

AMERICA THE LITERATE: A FICTIONAL ESSAY

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With Jonathan Franzen and his pals making all the big bucks, times are tough for guys like me.

I didn't care a great deal for *The Corrections* — I found it patronizing and self-indulgent — but anyone reading it would be hard put, I think, not to respond to its style and language. Those were the things that kept the book in my hand when my impulse was — I'm not lying here — to heave it across the room (and then maybe piss on it). That awesome grasp of the language is also on view in Jonathan Franzen's collection of essays (*How to Be Alone*), and here's what's nice about it: That maddening New York 'tude that seems to whisper, "I'm smarter than you, more sophisticated than you, better-read than you, just better than you" at least once on every single page is gone.

The sense of comic snortiness is gone, too, at least for the time being (Mr. Franzen may be one of those people who only feel it's necessary to do the I'm-a-smart-but-world-weary-guy thing in his fiction). There is, in fact, something almost endearing about his nearly constant need to take his own creative temperature. How is Jonathan faring today? he asks himself over and over. Will Jonathan be able to write tomorrow, in spite of the Internet, the decay of artistic sensitivity, and the growing idea that television might just be culturally important?

The idea to which Mr. Franzen returns over and over again in these essays (and with the obsessiveness of a child who has just lost his first tooth) is that serious literature no longer matters in America, and that writers of it have lost their audience. That they are essentially talking to each other and no one else. I wondered if this could really be true of what R.J. Franklin, the author of *American Intelligence and Creativity*, calls "the most literate society that has ever existed upon the face of the earth."⁽¹⁾ So I did some investigating, and it turns out that Mr. Franzen's fears of talking to no one but himself and his peers (one suspects that, in his most secret heart, Mr. Franzen believes he has none) are unfounded. He is, in fact, farting through silk.

Let us begin with *Ulysses*, James Joyce's tale of Leopold Bloom's big day. In 1998, eighty-one million copies of *Ulysses* were sold — not worldwide, but in the United States alone.⁽²⁾ Since there are roughly 290 million people in America,⁽³⁾ the math works out to one copy of *Ulysses* for every three and a half Americans. I think even Mr. Franzen would have to admit that, when it comes to serious literature, "*Ulysses* pretty much wrote the book."⁽⁴⁾ And in the vernacular of sales, these are mighty tall tickets.

I wondered how it could be that so many copies of *Ulysses* — generally acknowledged to be a "tough read" — could have sold in a single year. Although I can offer no definitive answer to this question, it's certainly interesting to note that the novel is taught in more than seven hundred American high schools and even in thirty American junior high schools.⁽⁵⁾ In his article on teaching literature to teenagers, Justin Reeve points out that "smoking and drinking are tough habits to pick up, but once they are formed, they are even tougher to break. The same is true of great literature, which is, let's face it, Jim Beam for the brain."⁽⁶⁾

If asked to name the novels most students are reading, a high school graduate from the 1950s or 1960s might be apt to name such "teenager-friendly" books as *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. It's perhaps hard to think of them reading *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby Jr. (sixty million copies sold in 1998)⁽⁷⁾ or *The Tunnel* by William H. Gass (forty million sold in 1998),⁽⁸⁾ but the numbers don't lie, and neither do the curricula. When asked about the latter, Andrea Gernet, a seventeen-year-old junior at Berlin (N.H.) High School, wrote: "It's hard at first, but once the guy started digging his tunnel, it was pretty easy to see the vaginal symbolism, unless you're a post-Freudian. Mr. Yardley [a teacher of modern American literature at BHS] helped us a lot, and we acted out the climax in class. That was fun, even though my mom was mad that I took my chest of drawers to school and the janitor said we'd have to clean up the dirt ourselves."⁽⁹⁾ She further pointed out that, after reading Mr. Gass, "*Danielle Steel* and *V.C. Andrews* seem pretty lame."⁽¹⁰⁾ It's

clear that the general American reader has come to share Andrea's growing thirst for serious literature (which, in her letter, she charmingly refers to as "the real deal"). Last year in America, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* sold 110 million copies. One might compare this with Ms. Steel, whose entire backlist sold less than a million copies. Mr. Franzen's own novel *The Corrections* sold more than eighty million copies,(11) and while some of this may be attributed to the "Oprah flap,"(12) what can we say about sales of Mr. Franzen's previous novel (*Strong Motion*), which sold fourteen million copies in a single month?(13)

Certainly such sales have changed the idea that serious novelists live in poverty. William H. Gass, for instance, has moved to Nassau, a notorious tax haven, and late last year Mr. Franzen quietly bought an island in the South Pacific.(14) According to *Forbes*, in the fall of 2000 the well-known New York developer Donald Trump quietly acquired the novelist Joyce Carol Oates as a financial partner; when she joined his team, Trump Enterprises became Mulvaney Enterprises, Inc.(15) One might say that these days Mr. Trump is "feeling his oats"!

Given such numbers (and such a clear resurgence of serious fiction in the marketplace), one has a right to ask why the myth of the literate novelist as "a voice crying in the wilderness" persists. There are a number of answers to this question. One has to do with simple practicality. As Cynthia Ozick confided in a recent interview, "If my relatives knew that I make more money than Tom Clancy, Sue Grafton and John Grisham combined, I would never get any peace."(16) And Cormac McCarthy added, "I spend more time dealing with the IRS these days than I do working on my new novel, although there was nothing sneaky about my acquisition of El Paso; it was a straightforward nine-year lease with an option to buy."(17) And the novelist Ian McEwan describes his purchase of EMI Records not as a business decision — "Writers make lousy businessmen," he points out with a poignant grin(18) — but as "a decision of the heart." And when asked about her decision to buy a

tract of land that is, essentially, eastern Montana, Annie Proulx offers a terse, two-word response: “Bidness, partner.”(19)

Historically speaking, wealth has made writers uncomfortable. (“Money is writer’s block colored green,” Charles Dickens once wrote to Wilkie Collins, to which Collins reportedly responded, “Send me your crayons, Chuck.”)(20) This has always been less true of the more easily recognized “popular” writers (we’ll get to them in a moment), but the erroneous idea that money destroys serious thought continues to exist. This is probably why such books as *Ada*, by Vladimir Nabokov, have never appeared on the USA Today bestseller list, although it sells more than nine million copies a year. (21) One critic has, in fact, called it “The Bridges of Madison County for smart people.”(22) The truth is simply this: A powerful group of “literary novelists” have purchased all the major newspaper and Internet sites that publish bestseller lists, and any novel considered “too literary” is blocked from those lists. When asked for a clearer explanation for the rationale behind this decision, Annie Proulx — who, along with Cynthia Ozick, Don DeLillo and John Updike, now owns *The Wall Street Journal* — offers a terse, two-word response: “Bidness, partner.” (23)

Where, you might ask, are the more readily acknowledged bestselling novelists in this equation? Where are Clive Cussler, Anne Rice, Jonathan Kellerman? Where are such new kids on the block as Dennis Lehane and Michael Connelly?

Where is Stephen King?

Well, partner, let me explain it this way. You may have seen me photographed on a vintage Harley-Davidson Softail, but that is a lease job from Central Maine Harley (“The Boys With the Toys”). You may have seen me behind the wheel of a Mercedes-Benz, but that’s also a lease. The vehicle I actually own is a year-old Dodge Ram pickup truck, bought during the Year-End Blow-Out at McDonald Motors in western Maine. I, like virtually every other popular novelist in America, live mostly on a subsidy check of just over twelve thousand dollars a month (I barely clear a hundred grand a year,

after taxes). The check comes from Literature 'R' Us, a company incorporated in the Bahamas.(24) The president of this company is Ms. "Bidness, Partner" herself, Annie Proulx. The treasurer who signs my checks (the signature is not quite legible) appears to be Margaret Drabble.

As for my last novel, *From a Buick 8*? It sold just over a thousand copies.(25)

After that humiliating admission I shouldn't have to state what's going on, but for those of you who are a trifle "slow on the uptake,"(26) here it is: America's so-called "popular novelists" are actually fronts, created so that TV and the press will have someone to bother when they have an extra five minutes at the end of the nightly news or space to fill in the arts-and-leisure section of the Sunday paper. As Margaret Atwood so succinctly puts it, "Why would I want to give an interview to some newspaper nutter when I'm trying to write a novel? The idea is absurd."(27)

On a personal level I must admit I wish my books sold more, but sometimes the movies give me a boost; thanks to Frank Darabont's film of *The Green Mile*, for instance, my novel sold an extra fifteen thousand copies.(28) And as J.K. Rowling admits, "Without the movies, Harry Potter would actually be a total unknown."(29) At first, one might tend to scoff at this, or to call it unbelievable. But then, one realizes one has never actually met someone who has read these "wildly popular" novels. As Andrea Gernet says in her letter to me, "I have dozens of friends who've read all the Harry Potter novels, but I've been too busy, myself. I had to read *The Brothers K* for a class, and I'm working my way through a number of contemporary Chinese novelists in my leisure time. I might read the Harry Potter books next year." (30)

The most important thing is that literature is alive and well in America, and Jonathan Franzen need not worry (as though he ever did; as I've told you, it's all a front, but the Ever-Popular Tortured Artist Effect is a hard one to give up). And if he persists in worrying, he can do it in his Jaguar K-type as he drives to his ski lodge in Vail.

Vail, Colorado, by the way, is owned by the same consortium of writers I mentioned earlier. One likes to imagine Margaret Drabble, Don DeLillo and Mr. Franzen himself unwinding on the slopes. And as far as the profit involved in such a nifty resort acquisition? Well, writing is one thing. Vail, on the other hand... That's bidness, partner.

1. This quote and this source — like all the quotes and sources in this essay — are, of course, fictitious. One may argue that this to some extent negates the arguments that the essay makes, but since actual sources supporting those arguments don't exist, all I can say is that it seemed necessary.

2. Beverly Stonehouse and staff, "Year-End Survey," BookScan, February 1998, pp. 18-26.

3. American Population Clock (Internet).

4. John Kapp and Justin Reeve, *Literature's Funny!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), p. 89.

5. Justin Reeve, "Smart Books, Smart Kids," *The English Teacher*, Vol. LXXV, No. 7, June 1999.

6. Ibid.

7. BookScan.

8. Ibid.

9. Letter from Andrea Gernet to Stephen King, dated November 16, 2002.

10. Ibid.

11. BookScan.

12. Mr. Franzen expressed some reluctance about being a selection of Oprah's Book Club, which so distressed Ms. Winfrey that she quite rightly canceled the whole thing.

13. August 2000, prompting George Stillsbury to speculate, in BookScan's February 2001 "Year-End Survey," that readers saw it as "an upscale beach book."

14. Jacob Frisch, "Serious Writers Who Have It All," *Ritzy Hideaways*, Vol. 3, No. 2, October 2001.

15. According to BookScan ("Year End Survey," February 2001), Ms. Dates' *We Were the Mulvaney's* sold forty million copies in hardcover and an additional eighty million copies in paperback, surpassing sales of her previous bestseller, *Them*, by almost thirty million copies.

16. Ellen Prosser, "The Problem of Too Much Money," *Rich Folks Magazine*, Vol. 19, No. 9, September 2000.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Letter from Annie Proulx to Stephen King, dated December 9, 2002. (She adds, "Hope you'll have a merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year.")

20. Richard Woofington, *Dickens and the Money Question* (Paris: Paris Literary Press, 1976), p. 291.

21. BookScan.

22. Jacob LaFountain, *Literature As I See It* (Rahway: New Jersey Literary Press, 1995), p. 743.

23. Letter, Annie Proulx to Stephen King, *op. cit.*

24. U.S. Tax Haven Guide, 2001-2002; also *The Secret Wealth of America*, published on the Internet by www.stinger.com.

25. Scribner royalty statement, November 9, 2002.

26. Eric Partridge, *Slanguage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 1023.

27. Margaret Atwood, "Why I Don't Bother With Newspaper Nutters," *The Canadian Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (a whole number 16), Winter 2000.

28. Royalty statements, Scribner and Penguin Putnam, 1999-2001.

29. Anthony Crackbottom, "The Truth About Harry," *The Daily Mail*, Vol. CCCXXXIX, No. 159, June 19, 2000.

30. Letter, Andrea Gernet to Stephen King, op. cit.

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