

ERIC BULSON
Introduction

The novel is sogged with humanity.
—E. M. Forster

“His studies are not very deep,” one character says about another in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, “he is only reading a novel.”¹ Just imagine if that same critical judgment about novels and novel readers were accurate today! Not only would it be assumed that we all read novels merely to pass the time but also with the assumption that they don’t have much to teach us in the first place. We’d *only* be reading a novel, and that’s it. The real knowledge about life and living, we’d be told, lies elsewhere, maybe in the great epics of bygone ages, intensely private lyric poems, or sweeping dramas where all the world’s a stage.

The novel, of course, still has its detractors, but no one can deny that this literary genre runs “very deep.” Part of that depth comes from the fact that “the novel,” a term ironically rooted in the Latin word for new (*novum*), is actually rather old. In fact, by some accounts it goes back 4,000 years to the narrative fictions of ancient Egypt, with examples appearing subsequently as far afield as Hellenistic Greece, the histories and romances of medieval China and France, and the subgenres of modern England, Russia, Brazil, Nigeria, Japan, and the United States. And if the forms of the novel are indeed many, they are evidence enough that there has been an ongoing desire across cultures and over millennia to tell fictional stories in prose about life.

Milan Kundera defines the novel as “the great prose form in which an author examines, by means of experimental selves (characters), the great themes of existence.”² It is one of the few places, in fact, that human beings can go to find other voices, other stories, other locations that help them contemplate who, what, and where they are, and it all happens, strangely enough, with plots and characters that are fictional, in places real and imagined, and they exist in our minds long after the last page has been turned. But if novels give authors and readers this incredible opportunity to access the “great themes of existence” without reducing them to cliché, that’s

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because they have the power, as Walter Benjamin once observed, to give “evidence of the profound perplexity of the living,” leading E. M. Forster to the conclusion that the novel is “sogged with humanity.” “We may hate humanity,” he continues, “but if it is exorcised or even purified the novel wilts; little is left but a bunch of words.”³

The prospect of tackling the big questions about existence, living, and humanity is a tall order for any genre, not least for the one to which we still turn for its entertainment value. People reach for novels, not collections of verse, when boarding a flight, commuting to work, or getting ready for bed. The suggestion that we might be *reading for fun*, even when it’s “work” for the student or critic or editor, does not mean we are doing something wrong. Rather, it’s a sign that the novel is doing something right. Living in the digital age where the distractions of other media forms abound, the simple act of immersing ourselves in a novel, whether in print or on a screen, remains a unique experience, in part, because it transports us somewhere else to encounter people we’ve never met and places we’ve never been. And why not be entertained if, along the way, we also encounter what György Lukács called the “inexpressible meaning of life”?⁴ The history of the novel, in fact, is littered with attempts to express this “inexpressible meaning” that cannot be condensed into a single message or sound bite. And by putting time itself in a narratable form and combining it with the fictional lives of characters, novelists make it possible for us to understand “the unity” of the past, present, and future in our own lives. This is one of the things that makes the novel so important to everyone regardless of where they’re from or who they think they are. It is, to borrow Frederic Jameson’s memorable phrase, “a machine for living in a certain kind of temporality.”⁵ No one can escape time, but by reading titles new and old it’s the closest we can get to time travel, which, in a way, also makes the novel a time machine.

And we can’t forget, of course, that the novel, by many accounts, begins with the story of a man who prefers to live in a fictional past according to the laws of an outmoded chivalric code he has picked up from romances such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Amadís de Gaula*. The problem, however, is that he also confuses clouds of dust with charging armies, windmills with giants, a peasant woman with a princess, and a washing basin with an enchanted helmet. But as much as everyone else might think he’s crazy, he’s the one having all the fun, wandering the countryside with his nag, having adventures with his dim-witted sidekick, and never paying a hotel bill (a rule, he claims, that belongs to those who follow the chivalric code). The saddest part of this whole story of the character we know as Don Quixote de la Mancha is that when he returns home, not to die, at least in Part I, but to surrender to the

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boring reality of so many of the others around him, the book burners and do-nothings, who have lost, if they ever had it, the ability to enjoy the magic to be found in the world all around them.

Reading novels, you might say, is one way to imagine, and temporarily inhabit, other worlds and temporalities, but it can also help us to navigate our own, finding, along the way, moments of companionship but also instruction about how we feel, what we think, where we live, who we live among, even who we are, and what we do.⁶ The chronology provided at the front of *The Cambridge Companion to the Novel* includes more than 250 titles and is intended to provide some necessary coordinates for the novel's broad historical and geographic sweep. Some periods and subgenres will be more enticing than others, but this is just as true for so many of the great theorists of the novel, all of them with lists of their own. Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, preferred Greek and Hellenistic novels along with some nineteenth-century Russian classics (Dostoevsky at the top); Lukács adored nineteenth-century European historical novels (with a strong distaste for Joyce); Ian Watt, preoccupied with the novel's rise, singled out eighteenth-century British realist novels; and Pascale Casanova, though fascinated by the novel's global reach, has a soft spot for Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Whatever trajectories you decide to follow, remember that each novel in the *Companion's* chronology has a history of its own. Some are distinguished by their status as first novels in different countries, others for their invention of techniques of representation, and still others for exhibiting all the best qualities of the novel at a particular moment in time.

What should be most apparent by now is the fact that “the novel” prides itself on being new, ever in motion, not fixed in one place or even defined by one size. That, in effect, is what makes pinning this genre down such a daunting task. The novel doesn't just move around the world over time; it changes shape internally as it goes, often responding to particular literary traditions and print and nonprint cultures, and it can involve such things as how a plot begins or ends, what events seem possible or impossible in between, what kinds of characters can and cannot appear, and where the action can and cannot take place (at sea, in a drawing room, on a street, in the high plains, or out on the high seas). And what makes this reading experience all worthwhile is the simple fact that we might forget all about the technical and formal aspects, losing ourselves for a period of time, but, as the essays in *The Cambridge Companion to the Novel* also demonstrate, we can greatly enhance our appreciation by thinking more critically about how any of this was possible in the first place by focusing not just on what *novels are about*

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but also on how they manage to pull off so many tricks with time, space, characters, narrators, and the representation of fictional events.

Consider, for starters, the case of Dorothea Brooke, one of the many disillusioned characters in George Eliot's masterpiece *Middlemarch*. On arriving in Rome as a newlywed from the "prosaic neighbourhood" of a fictional town from which the novel gets its title, Dorothea's regret at marrying a much older and hopelessly unsympathetic man she doesn't love is so profound that she can hardly process her disappointment. Lucky for us, though, the narrator tells us what's going on inside her head and heart, and it's all juxtaposed with the backdrop of the eternal city in a series of elaborately constructed sentences that deserve to be quoted in full:

Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence; the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold monotonous light of an alien world; all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache of belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion.⁷

In this breathtaking passage, brimming with energy and insight about the clash between young and old civilizations, the full depth of a single character's mixed emotions is revealed. The narrator doesn't just tell us, for instance, that Dorothea was sad, confused, overwhelmed, lost, or, let's face it, emphatically not in love with her husband. Rather, this narrator makes the experience itself transmissible in the words and syntax, "this vast wreck of ambitious ideals" providing access points into a better understanding of Dorothea's own soul at the moment in which she is beginning to acknowledge that she's made a mistake. Her life is not what she thought it could, or perhaps should, be.

And how many novels, in fact, deal with this same problem of lost illusions? Honoré de Balzac wrote a novel with that title, *Illusions perdues*, but it is a problem that everyone faces at some point in their lives, not just Dorothea, but also me, the one writing this Introduction, and you, the one reading it. From the beginning, the novel has been a particularly productive genre for exploring these intense moments of discovery, solitude, isolation, and collapse. Robinson Crusoe is among them, the first British novel with a protagonist who ends up on a deserted island after a shipwreck. Far from the shores of England, he is also trying to figure out how he might survive:

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I never so much as troubl'd my self, to consider what I should do with my self when I came thither; what would become of me if I fell into the hands of savages; or how I should escape from them if they attempted me; no, nor so much as how it was possible for me to reach the coast, and not be attempted by some or other of them, without any possibility of delivering myself; and if I should not fall into their hands, what I should do for provision, or whither I should bend my course; none of these thoughts, I say, so much as came in my way.⁸

You don't need to be stuck on an island far away from home to empathize with Crusoe's plight. In a passage punctuated by so many I-ME-MYs, he is in the process of working through his own anxiety about the future and in so doing plan a course of action for an unspecified amount of time. Alone with his thoughts (before coming across a human footprint in the sand), Crusoe doesn't have the luxury of wondering what novel to take with him to pass the time if stranded on a deserted island. Rather, his life is the novel, and it is one, in fact, that reminds all of us of what's at stake when plotting our own "course."

In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, we actually get inside the heads of characters, and in so doing we access their thoughts, dreams, fears, and desires sometimes through interior monologue, other times free indirect discourse. Unlike Crusoe with his first-person narration, Mrs. Ramsay can wander around in the garden next to her husband of many years talking, and suddenly, for a split second, her mind wanders off. "All the great men she had ever known, she thought, deciding that a rabbit must have got in, were like that, and it was good for young men (though the atmosphere of lecture rooms was stuffy and depressing to her beyond endurance almost), simply to hear him, simply to look at him. But without shooting rabbits, how was one to keep them down? she wondered. It might be a rabbit; it might be a mole. Some creature anyhow was ruining her Evening Primroses."⁹ The rabbit that hops into the sentence, and eventually around the paragraph, doesn't just interrupt what's going on inside Mrs. Ramsay's head. It is, even more than that, a bit of commentary on the need to look around you so that you don't lose sight of the world outside. It's also a reminder about the fragility of life, the rabbit, here and then gone, and taking Mrs. Ramsay, as that white rabbit does Alice, down into the hole of her own mind.

The novel has never shied away from the complexity and messiness of what's going on in people's heads. And this can be made all the more complicated when they are caught in extraordinary circumstances. This is what happens, for instance, when Prince Andrew gets caught during an explosion on a battlefield in *War and Peace*. "What's this?" he wonders, "Am I falling? My legs are giving way." Laid out on the ground amid all the

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confusion, Andrew can see nothing but the sky above him. That's enough, in fact, for him to zoom out on everything, the war, the deaths, even his own pain, and find something bigger. "How differently do those clouds glide across that lofty infinite sky! How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that. But even if it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God! . . ." ¹⁰ Ending in an ellipsis that may well be Andrew trailing off into a state of unconsciousness, this is the moment that will redefine his life. That glimpse of the "infinite sky" is enough to make him realize not only the meaninglessness of a war, which has now left him seriously wounded, but also of human existence unable to see itself as part of a larger cosmos far more important than the goings on of the "great men" down on Earth.

But if Prince Andrew's moment of clarity about life comes from the sky above, for Tyrone Slothrop, the protagonist of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, it takes a much darker journey into a toilet down below:

The light down here is dark gray and rather faint. For some time he has been aware of shit, elaborately crusted along the sides of this ceramic (or by now, iron) tunnel he's in: shit nothing can flush away mixed with hard-water minerals into a deliberate brown barnacled of his route, patterns thick with meaning, Burma shave signs of the toilet world, icky and sticky, cryptic and glyptic, these shapes loom and pass smoothly as he continues down the long cloudy waste line, the sounds of "Cherokee" still pulsing very dimly above, playing him to the sea. ¹¹

As unbelievable as this journey below might seem (what individual, after all, can travel through septic systems), it pushes the realism of the novel far beyond its limits into a place where it is possible to see that nonsense even has its own meaning. And that, in effect, is what the novel has always done to stay new, the many experiments with characters, plots, settings, and narrative devices employed to explain what and where life happens.

And sometimes life goes on in the most unbelievable places of all, and it involves characters who are not, strictly speaking, human. Moby Dick is among them, a white whale getting chased around the world's five oceans by one salty captain and his brainwashed crew. Though tracked for more than a year (and 90 percent of the novel), Moby Dick manages to remain out of sight, but when he finally does breach, the novel climaxes, but not before Ahab gets his final words in:

Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death!

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Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! *Thus*, I give up the spear!¹²

Remember, at this exact moment in time, one so many have been waiting for impatiently, we have a fictional character talking to a fictional animal who can't hear or understand him. And yet, still, Melville has managed to generate a soliloquy seething with hate that is as great as any to be found in Shakespeare's plays. Ahab has devoted his "whole foregone life" to chasing down one whale, and faced with the possibility that the end is nigh, he pauses to put his hate into words. Moby Dick, of course, can't hear them, but as readers, we can, and in that moment, both epic and pathetic, we see Ahab at his most vulnerable, vengeful, and alone, right before he gets thrown into the water, tangled to death by his own rope.

Novels are not encyclopedias containing all the world's knowledge, but that doesn't keep them from trying to pack everything in. David James (Chapter 4) believes that this has something to do with the fact that the novel has an elastic structure, moving along from beginning to end like a wave, picking up whatever comes its way. It is a process, in fact, that has caused a great deal of genre confusion over the centuries, with readers scratching their heads or falling asleep when faced with, say, a sequence of chapters on cetology (*Moby-Dick*) or an extended meditation on history (the two Epilogues in *War and Peace*). This tendency to make the novel appear as something bigger than itself, an epic or an encyclopedia, is also one of its many virtues, a trick that can make it "seem well ahead of its time." There's also a way that the novel's encyclopedic ambitions can be interpreted as a critique of totalizing forms of knowledge gathering, the kind used to transform everything into data or reduce the complexity of life and experience into rigidly defined categories. This may be so, but James also suspects that living in an age of information excess facilitated by the World Wide Web and novels, contemporary and classic alike, can function as "antiglut therapy," providing opportunities for deep concentration.

Long before this threat of Web saturation existed, Lukács identified the novel as the literary genre best suited to express an alienated condition he called "transcendental homelessness." His *Theory of the Novel*, first drafted in 1914, was motivated by a world war and written, he later reflected, "in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world."¹³ Faced with the possibility that Western civilization was ending, Lukács argued that the

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novel was “the epic of a world abandoned by God,” a fragmented form reflecting an existential isolation that had been in the making for centuries and incapable of unifying human experience within a larger social, political, or even cosmic order. Unlike the epic, where form and content were identical and contained characters integrated with the world around them, the novel was incomplete and never a place where solitary protagonists could feel at home.¹⁴

This epic/novel binary has been an incredibly productive heuristic device, and theorists of the novel since Lukács, including Mikhail Bakhtin, Erich Auerbach, Franco Moretti, and Wai Chee Dimock, have used it to try to understand how major morphologic changes across time can help us to understand the nature of human experience and the representations of political, social worlds we must all inhabit. What makes the novel “epic,” as Kent Puckett (Chapter 3) explains, is the desire to “represent a whole world, to reveal connections between people, things, and events, to reveal the significance of things” while also recognizing “the fundamental impossibility of doing exactly that.” Put another way, some of the most monumental modern novels, such as *Faust*, *Ulysses*, and *Cien años de soledad*, are failed epics not because they are unable to achieve the qualities of a literary greatness associated with the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad* but rather because the scope and scale of the narrative structure, the use of linear time, the modes of narration, and characterization make that prospect of synthesizing experience into a coherent worldview impossible. Leopold Bloom, for instance, has no place in the Ithaca of Homer, and Achilles could never be found walking the streets of Dublin.

The kinds of characters that appear in the modern novel can, indeed, seem larger than life, sometimes caught in a web of extraordinary events or stranded in exotic lands. But the history of the novel is also filled with nobodies, who are barely getting by, and often involve plots where nothing “epic” happens. But the mere fact that these nobodies can have names such as Moll Flanders, Huck Finn, Julien Sorel, Alyosha Karamazov, and Lizzy Bennett or that they have stories worth telling is itself a major development in the history of the genre. Ian Watt suspects that this interest in highly individualized characters has something to do with the rise of industrialization and Protestantism, the former valorizing specialized skills of the individual, the latter the existence of an inward moral compass. “*Robin Crusoe*,” he reminds us, “is certainly the first novel in the sense that it is the first fictional narrative in which an ordinary person’s daily activities are the center of continuous literary attention.”¹⁵

The novel has never shied away from the “daily activities” of ordinary fictionalized individuals. In fact, this preoccupation with everyday life

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proved foundational to some of the novel's most radical experiments in the early twentieth century. Modernism is filled with novels about ordinary people and events, and though dramatic occurrences can happen, the focus by and large is on the way characters perceive and remember their experiences from day to day. Innovations such as interior monologue didn't just make it possible to record everydayness in real time; it allowed novelists to bend time, thereby allowing their characters to revisit people, places, and events from the past. Proust's 4,000-page *In Search of Lost Time* is one of the most remarkable realizations of this subjectively perceived time. Catherine Flynn (Chapter 6), in fact, demonstrates how the recurrence of a musical motif from the fictional composer Vinteuil circulates throughout the novel and is meaningful less for its sound than for the way it can "cut across narrative and logical modes of organization" unifying disparate events and moments of perception across different temporal registers. And if *In Search of Lost Time* is about fictional characters circling back to the past in their minds, it also provides an intense temporal experience for readers, reminding them of the reality of evanescent moments, the ones that give life meaning while time marches on.

So far I've defined the novel within and against other literary genres to foreground the fact that it never existed in isolation. In fact, as Mikhail Bakhtin first observed, the novel has been the great vacuum cleaner of genres because of its remarkable capacity to absorb whatever else was out there. By mixing so many different genres together, in fact, making prose fictions sound like histories or romances or epics with bits of verse thrown in, the novel always had the potential to reinvent itself as something else. The English word "novel" derives from the Italian *novella*, a term used in the fourteenth century to define the kinds of short stories collected in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. These were "little stories," but the term itself can also be translated as "news," which makes sense when you consider that they included bits of information about the world. *Novels are news*, too, because they function as convenient containers for transporting stories about shipwrecks and marriages, court intrigue and battles, philosophical meditations and murders, revolutions and love affairs. *Novels are long* (E. M. Forster claimed that 50,000 words was the absolute minimum) because these pieces of news are often made up of characters and modes of narration without any prescribed limits on where the plots should begin and end. *Novels are modern* because they have evolved alongside technologies of mass reproduction and consumption, which made possible the formation of a more expansive literary marketplace (filled with editors, critics, translators, and an expansive literate public). And *novels are fictional* because they tell

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stories about people, places, and events that are not, strictly speaking, real or true.

The novels discussed earlier do not contain all these qualities in equal measure. What they share in common is the fact that they are all fictions: Slothrop doesn't go down a toilet, Prince Andrew doesn't get wounded in battle, and Mrs. Ramsay never sees that rabbit. And yet these are the kinds of moments that make novels not only memorable but also true. They are all stories based on probable events with people, places, and situations that can seem oddly familiar, and they depend for their power on what is called "realism." Michael Sayeau (Chapter 5) points out that realism is a complicated category, in part, because reality itself is relative and has depended for its effect on different kinds of techniques and modes of representation at different points in history. Consider, for example, that moment with Ahab alone: where is the realism in that? Well, he is on *a boat*, he is holding *a harpoon*, he is *at sea*, and he is *speaking*. If he were part of a narrative that takes place nowhere and were caught speaking gibberish into a void, no one would expect the scene to feel realistic, and yet, with the accumulation of those concrete details, it is the category of reality itself, as Roland Barthes once put it, that gets signified.¹⁶ Ahab and that boat are not really there, in other words, but they signal that reality is in progress within a specific story. And no matter how much novelists push the limits of realism into the realm of absurdity, it is still one of the ways that the experience itself can seem more immediate and meaningful.

The fictionality of novels has relied on realist techniques from its earliest Western beginnings, and as Catherine Gallagher argues, it has played a major role in the interaction between novels and readers. "Novels," she explains, "promoted a disposition of ironic credulity enabled by optimistic incredulity; one is dissuaded from believing the literal truth of a representation so that one can instead admire its likelihood and extend enough credit to buy into the game. Such flexible mental states were the sine qua non of modern subjectivity."¹⁷ Considered along these lines, the experience of novel reading requires that a pact gets made. Readers may know these plots didn't really happen, that these characters aren't really there, but that doesn't make them any less believable. "Ironic credulity," in fact, requires that readers maintain the will to believe in spite of their skepticism, with the added implication that the identification with fictional selves is itself part of the invention of modern subjectivity.

Readers can be skeptical or ironic during these encounters with realist fictions, but, as Suzanne Keen (Chapter 8) explains, it is empathy that can keep them coming back for more. Novels don't just want us to believe that a certain sequence of events unfolded or that these real and imagined places