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The Atlantic Monthly | July/August 2001

BOOKS & CRITICS

BOOKS

A READER'S MANIFESTO

An attack on the growing pretentiousness of American literary prose

BY B. R. MYERS

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othing gives me the feeling of having been born several decades too late quite like the modern "literary" best seller. Give me a time-tested masterpiece or what critics patronizingly call a fun read—*Sister Carrie* or just plain *Carrie*. Give me anything, in fact, as long as it doesn't have a recent prize jury's seal of approval on the front and a clutch of precious raves on the back. In the bookstore I'll sometimes sample what all the fuss is about, but one glance at the affected prose—"furious dabs of tulips stuttering," say, or "in the dark before the day yet was"—and I'm hightailing it to the friendly black spines of the Penguin Classics.

I realize that such a declaration must sound perversely ungrateful to the literary establishment. For years now editors, critics, and prize jurors, not to mention novelists themselves, have been telling the rest of us how lucky we are to be alive and reading in these exciting times. The absence of a dominant school of criticism, we are told, has given rise to an extraordinary variety of styles, a smorgasbord with something for every palate. As the novelist and critic David Lodge has remarked, in summing up a lecture about the coexistence of fabulation, minimalism, and other movements, "Everything is in and nothing is out." Coming from insiders to whom a term like "fabulation" actually means something, this hyperbole is excusable, even endearing; it's as if a team of hotel chefs were getting excited about their assortment of cabbages. From a reader's standpoint, however, "variety" is the last word that comes to mind, and more appears to be "out" than ever before. More than half a century ago popular storytellers like Christopher Isherwood and Somerset Maugham were ranked among the finest novelists of their time, and were considered no less literary, in their own way, than Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Today any accessible, fast-moving story written in unaffected prose is deemed to be "genre fiction"—at best an excellent "read" or a "page turner," but never literature with a capital L. An author with a track record of blockbusters may find the publication of a new work treated like a pop-culture event, but most "genre" novels are lucky to get an inch in the back pages of *The New York Times Book Review*.

Everything written in self-conscious, writerly prose, on the other hand, is now considered to be "literary fiction"—not necessarily *good* literary fiction, mind you, but always worthier of respectful attention than even the best-written thriller or romance. It is these works that receive full-page critiques, often one in the Sunday book-review section and another in the same newspaper during the week. It is these works, and these works only, that make the annual short lists of award committees. The "literary" writer need not be an intellectual one. Jeering at status-conscious consumers, bandying about words like "ontological" and "nominalism," chanting *Red River* hokum as if it were from a lost book of the Old Testament: this is what passes for profundity in novels these days. Even the most

obvious triteness is acceptable, provided it comes with a postmodern wink. What is not tolerated is a strong element of action—unless, of course, the idiom is obtrusive enough to keep suspense to a minimum. Conversely, a natural prose style can be pardoned if a novel's pace is slow enough, as was the case with Ha Jin's aptly titled *Waiting*, which won the National Book Award (1999) and the PEN/Faulkner Award (2000).

The dualism of literary versus genre has all but routed the old trinity of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow, which was always invoked tongue-in-cheek anyway. Writers who would once have been called middlebrow are now assigned, depending solely on their degree of verbal affectation, to either the literary or the genre camp. David Guterson is thus granted Serious Writer status for having buried a murder mystery under sonorous tautologies (*Snow Falling on Cedars*, 1994), while Stephen King, whose *Bag of Bones* (1998) is a more intellectual but less pretentious novel, is still considered to be just a very talented genre storyteller.

Everything is "in," in other words, as long as it keeps the reader at a respectfully admiring distance. This may seem an odd trend when one considers that the reading skills of American college students, who go on to form the main audience for contemporary Serious Fiction, have declined markedly since the 1970s. Shouldn't a dumbed-down America be more willing to confer literary status on straightforward prose, instead of encouraging affectation and obscurity?

Not necessarily. In Aldous Huxley's *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) a character named Mr. Cardan makes a point that may explain today's state of affairs.

Really simple, primitive people like their poetry to be as ... artificial and remote from the language of everyday affairs as possible. We reproach the eighteenth century with its artificiality. But the fact is that *Beowulf* is couched in a diction fifty times more complicated and unnatural than that of [Pope's poem] *Essay on Man*.

Mr. Cardan comes off in the novel as a bit of a windbag, but there is at least anecdotal evidence to back up his observation. We know, for example, that European peasants were far from pleased when their clergy stopped mystifying them with Latin. Edward Pockocke (1604-1691) was an English preacher and linguist whose sermons, according to the *Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes*, "were always composed in a plain style upon practical subjects, carefully avoiding all show and ostentation of learning."

But from this very exemplary caution not to amuse his hearers (contrary to the common method then in vogue) with what they could not understand, some of them took occasion to entertain very contemptible thoughts of his learning ... So that one of his Oxford friends, as he traveled through Childrey, inquiring for his diversion of some of the people, Who was their minister, and how they liked him? received this answer: "Our parson is one Mr. Pockocke, a plain honest man. But Master," said they, "he is no Latiner."

Don't get me wrong—I'm not comparing anyone to a peasant. But neither am I prepared to believe that the decline of American literacy has affected everyone but fans of Serious Fiction. When reviewers and prize jurors tout a repetitive style as "the last word in gnomic control," or a jumble of unsustained metaphor as "lyrical" writing, it is obvious that they, too, are having difficulty understanding what they read. Would Mr. Cardan be puzzled to find them in the thrall of writers who are deliberately obscure, or who chant in strange cadences? I doubt it. And what could be more natural than that the same elite should scorn unaffected English as "workmanlike prose"—an idiom incompatible with real literature? Stephen King's a plain, honest man, just the author to read on the subway. But Master, he is no Latiner.

If the new dispensation were to revive good "Mandarin" writing—to use the term coined by the British critic Cyril Connolly for the prose of writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce—then I would be the last to complain. But what we are getting today is a remarkably crude form of affectation: a prose so repetitive, so elementary in its syntax, and so numbing in its overuse of wordplay that it often demands less concentration than the average "genre" novel. Even today's obscurity is easy—the sort of gibberish that stops all thought dead

in its tracks. The best way to demonstrate this in the space at hand is to take a look at some of the most highly acclaimed styles of contemporary writing.

"EVOCATIVE" PROSE

It has become fashionable, especially among female novelists, to exploit the license of poetry while claiming exemption from poetry's rigorous standards of precision and polish. Edna O'Brien is one of the writers who do this, but Annie Proulx is better known, thanks in large part to her best seller *The Shipping News* (1993). In 1999 Proulx wrapped up the acknowledgments in a short-story anthology titled *Close Range* by thanking her children, in characteristic prose, "for putting up with my strangled, work-driven ways."

That's right: "strangled, work-driven ways." *Work-driven* is fine, of course, except for its note of self-approval, but *strangled ways* makes no sense on any

From *Atlantic Unbound*:

Interviews: "Passion's Progress" (April 20, 2000)
Edna O'Brien talks about how her new book, *Wild Decembers*—in which heartache is prefigured by a tractor—fits in with her own "inner gnaw."

Interviews: "Imagination Is Everything" (November 12, 1997)
A Conversation with E. Annie Proulx.

level. Besides, how can anything, no matter how abstract, be strangled and work-driven at the same time? Maybe the author was referring to something along the lines of a nightly smackdown with the Muse, but only she knows for sure. Luckily for Proulx, many readers today expect literary language to be so remote from normal speech as to be routinely incomprehensible. "*Strangled ways*," they murmur to themselves in baffled admiration. "Now who but a Writer would think of that!"

The short stories in *Close Range* are full of this kind of writing. "[The Half-Skinned Steer](#)" (which first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in November of 1997), starts with this sentence:

In the long unfurling of his life, from tight-wound kid hustler in a wool suit riding the train out of Cheyenne to geriatric limper in this spooled-out year, Mero had kicked down thoughts of the place where he began, a so-called ranch on strange ground at the south hinge of the Big Horns.

Like so much modern prose, this demands to be read quickly, with just enough attention to register the bold use of words. Slow down, and things fall apart. Proulx seems to have intended a unified conceit, but *unfurling*, or spreading out, as of a flag or an umbrella, clashes disastrously with the images of thread that follow. (Maybe "unraveling" didn't sound fancy enough.) A life is *unfurled*, a hustler is *wound tight*, a year is *spooled out*, and still the metaphors continue, with *kicked down*—which might work in less crowded surroundings, though I doubt it—and *hinge*, which is cute if you've never seen a hinge or a map of the Big Horns. And this is just the first sentence!

Proulx once acknowledged that she tends to "compress" too much into short stories, but her wordplay is just as relentless in her novels; she seems unaware that all innovative language derives its impact from the contrast to straightforward English. It is common to find her devoting more than one metaphor or simile to the same image. "Furious dabs of tulips stuttering in gardens." "An apron of sound lapped out of each dive." "The ice mass leaned as though to admire its reflection in the waves, leaned until the southern tower was at the angle of a pencil in a writing hand, the northern tower reared over it like a lover." "The children rushed at Quoyle, gripped him as a falling man clutches the window ledge, as a stream of electric particles arcs a gap and completes a circuit." In one brief paragraph in *The Shipping News* a man's body is likened to a loaf of bread, his

flesh to a casement, his head to a melon, his facial features to fingertips, his eyes to the color of plastic, and his chin to a shelf.

This isn't all bad, of course; the bit about the ice mass admiring its reflection is effective. And every so often Proulx lets a really good image stand alone: "The dining room, crowded with men, was lit by red bulbs that gave them a look of being roasted alive in their chairs." Such hits are so rare, however, that after a while the reader stops trying to think about what the metaphors mean. Maybe this is the effect that Proulx is aiming for; she seems to want to keep us on the surface of the text at all times, as if she were afraid that we might forget her quirky narratorial presence for even a line or two.

The decline of American prose since the 1950s is nowhere more apparent than in the decline of the long sentence. Today anything longer than two or three lines is likely to be a simple list of attributes or images. Proulx relies heavily on such sentences, which often call to mind a bad photographer hurrying through a slide show. In this scene from *Accordion Crimes* (1996) a woman has just had her arms sliced off by a piece of sheet metal.

She stood there, amazed, rooted, seeing the grain of the wood of the barn clapboards, paint jawed away by sleet and driven sand, the unconcerned swallows darting and reappearing with insects clasped in their beaks looking like mustaches, the wind-ripped sky, the blank windows of the house, the old glass casting blue swirled reflections at her, the fountains of blood leaping from her stumped arms, even, in the first moment, hearing the wet thuds of her forearms against the barn and the bright sound of the metal striking.

The last thing Proulx wants is for you to start wondering whether someone with blood spurting from severed arms is going to stand *rooted* long enough to see more than one bird disappear, catch an insect, and reappear, or whether the whole scene is not in bad taste of the juvenile variety. Instead you are meant to read the sentence in one mental breath and succumb, under the sheer accumulation of words, to a spurious impression of what Walter Kendrick, in an otherwise mixed review in *The New York Times*, called "brilliant prose" (and in reference to this very excerpt, besides).

Another example:

Partridge black, small, a restless traveler across the slope of life, an all-night talker; Mercalia, second wife of Partridge and the color of a brown feather on dark water, a hot intelligence; Quoyle large, white, stumbling along, going nowhere.

Black, small, large, white: these are lazy, inexpressive adjectives. For all its faux precision, that feather simile is ultimately meaningless: there are too many possible browns for it to evoke whatever shade Proulx had in mind (even with *dark water* involved). A more concise syntax would show up the poverty of this description at once, but by stringing a dozen attributes together she ensures that each is seen only in the context of a dazzlingly "pyrotechnic" whole.

Since Proulx is a novelist and not a poet, her need to draw attention to her presence throughout the text poses certain challenges. How can she keep the focus on her style even during the nuts-and-bolts work of exposition? How can she get to the next purple passage as fast as possible without resorting to straightforwardness, that dreaded idiom of the genre hack? Her solution: an obtrusive—and therefore "literary"—telegraphese: "Made a show of taking Quoyle back as a special favor. Temporary ... Fired, car wash attendant, rehired. Fired, cabdriver, rehired." Not even Proulx's fans will go so far as to praise this aspect of her writing, but they probably share her impatience to cut to the "lyrical" chase.

Many of Proulx's characters are described almost exclusively in terms of regional or ethnic origin. From *Accordion Crimes*:

[Chris] wore a pair of dark glasses and began to run with a bunch of *cholos*, especially with a rough called "Venas," a black mole on his left nostril, someone who poured money into his white Buick with the crushed velvet upholstery, whose father, Paco Robelo, the whole Robelo family, were rumored to be connected with *narcotraficantes*.

Venas is one of many characters to be introduced in a flurry of words and then dropped from the narrative. We hear no more of this Latin stereotype until several years and pages later, when the author, as if realizing she didn't need him in the first place, notes in an offhand sentence that he was found clubbed to death. We are not meant to care who did it or why, or how the death affects Chris. So why did we need to know the exact location of the man's mole, or his father's first name? If the lapping aprons are fake Dylan Thomas, an effort to mystify readers into thinking they are reading poetry, then this is fake Dos Passos, easy detail flung in for the illusion of panoramic sweep. Alas, Proulx is only cheating herself. By putting everything in sharp focus she lessens the impact of her vivid sense of locale. Some of the personal details, too, especially in *The Shipping News*, are so brilliant that they cry out for more breathing room—such as the information, which is somehow both funny and sad at the same time, that a man's cheap wet socks have dyed his toenails blue.

Of course, one can hardly blame Proulx for thinking, "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" Her novel *Postcards* (1992) received the PEN/Faulkner Award; *The Shipping News* won both the National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. Her writing, like that of so many other novelists today, is touted as "evocative" and "compelling." The reason these vague attributes have become *the* literary catchwords of our time, even more popular than "raw" and "angry" were in the 1950s, is that they allow critics to praise a writer's prose without considering its effect on the reader. It is easier to call writing like Proulx's lyrically evocative or poetically compelling than to figure out what it evokes, or what it compels the reader to think and feel. How can *Close Range* really impart a sense of life in Wyoming when everything—from the loneliness of the plains to the grisly violence it actuates—is described in the same razzle-dazzle style, the same jumpy rhythms? And why should we care about characters whose gruesome deaths and injuries are treated only as a pretext for more wordplay?

The critics' admiration for Proulx reflects a growing consensus that the best prose is that which yields the greatest number of standout sentences, regardless of whether or not they fit the context. (In *The New York Times* the critic Richard Eder quoted with approval a flashy excerpt from *Close Range* about a car trip that the characters themselves do not appear to find remarkable at all.) Proulx's sentences are often praised for having a life of their own: they "dance and coil, slither and pounce" (K. Francis Tanabe, *The Washington Post*), "every single sentence surprises and delights and just bowls you over" (Carolyn See, *The Washington Post*), a Proulx sentence "whistles and snaps" (Dan Cryer, *Newsday*). In 1999 Tanabe kicked off the *Post's* online discussion of Proulx's work by asking participants to join him in "choosing your favorite sentence(s) from any of the stories in *Close Range*." I doubt that any reviewer in our more literate past would have expected people to have favorite sentences from a work of prose fiction. A favorite character or scene, sure; a favorite line of dialogue, maybe; but not a favorite sentence. We have to read a great book more than once to realize how consistently good the prose is, because the first time around, and often even the second, we're too involved in the story to notice. If Proulx's fiction is so compelling, why are its fans more impressed by individual sentences than by the whole?

"MUSCULAR" PROSE

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he masculine counterpart to the ladies' prose poetry is a bold, Melvillean stiltedness, better known to readers of book reviews as "muscular" prose. Charles Frazier, Frederick Busch, and many other novelists write in this idiom, but the acknowledged granddaddy of them all is Cormac McCarthy. In fairness, it must be said that McCarthy's style was once very different. *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), his debut novel, is a masterpiece of careful and restrained writing. An excerpt from the first page:

Far down the blazing strip of concrete a small shapeless mass had emerged and was struggling toward him. It loomed steadily, weaving and grotesque like something seen through bad glass, gained briefly the form and solidity of a pickup truck, whipped past and receded into the same liquid shape by which it came.

There's not a word too many in there, and although the tone is hardly conversational, the reader is addressed as the writer's equal, in a natural cadence and vocabulary. Note also how the figurative language (*like something seen through bad glass*) is fresh and vivid without seeming to strain for originality.

Now read this from McCarthy's *The Crossing*

(1994), part of the acclaimed Border Trilogy: "He ate the last of the eggs and wiped the plate with the tortilla and ate the tortilla and drank the last of the coffee and wiped his mouth and looked up and thanked her."

Thriller writers know enough to save this kind of syntax for fast-moving scenes: "... and his shout of fear came as a bloody gurgle and he died, and Wolff felt nothing" (Ken Follett, *The Key to Rebecca*, 1980). In McCarthy's sentence the unpunctuated flow of words bears no relation to the slow, methodical nature of what is being described. And why repeat *tortilla*? When Hemingway wrote "small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers" ("In Another Country," 1927), he was, as David Lodge points out in *The Art of Fiction* (1992), creating two sharp images in the simplest way he could. The repetition of *wind*, in subtly different senses, heightens the immediacy of the referent while echoing other reminders of Milan's windiness in the fall.

McCarthy's second *tortilla*, in contrast, is there, like the syntax, to draw attention to the writer himself. For all the sentence tells us, it might as well be this: "He ate the last of the eggs. He wiped the plate with the tortilla and ate it. He drank the last of the coffee and wiped his mouth. He looked up and thanked her." Had McCarthy written *that*, the critics would have taken him to task for his "workmanlike" prose. But the first version is no more informative or pleasing to the ear than the second, which can at least be read aloud in a natural fashion. (McCarthy is famously averse to public readings.) All the original does is say, "I express myself differently from you, therefore I am a Writer."

The same message is conveyed by the stern biblical tone that runs through all of McCarthy's recent novels. Parallelisms and pseudo-archaic formulations abound: "They caught up and set out each day in the dark before the day yet was and they ate cold meat and biscuit and made no fire"; "and they would always be so and never be otherwise"; "the captain wrote on nor did he look up"; "there rode no soul save he," and so forth.

The reader is meant to be carried along on the stream of language. In the *New York Times* review of *The Crossing*, Robert Hass praised the effect: "It is a matter of straight-on writing, a veering accumulation of compound sentences, stinginess with commas, and a witching repetition of words ... Once this style is established, firm, faintly hypnotic, the crispness and sinuousness of the sentences ... gather to a magic." The key word here is "accumulation." Like Proulx and so many others today, McCarthy relies more on barrages of hit-and-miss verbiage than on careful use of just the right words.

While inside the vaulting of the ribs between his knees the darkly meated heart pumped of who's will and the blood pulsed and the bowels shifted in their massive blue convolutions of who's will and the stout thighbones and knee and cannon and the tendons like flaxen hawsers that drew and flexed and drew and flexed at their articulations of who's will all sheathed and muffled in the flesh and the hooves that stove wells in the morning groundmist and the head turning side to side and the great slaving keyboard of his teeth and the hot globes of his eyes where the world burned.
(*All the Pretty Horses*, 1992)

This may get Hass's darkly meated heart pumping, but it's really just bad poetry formatted to exploit the lenient standards of modern prose. The obscurity of *who's will*, which has an unfortunate Dr. Seussian ring to it, is meant to bully readers into thinking that the author's mind operates on a plane higher than their own—a plane where it isn't ridiculous to eulogize the shifts in a horse's bowels.

As a fan of movie westerns, I refuse to quibble with the myth that a wild landscape can bestow epic

significance on the lives of its inhabitants. But novels tolerate epic language only in moderation. To record with the same somber majesty every aspect of a cowboy's life, from a knife fight to his lunchtime burrito, is to create what can only be described as kitsch. Here we learn that out west even a hangover is something special.

[They] walked off in separate directions through the chaparral to stand spraddlelegged clutching their knees and vomiting. The browsing horses jerked their heads up. It was no sound they'd ever heard before. In the gray twilight those retchings seemed to echo like the calls of some rude provisional species loosed upon that waste. Something imperfect and malformed lodged in the heart of being. A thing smirking deep in the eyes of grace itself like a gorgon in an autumn pool.
(*All the Pretty Horses*)

It is a rare passage that can make you look up, wherever you may be, and wonder if you are being subjected to a diabolically thorough *Candid Camera* prank. I can just go along with the idea that horses might mistake human retching for the call of wild animals. But "wild animals" isn't epic enough: McCarthy must blow smoke about *some rude provisional species*, as if your average quadruped had impeccable table manners and a pension plan. Then he switches from the horses' perspective to the narrator's, though just what *something imperfect and malformed* refers to is unclear. The last half sentence only deepens the confusion. Is the *thing smirking deep in the eyes of grace* the same thing that is *lodged in the heart of being*? And what is a *gorgon* doing in a *pool*? Or is it peering into it? And why an *autumn* pool? I doubt if McCarthy can explain any of this; he probably just likes the way it sounds.

No novelist with a sense of the ridiculous would write such nonsense. Although his characters sometimes rib one another, McCarthy is among the most humorless writers in American history. In this excerpt the subject is horses.

He said that the souls of horses mirror the souls of men more closely than men suppose and that horses also love war. Men say they only learn this but he said that no creature can learn that which his heart has no shape to hold ... Lastly he said that he had seen the souls of horses and that it was a terrible thing to see. He said that it could be seen under certain circumstances attending the death of a horse because the horse shares a common soul and its separate life only forms it out of all horses and makes it mortal ... Finally John Grady asked him if it were not true that should all horses vanish from the face of the earth the soul of the horse would not also perish for there would be nothing out of which to replenish it but the old man only said that it was pointless to speak of there being no horses in the world for God would not permit such a thing. (*All the Pretty Horses*)

The further we get from our cowboy past, the loonier becomes the hippophilia we attribute to it. More to the point, especially considering *The New York Times's* praise of *All the Pretty Horses* for its "realistic dialogue," is the stiltedness with which the conversation is reproduced. The cowboys are supposed to be talking to a Mexican in Spanish, which is a stretch to begin with, but from the tone in which the conversation is set down you'd think it was ancient Hebrew. And shouldn't Grady satisfy our curiosity by finding out what a horse's soul looks like, instead of pursuing a hypothetical point of equine theology? You half expect him to ask how many horses' souls can fit on the head of a pin.

All the Pretty Horses

received the National Book Award in 1992. "Not until now," the judges wrote in their fatuous citation, "has the unhuman world been given its own holy canon." What a difference a pseudo-biblical style makes; this so-called canon has little more to offer than the conventional belief that horses, like dogs, serve us well enough to merit exemption from an otherwise sweeping disregard for animal life. (No one ever sees a cow's soul.) McCarthy's fiction may be less fun than the "genre" western, but its world view is much the same. So is the cast of characters: the quiet cowboys, the women who "like to see a man eat," the howling savages. (In fairness to the western: McCarthy's depiction of Native Americans in *Blood Meridian* [1985] is far more offensive than anything in Louis L' Amour.) The critics, however, are too much impressed by the muscles of his prose to care about the heart underneath. Even *The Village Voice* has called McCarthy "a master stylist, perhaps without

equal in American letters." Robert Hass wrote much of his review of *The Crossing* in an earnest imitation of McCarthy's style:

The boys travel through this world, tipping their hats, saying "yessir" and "nosir" and "si" and "es verdad" and "claro" to all its potential malice, its half-mad philosophers, as the world washes over and around them, and the brothers themselves come to be as much arrested by the gesture of the quest as the old are by their stores of bitter wisdom and the other travelers, in the middle of life, in various stages of the arc between innocence and experience, by whatever impulses have placed them on the road.

The vagueness of that encomium must annoy McCarthy, who prides himself on the way he tackles "issues of life and death" head on. In interviews he presents himself as a man's man with no time for pansified intellectuals—a literary version, if you will, of Dave Thomas, the smugly parochial old-timer in the Wendy's commercials. It would be both unfair and a little too charitable to suggest that this is just a pose. When McCarthy says of Marcel Proust and Henry James, "I don't understand them. To me, that's not literature," I have a sinking feeling he's telling the truth.

"EDGY" PROSE

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ot all contemporary writing is marked by the Proulx-McCarthy brand of obscurity. Many novels intimidate readers by making them wonder not what the writer is saying but *why* he is saying it. Here, for example, is the opener to Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985).

The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories. The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags, with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints.

This is the sort of writing, full of brand names and wardrobe inventories, that critics like to praise as an "edgy" take on the insanity of modern American life. It's hard to see what is so edgy about describing suburbia as a wasteland of stupefied shoppers, which is something left-leaning social critics have been doing since the 1950s. Still, this is foolproof subject matter for a novelist of limited gifts. If you find the above shopping list fascinating, then DeLillo's your man. If you complain that it's just dull, and that you got the message about a quarter of the way through, he can always counter by saying, "Hey, I don't *make* the all-inclusive, consumption-mad society. I just report on it."

Of course the narrator, a professor called Jack Gladney, can't actually see what's inside the students' bags; he's just trying to be funny. So is there really a caravan of station wagons, or is that also a joke? How much of the above passage, for that matter, are we even supposed to bother visualizing? Similar questions nag at the reader throughout *White Noise*. We are no sooner introduced to Jack and his wife than their conversation marks them as paper-flat contrivances.

"It's the day of the station wagons." ...

"It's not the station wagons I wanted to see. What are the people like? Do the women wear plaid skirts, cable-knit sweaters? Are the men in hacking jackets? What's a hacking jacket?"

No real person would utter those last two questions in sequence. DeLillo's characters talk and act like the aliens in *3rd Rock From the Sun*, which would be fine if we weren't supposed to accept them as dead-on satires of the way we live now. The American supermarket is presented as a haven of womblike contentment, a place where people go to satisfy deep emotional needs. (In a *New York Times* interview after the novel's publication DeLillo elaborated on the theme by comparing supermarkets to churches.) This sort of patronizing nonsense is typical of Consumerland writers; someone should break the news to them that the average shopper feels nothing in a supermarket but the strong urge to get out again. *White Noise* also continues a long intellectual tradition of exaggerating the effects of advertising. Here Steffie, the narrator's young daughter, talks in her sleep.

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

Toyota Celica.

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform ... Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.

DeLillo has said that he wants to impart a sense of the "magic and dread" lurking in our consumer culture, but what a poor job he does of this! There is so little apparent wonder in the girl's words that only a metaphor drawn from recognizable human experience could induce us to share Jack's excitement. Instead we are told of an un-named name carved on a tablet in the sky, and in cuneiform to boot. The effect of all this is so uninvolved, so downright silly, that it baffles even sympathetic readers. It is left to real-life professors to explain the passage in light of what DeLillo has said in interviews and other novels about how people use words to assuage a fear of death. Cornel Bonca, of California State University, writes, "If we see Steffie's outburst as an example of the death-fear speaking *through* consumer jargon, then Jack's wondrous awe will strike us, strange as it may seem, as absolutely appropriate." 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.

In this excerpt from *White Noise*, Jack and his family go shopping.

In the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening.

Could the irony be any less subtle? And the tautology: *mass, plenitude, number; well-being, contentment!* The clumsy echoes: *size, sizes; familiar, family; sense of, sense of; well-being, being!* I wouldn't put it past DeLillo's apologists to claim that this repetition is meant to underscore the superfluity of goods in the supermarket. The fact remains that here, as in the *Toyota Celica* scene, the novel tries to convey the magical appeal of consumerism in prose that is simply flat and tiresome.

At least that paragraph is coherent. Most of the author's thoughts, regardless of which character is speaking them, take the form of disjointed strings of elliptical statements. This must be what satisfies critics that they are in the presence of a challenging writer—but more often than not "the dry shrivelled kernel," to borrow a line from Anne Brontë, "scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut." Here, for example, Jack Gladney tells a woman why he gave his child the name Heinrich.

"I thought it was forceful and impressive ... There's something about German names, the German language, German *things*. I don't know what it is exactly. It's just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course."

"He was on again last night."

"He's always on. We couldn't have television without him."

"They lost the war," she said. "How great could they be?"

"A valid point. But it's not a question of greatness. It's not a question of good and evil. I don't know what it is. Look at it this way. Some people always wear a favorite color. Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It's in this area that my obsessions dwell."

So Gladney thinks there is something forceful about German names. This is such a familiar idea that we naturally assume DeLillo is going to do more with it. Instead he gives us a frivolous non sequitur about television, followed by a clumsy rehashing of the first point. If the narrator's obsessions dwell "in this area," shouldn't he be able to tell us something we don't know, instead of "Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer"?

From the archives:

"An Urban History of Mid-Century America" (October 1997)

A Dantean Novel, to be talked about for years to come. (A review of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*.) By Tom LeClair

Another source of spurious profundity is DeLillo's constant allusions to momentous feelings and portents—allusions that are either left hanging in the air or are conveniently cut short by a narrative pretext. Jack ponders the clutter in his house: "Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding. They make me wary not of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content." What is this *something large in scope and content*

? We are never told. Later Jack registers "floating nuances of being" between him and his stepdaughter. Similar phrases turn up throughout DeLillo's novels; they are perhaps the most consistent element of his style. In *Underworld*

(1997) a man's mouth fills with "the foretaste of massive inner shiftings"; another character senses "some essential streak of self"; the air has "the feel of some auspicious design"; and so on. This is the safe, catchall vagueness of astrologists and palm readers. DeLillo also adds rhetorical questions or other disclaimers to throw his meaning out of focus. Here, to return to *White Noise*, is another of Jack's musings.

"We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot."

Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?

The first and third of those questions are easily answered; after all, we edge nearer death every time we do anything. So why, indeed, does Jack say this? Because DeLillo knew it would seem profoundly original to most of his readers. Then he added those questions to keep the critical minority from charging him with banality.

Interspersed with these ruminations we get long conversations of the who's-on-first? variety. These only

highlight the sameness of the characters' speech. Young and old, male and female, all sound alike.

"What do you want to do?" she said.

"Whatever you want to do."

"I want to do whatever's best for you."

"What's best for me is to please you," I said.

"I want to make you happy, Jack."

"I'm happy when I'm pleasing you."

"I just want to do what you want to do."

"I want to do whatever's best for you."

And so on. To anyone who calls that excruciating, DeLillo might well respond, "That's my whole point! This is communication in Consumerland!" It isn't unlikely, considering how the dialogue loses its logic halfway through, that the whole thing was written only to be skimmed anyway. Like the bursts of brand names that occur throughout the text ("Tegrin, Denorex, Selsun Blue"), this is more evidence of DeLillo's belief—apparently shared by Mark Leyner, Brett Easton Ellis, and others—that writing trite and diffuse prose is a brilliant way to capture the trite and diffuse nature of modern life.

But why should we bother with Consumerland fiction at all, if the effect of reading it is the same queasy fatigue we can get from an evening of channel-surfing? Do we need writers like DeLillo for their insight, which rarely rises above the level of "some people put on a uniform and feel bigger"? Or do we need them for an ironic perspective that most of us acquired in childhood, when we first started sneering at commercials? Yes on both counts, according to the jurors of the National Book Award, who gave *White Noise* the nod in 1985. The novel's inflated reputation remains a clear signal that we should expect less from contemporary fiction than from books written in our grandparents' day. Just as it is now enough for a prose poet to be vaguely "evocative," it is enough for an intellectual writer to point our thoughts in a familiar direction. Jayne Anne Phillips praised *White Noise* in *The New York Times* in 1985 for choosing to "offer no answers" and instead posing "inescapable questions with consummate skill." She also said, "[The narrator of *White Noise*] is one of the most ironic, intelligent, grimly funny voices yet to comment on life in present-day America. This is an America where no one is responsible or in control; all are receptors, receivers of stimuli, consumers." In other words, this is an America that Andy Warhol began commenting on in the 1960s, and in far more coherent fashion. Warhol even *wrote* better, for God's sake. But then, where would Notable New Fiction be without the willing suspension of cultural literacy?

Most of DeLillo's admirers hedge their bets by praising his style—or, my favorite, his "analytic rigor" (Jay McInerney)—while offering only a phrase or two of textual evidence. Phillips at least had the guts to quote a lengthy excerpt from *White Noise* in which a character holds forth on the semiotics of—what else?—the supermarket.

"Everything is concealed in symbolism ... The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation ... code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering ... Not that we would want to ... This is not Tibet ... Tibetans try to see death for what it is. It is the end of attachment to things. This simple truth is hard to fathom. But once we stop denying death, we can proceed calmly to die ... We don't have to cling to life artificially, or to death ... We simply walk toward the sliding doors ... Look how well-lighted everything is ... sealed off ... timeless. Another reason why I think of Tibet. Dying is an art in Tibet ... Chants, numerology, horoscopes,

recitations. Here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think."

That couldn't be rendered any less coherent if the sentences were mixed up in a hat and pulled out again at random. I hasten to add that Phillips made those ellipses herself, in a brave attempt to isolate a logical thought from the original mess. All the same, she presented the above as evidence of DeLillo's "understanding and perception of America's soundtrack." This is the irony of Consumerland fiction: its fans are even more helpless in the presence of authoritative posturing, and even more terrified of saying "I don't understand," than the shoppers they feel so superior to.

Throughout DeLillo's career critics have called his work funny: "absurdly comic ... laugh-out-loud funny" (Michiko Kakutani), "grimly funny" (Phillips). And most seem to agree with Christopher Lehmann-Haupt that *White Noise*

is "one of Don DeLillo's funniest." At the same time, they refuse to furnish examples of what they find so amusing. I have a notion it's things like "Are the men in hacking jackets? What's a hacking jacket?" but it would be unfair to assert this without evidence. Luckily for our purposes, Mark Osteen, in an introduction to a recent edition of the novel, singles out the following conversation as one of the best bits of "sparkling dialogue" in this "very funny" book. It is telling that the same cultural elite that never quite "got" the British comic novel should split its sides at this.

"I will read," she said. "But I don't want you to choose anything that has men inside women, quote-quote, or men entering women. 'I entered her.' 'He entered me.' We're not lobbies or elevators. 'I wanted him inside me,' as if he could crawl completely in, sign the register, sleep, eat, so forth. Can we agree on that? I don't care what these people do as long as they don't enter or get entered."

"Agreed."

"I entered her and began to thrust."

"I'm in total agreement," I said.

"Enter me, enter me, yes, yes."

"Silly usage, absolutely."

"Insert yourself, Rex. I want you inside me, entering hard ..."

And so on. Osteen would probably have groaned at that exchange if it had turned up on *Sex and the City*. The fuss he makes over it in this context is a good example of how pathetically grateful readers can be when they discover—lo and behold!—that a "literary" author is actually trying to entertain them for a change.

"SPARE" PROSE

A

nyone who doubts the declining literacy of book reviewers need only consider how the gabbiest of all prose styles is invariably praised as "lean," "spare," even "minimalist." I am referring, of course, to the Paul Auster School of Writing.

It was dark in the room when he woke up. Quinn could not be sure how much time had passed—whether it was the night of that day or the night of the next. It was even possible, he thought, that it was not night at all. Perhaps it was merely dark inside the room, and outside, beyond the window, the sun was shining. For several moments he considered getting up and going

to the window to see, but then he decided it did not matter. If it was not night now, he thought, then night would come later. That was certain, and whether he looked out the window or not, the answer would be the same. On the other hand, if it was in fact night here in New York, then surely the sun was shining somewhere else. In China, for example, it was no doubt mid-afternoon, and the rice farmers were mopping sweat from their brows. Night and day were no more than relative terms; they did not refer to an absolute condition. At any given moment it was always both. The only reason we did not know it was because we could not be in two places at the same time. (*City of Glass*, 1985)

This could be said in half as many words, but then we might feel even more inclined to ask why it needs to be said at all. (Who ever thought of night and day as an *absolute condition* anyway?) The flat, laborious wordiness signals that this is avant-garde stuff, to miss the point of which would put us on the level of the morons who booed *Le Sacre du Printemps*. But what *is* the point? Is the passage meant to be banal, in order to trap philistines into complaining about it, thereby leaving the cognoscenti to relish the irony on some postmodern level? Or is there really some hidden significance to all this time-zone business? The point, as Auster's fans will tell you, is that there can be no clear answers to such questions; fiction like *City of Glass* urges us to embrace the intriguing ambiguities that fall outside the framework of the conventional novel. All interpretations of the above passage are allowed, even encouraged—except, of course, for the most obvious one: that Auster is simply wasting our time.

This is another example of what passes for thought in his fiction.

"Remember what happened to the father of our country. He chopped down the cherry tree, and then he said to his father, 'I cannot tell a lie.' Soon thereafter, he threw the coin across the river. These two stories are crucial events in American history. George Washington chopped down the tree and then he threw away the money. Do you understand? He was telling us an essential truth. Namely, that money doesn't grow on trees." (*City of Glass*)

It's always risky to identify a novelist's thoughts with his characters', but the prevalence of these free-associative parlor games in Auster's fiction suggests that he finds them either amusing or profound. This is from *Moon Palace* (1989).

One thought kept giving way to another, spiraling into ever larger masses of connectedness. The idea of voyaging into the unknown, for example, and the parallels between Columbus and the astronauts. The discovery of America as a failure to reach China; Chinese food and my empty stomach; thought, as in food for thought, and the head as a palace of dreams. I would think: the Apollo Project; Apollo, the god of music ... It went on and on like that, and the more I opened myself to these secret correspondences, the closer I felt to understanding some fundamental truth about the world. I was going mad, perhaps, but I nevertheless felt a tremendous power surging through me, a gnostic joy that penetrated deep into the heart of things. Then, very suddenly, as suddenly as I had gained this power, I lost it.

That talk of *secret correspondences* and *gnostic joy* appears aimed at making trusting readers think there must be some insight here that they are too dim to grasp. For the rest of us the narrator includes a disclaimer: "I was going mad, perhaps." Like DeLillo, Auster knows the prime rule of pseudo-intellectual writing: the harder it is to be pinned down on any idea, the easier it is to conceal that one has no ideas at all.

What gives Auster away is his weakness for facetious displays of erudition. In passages like the following it becomes so clear what Nabokovian effect he is trying for, and so clear that he can't pull it off, that the whole house of cards comes tumbling down.

When I met Kitty Wu, she called me by several other names ... Foggy, for example, which was used only on special occasions, and Cyrano, which developed for reasons that will become clear later. Had Uncle Victor lived to meet her, I'm sure he would have appreciated the fact that Marco,

in his own small way, had at last set foot in China. (*Moon Palace*)

By falling in love with a Chinese woman, the narrator can perhaps be said to have "discovered" China, though God knows that's awful enough, but *set foot* in it? It is no mean feat to be precious and clumsy at the same time. More examples:

[At school the name] Fogg lent itself to a host of spontaneous mutilations: Fag and Frog, for example, along with countless meteorological references: Snowball Head, Slush Man, Drizzle Mouth. (*Moon Palace*)

... a new tonality had crept into the bronchial music—something tight and flinty and percussive— ... (*Timbuktu*, 1999)

Was Mr. Bones an angel trapped in the flesh of a dog? Willy thought so ... How else to interpret the celestial pun that echoed in his mind night and day? To decode the message, all you had to do was hold it up to a mirror. Could anything be more obvious? Just turn around the letters of the word *dog*, and what did you have? The truth, that's what. (*Timbuktu*)

Nobody's perfect. But why should we forgive a writer for trying to pass off a schoolboy anagram as a *celestial pun*, or *snowball* as a meteorological reference, or *tonality* as a synonym for "tone," when he himself is trying so hard to draw attention to his fancy-pants language? Even worse is the way he abuses philosophical terms.

According to him, [the name Marco Stanley Fogg] proved that travel was in my blood, that life would carry me to places where no man had ever been before. Marco, naturally enough, was for Marco Polo, the first European to visit China; Stanley was for the American journalist who had tracked down Dr. Livingstone "in the heart of darkest Africa"; and Fogg was for Phileas, the man who had stormed around the globe in less than three months ... In the short run, Victor's nominalism helped me to survive the difficult first few weeks in my new school. (*Moon Palace*)

This is for people who know only that *nominalism* has something to do with names. In fact the nominalists argued that just because words exist for generalities like humanity doesn't mean that these generalities exist. What does that have to do with Uncle Victor's talk?

Another hallmark of Auster's style, and of contemporary American prose in general, is tautology. Swing the hammer often enough, and you're bound to hit the nail on the head—or so the logic seems to run.

His body burst into dozens of small pieces, and fragments of his corpse were found ... (*Leviathan*, 1992)

Blue can only surmise what the case is not. To say what it is, however, is completely beyond him. (*Ghosts*, 1986)

My father was tight; my mother was extravagant. She spent; he didn't. (*Hand to Mouth*, 1997)

Inexpressible desires, intangible needs, and unarticulated longings all passed through the money box and came out as real things, palpable objects you could hold in your hand. (*Hand to Mouth*)

Still and all, Mr. Bones was a dog. From the tip of his tail to the end of his snout, he was a pure example of *Canis familiaris*, and whatever divine presence he might have harbored within his skin, he was first and foremost the thing he appeared to be. Mr. Bow Wow, Monsieur Woof Woof, Sir Cur. (*Timbuktu*)

This sort of thing is everywhere, and yet the relative shortness of Auster's sentences has always fooled critics into thinking that he never wastes a word. His style has been praised as "brisk, precise" (*The New York Times*)

and "straightforward, almost invisible" (*The Village Voice*). Dennis Drabelle, in *The Washington Post*, called it "always economical—clipped, precise, the last word in gnomic control," which looks like something Auster wrote himself.

The creator of Monsieur Woof Woof has also received the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. (Why he still hasn't received the National Book Award I cannot imagine.) Critics compare him to Kafka, but it is from Borges that Auster borrows his allegories (detective work, biographical research) and his favorite theme: the impossibility of ever really *knowing* anything. This is an unwise choice of material, because he is not enough of a thinker to convey the fun that makes intellectual exercise worthwhile after all. The gnostic correspondences between *Chinese food* and *food for thought*; *dog* spelled backwards is *god*—this is philosophical writing?

Then again, Auster is commercially successful precisely because he offers so much cachet in return for so little concentration. Whole chapters can be skimmed with impunity. He creates a dog that understands English perfectly, only to describe how it likes to sniff excrement. He christens his hero Marco Stanley Fogg, a name portending lots of onomastic exposition and tales of playground cruelty, and then spends pages giving us just that. A man counts his books (why?) and finds that there are precisely 1,492 of them, and his nephew is going to a certain university in New York City. "A propitious number, I think, since it evokes ..." Go on. Take a wild guess.

GENERIC "LITERARY" PROSE

A thriller must thrill or it is worthless; this is as true now as it ever was. Today's "literary" novel, on the other hand, need only evince a few quotable passages to be guaranteed at least a lukewarm review. This reflects both the growing influence of the sentence cult and a desire to reward novelists for aiming high. It is perhaps natural, therefore, that the "literary" camp now attracts a type of risk-averse writer who, under different circumstances, might never have strayed from the safest thriller or romance formulae. Many critically acclaimed novels today are no more than mediocre "genre" stories told in a conformist amalgam of approved "literary" styles. Every amalgam is a little different, of course; what unites these writers and separates them from the rest of the "literary" camp is the determinedly slow tempo of their prose. They seem to know that in leaner and livelier form their courtroom dramas, geisha memoirs, and horse-whisperer romances would not be taken seriously, and that it is precisely the lack of genre-ish suspense that elevates them to the status of prize-worthy "tales of loss and redemption."

The most successful of these writers is David Guterson, who was recently named by the tony journal *Granta* as one of America's twenty best young novelists. This is from *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994), which won the PEN/Faulkner and spent more than a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

He didn't like very many people anymore or very many things, either. He preferred not to be this way, but there it was, he was like that. His cynicism—a veteran's cynicism—was a thing that disturbed him all the time ... It was not even a thing you could explain to anybody, why it was that everything was folly. People appeared enormously foolish to him. He understood that they were only animated cavities full of jelly and strings and liquids. He had seen the insides of jaggedly ripped-open dead people. He knew, for instance, what brains looked like spilling out of somebody's head. In the context of this, much of what went on in normal life seemed wholly and disturbingly ridiculous ... He sensed [people's] need to extend sympathy to him, and this irritated him even more. The arm was a grim enough thing without that, and he felt sure it was entirely disgusting. He could repel people if he chose by wearing to class a short-sleeved shirt that revealed the scar tissue on his stump. He never did this, however. He didn't exactly want to *repel* people. Anyway, he had this view of things—that most human activity was utter folly, his own included, and that his existence in the world made others nervous. He could not help but possess this

unhappy perspective, no matter how much he might not want it. It was his and he suffered from it numbly.

I apologize for the length of that excerpt, but it takes more than a few sentences to demonstrate the repetitive sluggishness of Guterson's prose. Michael Crichton could have given us the same stock character of the Alienated Veteran in one of those thumbnail descriptions he's always getting slammed for, but Guterson seems intent on dragging everything out.

The word *thing* is used to add bulk. "You could not explain to anybody why every thing was folly" becomes *It was not even a thing you could explain to anybody, why it was that everything was folly*. "His cynicism disturbed him" becomes *His cynicism ... was a thing that disturbed him*. "He believed that" becomes *he had this view of things—that*. There is plenty of unnecessary emphasis, the classic sign of a writer who lacks confidence: "*enormously* foolish," "*wholly ... ridiculous*," "*entirely* disgusting." There are sentences that seem to serve no purpose at all: "He could repel people if he chose by wearing to class a short-sleeved shirt that revealed the scar tissue on his stump. He never did this, however. He didn't exactly want to *repel* people. Anyway ..." Almost every thought is echoed: "He preferred not to be this way, but there it was, he was like that ... He could not help but possess this unhappy perspective, no matter how much he might not want it." And "... everything was folly. People appeared enormously foolish to him ... In the context of this, much of what went on in normal life seemed wholly and disturbingly ridiculous ... Anyway, he had this view of things—that most human activity was utter folly ..." You could study that passage all day and find no trace of a flair for words. Many readers, however, including the folks at *Granta*, are willing to buy into the scam that anything this dull must be Serious and therefore Fine and therefore Beautiful Writing.

Like Cormac McCarthy, to whom he is occasionally compared, Guterson thinks it more important to sound literary than to make sense. This is the oft-quoted opening to *East of the Mountains* (1999).

On the night he had appointed his last among the living, Dr. Ben Givens did not dream, for his sleep was restless and visited by phantoms who guarded the portal to the world of dreams by speaking relentlessly of this world. They spoke of his wife—now dead—and of his daughter, of silent canyons where he had hunted birds, of august peaks he had once ascended, of apples newly plucked from trees, and of vineyards in the foothills of the Apennines. They spoke of rows of campanino apples near Monte Della Torracchia; they spoke of cherry trees on river slopes and of pear blossoms in May sunlight.

Now, if the doctor's sleep was *visited by phantoms* (*visited*, mind you, not "interrupted"), then surely he was dreaming after all? Or were the phantoms keeping him awake? But isn't *restless sleep* still sleep? The answer, of course, is that it doesn't matter one way or the other: Guterson is just swinging a pocket watch in front of our eyes. "You're in professional hands," he's saying, "for only a Serious Writer would express himself so sonorously. Now read on, and remember, the mood's the thing."

What follows is a Proulx-style succession of images. By the end of the third sentence, with its *cherry trees*, *pear blossoms*, and still more *apples*, the accumulation of pedestrian phrases is supposed to have fooled the reader into thinking that a lyrical effect has been created. The ruse is painfully obvious here. Proulx would at least have drawn the line at something as stale as *august peaks*—especially in an opening paragraph. (She would also have avoided the clumsy echo of *restless* and *relentlessly*.)

It is from Auster, however, that Guterson seems to have learned how to create writerly cadences through tautology: "a clash of sound, discordant," "an immediate blunder, a *faux pas*," "Wyman was gay, a homosexual," "She could see that he was angry, that he was holding it in, not exposing his rage."

On the positive side, Guterson has more of a storytelling instinct than many novelists today. Beneath all the verbal rubble in *Cedars* is a good murder mystery crying out to be heard—feebly, to be sure, but still loud enough for *The New York Times*

to have denied the book its "non-genre" bonus of a second review. Guterson also knows that he has no gift for figurative language; outbursts like "a labyrinth of runners as intricate as a network of arteries feeding" are mercifully rare. As a result he sinks below mediocrity as rarely as he rises above it. Only the sex scenes, which even his fans lament, are laughably bad.

"Have you ever done this before?" he whispered.

"Never," answered Hatsue. "You're my only."

The head of his penis found the place it wanted. For a moment he waited there, poised, and kissed her—he took her lower lip between his lips and gently held it there. Then with his hands he pulled her to him and at the same time entered her so that she felt his scrotum slap against her skin. Her entire body felt the rightness of it, her entire body was seized to it. Hatsue arched her shoulder blades—her breasts pressed themselves against his chest—and a slow shudder ran through her.

"It's right," she remembered whispering. "It feels so right, Kabuo."

"*Tadaima aware ga wakatta,*" he had answered. "*I understand just now the deepest beauty.*"

If Jackie Collins had written that, reviewers would have had a field day with *You're my only*, the searching penis, the shudder's slow run. Thanks to that scrotum slap, which makes you wonder just what Hatsue's body felt the rightness of, the passage fails even on a Harlequin Romance level. But critics gamely overlook the whole mess, because by this point in the book Guterson has already established himself as a Serious Writer—mainly by length and somberness, but also by all those Japanese words.

Almost every fourth amateur reviewer [on Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) complains about the repetitiveness of *Snow Falling on Cedars*. *Kirkus Reviews*, on the other hand, called the 345-page novel "as compact as haiku," and Susan Kenney, in *The New York Times*, praised it as "finely wrought and flawlessly written." The novel is required reading in some college English classes, and even history students are being urged to read it, as a source of information about the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. So much, I suppose, for Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), another good book displaced from the school canon by a bad one.

NO WAY OUT?

A

t the 1999 National Book Awards ceremony Oprah Winfrey told of calling Toni Morrison to say that she had had to puzzle over many of the latter's sentences. According to Oprah, Morrison's reply was "That, my dear, is called reading." Sorry, my dear Toni, but it's actually called bad writing. Great prose isn't always easy, but it's always lucid; no one of Oprah's intelligence ever had to wonder what Joseph Conrad was trying to say in a particular sentence. This didn't stop the talk-show host from quoting her friend's words with approval. In similar fashion, an amateur reviewer on Amazon.com admitted to having had trouble with Guterson's short stories: "The fault is largely mine. I had been reading so many escape novels that I wasn't in shape to contend with stories full of real thought written in challenging style."

This is what the cultural elite wants us to believe: if our writers don't make sense, or bore us to tears, that can only mean that we aren't worthy of them. In July of last year Bill Goldstein, in *The New York Times*, wrote an article putting the blame for the proliferation of unread best sellers on readers who bite off more "intellectually intimidating" fare than they can chew. Vince Passaro, writing for *Harper's* in 1999, attributed the unpopularity of new short fiction primarily to the fact that it is "smart"—in contrast (he claimed) to the short stories of Hemingway's day. Passaro named Rick Moody as a young talent to watch, and offered this excerpt from "perhaps the best thing he's written," a short story called "Demonology" (1996).

They came in twos and threes, dressed in the fashionable Disney costumes of the year, Lion King, Pocahontas, Beauty and the Beast, or in the costumes of televised superheroes, Protean, shape-shifting, thus arrayed, in twos and threes, complaining it was too hot with the mask on, *Hey, I'm really hot!*, lugging those orange plastic buckets, bartering, haggling with one another, *Gimme your Smarties, please?* as their parents tarried behind, grownups following after, grownups bantering about the schools, or about movies, about local sports, about their marriages, about the difficulties of long marriages; kids sprinting up the next driveway, kids decked out as demons or superheroes or dinosaurs or as advertisements for our multinational entertainment-providers, beating back the restless souls of the dead, in search of sweets.

By the third line you realize you're back in Consumerland. (Moody says he was "utterly blown away" by *White Noise*.) Far from evincing any challenging content, unless you count those feeble jabs at Disney, this passage offers a good example of how little concentration is required by modern "literary" prose. You don't need to remember how that long, chanting sentence began in order to finish it; after all, Moody doesn't seem clear on who is *beating back the restless souls of the dead* either. (The metaphorical verb implies more awareness of the dead than can be attributed to either the excited children or their chattering parents.) You don't even need to read each word, because everything comes around twice anyway: "Protean, shape-shifting"; "in twos and threes ... in twos and threes"; "complaining it was too hot with the mask on, *Hey, I'm really hot!*"; "as their parents tarried behind, grownups following after"; "in the costumes of televised superheroes ... kids decked out as ... superheroes." None of this can hide Moody's tin ear (*Hey, I'm really hot!*), his unfamiliarity with the world of children (who haggle after they get home—and over less humdrum treats), and the complete absence of sharply observed detail.

All Passaro said to justify quoting that passage was that it combines "autobiography, story, social commentary, and the irony to see them all as a single source of pain." (I think I got the pain part.) This is typical of today's reviewers, who shy away from discussing prose style at length, even when they are praising it as the main reason to buy a book. The reader is either told some nonsense about sentences that "slither and pounce" or given an excerpt in its own graphic box, with no commentary at all. The critic's implication: "If you can't see why that's great writing, I'm not going to waste my time trying to explain." This must succeed in bullying some people, or else all the purveyors of what the critic Paul Fussell calls the "unreadable second-rate pretentious" would have been forced to find honest work long ago. Still, I'll bet that for every three readers who finished Passaro's article, two made a mental note to avoid new short fiction like the plague. Even a nation brainwashed to equate artsiness with art knows when its eyelids are drooping.

People like Passaro, of course, tend to think that anyone indifferent to the latest "smart" authors must be vegetating in front of the television, or at best silently mouthing through a Tom Clancy thriller. The truth is that a lot of us are perfectly happy with literature written before we were born—and why shouldn't we be? The notion that contemporary fiction possesses greater relevance for us because it talks of the Internet or supermodels or familiar brand names is ridiculous. We can see ourselves reflected more clearly in Balzac's Parisians than in a modern American who goes into raptures when his daughter says "Toyota Celica" in her sleep. This is not to say that traditional realism is the only valid approach to fiction. But today's Serious Writers fail even on their own postmodern terms. They urge us to move beyond our old-fashioned preoccupation with content and plot, to focus on form instead—and then they subject us to the least-expressive form, the least-expressive *sentences*, in the history of the American novel. 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.

Older fiction also serves to remind us of the power of unaffected English. In this scene from Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) a man meets a woman at a Fourth of July picnic.

He saw her running in the women's race, her arms close to her sides. She was among the stragglers and stopped and walked off the field, laughing and wiping her face and throat with a handkerchief of the same material as her silk summer dress. Leventhal was standing near her brother. She came up to them and said, "Well, I used to be able to run when I was smaller." That she was still not accustomed to thinking of herself as a woman, and a beautiful woman, made Leventhal feel very tender toward her. She was in his mind when he watched the contestants in the three-legged race hobbling over the meadow. He noticed one in particular, a man with red hair who struggled forward, angry with his partner, as though the race were a pain and a humiliation which he could wipe out only by winning. "What a difference," Leventhal said to himself. "What a difference in people."

Scenes that show why a character falls in love are rarely convincing in novels. This one works beautifully, and with none of the "evocative" metaphor hunting or postmodern snickering that tends to accompany such scenes today. The syntax is simple but not unnaturally terse—a point worth emphasizing to those who think that the only alternative to contemporary writerliness is the plodding style of Raymond Carver. Bellow's verbal restraint makes the unexpected repetition of *what a difference* all the more touching. The entire novel is marked by the same quiet brilliance. 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."

It's easy to despair of ever seeing a return to that kind of prose, especially with the cultural elite doing such a quietly efficient job of maintaining the status quo. (Rick Moody received an O. Henry Award for "Demonology" in 1997, whereupon he was made an O. Henry juror himself. And so it goes.) But the paper chain of mediocrity would probably perpetuate itself anyway. Clumsy writing begets clumsy thought, which begets even clumsier writing. The only way out is to look back to a time when authors had more to say than "I'm a Writer!"; when the novel wasn't just a 300-page caption for the photograph on the inside jacket. A reorientation toward tradition would benefit writers no less than readers. In the early twentieth century it was fashionable in Britain to claim that only a completely new style of writing could address a world undergoing an unprecedented transformation—just as the critic [Sven Birkerts](#) [claimed](#) in a recent *Atlantic Unbound* that only the new "aesthetic of exploratory excess" can address a world undergoing ... well, you know. For all that Georgian talk of modernity, it was T. S. Eliot, a man fascinated by the "presence" of the past, who wrote the most-innovative poetry of his time. The lesson for today's literary community is so obvious that it may seem patronizing to bring it up. But if our writers and critics already respect the novel's rich tradition—if they can honestly say they got more out of *Moby-Dick* than just a favorite sentence—then why are they so contemptuous of the urge to tell an exciting story?

Moyer Bell and other small publishers are to be commended for reissuing so many older novels. It would be even more encouraging if our national newspapers devoted an occasional full-page review to one of these new editions—or, for that matter, to any novel that has lapsed into undeserved obscurity. And modern readers need to see that intellectual content can be reconciled with a vigorous, fast-moving plot, as in Budd Schulberg's novel [What Makes Sammy Run?](#) (1941) or John O'Hara's [Appointment in Samarra](#) (1934). Patrick Hamilton's [Hangover Square](#) (1941) and Roy Fuller's [The Second Curtain](#) (1953) are British psychological thrillers written in careful, unaffectedly poetic prose; both could appeal to a wide readership here. By the same token, many of the adults who enjoy Harry Potter would be even happier with Mervyn Peake's [Gormenghast trilogy](#) (1946-1959) if they only knew about it. Suspense fans would be surprised to find how readable William Godwin's [The Adventures of Caleb Williams](#) (1794) is. Americans should also be encouraged to overcome their growing aversion to translated fiction. To discover Shiga Naoya's [A Dark Night's Passing](#) (1937) and Enchi Fumiko's [The Waiting Years](#) (1957), two heartbreaking classics of Japanese fiction, is to realize how little we need a white man's geisha memoirs.

Feel free to disparage these recommendations, but can anyone outside of the big publishing houses claim that the mere fact of newness should entitle a novel to more of our attention? Many readers wrestle with only one bad book before concluding that they are too dumb to enjoy anything "challenging." Their first foray into literature shouldn't have to end, for lack of better advice, on the third page of something like *Underworld*. At

the very least, the critics could start toning down their hyperbole. How better to ensure that Faulkner and Melville remain unread by the young than to invoke their names in praise of some new bore every week? How better to discourage clear and honest self-expression than to call Annie Proulx—as Carolyn See did in *The Washington Post*—"the best prose stylist working in English now, bar none"?

Whatever happens, the old American scorn for pretension is bound to reassert itself someday, and dear God, let it be soon. In the meantime, I'll be reading the kinds of books that Cormac McCarthy doesn't understand.

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"A Reader's Manifesto" is a 2002 book written by Brian Reynolds Myers (B.R. Myers) that was originally published in heavily edited form in the July/August 2001 issue of "The Atlantic Monthly" magazine. Description. Myers described the original article, which saw no end of responses from admirers and critics, as "a light-hearted polemic" about modern literature. A Reader's Manifesto. We may still live for the rustle of the pages. Keerthik Sasidharan | 27 Dec, 2019. The wheels of taste seem to have turned a full circle. It feels as if the e-readers have found a niche and are unlikely to grow any further. Many have returned to the pleasures of yellowing pages and papercuts; dogeared books are back in the hands of many of my fellow travellers. Share this on. A Reader's Manifesto. Levi Asher April 1st, 2005. Being A Writer Big Thinking Classics Fiction Jazz Age La Boheme Language Lit-Crit Love Personal Psychology Reading Visual Art. Reading is confrontation. At the end of a good book, you may decide to change your life, and a reader or writer is somebody for whom that possibility is always open. Interviews: "A Reader's Revenge" B. R. Myers, the author of A Reader's Manifesto, argues that the time has come for readers to stand up to the literary establishment. I realize that such a declaration must sound perversely ungrateful to the literary establishment. For years now editors, critics, and prize jurors, not to mention novelists themselves, have been telling the rest of us how lucky we are to be alive and reading in these exciting times.