

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

Brian Huba

### "Is the Novel Old News?"

*This may be my Jerry Maguire moment, and the next time you hear from me, I could be an ex-English teacher from Upstate New York, but I'm here to tell you the once-requisite novel might be old news...*

I've always wanted to be a teacher. As a little kid, I'd sort my stuffed animals in rows on the bedroom rug and teach them pretend lessons. Now I teach 12th-grade English in a real school, full of real students. Since I began working as an educator, back in September 2006, my classroom, like the world around it, has rapidly evolved. ChromeBooks have replaced textbooks. Smart Boards have replaced chalkboards. I'm now halfway through my career, and I've come to one indisputable conclusion: the novel is no longer the most-effective tool for teaching literacy.

I tell my students, "English 12 isn't the real world, but it's based on it," and for those who crave compelling stories that speak to the human condition, today's world offers endless options, on countless platforms, all of which make the novel feel clunky and outmoded.

Content on television, for instance, has never been sharper. We've cut the cord for on-demand streaming. Great stories anytime, anywhere. When I grew up, it was laugh tracks, paint-by-numbers murder mysteries, nonstop commercial breaks. Back then, an actor did TV as a springboard to film. Now it's the other way around. A-list stars and master storytellers work on *Ted Lasso*, *The White Lotus*, *Yellowstone*. They're making documentaries and reality programming. To stay on TV, a product must be brilliant *and* binge-worthy. Anything less and it's devoured by the endless competition. I'm a lifelong reader, and have no plans to stop reading anytime soon, but lately I've been asking myself: why bother with a 300-page novel when I can touch a button and be transported to the deepest reaches of the Known Universe? Perhaps TV once rotted the brains. Now it illuminates. It educates. At this point in human history, the novel might belong in the same class as the transistor radio. Functional, sure, but why bother when there are so many better ways?

In the 2011 comedy film *Bad Teacher*, when Cameron Diaz's Elizabeth Halsey character said, "You know, in a lot of ways, movies are the new books," she might've been onto something.

When I decided to write this essay, I met with our tenth-grade English teacher. As far back as I can remember, she's branded Fridays "Independent Reading Days" in her classes. Once a quarter, her students would select a novel from the school's media center, then spend the next ten weeks silently reading through that novel on Fridays. I wanted to know how the program was progressing since we resumed in-person learning in March of 2021. She said, "I don't really do it anymore. It's devolved into a period of distraction and endless prompting vs. any actual reading." I asked why she thought it no longer worked. She said, "They don't have the stamina to sit still for forty minutes and read. There was a time when I'd tell them, 'you can learn something about yourself from a novel.' But they aren't buying into that anymore. They don't know how to connect with charac-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

ters. TikTok has taken over their brains. They want a bang-bang story and onto the next. Novel reading is now a wasted class. I've even tried audio books. They just...they just don't care."

I myself once consumed audio novels with addict-like energy. I listened in the car, on my lunch hour, at the gym. It was either break a sweat with John Grisham in my ear or listen to "In Da Club" for the ten-millionth time. I used an app called Libby, which allowed me to borrow its audios for free. Easy, right? Not as easy as you may think. Most new releases and/or popular titles carry months-long waiting lists (I waited half a year for *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid before giving up). And when you borrow an audio novel through Libby, you have 7 to 14 days to finish it, so good luck conquering an eighteen-hour Stephen King in that window. Could I switch to some other audio-novel app that requires me to buy its books? I could. But I don't want to.

Cue the Podcast genre. Thrilling, literary stories packaged for on-the-go consumption. Some that I've enjoyed listening to are *The Moth*, *Casefile*, *The Truth*. Almost everyone of a certain age has a bookmarked podcast, while millions more have lent their own voice to the meteoric genre. Jeremy Piven has a podcast. Rachel Maddow has a podcast. My neighbor has a podcast. I want a podcast. Most Americans no longer have the patience for a beautifully-crafted novel. And we're no longer stuck with the stories that NYC agents and publishers deem worthy. We now have a route to any subject matter we want. And if we don't like what's out there, we can author our own story.

My first classroom was a claustrophobic enclosure, lit by a single bulb that buzzed inside its bug-splattered casing. There was no PA speaker, no clock, no windows. I taught Freshmen English. My students were the "Challenge kids." One boy had found his mother dead from a heroin overdose. A few others had close family in Iraq and Afghanistan. My top student read at a fifth-grade level. But this was 2006. Bush was President. And No Child Left Behind was the deal, meaning each and every student had to pass the State Test. I believed the first step to achieving that goal was to make them fall in love with literature. I brought in second-hand bookshelves and filled those shelves with tattered paperbacks I'd bought from bargain bins. I hung glossy posters of Shakespeare on the walls. I still remember the day I read out loud the last pages from *Of Mice & Men*. When George put that bullet in Lennie's head, I heard little snuffles in the room around me. Right then, in that moment, I truly believed a great novel was the most-powerful force on earth.

Today's smartest stories are being authored by America's journalists, writers like Thomas Friedman and Mike Lupica, just to name a few. If you don't believe this to be true, I encourage you to Google "My Time With Kurt Cobain" by Michael Azerrad. I defy anyone to find a better-written, more-engaging story than this. And the best part: it can be read, start to finish, in forty minutes, at most, meaning I could conquer it in a single period of Senior English. Instead of spending the school year going from novel to novel—Naturalism, Realism, Romanticism—I teach essays by John Krakauer. I group debatable topics—high school sports, parents' influence on public-ed curriculum, should employers govern their employees' social media—from *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. We've looked at

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

the War in Ukraine, the Supreme Court, college & career research, the concept of 'gaslighting,' how the Covid Pandemic affected Gen Z, the myriad ways 9/11 altered America, what happened to Will Smith? And it can all be accessed for free, digital and/or print.

I asked our eleventh-grade English teacher what he thought the future of teaching literacy to high schoolers looked like. He answered, "Tectonically, under our feet, we're moving to nonfiction. Right now I'm doing a lot of memoirs, which bridges that gap between fiction and nonfiction." After speaking with him, I went back and studied the State Exams for English administered at the conclusion of the past ten school years (2012-2022). Once upon a time that test was almost all fiction. Today, the majority of excerpts utilized by the State are articles and essays.

The traditional novel, generally speaking, offers nothing...*novel*. Every move has been made, every twist twisted. Modern novelists are straining at the outer edge of credulity to manufacture shock and awe. Whenever I take on a "hot" novel, it always ends the same way: me flinging it aside in frustration. People who still routinely read novels are probably doing it for one of three reasons, 1) They have a lot of free time, 2) They aren't on the internet much, 3) They believe reading novels makes you smarter.

Before I put the novel on ice, I decided to try a mental reset. I pretended I was a person looking to engage this genre for the first time. Since there isn't a bookstore within a hundred miles of my house, I drove to our local Target to scope out its paperback selection. Millions of Americans frequent Target on a daily basis, so this was surely the most-apt showcase for the top titles the genre has to offer. The entire rear-facing wall was plastered with books by someone named Colleen Hoover. All right, I thought to myself, this is the author who's supposed to make us turn off our TVs, tune out our favorite podcasts. I did some research and learned that Ms. Hoover's "hottest" novel was titled *Verity*, so I bought it, went home, eased into my comfy recliner and went to work.

How do I put this kindly? Colleen Hoover's *Verity* was plain stupid. The plotline made no sense. The characters possessed all the depth of cardboard cut-outs. The superfluous porn was cringy. And the whole mess was capped off with a climax the writers of a Scooby Doo cartoon would've rolled their eyes at. Right now we're in the Golden Age of entertainment. The field has never been more fertile, and *this* is what the novel-publishing industry wants me to shell out fifteen bucks for? Not interested.

Another development that is clearly doing the novel no favors is, of course, the mass-proliferation of the iPhone. This technology has essentially rewired the brains of our young people. They are, in many ways, a different species than their predecessors. Back when I was in school, we were drilled daily on state capitals and multiplication tables. Thanks to the iPhone, such recall is no longer necessary. This phenomenon, combined with the Covid 19 "Pause," has forced educators like me to examine our approach.

And here's what I've learned: plopping a novel upon a student's desk doesn't evoke the excitement it once did. So, when all else failed this year, I gave up on fiction and showed Netflix's documentary about ex-NFLer

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

Aaron Hernandez. I couldn't believe the response. Rapt attention for three, iPhone-free days. And when it ended, two more days of debate and discussion about the impact of playing pro football on a person's physical and mental wellbeing, who commits suicide in our society and why, the complicated workings of the American legal system. I brought in excerpts from *Gang leader for a Day*, a first-person account of gang life by 'rogue sociologist' Sudhir Venkatesh, then concluded this impromptu mini-unit with a project-based research assignment and presentation.

Don't let the narrative around our "know-nothing" youth fool you. And don't give me that line about how today's teens stare drone-like at their screens. Every generation has been seduced by one screen or another. When I was in middle and high school, I could watch MTV 'round the clock. Trust me when I tell you: Gen Z has a lot to say about the world it will soon inherit. And it's our job as educators to draw it out. Sadly, the novel no longer feels like the most-effective tool for this kind of critical exchange. In my opinion, any circa-2023 educator who resists the evolution in storytelling that's taking place, will someday be lumped with the bunch that once resisted indoor refrigeration.

I reached out to an admissions officer at a nearby community college. I asked him to identify the most-concerning gaps he sees with incoming freshmen. Without pause, he answered, "Speaking and communicating." As our conversation continued, it became obvious that deconstructing literature wasn't an imperative skill in today's "Real World." There might've been a time where that sort of thinking was the key that unlocked every door. But now you can ask your iPhone anything. Seconds later, it'll give you the answer. In many instances: multiple answers, all sourced and linked to associated topics. It's a riptide of intel. What teacher *wouldn't* employ that in his/her classroom?

Back in 2010, when I finally broke down and bought my first iPhone, I asked the Verizon rep why a phone costs so much. He smirked, and said, "This isn't a *phone*. This is a computer in the palm of your hand."

Are rumors of the novel's demise exaggerated? I needed to know for sure, so I did some research. Per a Gallup Poll done in December of 2022, Americans, on average, read about 12.6 books in the past year, roughly 2 or 3 less than they read between the years 2002-2016. All forms of a "book" were included, meaning print, electronic, audio. This decline is greatest among women readers and college grads, the novel's key demos. In 2021, women read 15.7 books vs. 19.3 in the years between 2002-2016. College grads read about six fewer books in 2021 than they did between 2002-2016 (14.6 vs 21.1). Older Americans (over 55 years old) are now reading about 4 less books per year. The bottom line: reading is "in decline as a favorite way for Americans to spend their free time."

I made one last move before throwing dirt on the novel. Our school still hosts a Book Club once a month. I showed up to see what they had to say. The meeting took place in a corner of the media center, behind the Chromebook carts. There were bottles of water and an untouched cookie platter. Members sat in a circle of foldable chairs. Several chairs were empty. They discussed a novel called *One of us is Lying* by Karen M. McManus. I asked if they thought the novel itself was a lost artform. The consensus: no way! They cited a great novel's "world-building," and the "escapism"



## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

and “the joy of disconnecting from the screen.” There were four members present (the club advisor, a teacher who’s retiring in June, an AP student, and her mother). I asked if any members were absent. All four shook their heads. Indicating the empty chairs, the advisor said, “Always room for more.”

My position on the novel’s place in a modern-day classroom may not be one administrators want me taking, as I’m theoretically paid by them to argue the exact opposite. But I can’t do that anymore, the same way our computer teacher can no longer advocate for the floppy disk. This may be my Jerry Maguire moment, and the next time you hear from me, I could be an ex-English teacher from Upstate New York, but I’m here to tell you the once-requisite novel might be old news.

A few nights ago, I came upstairs and my wife, Lynda, was sitting in bed, iPhone a few inches from her face. Like me, Lynda is a high school English teacher. We met while student-teaching together in 2005. I asked what she was doing. Without looking up, she said, “Trying to find a good book.” I glanced at the pile of library books on the end table. “How ‘bout those?” I pointed, and Lynda made a “psst” sound. A few seconds later, she dropped her phone on the comforter. “I give up,” she said.

My third-grade teacher, a woman named Marion Rogers, was the first great teacher I ever had. Before Mrs. Rogers I hated school. Before Mrs. Rogers I viewed educators as the collective enemy. The early-autumn morning she placed *The Trumpeter Swan* in front of me was the day my love affair with reading began. There was nothing I loved more than snuggling with a good novel, my stuffed animals heaped around me. I loved everything about books. I loved the way they felt in my hand. How all that ink and paper smelled. My favorite gift was always a new book. I remember the birthday I received *Mrs. Frisby & the Rats of Nimh*. The Christmas morning I unwrapped *I am the Cheese*. And now those books I once read to tatters are shoved inside damp-bottomed boxes in my basement, next to the boxes that house my old CDs and photo albums.

At this point I planned to end my essay. The novel’s dead. There’s nothing to be done. Then I went back and reread the previous paragraph, *My third-grade, a woman named Marion Rogers...*, and I couldn’t help but wonder if there was something I could do to stave off the novel’s curtain call. I owed my first love *at least* that. So I went to those boxes in the basement, and dug out that old, age-scalloped copy of EB White’s classic, the same one Mrs. Rogers once laid in front of me. Later on, I sat in the comfy recliner with my six-year-old daughter, and began reading to her. For the next few weeks, we read every evening after dinner. At first she resisted. She wanted to play on her tablet, watch TV, color and do crafts. Then she got hooked. Finished with *The Trumpeter Swan*, we read another, then another, and right now we’re working on our fourth full-length story. Maybe the novel isn’t old news after all. Maybe it’s up to us to keep it relevant. Maybe there’s more to this story...

Or, as our Honors English teacher argued, “No way is the novel dead. I refuse to accept that, to surrender to that sort of thinking. It’s a genre that allows for the greatest character and plot development. And it forces the reader to carry a concept through several pages rather than through shorter contexts. If we don’t insist on maintaining this level of attention in

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

our students, everything will be condensed, shortened. As a society, we'll have no attention span. And this will lead to degradation. People won't be able to hold a job or see any sizable task all the way through. More so, a great novel provides astute insight and the ability to understand each other more accurately, a lacking skill today. To *not* teach the novel feeds our instant-gratification culture. And that's *not* a good thing."