Abstract

Reading in the normal or general sense limits the possibilities of meaning, yet a text can be read for the plurality of meaning which is very evident in contemporary fiction. An author writes a text in order to throw it open to the reader whose activity produces meaning. Thus reading and understanding of a text is the result of the very subtle interaction between the text and the reader. In this sense contemporary fiction remains a sole exercise or activity of a reader. Complexity of the age in which we live makes this more challenging task for the reader. Since the author replicates his world of ideas from this complex world, this complexity and disintegration of recognizable truth, makes a deep crisis in art and society which is in flux.

KEYWORDS: COMPLEXITY, MULTIPLE NARRATORS, METAPHYSICS, IDIOSYNCRATIC LANGUAGES, ESOTERICITY.

We often hear that contemporary fiction is hard to read, boring. Narratives of Franzen, Umberto eco, William Gaddis are hard to read and digest. Contemporary fiction does not goes easy with readers. There are challenges faced by the reader such as multiple narrators, metaphysics, stream of consciousness, idiosyncratic language, inaccessibility, etc. Take for example James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake (1939). There is no clear plot — it’s all stream of consciousness, filled with idiosyncratic language, free association, and an overall attempt to capture the feeling of dreams. After seven decades, Joyce scholars continue to argue over what it all means taking this famous passage: “in the Nichtian glossery which purveys aprioric roots for aposteriories tongues this is not language in any sense of the world.” [James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake (1939), pp. 10-12] (83.1—12). The text of the Finnegans Wake is divided into four main parts. Each of these Books contain sub-cycles as well, as represented by “Chapters”, while sometimes called “episodes”. Finnegans Wake is delight for interpretations, and no two readers read or misread it the same way. For example we take another passage:

For that (the rapt one warns) is what papyr is meed of, made of, hides and hints and misses in prints. Till ye finally (though not yet endlike) meet with the acquaintance of Mister Typus, Mistress Tope and all the little typtopies. Filstup. So you need hardly spell me how every word will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypsical readings throughout the book of Doublends Jined. (FW 20.10-16)

One further example is William Faulkner’s The Sound and Fury (1929). The style is stream of consciousness with three different narrators and one third-person section. It is the story of the Compson family’s decline and fall in 1860s. The first narrator is mentally disabled to the extent that he cannot process linear time and jumps between past and present mid-sentence: “Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep” (Book 1). One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) by Gabriel Garcia Marques follow the same trend. Few family sagas stretch as wide as that of the Buendia clan — there are seven generations depicted here. As if
that’s not confusing enough, names are frequently repeated (basically every character is named Aureliano). One of the passages took from the novel proves this:

Lost in the solitude of his immense power, he began to lose direction. He was bothered by the people who cheered him in neighboring villages, and he imagined that they were the same cheers they gave the enemy. Everywhere he met adolescents who looked at him with his own eyes, who spoke to him with his own voice, who greeted him with the same mistrust with which he greeted them, and who said they were his sons. He felt scattered about, multiplied, and more solitary than ever. He was convinced that his own officers were lying to him. He fought with the Duke of Marlborough. The best friend a person has, he would say at that time, is one who has just died. (166)

Authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Joanna Russ and Cormac McCarthy are really hard to understand. *Infinite Jest* (1996) by D.F. Wallace is nearly 1100 pages. Besides the novel is complex with endnotes, footnotes. Reading Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) you know you’re in for something difficult when the prose is described as both “sparse” and “expansive.” *Blood Meridian* (1985) is an anti-western novel. The narration is through the kid and his experiences with Glanton gang. McCarthy doesn’t use quotation marks or apostrophes, and he even refused to grant any interviews about the novel: “Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of which is put at hazard” (249). Take a look at another passage.

After a while, someone asked the ex-priest if it were true that at one time there had been two moons in the sky and the ex-priest eyed the false moon above them and said that it may well have been so. But certainly the wise high God in his dismay at the proliferation of lunacy on this earth must have wetted a thumb and leaned down out of the abyss and pinched it hissing into extinction. (244)

*The Name of the Rose* (1980), a novel by Umberto Eco, is related to semiotics, the study of signs. It is a straightforward mystery, but with complicated postmodernist elements. The novel is complex. Take one of such passages for instance:

I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand is the relation among signs… I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe. But in imagining an erroneous order you still found something… What you say is very fine, Adso, and I thank you. The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless… The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away. (527)

*The Recognitions* (1955) by William Gaddis is a story of Wyatt Gwyon, a Calvinist son from rural New England who forges paintings. It is a novel where different characters are interwoven throughout the main narrative, which is loose to begin with. Gaddis admitted that his novel was “not reader-friendly” (53). That’s an understatement. Jonathan Franzen (who appears on this list) called The Recognitions the most difficult book he’d ever voluntarily read. One of the opening passages appears as follows:

“–Seeing you now, you know, it’s answered one of the questions I’ve had on my mind for some time. The first thing I saw, it was small Dierick Bouts, I wondered then if you used a model when you worked.
–Well I …
–But now, it’s quite obvious isn’t it, Valentine went on, nodding at the picture between them. – Mirrors?
–Yes, yes of course, mirrors. He laughed, a constricted sound, and lit a cigarette.”

Another example is *Cloud Atlas* (2004) by David Mitchell; it consists of six nested stories that take the reader from the remote South Pacific in the nineteenth century to a distant, post-apocalyptic future. In many ways, Mitchell’s novel is
easier than the others on the list — it’s engaging and very readable. At the same time, it moves from the nineteenth century to a post-apocalyptic future, with a series of interconnected stories that ended abruptly, and then finished in reverse chronological order:

The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming, ever more problematic to access, reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening, ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent. The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies, legitimacy to the imposition of will. (Cloud Atlas - “Half-lives: The first Luisa Rey Mystery”, 340)

These novels fall in the same lines which are challenging fiction for the readers. So we can say by these examples that reading contemporary fiction is really a hard nut to crack. Thomas Pynchon’s gravity rainbow (1973) talks about Quantum mechanics, mass extinction, speculative metaphysics — this is a heavy stuff. This has been called the definitive postmodern novel, which tells you everything you need to know:

But out at the horizon, out near the burnished edge of the world, who are these visitors standing… these robed figures -- perhaps, at this distance, hundred of miles tall -- their faces, serene, unattached, like the Buddha’s, bending over the sea, impassive, indeed, as the Angel that stood over Lubeck during the palm Sunday raid, come that day neither to destroy nor to protect, but to bear witness to a game of seduction… what have the watchmen of the world’s edge come tonight to look for? Deepening on now, monumental beings stoical, on toward slag, toward ash the colour the night will stabilize at, tonight… what is there grandiose enough to witness? (214)

The Corrections (2001) by Jonathan franzen also shed the challenge of understanding his novel. It is a novel about an elderly Midwestern couple and their three adult children, tracing their lives from mid- twentieth century to one last Christmas together at the turn of the century. The opening lines of the novel tell something is wrong in the family of Lamberts: “The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it; something terrible was going to happen” (1). Another passage for example is:

By now it had been ringing for so many hours that the Lamberts no longer heard the message of ‘bell ringing’ but, as with any sound that continues for so long that you have the leisure to learn its component sounds (as with any word you stare at until it resolves itself into a string of dead letters), instead heard a clapper rapidly striking a metallic resonator, not a pure tone but a granular sequence of percussions with a keening overlay of overtones; ringing for so many days that it simply blended into the background except at certain early-morning hours when one or the other of them awoke in a sweat and realized that a bell had been ringing in their heads for as long as they could remember; ringing for so many months that the sound had given way to a kind of metasound whose rise and fall was not the beating of compression waves, but the much, much slower waxing and waning of their consciousness of the sound.”

Through above novels quoted I can say that contemporary fiction is not Sunday leisure lunch like reading Jane Austen which it used to be in past. Contemporary fiction is really complex to read and understand which demands concentration of mind to go backward as well as forward while reading it. Many critics say, literature must be accessible and digestible like food to the readers. Since readers read fiction for pleasure – pleasure of escapism, mental exercising, of experiencing what it would be like to be another person, for fantasy – it should be readable and accessible. But why it should be easy and accessible. After all, contemporary art does not communicate in a straightforward manner and we have to interpret it. Contemporary fiction is far too diverse in its style to be a genre. I would prefer to think of contemporary fiction as a particular sensibility, as set of principles and a value system which unites specific currents in the writings of this twenty first century. Modern art is not going to give its meaning over to us without a struggle. The contemporary fiction requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer. Thus contemporary fiction tendency is to draw the reader’s attention to his or her own process of interpreting as he/she reads the text. Reading and understanding contemporary fiction interrogates the
commonsense and commonplace assumptions about literature which prevails in culture. It deepens our knowledge about literature on a wider scale.

References


Buzzfeed, Available at http://www.buzzfeed.com/louispeitzman/the-25-most-challenging-books-you-will-ever-read


Contact details of the authors

Hossein Sheikhzadeh (Corresponding Author)
Department of Humanities, Saravan Branch, Islamic Azad University (IAU), Saravan, Sistan and Balochistan, Iran
Email: behz2000@gmail.com

Nazanin Sheikhzadeh
M.A. in Persian Literature, Teacher, Saravan Education Department, Saravan, Sistan and Balochistan, Iran
Email: lit1363@gmail.com