



Being Genre Fluid

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IT'S NEVER A GOOD IDEA asking a novelist to describe their books. The shoulders sag, the face grows weary, the same tired set of words are trotted out, cast together from half-remembered reviews and ancient marketing copy. Perhaps I'm generalising too much, and this is a failure that affects me more than others. But it's an interesting failure, and I think it's worth exploring.

The easiest way of describing a novel – of 'saying what it is' – is to identify its genre. Perhaps it's a romance, a historical thriller, a crime novel, a horror story. (Each of these labels in turn containing sub-genres, which can be split further too.)

To writers of what are clearly 'genre' novels, perhaps description isn't too onerous a task, though even then I doubt it's ever really, wholly satisfying. But what about those who don't seem to fit? Writers, perhaps, who mutter something vague about 'literary fiction'? What kind of books are they writing?

'Literary fiction' isn't a genre, rather a negative classification arrived at because of the absence of anything resembling a genre. It's content without form, the flavour that has no taste. And as such, it's easier to say what it isn't than what it is. I'd suggest that many writers whose work is described as 'literary fiction' are uncomfortable with the label, largely because they're unsure it actually means anything. If I say my work is 'literary fiction,' I'm cheating whoever's listening. I'm also cheating myself.



I tell myself I wouldn't be interested in reading, let alone writing, something that could be satisfactorily described. If I could actually say what any specific book is, then in a sense I'm undermining it. Surely the only faithful description of a book is the 70–150,000 words or so that compose it?

As tempting as it might be to give in to this kind of rhetoric, it's essentially just another way of avoiding the question. What kind of book is it? What is it like?

A book, really, can be anything in the world; we can never get to the end of the novel, a category with infinite range. And while there is a lot to admire in this, there's also something daunting. How do I start writing, in a form without limits? How do I develop a book, and bring it to completion, when it can be anything? How do I write something, if I can't see it, and certainly can't say what it is?

One answer is to admit that what you're writing probably, at the very least, borrows from genres (however reluctant your publisher might be to admit this). It becomes easier to see that your book has a shape. A genre – police-procedural, say – brings with it a certain set of circumstances, expectations, a scaffolding that might help you build something. You can follow these expectations, or deviate from them, but either way, you're using them. When the building is complete, the scaffolding, of course, can come down. But even if you can't see it anymore, it's still essential to the thing that's been made.