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How Could You Like That Book?
Tim Parks
I rarely spend much time wondering why others do not enjoy the books I like. Henry Green, an old favorite, almost a fetish, is never an easy read and never offers a plot that is immediate or direct. “There's not much straight shootin’,” he admitted, in the one interview he gave. Elsa Morante is so lush and fantastical, so extravagantly rhetorical, she must seem way over the top to some. Thomas Bernhard offers one nightmare after another in cascades of challenging rhetoric; it's natural to suspect he's overdoing it. Christina Stead is so wayward, so gloriously tangled and disorganized, it's inevitable that some readers will grow weary. And so on.

Perhaps it's easy for me to understand why so many are not on board with these writers because I occasionally feel the same way myself. In fact it may be that the most seductive novelists are also the ones most willing to risk irritating you. Faulkner comes to mind, so often on the edge between brilliant and garrulous. Italy's Carlo Emilio Gadda was another. Muriel Spark. Sometimes even Kafka. Resistance to these writers is never a surprise to me.

On the other hand, I do spend endless hours mulling over the mystery of what others like. Again and again the question arises: How can they?

I am not talking about genre fiction, where the pleasures are obvious enough. Reviewing duties over the last few years have had me reading Stieg Larsson, E.L. James, and a score of Georges Simenon's Maigrets. Once you accept the premise that you are reading for entertainment, their plots and brightly-drawn dramatis personae quickly pull you in. However "adult" the material, one is reminded of the way one read as a child: to know what happens. You turn the pages quickly, even voraciously, and when something galls—the ugly exploitation of sexual violence in Larsson, the cartoon silliness of James, the monotonous presentation of Maigret as the dour, long-suffering winner—you simply skip and hurry on, because the story has you on its hook. You can see why people love these books, and above all love reading lots of them. They encourage addiction, the repetition of a comforting process: identification, anxiety/suspense, reassurance. Supposedly realistic, they actually take us far away from our own world and generally leave us feeling pleased that our lives are spared the sort of melodrama we love to read about.

But what are we to say of the likes of Haruki Murakami? Or Salman Rushdie? Or Jonathan Franzen? Or Jennifer Egan, or recent prize-winners like Andrés Neuman and Eleanor Catton, or, most monumentally, Karl Ove Knausgaard? They are all immensely successful writers. They are clearly very competent. Knausgaard is the great new thing, I am told. I pick up Knausgaard. I read a hundred pages or so and put it down. I cannot understand the attraction. No, that's not true, I do get a certain attraction, but cannot understand why one would commit to its extension over so many pages. It doesn't seem attractive enough for what it is asking of me.

Take Elena Ferrante. Again and again I pick up her novels and again and again I give up around page fifty. My impression is of something wearisomely concocted, determinedly melodramatic, forever playing on Neapolitan stereotype. Here, in My Brilliant Friend, the narrator is remembering a quarrel between neighbours:

As their vindictiveness increased, the two women began to insult each other if they met on the street or the stairs: harsh, fierce sounds. It was then that they began to frighten me. One of the many terrible scenes of my childhood begins with the shouts of Melina and Lidia, with the insults they hurl from the windows and then on the stairs; it continues with my mother rushing to our door, opening it, and looking out, followed by us children; and ends with the image, for me still unbearable, of the two neighbors rolling down the stairs, entwined, and Melina's head hitting the floor of the landing, a few inches from my shoes, like a white melon that has slipped from your hand.
can't recall dropping a melon myself, but if the aim of a metaphor is to bring intensity and clarity to an image, this one goes in quite a different direction. The dull slap of the soft white melon hitting the ground and rolling away from you would surely be a very different thing from the hard crack of a skull and the sight of a bloody face. I'm astonished that having tossed the metaphor in, out of mechanical habit one presumes, the author didn't pull it right out again. And even more I'm astonished that other people are not irritated by this lazy writing.

It's not only fiction that does this to me. I am told, for example, that Stephen Grosz's book *The Examined Life*—a psychoanalyst giving us his most interesting case histories—is a work of genius and is selling like hotcakes. I buy a copy, and halfway through I toss it away, literally, at the wall, in intense irritation. How can people like these stories, with their over-easy packaging of what are no doubt extremely complex personal problems, their evident and decidedly unexamined complicity about the rightness of the analyst's intervention?

There, I live under the constant impression that other people, other readers, are allowing themselves to be hoodwinked. They are falling for charms they shouldn't fall for. Or imagining charms that aren't there. They should be making it a little harder for their authors. Reading Neuman's *The Traveler of the Century*, I appreciate that he is brilliant, that he effortlessly churns out page after page of complex prose, but I feel the whole thing is an ambition-driven exercise in literariness. Same with so many who flaunt their fancy prose. Even when I read an author I recognize as a very serious and accomplished artist—Alice Munro, Colm Tóibín—I begin to wonder how people can be so wholehearted in their enthusiasm. Both writers, it seems to me, equate fiction with the manufacture of a certain rather predictable pathos, an unspoken celebration of our capacity for compassion and the supposed redemption of suffering in the pleasure of fine prose and good storytelling. No doubt these things do have their worth; I acknowledge that; it is the growing impression that they are merely being rehearsed that is wearisome. Toni Morrison is another. The writer has learned how to concoct our sophisticated drug for us. How can readers feel at ease with that?

No sooner have I articulated my amazement, my sense of betrayal almost, than I begin to feel insecure. Is it really possible that so many people I respect have got it wrong? Close friends as well. Am I an inveterate elitist? A puritan? Or resentful of other people's success? Shouldn't I perhaps relax and enjoy my reading a little more rather than approaching books with constant suspicion?

On the other hand, there are those moments when a work overcomes my suspicion, and persuades me that what I'm reading really is something more than a carefully calculated literary operation. I remember my first encounters with W. G. Sebald or J. M. Coetzee, or Natalia Ginzburg—and those moments give me great pleasure and make me feel happy with how I read. Then I'm glad I didn't waste too much time with the white melons.

Where to go with this uncertainty? Perhaps rather than questioning other readers' credulity, or worrying about my own presumption, what might really be worth addressing here is the whole issue of incomprehension: mutual and apparently insuperable incomprehension between well-meaning and intelligent people, all brought up in the same cultural tradition, more or less. It's curious, for example, that the pious rhetoric gusting around literature always promotes the writing and reading habit as a powerful communication tool, an instrument for breaking down barriers, promoting understanding—and yet it is exactly over my reaction to books that I tend to discover how completely out of synch with others I am.

I have often argued not just over whether *Disgrace* is a good novel, but over what it means. How can you suppose (I grow heated) that Coetzee is too austere, that he lacks a sense of humor? How can you imagine that he is claiming a direct moral equivalence between a professor sleeping with one of his students and a band of young men raping a woman in her isolated farmhouse? Yet people do suppose Coetzee has no humor and they do imagine he means that equivalence. And perhaps he does. Certainly I have no way of proving he doesn't.

Could this be the function, then, or at least one important function of fiction: to make us aware of our differences? To have our contrasting positions emerge in response to these highly complex cultural artifacts? Not that superficial togetherness in celebration that the publishing industry, the literary festivals, and the interminable literary prizes are forever seeking to generate, the happy conviction that we have found a new literary hero and can all gloat together over his or her achievement. But all the heated debate that actually preceded the prize-giving, the shifting alliances as each book was discussed, the times you just couldn't believe that the fellow jurist who supported you over book A is now seriously proposing to ditch book B, and so on.

In this view our reaction to literature becomes a repeated act of self-discovery. Our contrasting reactions to the books we read tell us who we are. We are our position in relation to each other as understood in the reaction to these books. Reading other peoples' takes on Primo Levi, or Murakami, or David Eggers, and comparing them to my own, I get some sense of who we all are and what we're up to. Sometimes this turns out to be far more interesting than reading the book itself.

If this is the case, then, the important thing would be, first, really to understand one's own reaction, to observe it with great care; and, second, to articulate it honestly, without any fudging for fear that others might disagree. Though even a fudge is a declaration of identity. And nothing could be more common among the community of book reviewers than fudging.