

A Reader's Manifesto: An Attack on the Growing Pretentiousness in American Literary Prose

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Available for the first time, the full-length, unexpurgated version of the essay that incited one of the most passionate literary controversies ever in American letters . . .

When the Atlantic Monthly first published an excerpted version of B.R. Myers' polemic—in which he attacked literary giants such as Don DeLillo, Annie Proulx, and Cormac McCarthy, quoting their work extensively to accuse them of mindless pretension—it caused a world-wide sensation.

"A welcome contrarian takes on the state of contemporary American literary prose," said a Wall Street Journal review. "Useful mischief," said Jonathan Yardley in The Washington Post. "Brilliantly written," declared The Times of London.

But Myers' expanded version of the essay does more than just attack sanctified literary heavyweights. It also:

- * Examines the literary hierarchy that perpetuates the status quo by looking at the reviews that the novelists in question received. It also considers the literary award system. "Rick Moody received an O. Henry Award in 1997," Myers observes, "whereupon he was made an O. Henry juror himself. And so it goes."
- * Showcases Myers' biting sense of wit, as in the new section, "Ten Rules for 'Serious' Writers," and his discussion of the sex scenes in the bestselling books of David Guterson ("If Jackie Collins had written that," Myers says after one example, "reviewers would have had a field day.")
- * Champions clear writing and storytelling in a wide range of writers, from "pop" novelists such as Stephen King to more "serious" literary heavyweights such as Somerset Maugham. Myers also considers the classics such as Balzac and Henry James, and recommends numerous other undeservedly obscure authors.
- * Includes an all-new section in which Myers not only considers the controversy that followed the Atlantic essay, but responds to several of his most prominent critics.

Published on the one-year anniversary of original Atlantic Monthly essay, the new, expanded A READER'S MANIFESTO continues B.R. Myers' fight on behalf of the American reader, arguing against pretension in so-called "literary" fiction, naming names and brilliantly exposing the literary status quo.

A Reader's Manifesto: An Attack on the Growing Pretentiousness in American Literary Prose Details

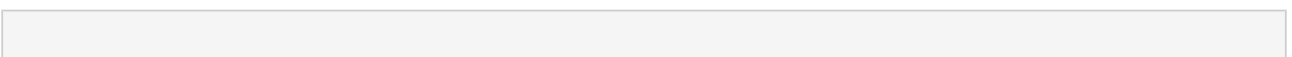
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Timothy Hallinan says

ALLIIRIGHT!!!!!!

FINALLY someone takes a well-organized poke at the most pretentious of lit-fic and the critics who enable it. (Michiko Kakutani, anyone?) He makes a compelling case that a relatively small cadre of writers, publishers, and critics have foisted upon the American reader a barrage of intentionally obscure, overwritten junk in the form of the "important" novel. Along the way he takes passages that critics have praised from writers like DeLillo, Proulx, and McCarthy and simply critiques them, line by line, pointing up the paucity of meaning and the emptiness and inappropriateness of most of the "stylistic" flourishes. It's not that he's hocking for James Patterson -- he appreciates Joyce, Woolf, Balzac, and many other "literary" writers -- but he believes a snob's fraud is being perpetrated upon us, and he makes a persuasive case for it.

EVERYBODY should read this book.

Donna says

There are brain laughs and there are belly laughs. This was brain and belly laughs; not just knowing little chuckles swallowed quickly lest expert boredom be endangered by a smile, but the full out cleansing laughs that come from a standpoint of 'oh for fuck's sake...' on its way to the heart of nonsense.

P.S. Wish I had read this when it was first printed in the 'Atlantic'. I would have felt like less of a doofus and not given up on fiction for almost 10 years.

Jeremy says

While I didn't agree with everything Myers said (I'm also, to be fair, a big Cormac McCarthy fan.) The majority of his grievances and criticisms against the writing of people like Annie Proulx, Paul Auster, David Guterson and some of Don DeLillo struck me as dead on. In fact, I think the case against pompous, self-important literary fiction is even stronger than the one he makes. Not only does it produce bad, self-important books which too many authors strive to imitate, but it also cheapens our language and turns expression into a vehicle for shallow, hip posturing. Like a lot of polemics, it can be unrelentingly negative, and I wish he would provide more examples of what he thinks good writing is, because the few he does provide are very compelling (Woolf! Balzac!). I actually found myself wishing this was longer, partly so he could provide more examples of well written prose, but mostly because I really wanted to see who else he would gleefully tear apart.

Paul Bryant says

A lolcat is an image combining a photograph of a cat (usually in a "zany" situation) with text intended to contribute humour. The text is often idiosyncratic and grammatically incorrect, and its use in this way is known as "lolspeak" or "kitty pidgin". "Lolcat" is a compound word of the acronymic abbreviation "LOL" and the word "cat".

Lolcats are commonly designed for photo sharing imageboards and other Internet forums including Goodreads.

Imagine then if you will a lolcat with a rabid grin on its face, a collar round its neck on which is clearly written B R MYERS, its arse perched on a copy of a Rick Moody novel, smacking its paw on its computer keyboard ENTER key - on the screen is the unfeasibly large text "YOUR MESSAGE HAS BEEN SENT". The caption says

I IZ IN ZO MUCH TROUBLE NOW!!

Yep, Mr Meyers was in zo much trouble when he wrote this amusing and - cue gasps - *not wholly incorrect* tirade against the precious end of recent American literary fiction.

In fact, if you only lived a little nearer, I'd buy you all a copy for Christmas and we could have so many arguments on Boxing Day over our left-over turkey and mulled wine. It would be fun!

"You can shove your Safran Foer where the sun don't shine"

"David Foster Wallace makes James Joyce look like a haddock"

"James Joyce did look like a haddock"

etc etc

Christy says

Why is it okay for fans of so-called Serious Literature to make fun of genre writers without thinking twice, but when Myers turns the tables and skewers a few "respectable" modern authors people freak out and call him an idiot? If you have a problem with someone telling you they think Stephen King is better at the *craft* of storytelling than Cormac McCarthy, and you think that person should just shut his mouth because he clearly didn't (couldn't?) understand McCarthy as well as you did, you're being kind of an elitist. *A Reader's Manifesto* is an articulate and humorous counter to that elitism, which has ravaged the modern literary world. It's funny and it points out, using fine examples, the kind of crap that is being lauded as impressive writing these days.

I've noticed a couple of trends about the negative reactions to "A Reader's Manifesto":

1. That people think it is sleazy for Myers to cherrypick and mock certain passages from these authors' books

2. That people scoff at it because, after all, why should we need someone's permission to decide what literature to read/like? Why should we allow Myers to tell us what is and is not worthy of our time?

To number 1, I would invite a re-reading of the text (I know you won't do it, because you've already decided to hate it, probably because you like one or more of the authors he attacks). He makes it pretty clear that he took pains to avoid that kind of sleaziness, because it runs the risk of damaging the credibility of the entire theory. But some have decided to ignore that and attack him for the very thing he did not do. For them, I have no words. It's kind of a straw-man argument, which is annoying (I'm aware that my whole review reeks of straw-man, actually, but I don't care). Why waste my breath re-explaining that Myers analyzed passages that had already been singled out as praise-worthy by critics, thus analyzing, not the authors' "worst" moments, but moments that had been touted as their best? Okay, so I had a few words. So anyway, before you get your panties in a twist, I might mention that it's not so much an attack on the authors as it is the critics. I have not read all of the books mentioned, but I must say, the passages I've read are shockingly bad. Who are they speaking to if this is what they present as enticement?

As for number 2, the concern that people only like this essay because they like being told what is and is not okay to like...I will bring it home and say that the fundamental point of "A Reader's Manifesto" is that we should read what we enjoy, and I, for one, enjoy reading things that agree with my own preconceived notions of what makes literature enjoyable. It's fun to laugh at bad writing, just like it's fun to laugh at typos on menus and other signage. And I like to have fun. So there.

Meika says

All you need to read from this book is in the article: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200107...>

The article is well worth reading. I thought his tone was scathing, and he attacks the work of a few critically acclaimed authors - but his defense for doing so is sound. His criticism extends to the publishing industry, and the literary elite... who propagate literary crap.

If you're looking for an excuse to skip over the critically acclaimed snoozers, this is a great set of ideas to use in your defense.

I don't like that he is unkind about it. Maybe he has to be, but his openly incendiary tone turns what should be an open and free-thinking discussion on modern literary aesthetics into a throw-down.

For a good opposition viewpoint to the article, which is equally well worth reading, see the following article: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage...>

Tripp says

A few years back B.R. Myers made a splash with an attack on what passed for greatness in literature and on

the literary elite that sets the standard for taste. In a Reader's Manifesto, he includes his original essay along with criticisms of the essay and his response. In occasionally waspish but just as often exasperated tones, Myers attacks the prose style of Proulx, DeLillo, McCarthy, Auster, Moody and others. This means you might, as I did, laugh at some of these sections and feel sheepish in others. I nodded vigorously at his attacks on DeLillo (he uses *White Noise* which I thought was flat out terrible,) but then got into a huff about his review of McCarthy whose prose I do like.

His attacks on the weakness of the prose (over-wrought, meaningless, retreads of better recent works, humorless and so on) are entertaining, but they do not provide the heart of the book. The main target of the book is the world of the literary review, which praises this prose and heaps scorn on those that don't disagree, essentially using the "they don't get it" argument.

Like the foreign policy and finance establishments, the elites are careful not to be too critical of their review subjects, as they often are hoping for good treatment themselves. The critics publish novels and hope for nice notices and the novelist becomes critics themselves and further praise their friends.

Myers would have readers read the books they like and feel free to call crap crap. He paints the modern literary world as a throwback to the medieval church, where the mysteries of the texts could only be deciphered by the literary priesthood and the readers should just read as they are told. Myers notes an infuriating exchange between Oprah Winfrey and Toni Morrison where Winfrey says she had to re-read and puzzle out certain paragraphs, Morrison replies that she is describing "reading." Myers counters that what she is describing is "bad writing." If you have been flummoxed by seemingly opaque prose, then you will likely enjoy this book.

Melissa Milazzo says

Nothing short of amazing. I've been cringing at Paul Auster and Annie Proulx for years now, unable to finish their works and feeling guilty that I couldn't "appreciate" what was being touted as THE best prose of our era. To me it seemed, well. . . boring. This little manifesto provides a clear, well argued call for readers to trust their own judgement as to what constitutes Serious Literature, or at very least, to demand a good explanation as to why a book should be considered as such.

Highly recommended.

Jason says

Although I don't come from a family of bibliophiles I have been an avid reader of both fiction and nonfiction since I got my first library card at age 6, and for the larger part of my life I focused on what I later learned was called "genre" fiction, particularly science fiction and fantasy. It was only as a bookseller (and SF/fantasy bookbuyer) at a now defunct bookstore in San Francisco that I learned about the distinction between genre and "literary" (i.e., "Serious") fiction. Back in those days (before I challenged myself with genuine literary masterpieces like *Moby Dick*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Don Quixote*, *Candide*, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, *Catch-22*, *Zorba the Greek*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, *The Deptford Trilogy*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, among others) I believed the hype that the best of the SF I enjoyed was by definition inferior to all those "literary" award-winners (like this gem) over which the fiction mavens fawned, but which left me cold.

A couple years later, while working at another (less pretentious) bookstore, I skimmed with amusement this slim and articulate polemic, and I wondered if perhaps it had been those mavens, rather than me, who had been the clueless ones. After picking it up at a library sale today and devouring it in one laugh-filled session, I know there is no "perhaps" about it; truly the emperor of literary fiction has no clothes. Whereas I had only my relatively limited literary education and naive personal tastes to guide me, and so chose to read and appreciate novels based on their plots, characters, and storytelling, the "aficionados" were guided in their collective opinions by a self-selected cadre of writers and reviewers who evidently sought to convince themselves and their readers that, because they liked books that were pretentious, they weren't "pedestrians" and "philistines."

Contrary to the many negative responses this manifesto received (most of which apparently came from people who either didn't read it or can't follow an argument) Myers doesn't reflexively praise genre crap and poo-poo well crafted literature in an attempt at reactionary, faux populism. Nor does he bewail books that are challenging and that aim for more than just entertainment. Instead he points out—using the very excerpts of poor prose that have earned breathless accolades from the critics—that much of what passes for serious modern American literature is masturbatory pretension, that the contemporary American literary scene is something of a circle jerk, and that readers should trust themselves rather than outsource their opinions to these wankers.

[A]t least the "genre" readers realize that the text is more important than the writer, and they trust solely in their own response to it. Try telling them that someone may not write great thrillers but is still a great thriller writer, or that someone has earned the right to bore them for their own good, or that they should read a half-bad novel because it was ambitiously conceived, and they'll laugh. (125)

Lobstergirl says

Scathing and delightful, but apparently it punctured few egos, as its targets (pretentious novelists and the critics who love them) were deaf to Myers' complaints. Myers should issue a new version every five years, critiquing five new novelists.

At the risk of falling into "the cult of the sentence" that he decries, here's one of my favorite of Myers':

The further we get from our cowboy past the loonier becomes the hippophilia we attribute to it.

(from a critique of *All the Pretty Horses*.)

Sentimental Surrealist says

Whenever I hear the word "pretentious," I reach for my revolver.

Algernon says

Even if you disagree with Myers's thesis, that the literary establishment is puffing up the reputation of bad books and thus degrading the popularity of reading; and even if you disagree with his criticisms of the writers he singles out; grant him that his thesis is clear, heartfelt, and supported with plenty of examples both positive and negative.

This is a book about prose, and addresses the question of what really is good prose, and what isn't. In the course of this, he is suggesting that perhaps the emperor of literary respectability, the elite that looks down on "genre" fiction and elevates bad form over substance, has no clothes.

Shrewdly, Myers counteracts the defense that his examples are unfairly taken out of context, by favoring excerpts that had been singled out for *praise* by prominent book critics.

The book is well-argued and witty, and the author is honest about the book's perspective: it is your taste that matters, not the *New York Times's*, and certainly not his. You may emerge still enjoying Paul Auster or Don DeLillo, and that's fine with Myers.

You may also emerge with some interesting old novels you haven't heard about or forgot about that you may also enjoy. That's a net gain, over and above the remarkable achievement that Myers has written a book of literary criticism that encourages readers to question their assumptions, to read and think for themselves.

Now why would some people disdain that outcome?

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

My rant about this book and its approach is based on the Atlantic article.

The Attack on Pretentiousness

The article was presented as "an attack on the growing pretentiousness of American literary prose".

Many of us would agree with the need for such an attack.

But every attack must come from a position of its own, and sometimes you have to work out whether you agree with the origin of the attack, before you agree with the attack itself.

So, from what point of view is BRM attacking his victims?

The Victims and Their Crimes

Here is the list of victim authors, together with their crimes:

* Annie Proulx ("Evocative" Prose)

* Cormac McCarthy ("Muscular" Prose)

- * Don DeLillo ("Edgy" Prose)
- * Paul Auster ("Spare" Prose)
- * David Guterson (Generic "Literary" Prose)

Myers Attacks

There might be 20,000 reasons to attack their prose, but what were BRM's reasons?

What style of prose does he posit as an alternative?

What positive emerges out of his rant?

What I Like About What I Like

Here are some of the characteristics and qualities that BRM rates highly:

- * popular storytellers
- * accessible, fast-moving stories written in unaffected prose
- * an excellent "read" or a "page turner"
- * a strong element of action
- * a natural prose style
- * unaffected English
- * a plain, honest man, just the author to read on the subway
- * the reader is addressed as the writer's equal
- * a natural cadence and vocabulary
- * the figurative language (like something seen through bad glass) is fresh and vivid without seeming to strain for originality
- * movie westerns
- * epic language only in moderation
- * A good novelist, of course, would have written the scene more persuasively in the first place. Far stranger things happen in Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842), but we don't need an academic intermediary to argue their plausibility or to explain what Gogol was getting at
- * A thriller must thrill or it is worthless; this is as true now as it ever was

* genre-ish suspense

* make sense

* more of a storytelling instinct than many novelists today

* Time wasted on these books is time that could be spent reading something fun. When DeLillo describes a man's walk as a "sort of explanatory shuffle ... a comment on the literature of shuffles" (Underworld), I feel nothing; the wordplay is just too insincere, too patently meaningless. But when Vladimir Nabokov talks of midges "continuously darning the air in one spot," or the "square echo" of a car door slamming, I feel what Philip Larkin wanted readers of his poetry to feel: "Yes, I've never thought of it that way, but that's how it is." The pleasure that accompanies this sensation is almost addictive; for many, myself included, it's the most important reason to read both poetry and prose

* convincing

* As Christopher Isherwood once said to Cyril Connolly, real talent manifests itself not in a writer's affectation but "in the exactness of his observation [and] the justice of his situations."

* British psychological thrillers written in careful, unaffectedly poetic prose

* Suspense

* the old American scorn for pretension

Food for Thought

Hopefully, there is some food for future thought in this list.

However, ultimately, this attack reminds me of the year I watched 37 Alfred Hitchcock films in a row and thought that everything else in film, literature, work, life and girlfriends was absolute crap.

Luckily, I kept my thoughts to myself.

If I hadn't, hopefully I would have tried to praise Hitchcock, instead of just slamming everybody else in my life.

In other words, if BRM had had the guts of his vision, he would have stated the positive of his alternative, instead of heaping negative shit on his victims.

And if he had been genuine, he would have admitted that he loved B movies and pulp fiction more than he loved any definition of literary fiction whatsoever.

Good luck to the man, but just because he loves black jelly beans doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with purple ones.

Except he needed to attack, perhaps discriminately, perhaps indiscriminately, in order to sell copies of the Atlantic and his book.

A.J. says

I've been fascinated for a long time by the apparent war between so-called 'mainstream' and 'literary' fiction. What this little work does is add ammunition to a thought I've long suspected might be true: literary fiction (as opposed to genre fiction [anything that isn't painful to read]) is pretty much the evolution of a high school popularity contest. Instead of prissy prom queens that wear too much mascara, we've got the literatti, a group of college-educated elitists who sit around at coffee bars pretending to like books that nobody with a central nervous system could possibly like (these are the same people that still think being a Democrat is edgy). And in the same breath that they hold up plodding, unreadable modern classics as the divine rationale for reading, they bitch and moan about why their books don't sell.

Anyway, more to the book—er—manifesto, it's a quick read, darn entertaining, and a reassurance for someone like me who walked through the oaken doors of academia with the preconception that professors weren't really the yardstick by which I ought to determine worthwhile literature. It's a good lesson for aspiring writers, too.

It waxes long with examples, so a skim would be sufficient to get the point (which is ironic), but definitely worth the time for English students, writers of all kinds, and anyone generally interested in fiction

Todd says

This book dragged me through several emotions. First, I was a bit angry that Myers attacked several works of authors whom I admire (e.g. Cormac McCarthy). Second, Myers made some valid points which I didn't want to initially accept, thus denial. Third, he kept from being *ad hominem* and focused his attacks on the writing style, use of grammar, and sentence structure of various writers. This was a relief, since other critics I have read usually tend to be brash about the author because of the style, etc.

While I enjoyed this book, and walked away with a lot to think about, it still left me with a bitter taste. I realize that certain features of literature are objective: syntax, use of words, sentence structure, grammar, literary devices, etc. But, literature is also relative to tastes, preferences, and opinions. The first time I ever read Cormac McCarthy, his grammar bothered me. He used too many sentence fragments, he put no quotation marks around his dialogue, and his work was peppered with run-on sentences (Blood Meridian was my first attempt at his work back in 1987). But I was able to overlook these things and try and enjoy the story (I should note that it took me several attempts to get through Blood Meridian).

Myers makes some good points about flowery sentences that do not make sense, and literary devices that do not work, and words that seem superfluous, etc. And I do not disagree with him about these things. However, most of his focus seemed to be on sections of works, certain paragraphs, or sentences. These things are important, but there is more to a novel than merely how a few sentences or paragraphs are arranged and sound. For instance, in McCarthy's novel *The Road* there are a lot of sentence fragments. But as I was reading the story, those fragments began to make sense in light of the story McCarthy was telling; about a fragmented society, burned and torn. To me, this actually added to the story (although, if this was not McCarthy's intent, and the fragments were out of mere laziness or poor writing skills, I might jump the fence and shout along with Myers. But, I can't help but think that McCarthy used fragments deliberately).

Anyway, this book is worth reading. And Myers is skillful in his criticism. And, for that I appreciated the

work. But keep in mind, he is being very critical of a handful of award winning novelists, and for that this book might stir your anger.
