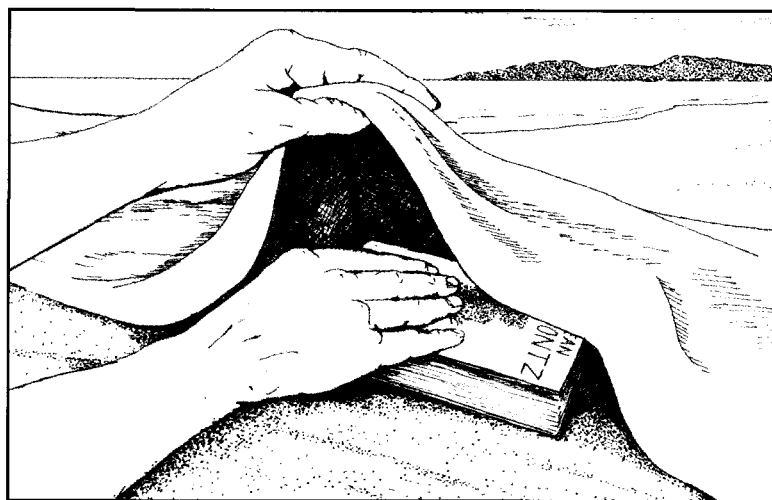


Literary Worth and Popular Taste

Taking Proust to the Beach

by Clay Reynolds



As an academic trained in the study and appreciation of literature, I have spent the better part of my life staunchly defending the ramparts of literary endeavor against the slings and arrows of outrageous pop-fiction lovers. I have steadily despaired of those who read Stephen King, Terry C. Johnston, Mary Higgins Clark, Danielle Steel, and their ilk. I said things like, “If you want a good ghost story, go read Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*. Edgar Allan Poe can’t be beat for a good thriller. A great Western is *The Last of the Mohicans*.” Then I would wait until my companion was out of earshot, switch my radio from NPR to my favorite C&W station, drive home, draw the shades, and curl up with a good Dean Koontz, Robert B. Parker, or Elmore Leonard novel. And I would tell no one about it, for I was terrified that someone might learn that, in my heart of hearts, I preferred schlock to art. After all, as a college professor, I was supposed to be an arbiter of great literature, not an enthusiastic fan of the “easy read.”

It took me a long time to come to terms with this, to understand that the problem lay in the elitism in which I had been trained. Like most of my colleagues, I wanted to be an arbiter of artistic worth, but I refused to admit to reading anything that did not have a canonical stamp of approval. I carried this attitude into my choice of other entertainments as well: plays, film, even television programming. By doing so, I was imitating my academic mentors, trying to fit my taste and sensibilities to those whose opinions I respected, whose aesthetic measuring sticks were hewn out of some solid scholarly notion of what is art and what is not. I wanted to be like them, and I desperately wanted

to reach a point where I could eschew popular fiction and look down on it with the same conviction that causes me to sneer whenever I am confronted with the latest television sitcom.

After all, I *never* watch commercial television. I *only* tune in PBS. Right.

I think, though, that I—and they—were missing the point. If we were sincere, we were also missing a lot of good reading and viewing. And as a professional writer, I finally began to realize and embrace an alternative point of view.

You see, it is not whether something is deemed to be literature that matters; it is the value of the canon that is at stake. But that value rests in the breadth of individual erudition, not in the depth. The reason people can read and appreciate something that is popular, even the latest ghost-written celebrity autobiography, and determine its worth is because they have read widely in the established literary tradition. They have experience with those works that have withstood the test of time, those that still speak to us today through their wisdom, beauty, and eloquence. These are the genuine standards by which anything new has to be measured. As educated readers, we have no other reliable source of arbitration.

But it is important to realize that many popular works are written by men and women who are themselves as well read as any stuffy academic. These writers are as sensitive to what creative-writing professors call “the elements of fiction”—character development, solid plot line, credible dialogue, and highly detailed settings—as are any of the literary giants of the canon. Indeed, it is in their adaptation of these admittedly amorphous principles of fiction composition that their success as writers is established and sustained. As T.S. Eliot and others have reminded us, all art depends on the established traditions of the

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individual talents of the past; or, to put it colloquially, where fiction is concerned, there is precious little “new under the sun.”

Even so, Eliot was not saying—nor am I—that everything written has to imitate or slavishly ape the past. Rather, those who decide whether a contemporary form has artistic merit should be measuring it against a standard of quality that a huge number of people over a long span of time have established by their patronage (if nothing else). But it is vitally important that readers be well read in the works that established that standard; otherwise, to put it in pure business terms, they are trying to assess the worth of something without knowing the parameters of the market.

This is where the dilution of the canon in the name of political correctness hurts. Dredging up works that have not sustained a readership over a period of time and touting them merely because of the identity of a writer erodes the standard. It suggests that works are valuable because of who wrote them, not because of their innate quality or originality, their staying power, and their capacity to excite and amaze successive generations of readers.

Finding previously ignored writers and adding them to the greater body of Western literature—heretofore, mostly a collection of Dead Old White Guys—is a worthy enterprise, so long as the critical standard applied to such works is the same that would be applied to a forgotten work by a Dead Old White Guy. Again, breadth is more important than depth. The problem is that some of the replacements for the works of DOWGs that one finds in anthologies are not as good—by a long shot—as the stuff that was taken out to make room for them.

Of course, one might argue that—traditional standards be damned—deciding what is “good” and what is not is a subjective process, often colored by the evaluators’ personal priorities. But that is precisely my point. If a reader decides that something is *ipso facto* “bad” merely because it appeals to a great many less-than-well-educated people, then hasn’t he applied the same sort of prejudice that may well have excluded some writers from the canon all along? Isn’t this the same sort of prejudice that kept the novel from achieving literary respect for nearly 200 years?

At the same time such novelists as Trollope and Thackeray and certainly Charles Dickens were penning their fiction with a close eye on what the public wanted to buy, numerous intellectuals and prominent citizens, including no fewer than two American presidents, proudly proclaimed that they had never read a novel and had no intention of doing so. In that era, the novel was rarely if ever taught as a literary form in universities, and the works of such writers as Balzac and Flaubert were kept hidden in public libraries, reserved only for those brave enough to ask for them by name. But the public called for more of the kind of thing that gratified its sensibilities and satisfied its reading appetites. This, I believe, is what led to the elevation of the novel to literary form by such writers as Henry James, Edith Wharton, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, as well as many others. William Dean Howells championed this cause from “The Editor’s Chair” for years. But at the same time Howells was promoting the popular novel, Henry James was castigating many of his American contemporaries (particularly Mark Twain) for pandering to low standards and base tastes. James wanted literary quality to be the arbiter of literary art; Howells understood that other appeals were required to sustain a readership.

But even the most common denominator of audiences demands literary quality. Today, when people attend a popular film or play, I think they are seeking the same quality they might find in *bona fide* literary works, more or less. It may be that they are merely seeking pure entertainment or escape, but there is ample literary effort in that vein, too. Much of Shakespeare is frivolous and escapist, and he was not afraid of the Elizabethan equivalent of blood-and-guts violence, gratuitous sex, and slapstick silliness. He was not writing for Oxford dons and delicate intellectual sensibilities but, by and large, for unwashed “groundlings” who paid a penny apiece to be entertained. And he was writing for a queen who had a remarkable sensitivity to good humor and sentimental love stories.

That his works have survived over four centuries is substantial proof that Shakespeare did what he did better than most, but he was not the only person of his time writing good stuff. Still, few of us would pay Broadway prices to see a revival of *Ralph Roister Doister* or *The Dutch Courtesan*, although they are both extremely funny, well-written plays. And consider this: If Shakespeare’s reputation rested entirely on *Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens*, or *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he probably would not have survived as a literary figure. Certainly his name would be no more familiar to most of us than are those of Beaumont and Fletcher or Thomas Marston.

The point is that every age has its *Laverne and Shirley* or *Brady Bunch*, or the comparatively easy humor of its *Seinfeld*, the romantic melodrama of its *Waltons*, and the marginally silly imaginative speculations of its *X-Files* or *Star Trek*. But ours has also produced *Twelve Angry Men*, *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *The Forsyte Saga*, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, and *I, Claudius*.

Every age has also had its share of naysayers. Samuel Clemens, whose satiric disparagement of James Fenimore Cooper is legendary, pronounced one library to be “excellent” on the basis that the librarians “had the good taste” to exclude all volumes by Jane Austen, “whom the British mercifully permitted a natural death.” Readers were so outraged by E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India* that travelers passing through the Suez Canal littered the surface of the Red Sea with copies thrown overboard in disgust; incensed and overly pious readers burned copies of *Ulysses*; and in the 1930’s, school boards across the country banned Arthur Conan Doyle’s collected works from school libraries because they were deemed “a popular distraction.”

Paul Scott, author of the celebrated *The Raj Quartet*, which included *The Jewel in the Crown* (naturally filmed for PBS), once told me, “The greatest curse for a contemporary writer is to be labeled ‘popular.’ It is in their unpopularity, their obscurity, their obtuseness that their worth is measured, not in their appeal to a broad number of people.” Scott lamented, “The worst thing that ever happened to John Fowles was to have published *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. He’d have been called a ‘great writer’ otherwise, not merely a clever romanticist.”

The same might be said of such “popular” writers as John Irving, Anne Rice, or even Stephen King, who from time to time aspire to write literary art—and sometimes come very close to achieving it.

Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Erica Jong, Michael Crichton, and Ayn Rand all have said at one time or another that they were torn between the desire to be popular and widely read (to say nothing of well paid) and the desire to be taken seriously by the academic arbiters of the canon. Edward Albee once remarked that if he could exchange places

with Neil Simon, he would. At least, he said, he would exchange incomes. But he could not write “easy plays,” works that appealed to the masses. “I’ve tried,” Albee said in response to a student’s question, “but I just can’t. I have to write for something higher.”

Higher? How so? Are we, as readers, truly justified in scoffing at the common denominators of popular fiction? Are the paperback romances and Westerns and crime novels that occupy grocery-store checkout-lane shelves nothing more than passing fancies, worthless trash, facile entertainments? How does one define “entertainment,” anyway? And who has the right to say that simply because something amuses, enthralls, or occupies our hearts and minds for a space (however small) that it is somehow less worthy than more self-consciously “artistic” efforts that are often boring if not impenetrable?

Like Shakespeare’s plays, many early novels were penned out of a desire to appeal to a broad, common readership. Such works as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, and *Moll Flanders* were originally published as “entertainments,” couched in the pretense that these were “true histories,” not fictional recreations designed to amuse as much as to inform. If the blatantly literary efforts of Samuel Richardson were the only seed of the modern novel, chances are it would never have flourished.

Works based on topical subjects and socially immediate themes have always been with us. We should not imagine that, in Aristotle’s time, everyone sat around watching the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, although by virtue of the recognition they achieved, it is assumed that they were the most popular writers of the day. Even Aristophanes seasons his plays with jokes about contemporary themes and events, often referring directly to people who were expected to be present during a performance. Indeed, it might well be that Aristotle used these works as examples in the *Poetics* because he wanted to point out that it was possible for something to be both widely appealing as well as intelligently written.

Nor should we imagine that people lay about reading *The Faerie Queene* or *Paradise Lost* or Samuel Johnson’s *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* when less literary or artistically pretentious efforts were at hand. Johnson himself, though he outwardly despised Henry Fielding as “an ostler,” surprised his biographer Boswell by revealing that he had read at least parts of Fielding’s novels, particularly *Joseph Andrews*, and that he enjoyed Fanny Burney’s popular works. Even Chaucer’s audiences had the choice of listening to his work or to the wildly popular and bawdy *Lays of Marie de France*, which have only been regarded as literary efforts in recent centuries, and we should not forget that Hawthorne’s complaint about “that Damned Mob of Scribbling Women” was not directed toward the Bröntes or—Mark Twain’s complaint aside—even Jane Austen, but toward the antebellum equivalent of the “romance writer,” the purveyors of the “easy read.”

“Romance” was the operative word of the time, a fine semantic hairsplitting between the tale written purely to entertain and a “novel,” which seemed designed only to titillate. But the titillation—the sentimentality, the adventure, even the sexual fantasy; in other words, the popular appeal of the novel—is, after all, what sustained it and permitted it to develop as literary art.

Distinguishing between that which is literary and that which is popular is, then, a fool’s errand. Samuel Clemens desperately wanted to be popular in his work and to be wealthy from it as

well. He was disappointed in both endeavors. He openly envied Artemus Ward and Bret Harte, whose books and journalistic pieces received popular acclaim. Mark Twain’s *magnum opus* was regarded as a “boy’s book” in some quarters; in others, it was branded as “unfit for boys to read.” So he allied himself with one of the most popular writers of the day in a collaborative effort. His coauthor had more than a dozen books in print and was the darling of the reading circles, ladies’ clubs, and the literary societies of the 1880’s. Who was this paragon of popular literary effort? His name was Charles Dudley Warner. I am sure that all the readers of this article have his collected works on a prominent bookshelf.

My preconceptions about literary worth changed when I started writing, and the recent changes in New York publishing have altered them further. I do believe it is possible to write and even to publish a work of literary merit, but it is no easier to sell that to the general public than it ever was. Cormac McCarthy, Salman Rushdie, and Thomas Pynchon may be the best-selling literary authors of our day, but they write books that most people do not read. Even many people who buy them do not read them. They would rather read Caleb Carr or Mary Higgins Clark or James Michener or, God help us, Robert James Waller. They tend to place the others on their shelves, saving them for emergencies such as nuclear war, when they will be forced to read extensively and will be grateful for anything they can get their hands on.

And while I am sure that there are those, even today, who regularly curl up with a hefty volume by Dostoyevsky, Thackeray, or Henry James, who cannot wait to get home every night so they can dive back into Proust or *Pamela*, I have to admit that I would prefer to spend my return to the 18th century in *Tom Jones*, a book that was unashamedly written to be popular. I may take a copy of *War and Peace* with me every summer vacation, but I prefer the latest Andrew Vachss or Robert Ludlum for my actual poolside reading.

But even if one’s taste runs to the more puerile and pulchritudinous passages of popular pulp, that is nothing to be embarrassed about—or to apologize for. The right attitude is to keep an open mind and to laugh when some patched-sleeved, Birkenstocked pedant announces that this or that is “trash” or “garbage,” while busily stuffing the latest thriller, Western, or horror novel under his coat. You see, we know (even if we will not admit it) that it is possible for a Nancy Taylor Rosenberg to turn a good phrase, create a memorable character, or evoke the same muse that moved Anne Bradstreet or George Sand. But if one knows Bradstreet and Sand, then one’s ability to recognize the better efforts of a Rosenberg is heightened. And this is the point of reading widely and well, after all.

Tipu’s Tiger

by Paul Lake

A six-foot tiger, made to entertain
The sultan Tipu Sahib, rips the breast
Of a model Englishman, whose roars of pain
Amuse the sultan and his native guests,
Who, probing its French gears like vultures, all
Delight now in the multicultural.