction between “el personaje y la persona” [the character and the person], between neoliberalism and his political party’s ideology. In the end, he announces his resignation as a necessary step to take care of *himself*, never mentioning his victims, and expecting the letter and his resignation to be sufficient compensation for his misconduct. There is not any mention, either, of the immense disappointment that his private behaviour must cause among the women in his political circle and of the direct harm he has done to all left-wing political actions to further gender equality in Spain. Minister Yolanda Díaz, the Sumar leader and current second Vice-President of the Government and head of the Ministry for Work and Social Economy, must be raging (she forced Errejón’s resignation but has so far kept silent).

As a left-wing feminist who is constantly preaching the idea that progressive men have the capacity and the duty to fight patriarchy, I am indeed sorely disappointed. Neither Errejón nor his former Podemos buddy Pablo Iglesias are men I have ever liked, or trusted (Errejón was years ago the unlawful recipient of a grant for which he did no research), but, still, the details in the testimonials of the victims are appalling. This is not simply a case of sexual harassment but a man’s systematic strategy to degrade all the women he met, from unwanted touching in a punk feminist concert to forcing different lovers who knew nothing of each other to meet, passing through the physical aggression against a drunken woman asleep in his bed. I believe it is easy to see a pattern: this man felt inferior to all these women and he lashed out against them in search of personal patriarchal self-validation. This is not something he has learnt in his years as a public figure, but an example of how deeply rooted patriarchal ideology may bloom thanks to empowering celebrity. The wonder (and the horror) is that so many women fell for Errejón and that so many persons helped to conceal his creepy misogyny.

To finish this part of my post, I’d like to point out that I see no advantage in sending Errejón to prison, where sexual offenders meet other toxic patriarchal men and nothing much is solved. I don’t see that Harvey Weinstein’s sentence, to name a most famous case, is truly helping the victims or preventing other crimes from being committed against other women. I would turn Errejón into a public example, and start with him a much needed programme of public re-education. The trust between men and women is at a historical low, particularly if we add to this scandal others such as the sad case of Gisèle

Pelicot's multiple rapes by her husband and his accomplices along a decade. As we are seeing in her trial, there is no shaming mechanism that works sufficiently well as a deterrent and a source of true education for recalcitrant sexist men and we must find it.

I came across the other topic of my post after reading diverse articles reporting that J.K. Rowling and Elon Musk were mocking the guidance documents issued by the Scottish Government to the public bodies collecting data on sex and gender. The official [documentation](#) I have found online does not include any lists but the by now infamous list of 24 genders endorsed by the SNP's Government has been leaked by many newspapers. [Here](#) it is: cisgender, trans man, trans woman, non-binary, trans (not otherwise specified), agender, trans masculine, trans feminine, genderfluid, genderqueer, questioning, intersex, assigned female at birth (not specified), assigned male at birth (not specified), pangender, bigender, autigender, androgynous, gender non-conforming, detransitioned, neutral, demigender (female), demigender (male) and demigender (not otherwise specified). You can see why the list is easy to mock, as it is a strange mixed bag of little consistency or coherence, with some categories describing processes or experiences.

The way I see it, the SNP Government is trying to be as progressive as one can be these days, but it is making in the process a series of mistakes. To begin with, wait until they find out that biological sex is far from being a binary system and apparently expands to about 40 variations if we take into account chromosomal diversity (check the four papers mentioned [here](#)). If you multiply the biological and the gender variations you get a much bigger list of personal identities beyond the classic binaries female/male or woman/man. What baffles me every time I fill in a public document is why Governments insist on asking their citizens questions that refer to their genitalia (what used to be called *private* parts for some good reason) or their gender identity. Why stop there and not ask us who we enjoy having sex with?? If the data collected helps disadvantaged collectives, I might agree that the Scottish list could have a point, but, still, I fail to see its immediate usefulness. We live, of course, in the era of big data and all information is potentially saleable, so perhaps the SNP's apparently benevolent approach hides something else. I hope not! On the other hand, if the Scottish Government is so interested in the gender identity of their citizens, the solution is quite obvious: instead of a list of options, they could offer in official documentation a blank slot where citizens could declare, only if they wish so, their chosen identity.

I'm well aware that Errejón's misconduct and the Scottish list are very different topics but they do have one thing in common: both are political issues. In one case, the fall of a prominent political figure of the left wing might have important consequences not only for Spanish feminism but also for other distant matters: Minister Díaz is now negotiating the reduction of the weekly working hour, if she resigns we might all lose that longed-for advantage. In Scotland the SNP has gone in recent years through very rocky times. Nobody needs their gender policies to reinforce the positions of persons as intolerant as J.K. Rowling (with residence in Scotland) or Elon Musk, now Trump's main supporter. Errejón's dishonesty and the SNP's misguided wokeism are setting up big hurdles in the road to progress and helping the traditional positions of those who support old sex-role essentialism.

A weird week, as I said.

30 October 2024 / ABOUT MY FATHER (AND WHY I'M WORKING ON MASCULINITIES STUDIES)

I don't know what the etiquette is in these cases, but I shared with my master's class the reason for my absence last Thursday: my father, 87, died suddenly of a heart attack the day before, Wednesday 23. He had just got off the bus mid-morning, felt dizzy and, the neighbours have told us, collapsed about fifty metres away from his home. My mother, watching impatiently from the window for him to return from his daily walk did not see the incident. She called me later (we live on the same street) complaining that the bus was being delayed by an ambulance, which had been interrupting the traffic already for one hour. I was quicker than her to join the dots and next thing I knew we were both being rushed to the hospital, courtesy of the local police, where my father had passed away alone a few minutes after admission.

As I explained to my MA class, he was far from being an ideal father, and if I am so involved in Masculinities Studies, this is because I saw my brothers study his behaviour and do the exact reverse with his children. Both are very good fathers. This gave me hope that patriarchal behaviour can be positively altered and confirmed for me the idea that the circle of patriarchal abuse in the family can be broken. Hence my intense dedication to this area of Gender Studies.

My father was not a typical abuser, in the sense that he never used physical violence against my mother or us, his children. He was a narcissist and what clinical psychologists call an integrated psychopath, which means that he was not perceived as a man with a pathology. He simply appeared to be a quirky guy who did as he pleased with a total lack of empathy. Yes, we played "My Way" in his funeral. My brothers and I left home at a relatively early age, in our early to mid-twenties, tired of his selfishness and indifference towards our persons and lives, but also of his controlling ways and obsession with money (he was extremely tight-fisted, except for whatever interested him, like his crummy cars).

This means that my mother has been on his own with him for about three and a half decades, seeing her life much restricted by his constant ill-humour, vulgarity, lack of sensitivity and inability to make friends or keep close ties with family members. Nobody attended his funeral for him, but to comfort her. My poor mother has been a victim of a blatant Stockholm system but the uncharacteristic black humour she used after the funeral gives us hope that she will soon be her own woman. She's 81, luckily in very good health, and we have high hopes that she can enjoy a few good years, perhaps a decade. I must clarify that when we spoke with her openly about the possibility of a divorce (twice!) she adamantly refused to leave my father. Typical of her generation and their economic dependence.

I have thought long and hard about why my father could not be happy and made everyone around him so miserable. I have seen the same behaviour in women in the family and in my work environment, and I should therefore avoid a narrow gender-based reading. I am aware that my father can be seen as a the typically entitled man who craves for the empowerment that patriarchy promises and who lashes out whenever he feels that he is not sufficiently respected. He fitted that description. Yet, at the same time his unpredictable outbursts and his lack of emotional engagement have always suggested to me a possible biochemical imbalance beyond any psychological diagnoses (I have described him before as an integrated psychopath).

My paternal grandmother was a stern woman who did beat up my father as a child when he misbehaved, which was often, and who once threw a knife at him (he was then in his early twenties, his watch deflected the blade aimed at his face). My guess is that she had the same biochemical imbalance, which other members of my paternal family seem to share, too. My paternal grandfather was a far more easy-going person. He learnt to protect himself from his wife's impossible character by staying away from home as much as he could, usually at the bar with his buddies. My father's pride and joy, and the reasons why he considered himself a great husband and father, was that he never used violence like his mother and stayed away from all bars unlike his father. My brothers and I see his point, but there is an enormous distance between his self-satisfaction and our disappointment.

These days I have found myself the recipient of many messages of condolence from colleagues and acquaintances who naturally have assumed that our loss must be very painful. Close friends knew of our bad relationship and have been more cautious, respecting our wish to restrict the funeral to just a very small family circle. Just for you to understand the situation, in December 2020 my father caused yet another embarrassing incident in a restaurant during a family meal, followed by a stream of invectives when my husband and I try tried to stop him from bothering other diners. That put an end to his presence in any family gatherings, except the ones in his own home for Christmas. He never asked why, going months without seeing me or his sons. I myself stopped attending any family celebrations at my parents' after he threatened to punch my mother in the face one New Year's lunch. I've never been so furious in my life. Of course, my mother paid the price, for we basically stopped visiting my parents' home, though we would see her quite often outside it.

I'm offering so much personal information because as the #MeToo campaign has taught us it is important to share private experiences so that public conversation flows. Mothers can also be guilty of the emotional neglect (and abuse) that my father was guilty of, but when a father fails to be a referent for his children the gap is particularly hurtful. Men who, like my brothers, lack a good father find it very hard to navigate their own masculinity, lacking immediate models, unless they find them in other circles or in fiction. As I have noted, my brothers chose to follow my father as an anti-model, which means that they learnt to be critical of his toxic patriarchal masculinity as young boys. In my case, the first crushing disappointment came when I realized around age 11 that my father could be totally wrong and was awfully sexist: the occasion was his suggesting that I was a slut for going to a male friend's house to pick him up for a totally innocent walk in the park with other children.

The feeling that you do have a father but that he is not a father to you is just horrible and never heals. Today in this post I'm not actually mourning the father my brothers and I did have, but the one we never had. It's a wound that never closes. I used to fantasize indeed about finding an alternative father figure that would somehow adopt me but this never happened, of course. I hear that some Japanese old men hire themselves out for that purpose, perhaps I should found a local branch of their service.

My father's passing comes at a point when I had actually decided to stop working on Masculinities Studies. I have other projects that have nothing to do with this area of research, and I also believe that the younger generations need to refresh the discourse, which is beginning to sound stale. The question is that in the last few days I see more and more evidence of the danger that patriarchy poses at all levels, from Íñigo Errejón's

downfall to the Taliban's decree to prevent women from talking to each other, as the world watches on doing nothing. Next week might bring the catastrophic return of Donald Trump to the American Presidency, though I remain hopeful that Kamala Harris can win, perhaps even by a wider margin than anyone may imagine right now. Around the world the breach separating men and women grows, from the public to the private. Yesterday, for instance, the *Daily Mail*, which can be hardly called a feminist newspaper, granted that the UK's falling childbirth rates are not the fault of selfish women who only think of their careers but of selfish men too immature to think of fatherhood until their late thirties. British women, it turns out, are freezing their eggs as they wait for their male partners to grow up, thus risking their chances of becoming mothers at all.

Masculinities Studies should ideally be addressing and educating men into a new anti-patriarchal world, but one thing I learned from my father is that recalcitrant male chauvinists never change. They simply don't want to learn. We told our father again and again that he had to be kinder to our mother and in this way we would be kinder to him, but he never even tried. There was no acknowledgement at all that he did anything wrong and, as you may imagine, he never asked for forgiveness. I accept, as noted, that this is behaviour that women may also indulge in, but I am convinced that the patriarchal sense of entitlement is the root of most evil in the world, at all levels.

The sad thing is that I don't believe my father was happy in any significant way. He was frustrated most of the time but would have been far more at ease if only he had had the ability to listen, change and be content. Without it nobody can be re-educated which makes me fear that patriarchy will last for centuries unless we see a deep revolution I cannot imagine right now. Perhaps, now it's not the time to quit Masculinities Studies and I should go on, with many others, hoping change will come sooner than we think.

And I hope that this post, which has been immensely painful to write, helps other persons in similar situations as writing it has helped me.

17 November 2024 / WILL I EVER WRITE A NOVEL? (I DON'T THINK SO)

[No, I'm not writing about Donald Trump's victory. I don't agree with any of the analyses I have read and there will be time enough to consider the catastrophes that his cabinet will cause in the USA and around the world. If we survive.]

A couple of my students asked me how come I have not written any novels since I have published several books. That was about ten days ago and since then I've been mulling what to reply. It's not easy.

I frequently correct in students' essays the use of 'book' as an equivalent of 'novel' ("In her book novel *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen indicates that...") because it worries me that the novel is swallowing all the other genres and writing itself. This may sound basic but we need to remember that there are many other kinds of books apart from novels. And it annoys me very much when a person says they're a writer and it is immediately assumed that they must be a novelist, or when somebody refers to the profession or the art of writing when they actually narrow it down to writing novels. For these reasons, the first time I saw myself described as a writer, I winced, thinking that I don't really deserve the title. But, like many of my academic peers, I am indeed a writer

with more books to my name than some well-known novelists. The question for me, then, is not so much why I have not written a novel (yet) but why only novelists seem to deserve the title of 'writer.'

Novels have existed now for centuries, whether you believe they started with Miguel de Cervantes' *El Quijote* (1605) or with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). By the time Jane Austen published her works in the 1810s novels were still a dubious enough genre, of low reputation, so that not only she and other women writers but also men like Walter Scott published theirs anonymously. In Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1847), published under the pseudonym Acton Bell (by then male authors like Charles Dickens had got rid of anonymous publication and discreet pennames), the protagonist Helen chastises her loyal maid Rachel when she relays scandalous gossip: "Have you been reading novels again, Rachel?," Helen asks annoyed. This is Anne's barb at those who still thought that writing and reading novels were vapid pass-times for women.

The novel became the respected genre it is today beginning in the second half the 19th century, but when Literature entered the academic space it did so through poetry. It was only in 1948, when professor F.R. Leavis published *The Great Tradition*, that the novel started to be taken seriously as a work of art (though the illustrious professor needed twenty-two more years to promote Dickens from entertainer to artist in *Dickens: the Novelist*, a volume of 1970). I might be exaggerating, but the current consensus from readers, reviewers, and academic literary critics putting the novel at the centre of reading and writing is about fifty years old, not that long ago if we look at the original date of publication of *El Quijote*.

An [article](#) in *The Conversation* claims that "The first classes in creative writing were offered at Harvard University in the 1880s and were wildly popular from the beginning with over 150 students enrolling in 1885." The author, John Dale, notes besides that "It was sometimes thought that Creative Writing lacked a theoretical underpinning although the workshop model, developed at the University of Iowa in the 1930s, has long ago reshaped, refined and incorporated theories of narrative, literature and creativity into a unified and successful pedagogical approach." Famously, the University of East Anglia's Creative Writing Course was founded by Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson in 1970 (the year Leavis declared Dickens was, after all, a novelist!). Its MA is still today one of the most prestigious in the United Kingdom, with its alumni including Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Anne Enright and Trezza Azzopardi.

And here's what I want to note first: to be a novelist you need to train in the craft. Before the introduction of creative writing courses, aspiring novelists would study the genre on their own, paying close attention to the features that constituted the novels they appreciated best. Well, most still do that. This is how the canon was formed: by writers selecting a list of other writers they highly admired. Then university teachers started borrowing that canon to form their own academic canon, so that when once George Elliot was admired by fellow authors for her writing skills (from the inside, so to speak), she is now also admired by the professional readers who teach Literature (from the outside, so to speak) and by common readers.

What students miss is that when they take a degree in English Studies they are indeed trained to become writers: they are trained in the Literature courses to become academic writers. This begins with basic text commentaries, followed later by argumentative papers and culminating in the BA dissertation. If they are interested or

show promise, then students may take an MA in Literature, which includes more papers and the longer MA dissertation. For those who truly enjoy academic writing the next step is the PhD dissertation, a text between 80000 to 100000 words which is already a book. If everything goes well, the new doctor will make sure their dissertation becomes their first published book, hopefully the first in a long series. Funnily, we never refer to academic training as professional training *in writing*, preferring to call it research. The fact is that in Literary Studies (and most disciplines) our research is communicated through writing, which presupposes a minimum talent. A researcher, of any type, who is a poor writer will simply fail to publish their research.

So, to sum up: all the specialists in Literary Studies (and other disciplines) who publish regularly *are* writers who have received highly specific training for long years to produce academic prose. This is a type of prose which is not necessarily attractive and which might not communicate well outside academia. And this is less frequent now, but there used to be Literary Studies specialists who cared very much for developing a style of their own that could cut across the barriers between the university and the common reader, from Raymond Williams to Terry Eagleton, passing through Elaine Showalter or Janet Todd. Today, academic prose has lost its gloss, being usually flattened down by legions of peer reviewers who want everybody to sound the same. The fact is, however, that academic prose does exist as a genre, with its own specialised writers, as much as poetry. Or the novel.

Asking me, therefore, how come I don't write novels is like asking ballet dancers why they don't practice breakdance. Both are disciplines in contemporary dance, but the training is very different and so are the talents. You might say that ballet is superior as an art form but this is not relevant for the point I'm making: I don't write novels because I have never taken training in that craft. I have been trained to write academic prose.

Students may assume that since I have read hundreds of novels, if not thousands, I have certainly given myself a training in how to write novels. This is a misconception. My academic training allows me to analyse novels, so that I can explain how they have been built and what makes them appealing as creative works (or the other way round, why some are so poor). Being able to produce criticism, however, has very little to do with being able to produce a novel. When I start an article, or book, I have a thesis (a central idea) that I want to develop. My academic training has taught me how to spot features in novels (and other texts) that inspire new ideas for me to develop in my research. To write fiction you may start as well with an idea, but you need, above all, a story, which needs to be developed into a plot. As happens, I have many ideas to write literary criticism, but I don't have stories. I lack that talent.

Have I ever tried to write a story? No. I have thought of stories to tell, but they are just a concept, and I simply don't know how to flesh out a concept into hundreds of pages, with narration, description, dialogue and so on. Many Literature teachers are, of course, novelists, but this is because they combine in their brains two types of talent: that of the writer of academic prose and that of the novelist. If they lost their jobs as teachers, they could still write novels, for this is a skill they have learned independently from their professional training. If the talent for writing novels grew with literary research, then 100% of the best current novelists would be Literature teachers, which is far from being the case.

Why, then, are novelists, so highly valued? And why do poets, playwrights, essayists, non-fiction authors, journalists and other types of authors working in print

media rank below them in public interest? I could say 'I don't know' and leave it here, but we can test diverse hypothesis. One is that we like novelists because we see them as magicians conjuring complete worlds out of their imagination, quietly labouring alone in their studios. Novels offer what we most love as readers: stories and characters, for we don't like ideas that much (you need to think to appreciate them...). Plays and non-fiction also offer stories and characters, but novels are self-enclosed as texts in ways which these other genres are not (they need actors, or they borrow a lot from reality). And the other way round: ageing readers, like myself, start losing their taste for novels (which is much stronger in youth) when they learn to appreciate works that transmit knowledge and not just story. When I start a new novel, the first thing I ask myself now is 'what am I going to get out of this?', followed by 'will I learn something?' I rarely ask 'will I be entertained?' though I drop immediately any novel with low quality writing and poor narrative skills.

Would I like to write a novel? Yes, I would, why not? Yet a sign that I will never get around to writing one is that I have no urge to try. If I truly wanted to write a novel, I would have started one by now (knowing, as I do, that it may take a few tries before one manages to write a novel and that usually the first one is terrible). I am very happy writing academic books and I have some ideas for a few more before I retire. In fact, I see myself writing academic books after I retire, but I never think of retirement as, finally, the chance to write novels. I leave that to authors with the required skills, and look forward to reading them!

1 December 2024 / THE OTHERS (YES, THE WRITERS) AND MY PARASITICAL SYNDROME

[This is a really complicated semester, with lots to mark and edit, and pressing personal issues, which explains why I'm being so irregular in my supposedly weekly posting. Apologies!]

Today I'm writing about writers and my parasitical syndrome. You may have heard of impostor syndrome (feeling you're underqualified for a task you're doing proficiently) and now I'm inventing this other syndrome to explain how I feel regarding the living professional authors I write about. The post is based on two key moments of this week now ending: one, a visit to my class by Ricard Ruiz Garzón, the other an email exchange with a major US author, whose name I will conceal to respect his privacy (and mine, in a way).

I'll begin with the visitor. [Ricard Ruiz Garzón](#) is a very well-known personality in the Catalan circuit of the fantastic. He is a writer (of fantasy fiction and children's and YA narrative), a teacher at the prestige creative writing school of the [Ateneu](#) in Barcelona, and the organizer of [Festival 42](#) gathering fans and writers of the fantastic the first week of November since 2021. I knew about Ricard before I met him at Barcelona's Eurocon 2016, and I have kept in touch with him mainly through the Catalan convention on the fantastic, [CatCon](#), and my collaborations at Festival 42. I need to add that Ricard has been active as a journalist specializing in culture for 25 years, during which he has worked tirelessly in most Catalan and Spanish national media. I invited him to class for him to tell students about all these professional experiences and because of his extensive

experience as a reviewer (I'm teaching my students to write reviews). Typically, less than half the class attended the session, but that's a matter for another post.

Ricard is always very forthcoming about his unstable professional situation. He was in the [news](#) in 2017, when his landlord decided to suddenly increase his rent and he was forced to cull his impressive library before moving to a cheaper location. He is a classic example of how difficult it is to make ends meet in a fast-shrinking professional cultural sector, which has always been precarious but might soon disappear given the disaffection of the young for traditional media. I do know that teaching my students how to review books professionally makes little sense since there is practically no market for that skill, yet, as Ricard explained, it is important to train persons with solid criteria, even if they end up writing for free for the social networks.

Ricard's dream, he told me, is to have two years to write in peace and quiet a literary novel for adults. So far, he explains, he has written his more than dozen books, including collaborations with other authors and the edition of diverse short story collections, in fits and starts, combining his work as a writer with many other activities. How, however, does a self-employed cultural activist like him manage to find time for a book? Not even the authors that sell thousands of copies can easily afford that luxury, often seeing their time interrupted by collaborations in the media, and other activities such as book tours, attending festivals and so on.

This is why I told my class that I feel guilty when I meet writers, for I'm a highly privileged tenured teacher with a rather decent salary, a fixed job, and, what is more, time to write. I must clarify that I have time now, when I have been a teacher for more than thirty years and my teaching load is much reduced. I didn't have that time until about eight years ago, which is why I published mostly articles and chapters instead of books, as I mostly do now. Anyway, I told Ricard before my students about my parasitical syndrome and he generously downplayed it, claiming that he could have chosen to become an academic but discarded that option. We commented on China Miéville's 2012 [proposal](#) that writers should be paid a fixed salary, as a means to compensate for digital piracy, and also on the Finnish government's [grants](#) for writers, but these are impossible options in Catalonia or Spain, which trusts the market laws to keep writers afloat or sink.

The email conversation with the major US writer went in a very different direction. He has been very kind to me in recent years and has not only welcome my academic work on his novels but also allowed me to ask him questions. This time I asked for yet another favour and I mentioned, somewhat imprudently, that I had written yet another piece (a chapter for a handbook on men in fiction) about a famous trilogy of his. This article is far more critical than my previous work on his novels but it seemed somehow disloyal not to mention that it does exist. So, he requested it and I sent it. His next email contained not only the text I had asked him to write for me, but also a rather lengthy comment on my article which, as I found, expressed eventually his view that I 'don't get it'. This 'it' referred to how authors conceive of characters, and insisted on a point raised in a previous exchange when I complained about this author's decision to kill off a character and he replied that this was not a decision calculated to facilitate a plot turn but something that happened to the character, as if he were alive.

My reply, so far the last message in the exchange (which I hope will continue), was a full acknowledgement that I, as a literary critic, 'don't get it' because I am a reader that looks at the text from the outside and not from the inside. The only way I could 'get it', I noted, is by working side by side with an author, asking questions at all points about

the process of writing, which would be excruciatingly tedious for both. The writer's complaint was that I had analysed the male characters in his trilogy as parts of an ideological puzzle that he felt had nothing to do with the subjective, organic experience of bringing those characters to life. Fair enough, but, then, literary criticism does not have the tools to examine the writer's psychological processing of characterization. So, the writer suggested that I read another one of his novels, to see what I could make of it. I offered to work alongside him to analyse this novel and run thus an experiment in academic writing. I'm waiting for his reply; in the meantime I certainly will read his novel and get ready.

My parasitical syndrome has reared its ugly head even more painfully in this case because I may have spoiled what has been so far a very special opportunity to stay in touch with this writer that I admire so much. What we, the literary and cultural academic critics, do is, if you think about it, very strange, for we make a living off the work of persons who, like Ricard, have difficulties to make a good living, or like the respected US writer, might feel we 'don't get it.' How do we justify our parasitism? My own justification is that I work to keep up standards, of course, but mainly to publicize among students the work of authors they may not know about, and to ensure the permanence of their work in this way and through academic publications. Obviously, the authors don't need the support of the academics and if we all disappeared their profession would survive, whereas we need them to continue writing or else lose our jobs. This is why we are parasites, as I fully acknowledge.

There used to be a professor in my Department who was adamantly against doing any academic work on living authors, with the argument that their careers could take a sudden turn and our publications be discredited. She had a point and, in fact, I never allow any doctoral student to write about an ongoing literary career. The advantage of writing, as she suggested, only about dead authors is that they cannot quarrel with you, of course, and, actually, I've seen an example of this in the career of my third conversational partner this week, José Francisco Sánchez, a specialist in Samuel Beckett. As happens, I like my authors living rather than dead precisely because you can ask them about the process of writing, but, then, I can see that I still lack the tact and the tools to do what they expect me (or us) to do. I'll keep on trying, see if I ever 'get it', for that's what I most would like.

Thanks for reading!

8 December 2024 / THE GOODREADS CHOICE AWARDS 2024: SOME NOTES

The [GoodReads Choice Awards](#) for 2024 were published three days ago and this is, then, the right time to take a look and see what they say about the platform and its readers. The most obvious implicit statement is that this is a heavily biased platform, with a very high presence of US readers and authors, which does not represent at all the state of reading worldwide. This might seem evident, but often evident matters need to be raised. The platform boasts that 6,261,936 votes have been cast but it does not clarify whether this is the number of persons who have voted or the number of votes considering all the different categories (I think it's the latter). There is not, as far as I know, another platform

that awards similar prizes with so many voters, which is why this is today my object of interest.

The first conundrum has to do with the list of categories, which fluctuates from year to year. The 22 categories of the first year, 2011, are many more than the 15 categories of 2024. These are: fiction, historical fiction, mystery & thriller, romance, romantasy, fantasy, science fiction, horror, debut novel, audiobook, young adult fantasy, young adult fiction, nonfiction, memoir, history & biography. A quite surprising matter is that although at least 11 categories are fiction and 3 non-fiction (the category 'audiobook' is mixed), GoodReads only calls one 'fiction' and another 'non-fiction'. What they mean by 'fiction' is actually 'literary fiction', but, of course, this is an overflowing category. *James* by Percival Everett, the new National Book Award winner, is classified as 'historical fiction'. The total winner, with 253,147 votes, far more than any other book is *The Women* by twice GCA winner Kristin Hannah. Set in 1965, this is classified as historical fiction (it's the winner in that category). The author, a worldwide best-selling novelist has not received any literary awards; see her [bio](#) here. *James*, by the way, came up second to *The Women* in the historical fiction category.

I expected Sally Rooney's new novel, *Intermezzo*, to win the 'fiction' category but the award went to Alison Espach's *The Wedding People* (Rooney was second). The shortlist for 'fiction' is a mixed bag of popular authors (Liane Moriarty, Dolly Alderton) and literary award winners (Rooney herself, Tommy Orange, Elizabeth Strout, Richard Powers, Louise Erdrich). I have not read Espach but the summary of her novel (girl crashes by accident a posh wedding) sounds a bit chick-lit to me (maybe the cover is confusing). That she got more than 94000 votes and Louise Erdrich only 4000 might have to do with their respective books, but also with GoodReads' democratization of taste. Juries composed by a handful of people awarding Bookers and Pulitzers cannot compete with the crowd at GoodReads, though my guess is that while Espach will be happy enough to get her third GCA, Erdrich (a Pulitzer and Book Award winner) won't care very much to miss her first.

I leave to others to count the names one by one, but at first sight my impression is that 80-85% of the nominees and winners are women. Whoever writes today that women are discriminated in any way in the world of writing is plain wrong. In fact, my impression is that men are jumping ship as writing and reading comes to be identified with women. This is not really good news. For me, ideally, everyone should read everyone and the market should offer books written from all sensibilities and any identity. If the number of male writers diminishes fewer men will read (for men, let's acknowledge this, are less open to reading women than women are to reading men), and this is a loss for everyone. And a gain for videogames.

I don't know why the category 'mystery & thriller' (winner Liz Moore's *The God of the Woods*) is not called 'detective fiction' or does not include that label. Many of the novels in this list are cosy mysteries in which someone has been murdered but death is not taken too seriously. *How to Solve Your Own Murder* by Kristen Perrin seems to encapsulate what I mean (it's, attention!, A Jimmy Fallon's Book Club Finalist for 2024, sorry for the snide...). "Romance queen Emily Henry," GoodReads announces, "takes home her fourth consecutive GCA with *Funny Story*." Well, never heard of her (nor did my students), but, as happens, I'm not a romance reader. I don't know why romantasy, the child of romance and fantasy, has a separate category (winner *House of Flame and Shadow* by Sarah J. Maas), but it gets 499,305 votes total. If, however, I consider that

'fiction' gets 546,063 votes only that might explain the rise of the category. Maas herself, though, is no novice with eighth Goodreads Choice Awards in the YA and Fantasy categories. And, no, her novel is not shortlisted in the fantasy category, so readers are indeed seeing this and romantasy as separate genres.

In the science fiction category the winner by twice as many votes as the second favourite novel is *The Ministry of Time* by Kaliane Bradley. Any Spaniard can tell you this is blatant plagiarism from popular series *El Ministerio del Tiempo*, though, of course, the author denies it. Caring nothing for the Booker Prize, readers have left Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* (the new winner) in the fourth position. Booker Prize Nominee for Longlist (2023) and Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best science fiction novel of the year (2024), *In Ascension* by Martin McInnes only gets 2495 votes, which shows that GoodReads voters do not like their SF to be so literary. I would agree. Things in horror don't look too well, as the winner is Stephen King... with a collection of stories, *You Like It Darker*. I'm really quite sceptical that a short story collection can be the best-liked horror book of 2024, but that might be simply because the genre is not going through its best moment. King himself is not at his best. Some of the 12 stories in his collection are not even new.

I'm skipping the categories debut novel and audiobooks, which are just too miscellaneous to focus next on young adult novels, once again split into 'YA fantasy' and 'YA fiction', as if fantasy novels were not fiction. The winner is *Ruthless Vows* by Rebecca Ross, which shames Brandon Sanderson's *Defiant* into a humble fourth position. There are 426,420 votes in 'YA fantasy' in contrast to 392,309 for 'YA fiction'; I assume that most (or all) who voted for 'fiction' voted for 'fantasy'. The winner for 'fiction' is the fifth volume of the series *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman, a major phenomenon that has broken many barriers for YA LGTBIAQ+ fiction.

Finally, the three categories left are non-fiction, memoir and history & biography. Again, I don't know what's happened to autobiography, which seems to have been fused together with memoir. There has been along the years other non-fiction categories such as travel writing, food & cooking, humour... and I think I can guess what has happened. GoodReads is now (my guess) the meeting point of younger and younger readers, far less interested in the non-fiction categories and keener on the YA categories growing so fast. I would insist that romantasy gets roughly half a million votes, and memoir (the more popular non-fiction category) a little below 300,000. That's an important difference.

The non-fiction winner is a no-brainer: *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt, subtitled *How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Caused an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. It's a sharp, very necessary book aimed at redressing the situation. The winning memoir is *The Third Gilmore Girl* by actor Kelly Bishop that with 80000 votes seems a very clear winner. Confirming the impression that GoodReads is extremely biased towards US authors, the winner for history & biography is Evan Friss's *The Bookshop: A History of the American Bookstore*, a title that is almost humorous in its use of synonyms to stress the Americanness of its subject. Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus* is only seventh.

I don't have clear conclusions but I would certainly love to have more information about the voting process. I do not know if voters choose in full knowledge of what they're doing or randomly in view of the long lists in each categories. Do readers vote only for what they have read? Do they vote for favourite authors regardless of whether they have read their books? As happens every end of the year I marvel that I have missed so many interesting books even though I am a quite constant reader. Who is the typical

GoodReads reader and how much do they read? Is this award, in short, an accurate snapshot of 2024 above the lists of the traditional media? Many questions, I know.

GoodReads is so Anglophonecentric that it does not even have a category for translated fiction as traditional media often have. This distinction irritates me very much because translated fiction is not a genre but a consequence of linguistic diversity. In Spain, for good or for bad, we include translations in the list of best books, perhaps because we worship anything that is foreign above our own productions. Yet, Anglophone media and social media, while apparently showing respect for translators manage to segregate all books not written in English. Thus, among the dozens of books shortlisted by GoodReads only one (if I'm not wrong) is a translation: horror category nominee *A Sunny Place for Shady People* by Mariana Enríquez (translated by Megan McDowell). I would call Enríquez a literary, rather than a genre, author but maybe this is a too fine distinction at this point of the post.

Thanks for reading!

18 December 2024 / RETHINKING INTRODUCTIONS (AGAIN)

I have written here at least twice about introductions. Back in 2011 (how time passes!!), I wrote a [post](#) about the introductions to British drama, which I was then teaching, and then in 2017 another [post](#) about Scottish literature. My point was similar and it is still similar today: no matter how brief the introduction, they are always too crowded with information.

I'm thinking again of introductions because, after being horrified because my fourth-year BA students had never heard of Joseph Conrad or *Heart of Darkness*, I realized we have a serious problem. Our teaching is based on the assumption that the texts we teach every semester (four novels or the equivalent) are read against the background provided by lectures and independent study. The fact, though, is that students can hardly cope with reading the texts and have stopped studying their background, if they ever did. I myself did a lot of background reading (I read the complete *New Pelican Guide* edited by Boris Ford, all 9 volumes), but I'm well aware that few of us in my class did that. I was one of the extreme Literature nerds. Still, we do need introductions today.

Yet, I don't know if it is my misguided impression, but I believe that introductions are disappearing, except for the Very Short Introductions [series](#) by Oxford. I refer here in any case to the introductions to specific periods. We have been recommending for Victorian Literature Maureen Moran's excellent [handbook](#) (2006), whose second edition (2009) coincided with the beginning of our new degree in English. There is, however, no third edition or further (or so I think), which is a sign that interest in introductions must have started waning by then. The [series](#) to which Moran's book belongs, *Introductions to British Literature and Culture*, by Continuum and later by Bloomsbury, is still available, but the editions seem to stop in 2010. I'm not speaking, by the way, of companions, which are for more advanced students, but only of introductions, which is what we need at BA level.

Anyway, back to Conrad. After my colleagues and I shared a series of emails bemoaning how little students know and what we can do to solve this problem, I proposed that we write new basic materials for them. As happens, a very kind Finnish professor

emailed me recently to ask whether he could use my chapter on post-WWII in the volume *Introduction to English Literature*, which Andrew Monnickendam, Joan Curbet, Felicity Hand and I wrote back in 1999. This was for a subject in the BA degree in Humanities of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya that I ended up teaching until 2008. Thanks to the interest of the Finnish teacher, the book, which is extremely clear and didactic, as UOC required, is now [online](#). Taking that clarity and didacticism as our referent, I proposed to my colleagues that we write new updated materials for our students, which could be gathered into a book, or a series in UAB's digital repository. I really believed this would be easy, just a matter of a few pages per subject/chapter. How naïve of me...

To offer my colleagues a model they could use, I started writing my own materials for Contemporary Anglophone Literature, the new compulsory subject which covers the period from 1990 to the present. The students are reading fiction and non-fiction from the whole Anglophone area, which means that the focus is wide-ranging. At the same time, this is a period of intense globalization, which means I need not explain in detail what has been going on in a particular nation. Even so, my basic materials extend to 40 pages, about 13000 words, most of them consisting of lists, with some notes. There are two main sections, 'An Overview of the Contemporary World' and 'Authors and Works'. The first section is subdivided into 'Politics and economy' (with a timeline), 'Scientific and technological innovation' (with another timeline), 'Social and personal life' and 'Arts and culture'; this fourth section includes lists of indispensable films, series, pop and rock albums (with lyrics in English) and videogame franchises. The 'Authors and Works' segment has notes on 'What Do We Mean by Literature?' and 'The Publishing Market: Main Trends', followed by four lists: 'The Literary Novel in the UK and the USA: A Selection', 'The Literary Novel in Other Anglophone Areas: A Selection', 'Popular Anglophone Fiction: A Selection' and 'Anglophone Non-fiction: A Selection'.

The emphasis on timelines and lists has to do with two things: first, I just love them...; second, I can't stand the kind of introduction that offers two very clever sentences about each literary work. This is what happens in most introductions, which means that I end up writing my own lists of works. You can only truly get familiar with literary works if you read them, so my view is that it makes no difference whether you have a list with no comments or comments with no list. I initially thought of testing my students by means of a quiz, but in the end they will have a tutorial for which they need to choose ten events they find relevant (this is a subjective choice) and ten books they would like to read. I might eventually gamify the materials using Kahoot, if I manage to learn how it works. The materials are not only yet, because I need to get feedback.

I was reasonably satisfied with the materials, but when I sent them to my colleagues I got nothing in reply. This is clear sign that they will not follow my lead... Then I started writing the materials for Victorian Literature, as a way to say goodbye to the subject for good, and leave some kind of trace behind. This is when I realised that there is something else to consider. The usual practice is to distribute introductions into different matters, as I have done for 'Contemporary Anglophone Literature'. This is what Maureen Moran also does for Victorian Literature. However, re-reading her handbook I realised that this is wrong, or not practical enough.

In both subjects (Victorian, Contemporary) my approach is to subdivide the period into units, so that each unit begins with an introduction to one or two decades, or just eight years in the case of Contemporary. The introductions, however, despite warning that the Victorian Age was 64 years long, in practice treat it as a single period,

perhaps subdivided into early, mid and late. The result is that neither teachers nor students can differentiate the 1840s, when the Brontës published their most brilliant work, from the 1860s (*Great Expectations*), the 1880s (*King Solomon's Mines*) or the 1890s (*Dracula*). Imagine mixing the 1960s hippies with 1990s grunge... So, to begin with I've put together my booklets with selections of scenes from novels, poetry, and essays and I'm working now on detailed timelines for each decade (about two pages each), which I will accompany with about two pages of comments. Beautiful things are happening. For instance, I learned yesterday that *Dracula* was published the same year the mechanism by which malaria is transmitted was first described. Both have to do with blood.

The Victorian timelines by decade have made me see that I also need to include comments on the decades in my materials for Contemporary, describing the essence of the 1990s, 2000s, 2010s and 2020s. It's funny how one may think 1990s 'collapse of the Communist block', 2000s 'aftermath of the 9/11 attacks', 2020s 'effects of Covid-19' but the 2010s may draw a blank ('Arab Spring', 'Trump's first mandate'...). With the Victorians, I find that the 1870s seem to be particularly unexciting, though the decade brought the telephone and generalised the first uses of electric light. This mismatch between what we know and what happened might have to do with a disconcerting surprise I've had while working on the timelines. Using the Victorian Web's lists of best-selling fiction, I realised that we no longer read the writers that dominated sales. I mean, I knew that but even so I didn't know our view is so biased. Just check. Have you read any of these: Edward Bulwer Lytton, W. H. Ainsworth, Captain Frederick Marryat, Charles Kingsley, Charles Reade, George Meredith, Henry Kingsley, Ouida, Rhoda Broughton, James Payn, Harrison Ainsworth...? The canonical novelists were also best-selling authors, by the way, this is not a matter of our preference for non-commercial authors.

So, before I lose my thread: we cannot ask students to read 20 books in each subject to guarantee that they are exposed to as many significant names as possible. I worked out that, taking the four years of the degree into account, they read a selection of about 60 authors at most (we teach nine core subjects only and they may take up to five elective subjects). This is a very low number considering the amazingly large panorama of Anglophone literature, which means that some other strategy needs to be followed regarding the authors they don't read but should know about (e.g. Joseph Conrad). Gone are the times when students were willing to read handbooks, introductions, companions and guides, which requires that we prepare more accessible materials. As YouTube shows, Indian teachers have become very proficient at making videos based on PowerPoint presentations and perhaps podcasts would be advisable today. I am very reluctant, believing very much as I do in the efficiency of the written text, but I'll have to accept that some kind of gamification is called for. Not for the content of the literary works, but for their background.

I'll finish writing the materials and then will rethink matters. One thing I can say is that I am indeed learning a lot...

3 January 2025 / SWAMPED BY NOVELTY: 2025 BEGINS

Happy 2025! May it brings the world the peace we so much need and is at least marginally better than we expect right now, three days before the second inauguration of President Trump (President Musk? President Trusk? President Mump?).

First, a confession: I'm distracted this semester with other personal and professional matters and I'm finding it hard to focus and find inspiration for the blog. Add to this that I joined Bluesky almost two months ago, and for the first time in decades I find myself engaged enough to participate in social media. I say 'decades' because using Bluesky (as it is now, before the trolls arrive) I'm reminded of the good vibes of the early Fidonet, a worldwide computer network used for communication between bulletin board systems (BBSes), and that according to Wikipedia still exists. I used Fidonet enthusiastically in the early 1990s, before the internet became commercially available, and I appreciated very much the intense online conversations. Like any other social network, Bluesky is far more hectic and has a torrent of images (Fidonet only used text!), but there are moments when I'm reminded of Fidonet and the broken promises of the early internet. All these are excuses, I know.

So, one type of post (blueet?) I'm seeing very frequently on Bluesky these days is the typical end of the year post with lists of the best books, films, series, music, videogames... and the typical new year post announcing the novelties for 2025 in these fields. I find the two types exhausting and I wanted to protest here a little against them. I refer to book lists specifically and I'll begin with the first type.

I've been keep a list of the books I read since I have fourteen, as I have explained here now and then, because I like keeping track and because I tend to forget books I have read and might read them again otherwise (this is not a sign of old age, it's just bad memory for titles). I have a personal rating system and I certainly enjoy checking at the end of the year what I have read and whether it was any good. I don't particularly like, however, sharing the results. In fact, my reading is private: I have a GoodReads account which I never use, and I would not post lists on any other social media. Who would care?

This is why I feel a bit baffled when people insist on commenting on the best books they have read the previous twelve months. I dislike in particular any mention of how much they have read. Many boast, whether they read 50 or 200 books, which I find silly because the figure means in the end very little. I tend to read on average 100 books a year (no boast, it's part of my job!), but this year, for instance, about half of the books were no good, and I may have abandoned 25. In fact, in 2025 I'll also keep track of the books I'm leaving, if only out of curiosity. So, I would have been much happier reading just 25 good books. I will be soon beginning a book on very long 19th century novels, besides, which means that I might end up reading fewer books in 2025 than any other year, though this might be one of the richest years in my life as a reader, we'll see. So, the message is please read but read only as much as you need, don't undertake any reading challenges, don't force yourself to reach any given mark (50, 100, or 200 books) if 25 will do (with less than 2 books a month, are you really a regular reader?).

If I check the list of 2024, I see that I only rated 18 books with top four stars, all of them non-fiction, except for two novels. My favourite book of 2024 was Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992), which I re-read possibly for the sixth time after watching Giórgos Lánthimos's quite accomplished film adaptation with Emma Stone as Bella Baxter in January 2024. I'm not going to say that everything went downhill from that moment until December, but if I were to publish a list of 2024 reads it would be perhaps a list of the

duds to warn other readers not to waste their time, an anti-list, so to speak. If you're wondering, apart from the many books I have abandoned, the most disappointing reads of 2024 were two novels: Esther García Llovet's *Los guapos* and Dolly Alderton's *Good Material*. A friend told me that negative reviewing and anti-recommendations like these should be avoided, but what I'm telling you here is please avoid overhyped books with misleading blurbs.

Now for 2025. My strangest habit as a reader is that I enjoy reading the final pages shortly after starting a book for two reasons: I can't stand suspense and I like guessing how the story progresses from beginning to end (I never get it right!). I have no fear of spoilers and, as a Literature teacher, I enjoy more how the plot is built than any twists and turns. However, with book recommendations it's the opposite: I absolutely hate knowing beforehand which books are going to be published in 2025 (same with films, series, music...). That is the kind of spoiler I don't like perhaps because, rather absurdly, I abhor being reminded that book publishing is a business with launch dates and advertising campaigns. Somehow, I prefer books to take me by surprise and to find out that they exist through reviews when they come out.

There is something else. I'm seeing in Bluesky these days very long lists of new books, up to 50 novelties, and I mean just in one field, whether this is SF or archaeology. I don't know how much publishers think readers do read every year, but if I put on my reading list already today 50 (or 100!) books, what margin is left for other novelties and, what is more important, for discoveries of valuable books from the past? One thing is anticipating a new book by a favourite author and quite another being swamped on all fronts with so many novelties. This is like going to a 19th century ball with your dance card already full for the next 50 waltzes, with no room to discover the love of your life and add him to your card. Just awful!! I have just opened the document with my list of books for 2025 and what I love most is that it's empty: I'm beginning now a twelve-month journey with no known destination, no plan, an open road ahead. That's the fun of reading, I think, and not taking a pre-planned journey already full of expected stops. I want to be surprised all the time, and have the feeling at the end of the year that this was a peculiar journey because in this field I'm a traveller, not a tourist.

I read recently that the publishing world is on the verge of collapse, split between top-heavy corporations and tiny micro-publishers, and that more books than ever end up being mercilessly pulped. This might be too extreme, but in a way I'm not surprised. Everyone can see the earnings in the profession of writing are shrinking, and this no doubt has very much to do with an excess of offer for a dwindling demand. The more books are published, the more readers flock towards the best-selling authors, swamped by a flood of novelties that only the most militant readers can manage (and I wonder who they are, because I gave up long ago the hard task of being up-to-date). A journalist wrote, I can't remember where, that reading would end up being like classical music, an elite pursuit to enjoy mainly the work of dead creators, but I don't see it that way at all. Reading is now closer to pop music, though we still lack the equivalent of Spotify, or perhaps more accurately to fashion.

I know that I'm not saying much today, except that I don't like end-of-year and new-year book lists, the former because they remind me of what I haven't read yet and the latter because they threaten to structure my reading too tightly. There is something else. These lists have the unwanted side-effect of ageing books too quickly. Suddenly, it seems that reading a 2024 book in 2025 is backward, a sign of cultural disorientation.

Reading a 2020 book in 2025 is proof positive of a total loss of bearings. Few can imagine today reading a book which is not a classic published (to name random years) 1983, 1972 or 1961. Why would you do it? It's so vintage!! The endless cult of the novelty increases presentism but, as I'm arguing, pushes still new books, and those of the recent past, into a limbo. No wonder so many books are pulped. This is why in Bluesky I'm enjoying in particular the accounts that recommend books just because the account runners find them cool, whether they are very well-known already or almost forgotten.

To end, I do know that big and small publishers must sell their wares to us, readers, but it's getting too hectic at our end. This week the European Union has passed legislation to force garment makers of fast fashion to recycle their wares, which now end up as discarded trash in places once as beautiful as the Chilean Atacama desert. It's easier, it seems, to pulp books to print more books than to recycle garments made of cheap polyester but the principle is similar: there is an overproduction problem, made even worse by the habit of introducing a constant stream of novelties. I might be wrong but I think that we're reaching the tipping point when not even the most committed readers can cope with the business needs of the publishing industry. The solution is not overwhelming existing readers but widening the field and engaging more readers of all ages and, let's say it, increase the quality of what is published. I'll leave that for another post.

12 January 2025 / A KIND OF MAGIC: ON AUTHORS' RELUCTANCE TO DISCUSS IMAGINATION

Citing Queen and the wonderful Freddy Mercury is always a good idea, though their song "A Kind of Magic" does not really refer to what I have in mind. Written by drummer Roger Taylor for the film *Highlander* in 1986, this song speaks of transcending time as the immortals in the movie's fable do. However, the lines "The bell that rings inside your mind / Is challenging the doors of time / (It's a kind of magic)" might be helpful for my purpose. This is exploring (again) the reluctance of fiction authors to discuss imagination, or what I prefer to call fabulation: the ability to think of a basic plot line and develop it by following trains of thought and ideation that are so far unknown by any of the current sciences.

I'm back in touch with the first-rank author who very kindly told me that "I don't get it" nor do my academic peers (see my post of 1 December), now facing the challenge of approaching another of his novels (his own choice) from a less reductive ideological perspective. This novel has a group of character reincarnate in different periods of human history following Buddhist tenets of great importance for the author, of which I have been warned. He insisted to me once again that while literary work may express the political unconscious as Fredric Jameson famously argued, this is not what writing feels like for writers. I do know that but, as I have explained here, the problem is that no author wants to discuss what it feels like to write fiction, or not in much depth.

This week I've seen another example of the same reluctance. Glaswegian writer and musician Neil Williamson ([@neilwilliamson.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/neilwilliamson.bsky.social)) posted on Bluesky "There's a thing with breaking ground on a new novel. You can only plan (or not) so much. You've got an idea of what it's going to be like, but you never really *know* until the world and characters come alive when you write that first chapter." Ready to be refuted again, I replied: "As a teacher/researcher of Literature I remain mystified by how little we know

about the process of writing fiction. Most writers report similar experiences of going along with characters' demands and changing the plot if required, but no literary scholar has truly explained how this works, have we?" To which Williamson most politely counter-replied "We have not, and (I realise this is no help to educators, sorry!) I kinda love that. It feels like magic when you do it, and I'm a fan of not trying to explain magic. Can we settle on 'just vibe it'? :D." I gave his post a like and moved on (I mean, I still follow Williamson, of course, but will not pester him like this again).

I don't write fiction but I do write books, and I have some experience of magic. In the case of scholarly work of the kind I write, magic happens when all the pieces fit together and for some miraculous reason all the quotations I have painfully selected work well. I assume that every literary scholar has gone through the process of planning a paper, article, chapter or book, writing an abstract and then deviating from said abstract in the process of writing, sometimes significantly. You may begin with an idea but, then, as you test it, this idea might not work, or lead you in an opposite direction. There have been many moments when I have written something (also in this blog!) and I had no clue where the idea came from. In fact, what I most enjoy about writing is that process of surprising myself and visiting corners of my brain I didn't know had something to express. Magic!

The question is that I have never ever in my life spoken to any of my scholarly peers about how we write, where ideas come from, how we know that the structure of our works is right and so on. This is quite peculiar considering that we are constantly subjected to peer reviewing, often by persons who seem to know better than us how we should have written our work and implicitly hint they would have done a better job of it. I myself make a living off teaching students how to write academic prose without fully understanding how they learn. I was marking today reviews written by my fourth-year students, the first ones they ever write, and reading some of the best I wondered how they had managed to acquire the necessary skills so well. It's not my merit but something in their brains that has clicked and now allows them to produce reviews. Magic!

Because this is what my brain and the brains of my students do, I think that putting ideas together in essays makes perfect rational sense. As I age, however, I'm getting a bit paranoid about the claims that fiction writers constantly make about how they put stories together. In one of his letters J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that his legendarium had been on his mind long before he had started writing the stories; when he did, he explained in one of his letters, "always I had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere: not of 'inventing'." We tend to overlook that kind of declaration as a flight of fancy, with writers typically being irrational about their task, invoking 'magic.' I am reminded of those posts in which parents report spooky domestic scenes when their children speak to imaginary friends or claim to see what can only be ghosts or spirits. Apparently the children grow out of that phase soon, but the reports are so many and so consistent that perhaps we should look into them. Likewise with authors.

In the case of fiction writers, we take their many declarations that characters have a personality of their own, or that plots take unexpected twists without their control, as a sort of natural eccentricity that goes with the craft. I must be perhaps a little crazy myself but I don't think that's quite normal. Hearing voices, the British Mental Health Foundation [informs](#), "can be a symptom of some mental health problems" though "not everyone who hears voices has a mental illness. Hearing voices is actually quite a common experience: around one in ten of us will experience it at some point in our lives." Fair enough. I've

never heard voices, but I sure talk to myself a lot. It turns out, and this is another surprising finding, that people with a constant internal monologue might be a minority of 30-50% according to some [reports](#), which, incidentally, makes the classic Modernist novel based on stream of consciousness a very odd exercise. My point is that whereas fiction writers do hear voices (those of their characters) and can even invent internal monologue for imaginary people, we take that for granted. Am I saying their literary creativity is some form of mental disorder? Nooooo!!!! What I am saying is that it is a mental singularity (a form of neurodiversity?) and, as such, worth exploring.

I am not asking for neurologists to read writers' brainwaves instead of their books, which sounds nightmarish in an Elon Musk kind of way, but speculating on what could be found if authors were open to exploring 'the magic'. It is obvious that they don't want to take that road for fear that the possible findings might spoil their mysterious abilities, and this is something to be respected. I just suppose that if we asked engineers to explore what happens in their brain when they have a new idea, most would go along in the hopes of further stimulating their neurones. Writers interfere indeed with their brains using coffee, alcohol and a variety of drugs (remember Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*?), but one thing is testing substances and another becoming the subject of lab tests. Of course!

In my wildest moments, I strongly suspect that fiction comes from the multiverse. If you Google "characters and multiverse" you will get all kinds of information about "shared universes", whether they appear in the works of one or more authors. Just to give an example, other novelists apart from Ian Fleming have written about James Bond. You will also get tons of comments on the multiverse now overwhelmingly present in superhero stories, from comics to movies. And, of course, you get Jungian disquisitions on how the sum total of all the fictions ever written constitutes a universe different from mundane reality. But, no, that's not what I mean. Imagine for a second that actually when writers fabulate characters and plots they are tapping into another universe, with each writer owning a strand. Or perhaps each writer owns an imaginative universe, which is part of the multiverse (in another universe our mundane reality is fictional). I've possibly got this mad idea directly from Jung, though I seem to recall Grant Morrison commenting on something similar.

No, I have not lost my sanity (yet!) and I'm not trying to establish the multiverse as the real source of fiction. There is no way I could manage this within a rational framework, though some literary theories feel to me whackier (to name one, the application of Lacanian psychoanalysis...). Being a fan of science fiction rather than fantasy, I'm asking whether 'magic' can be approached from a more scientific angle. If the question is what are we to gain, and whether we have all to lose, I have no clear reply. Would the mystery of how Emily Brontë could write *Wuthering Heights* diminish if we discover her brain was wired differently? Would we still feel her magic? I'm watching a football match on TV as I write (Barça against Madrid) and it occurs to me we don't know either why some bodies perform so well at sports and do 'magic'. But it's only human nature to be curious.

More... as soon as I can.

24 January 2025 / THE ONSLAUGHT: THE WEEK IN THE US PATRIARCHY

My weekly posts have become almost fortnightly posts because I am distressed by the events happening in the USA and I can't focus. Since the beginning of the year I am having serious difficulties to concentrate and read books; the very few I have read (*Kidnapped* and *Catriona* by R.L. Stevenson) are novels I needed to know to help one of my doctoral students. I thought that space opera could help me to escape for a few evenings the appalling historical moment we are going through but I didn't choose well. James S.A. Corey's latest novel *The Mercy of Gods* narrates, as far as I have read, the brutal alien invasion of a human colony, beginning with the extermination of one eighth of the population.

What is happening in this week is that patriarchy has returned to the US Presidency with a vengeance, bent on destroying all the class, gender, and race advances of the last sixty years, at least, if not the US Constitution itself. It is still to be seen whether President Trump and his brologarchy of tech billionaires will be able to implement the harsh measures of their electoral programme, inspired by the fascist Project 2025, but they are moving fast. The USA is, as we know, on the brink of political collapse, with democracy at risk of being destroyed to make room for a dictatorship. We, nerds, have seen it all before: Senator Padme Amidala was the one to lament in *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* that "So this is how liberty dies. With thunderous applause" when fellow Senator Palpatine stages the coup that makes him Emperor of the whole galaxy. No wonder that Mark Hamill, who played hero Luke Skywalker, is one of the most popular voices in Bluesky, as he was on Twitter. And, yes, Elon Musk appears to be Darth Vader, though the role seems split among the power-hungry brologarchy members. The Jedi Democrats are so far disoriented, knocked out and unable to abandon gerontocracy to offer a new leadership. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortes, you're our only hope...

Much has been written about these matters from a strictly political point of view, but I need to focus here on what concerns me, which is academia. A few days ago, Stephen King posted on Bluesky a brief message: "My advice: As best you can, ignore him." As you may image, there was a barrage of indignant replies, including mine, which I completed with a photo of PM Neville Chamberlain shaking hands with Hitler. It is clear enough that no US inhabitant (I was going to write citizen but the US has many non-citizens, too) can ignore the orange menace as another Bluesky member called him. The question is what are we supposed to do outside the USA and who are 'we'.

From an intersectional point of view, I'm both a concerned EU citizen and a specialist in English Studies. As an EU citizen, I'm in the same category as, to begin with, 48 million fellow Spaniards, and 449 million fellow Union-Europeans (the total population of Europe is 742,3 million, including Russia). It's funny how we tend to think that the EU is less populated than the USA, but in fact we are many more: they are 335 million. The first question is, then, why should the choices of that minority in the context of the whole world dominate us, and what kind of resistance should we put up. Can a responsible EU citizen switch off the news and, as King advised, 'ignore him'?

The obvious answer is 'no', if only because all of Europe is now falling in the grip of the right wing that has taken over the USA, as the local elections in each country are showing. If VOX is today not really a serious contender for the Spanish Presidency, this is only because PP has adopted many of its extreme right-wing policies, as we are seeing in the communities it rules. So, contradicting Mr. King, my message is 'Pay attention, and ignore him only at your risk'. Make yourself personally responsible for any damage that

might come to your community, your family, your person. Vote responsibly and do vote. Monitor what your chosen politicians do, and protest.

As an EU citizen, I am indeed very much concerned, worried sick that one day the European Commission may fall into the hands of the right-wing politicians already dominating some European countries. As an English Studies specialist who makes a living out of teaching UK and USA culture, I am sad, disconcerted and appalled. Being a specialist in science fiction, I am familiar with the many apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrations about the collapse of current civilization, but I had the hope that I would not see it happen in my lifetime. I was going to write 'I never thought I would see it happen', but this is not true. Anyone familiar with Orwell's *1984* or Collins's *The Hunger Games* (or, as noted, *Star Wars*) understands how easily democracy can collapse and tyranny begin. And, hey, I'm a Spanish national, well informed about the loss of the Republic in 1936 and the ensuing 40 years of Franco's harrowing tyranny, the type of regime that VOX aims at reinstating.

As a Spaniard (and a Catalan, of course) I used to approach Anglophone culture with respect, even with awe. You don't choose to spend your life studying and teaching a foreign culture unless you find something fascinating in it. I grant that this fascination might be the product of ignorance, for the horrors of British Imperialism were as present in 1984, when I first registered as an undergrad in the Licenciatura in Filología Inglesa, as they are now, in 2025. Well, I'll correct myself: they were then much better disguised. I don't know how our young students feel when they knock on our doors but I assume that they do like Anglophone culture beyond their interest in the English language. Anglophone culture is still producing, naturally, an impressive stream of high-quality works at all fronts, but the 'greatness' we naïve 1980s undergrads saw in the UK and the USA has fully evaporated.

I have always been critical of imperial glory in my Victorian Literature subjects, as I have been critical of US economic imperialism, yet I feel now that criticism is not an adequate response. These days, fans of English fantasy author Neil Gaiman have been horrified to know that he has been for many years a monstrous sexual predator and he is being cancelled among much disgust and desolation. I am beginning to feel similarly about my two former idols. The UK of Keir Starmer is not as terrible as the UK of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss or Rishi Sunak, but since Brexit (now five years ago) I have a much harder time admiring the UK than I used to have. I do know that not all Britons voted for Brexit and that if a second referendum took place they would vote to return. In the same way, I do know that only 77,284,118 Americans (23% of the population) voted for Trump, but I wish right now I could cancel the US and not have to worry about their politics or culture. Ignore him if you can.

Having established that I can't ignore Trump as an EU citizen, then, the question is whether I can ignore him professionally. Well, I certainly could if I devoted my energies to some area of English Studies that has nothing to do with the contemporary or if I focused on literary theory. My next book, for instance, is going to deal with the secondary character in the 19th century European novel in a variety of languages (*Bleak House* will represent English). This, however, is a project I have undertaken while I decide whether I should abandon for good Gender Studies, which is truly my main focus of research. This is a discipline heavily intertwined with US academia, from which 90% of the theory is coming. The repression and oppression that my Gender Studies peers are now about to face in the USA (the defunding of programmes and Departments has already started) is

going to condition what we do in English Studies all over the democratic world. My publishers (Routledge, Palgrave) are American or have American partners; my newest publisher, UK's Bloomsbury, almost lost its trading agreement with Amazon last week. Add to this that I publish about patriarchal masculinity from an anti-fascist angle.

As a woman, I am terrified as I have never been in my life. I thought I had seen the worst in my lifetime with the situation of women in Afghanistan and in Iran (a country that has just passed a law allowing children as young as nine to be married), but the USA is now on the path of *The Handmaid's Tale* combined with *1984*. Or, going even further, Burdekin's *Swastika's Night*. The patriarchal onslaught, of course, goes beyond misogyny. Yesterday, a Bluesky member asked what is the word for a genocide against the lower classes committed using disease, in reference to Robert Kennedy's anti-vaxxer policies, and I offered 'genusmorbicide', which is not very pretty but might make sense. Another Bluesky member wrote that the only explanation he could find for Trump's behaviour is that he has made a pact with the Devil and needs to make massive human offerings. His spiteful ill-treatment on X of Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, after she asked him in her sermon to have mercy of the undocumented migrants and the LGBTQ+ community, seems to confirm that he is no Christian, and a total psychopath.

I'm telling everyone who'll listen that many persons are going to die cruelly and unnecessarily in the USA in the next four years. Many will commit suicide, others will be assaulted by right-wing whackos and militias, others will be killed by the justice system, thousands will die for lack of health care and, what is worse, many children will be murdered if the public vaccine programmes are suppressed. What Trump's voters have failed to understand is that they are not safer than the rest, at least in matters of health. The USA has already withdrawn from WHO, now that avian flu is so strong in that country that there is a scarcity of eggs. Trump has also withdrawn the USA from the Paris agreement against climate change and given freedom to oil prospectors and any other polluting businesses. There is a fury in all this that goes beyond his personal hurt at having lost the 2020 election to President Biden. I just fail to understand what the ultimate plan is, for the brologarchy already rules the world though its invasive technology, and it won't help to deplete the economy of the workers already putting up with a heart-wrenching degree of exploitation. Many of them illegal migrants.

In these circumstances, how are we to teach and research US culture? So far, this is being produced mostly by defenders of democracy, but it is easy to imagine a time when all traces of diversity will be eliminated from Hollywood films, and when non-white, non-male authors of any type will be cancelled by the regime. Do recall that Trump has already suppressed all federal DEI programmes. We might end up with a new regimented white supremacist culture enforced in all universities, so that calling yourself an Americanist will be akin to calling yourself a fascist. Even worse, it might well happen that the word 'fascist' is respected and that not calling yourself a fascist is punished.

I would lie if I said I'm not scared. To give you an idea, every time I read the obituary of a well-respected person these days (like Jimmy Carter), the first thing that comes to my mind is 'lucky them, they won't have to go through this horror.' Good luck to all of us.

1 February 2025 / SEX ON THE SCREEN: ENOUGH IS ENOUGH?

Even though I write plenty about gender, I don't write about sex because, being a Victorian at heart, I believe this is a very private matter. I don't mean that sex should not be discussed (of course it should!), but that it is difficult to participate in the discussion because there is only a certain level up to which you may keep matters theoretical; personal experience defines sexuality and the other way round, and there are parts of my life I do not wish to share. That is the meaning of privacy, precisely.

An advantage I have is that I am heterosexual, which means I don't have to defend my choices in the context of monogamous heteronormativity, though the advances of right-wing politics are indeed affecting the choices of heterosexuals as regards reproduction, contraception, and general sexual behaviour. I'll end this introduction before I get carried away into matters which are not my focus today like the widespread reality of sexual abuse against children or the shocking case of Gisèle Pelicot. My focus, actually, is the representation of sex on the screen, so there we go.

I started watching last week the miniseries *Los años nuevos* by Rodrigo Sorogoyen, Paula Fabra and Sara Cano. Its ten episodes narrate the relationship between Ana and Óscar, presenting them on New Years' Eve along the ten years when they are a couple, 2015 to 2024, which happen to be their thirties. In fact, I don't know for how long they are together, since I stopped watching after the first two episodes, out of excruciating boredom. I have not watched *Normal People*, the miniseries, but I have read Sally Rooney's famous novel, and Ana and Óscar seemed to me an older version of Marianne and Connell, that kind of couple that, as you know from the very beginning, are made for each other, but put as many obstacles as they can in their relationship, which is really tiresome. My young students tell me this is how relationships work today, hence Rooney's immense popularity, but I lose patience with what I can only see as rather silly dithering, excuse my prissiness.

That's not my point, either. In the two episodes I watched of *Los años nuevos* Ana and Óscar have sex in very long scenes, as if Sorogoyen didn't know the meaning of the word 'ellipsis'. The sex is moderately explicit (you don't see a vagina or an erect penis) but it is detailed, since Sorogoyen invites us to see each action in the couple's intercourse, which appears to happen in real time. Watching Ana and Óscar I realized that sex scenes are all but disappearing from current cinema and series (or that I'm not watching films and series with sex scenes, I'm not sure).

These scenes made me feel uncomfortable, a voyeur rather than a spectator. The sex was exciting in its soft-porn rawness, but at the same time quite off-putting because of the director's insistence in prolonging the scenes. I thought that I was projecting my own prejudices, as an aging woman not too keen on watching young bodies in bed and being reminded of her age. Yet, to my surprise, checking reviews in FilmAffinity, I saw that many other spectators had commented on the awkwardness of watching the same sex scenes. Enough is enough?

I read now and then articles about how the younger generations have less sex and are generally less interested in its onscreen representation, an impression that clashes with the generalized perception that young persons watch plenty of porn: the heterosexual boys to learn about sex regardless of how unrealistic it is, the heterosexual girls to learn how to please the boys when they ask for oral or anal sex... I don't watch porn because I find it aesthetically unappealing, and because it tends to be misogynistic. I read now and then about specific stars or specific protests against porn, but generally

its appeal baffles me. I wonder what's it like to have a child choosing porn as their career, and whether the money compensates the actors for the sale of their privacy (supposing they do so freely). I assume it does.

This leads me to the actors who simulate sex on the screen. Watching Iria del Río (Ana) and Francesco Carril (Óscar) in their long sex scenes gave me time enough to start thinking about their jobs. I imagine an actor returning home to their partner, after a long day simulating sex with another actor, and I fail to understand how this works. As a spectator, instead of focusing on what's going on between the characters, I see an enormous breach in the privacy of the actors' lives, and the scene stops working for me.

Up to the 1950s, more or less, this problem did not exist. Actors might kiss passionately but need not take their clothes off; the image of Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr on the beach in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) with their bodies being swept by the waves acting as metaphors of lust is a paradigm of that type of pre-nudity sex. I'm not going to trace a history of sex on the screen here and of the gradual collapse of the censorship codes but basically, between *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981) and *Basic Instinct* (1991), the last prejudices were abandoned and it became quite normal for actors to simulate full sex on the screen in both indie and mainstream movies.

When I was a little girl, I saw a photo of Sophia Loren and Richard Burton kissing passionately on the set of the 1974 version of *Brief Encounter*. The caption claimed this was a 'fake kiss' ('un beso de mentirijillas'). I was quite puzzled because I couldn't understand why the obviously true kiss of the photo was said to be fake. Were the actors actually not touching? Was there a trick I was missing? I did not grasp then that the kiss was real, and the fakeness corresponded to the feelings, though we all know that the best movies are those in which the actors playing a romantic couple end up falling in love (*Gattaca*, with Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke, has this magic for me, no matter that they are long divorced now).

Perhaps because of that fake kiss, I remain puzzled by what exactly happens in the sex scenes, like many other spectators. I know that actors' genitals are covered by discreet, flesh-tone modesty garments, but even so, you see flesh touching flesh, tongues intertwining, hands caressing... Intimacy coordinators now make sure that every move is choreographed and the actors' mutual discomfort minimized, yet, I still can't imagine what kind of mental and physical havoc the sex scenes must play in the actors' lives. I know that I could not stand seeing my partner in bed with another person on the screen for everyone to see, and I must wonder how actors' partners cope with those scenes. Very professionally, I assume, though they are not necessarily part of the profession.

Apart from wondering what the actors in the sex scenes of *Los años nuevos* were feeling (or their partners), I also wonder what exactly this type of scene contributes. Famously, Bridget Jones said in the first novel of the series, in which she watches again and again the 1995 miniseries based on *Pride and Prejudice*, that nobody wants to see Elizabeth and Darcy in bed. That was the adaptation that contributed to the erotic imaginary the sight of Colin Firth in a wet white shirt clinging to his manly chest... better than any sex scene, really. These scenes, of course, can tell us whether the lovers treat each other with passion, tenderness, boredom, cruelty...but they cannot transmit how they feel inside (which literature can). Since spectators need to fill in that gap, I find that ellipses do the job much better. Have the *actors* kiss and undress each other, if you wish, but let me imagine what the *characters* do during sex.

There is a film that forced spectators and reviewers to face the question of sex but that failed for being too explicit. Does anyone remember Michael Winterbottom's 2004 movie *9 Songs*? Winterbottom, also the scriptwriter, narrates Matt and Lisa's sexual relationship; the nine songs are played by the eight different rock bands whose concerts they attend together from the night they meet until they split. Actors Kieran O'Brien and Margo Stilley (then not yet a professional) had unsimulated, real sex, which means that technically this is a porn film, with the difference that Winterbottom's main aim was not to titillate but to narrate sex. As he said at the time of the film's release, "Books deal explicitly with sex, as they do with any other subject. Cinema has been extremely conservative and prudish. I wanted to go to the opposite extreme and show a relationship only through sex." Opinions were divided, with some reviewers and spectators finding the sex unerotic and tedious, while Derek Malcolm of [The Guardian](#) praised it: "*Nine Songs* looks like a porn movie, but it feels like a love story. The sex is used as a metaphor for the rest of the couple's relationship. And it is shot with Winterbottom's customary sensitivity."

Winterbottom stressed that "the point of making the film was to say, 'What's wrong with showing sex?'" Watching his film twenty years ago I found it very honest and straightforward. I did wonder then about the actors' privacy, but their choices were so extreme that I assumed they were fine. The difference between *9 Songs* and, to continue with the same example, *Los años nuevos*, is that Winterbottom's film deals directly with sex while Sorogoyen's series deals with romance. In a relationship there are many other elements apart from sex but they rarely appear in romantic stories, from disagreements over domestic chores to intense conversations about, well, movies. The problem, then, is possibly the disproportion. If you use lots of screen time for sex, and this is not a porn movie or series, then you need to balance that with other elements that explain why the characters love each other. In the absence of good dialogue, which is what kept romance going before sex started being narrated in print and on the screen, the narrative quickly becomes boring. Either it seems that the couple are only in it for the sex, or their story seems too ordinary to engage the spectator's attention, which is what happened to me with Sorogoyen's Ana and Óscar. Why should I care for them?

Perhaps it's time I listen to my students' recommendations and start reading romantasy, they tell me this is where good, sassy romance can be found. We'll see when they start making the corresponding adaptations...

8 February 2025 / TWO PROJECTS WITH STUDENTS: MINISERIES AND REVIEWS

I have published this week not one but TWO books gathering works written by my students. As I have been narrating here, I started publishing students' work back in 2013-14, when I edited two volumes on *Harry Potter*. I became then hooked on project-oriented teaching for BA and MA subjects, mostly electives, and these new two books are my thirteenth and fourteenth projects. You can see the complete list [here](#). And download any volume you like for free, adding thus to the more than 54000 downloads the first twelve books have generated.

I grant that walking second-language students through the process of writing minimally publishable texts in English is not easy, but after so many years it seems I more or less know what I'm doing. An indispensable part of the process is providing students

with sample exercises that they can imitate and that give them a very clear idea of what I need from them. I usually include the sample texts in the corresponding volumes, for my students to see that the book we write together also matters to me as a scholar, not just as a teacher. If I have time, I write as many essays as they contribute, though lately I've been a bit lazy in that regard.

I call the publications 'books' with good reason because they are very extensive. Properly speaking, they are e-books, as I publish them in the digital repository of my university as .pdf, .mobi and .epub files, and they don't have a print edition. But, then, this happens with many books today. Of the fourteen books, five have been written by MA students and nine by BA students, both in English Studies degrees. The topics vary (please, see the list), but I focus mostly on contemporary literature, cinema and TV.

The most successful volume is so far [Reading SF Short Fiction: 50 Titles](#) (2016) with more than 12000 downloads. I have no idea why [Songs of Survival: Men in 21st Century Popular Music](#) has only interested 232 potential readers. I must clarify that apart from announcing the publication to the national English Studies association AEDEAN through our mailing list, and posting on Twitter and now on Bluesky when they are available, I do nothing to promote the books. I trust the student authors use their own social media and contacts to generate more downloads. UAB's DDD allows to see in the statistics page for each publication where they have been being downloaded, and it pleases me to see that the fourteen books have reached an international audience.

It's now time to comment on the two books I'm publicizing here. I'll begin with the book by the MA students, [Body and Gender in 21st Century Miniseries](#). This corresponds to work done in the MA elective 'Body and Gender in Narrative', which I have started teaching this past semester. This is a 5 ECTS subject in principle designed for 12-15 students. In the end, 17 registered though I'm sorry to say that two did not finish the course work.

I am not of a theoretical disposition and tend to focus my subjects on textual analysis. This academic year I wanted to do research with the students on SF novels written by women, having written myself a book on SF and men, but the MA coordinator asked me to focus on audiovisual texts. Having taught cinema last year (see [Beautiful Vessels: Children and Gender in Anglophone Cinema](#)) I decided to focus on the very much neglected miniseries. The inspiration came from watching the amazingly accomplished miniseries *Shōgun* and *Fosse/Verdon*; actually I chose the latter for my own essay. I drew a list of about 50 outstanding 21st century miniseries checking similar lists online, and adding my own recollections and preferences. I then assigned two of these series randomly to each student, and asked them to provide a third title.

The classes consisted of three ten-minute presentations by the students of their corresponding miniseries followed by debate until completing the 80 minutes of each session. The presentations acted as drafts for the 2000-word essays which students submitted two weeks later. I must explain that students propose their final mark on the basis of a rubric and I don't grade their work (I just validate or not their proposed final mark). If the essay is not apt for publication, I return it and ask for a second version. This usually happens in about one third of the cases, which means that I have corrected and edited about sixty essays (120000 words). The final book has 46 essays and is about 100000 words long.

I have no room here to comment on the 46 miniseries represented in the book (please, download it!), but I will clarify two points. One is that the focus falls, as you can

see from the title, on how body and gender are dealt with in each series. The book does not offer Wikipedia-style entries, but textual analysis focused on these two concepts, with bibliography (mostly reviews, interviews, and, yes, academic articles and chapters). Having said that, since the miniseries represented are quite well-known, the book also acts as a guide for anyone interested in watching very good examples of this type of narrative. Something we have discovered is that, sadly, some of these excellent miniseries are now almost impossible to find. They have not been edited in Blu-ray and the streaming platforms do not archive them. The platforms pay taxes depending on the value of their catalogue, so they often shed remorselessly a good number of films, miniseries and series to keep afloat.

Funnily, although the students did a very good job in their presentations and essays, we did not manage to reach clear conclusions. My general impression is that the quality of the miniseries as audiovisual narratives is very high, but they do not follow a specific body and gender discourse. Or at least, not one that goes beyond the heteronormative, only occasionally. The miniseries are, in short, less woke than right-wing critics of current TV suppose and not as liberal as should be expected from 21st century television and platforms. Most miniseries we analysed are US productions, with just a handful from the UK, and a reason for this common middle-ground might be related to US business practices. The model in which TV was dominated by big national channels (ABC, CBS, NBC) and, later, cable TV, seems to have produced more daring narrative than the current platforms (Netflix was launched in 2007 as a streaming service). UK's BBC is quite another case, as it appears to be ideologically more progressive.

The other book, [*Reviewing Contemporary Anglophone Fiction and Nonfiction*](#), gathers together 106 book reviews (800-1000 words each). These correspond to novels of all types and to nonfiction published in English between 1990 and 2023. The volume is the result of the work carried out by students in the new fourth-year compulsory subject 'Contemporary Anglophone Literature' in our BA in English Studies. In this subject, I assigned to each student a set of four books (I mean that each student read books no other classmate read): a) a literary UK or US novel; b) a literary novel in English not from these two countries; c) a novel in a popular genre; d) a non-fiction volume. I subdivided the sessions in two parts: a 40-minute lecture followed by a 40-minute interaction session, in which students spoke to 3-5 classmates about the books they were reading. There were 21 interactive sessions in total, and students had between 62 and 84 conversations with classmates (a total of 38 students registered). In the final tutorial, I asked students to comment on the ten books they most would like to read apart from the four books they had been assigned, on the basis of their classmates' recommendations.

I have taught students to write reviews of their four assigned books. My error was that I assumed they knew what a review was, and that they used GoodReads all the time, but that was not the case at all. I read very good reviews from magazines and newspapers with them, and we used class time to write a review together, but even so, things were not easy particularly for the students whose first review was for a nonfiction book. In the end, everyone passed the subject. I marked 152 reviews, of which 106 ended in the book, with only two students failing to produce at least one publishable review. My impression is that the reviews were all of their authorship, though I have no doubt that in some cases they used AI, not quite ChatGPT but perhaps Grammarly. Before publication I asked them to please withdraw the reviews which were not their own, promising I would not alter the final mark, but they all kept mum.

As in the case of the book on miniseries, [Reviewing Contemporary Anglophone Fiction and Nonfiction](#) is intended to be a guide, in this case to the very rich 1990-2023 period. Since students are no longer buying handbooks and introductions, I have not found any guide to the period; the existing volumes, besides, only cover the literary novel and I wanted my subject and the book to be far more inclusive, not only mixing UK, USA, and transnational fiction but also embracing the popular genres and the always neglected nonfiction. I don't know what I'll do next year, however. I might withdraw from the reading lists the books already reviewed, or I might publish them in a second volume. I need to think hard about how to progress.

As a teacher I couldn't be happier today. I simply love the two volumes, and I'm very proud of my students' work. I hope they are also satisfied and happy to have collaborated with their peers. To, precisely, my peers out there, let me stress once more that there is a small step between marking lots of exercises nobody else sees and students don't find useful, and using project-oriented teaching, always being careful to provide samples and assigning work on an individual basis. I could have chosen a few miniseries and a few books and base the two subjects on them, having everyone see and read the same, but my students have been exposed from a much longer corpus, and have interacted far more intensely among them than if they had just listened to me lecturing.

I know my method works best with contemporary texts, but it can be applied to very many subjects in different disciplines, I'm sure of that. Please, accept the challenge to do so...

14 February 2025 / VILLAINOUS WOMEN IN FICTION: A BOOK SOMEONE OUGHT TO WRITE

Many years ago, a publisher offered me the chance to publish a book about the figure of the *femme fatale*, addressed to a general readership. I cannot recommend enough the two books by Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (1986) and *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Culture* (1998), academic monographs that describe very well (and very critically!) how masculine insecurities led to the rise of the *femme fatale*. I initially accepted the proposal I have mentioned, hoping to disseminate some of Dijkstra's teachings but as my list of villainous women grew, so did my discomfort with the projected volume.

The *femme fatale* is a specific kind of villainess who uses her sexuality to fulfil her criminal aims, somebody like Mata Hari (in real life) or Catherine Trammell from *Basic Instinct* (1991) in fiction. Using sex for empowerment seems to me to be a classic non-feminist strategy that may ridicule (some) men's dependence on sex but that is ultimately subservient to patriarchy. I ended up abandoning the book on the *femme fatale*, advising my prospective publisher to find a male writer. As happens, Spanish author Marta Sanz published in 2009 with another publisher an anthology of texts and images on the *femme fatale*, but this seems to be out of print. By the time Sanz published her volume, the *femme fatale* had been reclaimed as a figure of anti-patriarchal empowerment by some enthusiastic feminists. My view today, in 2025, has not changed, and I still see the *femme*

fatale as Dijkstra described her: a fantasy embodying men's misogyny rather than a figure born of women's demand of power.

In the long time I spent working on my book *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2019), I did consider again the *femme fatale*, and in particular how she compared to the male villains I studied, none of whom use sex to empower themselves. Naturally: there is no powerful women in their stories that they need to seduce to empower themselves as men, and I never found a story in which a villain seduces through sex an even more powerful villain (hey! I thought of Elon Musk and Donald Trump as I wrote this...!). Many villainesses are *femme fatales*, but not all villainesses are *femme fatales*, and, yes, I could have considered together male and female villains. I did not, however, because misogyny confines the villainess to lower degrees of power than a man can ever conquer. If Adolf Hitler had been born a woman, she would not have gone very far. The few women villains I came across that seemed to break the mould, like Rosa Klebb in the James Bond's novels, proved my point: she is a formidable foe for Bond, but cannot shatter the glass ceiling limiting women in the supposedly egalitarian Soviet Russia.

At the same time, I briefly theorized in my book that there is a significant difference between the women who conquered some measure of power within patriarchy before and after Second-Wave feminism. Before feminism, women could find themselves in positions of great power through inheritance, marriage, widowhood or motherhood. Few, if any, empowered themselves in other ways, though authorship was from the 19th century onwards an interesting avenue into public life (I'm thinking here of Harriet Martineau or George Eliot). Women's road to power changed dramatically with First-Wave feminism and the combined conquest of education, property, the vote and the professions. Because Second-Wave feminism was mainly radical and left-wing, we made the collective mistake of thinking that there would be no right-wing feminism, a term, which, indeed, is an oxymoron. Yet, here it is.

The villainess that awoke me to the realisation that women may benefit from the advances in equality of feminism without being themselves feminist was, logically, Margaret Thatcher, UK's Prime Minister between 1979 and 1990. She came from a middle-class background and empowered herself through meritocratic education and the support of her generous husband Dennis Thatcher. I very much doubt that suddenly in the 1970s the Tory Party became a feminist haven; rather, Margaret Thatcher was so bold and assertive that no Tory man dared raise his voice against her. When they chucked her out, they did it on the sly, in a sort of conspiracy brotherhood. Thatcher destroyed much of the structure of British society, specially its welfare system, claiming that there is no society, only individuals, though personally she did not gain much. She enjoyed the power, no doubt, and being feared and respected but, unlike the billionaire clique now in the White House her material ambitions were more limited.

The other villainess that left me reeling in her fascist brutality was Alma Coin of *The Hunger Games*. This rebel leader who opposes with all her might the Capitol's regime headed by President Snow, is presented by author Suzanne Collins with much ageism: her rigid grey hair, Katniss observes with much dislike, seems to stand for her whole rigid personality as a mature woman. Coin dislikes Katniss, wants to use Peeta as the Mockingjay instead, and does all she can to undermine the heroine's reputation and even kill her. In the end, and I hope this is no longer a spoiler, Katniss realises she must kill Snow, by then a prisoner of the successful rebels, but also Coin when she announces

yet another edition of the atrocious Hunger Games with the children of the defeated members of the regime. I had not paid sufficient attention to Katniss's decision to assassinate Coin in public and thus forfeit her own future. But when the chance came to participate in a book on the final girl, I presented Katniss as a final girl trapped between two psychopaths: the patriarchal monster Snow, and the patriarchal monster Coin. The difference is that whereas Snow is a classic patriarch, Coin is a post-feminist one, who drifts from the left to the right wing fairly quickly as soon as she is empowered.

I am certainly interested in this type of villainess, which I see in the news now embodied by Marine Le Pen, Georgia Meloni, Isabel Díaz Ayuso and so on. They are not women who depend on a man to access power, but who have accessed political power within right-wing parties that are generally misogynistic towards women, condone gender-related violence and pursue pro-life policies. These women seem to be, as Lady Macbeth wanted, unsexed or degendered in their indifference to the plea of other women. You will always see them surrounded by men because they hardly like other women, whom they tend to see as rivals. Their game is not to seduce men, but to express a type of strongly conservative femininity which can gain masculine respect because, as the men sense, it is patriarchal. What these women forget is that, as happened to Thatcher, men are quick to get rid of the excessively empowered women; in fact, as I argued in my book, this is what happens to male villains, too: the patriarchal system always finds a hero to correct their deviance without altering the status quo.

You can easily find on Google lists of the most prominent female villains, though the category is treated very loosely and encompasses from murderers of a single victim to wide-ranging, structural villainy. Here are a few names in no particular order: Bellatrix Lestrange and Dolores Umbridge (in *Harry Potter*), Marisa Coulter (in *His Dark Materials*), Jadis the Snow Queen of Narnia, Daenerys and Cersei in *Game of Thrones*, the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, Roald Dahl's witches and Agatha Trunchbull (in *Matilda*), H. Rider Haggard's Ayesha (in *She*), Anne Rice's Queen of the Damned, Cruella de Ville in *101 Dalmatians*, Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca*, the Queen in "Snow White," the Other Mother in *Coraline*, Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*, Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Milady de Winter in *The Three Musketeers*, Annie Wilkes in *Misery*... take your pick! I will add, for good measure, Reileen Kawahara in Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, if only because her lair is the Francoist Valle de los Caídos near Madrid.

As you can see, there is plenty of material to write not one but several books. There are, however, two reasons why I'm not going to be the author of these potential volumes. One is misogyny. The other, too. The first kind of misogyny has to do with the danger of pleasing misogynist men if I claim that women have the same potential as men to do evil, a tenet of which I am totally convinced. Here's the irony: the only barrier that has prevented women from joining the ranks of the top male villains is misogyny. Suppress misogyny, give women full equality following the demands of feminism and, sooner or later, you will have a woman dictator who will put Hitler to shame. I cannot, however, be the woman to argue this thesis, for it would damage very much the cause of the good women fighting for freedom and equality from left-wing positions (like mine). This is a terrible sort of Catch 22 for I need to warn anyone who will listen that power for fascist domination should never be an object of desire for women, yet if I say that some women might like that type of power, the manosphere out there might conclude that, as they have been saying, all women are evil.

The other kind of misogyny has to do with the limitations of the fictional villainesses. I have already mentioned Rosa Klebb, but allow me to mention Bellatrix Lestrange and Dolores Umbridge. In the *Harry Potter* universe these two women are examples of complicity with patriarchy, embodied by Lord Voldemort. Bellatrix is besotted with the monstrous villain and, so, her collaboration in his regime is more or less understood (though Voldemort is very far from reciprocating her interest). Umbridge does not even know Voldemort, but she is so convinced about the virtues of his brutal fascist regime that she institutes of her own accord an anti-Muggle inquisition within the Ministry of Magic, which she tries to extend to Hogwarts. Now, try to imagine Voldemort as a woman, and see whether *Harry Potter* would work, or mean the same. Lord Voldemort's rise to power follows a classic pattern though Rowling's original contribution is that Harry neither kills Voldemort nor demands to be empowered once his foe manages to eliminate himself. Voldemort is eliminated at no cost to masculinity, which is reinforced thanks to Harry's antipatriarchal stance. If, in contrast, Bellatrix had been the one ambitious enough to claim absolute power, this would have reflected negatively on all the witches. Nobody would have trusted Hermione to be appointed Minister for Magic, which she does become because Harry's victory does not significantly alter the status quo. And because, though mightily intelligent and capable, Hermione is no feminist.

So, what worries me sick is that other feminist women might mistake the empowerment of right-wing women for true feminism. It's the other way round: conservative women have always been far more powerful than left-wing women, but now that left-wing feminism has paved the way for women's public empowerment a number of extremely ambitious right-wing women have discovered they can access power without directly depending on men, climbing up the hierarchy of their party, as Thatcher did with the Tories. I long to see Spain (or Catalonia, for that matter) governed by a woman, but I don't want that woman to be someone like Isabel Díaz Ayuso; I'm all for the other Díaz: Yolanda. In a similar vein, though I would like to see the USA government run by a woman, I would always prefer Elizabeth Warren or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to any of the appalling women in Trump's new cabinet.

When *Games of Thrones*, the TV series, ended with Daenerys's assassination by her nephew and lover Jon Snow, and the ascension to the throne of Brandon Stark, a chance was lost to celebrate a woman hero who claimed power to do good and not for domination. Many voices were then heard arguing that Daenerys was too far gone onto the path of villainy to be reclaimed as a hero. I do not think this is the case, but clearly the male showrunners, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, and the author of the novels, George R.R. Martin, saw Daenerys as a villain. Since Cersei Lannister already occupied a prominent position as a villainess in the show, it would have been appropriate to have Daenerys realise that she was taking the wrong path, and then to have her redeem herself. She could have turned Westeros into a completely different kingdom, as I think the audience wanted, but did not happen.

So, please, somebody write the book I will not write, perhaps as a collective volume. And please, let's have somebody tell the story of how a woman hero persuades a woman villain that, as Tolkien preached, true power lies in creation and not in domination. In the meantime, brace yourselves for the damage that the new patriarchal villainy in the White House will do, with the complicity of the many women voters that have given their support to Trump and to his extremely dangerous billionaire minions. And the villainesses in his cabinet.

20 February 2025 / POLITICS IN CLASS: PRO-HUMAN RIGHTS

I was told yesterday that I must bear in mind that not all of our students agree with the left-wing political position I defend, as a feminist and a socialist, and that some actually support right-wing policies. This is hardly surprising if we take into account voting statistics and the growth of the extreme right among young people all over Europe. It is, nonetheless, less expected in the context of my university, UAB, which has a reputation for being a blue-collar university with a clear left-wing inclination among students. Few campus flaunt, as ours does, a constant stream of left-wing graffiti in our central areas or have student strikes as commonly as ours.

My feminist teaching is encouraged at all points by UAB, which offers a BA degree in Socio-cultural Gender Studies and has a specific mandate to offer balanced selections of readings, so that women authors are always represented in all subjects no matter the degree. This balance needs to be reflected in the official syllabi, though, of course, subjects with a selection of only women authors or male authors face no obstacle as long as they refer to specific aspects of gender. We don't have a similar mandate for Black authors or LGBTQ+ authors, which is anyway compensated in the contemporary literature courses we teach by our own selections. We, teachers, don't follow any other political mandate from UAB beyond respecting gender equality, but this is already a political regulation supposing that the university has a left-wing, liberal disposition. Teachers still unwilling to respect gender equality may disobey the mandate, but do raise criticism from students (I've never heard of a penalty). I don't think UAB would tolerate a teacher who offered openly right-wing opinions, not even under the principle of 'libertad de cátedra' (academic freedom).

Since, in short, my own feminist-socialist position is common at UAB and right-wing positions are not really welcome by most students, how are we supposed to deal with students who oppose our political views? This is a rather new problem. In my own time as an undergrad, there were Literature teachers in my Department and in others that were clearly right-wing and didn't hide their ideas in class, above all their snobbish classism against us, working-class kids. The intense academic activism of the 1990s, with the launching of post-Marxist versions of feminism and Gender Studies, the rise of Queer Studies and Post-colonial Studies, opened up the way for an intense ideological re-interpretation of the canon and the inclusion in class of texts and authors so far discriminated against. We have passed in about thirty years from syllabi dominated by white, cisgender, straight men to offering all-inclusive subjects and tutoring dissertations by absolutely any type of author. This is our normality.

I do not deny that it is a heavily politicized normality and that, often, we run the risk of neglecting the literary elements that make a work worth exploring. I'm certain, however, that we cannot go back to the formalist times when all that mattered were the literary elements to the exclusion of ideology. Now and then an old-school teacher will request that we should do so because our ideological teaching is too excessive and can alienate students. So far, students have supported this ideological reading, but I'm concerned, in view of the warning I got yesterday, about whether those who have concealed their discomfort might start vocalizing it. I'm not speaking of trigger warnings (there has been a timid movement in that direction) but of openly questioning in class our choices and our lecturing. We have noticed that in teachers' surveys, students' opinions about our pedagogical styles have become more critical and entitled, and that might be a first sign of what is coming.

Yesterday, right-wing Catalan nationalist party Junts decided not to force the resignation of the extreme right-wing Catalan nationalist mayor of Ripoll, Silvia Orriols, a woman known for her antimigration, xenophobic positions. Catalan president Salvador Illa, a socialist, protested that “Either you’re for human rights or for the extreme right wing” (“O se está con los derechos humanos o con la extrema derecha”). I’m not an Illa fan, but I have posted on Bluesky this morning that I might change my vocabulary to stop using ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ and start using ‘pro-human rights’ and ‘anti-human rights’. The left/right division is complicated by associations with, respectively, 20th century communism and fascism and it might be necessary to reconduct this, as not all left-wing persons are communist and not all right-wing persons are fascist. My proposal, however, is still beset with all kinds of problems. In fact, I almost quarrelled with my Contemporary Literature class when I insisted that defending Afghan women from the Taliban is a matter of human rights.

The defence of human rights is not a unspecific doctrine, but a position backed by the UN’s “[Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#),” signed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 ([General Assembly resolution 217 A](#)), after the horrifying WWII. You can see [here](#) which countries have ratified the ensuing agreements and check whether you would like to live there. The USA is the only ‘Western’ country to significantly lag behind, not having ratified yet, for instance, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, presented in 1971 to the US Congress as the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution. President Joe Biden declared on January 17, 2025, that since many states had passed it, this is the 28th Amendment and is “the law of the land.” This declaration has not been confirmed, which explains a few matters about the current onslaught against women’s reproductive rights.

Why should matters like this be relevant in the teaching of Literature? Well, thinking of the past, *Pride and Prejudice* becomes a very different kind of story if you recall that in 1813, when it was published, women lost their legal status as independent citizens when they married following the principle of ‘coverture’. If you made a bad marriage to an abusive husband you were lost, as divorce was not available to women: this is what Anne Brontë narrates in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1847). The literature of the present is likewise conditioned by politics and legislation. Think not only of pro-feminist fiction, but also of anti-racist or anti-homophobic fiction. In fact, there is no anti-human rights fiction that I can think of, which is why reading novels such as Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) today is so complicated. It is perfectly possible to read this novel as a condemnatory portrait of a child abuser, but Nabokov’s intention in using a first-person narrative is extremely ambiguous.

Taking into account what is happening in the USA under Trump’s new mandate, we might be headed for a period of radical exclusion, aiming at a return to the canonical dominance of the white, male, cisgender, straight author. No more talk about misogyny, racism, LGTBIQ+ phobia and so on in class or research, and a renewed praise of the literary virtues of dead white males, without any allusion to their ideology. This is how my generation was being taught in the 1980s. Exclusion, however, is the lesser evil, for the young can always grow rebellious and read what is banned, forbidden or merely despised. What worries me is the ideological reversal by which the attackers of humans rights are renaming repression as freedom or knowledge as ideology, following Orwell’s newspeak and doubletalk. Think, for instance, of a lecture on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

(1987), a harrowing novel about the struggle of an enslaved woman to first reach freedom and then lay down the literal ghosts of the past. This novel is always taught from an anti-racist, pro-feminist point of view, which defends the human rights of the enslaved persons. Now, imagine how a teacher who does not believe in human rights and might defend slavery would teach or write about *Beloved*. In case you were thinking this is the solution, there is absolutely no way you could teach *Beloved* ignoring its legal and political background.

The young persons who endorse autocratic regimes all over the world, often do so thinking that politics are boring and a nuisance, and it would be great to forget about them by electing leaders for life. That could work if the persons who volunteered to lead for life did so truly following a willingness to serve, rather than to empower themselves. There is talk in the USA of installing an absolutist monarchy, and Trump called himself 'king' in a post celebrating one of his decrees. Spain was dominated by a leader for life, dictator Francisco Franco, for 40 years, and that didn't go well for the defenders of human rights (the attackers were happy, though). So, yes, democracy can be very tiring but it gives you the chance to defend human rights and, what is best, to get rid of useless leaders every few years. Voting is not that hard, really, and, if you ask me, it should be mandatory.

As for how we teach Literature, at this point I do not know what the next years will bring, particularly considering that in the last decades we have followed the US lead in the dismantling of academic patriarchy. Trump's defunding of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programmes and positions must be having already a deep impact, but there is a rather worrying silence in the press and the social media, possibly because people are shocked and stunned. Decisions about which texts and authors we can teach and how could be soon fraught, even outside the USA. Many university presses and private academic publishers might decide to stop publishing certain types of pro-human rights research (think of a dissertation on trans authors, for instance). The National Science Foundation has a now a list of [banned and trigger words](#) in federal grant writing. The website I'm citing advises being practical and disguising these words, but this includes replacing 'women' with 'adults girls'...

I'll stop here, take a deep breath...

2 March 2025 / SOME THOUGHTS ON MISOGYNISTIC AGEISM: FROM GREY HAIR TO DEMI MOORE

On Thursday we received at UAB the visit of our colleagues from the CELCA (Centre for English Languages and Literatures) of the Universitat de Lleida, an institute that gathers together the research groups [Ratnakara](#), which specializes currently in Indian Ocean literatures, and [Dedal-Lit](#), which deals with Age Studies (please take a look at the forthcoming international [conference](#) they will be hosting in April for ENAS and NANAS, 'Ageing, Old Age, and Intergenerational Relationships through Narrative and Practice: Challenging Ageism'). We participated in the meeting as members of the research group for the representation of conflict ([G4RoC](#)), though we are also members of the research project Beyond Postmemory: English Literary Perspectives on War and Memory in the (Post)Postmodern Era ([POSTLIT](#)).

I want to focus today, from a point of view which is not strictly academic, on the thoughts stirred by the colleagues who spoke about ageing (in drama, short fiction, novels, graphic novels). I must stress that I consider Age Studies to cover all ages. I have a couple of chapters on ageing men: "Fighting the Monsters Inside: Masculinity, Agency and the Aging Gay Man in Christopher Bram's *Father of Frankenstein*," in *Masculinities and Literary Studies: Intersections and New Directions*, and one on Agent Fox Mulder in a forthcoming book on SF and TV series, which I have co-edited with Michael Pitts. Yet, it could be said that I have done more work on children, from diverse pieces on *Harry Potter* to the book I edited with my MA students' essays last year, [Beautiful Vessels: Children and Gender in Anglophone Cinema](#) (see my [post](#) on this book). I have not written so far on ageing women simply because it's not my area of research, but as an ageing woman I have given the matter plenty of thought, and I wish to share some experiences and ideas here, linked to matters as diverse as my grey hair and Demi Moore's film *The Substance*.

I always make a point of telling students my age, so that they know how to place me generationally without the need to speculate. I'm 58, will soon be 59, and so my most immediate horizon in terms of decades is reaching 60 in 2026, if the world and I still exist. One thing I have noticed in academia is that the moment you hit 55 (perhaps just 50) everyone starts talking about retirement. As happens, I contacted the personnel services of UAB about eighteen months ago to check that my working record was correct and they emailed me the regulations about retirement, noting that I could retire with a full pension at 60 (I started working full-time at UAB when I was 25) as many teachers are doing.

In my Department, with few exceptions, my colleagues have been retiring at 65, with the current trend being retirement at 70, which we are allowed to take, followed by an extra stint as honorary of emeritus professor up to 74 (in that case you get your full pension at 70 and a tiny yearly stipend). I plan to retire at 68, which will be the mandatory retirement age for all workers in a few years' time in Spain, and also because 68 is 50 years older than our youngest 18-year-old students. I am already 40 years older than them and the generational gap is beginning to be too much. In practical terms, this means I have nine and a half academic years to complete, though I don't see myself ceasing to write this blog and to publish academic work at 68. As for teaching, I only teach now two subjects a year (17 ECTS) and I think I can continue doing that with no problem; what concerns me is that I'm running out of time to teach a few subjects I have always wanted to teach (on nonfiction, SF by women, etc).

As a researcher, I have never been more active in my life. After 40 years of training, if I count my first undergraduate year as the beginning of my career, I find it easier than ever to think of new topics for research and to write publishable work. I'm certainly enjoying more than ever that aspect of my work, and I think I made the right choice in opting to focus on writing books, and pushing articles and chapters to a secondary place. This has been facilitated, of course, by my diminished teaching workload, which has oscillated between 16 and 18 ECTS for years now, thanks to UAB's generosity in the application of the law as concerns the rewards for accumulating 'sexenios' (or six-year assessment exercises).

UAB is also generous in rewarding admin tasks with points that generate a little bit of extra income past the count of 30. In my case, though, since I got my first 30 points two years ago, and accruing 30 more points will take quite a while, this means that I no

longer volunteer to do any admin tasks. I don't feel guilty, as we have recently tenured staff that can take over. As a teacher, things have become more complicated because of the growing age gap between my students and I, but I'm making an effort to reach out to them, consider their preferences, and innovate my methodology. Not everyone likes me, but this seems to be too part of ageing as a woman in front of much younger students. Another thing I have noticed is that as the Department's staff changes with the entrance of younger part-time and full-time members, I feel more isolated. I don't know many of my younger colleagues and it feels a bit awkward to go chasing after them for coffee, lunch or a chat.

I commute to UAB by train and this public space has become the site where my ageing is most openly monitored. Students, obviously, don't comment to me on my looks. My colleagues, most of them women, are supportive of each other and we tend to compliment everyone on our outfits. I do make a point of telling everyone, man or woman, they look good when they wear something nice. Now, on the train I'm just an anonymous passenger and most reactions I get are based on my grey hair. Let me explain. I stopped dying my hair during Covid-19's lockdown, already five years ago, when hairdressers' establishments were forced to close. Many women, from 35 to 60, made the same decision as I could see on the public transport, but little by little they started dying their hair again. Once more, it is now automatically assumed that grey hair must mean you're 60 (the age at which most women stop bothering to dye their hair). I was very annoyed when people started giving me their seat, as my face is not much wrinkled, but I have learned to take advantage of my grey hair. In fact, I get now very annoyed with the cheeky students who won't budge from the reserved seats. I have overcome the temptation to die my grey hair again with highlights in a fancy colours: purple, blue, fuchsia, red... but right now I'm taking a pause from that.

Unlike other women who are much prettier and have much better figures I don't mind being invisible in the street. I think it's a relief not to be catcalled, as I was as a teen, or leered at, as I was in my twenties. Now and then a mature man looks at me with some kind of offer in mind, as they will inevitably do, but I just laugh inwardly and let them be. My partner and I have been together for almost thirty years now, and since we are the same age we're going through the same processes at more or less the same time. I assume that having a much older husband must affect ageing women in very different ways. And I am totally sceptical about relationships in which the man is much younger than the woman—which leads me to Demi Moore.

Moore, currently 62, might win this evening an Oscar for her performance in Coralie Fargeat's body horror hit *The Substance*. She has indeed been reaping many awards thanks to this film, her comeback after a few years in less popular projects. Demi Moore was a big star between 1984 and 1996, when the film *Striptease* was received as one of the worst films of the year. Moore, a stunning woman of great beauty (which, incidentally, she started modifying artificially for *Striptease*) was married to mega-star Bruce Willis between 1987 and 2000. In 2003, when she was 41, she started dating actor Ashton Kutcher, then 26, and they eventually married. He left her eight years later, in 2011, for Mila Kunis, an actress 20 years younger than Moore. Demi Moore was during the years of her marriage to Kutcher proof that older women could attract much younger men, but when she hit 49 she became proof of the opposite. Her career entered then a low-profile period, coinciding with her fifties, with plenty of work but no outstanding performance, until *The Substance*.

I have no words to describe how appallingly bad Fargeat's film is. The absurd premise supposes that Moore, a TV celebrity, starts taking a mysterious substance that promises to rejuvenate her. Instead, a younger woman (played by Margaret Qualley) emerges from her body, which she soon learns to vampirize rather than respect the weekly limit to which her own presence is reduced. The two women are supposed to be the same woman (just as Jekyll and Hyde are the same man), but actually they have different minds, personalities, and bodies, which makes it easier for the younger one to predate on the older.

Moore has been very brave to accept a role in which she ends up becoming a monster in a process of degradation that recalls that of Jeff Goldblum in Cronenberg's *The Fly*, but her performance has no merit except the patience with which she endured the many hours of make-up. My suspicion is that she is being given all these awards for the parts of the movie in which she shows her naked body, which is absolutely fabulous for her age (unless, that is, it has been somehow altered for the movie, just as Qualley's boobs were covered with a silicon prosthesis to make them look better). As a 58-year-old woman I must protest: *The Substance* is not only awfully misogynistic but also another example of the current trend forcing us, ageing women, to look not just younger but anatomically perfect. The last thing we need at age 60 is being looked down because we don't look like Demi Moore, and if we look like her, because we don't look like young Margaret Qualley.

And this is what it feels like to be an ageing woman academic: the brain works fine, but we're judged for our looks as if we could all be Demi Moore. Well, even she is judged against other younger women. It's a no-win situation. In any case, my aim is to ignore this misogynistic ageism and continue enjoying my job for as long as I can.

13 March 2025 / FIVE YEARS AGO: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION

Five years ago today, on 13 March 2025, Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez declared the state of emergency, in view of the alarming expansion of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus causing Covid-19. Today, many other persons and media are considering the impact of the pandemic on our lives and, in particular, on education. I don't have anything to contribute of special significance, but I feel this is a day to try to remember two things: the virus is now endemic but the pandemic is not really over, and the effects on the younger generation in our classrooms is still manifest and will take years to eradicate.

I'm not checking bibliography, online or otherwise, for this post because there is enough for a thousand doctoral dissertations. I just want to offer my own impressions, as I did when I wrote back in 2020 and 2021 about the worst effects of Covid-19 on higher education teaching. A colleague told me optimistically a few days ago that the crisis will necessarily be over next year, when we finally welcome students who were not in our classrooms during Covid-19, but I'm not sure this is the case. At this point, I don't know which children were not significantly affected by lockdown. For the sake of argumentation, I'll suppose that primary school children (6 to 11 years of age), and younger children, were not deeply affected, and that those beginning secondary education (at 12) and older children were significantly affected. Supposing I'm right, the youngest persons to endure deep mental stress due to the pandemic were born in 2008,

and are now 17. They are the ones that will enter university this September, which means we still have to face a minimum of four more years of post-pandemic troubles.

Re-reading my posts of 2020 and 2021 in preparation for a book based on selections from this blog, what strikes me is how scared I was at the time, and how fiercely I resisted returning to class. Like most people around me, I have blocked the details and the memories of that traumatic time, which is good for survival, but at the same time unfair to those who bore the brunt of healthcare, indispensable economic activity and government. I feel safe now, and totally unconcerned by Covid-19, but it has taken a long time to feel that safety, aided by the four vaccine shots I took.

I never doubted for a moment the gravity of the situation though, happily, my family went through the pandemic with very little trouble, and I myself was never infected; in fact, I didn't even take a test, leading after lockdown a very quiet life. I give credit to the government for having done the best that could be done in the circumstances, and I thank from the bottom of my heart the scientists who developed the vaccines. I had a good cry reading the memoir *Breaking Through: My Life in Science* by Nobel Prize winner for Medicine, Katalin Karikó, one of the main discoverers. We seem to believe that an anonymous 'they' quickly came up with solutions to stop the virus, but it took exceptional talent and hard work to understand it and work on the vaccines. I just wish the same method could be applied to healing us from other diseases and from solving other obstacles now making life on Earth so destructive and disappointing.

I am one of those persons who feels nostalgic for lockdown. Please, don't misunderstand me. I was so scared that at one point I fainted, the only time in my life I have spontaneously lost consciousness. This was in May, two months into lockdown, possibly because I didn't see when it would end, which was the hardest part of the whole process. When I say that I feel nostalgia, I mean that my memories of lockdown are paradoxically peaceful. I do know that many people died and others were left impaired for life, and that many workers were exposed to lethal danger. Privileged persons like myself and my husband could go on working from home thanks to them.

I was already working from home three days a week, and teaching at UAB two, and so lockdown was not as disruptive as it was for my husband, who used to spend three weeks each month abroad, or for so many other people. What makes me feel nostalgic is the sudden quiet that fell on big cities like Barcelona, where I live, and the sense of community that made us cheer health workers every evening at 20:00, hypocritically or not. I had a true hope that Covid-19 would make us reconsider the fragility of life on planet Earth, but this is not what has happened. Instead, our mad consumerism has trebled and the most unhinged rule the planet, stimulated by the dark philosophies that spread like wildfire, from the covidiot antivaxxers to the downright fascists.

Education could have been boosted by lockdown and the hesitant, spotty return to school, given the enhanced opportunities to fill in empty time with books, films, series, and the avalanche of online culture poured on us by musicians, poets, actors and all kinds of performers, either live or recorded. I've never seen so much theatre and ballet in my life... What happened instead, so the young tell us, is that they felt cut off from each other and have never recovered from that necessary isolation.

You would have thought that a generation raised on social media would be used to keeping in touch at a distance, but this is not what happened. I recall my eldest niece, then 14, and spending a year away from home in Canada, complaining that her

adolescence would be ruined, as if not only a few months but years had been taken away from socializing. Something truly deep and dark did happen, though, for I have discovered last semester that many students in my class had never spoken to their peers, despite having spent four years seeing each other daily as undergrads. From this perspective, my forcing them to spend forty minutes each session talking to at least three or four other classmates must have seemed extraordinary (or excruciating) to them.

Covid-19 felt apocalyptic at the start. It was the pandemic that, as so many dystopian narratives had foretold, would wipe us out. We were lucky that it didn't, but must not forget that any day now a new pandemic might carry us away into eternal oblivion. I understand that for the young persons awakening to teen life in 2020, the crisis must have seemed even more catastrophic; the young cared, above all, for the damage done to the expectations they entertained about their teen years but they also sensed the any promising future was receding.

As an adult born in 1966, I've had this feeling many times, most particularly in 1984, when I truly believed that nuclear war would begin any random day, and then again in 2001, when I watched live on TV the Islamic radical attacks against the Twin Towers in New York. Then came the 2008 financial crash. I recall being one day in a shop, thinking of buying an expensive shampoo because it seemed that, finally, I could afford stupid luxuries, and the next thing I know, the government was cutting our wages (which, by the way, have never been returned). Those born in 2008 could have no memory of this sudden loss of future expectations that those born in 1990 must have felt then, when they hit 18. For those who faced Covid-19, that was the end, if not of the world, certainly of their world.

I have heavily criticised in this blog how poorly online teaching replaced face-to-face teaching, resulting in a nonchalant attitude to education which has increased absenteeism beginning with very young schoolchildren. It is in many ways miraculous that schools did not close, and we need to be thankful that online services and home computer equipment were, in most cases, up to the challenge, though I can't forget the many children with no PC or laptop, or no bandwidth. I wrote here, perhaps a bit callously, that studying today can only be done with that kind of equipment and a good internet connection, and I was truly dismayed to see that not all our university students enjoyed that at home. By 2020, subscription to internet services was not as expensive as it used to be in previous decades, but the difficulties of so many students indicated that the 2008 crisis had hit truly hard most working-class homes. With no libraries to access wi-fi for free, many students were lost to each other and to their teachers.

I have no doubt that the greatest impact Covid-19 has had on the young is a permanent sense of uncertainty. I have always felt uncertain about the future because I was a child during the Spanish transition, and a teen during the end of Cold War. I think I have only felt minimally safe in the 1990s, after the fall of the U.S.S.R., even though clearly many areas of the world were going through war and extreme economic distress. With Putin threatening WWII and the effects of climate change, I no longer feel safe, but, then, I'm 58 and I have lived so far a satisfactory life.

If I were at an age somewhere between 17 and 25, I would not know what to do. What I see in class is, precisely, disorientation, scepticism, anxiety and, in the worst-case scenario, depression. My generation was the last to believe that if you work hard, you will be rewarded. Those hit by the 2008 recession are now facing the reality that their generation is poorer than us, the baby boomers, and have grown sceptical about the

future. If they were already parents by 2008, their children are the ones who faced Covid-19 as tweens, so you can imagine the weight of the generational disappointment.

Many days I grow impatient with my students' disinterest, lack of curiosity and general disregard for academic life. I feel that, in comparison to my own generation, which struggled to overcome the aftermath of Francoism, they have so much more to be happy about. Or content. As an undergrad, I would have been totally amazed by the possibilities that the internet and the digital technologies offer to learn, but for the younger generation their very smartphones have become a source of distress and even of enslavement to needs regulated by greedy corporations. If education cannot offer a way to a brilliant future because politics, climate change or another random pandemic could destroy it, why bother? Add to this that I work in a public university at a time when meritocracy seems to have reached a limit and when there is little chance that working-class children can climb up the social ladder. The many private universities opening in the community of Madrid are the clearest sign that this hope is now over.

Things are bleak, let's be honest, and I have not even mentioned what is happening in the USA, where an antivaxxer is now Secretary for Health. If a new pandemic strikes Earth, great segments of the US population might be wiped out, now that is the nation is no longer affiliated with WHO. This blatant, criminal, self-genocidal disregard of the lessons Covid-19 taught us and the brutal onslaught against public education at all levels that president Trump is unleashing are more bricks in the wall stopping current civilization from progressing. We will all be affected.

My hope is that seeing civil rights attacked in the most powerful nation in the world might galvanize our local students into action, to protect privileges they don't know they have, like that of freely expressing their opinions, engaging in activism of any kind, having a good public system of education and health, having their gender choices respected... It might not be sufficient at a personal level, but it's the foundation for a good communal future. I hope they see this truth and that they soon leave behind the fog of Covid-19 for a much brighter future.

24 March 2025 / THE LOST SOUL OF THE TEXT (ON HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY)

Sorry about the eleven-day gap without publishing here. I've been working full-time for the last two weeks on a book which gathers together selected posts from this blog, in Spanish, covering the last five years since the onset of Covid-19. The book was intended for a prestige Spanish academic publisher, but they told me they had no funds to promote it, meaning they wanted me to pay for publication. So, I waited no more to upload the book onto UAB's repository and [here](#) it is, in .pdf, .mobi and .pub: *Vivir la universidad. Notas sobre mis experiencias (como profesora de Literatura)*. I'll gain no money, but, then, zero royalties is always better than paying to publish. And, anyway, I do need an Open Access publication for my teaching assessment exercise next year. And, yes, I'm angry.

The miseries of academic publishing, however, are not my topic today but a classic film I saw yesterday, which has set me thinking about what we're missing and what is missing in recent cultural production, namely, the soul. The film is John Ford's *How Green Was my Valley* (1941, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0033729/>), based on a

script by Philip Dunne and adapted from the eponymous 1939 bestselling novel by Richard Llewellyn. I started reading this long novel (650 pages!) years ago, but it did not click with me; I might give it a try again. Llewellyn is a bit of a literary fraud because he pretended to be Welsh when actually he was English (of Welsh descent), a fact discovered only posthumously. The fame of his novel about the Morgan family is, thus, a bit unfair, or a lot, to local Welsh writers, but the case is that Llewellyn called attention to the harsh plea of Welsh coal miners during the last years of Victoria's reign and the beginning of her son's reign, Edward VII, like no other. Llewellyn apparently gathered his knowledge of South Wales from conversations with Gilfach Goch's villagers, the place where he spent his summers visiting his Welsh grandfather, though it seems he was briefly employed too as a coal miner. *How Green Was my Valley*, which won a National Book Award in the USA, was the first novel in a long career that extended to the 1980s, while the peripatetic author lived in a great variety of countries.

How Green Was my Valley, the film, was produced by Hollywood legend Darryl F. Zanuck. 1941 must have been a glorious year for the US film industry, despite WWII, because Zanuck's production won the Oscar for Best Picture beating, attention!, *Citizen Kane*, *Sergeant York* and *The Maltese Falcon*. Its other four Oscars went to John Ford for Best Director, Donald Crisp for Best Supporting Actor, Arthur Miller for Best Cinematography, and Richard Day, Nathan H. Juran and Thomas Little for Best Black-and-White Art Direction-Interior Decoration. Wikipedia informs that "in 1990, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry of the Library of Congress as being 'culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant'" and that the Academy Film Archive preserved it in 1998. This is an honour awarded to too few films since most pre-digital movies might get lost forever when frail celluloid decomposes. Apparently 75% of all US silent films have been already lost, and many great jewels are at risk of disappearing, despite the efforts of institutions like Martin Scorsese's [The Film Foundation](#). By the way, there were two well-liked BBC mini-series based on *How Green Was My Valley*, one broadcast in 1960, the other between 1975 and 1976; the latter can be purchased on DVD according to Amazon, but the former seems gone. The BBC had the bad habit of recycling celluloid and video to shoot new programmes.

I'm sure that *How Green Was My Valley* has been broadcast many times on Spanish television, but I don't know where to find that information. JustWatch informs that currently it can only be watched on subscription platforms Movistar + (where I saw it) and Filmin. I decided to watch it to fill in a gap in my movie buff record, but also in a bout of nostalgia recalling the many Saturday afternoons spent watching classics on Televisión Española. I loved the two hours of Ford's masterpiece, even though I was a bit disappointed that the film was shot in black and white because it was made in sunny Florida and there was no way to pretend that was Wales. To be fair, the black and white photography is glorious and matches very well the theme of coal mining, apart from providing a few stunning close-ups of the amazingly beautiful Maureen O'Hara, who plays the only Morgan daughter, Angharad (her two sisters in the novel are not present in the film).

I'm writing this post because I ended up crying a few tears, feeling deep emotions last elicited by Pixar's masterpiece *Coco* (2017). It is easy to argue that *How Green Was My Valley* pulls at the heartstrings by using the panoply of sentimental fiction, beginning with its being focalized through a child (Huw Morgan, played by a lovely Roddy McDowall), who acts as the first-person narrator. The tear-jerking focus on the problems

that beset a working-class family tied to an exploitative situation at the coalmines guarantees plenty of misery, from the deaths of young and old men to the forced migration of others. There is also a failed romance that pushes the heroine Angharad into the arms of a man who purchases her as chattel. All these mishaps are grim Ken Loach material, but what makes the difference between director John Ford and Loach, whose films I tend to avoid for their determined negativity, is that Ford focuses on the soul of the people, both individually and collectively.

I was surprised watching *How Green Was My Valley* by how often the Morgans are surrounded by fellow villagers singing and celebrating life together. There are diverse scenes at the Morgans' relatively well-to-do working-class home in which neighbours are invited to drink and eat. Composer Alfred Newman gave ample room to the men's singing, as traditional choir music by the miners is a staple of popular Welsh culture. In a poignant scene, the eldest son directs the local choir to honour Queen Victoria while two of his younger brothers silently leave the village for ever, bound for America. The men's reluctance to sing when Angharad leaves the church with her new husband comments on the unhappiness that awaits her, while the men's joyous singing celebrates her mother's long recovery after she almost freezes to death. The villagers also gossip about or mock the Morgans but their collective presence is a reminder that community matters. This is most visible, perhaps, in the scenes with the men walking back from the mine at the end of the day, or staging a long strike.

This sense of soulful collectivity is also projected onto the minor characters, perhaps because with so many leads it's hard to say who is the protagonist. The child Huw might be said to be the main focus, as I have noted, yet this is also mainly the story of her rather aged father and mother. I assume that the two miniseries have more room for the large cast of characters, but the film does wonders with the minor ones limited to a few scenes, such as the two men who teach Huw how to box, for he is being mercilessly bullied at school, and end up giving his sadistic teacher what he deserves. There is also plenty to learn about workers and masters when the coalmine's owner visits the Morgans, dressed to the nines including a top hat, to ask for the hand of their beautiful daughter for his son, without offering to make the rest of the family more prosperous. The girl's beauty is her ticket out of poverty but also into marital disaster. In contrast, Huw chooses employment at the colliery aged barely 13 over an education, though he eventually understands that this kind of loyalty to his father is misguided.

This soulfulness I'm alluding to is based on the idea that one must care for the characters because they are likeable. They may make mistakes or be plain wrong but, still, there is plenty of room for sympathy. Novelist, script writer and director do not hesitate to show how unfair life is to the characters in a context firmly rooted in the socioeconomic troubles of South Wales at the turn of the 19th century, when, as the film explains, the closure of some collieries caused a surplus of workers which, in turn, depressed wages. The Morgans suddenly face unemployment and the need to migrate, problems compounded with the low safety standards of the mines. All spectators should feel horrified, besides, by the group of boy workers Huw chooses to join, children who should be at school. Those interested in ecocriticism will note that Huw and his father comment on how the slag from the coal mine is beginning to cover the foot of the main hill near the village. This is a sad foreboding of the [Aberfan tragedy](#) of 1966 which killed 144 persons, 116 of them schoolchildren, when "a rain-soaked slag heap avalanched upon the mining village."

Caring for characters has become increasingly difficult in a process that possibly started in the 1960s, or 1970s, when anything sentimental was declared to be false. If the story of a mining village were to be told today, issues that are absent from *How Green Was My Valley*, such as alcoholism or domestic abuse, would probably take centre stage, and there would be much more detail in the discussion of class issues, the working conditions at the mines, sexuality, education and so on. I mentioned before Ken Loach, and I'll apologize to him for he certainly works hard, with his habitual scriptwriter Paul Laverty, to offer an extremely sympathetic portrait of working-class people. Perhaps what I mean by 'soul' is that whereas watching a Loach film you don't want to be part of the working classes, watching Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* you see that the miners stand for humanity in a way no middle- or upper-class person can. This may be sentimental, but I feel that it is necessary to be more Dickensian. I'll mention, by the way, that John Ford directed *How Green Was My Valley* one year after making *The Grapes of Wrath*, based on John Steinbeck's indispensable novel about the Great Depression.

I mentioned *Coco* before, yet another film about a working-class family, as an example of good soulful sentimentality and I realise that this type of empathy is now limited mainly to children's films, or, even, to adult films with child characters. In these cases spectators are allowed to lower the anti-sentimental barriers and enjoy the story. In most current fiction (print and audiovisual, though), with the exception of YA, characters are approached as specimens under a microscope, from a safe emotional distance and with all their defects exposed. We seem to have developed collectively a preference for dehumanized characters, or for dehumanizing characters by forcing them to face appalling situations. The Morgans of *How Green Was My Valley* or the Joads of *The Grapes of Wrath* do face dehumanizing situations, but the Hollywood of the 1940s made a point of keeping their souls intact. Darryl F. Zanuck, who produced both films, may have been working cynically to please the masses, but watching and reading the many contemporary texts that aim at feeding our personal and collective cynicism I wonder what we have gained by losing our souls. I'll keep on thinking...

31 March 2025 / ADOLESCENCE: A LIMITED CONVERSATION

WARNING: SPOILERS

The British Netflix miniseries *Adolescence*, created by Stephen Graham and Jack Thorne, has taken the world by storm, finally starting a long overdue general conversation on the influence of the manosphere on the aggressive, misogynistic behaviour of teen boys. The four-episode series only maintains a minimum of suspense in the first episode until it is proven, thanks to a CCTV video, that 13-year-old Jamie Miller (Owen Cooper) did indeed knife to death his classmate Katie, even though he has told repeatedly his father (played by series creator Stephen Graham) that "I haven't done anything wrong." While the first episode narrates Jamie's arrest and interrogation until that terrifying scene at the police station, the second episode deals with DI Luke Bascombe and DS Misha Frank's visit to Jamie's school, to find out who provided him with the knife. The third episode focuses on Jamie's interview with the child psychologist assigned to offer an independent report to the court. The fourth narrates the sad birthday of Jamie's father, as the family waits for his trial.

I understand the importance that this miniseries has taken on, and do not hesitate to recommend it. If you have teen sons or daughters, or siblings, please watch it with them. However, I do not think that *Adolescence* is a masterpiece, as everyone is saying. For me, the decision to shoot each episode in a single take is ultimately a serious mistake. The gimmick distracts from the content and forces the narration to focus too narrowly on certain locations and characters. I was concerned, above all, that the victim is only represented by her best friend, Jade, with other friends, and her family being excluded from the miniseries. Oddly, Graham and Thorne thought it was a good idea to have the actress we only see in a photo (and being stabbed at a distance) to sing the song for the final credits, though this is something I learned only by checking the IMDB trivia.

The script supposes that parents, teachers and the police are totally ignorant of how teens interact online, particularly on Instagram, which is where the main misencounter between Jamie and Katie happens. The two attend the same school, but are not friends. As Jamie narrates to the psychologist, Katie sent a photo showing her breasts to a boy who promptly circulated it to the whole school. Jamie, who had apparently a crush on her, believed that Katie's humiliation made her vulnerable and more accessible. He approached her to establish some kind of sexual contact, even though he had had none previously. Katie, understanding the manoeuvre, rejected Jamie and mocked him online as an incel. He then talked to his mates Ryan and Tommy, and the former suggested that he scared Katie into compliance, providing Jamie with a knife. When he approached her in an empty parking lot, Katie laughed at him again, and Jamie, as the video shows, stabbed her in a fury seven times. This sequence of events is established by episode three, but it is inferred, rather than shown directly.

My main complaint is that even though *Adolescence* has started a necessary conversation, it has done so on the basis of a weak plot, which only address superficially the issue of the manosphere's influence on teen boys and their rampant misogyny. To begin with, Jamie is too young and inexperienced at thirteen to feel so mightily offended by Katie's negative judgement that he is an incel. 'Incel' (or 'involuntary celibate') is a word originally invented by a young Canadian woman, named Alana, whose Celibacy Project was intended to be a friendly meeting point for persons seeking company. That was back in 1997. To her horror, 'incel' was soon appropriated by single men unable to get dates or constantly failing in their relationships, to comfort each other with the idea that women were to blame for their lack of amatory skills. The corresponding Wikipedia article is a good introduction to the concept and its development, but suffice it to say that incels have empowered a number of ultra-misogynistic influencers, among them the infamous Andrew Tate (not an incel himself). I do not doubt that a 13-year-old is already used to watching pornography, posts photos of semi-naked models on Instagram, or even follows Tate (though this is not explicitly mentioned in the series). I doubt, though, that his masculinity is already so warped that he overreacts in that murderous way to Katie's online slur. This corresponds to a boy at least one or two years older.

The key conversation in the series happens in episode two, between DI Bascombe and his son, Adam, who is also in Jamie's class. Bascombe is separated from his wife, and struggles to communicate with his son; he misses, for instance, that Adam's pleading that his stomach hurts as an excuse to skip school signals that he is being bullied. Seeing how clueless his father is regarding the murder case, Adam explains to him how teens communicate online, the meaning of the insulting emojis Katie used, and why teens are so cruel to each other. This is simply how their world operates. The

conversation takes just one scene, and I believe that more time is used in Bascombe's absurdly long chase of Ryan, when he bolts from school trying to avoid revealing to the Police that the knife Jamie used to murder Katie was his. Ryan has been beaten up in public by Jade, Katie's best friend, who accuses him of having organized her death. Nothing is made of her violent outburst, except for showing her pain at having lost her only friend (Jade is black, Katie white).

From the point of view of the psychological exploration of Jamie's personality, it might seem that episode three, with its long conversation between him and child psychologist Briony would be revealing. Instead, it's a bit of a mess, since Graham and Jones portray Jamie as both a shy boy who has never had sex because he doesn't know how to approach girls and a nasty little monster who does not hesitate to intimidate Briony. I neglected to mention, by the way, that the Miller family does not appear to be problematic. Since the Jamie arrested in the first episode is so childlike (he even pees his pants) and looks so vulnerable during his interrogation, as spectators we have no evidence of how he behaves with his family and friends. He may have pretended to be a nice little boy at home, but, surely, as it is hinted later, this is not who he was with his mates. Ryan, who ends up arrested as an accessory to murder, does not seem to be responsible for the crime beyond lending the knife, but he is also a piece of work, as seen in his first conversation with Bascombe. Since, anyway, we don't see the three male friends together, we have no idea of how they interact, what kind of conversations they have and whether they understand the consequences of Katie's death. The murder, shown from afar and in grainy video, is shocking, but even more crushing is the scene that follows, with Eddie, the father, coming to terms with the realization that Jamie has lied to him. It is important to note that Jamie does not claim he did not kill Katie; he insists instead that he didn't do anything wrong, to the point that his psychologist must ask openly whether he understands death. He does, but he has problems to grasp that he is a murderer until the end of the series (we don't see that process, either).

For me, the scariest part of *Adolescence* was not the murder, or the horrors endured by Jamie's parents (and his sister), but the representation of the secondary school he attended, during Bascombe and Frank's visit. I have just read an article in which a 14-year-old English boy, whose mother has decided to homeschool him, claims that the portrait of the school in *Adolescence* is accurate. I wish it wasn't. In one scene, Bascombe and Frank are introduced to Adam's class, and the teacher mentions that Bascombe is his father; Fredo, the boy's bully, slaps the back of Adam's head and mocks him, as if teacher and police were not there. You see teachers yelling all the time, struggling to keep order. The obnoxious boy who mocks Ryan when Jade beats him up appears to embody the negative spirit that dominates English school life. The harsh pecking order, the bullying of classmates and teachers, the indifference towards education, have always been present one way or another in schools, but there were limits. *Adolescence* presents the English state-sponsored secondary school as a space of discord (and even bad smells!) where teens are not educated at all, just kept enclosed against their will for a few hours a day.

I have seen in many articles and posts a call to pity boys like Jamie, and be sympathetic. My impression, watching in particular episode two, is that, first, the victim deserves more pity and empathy and, second, the whole generation is lost. My husband told me that in the last scene, when Eddie visits his son Jamie's room, he expected him to throw the boy's computer through the window. Instead Eddie tucks in the boy's teddy

bear in Jamie's bed, which is cloying and ineffective. Eddie and his wife are content that their daughter (Jamie's elder sister) is a good girl, and never talk about what needs to be done to help other parents. It seems clear to me that, as many educators have been claiming for ages, children should not be given smartphones nor have access to social media until they are 16, and that their access to the internet should be monitored. A key issue I have not seen discussed is privacy. It's fine to respect children's privacy, but only to a certain extent. Smartphones, PCs and laptops need to be checked by parents regularly. Playing police to your children can be awkward and embarrassing, but as *Adolescence* warns, it's always better to be on the safe side. Too much freedom may have appalling consequences.

And, please, let's build a better childhood. The children deserve it.

7 April 2025 / FIRST THOUGHTS ON MY NEW SUBJECT: ON MEMOIRS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

2025 is turning out to be one of the worst years in my life as a reader, for two reasons. One is that I find it harder and harder to find novels that interest me, of any type. The other is that since Trump's election, I'm spending at least two hours a day reading the press and interacting on Bluesky. No fiction story can compete with living history right now (for future reference, I'm writing in the middle of a general economic world collapse caused by Trump's imposition of a system of absurd tariffs that, to begin with, will ruin many US citizens).

For a few years now, I'm finding myself reading more and more memoirs and autobiographies, perhaps because at this point I can't abide made-up stories and I need to connect with the real-life experiences of other human beings. The current year is no exception. Of the thirteen books I have read so far (about half my habitual rate...), six are novels and seven non-fiction, of which five are autobiography: Alexei Navalny's *Patriot: A Memoir* (trad Arch Tait and Stephen Dalziel); Shari Franke & Carolyn Ryder's *The House of My Mother: A Daughter's Quest for Freedom*; Orlando Whitfield's *All that Glitters: A Story of Friendship, Fraud and Fine Art*; Richard Flanagan's *Question 7* and Edward Zwick's *Hits, Flops, and Other Illusions: My Fortysomething Years in Hollywood*. Not all are great, but all have lots to teach and more depth than many novels that pass today for masterpieces.

I've been thinking of teaching non-fiction for a few years now, and the chance has finally come up for 2025-26. This year I have already included non-fiction among the books that students had to read in Contemporary Anglophone Literature (1990-2023), one volume in the set of four books each student had to review (see their joint [volume](#)). I personally prefer narrative non-fiction, that is to say, journalistic reportage that narrates a story, or that reports research. I found, however, that students had a harder time reading that type of book, which is usually long (around 400 pages) and full of details, as if the writer (usually a journalist) was unable to let go of the knowledge assembled painstakingly during research. Teaching should not be selfish, in the sense that one should not impose on students personal preferences, and I have decided to leave narrative non-fiction for my research (I've been planning a book for a while). In view of the experience in Contemporary Anglophone Literature, then, I have decided to focus on memoirs and autobiographies.

I took a course as a doctoral student focused on autobiographies, memoirs and other texts, such as letters and diaries. I recall reading *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* and Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being*, though possibly the course included some other texts. I must have spent 25 years reading no other memoirs or autobiographies, as I didn't particularly enjoy the course, and I identified, in an awfully ageist manner, reading that kind of book with being middle-aged or older. My teacher was very conservative, and we missed the exciting new wave of memoirs and autobiographies that flourished in the 1990s and that has kept the flow going since then.

I learned from Dr. Usandizaga, that was her name, that whereas the Catholic tradition does not encourage believers to write, the Protestant tradition does. The Puritans, in particular, were fond of using diaries and journals as a tool to examine one's relationship with God and one's sinning conscience. Whereas in Catholicism we suspect anyone who wishes to share their life in public of being arrogant and conceited, in Protestantism sharing the story of one's life is not as suspect. Initially, the narrated lives were supposed to be exemplary or outstanding one way or another, but little by little the market opened up to just about anyone who had something to narrate. And then came a deluge.

Proof of that deluge is that I had a very hard time finding a course on memoirs and autobiographies as literary texts, though I found very many courses teaching how to write them, some offered by universities and others by writers (mostly of middling credentials). Prof. Simon Cooke, of Edinburgh University, taught in 2019-20, a postgraduate [course](#) called Modern and Contemporary Memoir, with the following weekly sessions:

- 1 Introduction: Virginia Woolf, *A Sketch of the Past* (1939).
- 2 Modernist experiment: Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933).
- 3 Émigré memoir: Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (1951/1966).
- 4 Race and the politics of memoir: Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1945).
- 5 Biomythography: Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982).
- 6 Witness and testimony: Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man* (1958).
- 7 Family history: Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (1982)
- 8 Nature: Kathleen Jamie, *Sightlines* (2012).
- 9 'Misery memoir' and the ethics of elegy: Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005).
- 10 Travel / Memoir / History: W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995/1998).

This is indeed a very beautiful course, but mine will operate quite differently. My focus, as usual in my elective subjects (I forgot to say this is an elective), will be the 21st century. As I did in Contemporary Anglophone Literature, I will assign four different books to each student, and they will have to write reviews (800-1000 words) to be gathered in an e-book. I will split the sessions into two 40-minute halves, with the first one devoted to lectures (I'll teach them the basics of the genre and a history), and the second to interacting with their peers. I believe this method worked well in Contemporary Anglophone Literature. Besides, since this is a second-semester subject, most students, if not all, will have already taken Contemporary and will be familiar with my teaching style.

Now, since I came across so many courses on writing memoirs and autobiographies, I have decided to use the course to initiate students into that kind of writing. I have some experience, since I asked for personal essays to be published in the e-books [*Addictive and Wonderful: The Experience of Reading the Harry Potter Series*](#) (2014), [*Gender and Feminism: The Students' View*](#) (2015) and [*Gender and Feminism: The Students' View, Vol 2*](#) (2018). To be on the safe side, I have asked our degree coordinator for his opinion of my idea (he likes it!) and I have also contacted half a dozen fourth-year students whose opinion I value highly. One of them has already replied, encouraging me but also advising me to discuss the matter with students, as some might be uncomfortable if forced to write a personal essay for assessment. I see the point but, actually, the essays in my three previous edited volumes were not assessed for the final mark. They were work the students agreed to write. Assessment, then, will be based on the four reviews of the books assigned, and I will have to negotiate the matter of the personal essay. Thinking of the very successful *Harry Potter* volume, I think I'll ask for a brief memoir about reading and books.

Talking about these plans with my sister-in-law, who is a keen reader, she told me that memoirs and autobiographies are not appealing to her because she sees them as ego trips based on name-dropping. She is right to accuse those genres of these faults and, certainly, the worst kind of memoir and autobiography is flawed in that way. The better kind offers solid writing and a candid approach to life, including quintessential questions about its meaning. In that sense, one of the best titles (though not quite one of the best autobiographies) is *The Meaning of Mariah Carey*. All memoirs and autobiographies could be called *The Meaning of...*, followed by the person's name.

Apart from the objections my sister-in-law raised, memoirs and autobiographies have a low reputation as literature because they are very often written by ghost writers, acknowledged or not, and we, literary critics, do not generally respect this kind of collaboration. Soon, of course, will have even worse kinds, when people use AI to shape their life writings (and all those expensive courses lose their clients...). As a reader, I understand that few non-professional writers have the talent to pen alone, with no editor or ghost writer, a solid text, but it may happen. As a literary critic, I believe that if a text is good, meaning you would recommend students to read it and write about it to being with, I don't much care if it is a collaboration, as long as this is made explicit.

Perhaps I should have started with this, but, in principle an autobiography covers a person's whole life, whereas a memoir refers to a particular episode. There is, anyway, much confusion, for the plural 'memoirs' may be in practice a synonym with autobiography. The point is that in both cases writer and protagonist are the same persons, whereas in biographies they are not, even though now it's common to group the three genres under the label 'life writing'. Confusingly, there is something called autofiction, which used to be called autobiographical fiction, and that is also very popular right now, especially among novelists with little ability to imagine life beyond their experience (an autofictional novelist is for me an oxymoron).

I would never write my memoirs, being a very private person (raised, besides, in a Catholic country), and because of this I'm fascinated by people's willingness to share their lives, often to very intimate details. My teacher, Dr. Usandizaga, used to say in the course I have mentioned, that everyone goes more or less through the same stages and so there is nothing 100% private. I see her point, but I totally disagree. I think that the whole point of memoirs and autobiographies is to underline that even though life here on

planet Earth is generally the same for all human beings, each person's experiences are different, even when talking about the same stages. Memoirs and autobiographies have, additionally, the function of telling readers they are not alone. Some experiences are singular but readers can find in them, or in less singular ones, comfort and company. I, for instance, find those in the memoirs by women who declassified themselves through studying despite being raised by awful fathers. I don't have the courage to tell that story but I'm happy others have done so, and it helps me much.

I'm very excited to have the chance to teach 21st memoirs and autobiographies and, hopefully, the students will respond to my glee!

27 April 2025 / THIS GLARING MEDIOCRITY: AWARDS, OVERHYPE AND THE STATE OF STORYTELLING TODAY

[Sorry about the long three-week absence, I have four books in my hands (two collective volumes, a monograph, a translation of a collective volume) and a journal issue, and no energy left to write. Also, blame Donald Trump for absorbing my mental energy with so much fretting about the appalling consequences of his random decisions]

I think it's about time we ring the alarm bell and show our collective concern about the limitations of current storytelling in all media, from print to the audiovisual. I read recently a tweet by a woman who wondered whether she was done for good with reading. Her complaint was that, even though she was trying very hard to like the books she was reading, they soon became boring and she found herself abandoning more volumes than she finished. Even worse, she was forcing herself to read certain books despite knowing she would find no satisfaction in finishing them, just for the sake of telling herself she still loved reading.

Poor thing, this woman thought her disengagement from reading was personal, when, feeling like her, I think this reflects a pattern beginning to emerge. If we, the habitual readers, keep silent about our disillusionment, this is for two reasons; firstly, we do not want to give non-readers the chance to feel smug; secondly, we do not want to be too harsh on authors. Stephen King protested this week on his Bluesky account that it's just too easy to complain if one has never written fiction, and he is right (if only partially).

Among the books I have recently enjoyed very much, I'll mention Edward Zwick's memoir *Hits, Flops, and Other Illusions: My Fortysomething Years in Hollywood* (2024). Zwick gives an excellent overview of his career, denouncing the financial narrowmindedness that prevents Hollywood from offering better narratives. Among many relevant films, Zwick directed in 2006 *Blood Diamond*, based on a plot by Charles Leavitt and C. Gaby Mitchell, and scripted by Leavitt himself. Zwick's movie is a political thriller set in the Sierra Leone Civil War (1999-2002), dealing with the efforts of local miner Solomon Vandy to escape slavery. The concept 'blood diamond', meaning a diamond tainted by the horrifying exploitation of the workers employed to extract it, gained currency thanks to the film. Yet, Zwick narrates in his memories how one of the studio executives told him this was the last 'adult' film they would produce, as new currents favoured superhero-based light entertainment, for which he was very sorry.

Zwick's memoirs set me thinking about why I dislike most of the films (and novels) I approach today, and I concluded that they have forgotten how to connect the personal with the social. I posted recently about John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley*, a film that fits my argument: the screenplay offers family melodrama, but this is firmly tied to the struggles of Welsh miners at the end of the 19th century. As I wrote then, not all stories need to follow that path, and be as serious as Ken Loach's cinema, but I'm missing that social dimension in most stories I read or watch.

If you want another example of poor storytelling, I'll mention Sean Baker's *Anora*, this year's Oscar winner. This is the story of a sex worker, Ani, who deludes herself into believing that she's in love with the ultrarich Russian brat who first employs her and then marries her to spite his parents. Baker, however, does not raise any issues concerning Ani's employment or the origin of her young husband's fortune. You might counterargue that these issues are not raised either in Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990), but at least the director knows what he's doing and offers at least good entertainment (I hate the film, but I cannot say it bores me!). *Anora* is just bad storytelling uninterested in the potential issues it could (or should) have raised: in short, a mess that is not engaging at all.

So, why did it get an Oscar for Best Film? (against *Emilia Pérez*, *A Complete Unknown*, *Conclave*, *Nickel Boys*, *I'm Still Here*, *The Substance*, *Dune: Part Two*, *Wicked*, *The Brutalist*). To be honest I don't know. I have not seen yet all of these films, but the ones I have seen (*Emilia Pérez*, *Nickel Boys*, *The Substance*, *Dune: Part Two*) were films I also disliked profoundly. The worst one was *Nickel Boys*, which I could not even finish watching (I'll read instead Colson Whitehead's novel). So, here's my theory: when the awards season comes, the prizes are given anyway regardless of the quality of the films released that year, for they need to be awarded (I'll come to the novels in a few paragraphs).

Anora ended up winning five Oscars: one for leading actress Mikey Madison and four (!!) for Sean Baker for best direction, screenplay, film editing, and film. This is something I totally fail to understand. I enjoyed Baker's *The Florida Project* (2017) but I just don't think that Baker is as talented as this year's Oscars suggest. Others might disagree, but this is my view. Overhyping, as noted, also plays a role. A spectator complained recently that he hated *The Substance* because it had been overhyped by critics and award juries, but he could have enjoyed it without so much fanfare. He named *No Hard Feelings* (2023), with Jennifer Lawrence, as a film he could enjoy precisely because it had not been overhyped, much the opposite. If it had received any hype, he wrote, "now I would be roasting Jennifer Lawrence instead of Demi Moore."

I don't follow series much but, checking the 2024 Emmys list of winners, my impression is that they seem to be less affected by the same pattern of overhyping and exaggerated award winning. *Shōgun*, the main winner last year, seemed to me a very good example of great storytelling combined with solid issues, such as power within feudal Japan, the interference of foreign missionaries and traders, the role of women and many others. *Severance* and *Adolescence*, two of the productions most hyped these past months that might win the main awards, are also quite solid.

There is indeed a case to be made for series offering right now the most solid storytelling, provided, that is, they don't go beyond season three, when they start fizzling out. Miniseries, then, like *Adolescence*, might be now ideally poised to strike that engaging balance between good narrative and appealing issue-based content that I'm

defending here, though, of course, they can also be overhyped. I could not go past episode one of Netflix's *Ripley* as much as I like Andrew Scott. He was totally miscast as young Ripley and Steven Zaillian's direction was awfully misguided in its use of pretentious black and white.

Now, for the novels. The two novels I most disliked last year, among the ones I managed to finish (about 60% of the ones I started), were Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007) and Samantha Harvey's *Orbital* (2023). Kang is the most recent Nobel Prize winner and Harvey won the Booker prize for her novel. That both are by women is irrelevant, there were many books by men that either I didn't finish or didn't like: Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) or Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) come to mind, within the category of novels I did read. The combination of overhyped and the awards reaped worked very much against Kang and Harvey, for the higher the expectations, the deeper the disappointment.

I totally accept that other readers might have other opinions, but what baffles me is that, systematically, in recent years the opinions of professional critics and award juries seems to find much to praise in works which are underserving. I'll insist again that since awards must be granted, for nobody would consider withdrawing any major award for lack of quality, underserving works are reaping distinctions for the wrong reasons. What I can't explain is why professional critics pour so much encomium into works that are, in my (very demanding) view, just middling novels.

What the novels I can't stand have in common is a lack of the effort, a refusal to provide good characterization and a renunciation to connect personal experiences with the larger issues beyond the narrow lives of individuals. I miss this in mainstream, realist fiction, but also in the more recent genre fiction. I used to enjoy SF because it extrapolated the main issues of the present onto an imaginary future, but now that fantasy has crept into this genre, SF offers mostly bland stories which seem to have been randomly plotted.

Luckily, good storytelling is not dead, though it's found where you least expect it. I found it this week in Robert Harris's *Conclave* (2016), the novel that has inspired one of the nominees to Best Picture in this year's Oscars. I have not seen the film yet, but I found the novel perfectly balanced: great plot, memorable characters, and very interesting issues, ranging from religion and power to gender. I found myself wanting to read Harris's novel and not wanting it to be over so soon (this is not a very long volume), which is a marvellous feeling in comparison with wanting to be done with a boring novel. Harris did a lot of research, cared about his characters, worked hard to surprise his readers with an excellent final twist, and connected his plot to current concerns. Was he trying to innovate narrative technique or did he use literary prose? No, but I found his novel entirely satisfying, a feeling that recently I have been only getting from documentaries and non-fiction works.

Some say that after thousands of years narrating stories, there is nothing new to narrate under the sun. I don't believe that is true. I'm not complaining about the lack of originality of, as mentioned, *The Vegetarian* (a woman adamantly refuses to eat meat) or *Orbital* (how does the ISS's international crew deal with political conflict on Earth?), but about the author's decision to strive for originality rather than for engaging storytelling. Of course, the opposite also disappoints. I'm now reading Suzanne Collins's *Sunrise on the Reaping*, the fifth *Hunger Games* novel, and I found on GoodReads many complaints, which I share, about Collins's laziness in imagining an original, appealing plot. There is

much anger at how she has taken the easier path (repeating the scheme of the Hunger Games, focusing on the ones Haymitch Abernathy won), instead of exploring many other aspects of the universe she created. The list is endless.

So, here's another key factor in the failing standards of current storytelling: the premises may be interesting but storytellers rarely have the ability to make the most of them. This is something you notice as you age and can compare decades worth of storytelling in your own lifetime. It gets harder to be satisfied with new stories, seeing how they pale in comparison to others acclaimed in the past you're familiar with. I'm not saying that any story invented in the past is better but that the impulse to narrate well (except in miniseries?) is being lost. If a mediocre story suffices and you find a producer or a publisher, and even critics and juries love it, why work harder?

The public is so hungry for novelty and so uninterested in past storytelling that they'll go for whatever passes today for great storytelling. Or not? We all do, until one day we tire and yell 'enough with so much mediocrity!'

5 May 2025 / I DON'T LIKE YOUR LIFE: JUDGING MEMOIRS

I haven't started reading yet the bibliography for my subject on the memoir as a literary genre, to be taught next year, though I have already a substantial bibliography. G. Thomas Couser's *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2012) seems to be the right text to begin reading. I don't think, in any case, that academic publications can help me to solve the riddle of critical judgement, as current scholarship tends to avoid that issue. It's amazing to see how an article can consider a text in great depth without the author commenting at all on its quality. I'm, in contrast, quite straightforward in my positive or negative criticism, an honesty not always welcome by my peer reviewers.

The issue I want to raise is quite simple: judging memoirs is quite different from judging novels. When we judge novels we judge the ability of the author as a storyteller, as an inventor of characters and plots. In my previous post, I argued that when judging novels we take into account not only the interest of the story and the characters, but also the effort made by the author to fully exploit the potential of these elements. I noted, therefore that Suzanne Collins's *Sunrise on the Reaping*, the fifth *Hunger Games* novel, is disappointing because Collins took the easier path (repeating the scheme of her first novel, *The Hunger Games*), instead of exploring other aspects of the universe she herself created. Reading this week RuPaul's *The House of Hidden Meanings: A Memoir* (2024) and finding it also disappointing I wish to consider now how reader's disappointment differs in novels and memoirs.

In novels, in which a degree of fictionalization is expected even when they are autobiographical, characterization produces the illusion of personality, but we know that characters are necessarily incomplete constructs. They are like those buildings used on studio lots, which are all façade and hide nothing behind. I'm not saying that fictional characters are superficial, but that they have only the depth that the author provides. We, literary scholars, are very fond of speculating about characters' psychology and behaviour, but we risk sounding quite ridiculous if we go beyond certain established limits. There is no point, for instance, in writing a paper about what characters enjoy doing in their free time, if no information is provided by the author. Characters are not persons, and that's final.

In contrast, writers of memoirs are indeed persons, who select which aspects of their personalities and experiences we can access as readers. In autobiographical fiction, writers turn themselves into characters through a similar process, but they need not be truthful. In, for instance, *The Shards* (2023), Brett Easton Ellis plays with his readers by lending his own name to his teen protagonist, though this does not mean that the character is Ellis himself nor that the extreme experiences he undergoes did happen to Ellis in his youth. As readers we need to understand that this is just a literary game. In memoirs (or autobiographies), as noted, truthfulness is a must, though, of course, memoirists can and do lie, or can be extremely selective, hiding what is not convenient to reveal.

I'm not, anyway, criticising RuPaul for being insincere, mendacious or too selective, but for not being thorough enough as regards the description of his professional call (RuPaul is the most famous drag queen in the world). RuPaul, born in 1960, had already published three memoirs, *Lettin' It All Hang Out* (1995), *Workin' It!* (2010), and *GuRu* (2018), but, not having read them, I cannot say whether these volumes are more detailed and comprehensive. What I can tell about *The House of Hidden Meanings* is that it seems to be incomplete, which is odd coming from such a practised memoirist.

I'm borrowing from the [website](#) of Celadon Books a list of the extant types of memoir, cautioning that the distinction between autobiography (a memoir that covers the subject's whole life) and memoir (an autobiographical text that covers mainly a major episode) seems increasingly irrelevant. Technically, RuPaul's text is an autobiography, but since he calls it a memoir, this is what it is. The categories are quite loose, but here they are: transformation memoirs, confessional memoirs, professional memoirs, celebrity memoirs, travel memoirs. Another [website](#), that of the Self-Publishing School, proposes a different list: traditional memoirs (they actually mean autobiography), childhood memoirs, coming-of-age memoirs, travel memoirs, literary memoirs, cultural memoirs, immigrant memoirs, historical memoirs, inspirational memoirs, memoirs of survival, memoirs of transformation. I miss here trauma memoirs, though the category memoirs of survival is quite similar.

These lists are, of course, limited and limiting. RuPaul's volume is a celebrity memoir about how he became famous, but it has elements of many of the categories mentioned in the previous paragraph, including traumatic childhood memories of being abandoned by his father and even travel writing (one of RuPaul's early jobs was fetching premium second-hand cars all over America for his brother-in-law's business). I'm not really a fan of RuPaul, knowing about him through news mainly. I have never listened to his music, nor have I seen any of the very popular TV shows he has developed. I expected his memoir to include detailed information about his unique professional career and a consideration of drag as a phenomenon and of the drag community, both in relation to gender and sexuality. Instead, RuPaul insists mainly on two ideas: one, that, as his pregnant mother was told by a psychic, he was always destined for fame (the mother gave him a unique name to facilitate his future celebrity!) and, two, his looks were so uncommon that it was odd for RuPaul to be desired, until he found love.

Checking GoodReads, I see that I'm not the only reader getting the impression that drag was not a strong vocation for RuPaul, but a practical means to reach fame, and that he could have become famous through other arts or offices. I know nothing about any controversies that RuPaul may have been involved in, though I recall reading that he

is not really a drag activist, paradoxical as this may seem. The memoir, indeed, says nothing about any drag association or movement, or about the evolution of drag in the United States. A person who knows nothing at all about drag would be puzzled as to what it is that RuPaul did to become so famous. This is the equivalent of reading an author's memoir in which they refer to their immense talent without mentioning that they write books. It was peculiar, to say the least.

I'll also note something that bothers me about the memoirs of professional success. The protagonist usually comes from a humble background and reaches a low point when it seems impossible that their dreams can be fulfilled. Yet, a miracle happens and this brings on the breakthrough that jumpstarts their careers. In RuPaul's case, he was back in his mother's home in San Diego after failing to conquer New York when, suddenly, a friend based in that city called him to, basically, order him to return. The rest was history. RuPaul is grateful to that friend, and humble enough to present luck as a key factor in his breakthrough, but there is no reflexion on what happens to those who, being equally talented, never made it. RuPaul has enormous confidence in himself and believes in the prophecy announcing his fame at all times, but others equally confident have failed or have not been sufficiently acknowledged; yet, in all the memoirs of success that I have read very few thoughts are spared for them. This lends this type of memoir a smugness that often alienates potential readers.

So, if a memoir disappoints you, does this mean you end up disliking the author? Not necessarily. In the case I'm discussing, my frustration with RuPaul's memoir comes from my dissatisfaction with the book, not the author. I still want to know more about RuPaul, but at the same time the style of the memoir is not inviting enough for me to want to read his other memoirs. I might read perhaps biographical articles (not books!) written by others analysing his career and his important contribution to popularizing drag. I would say that in that sense he is a failed memoirist, though he is an awesome artist as a major drag queen. I'll grant, in contrast, that I have a much better opinion of Pamela Anderson after reading her excellent memoirs *Love, Pamela* (2023) because the book destroys many stereotypes about who she is.

I'll finish noting that writing one's memoirs is extremely complex, as you need to strike the right balance between good storytelling and engaging content. You need to be brave to expose your private life, which readers always expect to a greater or lesser extent; you need to be honest about the less savoury aspects of your personality, and you need to communicate experiences that must be relatable but also singular. It's a lot to ask for, and this is why I'm grateful that so many persons have published their memoirs. I know I will never write mine, out of pure, simple cowardice.

11 May 2025 / WHAT LIES BEHIND LITERARY THEORY: NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION OF CHARACTER

I'm beginning to read (and in some cases re-read) the bibliography for my future book on secondary characters. I wish I could jump straight into the matter that interests me, for which there is relatively scant bibliography, but I need for my theoretical framework in the introduction an overview of the secondary sources discussing the concept of the character, otherwise my book will not be published.

I cannot simply start discussing how secondary characters work without first discussing how characters in general work, and this is where things get complicated. The list of sources on characters in fiction is very long, beginning with Aristotle and passing through all the academic fashions of the last hundred years, which is mind-boggling. I have started by compiling a rather long bibliography, to select next the newer sources that include an introduction of the type I need to write, poaching from them names, sources, and ideas, trying to avoid the many rabbit holes. Yes, each new book is like starting another doctoral dissertation.

A book I absolutely recommend is *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 2019). This is part of the series 'Trios' in which, I quote from the website, "an important theme in critical theory, philosophy, or cultural studies" is addressed "through three extended essays written in close collaboration by leading scholars." The authors of the book on character are three women with an extensive career: Amanda Anderson, Toril Moi and Rita Felski. In the introduction, signed by the three, they announce their intention to disregard all scholarly warnings not to deal with characters as if they were persons: "We are obviously not arguing that characters are persons. But in order to discuss characters in interesting ways we often find ourselves using some of the same language we use to talk about real human beings" (12). I find this refreshing, pure common sense.

To ward off accusations that they are old-fashioned humanists, the authors stress their respect for critical posthumanism, which has questioned the centrality of human privilege in traditional humanism: "On the one hand, posthumanism could be said to carry within it the enduring force of the characterological in its emphasis on the importance of how we relate to the nonhuman world. On the other hand, in characterizing this world, posthumanist thinkers cannot help but impute character to it, enacting various forms of anthropomorphism and animism. In this way, the ethically capacious aspects of posthumanism are potentially continuous with, and not opposed to, a renewed interrogation of character" (13-14).

As Anderson, Moi, and Felski note, much of the posthumanist revolution in criticism is founded on new ways of considering character identity, beyond the traditional humanist defence of the universal and the newer poststructuralist approaches to textuality. I also appreciate that the three authors call attention to the presence of character in non-fiction and in autobiographical fiction, in which the author becomes a character. Avoiding both extreme formalism and the confusion between real and imaginary people propounded by cognitive science, they propose that "perhaps it is the fictional qualities of characters that make them real: figures in novels and films are alluring, arresting, alive, not in spite of their aesthetic dimensions, but because of them" (19).

Of the three essays I enjoyed in particular Toril Moi's contribution, "Rethinking Character," which explores the roots of the taboo against treating characters like people. This requires some preliminary explanation. I have not found a satisfactory definition of character because all the bibliography I'm reading neglects the author. The focus of the discussion is always whether characters are textual constructions with a narrative function limited to the text, or constructs created in collaboration with the reader (or spectator) that gain life beyond the text. For me, characters are pseudo-persons imagined by a storyteller for the purpose of narrating a story. What I find most fascinating, but no scholar-critic seems to care about, is how authors imagine characters. For me,

the characters appear to be people because they are imagined by a person who wants to give them verisimilitude.

William Shakespeare occupies a central position in the discourse on character because of the widespread consensus that he is the best creator of characters ever. The peculiarity is that he was a playwright and characters in plays require the intervention of a performer to become fully realized. A reader can approach Hamlet with no intervening actor, but this is different from approaching a character in a novel, which has not been created to be performed. If you're going to protest that, to name a major character, Anna Karenina has been performed by diverse actresses in different adaptations, I will note that they have performed the role as it appears on the screenplay, which is, as its name indicates, a play.

Beginning in the mid-18th century, Shakespeare became the object of an immense cult, lasting to our days, based on the principle that his characters are as close to real life as fictional characters can be. From Samuel Johnson to A.C. Bradley (and later Harold Bloom), literary critics agreed that Shakespeare's creations have a life of their own, and that of all other writers aiming at the same standard only few succeed (Dickens, Balzac and Tolstoi are serious contenders). The whole 19th century realist novel is based on the premise of making characters as life-like as possible, even when they are just basic spear carriers, which is why I'm interested in the minor characters.

However, the subjective methods used to praise Shakespeare and realist (or naturalist) authors for their skill in creating characters became an object of derision in the early 20th century, when these methods were disqualified as part of amateurish belletrism. The worst possible sin was seeking in the author's biography clues for the exploration of the characters, though common readers have never cared for these academic taboos and they're still happy enough to treat characters as people and to pester writers with questions about who inspired them. I myself do both as a common reader and as an academic.

In practice, most scholars treat characters in narrative as real people whose identity, personality and actions are worth exploring. The exception are the theorists, who insist on enforcing the taboo against this generalized, sensible attitude, in all currents they operate. This intrigued Moi, who locates the beginning of the taboo in the pamphlet by L.C. Knights *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?*, based on a 1933 [lecture](#) Knights believed that was the kind of absurd question that character lovers who missed textual evidence asked, though the joke is on him since the childlessness of Macbeth and his wife can be deduced from textual evidence, as can the information that they had lost a child. This is no trivial question at all, besides, since Macbeth is a usurper who becomes king but has no heir.

What interests Moi is why Knights was so spiteful against those who treated Shakespeare's characters as full human beings. Her thesis is that Knights, a 28-year-old doctoral candidate in F.R. Leavis's Cambridge circle and a co-founder with Leavis in 1932 of the key journal *Scrutiny*, "wasn't trying to develop a theory. He was, rather, laying down some ground rules for a serious, professional critical practice" (29). "Fueled by a revolutionary ambition to transform literary criticism," Moi writes, Knights's fiery essay is "a quintessential product of the so-called Cambridge Revolution" (34). Knights's "intellectual heroes are I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, the lodestars of the Cambridge literary avantgarde" (34). Knights, who presents himself as "an intellectual on the cutting edge of literary and critical modernism," is desperate to defend *Wuthering Heights* (then

not yet a canonical novel), *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses*, *To the Lighthouse* and the novels by D.H. Lawrence from the dilettantes outside university who threatened the stability of English as a rather new academic discipline. “Character critics must be stopped in their tracks,” Moi elucidates, “for they are incapable of doing justice to the modernist literary canon Knights wishes to promote” (34).

What most amazes Moi (and me!) is how the combined efforts of the Cambridge Revolution, Russian Formalism and US New Criticism caused “the taboo on treating characters as if they were real people” to solidify “into a dogma” (30), or “fundamental axiom” (30), on which later theorization depended, beginning with 1960s Structuralism, followed by Narratology (1970s), Deconstruction (1980s) and Poststructuralism (1990s). In *Postmodern Characters: A Study of Characterization in British and American Postmodern Fiction* (1991), Aleid Fokkema uses several introductory chapters to criticise his predecessors, finding fault with all their theorization to propose an equally useless theorization of character based on Umberto Eco’s version of Semiotics. As Moi notes in reference to John Frow’s *Character and Person* (2014), the most recent all-encompassing theoretical work on character, “only someone who has fully accepted the taboo on treating characters as if they were real will believe that a phrase like ‘quasi-persons of narrative’ (CP, 23) does more work than the word we already have: namely, ‘characters’” (57). For this reason, Moi herself refuses to provide any new theorization, simply stressing that “There is no fundamental conflict between paying attention to language and paying attention to characters. Good critics of characters do both” (39).

Moi’s essay, as it can be seen, is much more than a critique of L.C. Knights’s position, for it questions the very essence of literary theory beyond the question of character. What she is saying is that the professionalization of Literary Studies was achieved at the cost of excising basic human emotion from criticism, so that a barrier could be set up between the (mostly male, white, cisgender, middle-class) academic specialists and the rest, a barrier that only started to be erased, I should add, with the arrival of Cultural Studies, but that still persists. In the introduction to my own book, I would like very much to ignore all the nonsense that Moi exposes in her essay, but we are still expected to show respect for predecessors who mostly used theory to spar with each other for professional prestige and not at all to illuminate the texts.

If Moi is right, and I think she is, we’re stuck with antihumanist theory, produced for spurious reasons by persons with no respect for their fellow common readers/spectators and who seem unable to enjoy the company of characters, as most of us do. This is worrying. I myself will be using theorization by Alex Woloch (in *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, 2003) and Maria Nikolajeva (*The Rhetoric of Character in Children’s Literature*, 2002) which is absolutely pragmatic and totally avoids the pitfalls of the (post)formalists models. I have to construct my own theory, for it is my aim to find out how many types of minor characters there are in relation to how important they are in the whole scheme of each novel I’ll study, but my approach is modelled on close reading and comparative literature. I find, anyway, that generalizations rarely work in fiction, for human imagination is too rich to be trapped into a pseudo-scientific grid.

More next week...

19 May 2025 / IN HOW MANY LEVELS DO CHARACTERS IN NOVELS OPERATE?: A PRACTICAL PROPOSAL

Continuing with my reading of bibliography on the minor characters, this week I've perused David Galef's *The Supporting Cast: A Study of Flat and Minor Characters* (1993), a volume less well regarded than Alex Woloch's *The One and the Many* but still quite remarkable. Whereas Woloch focuses on the 19th century novel (Austen, Dickens, Balzac), Galef traces the dissolution of the minor character from Conrad to Woolf, passing through Forster, or, as he says, from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism.

Woolf famously criticized, in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown," Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy for being unable to create character without a thick framework of social and economic information, arguing that novelists should be able to find the essence of character in the person, not so much in the context. Forster, as Galef notes, slyly pointed out that one does not find memorable characters in Woolf, beyond some specific protagonists. Since I have never liked Woolf or Modernism, I'll side with Forster to point out that the mark of a good storyteller is an ability to create memorable secondary characters, and justify the presence of the lesser ones. Think, respectively, of Kurtz's Russian acolyte in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and of the two women in black knitting in the Belgian office that Marlowe visits.

I'm not, however, about to embark on a discussion of what makes a minor character memorable. It is my intention today to take a novel and see into how many levels its characters are organized. Forster's classic distinction between flat and round characters refers to the density of their characterization, but as Galef demonstrates it is not quite useful to distinguish the protagonists from the minor characters, who can be initially flat and eventually become round, or vice-versa. Protagonists, besides, can be quite flat in action-driven narrative which requires no deep characterization. I'm interested, rather, in how many levels minor characters occupy, but so far I have not found a solid scheme. Galef's discussion of flat and minor characters results in great close readings of the selected authors, but I don't find his method applicable to other texts, which is the whole point of theorization. I already discussed in my previous post how suspect the reasons behind certain kinds of theorization are, so I'll do here something eminently practical.

Like Woloch, I've been thinking that I need to look at very long, very dense 19th century novels to understand all the levels of characterization, but Galef shows that a novella like *Heart of Darkness* is sufficient, and also that Woolf's *Jacob Room* (under 300 pages) uses hundreds of characters, if only in allusion. I have, therefore, decided to take the last novel I have read and see how it works. This is Manuel de Pedrolo's *Visita a la senyora Soler*, which the author wrote in 1959, abandoned in 1971 when the censors forbade its publication, and eventually destroyed. A copy was retrieved from the archives of Francoist censorship in Alcalá de Henares when the Càtedra Màrius Torres (Universitat de Lleida) started digitalizing in 2019 Pedrolo's censored books. Publishers Fonoll issued the rescued text in 2022. I've been asked to peer review a translation into English of the first chapter and I ended up reading the whole novel which, if you ask me, the author did well to destroy. Pedrolo felt that this novel was outdated and he was perfectly right.

Visita a la senyora Soler (Visit to Mrs Soler) is a 300-page novel, subdivided into three very long chapters, with plenty of dialogue and few locations. It narrates the story of how twenty-seven-year-old Jordina, a secretary, loses her onerous virginity when her

best friend Simona convinces her that the recurrent nightmare she's having is proof of her sexual repression. The topic was certainly very daring for 1959 Spain (the novel is set in Barcelona) but, far from being satisfactory, the denouement is quite depressing. One night, Jordina manages to hook up at a party with an attractive young man, Daniel, whom she lures into Simona's empty flat. He is reluctant to spoil what promises to be a romantic relationship with a premature sexual act with no intimacy whatsoever (Jordina, besides, does not mention she's still a virgin). Once her deflowering is over, she chucks Daniel out coldly, only to regret it as soon as she narrates the disastrous encounter to her sister Maria Alba. Still hopeful, Daniel left a note with his phone number but Jordina lost it and when the sisters retrieve it, the note has been ruined and the numbers are illegible. Jordina is left devastated but hoping, as Maria Alba suggests, that Daniel might find her since he knows where she works. Having read Anna Maria Villalonga's enthusiastic preface I expected Jordina to be exultant after losing her virginity, but I was very much disappointed by a novel which is both daring and backwards, though I can see why the censors were so concerned.

I'm inserting this plot summary because in all the bibliography I'm reading this is something I miss. I don't know why academic literary specialists seem to believe that their readers have already read the texts they are discussing or will read them anyway. I always suppose that my readers have no idea about the books I discuss and offer plot summary; if they are classics I begin with "as it is well known..." When reading Galef's book, I had a wonderful time enjoying his analysis of *Heart of Darkness*, which I used to teach in Victorian Literature, but I had to use Wikipedia summaries for Forster's *Howard's End*, which I read possibly thirty-five years ago, and for *Jacob's Room*, which I have not read, nor am I planning to read.

So, now that you know what *Visita a la senyora Soler* is about, I'll discuss the structure of the cast of characters, commenting that, whereas Anglophone theorization about character hardly ever goes beyond the 'secondary', in Spanish-language theorization it is not uncommon to speak of 'tertiary or incidental characters'. You will see, however, that things are not so easy. Here we go.

Jordina Blanes is no doubt the protagonist, also in her incarnation as Sra. Soler in her nightmares. I might be satisfied by saying that the rest, from her sister down to the group of anonymous middle-aged men seen in a bar Jordina visits are minor characters, but, clearly, this is not satisfactory. To begin with, I find that the secondary characters are actually divided into three tiers: the top one is occupied by Maria Alba and Simona; the second by Jordina and Maria Alba's ageing, unnamed mother; and the third by the men closest to Jordina: Conrad Miret (the man in the recurrent nightmare), Conrad (her deceased boyfriend), Daniel and Sr. Enric (Jordina's workplace harasser). I'm establishing a subdivision, on the basis of in how many scenes and pages they appear. No, I have not counted them, but I think I should in future studies of character.

The rest of characters are tertiary, that is to say, their roles could be occupied by other similar characters or they could be absent and the plot would not be substantially altered. They mostly appear in just one scene, mainly to show aspects of Jordina's characterization we might not be aware of. Amazingly, for I thought this was a novel with very few characters, Jordina interacts in significantly long dialogue (beyond one or two lines) with twenty characters. Again, I would subdivide them into four tiers, depending on their significance and extension of their presence in terms of pages and scenes. I'm not going to describe them all, just note that there is an obvious difference between Jordina's

boss Sr. Rosés (tertiary, tier 1), the sex worker who strips at a party Jordina attends (tertiary, tier 2), a client who drinks bad liquor at a bar Jordina visits (tertiary, tier 3) and Sr. Font, a shop owner who simply greets Jordina (tertiary, tier 4).

There is then another group that I will call incidental and who are characterized because they are present but with no dialogue (incidental, tier 1) or because they are alluded to but are of slight importance for the plot (incidental, tier 2). Tier 1 includes incidental characters such as the bus drivers of the buses Jordina takes or people she sees in the street but does not interact with. Tier 2 includes characters mentioned in passing, from Sra. Mafeira's useless daughter-in-law to Sra. Puig, a neighbour Jordina and Maria Alba fail to remember despite their mother's insistence. Some of the incidental characters are necessary (Jordina needs to move about in the city by bus and taxi) but others seem totally superfluous, such as the guests that, according to Simona, her sister is having for dinner.

I have used here ten levels, from the protagonist down to the incidental characters mentioned only in passing, which shows that speaking of minor or secondary characters is extremely imprecise. You might say that nothing is gained by speaking of characters as 'tertiary, level 4, with some dialogue' but theatre managers and film producers will probably laugh at you, since actor wages are organized according to the importance of their characters. To my surprise, I learned recently that Spanish background performers (as extras prefers to be called) distinguish between roles that require doing something (like driving a car) and simply being on set (though no extra is simply there, doing nothing). So, when we think of characters in novels, perhaps we should think of them as performative roles and consider which actor we might employ to play them, if we were to direct a stage or film adaptation.

I have not checked yet any handbooks teaching prospective novelists how to create characters, but that might be my next step, since theorization tends to shy away from the more pragmatic perspective. I don't know, and I think that no narrative theorist (or narratologist) knows, how and why authors make the decision to introduce superfluous tertiary and incidental characters. Pedrolo, in particular, does something quite peculiar in this novel: he introduces the top tertiary characters in a quite direct way that makes you think they might have a role in Jordina's story, but then they are simply dropped, which is tantalizing. Perhaps this is closer to life than presenting a neat character network in which each of them has a clear function. Something else to consider.

More next week!

27 May 2025 / USING BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND ATTENDING CONFERENCES: WHEN CONVENTIONS WERE ESTABLISHED

Sooo..... I asked ChatGPT after failing to find the information on Google about two matters. Here we go... I wrote: "I have read an academic book by Christopher Gillie called *Characters in English Literature* (1965), which has no bibliography. When did it become compulsory for academic books to have a bibliography or a works cited list?"

ChatGPT replied: There is no single date or universal regulation that made it compulsory for academic books to include a bibliography or works cited list. The

inclusion of bibliographies evolved as a disciplinary convention rather than a legal or regulatory requirement. Here's a clearer breakdown:

1. Historical Context: Pre-20th Century: Academic works often referenced sources within the text or footnotes, but bibliographies were not always provided as a separate section.
2. Early-to-Mid 20th Century: The use of formal bibliographies became more common, especially in scholarly monographs in the humanities and social sciences. However, it still wasn't universal.
3. By the 1960s: By the time Christopher Gillie's *Characters in English Literature* was published in 1965, bibliographies were common but not mandatory, especially in literary studies. Many works of literary criticism at the time, particularly those intended as introductory surveys or popular academic overviews, often omitted formal bibliographies. Instead, references were embedded in footnotes or in-text citations. Gillie's book appears to be part of the Teach Yourself Books series [*MY NOTE*: no, it is not, it's part of Chatto & Windus's Literary Criticism series], which aimed to make academic subjects accessible to general readers. Such books often prioritized readability over academic rigor, including bibliographic apparatus.
4. Gradual Standardization: From the 1970s onward, academic publishers, universities, and journals increasingly emphasized formal citation standards (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.). Graduate theses, dissertations, and peer-reviewed monographs typically required bibliographies by this time. Today, bibliographies are considered essential in academic publishing, both for scholarly integrity and intellectual transparency.

Conclusion: There was no specific year when bibliographies became mandatory. Instead, it was a gradual standardization process throughout the 20th century, heavily influenced by disciplinary norms, institutional expectations, and publishing standards. Gillie's 1965 book falls into a gray area where it was acceptable but not unusual to omit a formal bibliography, especially in educational or introductory formats.

Sooo.... I asked ChatGPT another question (this would be my twenty-sixth since 2023, not so many). I wrote: "When was the current format of academic conferences become standardized?" The bot replied: The current format of academic conferences—featuring call for papers, peer-reviewed abstracts, scheduled presentations, keynote speakers, and publication of proceedings—developed gradually over the 20th century, with standardization solidifying in the post-World War II period. Here's a breakdown of how and when this format became standardized:

1. Pre-20th Century Origins: Scientific societies (like the Royal Society in the UK or the American Philosophical Society) held meetings and public lectures as early as the 17th–18th centuries. These were mostly informal, discussion-based gatherings among elite scholars, without formal presentation slots or publication of proceedings as we know them today.

2. Early 20th Century: By the early 1900s, professional academic societies (e.g., the Modern Language Association (MLA) [MY NOTE: founded 1883] or American Historical Association (AHA) [MY NOTE: founded 1884]) were holding annual meetings. These featured multiple speakers, but the structure was still evolving and inconsistent across disciplines. Conferences were often by invitation, and the format of papers varied widely.

3. Post–World War II Standardization (1945–1970s). The modern academic conference structure crystallized after WWII, especially in the U.S. and Europe. Key features like call for papers (CFPs), peer or committee review of abstracts, parallel sessions, conference programs and printed schedules, invited keynote speakers, conference proceedings (especially in sciences and computer science), became common during this period. The rise in higher education and research funding after WWII, especially during the Cold War, fueled the expansion of disciplines and the need for regular, formalized scholarly exchange.

4. 1980s–2000s: Further institutionalization of formats: standard presentation lengths (typically 15–30 minutes), use of PowerPoint or slides, introduction of poster sessions, especially in sciences, growth of international conferences. Professional organizations began issuing formal guidelines for conference organization and paper selection.

5. 21st Century and Digital Shift: The rise of online submissions, digital proceedings, and more recently, virtual or hybrid conferences (accelerated by COVID-19 in 2020). Yet, the core format established in the mid-20th century remains dominant.

Summary: When Did Standardization Happen? The standardized format of academic conferences—structured CFPs, peer-reviewed selections, formal sessions, and published proceedings—became the norm between the 1950s and 1970s, varying slightly by discipline. What we now recognize as the “typical academic conference” has been broadly in place since then.

Now, here’s the carbon footprint of my two [queries](#): “Some of our best estimates are that one query emits around 2 to 3 grams of CO₂. That includes the amortised emissions associated with training”. If you want more details with comparative charts and so on, check [here](#). Both articles are quite optimistic, claiming that although a LLM (Large Language Model) search consumes ten times more energy than a Google search, it’s also more efficient (you might need more than ten Google searches to reach the same results). What is more worrying, let me say, is the water consumption and the carbon footprint left by the facilities where the computer servers are lodged. So, this is why my use of ChatGPT is absolutely minimalistic, in the same way I switch off the lights at home if they are not needed, or recycle the trash religiously. And this is why I wanted to share this with you.

Back to Gillie’s book, what an absolute pleasure to read a true essay instead one of our current academic monographies uglified by the cookie-cutter prose we use. The same applies to the book that I have read after Gillie’s, W.J. Harvey’s *Character and the Novel*, also published in 1965 and in the same Chatto & Windus collection. Harvey, who uses a bit more bibliography, pushed to the footnotes, does something that amazed me. Disliking very much formalism, the impact of New Criticism and the emerging boom of

1960s structuralism, he refuses to integrate them into the main body of his discussion, inserting instead two appendixes, “The Retreat from Character” and “The Attack on Character,” where he briefly discusses why since Modernism authors have lost the knack of creating memorable characters (they have, haven’t they?) and what can be done to get it back. I certainly wish I could do that, instead of having to mention in the introduction of my future book theorists I have nothing in common with (Seymour Chatman, really?).

Speaking of academic conventions, this time I ask everyone and not just ChatGPT about this other convention: why do we need to encumber introductions or first chapter with a barrage of theorization we don’t care about? Some of the post-1990 books I’m reading have even taken two chapters before starting the discussion that really interests them, which is tedious both for the author and for the readers. This, of course, descends from the ancient humanist convention of citing one’s predecessors to proclaim one’s authority, a rhetorical flourish that scientists have turned into the hated and hateful ‘literature review.’ The problem is that now instead of citing the authorities in our field that we follow, we are expected to discuss both the ones we follow and the ones we don’t, which seems to me a bit of an absurdity because this means you have to cover everything beginning with Aristotle. Perhaps the clever thing to do would be to follow Harvey and insert an appendix: a list of bibliography you don’t want to deal with, accompanied by some quotations. I’m complaining because each rejection of a particular scholar’s work means reading one of their books, which is precious time wasted.

In fact, the uglification of current academic prose has very much to do with the overuse of secondary sources, of which I myself declare myself guilty. I assume you all have the experience of sending an article for review with 30 or 40 secondary sources, only to be asked to insert a couple more. This makes me so anxious that I end up using massive bibliographies to cover all angles, leaving myself less and less room for my own words. I have a nagging inner voice constantly telling me ‘you have missed that absolutely essential source...’. Once, many years ago, I tried to have a real essay, with just a few sources, published in an academic journal, and the rejection was so brutal I’m still reeling. In the journal I co-edit, *Hélice*, we made room for that kind of essay in a section we call “Miscellaneous,” yet this is not common practice. My need to write essays rather than academic prose is what led me, in fact, to start this blog.

More next week, with no help from AI.

31 May 2025 / WHAT’S GOING ON IN THE USA AND WHAT CAN BE DONE FROM ABROAD (WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THAT!)

So, this woman, Fiona Hill, an Anglo-American academic, foreign affairs advisor and author, who since 2023 has served as Chancellor of Durham University, Wikipedia dixit, was interviewed on Chanel 4. Political activist George Conway posted a bluit highlighting her declaration that “The United States is on a path toward full-on state repression.” His post got 15000 likes, was reposted 5100 times and generated 415 replies.

One of them was mine. I wrote “You are all in denial, it’s really amazing as seen from Europe. The USA is fully repressed and depressed. What more evidence do you need?” This post unleashed a tiny storm in a teacup, with a flurry of 200 likes but also about two dozen direct replies of all kinds, from “yes, indeed” to “shut up, Karen” (I blocked that person and replied to the rest, with all my respect). Today I’m writing about

this small incident in the huge tornado that are the social media because one of the persons I upset questioned that I could do anything at all just posting bluits from Spain.

My daily task on BlueSky is recommending a book, and in that way publicising the collection of reviews of contemporary fiction and non-fiction that my students wrote and I [edited](#), *Reviewing Contemporary Anglophone Fiction and Nonfiction*. This gives my BlueSky participation a focus, and I quite enjoy it. The rest of my posts are comments on the news, sending dozens of likes (particularly to photographers) and, yes, replying to posts with a political content. I did ask the guys and gals of Anonymous, whom I follow, what I could do to help the US and democracy in general. They told me to pass on reliable information and opinion, and this is what I'm doing in Spanish, English, and now and then Catalan.

No doubt, writing bluits from the comfort of my Spanish home does not compare to marching in Washington DC but, to begin with, I have totally cancelled my chances of getting a visa to travel to the USA. Remember that French scientist whose laptop and cellphone were confiscated at the border and he was at once deported because the migration agents found anti-Trump comments in his social media posts? Well, that could be me. Or any of the millions posting pro-democratic bluits.

I have made a point, in any case, of never ranting against any person. I present myself as a European and a Spaniard with a direct knowledge of fascist dictatorship, as I child who attended Franco's school. Many of my bluits are about what things that work in European democracies are missing in the USA, such as being entitled to vote automatically when you turn 18, having an opposition to nag the government, the possibility to call an election when a leader is corrupt, how a Parliamentary monarchy works and so on.

I'm usually cautious and measured, but yesterday I got impatient. I'm reading many posts on BlueSky about how if things are going this or that way, the USA will be in trouble. I'm not in a position to teach lessons to anybody, but my view is that even though every day brings an even more preposterous decision by that President, and truly horrible things are happening because of his cruel randomness, Americans seem to believe that life can revert to normal after the 2026 mid-terms or in 2028, with the end of the second mandate (if it ends!).

I was told yesterday that many Americans understand the situation perfectly but they are missing a leader, or that the huge distances make it impossible to coordinate significant mass demonstrations, or that with the media keeping silent about the protests it seems they are not happening. Another person told me it's too much to expect a country to react efficiently in view of the carefully orchestrated political manoeuvring of the last five years. Fair enough.

The angriest person told me that I was wrong to believe Americans were all losers and guaranteed they would go down fighting. My point, precisely, is that I can't believe that Americans, who have shown themselves to be great fighters for human rights, are now unable to coordinate a collective response against the autocracy that has taken over their land. My view is that the ones who care, for half the country is clearly complicit with the guy they voted for, trust too much that the law will defend them. A few judges have stepped up and stopped the President, but this is a very slow system of defence and the damage done in the meantime is terrifying in terms of personal lives (the people brutally kidnapped and deported) and collective life (the assault on science or worldwide humanitarian aid).

There is another problem. Even though Americans (or at least the US Government) are used to interfering in other countries, with altruistic or predatory intentions, they have difficulties accepting that others can intervene in their own nation to help. I'm not speaking of expressing my personal opinion, or liking the posts by US politicians I have not voted for. I mean listening to the European Union, China, or the UN.

Twice in the 20th century did Germany threaten the world by unleashing international wars that caused much suffering. In both cases, the USA came to the rescue, leading the coalitions that put an end to the remains of 19th century imperialism and of Nazism. During the long Cold War, the USA presented itself as the guarantor of democracy worldwide although, as we know, the CIA and the US military did their share to support dictatorships like Chile or Iraq until they were no longer useful. The question is that the US President has gone rogue and there is no other world leader than can guarantee stability. If we think that China can play that role, then the world has become a truly strange place.

I wrote a second post, in reply to an American who assured me that they were doing all they could, but were being hampered at each step, and needed some luck: "I know, I know, this is why I'm here. I do wish you all the luck in the universe because the whole planet depends on saving American democracy, I really mean this." As I wrote these words, at 1AM, I felt as if I was dreaming, and the whole thing was a nightmare.

You can laugh at the ridiculous antics of that guy and his cabinet, send the sharp US cartoonists lots of likes, support Mark Hamill and George Takei's unflinching posting, but in the end the whole situation is sinister, dangerous, and contagious. I had to read a lot about Hitler when I wrote my book on villainy, and the same pattern is being repeated. I don't mean that 2025 is 1933, what I mean is that we are seeing at work the same systematic failure of the systems of control that prevent entitled persons thirsting for power from doing as they like, and destroying democracy.

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Sons of Jacob storm the Congress and the Senate, and kill all members. That's all it takes for US democracy to end: a bloody coup, with relatively few victims. I would like to insist that the main danger comes from the impression that life in the USA is still normal, because it is not like life in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Not for all, though for the migrants terrorized by ICE it's quite similar. The soft coup that has already happened shows an extreme deviousness and a relentless inhumanity, whether this comes from the President, or from the groups behind him. Even Elon Musk has been ostracized! Things are already very, very bad and will easily get much, much worse.

In a way we were lucky in Spain that although foreign governments did not intervene to stop Franco (actually his position was consolidated in 1953, thanks to the treaty signed with the American government of Dwight Eisenhower), the millions of tourists that started arriving in the 1960s did have an impact on our lives, if only because of their different understanding of personal freedom. They did not come to Spain to fight Franco and end our suffering, but they opened our eyes in many ways. Then some privileged Spaniards started travelling, and imported new ideas. Until we all saw, when Franco finally died, in his bed of old age, that the way ahead passed through becoming a European-style democracy. With a king, but that's another story.

That President understands that he can control the USA by isolating his fellow Americans from the rest of the world (as abusers deprive their victims of contact with family and friends). Migrants (and some US citizens) are being deported, including

children with cancer; no foreign students will be able to study in the USA next year; few tourists (or academics) will choose the USA as their destination; many Americans will stay home for fear of being unable to return if they travel abroad.

The next step, you know and I know, is controlling social media. Trump already tried to take TikTok away by force from its Chinese owners. He might think next of limiting X, BlueSky, Instagram, Whatsapp or any other social network to internal national use (as the Chinese do). Health Secretary Robert Kennedy Jr. announced this week that US researchers funded by the government would be banned from publishing internationally; he wants to set up instead national research bulletins.

So, I could keep quiet, post about mushrooms on BlueSky as that popular account does, or fill with likes the feed Photography (Trending), but that's not the reason why I abandoned my total inactivity in the social media. I'm posting on US politics because this is affecting my life and the persons in my immediate circle, which extends from Spain to the European Union. I'm posting because no foreigners helped Spaniards to get rid of Franco, and I wish they had.

Supposing BlueSky had existed in 1970, and I had been then a woman my age today, I may have been irritated at any posts by American citizens protesting that we, Spaniards, were in denial and not active enough. But I would have agreed: many Spaniards were risking prison, exile, and even death, while the rest did nothing and this is why Franco could die of old age. Yesterday I was no doubt projecting onto US citizens my frustration at my fellow Spanish citizens, who were unable to get rid of that monster for forty years. Inaction, you see?, has consequences, often lasting for generations.

I'm very scared. This is not like watching Argentina or Brazil struggle not to return to old dictatorial regimes. Post-communist Russia or China have been dictatorships for so long that we can't even believe they can one day be a democracy. The fall of the USA is much, much worse: it's seeing Superman become Lex Luthor or, even worse, Captain America join Hitler.

I was about to erase my post, but in the end I'm happy that it started a conversation among a handful of US citizens, even if it was a tiny one. When the person who got so annoyed with me told me off sharply ('go and take your privilege to a right-wing forum'), another American told them 'you're fighting the wrong person.' Indeed, and thanks for defending me!

Now, paraphrasing John Kennedy, don't ask yourself what democracy can do for you, ask what you can do for democracy. Before it's too late, and not just the USA but the whole world falls to the dark side, where so many nations already are. Trust me, it is very urgent. We all need to do something.

11 June 2025 / MORE ON SECONDARY CHARACTERS: TANCREDO, THE ITALIAN APOLLO, IN EÇA DE QUEIROZ'S OS MAIAS (1888)

The book I'm currently working on, a study of secondary characters, has a corpus composed of 19th century novels in diverse European languages. I started with nine authors, but I have decided to abandon Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf because I found it impossible to sustain my interest in her novel *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1891), which I had selected being curious about Sweden. Lagerlöf was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (in 1909), and this was her first novel, which she published aged 33

after being a teacher for years. I tried to read the novel in Paul Norlen's 2009 translation, against which I have no objection at all, but I just found Lagerlöf's narrative style quite superficial in plot and in characterization. Eça de Queiroz's masterpiece, *Os Maias* (1888), could not be more different, yet I have also decided not to include it in my book. Again, I find the translation by Margaret Jull Costa excellent, by which I mean that it has none of those ugly glitches that affect bad translation. The problem with Queiroz's novel is that, at 714 pages in the Dedalus edition, it is overlong in relation to the sexual melodrama it narrates, which could have been told in half the pages to the same effect.

Checking what readers think of *Os Maias* in GoodReads, I found very many Portuguese persons quite annoyed because they were forced to read this national glory in secondary school. A handful, now adults, expressed admiration for the astuteness with which Queiroz portrays Portugal's upper classes between the 1850s and the 1880s (the main plot takes place between 1875 and 1885, three years before the publication of the novel). The *Maias* of the title are three men from the gentry: the grandfather, Afonso; his son, Pedro; and the grandson, Carlos, the protagonist of the novel. Summarized in a couple of lines the novel tells the story of how Pedro commits suicide after his wife, Maria, abandons him for another man, moving abroad with their daughter Maria Eduarda but leaving behind their son Carlos (both are then little children, Maria Eduarda is about two years older). Afonso and Carlos come to believe that Maria Eduarda is dead, and she herself has no idea that she has a grandfather and a brother in Lisbon, the city where she returns about twenty-five years after her mother ran away. Not knowing who the other is, the relationship between Maria and Carlos strays from the moral path into the depths of taboo.

Queiroz is aware that his main plot is pure sexual melodrama, as I noted, which is why he has Carlos and his best friend Ega discuss the bizarre events as if they were out of place in the mundane reality of their lives, and of Maria's. Actually, in *Os Maias* characters often discuss the virtues, or lack thereof, of romantic versus realist storytelling, for Queiroz was hailed as Portugal's main naturalist. I don't know his other novels, and I'm sorry to say that I have not read Zola yet, precisely because I have an abhorrence of naturalism. Yet, one thing I can say is that I was very much surprised by the crudity of the representation of late 19th century sexuality, not because there were any graphic erotic scenes, but because the whole plot aims at revealing the predatory sexual behaviour of useless, idle, rich men like Carlos. He, his friends, and acquaintances, all unmarried men between 25 and 35, see married women as mere objects to conquer and quickly discard. Queiroz presents the upper-class women of Lisbon as willing participants in the seduction game, but also as its victims.

Queiroz's cast of characters is very large, as it is typical in 19th century novels in which the protagonist occupies a central position in society and is, therefore, surrounded by a large social circle and taken care of by many servants. As I read *Os Maias*, it occurred to me that someone should write a paper about the function of cab drivers in 19th-century fiction. Domestic servants, from governesses to footmen, have received some attention, but I was fascinated by how Carlos constantly requires the services of drivers while engaged in his sexual affairs; he even has sex with his mistress, the Countess, during a ride in a coach and I couldn't help thinking what the driver must have gossiped with his fellow drivers!

The secondary character I want to discuss, if only briefly, is Tancredo, the character without whom Queiroz's erotic melodrama would collapse. This Tancredo is a

refugee Neapolitan prince that Pedro Maia wounds accidentally during a hunting party organized to honour the Italian. Chagrined, Pedro takes the wounded guest home. Tancredo has run away from Naples, where he has been sentenced to death for conspiring against the Bourbons, which gives him a romantic, revolutionary patina. Maria is not supposed to visit the wounded, bedridden guest but feels excited and, curious, she sends her French maid to investigate. The girl describes to her mistress the amazing beauty of the Italian and Maria's curiosity increases.

When he sends her flowers and a poem in gratitude for her hospitality, Maria is ready to fall in love with the Italian Apollo. Pedro totally misses how the friendship between his wife and his guest Tancredo evolves, as the Italian recovers from the wound, and is devastated when he discovers that Maria has left with the Italian. Amazingly, Tancredo does not say a single word throughout this episode. He is just an attractive image, a magnetic presence, a sexual icon for whom Maria falls. He never appears again directly. A report by another character mentions that Maria and Tancredo lived for three years in Austria, where they had a daughter who died when she was only two. Tancredo, a gambler, died still young, in a duel in Monaco, leaving Maria penniless and in urgent need of a male protector. That's all.

Tancredo is so secondary that he does not appear in the lists of main characters in *Os Maias* available online. Yet, without Maria's sexual infatuation with him, there would be no plot: it's because she runs away with Tancredo taking her daughter Maria Eduarda that Pedro kills himself and, what is worse, that Carlos and Maria are not aware of each other's existence, with the horrendous consequences this has when they meet as adults. Tancredo, then, appears to be a flat character whose presence in the plot is merely functional, what could be called a tertiary character. He's not a background character like the drivers I mentioned before, but his whole characterization can be reduced to a few basic traits: he's an aristocratic, sexually appealing man and a gambler. In the studies of character I have read, Tancredo and similar characters hardly deserve a mention. Yet, there he is, complicating the existence of three generations of Maia men, if we think of how the lives of Afonso, Pedro, and even Carlos, who never meets him, are destroyed by his affair with Maria.

Funnily, seeking some information on Tancredo, I came across a novel published in 2018 by Italian author Paola D'Agostino, *Tancredi il Napoletano*. This is part of what Jeremy Rosen calls 'secondary character elaboration', a popular, parasitical trend by which current authors latch onto a well-known classic to write what is, basically, fan fiction, often with little to add to the preyed upon classic. In the article of the Portuguese *Diário de Notícias* about [D'Agostino](#), the rather fawning journalist explains that D'Agostino's imagination was stirred by her first stay in Portugal in 1998 as an Erasmus student. She still lives there. Being a Neapolitan, she was fascinated by how well Queiroz portrayed Tancredo using just a basic sketch and felt the need to explore the Italian's background before the fated meeting with Maria. Her interviewer notes that D'Agostini gives Tancredo, or rather Tancredi, "uma forte densidade." D'Agostini's fan-fic has left no trace that I could find beyond this article, but the translation of her novel into Queiroz's own Portuguese is a strange footnote in the history of *Os Maias*.

The more I read and pay attention, the more I confirm my initial hypothesis that we know next to nothing about characters in fiction. My good friend Víctor Martínez-Gil called my attention to how Cervantes appears to be the first author to create a secondary character with no function whatsoever. Víctor told me that the illustrious Claudio Guillén

was the first to note the uselessness of Contreras in “La gitanilla” [The Gypsy Girl], where his only function is to be upbraided by the ladies when they ask him for some money which he seems reluctant to lend. He does nothing, contributes nothing to the plot. Queiroz uses diverse characters who, like Contreras, could be described as ‘fillers’, such as a mature female relative that Afonso Maia invites to live in his home, and who is later said to have died without doing anything at all for the plot. Other minor characters have peculiar functions, such as the anonymous low-class man Carlos sees having sex with the not so shy English governess, Miss Sarah; or Manuelinho, the young son of a local builder, whose presence in a scene with Afonso Maia is intended to show that he likes children and will be a sweet great-grandfather (oddly, at this point neither the readers nor he know that he already is a great-grandfather).

I might be wrong, but my impression is that while Dickens’s characters are always of service to the plot, and hardly ever mere ‘fillers’, Queiroz’s characters appear in *Os Maia* as they could appear in real life: because they are there. Many scenes are about Carlos meeting people, either for the first time or as part of his social life. In other 19th-century novels, the moment a minor character is introduced you can bet that they’ll play a role in the plot, and have some function. In *Os Maia*, that is not necessarily the case. I spent the whole novel, for instance, wondering why Queiroz needed the Finnish ambassador, Steinbroken, since the conversation I expected about the differences between Finland and Portugal never happens. Mysteries of authorship.

More next week...

20 June 2025 / A MUCH DEEPER DAMAGE: LOSING ACADEMIC LIFE TO AI

I was supposed to take part in a seminar next week, which I’ll have to miss, with a talk about how to use AI correctly. In this talk I was going to describe, once more, how the late Iain M. Banks presents AI in his Culture [novels](#).

The Culture is a post-scarcity, anarcho-socialist society, born of a confederation of space-faring humanoid civilizations which agree that survival in their gigantic spaceships, orbitals, and the empty planets and asteroids they occupy requires superior management skills. They, therefore, entrust said management to their AIs, nicknamed the Minds, which are lodged in the computers running the spaceships. The Minds progressively help the Culture citizens to get rid of money, obligatory work and property so that these lucky, carefree citizens eventually reach a utopian state in which they can live as they please.

Banks is very optimistic, believing that the Minds can run efficiently a stable economy (Culture individuals are not interested in consumption) and that the citizens can find satisfaction in leisure, with most occupying their time in fulfilling endeavours with no need for aggression, possessiveness or dominion. The Culture is far from being perfect, as its enemies constantly point out, but it shows how AI can be used for human liberation: as an aid to reach social stability, get rid of the jobs nobody should be forced to do and free the citizens from the compulsions that often make life unbearable here on Earth. Also, to guarantee health and full control over the body. Banks says practically nothing about how actually the Culture citizens are educated, but there is a general supposition that once patriarchy and capitalism are eliminated education can be based on mutual respect and the development of each person’s capacities.

Instead, the way AI is progressing here on Earth has already become a nightmare, dominated by corporate interests based on greed. AI is being used in very many different ways that make human life easier, but I refer here to the generative AI which is depriving many persons of their jobs in creative professions and that is threatening to end the human capacity to process thought. As Brian Klaas wrote [yesterday](#), “In the formative stages of education, we are now at risk of stripping away the core competency that makes our species thrive: learning not *what* to think, but *how* to think.” Klaas, a college teacher, refers in particular to “a new genre of essay that other academics reading this will instantly recognize, a clumsy collaboration between students and Silicon Valley. I call it *glittering sludge*.”

Yet, here I want to go far beyond the problem of the students’ cheating and into a much larger issue, prompted by the teaching innovation workshop I attended yesterday at my school, the Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, of UAB.

The workshop was not a monographic discussion of AI. Other issues were discussed, such as absenteeism, gamification, how to connect teaching with practice (from experiences with museums to contacts with local authorities) and so on. Yet, inevitably, whenever teachers gather together AI looms large. There was a specific round table which quite scared me. The two colleagues that totally misunderstood the process of detecting AI-generated student exercises were a warning about the fact that many of us, ageing boomers, are overwhelmed by a situation we can hardly process. Yet, I was far more disturbed (this is the word) by the proposals coming from two colleagues who proposed that we integrate AI into our teaching and research respectively.

A colleague from the Philosophy Department described how a new syllabus for a core subject now integrates four different levels of AI use for the different exercises. It is taken for granted that students will use AI and, so, the teachers are now asking them to specify what services or programmes they have used for each exercise. I have no idea why she thought this strategy is feminist and linked to Haraway’s concept of the cyborg. Who knows. A colleague from my own Department showed how to use Google’s [NotebookLM](#), a research assistant integrated with LLM (Large Language Model) Gemini. He made the point that research is time-consuming, especially in the Humanities, as we need to read a lot, and NotebookLM can offer valuable assistance to ease our burden. Coming from him, an excellent academic with Job’s patience to dig into old texts, that sounded truly menacing. I’ll try to explain why.

As an SF lover and Banks’s fan, I am indeed in favour of using AI. I’m not in favour, though, of misusing AI. We have been using AI for decades now for instance to help us locate bibliography through online databases and catalogues, though these AIs are more opaque than the newer pseudo-human, chatty assistants, from Alexa to ChatGPT. I myself have recently asked ChatGPT to make a list of characters in a novel I’m studying or to find the title of a film whose plot I barely recalled. I do understand that NotebookLM can be very useful to locate key features of a text instead of having to read it once more, summarize secondary sources we might not want to read entirely, give better shape to our unstructured thoughts and so on. It can offer shortcuts.

I don’t want, however, this AI assistant to end up being a too close collaborator or even a co-author, as the flesh and bones research assistants have been to so many cheeky professors. We might all get there, in the same way we’ve been using Google to find or check information, but right now, at this stage, I still want to do the dirty job. My colleague argued that with so many teaching and admin commitments we hardly have

time for research, hence his use of NoetbookLM, but my impression is that we should be slowing down instead of rushing the publication of our research. That, of course, is my privilege as a researcher currently doing little teaching and no admin work.

What had escaped me, and I suddenly realized during the workshop, is that the problem we are facing now is far more serious than I thought. Someone mentioned how when calculators appeared everyone feared we would lose the capacity to do basic math, and everyone in the room laughed out loud. Well, we have lost indeed that capacity. With LLMs and research assistants like NotebookLM we will lose the capacity to think, organize information, extrapolate insights from our sources and, generally, write argumentative essays, which are the basis of education and scholarship in the Humanities. This is a Faustian bargain that has already contaminated education at all levels and that threatens to engulf academic writing, at least, I insist, in the Humanities. There is some hope in the return to the in-class exam, but this is a too basic type of exercise for higher education.

Not so long ago, scholars used to write academic books without using computers but we cannot go back to that past stage, just as we cannot ditch calculators. Yet, the problem is that the moment we use computers we succumb to the lure of AI. If we stop asking students for exercises written at home using computers, with citations from secondary sources, because we worry that they will use ChatGPT or similar, we are cutting the transmission belt that carries forward thought and knowledge. This is extremely serious.

We have been using writing and the scholarly method based on quoting authorities (bibliography, secondary sources) to pass on what we know. So far, we have trusted that each generation would produce persons capable of moving forward human knowledge, but since 30 November 2022, when ChatGPT was launched, we are staring at an abyss. Either we allow students to use AI as much as they wish, and we risk being replaced by generations of, excuse me, illiterate idiots, or we suppress all contact with AI, which might mean losing the scholarly methods that have served humankind for thousands of years.

Am I exaggerating? After all, we have planes, trains and cars, but we still walk and we have not really lost much by no longer enslaving horses (quite the opposite). Still, I am dismayed. This is no longer a question of students' cheating their way into getting degrees: it's a question of destroying the very foundations of scholarly life. In a few years' time, if not right now already, only AIs will 'read' our publications; we will be cited by students who will never read us and who will not understand how we produce bibliography. Academic literary criticism might soon be as dead as the dodo (or Renaissance pastoral poetry), which means that we urgently need to rethink what we do and what for. I can perhaps imagine a future with no literary criticism whatsoever, but the AI curse is extending to all disciplines, and I simply cannot accept a future without, for instance, historiography or ethics. Or indeed, science.

In a way, I have already given up, since I have stopped teaching students to write papers (as I used to do in Victorian Literature) and are now teaching them how to write reviews with no secondary sources (in Contemporary Literature). I was wondering yesterday what's going to happen to the BA dissertation in just two years' time if we stop teaching students to write papers for fear of ChatGPT. If our undergrads don't read secondary sources and don't write papers, they won't even understand the purpose of the BA dissertation, much less the method to write it. If that is suppressed, what kind of

exercises will students do at MA level? Will PhD dissertations be eventually abandoned? If I insist on writing a book along two years, even though ChatGPT or NotebookLM could help me to do it in under two months, am I being stubbornly stupid? Will be get eventually used to reading AI-generated scholarship?

We are now facing the consequences of two very wrong ethical choices. First, generative AI has been made available regardless of the consequences. Second, people (above all, young students) have started using it also regardless of the consequences. This is classic of current capitalism: we are dying of cancer in droves because many corporations are selling us toxic products but also because we choose to consume them; we can no longer afford housing because we prefer being tourists in other people's lands; and we'll kill the planet rather than stop climate change because it's too much effort to give up exaggerated consumption. The apex of stupidity, however, is building AIs that will deprive us in just one generation of the capacity to think, possibly what capitalism has wanted all along.

Welcome, then, to the new dark age of stupid, supposing climate change does not kill us first.

2 July 2025 / LEGAL FICTIONS OF THE 19TH CENTURY: THE CASE OF ANNA KARENINA

I must confess my total and utter failure to enjoy Leo Tolstoy's classic novel *Anna Karenina* (serialized 1875-1877 and printed in a single volume in 1878). I started with the customary patience I use when reading very long texts (1096 pages in my edition, the excellent 2000 translation by husband-and-wife team Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky), but I totally lost it after part six, of eight. I still had then about 175 pages to go, which I mostly skipped, stopping only in the chapters narrating Anna's tragic fate and her lover Vronsky's desperate reaction.

What is the problem with *Anna Karenina*? Well, I have avoided all its TV and film adaptations and so I had no idea that this novel, excuse my ignorance, is a composite of two stories. It may be called *Anna Karenina*, but apart from narrating the adulterous affair between this sexually frustrated lady and charming Count Alexei Vronsky, Tolstoy uses about half of the novel to describe in tedious detail the life of his delegate in the text, the noble landowner and farmer Konstantin Levin, and his relationship with Princess Kitty Shcherbatsky, before and after their marriage. I was reminded a little bit of the two-tier narrative of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), with the stories of Amelia and Becky, and initially thought the novel should have been called something like *Anna and Kitty* or *Two Women*. Eventually, I concluded that Tolstoy is only truly interested in Levin and his paterno-religious crisis, which was the very boring part I mostly skipped (it also narrated something I half understood about elections within the nobility or something). I even believe now that the fated romance between Anna and Vronsky was just a decoy for Tolstoy to sell to readers Levin's dull story, which is mostly autobiographical.

Famously, *Anna Karenina* begins with "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," the kind of sweeping statement that pleases readers and has them nod their heads in agreement, though it is actually nonsense. I found the novel a demonstration of the opposite: the European 19th century upper classes seem, the more I read novels in different languages, amazingly homogenous despite national

differences. The families of that class are all made unhappy exactly for the same reason: their dependence on the acceptance of their social circle is so strong that any deviance leads to disaster. This dependence is, on its turn, conditioned by three main elements: social respectability, religious beliefs and, the great forgotten, legislation.

I wrote a while ago “An Overlooked Adulteress: Annabella’s Irresistible Passion In Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” an [article](#) in which I read this novel in the context of adultery fiction, a sort of subgenre extremely dependent on legislation for its verisimilitude. I’m quoting a chunk here, the next two paragraphs.

The new Matrimonial Causes Act, passed in 1857, nine years after the publication of Brontë’s novel, came to replace previous legislation which, basically, always privileged the husband. As Lawrence Stone explains (in *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987*), from the 1760s onward, married couples who no longer loved each other could sign a private separation deal, with the husband ensuring out of pure good will the economic welfare, choice of residence, and personal freedom of the wife. Essentially, this is what Helen demands from Arthur in *Tenant* but these are the rights he denies her, not wishing to become an object of gossipy mockery in his neighbourhood and social circle. Stone adds that private deals still prevented both husband and wife from remarrying legally (this would constitute bigamy) and left the separated wife wholly in the hands of her husband. He could always sue her for “criminal conversation” (1990: 153) with another man, divorce her and turn her into a social pariah.

The 1857 legal reform enhanced the grounds for divorce and, most importantly, it took divorce away from the hands of the ecclesiastical Anglican courts of England, which were connected with civil legislation through the Doctors’ Commons or College of Civilians, where a young Dickens was employed as a reporter, to place it squarely within the domain of the civil courts. Divorce was, nonetheless, a hard to attain dispensation which could only be obtained in very limited circumstances; it was, besides, an extremely expensive procedure that required a Private Act of Parliament. In any case, most of the 314 divorces granted between 1700 and 1857 were instigated by husbands for, although both members of the couple could apply on the grounds of adultery, the wife’s plea had to be accompanied by proof of life-threatening cruelty, a stipulation which did not include psychological abuse of the kind Helen suffers in Brontë’s novel. Logically, whereas being caught in flagrant adultery had hardly any consequences for men (a wife could not even deny her husband his “conjugal rights” as Helen does), upper-class wives committing the same breach of matrimonial contract “were often tormented with guilt and shame” (Stone 1990: 339) and ruined by scandal. They could easily lose both lover and husband to “face total separation from all their children, severe financial hardship, loneliness, and social ostracism” (339).

Tolstoy’s 1860s-1870s Imperial Russia follows, essentially, the same legislation. Anna, who marries around age 18 a boring man twice her age (her aunt acts as matchmaker), finds herself passionately in love, around age 27, with Vronsky, a noble military officer a few years her junior. As a result of their affair, Anna, who already has an eight-year-old boy, Seryozha, gets pregnant, which precipitates the dramatic confession of her adulterous relationship to her husband, Count Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin, a high-ranking government official in St. Petersburg who is not a particularly loving husband or father.

Here Anna’s troubles begin, for Karenin decides not to apply for a divorce, convinced that this would ruin Anna and himself socially to no avail. According to Russian

legislation, Anna herself cannot divorce Karenin, as only the victim of adultery can do so (the other valid reasons for divorce were desertion, physical cruelty, or, this being Tzarist Russia, one spouse being sentenced to loss of rights and exile). When Karenin considers how he could obtain a divorce if he wished to do so, he stops himself right away as soon as he realises that the unavoidable public exposure of the case before a court of law would create a major scandal. No-fault divorce, in which no reason needs to be invoked by either partner, was introduced by the Bolsheviki after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Later in the novel, Karenin adds to his socio-legal scruples new religious scruples, although the Orthodox Church is not in Tolstoy's novel the immense influence it was in real-life Russia. The main point is that Anna can only divorce Karenin if he agrees to present himself falsely as the perpetrator of adultery which, of course, he is hardly willing to do, being chagrined (rather than hurt) by her behaviour. Taking advantage of the power that the laws grant him as a deceived husband, Karenin keeps Seryozha with him when Anna and Vronsky move temporarily to Italy, even telling the little boy that his mother is dead.

Anna, universally considered a fallen woman by her Moscow and St. Petersburg hypocritical social circle, is trapped between a rock and a hard place, as the Americans say: Karenin will not divorce her and she grows desperately jealous seeing how Vronsky, legally a single man, is not shunned as she is. Vronsky himself, also a Count and a richer man than Karenin as a landowner, can do nothing to free Anna and suffers, besides, the humiliation of seeing his daughter with Anna, little Annie, carry as her last name Karenina, for she is legally Karenin's child. Ironically, when Anna commits suicide unable to see an end to her situation and Vronsky leaves for war in Serbia, where he presumably also dies, Karenin keeps Annie, whom he needs not even adopt, as she is legally his.

Anna Karenina is, arguably, a great novel and possibly the greatest novel on adultery before no-fault divorce, but read in 2025, in the context of free divorce, Tolstoy's endless descriptions of the mental states of the persons involved in the triangle is irksome. I grant that even today, when the word 'adultery' is not so commonly used and 'infidelity' is preferred, stories about sexual triangles and marriage breakups have a certain appeal, despite no longer being a cause for scandal or only very exceptionally. Yet, there is a triteness in the theme that makes the modest language of the 19th century fiction particularly unbearable. Note that there are no sex scenes between Anna and Vronsky, though it is obvious that his appeal is sexual and that she discovers with him pleasure her husband is unable to provide and elicit. Funnily, instead of stressing Vronsky's attractive, Tolstoy mentions a few times that the guy is stocky and balding, making strangely a point of always mentioning his straight, white teeth.

What amazes me in that in my years as a student, none of my teachers bothered to mention legislation as one of the main factors in 19th century realist narrative, beginning with the very basic fact that when a woman married she lost her citizenship to become part of her husband's legal persona under coverture. Indeed, in cases of adultery, most European husbands (I assume that American, too) could sue their wife's lover for damaged goods. If legislation is considered, and not only religious belief, social uses, or plain morality, 19th century fiction takes on a very different cast. In, for instance, *Great Expectations*, Dickens uses legislation abundantly to justify why Magwitch, a convict transported to Australia, cannot freely return to England, or why Pip loses Magwitch's legacy as his designated heir when the man is arrested. You need to do a little bit of digging, though, to understand that Estella's status as Miss Havisham's adoptive

daughter is quite unstable, and that it could have been contested at a court of law by the Pockett family, the adoptive mother's cousins. We generally find legislation a sort of extra background element when actually tragedies like that of *Anna Karenina* are caused by restrictive laws, and not, as we surmise, by passion out of control.

The most extreme legal reform is, of course, revolution. Reading *Anna Karenina*, particularly Levin's snobbish remarks against the muzhiks (or peasants) freed by Tzar Alexander II from serfdom only in 1861 (in parallel to Lincoln's liberation of blacks from enslavement) and the legal consequences of that liberation, I felt cruelly happy that his class were swept away by the Bolsheviks. I was surprised that communism is mentioned by Tolstoy, not having realised that it was already present in 1860s Russia. It's in many ways scary to see revolution lurking in the shadows, ready to do away with Imperial Russia, a feeling no minimally informed reader can miss. I'm no communist, but I understood with *Anna Karenina* why the Russian nobility elicited so much hatred, and what a miracle it was that communism didn't extend to many more countries in Europe, though I'm sure that in 1877, when he started writing this novel, Tolstoy had no idea this was a sort of Götterdämmerung, and good riddance to them all.

Now, I dare a contemporary novelist to write a great *literary* novel about the current upper classes, perhaps centred on Jeff Bezos's wedding in Venice last weekend and his guests. What an immense distance in feeling there is between Tolstoy's characters, even the most trivial, and the current vanity fair! And poor *Anna Karenina* and the bloody stupid legislation!

6 July 2025 / THE MEANING OF 'WORK': REFLECTIONS ON LABOUR

Last week I confessed my gradual loss of enthusiasm over *Anna Karenina*, a novel whose last sections I mostly skipped. This week I confess that I had a similar problem with Studs Terkel's *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (1974). This is a collection of over a hundred testimonials from US workers of all descriptions that Terkel, a non-academic oral historian, interviewed. The book is subdivided into nine sections, and if you're curious about the long list of occupations covered, you may check the details in the corresponding Wikipedia [article](#).

Although I find Terkel's book fascinating, at 700 pages it feels overlong, particularly because some of the testimonials are quite repetitive and/or could have been better introduced and edited. Some readers complain in GoodReads that *Working* is dated, but I didn't find it so; actually, I find this type of comment presentist and disrespectful of the persons Terkel interviewed. In fact, a striking feature of Terkel's non-fiction classic is that some occupations, such as waitressing or working on an assembly line, have changed very little in the last fifty years. Other jobs, of course, have been swept away by new technology (think of telephone operators); some of the inevitable changes, mostly caused by the introduction of computers, are accurately forecast in the testimonial of some white-collar workers.

Terkel is one of those larger-than-life US personalities that are not so well known outside the USA, in this case because his main medium was radio. There is an online archive with more than 2000 records of his conversations with guests [here](#). *Working* was a highly acclaimed book which followed on the heels of *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970). Both volumes were written with the same method, which

recalls to me what Victorian journalist Henry Mayhew did in *London Labour and the London Poor* (serialized in the 1840s and published in three volumes in 1851), with the difference that Terkel wanted to demonstrate the value of work rather than criticize its conditions. Terkel received a Pulitzer award in 1985 for *'The Good War': An Oral History of World War Two* (1984). His list of published work extends to many more volumes, including diverse books of memoirs. A man to (re)discover, then, for many in or outside the USA.

I'll start my reflection on the meaning of work with a quote from Steven Simonyi-Gindele, a Canadian entrepreneur and self-made man. When Terkel interviewed him, Simonyi-Gindele was the editor, together with founder Pat Garrard, of the magazine *The Capitalist Reporter* (later known as *Free Enterprise*), a publication aiming at giving readers tips to invest and develop their own businesses. In his LinkedIn [page](#), Simonyi-Gindele claims that when Terkel showed up at the magazines offices to interview him he had no idea who the man was. Simonyi-Gindele was then 26, a young man born in Hungary who had migrated with his parents to Canada after the 1956 revolution. Apparently, he started working aged nine doing a paper round; he soon abandoned school and by 21 was already a successful entrepreneur. Those were other times indeed.

Here's a key quotation from Simonyi-Gindele's interview: "This is a lie about meaningful work. It comes from teachers. Ph.D.'s who've never really worked. They feel they have a special knowledge to impose upon a lower being, who goes to work when he's thirteen or fifteen and settles down, and goes forward... If I've done my best, I find my work meaningful. If I haven't done as well as I could, I don't find it meaningful. I don't think my work is any more important than a man sweeping the streets. It's important to me only because it provides my livelihood. Whether it's important to society only time will tell" (original ellipsis). I see here two points of tension. On the one hand, Simonyi-Gindele wants to stress that those with an academic education do not understand the meaning of work, while he does; on the other hand, though he claims that his job and that of the street sweeper have the same importance, he does want society to consider his job more important.

Now consider the following. On 28th June, Montserrat A., a 51-year-old employee of Barcelona's street cleaning services, died of a suspected heatstroke in the middle of the worst heatwave ever registered in the city (she worked that day sweeping the tourist-full streets of the Gothic Quarter, from 14:30 to 21:30). Apparently, she warned her supervisor that she was feeling poorly, but was told to take a cold drink and continue working. She died shortly at home. The town council reacted, not too quickly, forcing the four companies under contract to apply cautionary measures at 34° degrees (yellow alert) rather than 37° (orange alert). Workers will be finally allowed to take a five-minute break every hour to drink. This means that up to Montserrat's death, workers were expected to work, without stopping to hydrate themselves, in temperatures which, considering Barcelona's very high humidity, are totally inadequate to walk the streets, never mind working in them.

I think we all agree that the workers who clean our streets do fundamental work, as we see when they go on strike (or, sadly, die). The difference between 'meaningful' and 'non-meaningful' employment is not, however, the importance of each occupation, but the degree of bodily and mental harm to which each worker is subjected. And this is connected with the opportunity for choice. Simonyi-Gindele is a classic example: he has had a few very humble jobs and because he had the talent for self-promotion, he pulled

himself by the bootstraps to eventually become a successful man, and an employer. Persons like him are still subjected to disease (many executives die of heart attacks, as we know) but they will not pass away after sweeping the city streets in the middle of a heatwave. The persons subjected to that kind of danger, or similar, in this and many other occupations simply have no choice.

I myself could choose, not without important conflicts about the meaning of work. My mother had been employed between 14 and 22 in diverse companies doing basic admin work; she wanted to pursue professional training, and perhaps, a secondary education, but my grandparents decided to invest their scant resources on my uncle. I vowed to myself this would not happen to me, though I could not imagine at 14 that I would attend university. At that point I just wanted to attend secondary school. My father was employed in diverse printing companies, between the ages of 14 and 57, when he was made redundant and offered early retirement. He used to work from 7:00 to 15:00 in a noisy printer's shop, and never reconciled himself with his schedule or the need to work. He would play the football pools (the 'quiniela') and every Sunday afternoon he would tear the betting slip, for he never won anything, and bemoan he had to go to work the following morning.

My siblings and I grew up thinking that work was a terrible thing, until we made our own choices. My father's negative attitude to work (he was dutiful but grouchy) was a great incentive to build our own careers. My two brothers are self-employed, and I am, as you know well, a tenured academic. My father never accepted that our jobs are work because, unlike him, we don't have to wake up at 6:00 AM or spend eight hours a day managing a machine. I myself had doubts about academic work until I heard my amazing Literature teacher in secondary school, Sara Freijido, describe the tiredness I felt after studying for hours as the result of work. I thought that only people who, like my father, were bodily tired after doing hard work could claim they were real workers. People mentally tired were, for me, just impostors. At heart, I still think that we are.

Terkel set out to demonstrate the dignity of jobs many people look down upon. Famously, waitress Dolores Dante defended before him her choice to be a waitress and herself from her patrons' attitude: "People imagine a waitress couldn't think or have any kind of aspiration other than to serve food. When somebody says to me, 'You're great, how come you're just a waitress?' Just a waitress. I'd say, 'Why, don't you think you deserve to be served by me?' It's implying that he's not worthy, not that I'm not worthy. It makes me irate. I don't feel lowly at all. I myself feel sure. I don't want to change the job. I love it." This is beautiful, but I'm not sure that many workers in the hospitality business feel this way, or that all patrons are capable of sympathizing with Dolores' stance. Many workers Terkel interviewed are content like her, and I mean employees of all types, but many are unhappy, disliking jobs in which they are just replaceable cogs in the machine, especially on assembly lines. Workers in 'meaningful' occupations might think that those trapped in repetitive, mind-numbing, body-harming jobs have no ability to analyze their situation or articulate a critique of their employers, but Terkel demonstrates this is not the case. If they are generally ignored or silenced, this is because we hush anything that might smack minimally of Marxism, given the very negative historical record of this ideology.

If you think that work is part of today's general conversation, you're wrong. There is abundant talk about unemployment and precariousness, and of how migrants are taking the jobs nobody else wants, but we don't really talk about our jobs and how we

feel about them. In what passes for literary fiction today (and in cinema or series), most characters have careers, rather than jobs, and what they do for a living is hardly ever discussed. An interesting exception is *The Bear*, which focuses on a restaurant, but it's hard to imagine similar shows about other types of business. Out of sight, out of mind.

As for my own job, if Terkel had interviewed me I would have said that Simonyi-Gindele was very wrong and unfair when saying that teachers have “never really worked” and lie “about meaningful work.” From kindergarten to doctoral tutoring, teachers prepare students for employment, and do hard work. The problem is that today, in 2025, very few people believe that work is meaningful; it's understood, rather, as a necessity which gives employers huge power over our lives.

We need, then, more books (or websites, or whatever!) like Terkel's *Working* to raise awareness about what people must do at least eight hours a day and which choices are open to us, to demand better ones. For everyone.

13 July 2025/ (DON) JUANITO SANTA CRUZ: THE SEDUCER AS MINOR CHARACTER IN *FORTUNATA Y JACINTA*

In this summer of very long books, I have re-read with great pleasure Benito Pérez Galdós's masterpiece *Fortunata y Jacinta: dos historias de casadas* (1887), a novel certainly far superior to Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*, but still not hailed as the universal classic it should be. Blame for this a certain prejudice against Spanish literature and the difficulties to faithfully translate Galdós's luscious prose.

Galdós, an admirer of Dickens, is, arguably, closer in his fiction to Balzac, having built his own human comedy: a very dense network of interconnected characters and novels along 80 published works, 46 of them the famous series of the *Episodios Nacionales*. His realism, which is not as close to naturalism as that of his close friend and lover Emilia Pardo Bazán, is unashamedly *costumbrista*, reflecting all social classes. This made the 1898 proto-Modernist Spanish generation of younger writers dislike Galdós's oeuvre, which they unfairly panned. His *castizo* style, intended to reflect as closely as possible the mentality of his characters has, nonetheless, aged very well and is one of the main features of the novel I comment on here today.

Fortunata y Jacinta was published in four volumes between January and June 1887 and is part of the cycle of 21 novels set in Madrid that Galdós himself called *Novelas españolas contemporáneas* (1881-1889). This novel is set between December 1869 and April 1876, which corresponds historically to the period between the Glorious Revolution (1868) by which Queen Isabel II exiled herself after the coup by generals Prim, Serrano y Topete, and 1874, when the monarchy was restored in the person of her son Alfonso XII (after the failed reign of Amadeo de Saboya, 1870-73 and the brief first Spanish Republic). In 1876 a new Constitution was established, under a bipartisan system, with the new chambers of the Congreso de los Diputados and the Senate. Galdós alludes to all these events, but his focus is the triangle formed by posh Juanito Santa Cruz, his low-class lover Fortunata and his wife Jacinta.

I have chosen to write on Emilia Pardo Bazan's *Los pazos de Ulloa* and *La madre naturaleza* for my book on secondary characters, wishing to make room for a woman author. I'm therefore using my post to discuss the secondary character I would have focused on if I had selected Galdós instead. *Fortunata y Jacinta*, like most 19th-century

novels has a very large cast of secondary characters, not all of them strictly necessary for the plot, whose backstories and personality quirks Galdós loves to discuss through his unnamed narrator (a direct acquaintance of most, if not all, of them). Upper-class idler Juanito Santa Cruz is absolutely essential for the plot, for his seduction of strikingly beautiful Fortunata sets the ball rolling. Yet, at the same time, he receives far less attention than other minor characters, to the point that Galdós robs readers of the final scene in which his wife Jacinta announces to him, after discovering Fortunata's sad fate, that sex between them is over. Oddly, Galdós offers a report rather than the full dialogue.

I assumed that many Spanish scholars had already looked into Juanito's condition as a rather blurred, or stereotyped, character compared with the rest of the cast and I found that Galdós's seducer is usually read as a late 19th-century descendant of Don Juan. Funnily, this hadn't occurred to me because Juanito soon becomes a husband in the novel, and I don't connect Don Juan to marriage (at least, not to his own.) Josefina Acosta de Hess and Alicia G. Andreu (see the reference list) have explored most directly this association between Juanito and Don Juan, but I'm citing here mainly José Luis Eugercios Arriero's comparative essay "Cortesianos del Amor Pretérito: Otra Vuelta sobre el 'Donjuanismo' de Álvaro Mesía y Juanito Santa Cruz," which connects Clarín's *La Regenta* (1884-5) and *Fortunata y Jacinta*. A comment by Eugercios led me to Vernon A. Chamberlain's gossipy article, which claims that Juanito is based on Juan Valera, a fellow Spanish author Galdós disliked very much and who was known for his reckless womanizing.

Eugercios's thesis is that Clarín and Galdós had difficulties to turn their respective Don Juan into substantial characters because the passage from drama to the novel, from verse to prose, and the need for a "very specific social contextualization" (100) hinder their characterization. Juanito is the only son and heir of a wealthy bourgeois family, so rich that he can afford to live in complete idleness in his parents' home, which he does not leave even when he marries his cousin Jacinta, thanks to a match made by his mother. According to Eugercios, and I do agree, Juanito is, in view of this situation, almost anachronistic. Galdós cannot explain what Juanito does once he graduates in Law, and so he says nothing, making his readers believe that his wife and his parents never ask how he spends his days away from home, which is partying hard and having bought and stolen sex. Acosta de Hess defined him as a flat character (1988: 77), and I agree that there is no progression in his personality; his narrative arc deals basically with his sexuality, which he starts exploring in his early youth with Paris classy prostitutes and that he is still enjoying at the end of the novel with yet another mistress, with whom he cheats both on Jacinta and on Fortunata.

Eugercio argues that Juanito combines in his characterization Galdós's penchant for "dramatismo folletinesco" (or, sensationalism) and his interest in exposing the damage done by the bourgeoisie, yet Juanito is in any case "an archetype about to be superseded" (104). Eugercio finds fault, above all, with Juanito's inability to understand Fortunata's and Jacinta's growth as persons, once both open their eyes to his mistreatment. He, in contrast, is reduced from "Don Juan to donjuanito, a totally minor character overcome by history" (104). The gossipy article by Chamberlain I have mentioned explains why Juanito, no doubt the main villain among Galdós's mostly vile men, does not get his come-uppance, arguing that actually he is punished. According to Chamberlain (27), Galdós may have copied Juan Valera's fate. After five years of marriage, Valera was also expelled from his wife's bedroom, as all of Madrid knew. In a

letter of 1885, only two years before the publication of *Fortunata y Jacinta* (Valera's scandalous letters were freely circulated all over Madrid), Valera bemoaned the lack of a willing sexual partner in the years to come, when his sex appeal would necessarily wane and "it will be ridiculous and impossible to love outside home" (*Cartas íntimas* 266). Chamberlain's argument is quite good, but I still wished that Juanito would have been cast out of society and driven to exile, if possible to a place with no women.

Instead, Galdós chose to punish Fortunata, in a predictable but conservative turn of events which may have pleased his original readers but left me fuming, even though I already knew how the novel ends. Galdós spends 1400 pages (in the Castalia edition I have read) asking us to sympathize with Fortunata, who is rejected three times by Juanito and has two babies by him, only to satisfy Jacinta's wish to finally have a child by her husband, even if this is not hers but her rival's. Fortunata, we must believe, never loses her sexual passion for Juanito, despite his appalling ill-treatment, or her having to become a prostitute when he first deserts her. Jacinta is, likewise, in thrall to her husband's sexual prowess, despite knowing that he is a serial cheater. Only Fortunata's baby breaks that her enslavement, and this is why she is empowered to close her bedroom's door in Juanito's face.

The problem in this triangular scheme is that we need to accept with no textual evidence, in the absence of any sex scenes, that Juanito's bedroom skills are so good that these two intelligent women lose their heads over him. Fortunata may be forgiven, for she is illiterate and a daft romantic, but Jacinta knows Juanito (her cousin) very well since childhood. Instead of fine words, we get a collection of moments characterizing Juanito as a total cad. He seduces Fortunata by falsely promising her marriage, and silences Jacinta's complaints cynically with the same caresses he offers to other women, as she knows. Galdós often repeats that Juanito is guided by self-love rather than the conscience he lacks, but he totally stretches our suspension of disbelief when he has Fortunata surrender to Juanito so easily again and again, as soon as she sees him. For the novel to function, in short, we need to accept without question Juanito's bad boy personality, and assume Fortunata and Jacinta's absurd view that his mistresses rather than him must be blamed for his waywardness. I am willing to accept that a woman may feel deep sexual passion for a man, but Juanito, really? How come Galdós could not do any better? Or was that the whole point of his novel: that no man in all of Madrid deserves Fortunata and Jacinta?

I'll finish with a doubt: would *Fortunata and Jacinta* work in the present? As I wrote two posts ago, 19th-century fiction depends mostly for its plots on the legal issues that prevent women from behaving freely. Anna Karenina cannot divorce her husband, and nor can Jacinta divorce Juanito; Fortunata tries but fails to convince anyone that, since she has had two children by him, she's Juanito's 'legal' wife. My query has to do, rather, with class. I wonder if there is in Spain a novelist who could narrate with as much talent as Galdós possessed how sexuality crosses class barriers. Are there still posh seducers from Madrid's rich neighbourhoods lying their way into the beds of Fortunata's current equivalents? Are there still Jacintas putting up with their handsome husbands' serial philandering? Would a 2025 retelling of *Fortunata y Jacinta* soar high above soap opera? Is Juanito still very much alive? So many questions...

Please, read Galdós. Any of his novels is worth a thousand we have in our current best-selling fiction lists. I'm begging you for your own good.

References

- Josefina Acosta de Hess, *Galdós y la novela de adulterio*. Madrid: Pliegos, 1988.
- Alicia G. Andreu, "Juanito Santa Cruz en diálogo con el mito de don Juan." *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 42 (1989): 3–18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30203199>
- Vernon A. Chamberlain, "Juan Valera y la caracterización de Juanito Santa Cruz en *Fortunata y Jacinta*." Actas del IX Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas, Berlín, Frankfurt am Main, Vervuert: 1989: 1237–1242. <https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/juan-valera-y-la-caracterizacion-de-juanito-santa-cruz-en-fortunata-y-jacinta/>
- José Luis Eugercios Arriero, "Cortesanos del Amor Pretérito: Otra Vuelta sobre el «Donjuanismo» de Álvaro Mesía y Juanito Santa Cruz" *Beoiberística* 2.1 (2018): 99-112, <https://beoiberistica.fil.bg.ac.rs/index.php/beoiberistica/article/view/37>

22 July 2025 / WHY VICTORIAN NOVELS ARE SO LONG (AND WHY WE LACK PATIENCE TO READ THEM)

You might think that Victorian novels are so long because of their serialization in weekly or monthly instalments, sold either as part of periodical publications or independently. However, this business practice, introduced by Charles Dickens's publisher, Chapman, with the serialization of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (19 instalments between March 1836 and November 1837) was preceded by an equally successful tactic to expand the word count of novels: the three-decker. Walter Scott's *Kennilworth* (1821), published by Archibald Constable, was the first novel to appear in three volumes, at the astonishingly high price of 1 ½ guineas (current £221 or €257).

The idea behind the three-decker was to attract readers to circulating libraries, which charged a fee for each volume (as the now defunct video-rental outlets used to do for each film). This means, of course, that the profit obtained from a novel multiplied by three with its publication in three volumes. The idea itself of the circulating library seems to have been the brainchild of Allan Ramsay, who opened the first one in 1725, in Edinburgh. Bookseller Charles Mudie's famous circulating library appeared twenty-one years after Scott and Constable's pioneering three-decker, being founded in 1842, and was responsible for its dominance until 1894, when the business collapsed. What caused this failure was the nationwide generalization of the public libraries network (the Public Library Act was passed in 1850 in the UK) and the problem of what to do with the best-selling titles that briefly flared up and quickly went out of fashion, finding no buyer for its expensive three-decker editions. W.H. Smith adapted better to the new times, managing to keep its circulating library, founded in 1860, in business for 100 years until 1961. Serialization, which usually led to publication as a single volume, fared better than the three-decker.

There had been very long novels already before the introduction of the three-decker and of serialization in instalments. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady*, the longest novel in English at roughly 950000 words, was originally published between 1747 and 1748 in seven volumes. It is not, however, to be considered a heptalogy like *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) but a very long novel (well, possibly *Harry Potter* is also a very long novel in seven volumes!). In novel series, such as for instance

Ian Rankin's John Rebus police procedural series, each volume is supposed to be independent, though, of course, the reading experience is enriched if you know the previous volumes.

Serialization in the style of Dickens and three-decker publication, both usually illustrated, were practically abandoned at the turn of the 20th century, to be superseded in the 1950s with the modern non-mimetic trilogy (though literary mimetic novel series continued with, for instance Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Times*, 12 novels, 1951-1975). This was a bit of an accident, since J.R.R. Tolkien's publishers, Allen & Unwin, refused to publish his novel *The Lord of the Rings* as a single 1000-page volume, because of the high printing costs and the post-WWII scarcity of paper in the UK.

Since splitting it into three volumes was cheaper, we know Tolkien's long novel today as a trilogy formed by *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), *The Two Towers* (1954) and *The Return of the King* (1955). The later success of Isaac Asimov's original *Foundation* trilogy, composed by *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire* (1952) and *Second Foundation* (1953), consolidated the presence of trilogies and series in genres such as science fiction, fantasy, YA novels, detective fiction or romance. Since the 1980s, stand-alone novels have become less habitual in these genres, though they still are the main staple of literary fiction. You might say that current publishers have returned to the three-decker, though for direct sales rather than subscription to circulating libraries.

Here's the question: do the very long novels of the past operate under the same narrative principles as the very long novels of today? Are three-deckers essentially the same as Tolkien-style trilogies? Are current novel series similar to the multi-volume *Clarissa*, or to Dickens's serialized novels? The answer is yes and no. I dare anyone to make sense of this very complex panorama.

In essence, very long narratives can only be sustained on the basis of plenty of incidents and/or a large cast of characters. Unfortunately, my argumentation today has a huge gap in it because I have not read Marcel Proust's seven-volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927, around 1.2 million words), and I cannot say what sustains it. What I have noticed reading Tolstoj, de Queirós, Pardo Bazán and Galdós recently is that their very long novels have quite simple central plots but are extended to occupy hundreds of pages by introducing many secondary characters with a relatively marginal importance, and even no impact on the main plot. There is also abundant description of persons, places, and objects. Dialogue is full of very long speeches that do not correspond at all to the way people do speak, either now in the 21st century or back in the 19th. From this perspective, Tolkien is, arguably, a late Victorian writer rather than a post-Modernist, as he should be considering his biography. Reading *The Lords of the Rings* is an experience closer to reading Dickens (even Eliot or Trollope) than to reading D.H. Lawrence or Virginia Woolf.

My argument must be obvious by now: the literary 19th century novel—to distinguish it from the French *feuilleton*, the serialization in newspapers of plot-driven melodrama such as Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1842-3) or Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844-46)—is character-driven, even when it is full of incident, as it happens in Dickens. In the 1880s shorter works, such as Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) or R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and many others, changed the pace dramatically, as part of the late Victorian current that led eventually to the far more concise novels of the 20th and 21st centuries sold in a single volume (yes, I know that Joyce's *Ulysses*, published in 1922, and initially serialized, is

262869 words long, more than 700 pages). Character is still consistently built, but the casts are radically reduced, and so are their descriptions and backstories. Everything, in short, becomes more concise and to the point, as usual with exceptions.

The Lord of the Rings is, so that you know, 481103 words long. What happens after the 1950s, then, when Tolkien reshapes the very long Victorian novel is that its internal logic stops being dominated by the external logic of the publisher in search of the three-decker. There is a world of difference between narrating in 1000 pages what could have been narrated in 400 if the cast of minor characters and description had been minimized, and coming up with dense stories that require immense word counts because they are full of incident (being perhaps closer to the *feuilleton*).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien is still using slow-paced Victorian literary narrative techniques, but by the time we get to, say, to Ken Follett's historical novel *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989) the old codes have been replaced with the fast-moving styles mainly borrowed from cinema and TV (but read Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*, published between 1895 and 1896, and you can see classic Hollywood already lurking among its pages). My guess is that the film and TV adaptations of the Victorian novels are essential in this process: the production design and the actors' looks absorb much of the description; dialogue is pared down to suit the pace of audiovisual production, and the less essential subplots are trimmed off. We may still get large casts of characters, but the Victorian narrative clutter has been swept away, forcing writers to structure plots as bursts of fast dramatic action. The result is that in the 21st century we feel more comfortable reading fantasy sagas that run to thousands of pages than *Middlemarch* (319402 words, about 900 pages).

I have not yet mentioned the content of the novels. 19th-century fiction, excepting Gothic and adventure, is in love with realism, a tendency that reaches an extreme morbid low with Zola's naturalism, a current that is often extremely classist rather than critical of social marginalization. The Victorian reader was given a choice between the thwarted passions of the upper and upper-middle classes, with no second thought for how their lifestyles were sustained by the working classes, or plunged into the degraded lives of these labouring individuals in the naturalist novels. The plots, as I have been arguing here, often depend on legal, moral or religious rules that are now obsolete. It takes, in short, much good will on the reader's side to engage for many hours in the conflicts of persons we would probably dislike in real life, supposing they didn't exclude us from their circles. Clearly, if Jane Austen is today everyone's favourite 19th century writer, this is because her narrative style is so uncluttered and concise, so un-Victorian, never mind that most of us would hardly be candidates to be on Pemberley's guest list.

To us, Victorian fiction seems as cluttered as the style of décor Victorians favoured in their homes, which is why we grow impatient with them. In contrast, our fictions have been decluttered to make room for action and are much faster paced, even when they are long. When I take a long Victorian novel, like Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1), I must be ready to cope with a torrent of description, dialogue, authorial comment, characters' introspection, usually concealing very carefully a shrill melodramatic skeleton (idiot girl inherits a fortune and stupidly marries a scoundrel). In an equally long contemporary novel, the same elements can appear but are reduced to 10% of the space they used to occupy, which makes the reading far lighter but forces authors to pack them with far more incident. It's, then, relatively unsurprising that our longest novels are the ones in the non-mimetic genres, where writers can let their

imagination fly (or *must*, after signing contracts for trilogies). In mimetic, realist fiction, in contrast, the writers' imagination and, above all, the capacity to vividly portray character, has waned, leaving us with pallid reflections of life, which only light up when the old Victorian narrative techniques are imitated, or Modernist-style introspection is put to good use.

So, overall, the Victorian three-decker is not the same as the post-post-Modern genre trilogy, not even when they have the same exact word count. We have grown used to fictions full of incident and action, possibly because of the influence of cinema and TV series, which has eroded our patience with description, authorial comment and introspection. Our characters don't think much, or have shallow thoughts supposed to be representative of today's life, which is likewise shallow. This makes for faster reading, which explains the popularity of trilogies and series today, and our impatience with most 19th century novels, which seem to us unnecessarily loaded with clutter, no matter how brilliant that can be.

28 July 2025 / OMINOUS PROPOSALS: AI-DEPENDENT STUDENTS CANNOT BE OUR EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS

Today I'm reading an [article](#) by, I quote, "Mary Curnock Cook CBE, who chairs the Dyson Institute and is a Trustee at HEPI, and Bess Brennan, Chief of University Partnerships with Cadmus, which is running a series of collaborative events with UK university leaders about the challenges and opportunities of generative AI in higher education." HEPI (The Higher Education Policy Institute, 2020) is a key educational think tank, they explain, "UK-wide, independent and non-partisan. We are funded by organisations and universities that wish to see a vibrant higher education debate as well as through our own events."

The article is called "From AI prohibition to integration – or why universities must pick up the pace," and you can see from the title where it is going. It's a summary of the [Teaching and Learning Forum](#) by Cadmus and King's College of June 2025, about "the mismatch between the pace of technological and social change facing universities and the slow speed of institutional adaptation when it comes to AI." I'm not going to repeat the main ideas we are all familiar with, but, basically, the forum dealt with the situation we have been facing in the last two and a half years: students are massively using AI, and this has forced us to change our approach to assessment, with a far closer focus on classroom exercises, away from the internet.

The generative AIs (or, rather, LLMs) are, besides, multiplying, with ChatGPT being now accompanied by Claude, Copilot, Gemini and DeepSeek. Anthropic's Claude for Education, "which helps students by guiding their reasoning process, rather than simply providing answers," seems as scary as the rest, if not more. There was in the forum a general acknowledgement that the introduction of generative AI into higher education has been forced by students, and not at all a choice we, the teachers, would have freely embraced. The change, besides, has been very quick, giving us hardly any time to react. There are references in the article to Birmingham City University's Cadmus implementation ("saving 735.2 hours of academic staff time while improving student outcomes") as a success story. [Cadmus](#), which ran this forum, is a private platform that promises to improve assessment avoiding LLMs. It seems to be a few steps ahead of

Moodle, as the ultimate tool in digitalising assessment. As if we teachers no longer knew how to collect exercises and grade them.

I'd like to focus on the three recommendations from the forum that the article gathers. The first one, is "Address systemic inequalities, not just assessment design," which seems plain common sense. Digital media are giving an advantage to the more privileged students that have access to updated computers and smartphones, the required bandwidth, and so on. The ones who lack these tools suffer from, attention!, 'digital poverty.' Second suggestion: "Reduce high-stakes assessment." Another common-sense suggestion: "reduce reliance on high-stakes exams in favour of diverse and more authentic assessment methods." I'm surprised by this because, precisely, the problem with generative AI has surfaced because, in the last fifteen years since the implementation of the ECTS-based degrees, we have been generally replacing exams with other types of exercises done at home.

Now, here's the suggestion that bothers me: "Co-create with students as partners." I'm quoting: "Students are driving the pace of change – they are already using AI. They need to be partners in designing solutions, not just recipients of policies." The action recommended is "Involve students in co-designing assessments, rubrics and AI policies. Create bi-directional dialogue about learning experiences and empower students to share learning strategies. Build trust through transparency and genuine partnership." So that you understand my position, in my MA classes I have totally delegated to students the responsibility for their assessment. They have a rubric and they can rate their performance. If they exaggerate their merits, then I intervene, but this has been unnecessary so far. In my BA classes, I used to ask students to rate their classroom participation mark, also on the basis of a rubric. I speak in the past because I did that with my second-year students. Now that I'm teaching fourth year, I'm using a completely different model for classroom participation, which needs my input, but that I'm willing to rethink with them.

So, yes, students ARE my partners, if only because I cannot teach if they don't want to collaborate with me. They can even rate my performance in the semestral surveys though, as my school knows very well because of my constant protests, said surveys need to be modified so that they reflect the opinion of the whole class and not only the 30% who bothers to fill them in, and who, in some cases do not even attend the sessions. Despite the power that rating surveys have placed in the students' hands, and that may affect our obtaining our five-yearly salary supplement for quality teaching, higher education is *not* designed to be a full, equal partnership. The power imbalance on which assessment depends cannot be done away with, though it can be reduced.

Yet, what bothers me most is not assessment, but pedagogy. For me, the idea that students' opinions on how they should be educated has the same weight as the teachers' is not acceptable. I know that some of my former teachers, particularly in secondary school, could be smirking if they read this because I was the kind of cocky student always protesting against exams, which I have hated with a passion all my life. I do believe that students must express their opinion about assessment, if they find it unfair, biased, or faulty in any way, but I'm not willing to accept impositions.

The use of generative AI is an imposition, an implicit one that is becoming explicit with the collusion of the universities under pressure from think tanks and businesses. This follows from the imposition of lower standards, which we have gradually agreed to, as well. I refer to the resistance to reading, which we have meekly accepted as a sign of

the times and of our obsolescence as Literature teachers. We have been reducing our reading lists and now we're caving in to the use of generative AI. There is nothing beyond this, except the death of the Humanities.

I had a disagreement on BlueSky with the very friendly Prof. Jon Jackson (@iamjonjackson.bsky.social), Senior Lecturer in Software Engineering and Management of Queen Mary's University in London. He actually recommended the article I've been commenting on. I wrote that "Students are not driving the pace of change - they are imposing their misuse of AI and destroying key practices in learning and research. At least the lazier students. The more motivated are not happy with the use of AI, either. Why this total connivance??" He replied that although in "Language, literature, and the arts for example, I totally get how GenAI can be viewed as a scourge + an affront to the dignity of human creativity" in software engineering the more motivated students "will (and should) have a very different view on GenAI compared to students of English literature, for example. Context is super important..." I ended our brief exchange agreeing that, yes, context is key, this is why the use of AI feels like a frontal attack against the Humanities.

There is no way, then, I can see an advantage in collaborating with students to decide how they can use AI for assessment in the English Literature classroom specifically. It would be tantamount to collaborating in the obliteration of the academic practices I've been defending for most of my life, since I was a secondary education student dreaming of being a university teacher. Other revolutions in academic life, introduced by the gradual digitalization of catalogues, databases, and texts, have been shared by students and teachers alike, and have improved our work in and outside the classroom. Indeed, we teachers know that we are far more proficient at finding secondary sources and information online than our students, for, naturally, we have more practice. What generative AI has brought into higher education has nothing to do with improvement, but plenty with destruction of our thinking processes and I will not accept it.

I'm not a digital Taliban, and I do see the advantages of using generative AI in some fields and for some purposes. Since Google introduced Gemini, I find myself checking doubts and information, yet in a way slightly more advanced than by simply using Google itself. I have asked ChatGPT occasionally about primary and secondary sources. I have not, however, used LLMs to write or correct my texts, grade students exercises, write book reviews or do peer reviewing and, in short, anything that requires the use of my thinking abilities. I read yesterday a comment by a student noting that she'd rather have an AI grade her exams, for teachers get tired as they grade and become noticeably unfair after a few hours. Imagine, however, a situation in which the student writes the exercises using ChatGPT and teachers, glad to use their time for research, also use ChatGPT for marking. How is that acceptable pedagogy? What kind of twisted educational collaboration is this?

I always tell my students that using ChatGPT is like having a friend help you with your essays and that might be in the end a key issue. Jeremy Ettinghausen, a teacher who has [explored](#) the 12000 questions three of his (male) students had asked ChatGPT over 18 months came to the conclusion that these three students, who "are not friendless loners" are "typing into the void with only an algorithm to keep them company." They "are increasingly turning to computers to answer the questions that they would once have asked another person. ChatGPT may get things wrong, it may be telling us what we

want to hear and it may be glazing us, but it never judges, is always approachable and seems to know everything. We've stepped into a hall of mirrors, and apparently we like what we see." ChatGPT and other AIs are causing what my good friend Carme Torras called a 'sentimental mutation' in her eponymous novel (translated as *The Vestigial Heart*). Carme, a robotics engineer, imagined a humanity weakened by dependence on ubiquitous robotic assistants provided with AI. We have now the basic AI, and I wouldn't be surprised if it soon jumps from the smartphone or the laptop into the humanoid robotic companions.

I don't want to collaborate with AI-dependent students on assessment, but I'm open to suggestions from those who resist AI and see how its misuse is destroying the Humanities. I will insist on the word 'misuse', for there are indeed positive ways to use AI. The question is that these positive ways should always exclude replacing human intellectual and artistic creativity. AI should help us, not replace us.

4 August 2025 / VISION AND SUPPORT: WHAT PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS CAN DO TO SUPPORT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

This is a report of the 'Vision and Support Session', an open discussion held last week, on 30 July, within the Science Fiction Research Association conference, "Trans People are (in) the Future: Queer and Trans Futurity in Science Fiction" (University of Rochester, New York), a conference which lasted until yesterday, August 3rd. The organizer of the panel was Chris Pak (Swansea University, UK) and the participants were Ida Yoshinaga (Georgia Institute of Technology), Isiah Lavender III (University of Syracuse), David Higgins (Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide) and myself (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona).

I was the accidental originator of the panel, having asked Chris Pak (the current SFRA Vice-President) in one of our international delegates meetings what we could do as a professional association to protect all our members from the unwanted attention of the US authorities. Chris decided to set up the session to start the ball rolling and gather ideas. Please, note that the main concern we addressed is the implementation of anti-DEI policies, but that the name itself of the session does not include this term to prevent any attempt at censorship.

I opened the panel with a statement that I'm not going to reproduce here in full, but whose main ideas are the following. First, the US Government is trying to implement anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) policies beyond the US borders, for instance by withdrawing funds from cultural exchange activities and trying to control their content. Second, the impact of anti-DEI policies affects scholars worldwide, as we publish in US journals and with US publishing houses that might start rejecting our work, very often focused on identity issues. International collaboration is, then, at risk. What I proposed to curb this situation is that we, SFRA members (and the members of any other professional academic association) inform each other about any grievances through social networks (I recommend BlueSky), in conferences, through an observatory that the SFRA web could run, and using the *SFRA Review* to write opinion pieces, and to discuss, review and recommend works that are openly pro-democracy and anti-fascist.

I'll add that self-censorship is our main enemy and this is why it's important that we express our opinions, despite having the certainty that any online media is subjected

to Government surveillance (yes, BlueSky included). The other main enemy is, in my view, denial. My impression is that many US citizens are still denying that US democracy has already been severely compromised and no longer deserves that name because of the many grievous, illegal cases that are becoming common and are being normalized. This denial has its roots in the impression that fascism cannot rise in the USA as it has risen in many other countries, including my native Spain under Franco. This is why it's crucial to be aware of what has happened in these other countries, as the historical pattern is, basically, the same one.

David Higgins defended groundedness, and grounded practices in teaching and research, warning that the far right movements, with their perverse reading of civil rights law, have appropriated abstractions that used to be defended by the left (for me, 'freedom' is the main one). He also warned that even though community action is paramount, we need to consider carefully the use of street action, which might fuel the violent response of the far right in and out of Government. David recommended reformulating the use of language to give cover to our activities (as the title of our panel did), including in scholarly meetings hybrid online options that open up dialogue without the need for travel and the risks this might entail now, and working on mentorship that leads to better connections between individuals and better techniques of solidarity. David, in short, counselled that we proceed tactfully and, I would add, through better networking.

David Higgins also suggested that SFRA members expand the paradigm of research as we know it, making it less dependent on the traditional university framework. As an example of this trend, I mentioned the work my co-editor Mariano Martín and myself do with the journal *Hélice*, which is not associated to any university and that Mariano, an independent scholar, funds himself at a very low cost (the hosting of our website). Later, in the Q&A segment, there was a call to widen our horizons and start publishing with other academic presses, beyond the omnipresent ones.

Isiah Lavender III started his intervention by presenting himself as a scholar who has benefitted in his thirty years as a student of English from policies aimed at undoing inequality. He stressed his African-American identity, a point I would like to stress as well because two other members of the panel, Chris and Ida, are of Asian descent and spoke as scholars directly under attack (so did I as a woman, though white). Isiah brought a humorous note into the debate by borrowing the slogan of the popular show *Survivor*, "outwit, outplay, outlast," as the motto that could help us navigate the new deep, dark waters. For him, we are already in survival mode, which is why re-reading texts such as Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* or Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* is important. These and other dystopian novels are now not just more or less valuable texts, but instructive handbooks for the present and the near future.

Ida Yoshinaga described the current situation as the beginning of a wave that, as she fears, might last for her whole lifetime. She endorsed David Higgins's proposal that we produce more grounded research, with more critical evaluation and less theory, and that we choose carefully our subjects (also for teaching), thinking of the current situation. Ida introduced a topic that resonated deeply with the audience: how do we define an archive and preserve knowledge when the labels we may attach to this archive are being erased? She also noted that the crisis of leadership is leading to weaknesses in organization, which is why we need to make an effort to circulate information. As Ida

defended, care, kinship, connection and empathy are on our side, and these are values that we must integrate into collective leadership.

The contributions from the members of the audience started with a comment on the matter raised by Ida regarding archives. A participant commented that many libraries are now using malicious compliance to protect the public's access to sources that must be preserved at all costs. Cataloguing, for instance, needs to bypass the newspeak now being imposed by the far right, with an alternative newspeak, though in my view (and thinking of the famous list of forbidden terms that cannot be used in applications for federal funding), I don't quite see how categories such as gender, race, LGBTQ+ and so on can receive an alternative, less 'blatant' denomination. This participant also mentioned the importance of word of mouth within the communities of readers, which, as I see it, should be already more active, forming perhaps private book clubs.

Another participant, a trans British person, suggested copying from the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (1981-2000) the habit of documenting action, with a view to, for instance, making documentaries. This is a strategy that, I will add, also helped very much AIDS activism (see for instance David French's book and documentary *How to Survive a Plague*). This conference participant also shared their worries that travelling to the USA from the UK could be problematic, being a trans person, and the new fear that on returning home they might be accused of collaborating with terrorism for supporting a now heavily chased pro-Palestinian organization. I'll add that our focus on the USA is perhaps making us miss the recent undemocratic legislation passed in the UK by Starmer's Labour Government. Sonja Fritzsche joined the conversation, asking, as I did, to consider other historical periods (such as Germany in the 1930s) and to avoid self-censorship. Another participant suggested that the SFRA website could host a podcast, with international participation for, as Isiah Lavender noted "what we're not saying is even scarier."

A member of the audience shared her "deep sense of shame" after having suppressed from her syllabus a segment on Palestine, following suggestions that this could be 'complicated' to teach. From the floor, Prof. Douglas Kilgore sent a potent warning about the need to defend key human values as intellectuals and citizens, for, I quote his words, "this is a war." He warned how compliance may quickly lead to complicity, often indulged in just to protect tenure. "How much risk," he asked, "are we willing to undergo?" Ida Yoshinaga argued, against Prof. Kilgore's comment, that not just tenure is at stake but a whole way of doing academic work. As I work in Europe, I'm often confused about what exactly is at stake, and this is the reply I got to my question: tenure and loss of jobs, yes, but also the defunding of teaching and research programmes into extinction, censorship, and, to cap all this, the arrest and deportation of students and teachers. All this is already happening. This is how dire the situation is.

In view of the panorama, it is perhaps too much to ask that the SFRA solves the huge problem of how to protect its members so that they can teach and do research as freely as until 2024. I believe that we need a solidarity network of all academic associations at an international level, with a common chart of rights, and common action aims. We, the SFRA members, have a very good knowledge of dystopia but perhaps what we need now is to study how it is destroyed and how utopia can be built. We are now witnessing the cancellation of the media and the public figures that oppose the current US regime, which in a way was to be expected. If powerful companies are bowing down

and critics of the regime are forced to step down, what can a handful of academics do? Well, let's think hard about it and act: it's urgent.

11 August 2025 / THE MATTER OF THE LENGTH OF CLASSES: SOME THOUGHTS

Duncan Yellowlees, PhD, (@dyellowlees.bsky.social), who presents himself as a researcher trainer, posted the following on BlueSky:

“Practical tips for maintaining an engaged audience that sooo many academics fail at:

- vary what they are listening to/focusing on
- make sure data is connected to context
- talk to them not at them
- give the impression you want to be there.”

I know he's addressing researchers presenting their work before an audience of peers (do they really need these tips!?), yet I replied “That's lovely, but the problem is that students are used to TikTok videos and their attention span is much shorter than it used to be. I teach 90-minute classes (a mixture of lecture and seminar) and they feel eternal to them and to me.” It occurs to me that we never talk about the length of classes, so this is my topic today.

To begin with, I'm uncertain about which vocabulary to use. In the Anglophone countries teachers deliver lectures (50' to 75') or teach seminars (1.5 to 3 hours, typically once a week). In Spain there is no such division. We are mostly expected to avoid lectures ('lecciones magistrales'), which are usually left for guests or special occasions, such as the academic year's inauguration. Instead, we are expected to use our twice- or three-weekly classroom sessions to teach a mixture of the lecture and the seminar, which we simply call 'clases'.

When I was a student back in the 1980s the classes I attended were one hour long, three days a week, for each subject (and they were 80% of them 'lecciones magistrales' without student participation, with no seminars at all). Then in the 1990s my school at UAB switched to two 90-minute classes a week per subject. In practice, we teach for 75 minutes, because we have a 10-minute courtesy margin between classes and because students start gathering their stuff 5 minutes before the hour, or earlier, whether we're done or not.

When the 90-minute format was introduced (possibly with the 1992 syllabus), the internet was still to be popularized, and there was no question about the stamina of teachers and the ability of students to remain interested throughout a long session. Progressively, however, this has changed, with some exceptions. In MA degrees it is not uncommon to have two- and even three-hour sessions, and I have taught three-hour sessions in the BA, in elective courses scheduled just once a week (that was NOT a good idea). I have also taught intensive Summer courses lasting one week, with five-hour daily sessions, but that was a chore!

The general rule is that the longer the session, the more time is wasted. If you meet your class three days a week for one hour, you can use about 150 of the 180 minutes. If you meet them for a single weekly session, the 180 minutes easily boil down to 130, because the 20-minute break usually becomes a 30-minute break and you still have a 10-minute delay at the beginning and the tired students abandoning the classroom 10 minutes before time is up. And, obviously, you need a magician's full bag

of tricks to keep students interested for three hours in a text, if what you teach is Literature.

The issue of students' boredom is as old as education itself, with the difference, as I have often noted here, that current students do not believe in keeping up appearances and show their boredom openly through facial expression and bodily posture. I read recently that the idea that students of all ages, except the very young, should sit up in silence and provide signs that they are listening goes against human nature, but it's also human nature for teachers to receive feedback. Call me old-fashioned, but I do expect silence (unless students talk to me), a body language and facial expression that indicate attention (no glassy eyes...), and a direct eye-to-eye look (a nice one, if possible). The problem is that students who, by the way, are sitting on awfully hard benches or chairs the whole morning, are losing the ability to respond in that way, or can only maintain it for, say, 15 minutes.

This is why our school suggested that we should change the focus of our sessions every 15 minutes. A 75-minute class, then, should consist of five parts. My niece is a student in another school of UAB, and she is always complaining that her teachers use the lecture format, very often boring students to death by basically reading from a PowerPoint the whole time, with no attempt to vary the pace of delivery or to follow the 15-minute rule. Some teachers just don't care that their students are bored, and simply assume that teaching is boring. Good for them, but I happen to get nervous when I see bored faces, and have tried, accordingly, to apply the 15-minute rule. But what five parts can one introduce in a Literature class in which the focus is close reading?

What I have done for many years is to use a first 15-minute segment for a brief PowerPoint presentation (in dialogue with the students) or to read from my booklets of selected essays, poems or scenes in key novels. Or both: Power Point and then the 'extra' reading, though I overheard students more than once complain that that was 'wasting' our time. The rest of the time (45 to 60 minutes) is taken up with close reading, with me proposing that we read and comment on six passages of about 10 lines (I bring to class twice as many, just in case I run out of passages to comment on). I may have the students work in pairs to read the passages and then comment on them together with the rest of the class, or work with the whole class. In years long gone, I often brought to class clips from film or TV adaptations of the novels I teach, but this takes plenty of time that now we need to read the texts. A 75-minute class can fly by very quickly if students have read the texts in advance, or at least the plot summaries, but since this is not happening time drags out endlessly, and 75 minutes feel like 150.

In my elective courses, I have students teach each other using 10-minute presentations usually after a mini-lecture of 20 minutes; their presentations are followed by debate, from the notes I make as they speak. This is a sort of improv-teaching, which I very much enjoy. Some students complain that they don't want to be taught by their peers but by me, but this is because they have a traditional understanding of teaching, lecture-based. I very much prefer this type of interaction, which is closer to the seminar. The difference is that I usually give each student different texts, or allow them to choose. I've taken this practice to the maximum degree in my fourth year compulsory subject, in which instead of presentations, students must talk to each other about the books they are reading (four different ones for each student). That worked well with 40 students last year, but I have no idea how it will work for 70!

In my fourth year class, I have subdivided the 75 minutes into two parts of 35 and 40 minutes. For the first part, I have three activities: a mini-lecture, reading from a text, and a general question for debate. In the second part, students talk to each other, usually with a different partner every 10 minutes. What happened as the course progressed was that students grew impatient with my 35 minutes, as I could see from their body language and reluctance to interact with me. They very much preferred the noisy interaction with their peers, which I designed for them to hear about as many books as possible.

My impression, taking into account my almost 34 years as a teacher, then, is that sessions should not last longer than 45 minutes, and that the students' actual attention span is about 30 at most. My own capacity to hold forth on a topic is also diminishing, not because I watch TikTok videos, but because, in general, life is now faster in 2025, than it was in 1991, when I started teaching. In conferences, plenary sessions now last for about 45, followed by Q&A; panels are usually 90 minutes long but are subdivided into 20-minute presentations followed by debate. When I am invited to speak, it's usually for 45 to 50 minutes followed by questions. It makes then, less and less sense to subject students to 75-minute sessions by a single speaker (the teacher!), though I can well imagine what a hassle it would be to have students move from classroom to classroom every 30 minutes (lab practice, of course, is quite another matter).

I'm going back to Duncan Yellowlees's advice to researchers, which concludes with "give the impression you want to be there." I do want to be in class building up students' knowledge, but to be perfectly honest, I'm feeling increasingly embarrassed by the obligation to fill in the 75 minutes of each session. It's awkward for me and for them. I'm losing the ability to anticipate what will interest them and for how long, so that now I bring to class twice as many items for discussion (if I plan for three, I bring six). If a class is interested in a topic, discussion could and should take up the whole session, but if they're not interested each single minute drags.

Yet, I hear no conversation about time management in my school or my university, possibly because we're all avoiding the subject for fear this will lead to a major rehaul of our schedules. Another issue to be faced, sooner or later. Time will tell!

CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE/LICENCIA



Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (by-nc-nd)

You are free: to Share—to copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions:

Attribution—You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Non-commercial—You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works—You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You're specifically forbidden to generate academic research and publications based on this paper, though you may quote from it.

If you wish to cite it, the correct **citation** is:

Martín Alegre, Sara. *The Joys of Teaching Literature, Volume 15, September 2024-August 2025*. Bellaterra: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2025. <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328>

Notice: For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. If in doubt, contact the author, Sara Martín Alegre (Sara.Martin@uab.cat)



Reconocimiento — NoComercial — SinObraDerivada (by-nc-nd): No se permite un uso comercial de la obra original ni la generación de obras derivadas.



Reconocimiento (Attribution): En cualquier explotación de la obra autorizada por la licencia hará falta reconocer la autoría.



No Comercial (Non commercial): La explotación de la obra queda limitada a usos no comerciales.



Sin obras derivadas (No Derivate Works): La autorización para explotar la obra no incluye la transformación para crear una obra derivada.

Se prohíbe específicamente generar textos académicos basados en este trabajo, si bien puedes citarlo. La referencia correcta sería:

Martín Alegre, Sara. *The Joys of Teaching Literature, Volume 15, September 2024-August 2025*. Bellaterra: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2025. <http://ddd.uab.cat/record/116328>

Nota: Para cualquier duda, ponerse en contacto con la autora, Sara Martín Alegre (Sara.Martin@uab.cat)

UAB

**Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona**