



The Future of Literature

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THE DEATH OF THE NOVEL has been trumpeted loudly and repeatedly. At the end of 2017, Arts Council England published a report which discussed the 'crisis' in the sales of literary fiction. The following year, Will Self declared that the novel was 'doomed to become a marginal form.' I imagine if The Novel could talk (or send a telegram) it would respond much like Mark Twain; reports of its death have been exaggerated.

It's true that as our attentions get fractured by the bite-sized nature of social media and the endless variety of infinite scrolling, more challenging experiences might suffer. I noticed one online discussion recently where previously dedicated readers had found their attention so degraded by new modes of reading that they couldn't relocate in themselves the deep involvement in story they had previously experienced. Combine this with the 'always on tap' passive entertainment of TV box sets to satisfy the human desire for stories and one might imagine a future in which novels are only sold as scriptwriting fodder for Netflix and Hulu.

But during the first year of the pandemic, fiction made a comeback, as locked-down readers found a glut of time coincided with a desire for escapism. Current times, no less tumultuous, look likely to consolidate both reading habits and the move towards fiction. Some young adults are also turning away from apps that find ever more devious ways to devour their attention, and towards the immersion of a good book. Poetry has been unexpectedly catapulted into bestseller lists by Instagram poets, and though you might despair of the Hallmark-cardiness of some of those



consumable verses, consider them a possible gateway drug to the deeper halls of literature by way of Philip Larkin and Carol Anne Duffy.

There are other reasons to be hopeful. Humankind is evolving and the state of the world is forcing us into new capacities. Meditation and mindfulness practices are probably behind the fast-growing percentage – already more than a quarter of the UK and US populations – who now categorise themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’. This percentage is likely to continue increasing as the global pandemic, and political upheaval, lead people to seek reassuring perspectives and practices that help them to weather these uncertain times. Despite significant successes in what I call ‘conscious fiction’ such as George Saunders’s *Lincoln In the Bardo* and Heather Rose’s *The Museum of Modern Love*, UK and US publishers have yet to invest in, or seemingly even notice, this trend as a potential new market.

Yet in this growing movement are fiction-lovers practiced at deep immersion, looking for thought-provoking literature that speaks knowledgably from the rising spiritual consciousness. From my own perspective, I have recently struggled to enjoy fictions geared towards the older materially focused reality, such as the ‘worthy’ but grimly unconscious lives of the characters in Man Booker Prize-winning *Shuggie Bain*.

My hopeful prediction is that when the ‘conscious fiction’ market is finally recognised and catered to, literature, like an earlier spiritual prophet, will rise from apparent death and surprise the doubters.