

THE DEVOUTLY LITERARY BESTSELLER

A true book lover's book . . . A testament to resilience and to the power of words.

—blurb on the back cover of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2002)

Wondrous . . . masterful . . . *The Shadow of the Wind* is ultimately a love letter to literature intended for readers as passionate about storytelling as its young hero.

—blurb from *Entertainment Weekly* on the back cover of *The Shadow of the Wind* (2005)

The Thirteenth Tale is a love letter to reading, a book for the feral reader in all of us. Diane Setterfield will keep you guessing, make you wonder, move you to tears and laughter and, in the end, deposit you breathless yet satisfied back upon the shore of your everyday life.

—Dustjacket copy for *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006)

I have this fantasy book club in my mind where other people feel as passionately as I do about reading. As if it were a really good kiss. The sheer pleasure and intimacy of having a relationship with a novelist and all of the characters is transcendent—even sensual. Certain passages keep resonating in my head long after I've closed the book, and I often can't wait to get back to the story, as if it were a secret lover.

—*Literacy and Longing in L.A.* (2006)

I begin this chapter with these passages because they epitomize one of the most distinctive developments within popular literary culture—the feverish celebration of literary reading as an experience so overpowering that it can only be described in erotic terms. While the novels by Fielding, Bushnell, Bank, and Hornby that I discussed in the previous chapter all make extensive use of literary intertexts and are filled with characters who make the choice of reading material a key determinant in selecting the proper love object, none of those novels identifies the act of reading as erotic. Literary fiction, if given the right sort of radical makeover, can offer vital lessons in finding the right partner with whom erotic pleasure may be inevitable, but reading, as an end in itself, gets you nowhere but home alone on a Saturday night. Not so surprisingly, none of those post-literary novels has been circulated as a literary bestseller and none has won any prestigious literary prizes.

Judging by the winners and short-list nominees for the most prestigious literary prizes awarded between 2004 and 2008, the best way to ensure that a novel will be deemed a literary bestseller, and make a big splash in the awards game, is to feature a highly self-conscious celebration of the transformative power of the written word and equally impassioned advocacy of the need for aesthetic beauty. The most obvious examples of just how explicit these imperatives have become, and how they have been critically acknowledged accordingly, are Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (winner of the Man Booker Prize and one of the top ten Notable Books in the *New York Times* in 2004) and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (one of the top five novels short-listed for the Man Booker and one of the top five Notable Books in fiction in the *Times* in 2005). You also need more than just the invocation of canonical novels by Austen, Wharton, James, and company—you need to make the man himself, Henry James, your main character and make the trials and tribulations of writing literary fiction the central action of the novel, which is the case with both David Lodge's *Author, Author* and Colm Toibin's *The Master* (short-listed for the Booker and among the *Times*' top ten Notable Books in 2004). Or you need to have a main character repeatedly denying that literary writing can transform your life in substantial ways, only to have him undergo a traumatic conversion experience that convinces him that literary beauty can indeed save your life, as is the case in McEwan's *Saturday* (one of the *Times*' top five Notable Books in fiction in 2005, long-listed for the Booker). Or you can feature a character who reads voraciously and insists on detailing her close encounters with important literary novels,

as in Marisha Pessl's *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* (among the *Times*' top five Notable Books in fiction in 2006), in which the narrator, a maniacally well-read Harvard undergraduate, presents her table of contents as an English class syllabus — “Core Curriculum (Required Reading),” with each chapter bearing the name of a relevant classic (chapter 18, *A Room with a View*; chapter 25, *Bleak House*, etc.). Or you can just go whole hog and make all of your characters New York intellectuals, each defined by the books they're either in the process of writing, or by the books they're currently reading, as in Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (another of the *Times*' top five Notable Books in fiction, 2006). Or in the case of Kate Christensen's *The Great Man* (winner of the PEN Faulkner Award in 2008), you can focus more specifically on the New York art world and fill your fictional universe with painters, might-have-been novelists, and two biographers, and then conclude the action with what appears to be a reprint of a review of those biographies in the *New York Times Book Review*. Or, in the case of Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008, you can ostensibly avoid that world entirely by concentrating on a working-class family from the Dominican Republic now living in New Jersey, but still nevertheless subscribe to all things bookish by making the title character a helpless book nerd: “You really want to know what being an X Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in contemporary U.S. ghetto” (22).

That's obviously a whole lot of intertextuality going on, only in these novels it's not a matter of one author just invoking another—it's a kind of *lived* intertextuality, since these characters—whether they be Henry James, New York intellectuals, or a sci-fi-reading nerd like Oscar—can't really function without the books they read, and they apparently can't exist as characters unless they're situated within the universe of literary fiction. All of these novels promise to deliver bona fide aesthetic experiences and are advertised accordingly. These are, most assuredly, not the sort of literary novels that Bridget Jones puts in the same category as pasta machines, the impressive books designed with serious intent but that have no practical use in the actual world.

In these Devoutly Literary novels the act of reading becomes an all-sustaining pleasure that is available only between the covers of a book. While I have argued throughout the previous chapters that the popular literary is a prime example of media convergence, these novels which are hailed by book reviewers as love letters to the power of literary reading reject any such convergence by celebrating the absolute singularity of literary reading

the way it used to be—a solitary, exclusively print-based pleasure far removed from the realm of adaptations, television book clubs, Web sites, and superstores. Consider the opening scene in *The Shadow of the Wind*, where the main character, Daniel, is taken by his father to the Cemetery of Forgotten Books:

This is a place of mystery, Daniel, a sanctuary. Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens. When a library disappears, or a bookshop closes down, when a book is consigned to oblivion, those of us who know this place, its guardians, make sure that it gets here. In this place books no longer remembered by anyone, books that are lost in time, live forever, waiting for the day when they will reach a new reader's hands. Every book you see here has been somebody's best friend. In the shop we buy and sell them, but in truth books have no owner. Now they have only us, Daniel. Do you think you'll be able to keep such a secret?

Here books have achieved the status of sacred relics, still filled with intrinsic, transformative power but in need of a cult of readers to serve as their guardians, the people of the book who know their secrets. Yet I first encountered *The Shadow of the Wind* on the “Zafon table” at Barnes & Noble, where it sat alongside his new novel *Angel's Game*, the publishing industry's equivalent of a summer blockbuster release. Barnes & Noble isn't exactly a cemetery, nor is Borders, which made it a featured selection of the Borders Book Club, nor is Amazon, which included video interviews with the author at the homepage for the novel. While the novel presents reading as an imperiled activity kept alive only through the intervention of a small but devoted cult, the critical blurbs on the front and back covers attest to its vast mass-market potential—“One gorgeous read” (Stephen King). This apparently paradoxical situation epitomizes the current state of the literary bestseller. A novel that revolves around a cemetery of forgotten books is marketed aggressively by superstores and Amazon as an “international phenomenon,” driven by a testimonial about how it is a love letter to literature from none other than *Entertainment Weekly* (the preeminent mass-market entertainment magazine in North America) and by praise from Stephen King (the author synonymous with bestselling genre fiction for the previous three decades). In other words, literary reading now comes with its own self-

legitimizing mythology that sanctifies the singularity of reading novels as an aesthetic experience, the way they *used* to be read, yet these same novels become global bestsellers only through the intervention of popular literary culture.

But how do these Devoutly Literary novels create this value for themselves? Just what sort of aesthetic experience is being offered and why is it so *transformative*? Who are these people of the book? And how have these self-consciously literary novels, which insist so strenuously on the singular therapeutic power of the literary, become a kind of *category fiction*, what I'm referring to as *Lit-lit*?

Answering these questions requires an approach that integrates the concerns of traditional aesthetics and cultural studies in unprecedented ways, primarily because each has tended to either discredit or simply ignore the other in wholesale fashion. The former will be of very little help in answering those questions, since it insists so steadfastly that genuine aesthetic experiences take place only in far more rarefied circumstances. Denis Donoghue's *Speaking of Beauty* (2003) exemplifies this refusal to even consider the possibility that some sort of aesthetic experience might actually occur within the realm of popular culture. He is delighted that academics are now interested in talking about aesthetic issues, once again, but forecloses the possibility that anyone other than the professional devotees of fine art can really have such experiences: "The most immediate reason to talk about beauty is the hope of saving it from the mercenary embrace of TV and advertisements. The hope is a frail one, since the owners of these instruments make their money by effecting strong links between health, beauty, high spirits, and sex" (26). If the discussion of the aesthetic experience must, as Donoghue insists, distance itself unilaterally from such a world because "the commercialization of art has removed its intrinsic or useless quality and turned the beautiful object into common processes of exchange," then the return to aesthetics signals only the return of a kind of guilt-free polo playing for academics—fun for the club members, but completely irrelevant to just about everyone else.

Cultural studies has rightly argued that this insistence on the intrinsic value of the genuine aesthetic object is the worst sort of theoretical mystification, because it isolates aesthetic texts so completely from the circumstances of their circulation and evaluation by a wide variety of different audiences. That being said, the determination to demystify aesthetic texts has precluded much discussion of how aesthetic texts are, nevertheless, a very

particular type of cultural production, one that involves experiences not offered by other consumer products. Not so surprisingly, then, the sort of novels and films that have been avoided at all costs are those that have insisted on their own transcendent power. But the Devoutly Literary novels I will be focusing on in this chapter do exactly that. They are determined to prove their apartness through their ability to offer profoundly transformative aesthetic experiences—but they are also literary bestsellers. In other words, they are a form of popular culture that claims to provide a grand alternative to “all that”—distinguished, prize-winning novels, whose aestheticism has become their main selling point. As such, they cannot be fully appreciated either by traditional aesthetics or by the traditional forms of cultural studies. It is one thing to ponder whether watching Oprah’s Book Club is an aesthetic experience, but quite another when we take up novels that insist, in no uncertain terms, that reading them will be a firsthand encounter with *beauty*. How are these aesthetic experiences marked off as such? And why have they become so marketable?

I want to pursue these questions by looking first at how the novels by Colm Toibin, David Lodge, and Alan Hollinghurst all imagine the relationship between the type of beauty offered by reading literary fiction and other sorts of aesthetic beauty, specifically those offered by material culture. Literary critics have theorized about the pleasure of the text for the past three decades, and we now know a fair amount about the various libidinal energies that are involved in the act of reading. In much the same way, the pleasures furnished by material objects have also been theorized about just as relentlessly by sociologists eager to identify the underlying desires that animate consumer culture. Yet I know of no attempt to situate the two in reference to each other. Throughout these novels, the experience of aesthetic beauty is alternately set apart from the realm of material pleasures, and at other points, just as tightly intertwined within those material pleasures. If we hope to gain better understanding of the literary bestseller and its readership at the turn of the twenty-first century, I think it is vitally important to understand the ways in which certain kinds of “beauty” now circulate within this taste culture, in and around and through those books. Just what sort of “literacy” do these novels take for granted as the basis for appreciating that beauty?

Karen Jay Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* reveals a great deal about that literacy, particularly in regard to the relationship between literary and material pleasures. The members of a reading group meet monthly in

each other's homes to discuss a different Austen novel, and the first line of Fowler's novel attests to the importance of books in terms of defining their self-image: "Each of us has a private Austen." So intimate is the relationship between self-image and choice of reading material that they are dubious about Grigg (the only male member of the group), not just as reader, but also as a person, because his favorite Austen novel is *Northanger Abbey*, and "This was not a position we could imagine anyone taking" (120). That this reading takes place within a landscape of quality consumerism, in which selection of reading material is one of a number of interdependent, all-defining taste choices, is exemplified by another moment in Fowler's novel. When the group visits Grigg's home for the first time, the other members are expecting the worst: "We had been curious about Grigg's housekeeping. Most of us hadn't seen a bachelor pad since the seventies. We were picturing mirror balls and Andy Warhol." He scores points with the other members because he serves "a lovely white from the Bonny Doon vineyard" alongside the buffet he prepares for them, but they are relieved when they discover "a rug by the couch that many of us recognized from the Sundance catalogue as something we ourselves had wanted, the one with the poppies on the edges. The sun glanced off a row of copper pots in the kitchen window" (121).

Each of us may have our own Austen, but apparently, each of us also has our own Sundance catalogue that is another form of required reading within this taste culture. The choice of books, like the choice of wine, rugs, and cooking utensils, attests to a set of shared values and rituals. They share the same novels in their discussions, but those discussions work only if their homes share the same quality *mise-en-scène* for all that book talk. This is fiction that comes with its own art direction. Here Sundance needs no introduction because the upscale home décor and clothing catalogue is as much a part of this world as Jane Austen. Identification between the characters, and between these characters and the readers of Fowler's novel, is secured by a shared taste for quality literature and quality décor, both of which can be referred to with equal specificity because the novel assumes a thorough familiarity with both, at which point, consumer objects lusted after by the club members can be cited, like a favorite literary passage.

And well they should, since the Sundance catalogue is just as determined to combine literary and material pleasures into a thoroughly integrated aesthetic experience that includes this same Jane Austen, as well as Virginia Woolf, and Jhumpa Lahiri, and Gabriel García Márquez. The

winter 2006 catalogue featured a home library ensemble entitled “Winter Wanderlust? Escape with a Good Book,” which furnishes exactly the right sort of mise-en-scène for Fowler’s book clubbers, including a leather club chair, tripod library lamp, Cornell bookcase, serape rug, and “Great Winter Reading” — which offers books by Wallace Stegner, William Kittredge, and Terry Tempest Williams to complete the experience. And in the Sundance summer catalogue of 2006 a seasonal selection of books is again offered to customers, but in this case the “Summer Reading Set of 8” is presented as a mini-library:

We’ve gathered the collective experience of some pretty smart people and come up with a pre-packaged mini library of Sundance staff favorites — eight eclectic classics that span hemispheres, genres, and eras — for an armful of armchair adventure and beach-blanket travel. Included are *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (197 pp.); *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner (335 pp.); *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (291 pp.); *Charing Cross Road* by Helen Hanff (97 pp.); *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez (348 pp.); *Chronicles Volume One* by Bob Dylan (293 pp.); *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (435 pp.); and *Tracks* by Robyn Davidson (256 pp.). All paperback. See sundancecatalog.com for more info.

Quality readers obviously want quality fiction for their pleasure reading, only here it’s the clothing and décor catalogue, not the online bookstore or television book club that is hooking them up with the appropriate titles. Notice too that the staff recommendations — a fixture at independent bookstores and now also at most superstores — are offered as the reason why we should have faith in this particular armful of books. We should trust these “pretty smart people” to choose our books for us, but here the expertise has everything to do with quality reading as an expression of taste rather than indicator of abstract knowledge. If customers trust this staff enough to choose from their selection of clothing, jewelry, and décor items, then they can certainly be trusted to choose the reading material to complete the ensemble. I say “ensemble,” because the facing page in the catalogue is a full-page photograph of a model reading a book, with the text that urges us to read, because it’s “fundamental.”

The model looks directly out at the catalogue reader, dressed simply in unspecified jeans, the “Poplin Boyfriend Shirt” (\$50) and “Zen Thong Sandals” (\$160). Here the only accessory is not the Native American-style jewelry featured throughout the rest of the catalog but the book she holds



19. "Read": model with book, from the summer 2006 Sundance catalogue

in her hands. Except for the barely discernable capital letters that identify the catalog items in the picture, the image appears to be a public service announcement for reading, yet it also functions as an effective visualization of the place of literary reading within the broader taste culture that Sundance cultivates so brilliantly, a world where books are transcendently important enough to deserve this kind of philanthropic endorsement, but also eminently stylish, as much as expression of one's tasteful self as the Zen thong sandals, or the "Field of Poppies" rug, or all of the Arts and Crafts-style furniture.

So what did Henry James know about furniture?

The Literary Bestseller, Neo-Aestheticism, and Quality Consumerism at Different Price Points, or Henry James at Target

Resurrecting Henry James in order to demonstrate anew the value of literary fiction is, at first glance, a somewhat perplexing move, since James may indeed be a literary god, but his notoriously complicated prose style would hardly make for the most effective hook to win converts to the cause. His emotional detachment poses yet another obstacle: Shakespeare in love,

maybe, but reimagining James's writing as elegant transcription of carnal lust is, well . . . more of a stretch. Yet James is a central figure in the Devoutly Literary novel—proving that literary fiction provides a transcendent aesthetic pleasure that makes mere sex pale by comparison to the ecstasies available between the covers of the right book. In other words, according to these novels, Lady Viola was right the first time—there is nothing better than a play, or in this case, the right sort of literary novel.

In his compelling essay “What Henry Knew” (2005), Michael Wood argues that James's novels give us certain types of knowledge and that he focuses on the “strong and multiple valences of the word *know*” throughout his novels. Wood delineates seven different types of knowledge in *The Wings of the Dove*, and this overt complication of what anyone can know with certainty is what I used to think Henry knew and what I tried to convey to my students when I taught his novels (although not nearly as elegantly as Wood does in his essay). But according to the Jamesian novels that appeared in 2004, Henry knew with utmost certainty about other matters—he knew about royalties, and he knew that furniture is important, . . . very, very important.

This invocation of James is not a matter of summoning back the Master of literary style as the embodiment of all that the literary marketplace no longer values. When I first heard that Toibin, in *The Master*, and Lodge, in *Author, Author*, had turned James into a fictional character, I imagined the worst—novels that would transport the reader back to the halcyon days of American literary culture when stylistic refinement was valued for its own sake and the publishing industry had not abandoned quality in pursuit of pure profit. But instead of a willful amnesia about the current state of the literary marketplace, both Toibin and Lodge concentrate on James as a stylist in pursuit of literary success measured in terms of financial gain as well as artistic refinement. Both making teasing references to the later 1890s, when James wrote what are widely acknowledged to be his masterpieces (*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*), but they situate the action in the late 1880s and early 1890s, concentrating on James's ill-fated attempt to go for box office success with his play *Guy Domville*. In *Author, Author*, Lodge makes James's desperate attempts to become a popular author, on his own terms, the central arc of the novel. These novels may be set in the 1890s, but James's plight is clearly intended to resonate powerfully in the present—how does one write literary fiction that will be widely read in a world where badly written bestsellers dominate and publishers appear

to want only those books that will sell? According to Lodge's novel, James had always

secretly hoped that he might become wealthy as well as famous by his writing. It was not because he lusted for gold as such, or for the luxuries that it might buy—yachts, carriages, and diamond cravat pins had no attraction for him. It was because to make significant amounts of money and to advance the art of fiction—to transfix this double target with a single arrow—was the only way for a novelist to impress the materialistic nineteenth century. Dickens and George Eliot had managed it. Why not HJ? . . . To reverse this decline by the work of his pen, to count royalties in tens of thousands, while maintaining the highest artistic standards, was Henry's dream. But as the years passed, the prospects of realizing it appeared fainter and fainter. Not that it was getting more difficult for novelists to become rich—quite the contrary—but they were the wrong ones. There was Rider Haggard, for instance who's bloody and preposterous. She sold 40,000 copies in 1887. (95)

That James was bedeviled by the desire to be both artistically and financially successful is not a revelation to James scholars, because such concerns do indeed figure in his letters. But for nonspecialist readers familiar with James only as the stylist supreme, the father of the modernist novel, this is indeed a different perspective on the Master. As a high school student working through *The Turn of the Screw* and *Daisy Miller*, and then as an undergraduate savoring the mysteries of *The Ambassadors* and *The Wings of a Dove*, I never even heard mention of James's despair over his failure to write best-sellers. But then my English education in the seventies was shaped entirely by the modernist master narrative that could not allow for anything other than the great divide between the art and mere commodity. By situating James in a world where he is seemingly surrounded by examples of mediocre novels becoming bestsellers while his artistry goes underappreciated (his closest friends, George du Maurier and Constance Fennimore Woolson, both write runaway bestsellers: respectively, *Tribly* and *Anne*), Lodge presents the reader with a James who is never so lost in his sacred art that he isn't above comparing the size of the ads for *Guy Domville* to those of rival plays in the West End as he reads the theater listings in the *London Times*. In his hands, the Master may despair about not being more widely read, but we are lead inexorably to one relatively simple conclusion—James shouldn't have tortured himself with such concerns, because the bestselling authors

have become the stuff of footnotes, while his devotion to his sacred art has rendered him immortal. The traditional dichotomy between genuine art and the marketplace is triumphantly reaffirmed because, after all, we all already knew who won in the long run, so we regard Henry's concerns about his marketability as sadly misguided, right from the opening anxiety attack.

Yet the relationship between aestheticism and consumerism was far more complicated during the 1880s. Jonathan Freedman, in his masterful study of this period, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1990), demolishes exactly this dichotomy.

James was able to complete the professionalization of the high-culture artist that the aesthetic movement began but failed to accomplish; he was enabled to institutionalize himself in the competitive literary marketplace of Edwardian London as the great Master of the new Art of Fiction, and thus to create a career model for the writers and artists who were to follow in his wake. . . . And this move, born equally of the commodification of art and the artistic career, and the resistance to such commodification, helped accomplish the full delineation of a zone of "high culture," the creation of a separate niche amidst a complex market economy for the earnest production and avid consumption of austere, self-regarding art. (xxvi)

Because the ultimate goal of Lodge's novel is to reaffirm the separation between aesthetic refinement and the marketplace, it doesn't acknowledge the massive expansion of that niche within the popular literary culture of the past decade. Within the world of *Author, Author* there are only two categories, literary novels and bestsellers, yet within the literary culture that Lodge's own novel circulates in, the twain that could not meet have become a thriving category of quality fiction called literary bestsellers, cultivated most energetically by authors, publishers, book superstores, and television book clubs. At the end of *Author, Author*, Lodge, as the voice of the author, breaks into the fictional universe of his novel:

It's tempting, therefore to indulge in a fantasy of somehow time-traveling back to that afternoon of late February 1916, creeping into the master bedroom of flat 21, Carlyle Mansions, casting a spell on the little group of weary watchers at the bedside, pulling up a chair oneself, and saying a few reassuring words to HJ, before he departs this world, about his literary future. How pleasing to tell him that after a few decades of relative

obscurity he would become an established classic, essential reading for anyone interested in modern English and American literature and the aesthetics of the novel. That all of his major works and most of his minor ones would be constantly in print, scrupulously edited, annotated, and studied in schools, colleges, and universities around the world, the subject of innumerable postgraduate theses and scholarly articles and books . . . and what fun to tell him that millions of people all over the world would encounter his stories in theatrical and cinematic and television adaptations . . . and that film and TV tie-in editions of these books would sell in large quantities. (375)

Perhaps it would be fun to tell HJ how important he has become to AP English students, college professors, and Harvey Weinstein, but I think it would be even more fun, and even more satisfying to the Master, to tell him something else: that in the future his life would become the subject of not one, but two literary bestsellers in the same year and that another book (*The Line of Beauty*), which would attempt to update him—in the form of a “Jamesian novel” about the fin de siècle of the twentieth century—would win a prize designating it the best novel written in a year in the early twenty-first century . . . and it would sell like hotcakes. While James may indeed be pleased to hear about his academic canonization and the royalties he could expect from all the movie and television rights, I think he would be delighted to learn about the robust flourishing of what he himself had always longed to write—a literary bestseller.

In *The Master*, Toibin breaks down the traditional dichotomy between literary culture and consumer culture by suggesting that James may well have been devoted to his sacred art, but he also had a taste for up-market material goods. Lodge assures the reader in his novel that HJ’s anxiety about his books’ not selling was not fueled by a desire for luxury items; in Toibin’s novel, Henry likes to shop, and his dissatisfaction with his royalties has everything to do with his taste for the right sorts of material objects:

It was easy to feel that he was destined to write for the few, perhaps for the future, yet never to reap the rewards that he would relish now, such as his own house, and a beautiful garden, and no anxiety about what was to come. He retained pride in decisions taken, the fact that he had never compromised, that his back ached and his eyes hurt solely because he continued to labor all day at an art that was pure and unconstrained by mere mercenary ambitions. For his father and his brother, and for many in London too, a failure in the market was a kind of success, and success in the market a matter not to be discussed. He did not ever in his life ac-

tively seek the hard doom of general popularity. Nonetheless, he wanted his books to sell, he wanted to shine in the marketplace and pocket the proceeds without comprising his sacred art in any way. It mattered to him how he was seen; and being seen not to lift a finger to make his work popular pleased him; being seen to devote himself to solitude and selfless application to a noble art gave him satisfaction. He recognized, however, that lack of success was one thing, but abject failure was another. (20)

In this novel, a taste for literary books and a taste for interior design items are completely intertwined—both reflect a singular, discriminating sensibility. When he acquires Lamb House, he begins to develop a sense of self articulated in terms of the décor that he surrounds himself with: “For so many years now he had had no country, no family, no establishment of his own, merely a flat in London where he worked. He did not have the necessary shell. . . . [I]t was as though he lived a life without a façade, a stretch of frontage to protect him from the world. He dreamed of now being a host, having friends, and family to stay; he dreamed of decorating an old house, buying his own furniture and having continuity and certainty in his days” (123). In these dreams decorating is as much an expression of his singular aesthetic sensibility as his writing. It is most decidedly not a matter of merely acquiring material goods versus the creation of genuine art. James is taken around London in search of the proper décor items by Lady Wolseley, a woman of immense taste who has read his novel *The Spoils of Poynton* and is convinced that the widowed Mrs. Gareth, ready to die for her carefully collected treasures of Poynton, was based on her: “‘Not the greed,’ she said, ‘and not the foolishness and not the widowhood, I have never gone in for widowhood. But the eye, the eye that misses nothing, can see how a Queen Anne chair can be restored, or a faded tapestry hung in the shadows, or a painting bought for the frame’” (125). Her ultracultivated eye for décor reveals the density of meaning hidden in those surfaces, a talent that we normally associate only with James as literary master: “Lady Wolseley provided him with a secret guide to London, to the hidden places from which he could fill and furnish Lamb House; she offered him also a version of London at its most densely packed, most resolutely inhabited. Each object he fingered and handled possessed a wondrous history that would never be known, suggesting England to him in all its old wealth and purpose” (127). James becomes so enamored of his acquisitions that Constance Fennimore Woolson, his “most intelligent reader,” teases him about his “addiction to refinements.”

These dual addictions, to writing as sacred art and to interior decoration as an equally exacting form of self-expression, may seem like contradictory impulses to readers whose impressions of James have been shaped so thoroughly by modernist critics, which celebrate the former but can only dismiss the latter as commodity fetishism. But within the British and American aesthetic movement of James's time, those addictions were tightly intertwined, mutually reaffirming expressions of *the eye* responsible for both sorts of critical judgment. Freedman makes the essential point:

The aestheticist project of the beautification of everyday life, its privileging of sense experience its evocation of a redemptive world elsewhere where such experiences could be ceaselessly realized—all these intersected with the dynamics of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century American culture so as to exert a significant pressure on its social and ideological configurations. For example, the concerns of British aestheticism coincided with those of mid-century American domestic ideology in such a way as to make palatable, even desirable, new, more luxurious tastes in household decoration and ornamentation; under the guidance of Morris, and even more powerfully, his popularizers, Americans were led to supplant the ideal of the “American home” with that of the “House Beautiful.” (82)

This notion of a “redemptive world” formed by a series of associated, interconnected tastes unified by the power of the eye privileges the experience of beauty as an end in itself, wherever that eye might find it. But that ideology of taste requires another essential component—the transformation of buying into a form of self-expression that so diminishes the taint of cold hard cash that the experience of beauty remains somehow transcendently elsewhere. Freedman argues that this aestheticism involved more than just a celebration of interior design. “What we witness is the emergence of a rhetoric of that deployed ‘cultural’ and the ‘aesthetic’ as advertising slogans, as part of a naive, but nevertheless effective strategy for advertising commodities that would at once glorify and efface the act of consumption itself by grounding the most mundane acquisitive choices in the nonmaterial realm of transcendent value designated by the aesthetic” (109).

I have pursued this point at some length because I think it has enormous relevance for understanding the literary bestsellers that emerged in the late 1990s. This sort of effaced consumerism that makes the pursuit of aesthetic experience something that may be explicitly advertised as such, without

invalidating the experience, had to be solidly in place for the literary best-seller to thrive as a superior form of quality reading within the past decade. Just as important, our understanding of the place and function of literary bestsellers, especially the Devoutly Literary, neo-aesthetic novels, depends on our coming to terms with another integral feature of contemporary taste formations—that a taste for things literary and things of a more material nature (furniture, houses, clothing) are no longer mutually exclusive but wholly interdependent pleasures. When the authors of the National Endowment for the Arts report *Reading at Risk* tried to delineate the profile of the serious reader in terms of other leisure-time activities, they identified museum going and attendance at classical music concerts as the definitive “associated tastes.” While there is no reason to dispute the fact that museum going is an important associated taste, I think it is just as productive to trace the activities that form another associated taste that has everything to do with the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure—shopping at good-design chain-stores, reading shelter magazines and décor catalogues such as Sundance, or watching décor-porn programming on cable television. The relationship between reading literary fiction and this particular range of associated tastes needs to be explored more fully, because both are predicated on the search for self-defining aesthetic pleasures that are themselves dependent on quality consumerism, outside the sanctified spaces of the academy and the museum.

This convergence of tastes for things literary and things material was accelerated by a publishing industry increasingly determined to place books in consumer destinations that are anything but bookstores, at least in the traditional sense of the term. This trend was covered by a front-page story in the *New York Times*, entitled “Selling a Little Literature to Go with your Lifestyle” (November 2, 2006). According to its author, Julie Bosman, the appearance of literary titles in stores such as Anthropologie, Urban Outfitters, and Restoration Hardware was part of a new marketing strategy:

With book sales sagging—down 2.6 percent as of August over the same period last year, according to the Association of American Publishers—publishers are pushing their books into butcher shops, car washes, cookware stores, cheese shops, even chi-chi clothing boutiques where high-end literary titles are used to amplify the elegant lifestyle they are attempting to project. . . . “You walk into Restoration Hardware and you want the couch, and the vase and the nightstand, and then you want the

two books that are on the nightstand,” said Andrea Rosen (vice president for special markets at HarperCollins). “The books complete the story.”

And, one could argue just as easily, the décor completes the books, or more precisely, it completes the quality literary reading experience, since it provides the right *mise-en-scène*—the furniture and the books are both a matter of *interior* décor. Rosen’s choice of words here is especially apt. In order for the furniture ensemble to become a compelling purchase, it has to have a “story” that places the consumer-reader into a narrative fashioned out of a host of interdependent choices that form a total taste environment, the books completing the décor, the décor completing the books.

This is not to suggest that quality reading used to take place in some sort of clean, well-lighted minimalist place where nothing was supposed to get in the way of the transcendent reading experience. An appreciation of the finer things in life was clearly not banished from the premises, in fact one could argue that it was simply taken for granted—readers of quality fiction obviously had good taste, just as they obviously had an interest in museum exhibitions and classical music concerts. That went without saying. The omnipresence of gorgeous set decoration in practically every corner of the Merchant and Ivory universe exemplifies this casual taken-for-granted quality. That visual sumptuousness is the result of meticulous art direction, but we don’t see the characters doing much to actually transform their domestic space into a fully personalized total design aesthetic. The decor is already just there, along with the appropriate reading material. In the Devoutly Literary universe, the relentless quest for the self-defining purchase, whether it be a décor item or a literary novel, forms the central action of the novel because the taste for those finer things in life needs to be catalogued, relentlessly. Writing and reading literary fiction is not just foregrounded as one of the finer things in life—it is woven into an entire web of interdependent aesthetic pleasures that form both the action and stage set for the quality literary experience, both within the novels and in the domestic space of the reading of those books. Henry James longs to make Lamb House as much of an expression of his artistic sensibility as any of his novels; Toibin’s novel sits on the Restoration Hardware night table.

I have been using the term “neo-aestheticism” to describe this phenomenon not just because so many novels and adaptation films have been set in the golden age of British and American aestheticism at the turn of the twentieth century. One of the cornerstones of that aestheticism was, after

all, exactly this sort of cultivation of tastes for all of the finer things in life as part of an all-encompassing celebration of aesthetic pleasure in which appreciation of décor was deemed as essential as an appreciation of fine art. This fusion of artistic and material tastes that is so much part of the impassioned advocacy of beauty in Devoutly Literary novels of the early twenty-first century was omnipresent in the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, a movement that, not so surprisingly, has been enjoying a phenomenal resurgence in both museum exhibitions and consumer culture. During the same three-year period (2004–6) in which *L’Affaire*, *The Master*, *The Line of Beauty*, *On Beauty*, and *Author, Author* were published, three museum retrospectives devoted to the Arts and Crafts movement were launched by major museums—“The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America” (organized by the Los Angeles County Museum), “International Arts and Crafts” (which originated at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London), and “Louis Comfort Tiffany at Laurelton Hall: An Artist’s Country Estate” (the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York). The title of this last exhibition sums up the neo-aesthetic agenda in epigrammatic form—private domestic space is the ultimate form of artistic expression. This is articulated in no uncertain terms in the exhibition statement:

Laurelton Hall, Louis Comfort Tiffany’s extraordinary country estate in Oyster Bay, New York, completed in 1905, was the epitome of the designer’s achievement and in many ways defined the multifaceted artist. Tiffany designed every aspect of the project inside and out, creating a total aesthetic environment. The exhibition is a window into Tiffany’s most personal art, bringing into focus this remarkable artist who lavished as much care and creativity on the design and furnishing of his home and gardens as he did in all of the wide-ranging media in which he worked.

The emphasis here on the “total aesthetic environment” is significant, because the museum show demonstrates how the cultivation of domestic space could become a kind of home-grown *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which all taste distinctions are outward manifestations of a unified personal aesthetic, a taste ideology that has expanded exponentially in terms of who feels capable of trying to achieve that total design environment by the popularization of a certain way of talking the talk of aesthetic pleasure and a concomitant revolution in terms of marketing high design for mass audiences.

The resurgence of the Arts and Crafts movement, then, is not just a matter of taking delight in a certain style—that resurgence is also attributable to the ways that it now provides for talking the talk of aesthetic appreciation in which pure aesthetic pleasure is deemed redemptive for everyone, rather than a trivial pleasure reserved for the elite. The Web site exhibition statement for the “International Arts and Crafts” exhibition stresses the same sort of total design aesthetic as the “Tiffany at Laurelton Hall” show, but the chief goal here is to focus on the ways that redemptive beauty infused all aspects of domestic life: “Led by theorists John Ruskin and William Morris, the movement promoted the ideals of craftsmanship and individualism along with the integration of art into everyday life. Arts and Crafts principles changed the way people looked at the things they lived with—from teacups and spoons to tapestries and stained-glass windows—and resulted in a new respect for the work of individual craftsmen.” This integration was made possible in terms of placing exemplars of such works on display in meticulously curated shows, but also through the gift shops that accompany them. When I attended “The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America” during its time at the Milwaukee Art Museum, the last “gallery” of the exhibition was an elaborate display of Arts and Crafts-style pottery, lamps, rugs, and wall hangings, all available for purchase. One could quite literally take the beautiful into one’s home in the form of museum reproductions produced by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, or other décor items executed by contemporary individual craftsmen working within the form vocabulary of the Arts and Crafts movement (Pewabic pottery, Motawi tile, etc.). Here were beautiful objects directly inspired by the work of James’s contemporaries, the sort of exquisitely crafted objects that the Master himself may have lusted after and contemplated taking back home, just as I did as I wandered through the galleries.

This celebration of the redemptive power of pure aesthetic beauty in the form of return to Arts and Crafts is not limited to museum shops. When I began my research for this book I happened to be looking for a couch for my living room, and I visited Crate and Barrel, a good-design chain store on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, one of the most superheated consumer environments in the United States. I encountered there an entire ensemble of furniture named the “Morris Collection,” complete with a copy of Barbara Myer’s *In the Arts and Crafts Style* placed judiciously on the coffee table as the book accessory that “completed the story” of this ensemble. The mass production of Morris may indeed seem like a perversion of his craft-based

aesthetic, but the Arts and Crafts movement celebrated exactly this sort of taking the beautiful into domestic space, making the average family home into the house beautiful. In her review in the *New York Times* (July 26, 2005) of “The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America” exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Roberta Smith stresses exactly this connection. She describes the Arts and Crafts movement as one of those “great switching stations of thought during the Victorian Era and commensurate in its way with Darwinism, Marxism, and photography.” She details the inbound tracks: medieval art, English Gothic revival, the writings of Ruskin and Morris, and the rage against the industrial revolution. Her list of outbound tracks includes the styles and figures one would expect (art nouveau, art deco, de Stijl, Bauhaus, and Frank Lloyd Wright) but also good-design chain stores and catalogues such as those by Ikea, Pottery Barn, and Design within Reach. Making the beautiful accessible to a broad audience, specifically in terms of how such objects may form the fabric of everyday life in middle-class homes, dorm rooms, and elsewhere may indeed be seen as an extension of that aestheticism of the late nineteenth century, but the ability to realize that goal on a massive scale depends on delivery systems that provide both the aesthetic objects and the way to talk about their redemptive beauty as a process of self-definition, at which point any domestic space is potentially as much of a total aesthetic environment as Tiffany’s Laurelton Hall or the Sundance catalogue reading room.

The convergence of that Arts and Crafts aestheticism and the contemporary literary bestseller reached its zenith in the late summer of 2007, when Nancy Horan’s novel *Loving Frank* was at the top of the bestseller lists, and readers began to encounter stacks of copies on the front tables at Borders and Barnes & Noble superstores across the country. According to Horan’s account of their scandalous love affair, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Cheney were drawn inexorably to each other because of the aesthetic sensibility they shared and could find nowhere else in their stolid Midwestern world. The end result reads like a cross between *Shakespeare in Love* and *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*: we learn the source of Wright’s creative genius and, at the same time, see how an unassuming young woman, possessed of a genuine aesthetic spirit, could captivate the master: “It frightened her to feel so out of control. But any thoughts of ending the affair floated away the minute he set foot in the same room. Frank Lloyd Wright was a life force. He seemed to fill whatever space he occupied with a pulsing energy that was spiritual, sexual, and intellectual all at once. And the wonder of it was,

he wanted her” (28). Reading together becomes a kind of aesthetic foreplay for Frank and Mamah, as their mutual admiration for the same works of literature, art, and architecture enflames their passion for one another. As a bookish woman who initially feels a world apart from the flamboyant aestheticism of Frank but then blossoms when she begins to open herself up to the power of aesthetic pleasure, this Mamah Cheney could be the Laura Brown of Oak Park, the Girl with the Ginko Leaf Earring. Transcendent aesthetic experience is not restricted to the Frank Lloyd Wrights, Vermeers, and Virginia Woolfs of this world, but neither is it available to absolutely everyone—it becomes available to a select type of seemingly average individuals who, despite all appearances, nonetheless possess a heightened sensitivity to all things artistic.

The widespread popularity of Arts and Crafts aestheticism in museum shows, good-design stores, and literary bestsellers represents the complicated, often contradictory dimensions of the movement and it is only by appreciating those tensions that we can fine-tune our understanding of the popularized neo-aestheticism that is so all-pervasive within the Devoutly Literary. Freedman makes the critical point that there were two dominant, yet thoroughly antithetical impulses in conflict at the end of the nineteenth century—the overtly democratizing side of aestheticism, particularly in the works of Morris and Ruskin, whose criticism can be easily read as a kind of “aesthetic Reform Act, an extension of the franchise of art appreciation from exclusively elite circles to any patient and attentive reader of his work,” and the anti-egalitarian side, represented by Pater and Wilde, in which the aesthete proclaims himself a “rare and superior being, capable of special perception and appreciation,” the dandy who insists that the proper appreciation of the beautiful is anything but a universal or communal experience. The literary bestseller, like the good-design chain store, represents a neat synthesis of these two impulses by extending the franchise to a mass audience of connoisseurs—people who know that the proper appreciation of the aesthetic is not universal but is certainly downloadable from any of a variety of authorities who function not as dandies but as popular connoisseurs, devoted to bringing the aesthetic pleasure to anyone attentive enough to watch television design makeover programs or read shelter magazines.

One of the most vivid examples of this popularized aestheticism is the motto of Target discount stores, “Design for All”—the same discount chain that sponsors Project Literacy, a philanthropic enterprise that underwrites a number of literary events around New York (regularly advertised in full-

page ads in the *New York Times*), as well as sponsoring exhibitions such as “Massive Change: The Future of Global Design” (curated by Bruce Mau) and “Free Tuesdays” at art museums throughout America. Design for All involves more than just bringing good design at an affordable price to mass audiences; what makes it an especially clear-cut reaffirmation of the democratization of aesthetic appreciation that was central to the Arts and Crafts movement is the language used to describe the use value of beauty.

I’ll offer just one example of how all-pervasive this neo-aestheticism has become. While I was writing this chapter, I was in my local Target store one afternoon and I decided to pick up a pizza cutter because the wheel had fallen off my old one. I opted for one in the Michael Graves Collection because I liked the chunky handle, and for five dollars, it seemed like a good buy. The cardboard packaging informed me, however, that I had made this decision without realizing what was really at stake, because there, in addition to a photo of the man himself, and his hand-written signature, was this product description: “The Michael Graves product line is an inspired balance of form and function. At once it is sensible and sublime, practical and whimsical, utilitarian and aesthetically pleasing. Michael Graves creates useful objects, which not only carry their own weight, but simultaneously lift our spirits.” By imbuing this kitchen utensil with the power to “lift our spirits” because it is “aesthetically pleasing,” the beautiful has a use value unto itself; is not just useful and beautiful, it is useful *because it is* beautiful—without it, our spirits will not be lifted.

While Target stores provide abundant evidence of the popularization of aesthetic appreciation, they are even more significant as epicenters of a new cluster of associated tastes that surround and inform the literary bestseller. Judging by this “Ode on a Pizza Cutter,” which sounds as if it was authored by a contemporary aesthete channeling the ghost of William Morris as determinedly as Lodge and Toibin channel Henry James, the mission statement for Design for All could well be “Redemptive Aesthetic Experience for Everyone (at a remarkably affordable level).” The extension of the franchise for aesthetic appreciation moves in a number of directions simultaneously. The same Target store where I bought my pizza cutter features not only design collections by Graves, Todd Oldham, and Thomas O’Brien; it also features, just as prominently, literary bestsellers on face-out displays in their Recommended Reading section, right next to another display for the Target Book Club, Bookmarked.com. Last but not least, when I stopped to get my daughter a treat at the café, the plastic cup that held her drink

was emblazoned with the following message: “All for books, and books for all—Join Book Club today! Target.com/readysitread.”

My point here is not to prove that we need to talk about décor in order to get a handle on literary bestsellers but rather that we need to pay far closer attention to the ways in which décor and books are given redemptive use value within a discourse of popular connoisseurship found on dust jackets as well as pizza cutter packaging, a discourse that valorizes the beautiful for its own sake and makes its appreciation something that all can experience within the heart of consumer culture. While the British and American aestheticism of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth generated two conflicting narratives regarding aesthetic experience—one that expanded the franchise of aesthetic appreciation to the middle class, and one that restricted it to a professionalized elite—it was the latter that became dominant at the beginning of the twentieth century within the academy and the museum, and it held sway for decades to come. But at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that other narrative, the one that advocated the democratization of aesthetic pleasure, has made a triumphant return. One could, of course, argue that consumer culture has always been all about selling beauty in the form of fashion, cosmetics, luxury automobiles, and so on, and that the appreciation of beauty has hardly gone unremarked. But what is at play here is the massification of elite tastes made possible by the mass production of goods and the mass dissemination of a new way of talking the talk of aesthetic appreciation, in which the aesthetic experience becomes explicitly designated as such, on pizza cutter packaging at Target and by bestselling Booker Prize finalists and books on the *Times*' Top Ten Notables list.

Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* exemplifies how this updated neo-aestheticism works in the literary bestseller of the early twenty-first century. The main character is Nick Guest, a young man who was “out as an aesthete” at Oxford (but not yet out as homosexual). The novel opens in 1983, shortly after Nick has moved into the home of his school chum/wicked crush, whose family has a majestic home in London. The first thing we are told about Nick is how much he relishes the house and its décor. A long paragraph detailing his enjoyment of its many luxurious features ends with: “Above the drawing-room fireplace there was a painting by Guardi, a capriccio of Venice in a gilt frame; on the facing wall were two large gilt-framed mirrors. Like his hero Henry James, Nick felt he could ‘stand a great deal of gilt’” (6). He is intending to write a doctoral thesis on James, and his devo-

tion to the Master has everything to do with his obsession with style. When the family brings him along to a wedding at a stately home, Hawkeswood, Nick wanders through the magnificent library. The host, Lord Kessler, sees that he's taken down a copy of *The Way We Live Now*, and asks him if he's a Trollope man, and he responds disdainfully, "What was it Henry James said, about Trollope and his 'great heavy shovelfuls of testimony to constituted English manners'?" (52). Later in the conversation, when Lord Kessler asks him about his chosen field of study, he replies that he wants to have a look at "style":

"Style *tout court*?"

"Well, style at the turn of the century—Conrad, and Meredith and Henry James, of course." . . .

"Ah," said Lord Kessler intelligently, "Style as an obstacle."

Nick smiled. "Exactly. . . . Or perhaps style that hides things and reveals things at the same time." For some reason this seemed rather near the knuckle, as though he were suggesting Lord Kessler had a secret. "James is a great interest of mine, I must say."

"Yes, you're a James man I see now."

"Oh, absolutely!" and Nick grinned with pleasure and defiance, it was like coming out, which revealed rather belatedly why he wasn't and never would be married to Trollope.

"Henry James stayed here, of course, I'm afraid he found us rather vulgar," Lord Kessler said, as if it had only been last week. (54)

This exchange is significant for a number of reasons. In foregrounding its affiliations so pointedly, *The Line of Beauty* engages in the same kind of literary self-positioning as *Bridget Jones's Diary* or *Trading Up*. As in those novels, there is unvarnished fascination with style as expressed in terms of material objects—in addition to writing a dissertation about James, Nick wants to do a film adaptation of James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton*: "I think it *could* be rather marvelous, don't you. You know Ezra Pound said it was just a novel about furniture, meaning to dismiss it of course, but that was really what made me like the sound of it!" (213). And as with these novels, the relevance of those canonical novels of manners to contemporary society is taken for granted, as if Austen, Wharton, or James really had been there last week. Hollinghurst goes further out of his way to make the parallels as exact as possible—during his stay at Hawkeswood, Nick goes through the family photo albums and finds that the Master was indeed a guest there too, and he

now sits in the library just as the Master once did. James was here last week, Hollinghurst is here this week.

Yet one of the main reasons that Hollinghurst's novel won the Man Booker Prize, and was roundly promoted as a literary bestseller, is that Nick, unlike the heroines of Fielding, Banks, and company, is a self-professed aesthete, and the novel strives to update the Jamesian novel in all of its self-conscious aestheticism. In response to a friend's question about whether James's motto was "Art makes life," Nick tells a friend in the words of the Master, "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process" (139). Hollinghurst reiterates the primacy of the aesthetic even as he attempts to update James by taking him headlong into the decadence of twentieth-century London. This highly self-conscious aestheticism functions as social critique within the novel in a variety of different forms. Nick is appalled by the *nouveau riche*, who have enormous amounts of capital but are devoid of taste. The conspicuous consumption of luxury *décor* made possible by the boom economy of the mid-eighties is unguided by the proper *eye*, resulting in chaotic consumerism—only the intensely cultivated, intensely personalized eye of the aesthete can transform commodity into collection. What distinguishes Hollinghurst's version of neo-aestheticism from James's is the way in which it becomes an articulation of gay identity in a homophobic culture. Through the invocations of James, as quotable aesthete hero, or in the form of actual copies of his books that keep popping up throughout *The Line of Beauty*, Nick invokes James dozens of times and ponders how the Master would articulate that which was unimaginable in his fiction: "Nick wondered for a moment how Henry would have got round it. If he had fingered so archly at beards and baldness, the fine pared saliences of his own appearance, what flirtings and flutterings might he not have performed to conjure up Rickey's solid eight inches?" (209).

Nick, like Henry, can stand a "great deal of gilt" in the various forms it takes at the end of the twentieth century, but so, apparently, can the readers who form the potential audience for this novel. I bought my copy of *The Line of Beauty* because it won the Booker Prize, just as thousands of other readers did. It came to all of us already humming with significance, a book to be read as the Important Literary Novel whose aesthetic qualities are emphasized as a selling point on the back cover just as explicitly as they were on the packaging for Graves's pizza cutter at Target: "In an era of endless

possibility, Nick finds himself able to pursue his own private obsession with beauty—a prize as compelling to him as power and riches are to his friends . . . Richly textured, emotionally charged, disarmingly funny, it is a major work by one of the finest writers in the English language.”

Whether this “obsession with beauty” is a critique of “riches” unguided by taste, or simply the poetry of the high-end consumer sales pitch is, of course, debatable, but one thing is certain—the aesthetic pleasure that enjoys transcendent power within this fiction is also what makes it highly marketable for readers in search of such pleasures when they come with the guarantee of genuine culture, a prize-winning novel by one of the finest writers in the English language.

From Chick-lit to Lit-lit, Longing for Which Sort of Literacy?

Given the interplay between aestheticism and its marketability, it is not surprising that literary fiction has become a form of category fiction. This transformation is, in part, attributable to the ways in which publishers now target quality audiences and present certain novels as books to be read for exactly those readers. But it is also attributable to a remarkable consistency in the fictional worlds created and the pleasures that are offered there. I want to turn to McEwan’s *Saturday*, because it is a paradigmatic example of a literary novel that is a critically esteemed “notable book” that also works like genre fiction for its devoted audience.

In his review of *Saturday* in his column in *The Believer* (April 2005), Nick Hornby praises it as a “very good novel, . . . humane and wise and gripping,” but he lambastes what it suggests about the state of literary reading in the United Kingdom and United States. After quoting statistics regarding the decline of reading, he says:

And meanwhile, the world of books seems to be getting more bookish. Anita Brookner’s new novel is about a novelist. David Lodge and Colm Toibin wrote novels about Henry James. Alan Hollinghurst wrote about a guy writing a thesis on Henry James. And in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, the central character’s father-in-law and daughter are both serious published poets and past winners of Oxford University’s Newdigate Prize for undergraduate poetry. . . . Sort it out, guys! You can’t all write literature about literature! One book a year, maybe, between you—but all of the above titles were published in the last six months. There are, I think,

two reasons to be a little bit queasy about this trend. The first is quite simply, it excludes readers. I don't want people who haven't got a degree in literature to give up on the contemporary novel. . . . Taken as a group, these novels seem to raise the white flag: we give in! It's hopeless! we don't know what those people out there want! Pull up the drawbridge!

But they are a group, and novelists and their publishers know exactly what those readers out there want—novels about passionate readers just like themselves, who have a taste for the finer things in life. Rather than a retreat, it represents a headlong charge into the marketplace in search of the quality readership for which this fiction can be identified as books to be read and loved passionately by exactly the right audience. They have indeed sorted it all out already; this readership wants to read about people just like themselves, only that much more literary. Hornby is concerned about this exclusive focus on characters who are “highly articulate people. Henry Perowne, the father and son-in-law of the poets, is a neurosurgeon, and his wife is a corporate lawyer; like many highly educated middle-class people, they have access to and a facility with language, a facility that enables them to speak very directly and lucidly about their lives. . . . [T]here's a sense in which McEwan is wasted on them” (83). He argues that the success of Roddy Doyle with infrequent readers is attributable to his ability to be “smart about people who don't have the resources to describe their own emotional states. . . . It seems to me to be a more remarkable gift than the ability to let extremely articulate people say extremely literate things.”

While this is undoubtedly an important distinction, I think there's another way to regard this insularity. The readership of the Devoutly Literary novel doesn't *need* McEwan in the way that readers might need Roddy Doyle. It's not a matter of needing instruction as much as of finding a kindred spirit who shares your sensibilities and believes in the power of reading. To return to Bridget Jones's analogy, *Saturday* isn't a literary novel that functions like a pasta machine or an ice-cream maker, because it has an important use value—it affirms the superiority of your taste culture. Chick-lit was condemned by Curtis Sittenfeld for the best-friend coziness between characters and readership founded on their mutual tastes and sensibilities. The lead blurb on the back of my paperback copy of *In Her Shoes* exemplifies this perfectly, since, according to *People* magazine, “This book is like spending time with an understanding friend who has the knack for always being great company. Bottom line: wonderful fit.” The popularity of the Devoutly Lit-

erary novel depends on exactly the same sort of cozy fit between characters and readership, the same sense that they're "just like us." Consider the blurb for another Lit-lit book, Hellenga's *The Fall of the Sparrow* (1998): "Here's the new Robert Hellenga novel, as richly detailed and absorbing as *The Sixteen Pleasures*. You know what you need to do: boil the tea water, get into bed, tell your family to go away for a few days and begin the journey." What sort of journey do these novels offer, and who's supposed to sign up for the trip?

McEwan's novel, then, details the life of Henry Perowne, neurosurgeon. As a narrative of a day in the life of a wealthy contemporary Londoner, the novel bears more than a passing resemblance to *Mrs. Dalloway*, and there are a number of references to literary authors throughout the book, even though Perowne himself is skeptical about the power of literary fiction. His daughter, Daisy, studied English at Oxford, and her first book of poetry has just been published. She is responsible for Perowne's literary education, but throughout most of the novel, the narrator details only his failure to be affected by her recommended readings, because they lack the clarity of scientific prose. He admires *William James*, for example, because

James had the knack of fixing on the surprising commonplace—and in Perowne's humble view, wrote a better-honed prose than his fussy brother, who would rather run round a thing a dozen different ways than call it by its name. Daisy, the arbiter of his literary education, would never agree. She wrote a long undergraduate thesis essay on Henry James's late novels and can quote a passage from *The Golden Bowl*. . . . At her prompting, he tried the one about the little girl suffering from her parents' vile divorce. A promising subject but poor Maisie soon vanished behind a cloud of words, and at page forty-eight Perowne, who can be on his feet seven hours for a difficult procedure, who has run the London marathon, fell away exhausted. Even the tale of his daughter's namesake baffled him. What's an adult to conclude about Daisy Miller's predictable decline? That the world can be unkind? It's not enough. . . . Perowne is counting on Daisy to refine his sensibilities. (64)

He thinks it would be no bad thing to understand what's meant, what Daisy means, by literary genius. He's not sure he's ever experienced it at first hand, despite various attempts. He even half doubts its existence. . . . In fact, under Daisy's direction, Henry has read the whole of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, two acknowledged masterpieces. . . . If, as Daisy said, the genius was in the details, then he was unmoved. . . .

Work that you cannot begin to imagine achieving yourself, that displays a ruthless nearly inhuman element of self-enclosed perfection—this is his idea of genius. This notion of Daisy’s, that people can’t live without stories, is simply not true. He is living proof. (67)

Now, what’s going to happen to poor Henry Perowne before this novel can come to an end? Will he realize the error of his ways, and finally allow his Henry James-loving daughter to refine his appreciation for literature? Will he finally have a firsthand experience of literary genius? Will he realize just how transformative the written word can really be? Dear reader, we all know by now that this man has a date with fate, a redemptive literary experience is just waiting for him like a bullet with his name on it. The man doesn’t get *Henry James*?! That’s like stomping on a crucifix in one of these neo-aesthetic novels. And that means he needs killin’ . . . or redeemin’, and by God, McEwan pulls out all the stops on his transformation. Daisy refines his sensibilities the hard way—she recites a Matthew Arnold poem to thugs who are about to rape her while her family looks on, but since they enjoy a firsthand experience with literary genius for the first time, they relent. Perowne tries to do a quick interpretation of the poem as it’s being read, but he’s baffled at first, because he’s a doctor, after all, who doesn’t really believe in literary genius, remember? The thugs, Baxter and Nigel, have given Daisy a copy of her own book of poetry to read as part of the spectacle of cruelty they are about to inflict, but then Daisy decides to recite “Dover Beach” instead—as a poet, she knows about metrical heavy ordinance and decides to go with a poem that will drop Baxter where he stands. When she finishes reciting, Baxter is at first dumbstruck, and then says excitedly,

“You wrote that. You *wrote* that.”

It’s a statement, not a question. Daisy stares at him, waiting.

He says again, “You wrote that.” And then hurriedly, “It’s beautiful. You know that, don’t you. It’s beautiful. And you wrote it.”

“Oi, Baxter.” Nigel cocks his head at Daisy and smirks.

“Nah, I’ve changed my mind.”

“What? Don’t be a cunt.”

“Why don’t you get dressed,” Baxter says to Daisy, as if her nakedness were her own strange idea. (231)

Baxter knows literary beauty when he hears it, and he is transformed by mere exposure, literary language possessing a nearly radioactive power. It

comes from out of nowhere and immediately transports all who hear it into another realm of transcendent understanding, more or less like the Papageno's bells in *The Magic Flute*. The bad guys dance with delight at the sound of genuine beauty—they just can't help themselves.

Saturday, like *The Line of Beauty*, *The Master*, *Le Divorce*, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, *The Archivist*, *The Dante Club*, *Literacy and Longing in L.A.*, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, *Heyday*, *The Thirteenth Tale*, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, *The People of the Book*, *The Shadow of the Wind*, and *Author, Author*, is literary genre fiction, what I'm calling "Lit-lit" for short, which is category fiction every bit as much as Westerns or bodice-ripper romances, but for a far more cultivated readership (who would be appalled by the very idea that all these quality literary books were mere genre fiction). If a genre depends on a relatively stable, instantly recognizable narrative universe consisting of recurring locations, iconography, dialect, conflicts, and an overarching logic that justifies all the characters' actions, no matter how baffling they would be to a nonfan, then Lit-lit certainly fits the bill. In terms of spatial locations, instead of dance floors, deep space, or desert landscapes, one finds a remarkable number of scenes taking place in libraries, classrooms, private studies, theaters, and galleries. In terms of temporal locations, just as the action in a Western has to take place between the 1860s and 1914, the action in the Lit-lit novel transpires either between the 1880s and the 1920s, or in a hybridized phantom universe composed of equal parts of the early twenty-first century and the late nineteenth. In terms of character occupations, the uniformity here makes detective fiction seem wildly diverse; in these novels you can't throw a rock without hitting a novelist, professor, or a graduate student in literature or art history and, most important, everyone reads, with a vengeance. That sameness in occupation produces a consistent iconography. The objects invested with intense significance aren't six guns and light sabers—books, manuscripts, and paintings get the big close-ups and the dadada-*dum* music. And as far as specialized generic dialect is concerned, the language they all speak is as uniform as any hard-boiled detective novel. Instead of gats and gams and kissers in short, choppy sentences, it's frightfully articulate speech, accessorized with endless references to books, travel, classical music, décor, and haute cuisine.

More pointedly, one finds a generic logic in these novels that gives purpose and explanation to all character action. The transformation of McEwan's hoodlums into poetry hounds can transpire only within a fictional universe

where the power of reading is a given, one of the taken-for-granted that form the bedrock logic of that narrative. Watching a Western, the viewer knows why “a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” At the end of *The Wild Bunch*, for example, Pike and company decide to march into certain death to try to rescue a newcomer to the band who is being held captive by the evil generalissimo, who has just paid them handsomely for the stolen rifles they’ve delivered. They have their money and are free to go anywhere they choose, yet they opt for certain death without any discussion whatsoever. After a night of drunken revelry in the whorehouse, they get up the next morning, look at each other, laugh, load their guns, and then go get shot to pieces in the final bloodbath. Any discussion would be superfluous, because both the characters, and the fans of the genre, know this is how this world works—everything depends on a shared, unquestioned sense of just what a man’s gotta do. This sort of shared logic is the foundation of all popular genres. Stella Dallas stands outside in the rain watching her daughter marry the rich kid and his mother opens the drapes so she can see, because within the logic of the maternal melodrama, a woman’s gotta do what a woman’s gotta do—character action is always already automatically justified. In musicals, characters spontaneously burst into song, not because they happen to be talented—their otherwise bizarre behavior is considered completely natural, because, as Gene Kelly tells us in *Singin’ in the Rain*, these people, “Gotta dance! Gotta dance! Gotta dance!”

I offer these examples because within the fictional universe of Lit-lit, we find characters that spontaneously “Gotta read! Gotta quote! Gotta recite!” for audiences who are just as automatically enthusiastic in their response to all that aesthetic razzmatazz. Of course the ruffians are transformed by hearing all those literary words—it goes without saying that they could only respond in this way. Perowne may initially be skeptical about the power of literary genius, but he gets redeemed in the end, and in the meantime, he just goes on and on about books and why they don’t work for him the way they do for everyone else in the family. In any world other than a “Lit-lit” universe, someone like Henry just wouldn’t give that much thought to literary fiction at all.

These self-consciously literary novels about the writing and reading of literary texts, however, do not “show their workings” (to use the phrase Hornby employs to characterize literary fiction), because they involve none of the self-reflexive play of the metafictional texts one finds in William Gass’s *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968), John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*

(1969), Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1981), or Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984). Those narratives were perpetually in the process of undermining the status of a fictional universe by drawing the reader's attention to the words on the page, insisting that any kind of fictional reality was finally just a matter of print on paper. The problematics of literary composition were, in effect, what these stories were *about*, and that self-reflexivity came with a high degree of ambivalence, which was expressed by the authors themselves within those fictions, exemplified by this passage from Barth's "Life Story":

You, dogged, uninsuitable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't even go to a movie, watch tv, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, maybe make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where's your shame? (12)

This is never a move on the board in the Lit-lit novels, which endlessly celebrate the joys of the literary experience, where readers aren't print-oriented bastards but print-loving brethren—there is simply no room for ambivalence in a world that imagines literary reading to be so imperiled. The exchange between the Lit-lit novel and its passionate readership depends on a different kind of wonderful *fit*, and might go something like this:

You lover of books, it's you I'm addressing from inside this wonderful fiction. You've read me thus far, of course, because we both know what's really *special* about the *magic of reading* in all of its transformative power. Some might prefer to watch tv or play video games but we know that Jane and Henry offer something just a *little* more enriching, don't we? So why don't you come over, I'm making my bouillabaisse, and I'll open that new Rhone clone from Boony Doon that Parker went nuts over. And I've got to show you the rug I'm lusting after in the new Sundance catalogue.

This exchange between novel and readership in Lit-lit depends on a host of shared tastes and reading pleasures of a familiar, dependable sort. In other words, the reading pleasures normally associated with genre fiction. My goal in demonstrating how these contemporary self-conscious literary novels resemble genre fiction more than metafiction is not to diminish

either the quality of the writing or the quality of the pleasures they generate. But reading pleasure here is not some all-purpose pleasure of the text, or hymn to the joys of solitary reading; the exchange between this particular sort of literary novel and its readers is all about the celebration of an imagined reading community, and the novels by McEwan, Lodge, Toibin, Fowler, and their kind all consolidate and consecrate that community as much as television book clubs, Vintage Press chat rooms, or Amazon list makers.

In this regard, Lit-lit fiction more closely resembles the “white glove” detective fiction written between the world wars by Dorothy Sayers, Michael Innes, and others than it does the metafiction of the sixties. In novels such as *Clouds of Witness* (1926), *Gaudy Night* (1935), and *The Long Farewell* (1956), the story may revolve around the central mystery, but the locations and characters are uniformly genteel and the majority of those characters read books and won’t let you forget it—literary allusions are tossed about casually like so many decorative throw pillows, alongside references to vintage port and first editions. The Lord Peter Wimsey novels offer a smorgasbord of refined tastes, and readers aren’t there because he can ratiocinate like no other genius detective—they’re there for the lifestyle, every bit as much as Merchant and Ivory fans are there for the décor and the costuming. Lit-lit novels are remarkably similar in terms of the all-pervasive bookishness and the intertwining of literary taste with comparable sophisticated tastes in gastronomy, décor, and clothing. But in Lit-lit novels, the central question is not who done it, but when will X have his/her transformative aesthetic experience? The world of the white-glove detective novel became so formalized that it was transformed smoothly into the ever-popular board game *Clue*. In that game, the player takes the role of detective solving the crime in the country house, posing questions to crack the case: Was it Colonel Mustard in the Drawing Room with the lead pipe? Was it Miss Scarlet in the Billiard Room with the revolver? Given the generic nature of Lit-lit, it’s easy to imagine a comparable board game, in which players try to determine who will have the aesthetic epiphany: Will it be the Physician in the Drawing Room with the Matthew Arnold poem? Or the Aesthete in the Billiard Room with the Henry James novel? Or the Jane Austen Reader in the Living Room with the Sundance poppies rug?

The staging of the aesthetic experience, the demonstration of the power of culture to lift us up, is crucially important, because the aesthetic pleasures afforded by these novels is primarily a matter of describing how characters

undergo such experiences. In other words, one of the most significant differences between the aesthetic writing of a century ago and contemporary neo-aesthetic novels is that the former was determined to make the reading of the text an intense aesthetic experience unto itself through flamboyantly “artful” stylistic strategies, where the latter depicts characters having such experiences, in prose styles that feature anything but such stylistic virtuosity. Bushnell, Johnson, Hollinghurst, and company may want to rewrite the novel of manners, but, in terms of their prose style, they resemble one another far more than their literary forbears—well-tailored, genteel realism will do very nicely, thank you. The *mise-en-scène*, here as it is in all such scenes in Lit-lit fiction, revolves around the staging of the literary experience in which epiphany is the reading transformation scene that the reader is expected to take on faith. As such, these transformation scenes resemble the paintings incorporated in my daughter’s *The Reading Woman* calendar that she got last Christmas from her grandmother. Here, paintings such as Kerr-Lawson’s *Caterina Reading a Book* (1888), Wiles’s *Woman Reading on a Beach* (1899), Waltrous’s *Just a Couple of Girls* (1915), and Fantin-Latour’s *La Lisense* (1861) provide beautiful images of the act of reading, featuring attractive, earnest-looking young women reading passionately in very pretty, tasteful surroundings.

The reading transformation scenes in Lit-lit fiction work in much the same way. They depict the act of reading as an exquisite aesthetic experience, but the aesthetic quality is largely picturesque. We are shown people enjoying the pleasures of reading, but the book we hold in our hand offers little more than the literary equivalent of these paintings—the words only depict aesthetic pleasure felt by others, resulting in a bizarre pornography of reading in which pleasure comes from watching others lost in the pleasure of reading really great novels or looking at really great paintings. In making the reading scenes so pivotal, these novels produce the literary equivalent of the Miramax “author’s hand” close-ups discussed in chapter 4, only here the hand that holds the book is every bit as important as the hand that holds the pen, provided that hand is simply throbbing with the pleasures of reading.

Just how far the resulting book talk is from metafictional “book talk,” is thrown into sharp relief in Dai Sijie’s *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2002). Here, virtually all of the features of Lit-lit are solidly in place, and advertised accordingly. The cover of the American paperback edition has “National Bestseller” emblazoned across the top and on the back cover, and

the lead blurb from the *Washington Post Book World* insists that this is “a funny, touching, sly and altogether delightful novel . . . about the power of art to enlarge our imagination.” One of the featured blurbs on the first page is from the *Boston Herald*, which identifies its intended audience: “A true book lover’s book. . . . A testament to resilience and to the power of words.” That this transformative power of reading is being used as the primary selling point is made even more abundantly clear in the back cover copy: “In this enchanting tale about the magic of reading and the wonder of romantic awakening” The narrator also attests to this magical power when he describes his first encounter with the Balzac novel *Ursule Moiret*: “The messy affair over the inheritance and money that befell her made the story all the more convincing, thereby enhancing the power of the words” (57).

This power fuels another standard feature of the Devoutly Literary—the virtual erasure of the differences between writing and reading passionately. (“Readers are artists too, you know.”) The narrator doesn’t want to just read *Ursule Moiret*; he transcribes it onto the lining of his coat. Once transcribed, and transformed into a form of oral storytelling by the narrator and his friend Luo, it has the power to mesmerize the noble savage, instantaneously. When Luo reads from this coat to the little seamstress, she takes it from him and rereads it herself:

When she’d finished reading she sat there quite still, open-mouthed. Your coat was resting on the flat of her hands, the way a sacred object lies in the palm of the pious. “This fellow Balzac is a wizard,” he went on. “He touched the head of this mountain girl with an invisible finger, and she was transformed, carried away in a dream. It took a while for her to come down to earth. She ended up putting your wretched coat on. She said having Balzac’s words next to her skin made her feel good, and also more intelligent.” (62)

Because of this power to transform listeners into passionate readers on contact, there are no differences between popular storytelling and literary prose, or between readers and authors within Sijie’s novel. Before they acquire their trove of literary classics, Luo and the narrator tell stories based on the films they’ve seen to entertain their audiences of simple country peasants, but the stories they draw from their reading of Balzac and Dumas novels prove even more mesmerizing. The narrator strings the village tailor along à la Scheherazade, with nightly installments of *The Count of Monte Cristo*:

The artistry of the great Dumas was so compelling that I forgot all about our guest, and the words poured from me. My sentences became more precise, more concrete, more compact as I went along . . . I lost all sense of time . . . How long had I been talking? An hour? Two? We had arrived at the point of the story where our hero, the French sailor, was locked up in a cell for the next twenty years. I felt drowsy, and I had to stop.

“Right now,” Luo whispered to me, “you’re doing better than me. You should have been a writer.” Intoxicated by this compliment, coming as it did from a master storyteller, I drifted off to sleep. Suddenly I heard the old tailor’s voice rumbling in the dark.

“Why did you stop?”

The difference between the celebratory hymn to the glory of reading of Lit-lit and the self-reflexivity of metafiction becomes especially clear-cut if we compare Dai Sijie’s use of Dumas to Italo Calvino’s “transcription” of the same novel in his story “The Count of Monte Cristo.” Calvino constructs an elaborate imaginary universe of possible texts out of the fictional universe constructed by Dumas, but Sijie describes the narrator’s retelling of Dumas. As such, it is heartfelt testimony to the master’s storytelling powers, a *depiction* of the telling and reading and listening. The *mise-en-scène* focalizes, as it does in all such scenes in Lit-lit fiction, on the reading transformation scene in which the reader is expected to take the epiphany on faith. But no great leap of faith is required here, since the readership in attendance is already firmly convinced that such power exists and relishes the reaffirmation.

Jennifer Kaufman’s and Karen Black’s novel, *Literacy and Longing in L.A.* (2006) is another *Portrait of a Reading Woman* in novel form, which reveals how much more aggressively authors and publishers began, between 2002 and 2006, to identify an intended audience as a specific type of reading community. The main character, Dora, is a passionate reader, longing for the next right book and the next Mr. Right to come into her life, more or less in that order. She is surrounded by a bookish *mise-en-scène* that extends throughout her adventures. We learn right from the start that her mother named her after Eudora Welty and that her sister, Virginia, was named after, well, you know who. When they were children, their mother would take them on literary field trips in search of the homes and haunts of famous writers. After Dora finishes her degree at Columbia University (duly noted), she moves to L.A., where she eventually marries Palmer, who eventually gets

“the top job at Sony Pictures.” As an avid reader who also happens to be a very attractive woman living in glitzy surroundings with a husband who is a major player in Hollywood, Dora obviously bears a strong resemblance to Janey Wilcox in Candace Bushnell’s *Trading Up*. The resemblance is stronger yet if one considers Dora’s insider observations about L.A. Instead of “In the Hamptons, everyone . . .” we get, “In Bel Air, everyone . . .” And in both novels the name-dropping of designer labels is ubiquitous, from Prada bags to “my *Dolce*.” But what makes this novel a devoutly Lit-lit novel, instead of a post-literary novel of manners, is Dora’s relentless reading and incessant book talk. She insists, “I collect books the way my girlfriends buy designer handbags,” but it’s actually more accurate to say she does both. That’s a “scholarly biography of Henry James” in that Prada bag, *buddy!* Like Janey, she has a healthy respect for one-night stands, but for Dora the ultimate ecstasy is reading. As the title suggests, the longing for both a literary good read and a literary good lay are interdependent—a point made quite clearly when she falls for Fred, the hunky guy with a doctorate in Comparative Literature who works at her favorite independent bookstore. She has great sex with Fred, after what is referred to as “esoteric foreplay” (e.g., he quotes Edward Lear, and Dora responds, “Oh shit, I’m thinking, He’s at it again. I melt every time. ‘Let’s forget the movie,’ I whisper”; 164). But no matter how wonderful this esoteric sex might be, or how graphically it is described, the most erotic scenes in the novel are clearly meant to be the bathtub scenes, where Dora enjoys the ecstasy of reading whatever she wants, on her own terms.

I have a whole mantra for my book binges. First of all, I open a bottle of really good wine. Then I turn off my cell phone, turn on my answering machine, and gather all of the books I’ve been meaning to read or reread or haven’t. Finally, I fill up the tub with thirty-dollar bubble bath, fold a little towel at the end of the tub so it just fits the crook of my neck and turn off the music. . . . Within my bathroom walls is a self-contained field of dreams, and I am in total control, the master of my own elegantly devised universe. The outside world disappears, and here, there is only peace and a profound sense of well-being. (8)

This kind of passion clearly depends on the right partner, and Dora also details her dance card in an extended description of her library, which is arranged according to her own emotional logic, exactly as Rob’s record library is organized in Hornby’s *High Fidelity*. Vestiges of some earlier academic

training in reading appear throughout the novel (she went to *Columbia*, okay?), but ultimately it is the intensely personal nature of her reading that gives her the greatest pleasure. Fred turns out to be an utterly self-absorbed bastard, but the insightful reader knew this affair never would go so well after Dora tells us, “He has a degree in comparative literature and he did his thesis on heterogeneous space in post-modern literature. What does that mean?” (18). She also provides her own portrait gallery of Readers Reading, arranged as an “unspoken hierarchy of readers” — Purists, Academics, Book Worshippers, people who just want an old-fashioned story, bottom-feeders who do their reading via audio tapes, and so on. But *Literacy and Longing in L.A.* adds something else to the portrait gallery — a list of suggested readings, as in Nancy Pearl’s *Book Lust*. Dora might refer to favorite books and authors repeatedly, but the authors Kaufman and Mack provide a list of these very books at the end of the novel:

Book List

Authors, artists, and works that are discussed or mentioned in this novel, listed in order of their first appearance.

Ted Kooser, poet

Jorge Luis Borges, author

John Gardner, author

And this list continues, for the next ten pages, until it concludes with “Emily Dickenson, poet.” This list is obviously a handy thing to have around, and it also reveals a great deal about the sort of reading community this book celebrates. The book talk rarely stops for very long, and everything is thoroughly marinated in bookish pleasures — but the reflections on reading are unilaterally celebratory, containing none of the ambivalence found in metafictional texts that are determined to *show their workings*. The citation of Julian Barnes provides a particularly telling example of this difference. Dora tells Palmer:

“I think the only time I’m really happy is when I’m reading. ‘Books make sense of life,’* — Somebody said that. Anyway, that’s how I feel.”

* Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot*

Even though Dora doesn’t remember the source of the reference, the authors provide it anyway in a footnote at the bottom of the page, a gesture which, in and of itself, suggests a great deal about the particular brand of bibliophilia at play. Apparently, the readers of this novel aren’t expected

to know the source of the reference either, but it's taken for granted that they want to be told so they can track the book down if they care to. Even more revealing, however, is the invocation of Barnes's book as confirmation of Dora's passionate book addiction, since that phrase, when it appears within the flamboyantly metafictional *Flaubert's Parrot*, expresses a profound ambivalence about the transformative power of literary reading. Barnes's narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, may be obsessed with books by and about Flaubert, but as the novel progresses it becomes increasingly apparent that this obsession insulates him from the heartbreak of his wife's adultery and death: "Ellen. My wife: someone I feel I understand less well than a foreign writer dead for a hundred years. Is this an aberration, or is it normal? Books say: She did this because. Life says: She did this. Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't. I'm not surprised that some people prefer books. Books make sense of life. The only problem is that the lives they make sense of are other people's lives, never your own" (168). The citation of *Flaubert's Parrot* in *Living and Longing in L.A.* suggests none of this ambivalence—when I read the passage "books make sense of life," complete with informative footnote, I felt as if I was supposed to write "How true!" in the margin. In Barnes's novel, the "book talk" never stops, but what literary reading fails to accomplish is detailed as extensively as what it might deliver in the best of circumstances. In a Lit-lit novel like *Literacy and Longing in L.A.* there is only unequivocal celebration of literary reading, in which book talk becomes endless recommendation. The passionate readers in these fictions aren't really bibliophiles, in the truest sense of the term, because the details of book collecting are relevant only in terms of arranging one's library as an extension of one's self—details concerning which editions, or the state of individual copies of books as collectible objects, rarely become important. The activity of reading is what's addictive, not the hunt for the books themselves. And academic readers in a Lit-lit book are generally disqualified as people who have lost their amateur status, and inevitably their ability to read for pure pleasure, unless they undergo a reverse transformation process and return to pure reading. As passionate readers who also act as experts on reading, the readers in Lit-lit fiction come closest to the figure of the librarian, the master reader whose expertise is measured not in terms of critical reading but of enthusiastic recommendation, at which point these characters resemble national librarians/list makers like Nancy Pearl or Sara Nelson, author of *So Many Books, So Little Time* (2004), rather than the book-obsessed characters of metafictional texts. Not sur-

prisingly, *Literacy and Longing* includes an appreciative blurb from Nelson on its back cover: “The book is sharp, seamless, and very, very funny. I wish I had written it.” In effect, Nelson already has written the nonfiction guide to reading it, since Kaufman’s and Mack’s novel reads more like the fictionalization of *So Many Books, So Little Time* than *Flaubert’s Parrot*.

The convergence of the Lit-lit novel and the Guide to Reading book, complete with a list for further reading at the back, depends on a form of book talk that is nowhere to be found in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, even though Barnes’s narrator is a self-professed amateur reader who is even more dismissive of academic critics. The book talk that circulates through that novel is not the unalloyed celebration that it is endlessly recommending, but then the absence of that sort of discourse is understandable. When Barnes’s novel first appeared in 1980, there was no popular literary culture held together by a set of interlocking delivery systems with its own way of talking the talk of literary appreciation, all unified by an ideology of reading as personal transformation, advocated with varying degrees of explicitness by Oprah Winfrey, the list makers at Amazon, the Target Kids Book Club, prize-winning Lit-lit novels, and the Sundance catalogue. It is precisely this ideology of reading that mandates the celebration of reading, as a sophisticated form of self-help therapy and as an even more sophisticated means of demonstrating personal taste, that provides the thrill factor for the pornography of reading that is so inescapable in Lit-lit fiction.

Just how overtly that pornography of reading has been transformed into a thriving form of genre fiction intended for an expanding target audience is exemplified by both the conception and the promotion of Diane Setterfield’s novel *The Thirteenth Tale* (2006). The main character, Margaret Lea, works in her father’s antiquarian bookshop, where she devotes most of her day to reading books and is given to saying things like, “I did not simply read them. I devoured them. Though my appetite for food grew frail, my hunger for books was constant. It was the beginning of my vocation.” Here too we find the alternation between the languages of spiritual and sexual ecstasy to describe the reading experience. Although Margaret’s vocation may lead her to devote herself to nineteenth-century novels and reject contemporary fiction, she is captivated by the tales of the “most popular living novelist,” Vera Winter (who writes about people in stories with beginnings, middles, and ends where they’re supposed to be): “I remember the *Thirteen Tales* that took possession of me with its first words and held me captive all night. I wanted to be held hostage again. . . . Miss Winter restored to me

the virginal qualities of the novice reader, and then with her stories she ravished me” (31). Reading the right sort of literary books may indeed get Margaret’s reading spectacles all steamed up, but the cohesiveness of this genre is secured by more than a generic logic that justifies all character behavior and the trumpeting of erotically charged reading experiences that lead them to recommend books compulsively while they circulate through the stable iconographic locations found on the Lit-lit game board—libraries, bookshops, and bathtubs, and so on. The identification of a “literary good read” as a new form of category fiction also depends on how those titles are connected to a reading community that will know that this book is indeed intended “just for them.” Genres depend on the stability of conventions and shared values but also the transformation of individual fans into communities that can be identified as target audiences. As the “Inaugural Selection” of a new program, Barnes & Noble Recommends, *The Thirteenth Tale* was the featured selection on its own table in the rotunda of my local store. This display was addressed to a very particular readership identified by the pamphlets introducing this new series, which included reading group discussion questions, an author bio, advance reviews, and this mission statement:

Unputdownable

This word is not in every dictionary but it is one that booksellers often use. Nothing gives us more pleasure than recommending books that we have read and loved. And finding unputdownable books gives us the greatest pleasure of all. The number of books that are hand-sold in our stores everyday is staggering: every day, our booksellers lead readers to hundreds of books—new and old—across every category and topic imaginable. Even more staggering is the number of new titles being published. From among these we often find works of exceptional merit that go on to become both popular and critically acclaimed. Barnes & Noble Recommends provides us with the opportunity to share such books with you. From the thousands of titles published each season we select one book we love. Each selection will be a book that that we know is a riveting read and a work of extraordinary quality worthy of stimulating discussion. Each Barnes & Noble Recommends selection will be chosen by our discriminating and independent-minded booksellers from across the country. Each selection will be a book we are sure you will recommend to another reader.

Within this discourse of reading as emphatic recommendation shared by characters, readers, and booksellers of Lit-lit, the selling of books is merely the excuse for entering into a conversation about loving books. In Setterfield's novel, Margaret tells the reader that the quaint book shop that she and her father operate "makes next to no money," but it is "a place to read. . . . [T]he shop was both my home and my job. It was a better school for me than school ever was and afterward it was my own private university. It was my life" (14). (Whether Margaret has taken any courses at Barnes & Noble University is never specified, but the author who created her was there on the faculty at www.bn.com/bookclubs throughout November 2006.) This is pure fan talk, but here the fans all sound like overstimulated librarians. The use value of reading literary fiction at this point transcends the search for the appropriate significant other. The pleasures of reading culminate in the relentless articulation of personal taste as an end in itself—the erotics of reading depending equally on private, masturbatory delights and the exhibitionist thrill of enthralled recommendation in the most public arenas. As such, Lit-lit represents the perfect convergence of all of the interdependent components of popular literary culture—literary *category* fiction that observes all of the already formalized conventions that guarantee entertainment value for passionate amateur readers, catered to enthusiastically by superstore and Web site bookstores, with all of the players speaking the same language of popular connoisseurship with utmost confidence. The language of the novel, its appreciation, and its marketing are all blended seamlessly into the same book talk, which recommends a shared sensibility as much as any favorite title.

What I've been describing as the Lit-lit genre of literary fiction represents a complicated development that cannot be judged unilaterally positive or negative. The Lit-lit phenomenon certainly provides ample evidence that there is a stable, thriving market for literary reading of a most sophisticated variety, and it should continue to flourish as long as it is cultivated so lovingly by segments of the publishing, film, and television industries. One could argue that this is an extremely positive development, since it represents what allegedly isn't supposed to happen—a form of literary reading has emerged within the heart of electronic culture via that electronic culture, even if it holds itself apart as an alternative to all that noise. The best-friend clubbiness gives the solitary pleasures of reading literary fiction a social dimension that it previously lacked, except for a rarefied audience of professionalized readers. That celebration of shared sensibilities provides

a degree of cohesiveness, a sense of belonging to a reading community, actual or virtual, which obviously only intensifies the pleasures of reading for thousands of readers. As such, Lit-lit represents a thorough-going incorporation of reading into the textures of day-to-day life, a world where reading has indeed become part of the furniture. And as such, it may well represent the best chance for literary reading to become the sort of lifelong activity that teachers and professors of English can only hope to inspire.

So that's all to the good, right? Indeed it is, but there are also things about the Lit-lit phenomenon that are just as disturbing in regard to the future of reading literary fiction. Is it really so wrong to want to sit in a swell leather club chair while reading one of this year's Notable Books? Of course not, provided that the book isn't the print equivalent of that leather club chair, all richly textured and evocative of another, more tasteful age, when reading was truly valued. That Margaret Atwood appears in *Bon Appetit* as a celebrity foodie (March 2006), for example, exemplifies just how thoroughly intertwined the pleasures of reading have become with those other formerly elite pleasures that are now offered throughout popular culture. On the other hand, this issue is entitled "WARM and COZY," a title that could also apply to most Lit-lit novels, since their celebration of shared pleasures rarely leads to anything that might be a challenge to its readers' core values. Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, was featured in advertisements for Audi automobiles in a series entitled "Never Follow," along with celebrities such as David Bowie, Daniel Libeskind, K. D. Laing, and John Malkovich. The publicist, Rod Brown (management supervisor for the Audi of America account at McKinney & Silver), explained why Nafisi was chosen: "We want to make Audi distinct from BMW or Mercedes by associating it with these people. We wanted people who weren't just famous or rich but who are doing something really cool. A light bulb went off, Azar is to literature what Audi is to cars" (quoted in Julie Salamon's article in the *New York Times*, 2004). For a writer best known as a book club leader to acquire that kind of celebrity status reveals a great deal about the very different sort of conversation now being conducted about books and how audible it has become. That Nafisi's name is associated with a luxury car also suggests a fair amount about this audience, which believes in the transformative power of literary fiction so absolutely that it works as a sales pitch, of the most discreet variety.

Reading within the Lit-lit taste community relies on certain "production values." As such, Lit-lit novels have a great deal in common with Miramax adaptation films, since "the words are the special effects," to echo Harvey

Weinstein—but only if they’re given the right *mise-en-scène*, and only if they’re all about people just like us, only maybe more attractive and with a lot more time on their hands to read. I’ve used the term “Miramaxing” to describe a type of adaptation film, but it can also be just as descriptive of a particular form of literary fiction with the right sort of art direction and sensitive attractive characters, identified as a text-to-be-read for a particular quality audience. The conception and promotion of *The Thirteenth Tale* is pure Miramax, long before it ever becomes an adaptation film.

The best-friend coziness factor becomes especially pernicious when it is built on an ideology of reading that insists that the transformative power of words is available to all, but is really appreciated only by we few, we happy, tasteful few, who already know that power. At that point, the “we few” dimension of Lit-lit becomes a double-edged sword, frightening away as much as it safeguards. It undoubtedly provides a high degree of cohesiveness and a deep sense of belonging for those who affiliate with it, since that community of book lovers is imagined as such an imperiled group, clinging to genuine aesthetic values while the electronic culture that surrounds it threatens annihilation at any moment. This sort of us-versus-them opposition is all-pervasive throughout the NEA’s *Reading at Risk* report, but the sanctification of this community of book lovers under siege, this ideology of the faithful remnant struggling to survive, is nowhere more obvious than in one of the novels chosen by the NEA for its community-wide Big Read projects in the spring of 2006—Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). No other novel in the history of literature presents in more pristine form this scenario of the “we few, we happy few” readers imperiled by mass culture but all the happier for it. This is indeed a brilliant choice of reading material, if you’re looking for converts to a cult of readers. They can identify with Montag, the brave, sensitive fireman who, though surrounded by electronic media when not otherwise burning books, eventually sees the light when he gets a load of what reading really involves, after he meets the wonderfully sensitive book people, at which point he’s just “*Gotta read, gotta read . . .*” (Cut to Wide Shot of Montag dancing with his copy of Dickens and surrounded by banks of television monitors. Bring up music. Cue flames.) This conversion to the imperiled cult approach may indeed be a powerful rhetorical strategy for enlisting potential readers. In Althusserian terms, this is very skillful form of interpellation, since the Fireman as Noble Savage in the Electronic Jungle answers the call once he hears all those words. But is this 1950s fable about the evils of mass culture really the most effective way to convince people

that reading books is facing certain extinction when they are surrounded by television book clubs, literary adaptations at the multiplex, and superstore bookshops in practically every mall in America? When the Sundance catalogue, as well as posters in school libraries feature Orlando Bloom and company urge us to READ! at all costs, and the kids' drink cup at another chain store tells youthful customers to sign up now for the Target Kids Book Club—a message surrounded by a cluster of pandas, ducks, monkeys, and crocodiles, all avidly reading books? To employ the old “if-visitors-from-another-planet-suddenly-arrived-they'd-think . . .” conceit, those newly arrived aliens would surmise that this society was one run by a tribe of Book People, hell-bent on eradicating all forms of electronic media (while a guerilla underground traded DVD copies of *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* and walked through the woods, committing them to memory). And those aliens better be ready to read their Bradbury, or there's going to be trouble, . . . big trouble.

The imperiled clubbiness of the Devoutly Literary may consolidate a community of readers by validating their shared sensibilities, but it comes with an enormous risk—that potential readers may not answer the call because they don't want to affiliate with a club that gives no validity to any aspect of their cultural life other than literary reading. The noble savages will simply go elsewhere. Popular literary culture represents a powerful counterargument to the *Fahrenheit 451* scenario, since it is built, from the ground up, on the interdependency of the print and visual culture, not a world of books versus wall screens, which persists only within an ideology of reading that can accept just one form of literacy and, therefore, must demonize all electronic culture.

In order to visualize that interdependency, I want to return to the Authors Mural at my local Barnes & Noble café, which I discussed in the opening pages of this book, but update it so that it captures the current state of literary culture, not the retro diner version of all things literary. Imagine that mural as a wraparound diorama, complete with moving pictures and soundtrack. It would include many of the same figures but redeployed among a new cast of characters. Jane Austen would still be there, of course, but at a table with Helen Fielding, Colin Firth, and Kiera Knightly, all locked in conversation while Jane reads her copy of *The Jane Austen Book Club* on her Kindle and Kiera leafs through an issue of *Vogue* (December 2005), where she's featured in a photo retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, costarring the likes of Jasper Johns as the Cowardly Lion, Brice Marsdan as the Scarecrow,

and Chuck Close as the Wizard. At the next table, Harvey Weinstein is in animated conversation about the art and business of adaptation with Nicole Woolf and Gwyneth Plath, right alongside Oprah's table where William Faulkner and Leo Tolstoy (wearing his "I Wasn't Scared" T-shirt) delight a cluster of Book Clubbers by imploring them to help them complete the creative process. And Henry James would no longer be lost in thought, trying to evade Oscar Wilde's gaze—he'd be holding court, talking about his celebrity profile in *Vanity Fair* with Alan Hollinghurst, Colm Toibin, Ian McEwan, and Helena Bonham Carter, saying wickedly amusing things about Harvey. And on the walls behind them, images from *The Hours* and *Shakespeare in Love* and *The English Patient* and *Atonement* and *No Country for Old Men* would run perpetually, interspersed with Amazon pages clicking back and forth endlessly between "Listmania" lists, "So You Want to Be . . ." guides and "Better Together" package deals. At a table below, I sit with my own daughters, whose conversation, on a given Saturday afternoon, ricochets from Harry Potter to Alfonso Cuarón to E. L. Konigsburg to Wes Anderson to William Joyce to *Family Guy* to YouTube to *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* to Baz Luhrmann and the enormous aesthetic pleasure they get from them all. I could be concerned that the special apartness of literary reading will be diminished by its place in that mix, or that as readers they will be addressed primarily as quality consumers. They will indeed encounter that omnipresent consumerism, but they will also encounter other readers in the realm of popular literary culture who will be just as passionate about defining themselves in terms of their aesthetic choices. I'm delighted that literary fiction forms part of the cultural mixes they assemble with such gusto to articulate who they are, and what is crucially important to them. I could, as a curator of the written word, long for a time when literary reading transcended that mix, but I have no desire to engage in time travel to an imaginary past where reading was *really* transformative. We sit in Barnes & Noble at the beginning of the twenty-first century, not the end of the nineteenth, and given the access to the excess of cultural information, we're all curators now, of words *and* images.