

Fred Russell

HARLAN COBEN, AMONG OTHERS

Now that we have the Internet it is very easy to get at lists of the greatest things – movies, books, records, kings, criminals, snacks. Of course, we had such lists before, but now we have them in abundance and naturally enough they reflect the changing times. For example, while old lists of the greatest movies always included popular or Hollywood films alongside what we would call art house films – *Gone with the Wind* and *The Godfather*, *E.T.* and *Star Wars*, alongside Bergman and Fellini, Goddard and Truffaut – lists of the greatest novels did not, that is, did not include popular novels – no *Gone with the Wind* and *The Godfather* alongside Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Kafka and Mann. Now they often do, and even the Harry Potter books. It is understandable why such a democratization of literature should have occurred in an age of declining standards where anyone can log on and say whatever comes into his head to a pretty big audience. But when things were different and a list was still a list, it did occur to me to ask myself why the movie lists were such a mixed bag while the book lists were pure gold. My simple answer at the time was that while it was literary critics and scholars who set literary standards, it was mostly people associated with Hollywood who set movie standards. Therefore, when all was said and done, popular films and “serious” films were spoken of by respectable critics in pretty much the same terms – as epic, powerful, moving, and so on and so forth. In the context of the Hollywood film, serious films were almost a genre, representing, like foreign films, which they were often thought to resemble, one category among many and judged in the end by the standards of the popular film. What the popular film and the popular novel have in common is that they focus on the telling of a story. Serious films and novels may of course also tell a story, but unlike the popular film and novel, where the demands of the “plot” dictate the actions of the characters, who exist solely to serve its requirements, narrative works of art grow out of the characters themselves, who determine the direction of the story and give it meaning.

It is therefore easy enough to distinguish between a novel by Joyce Carol Oates or Philip Roth or John Updike and a novel like *The Godfather*, which is as well written as a popular novel can be, with echoes even of D.H. Lawrence in the superb Apollonia section, but totally flat in the rendering of character and thematically as banal as a novel by Harold Robbins. Or are we being too hard on popular literature? Well, the fact is that people of discriminating or shall we say literary taste can be moved by popular movies just as they are moved by popular music, but are never moved by popular novels. This may strike one as odd. However, the popular movie has the advantage of being able to circumvent the banality of its text and achieve a measure of credibility by attaching itself to the persona of the actor, while popular music can hide the banality of its lyrics behind the art of the singer or a haunting melody. Popular literature, on the other hand, has no such props. It stands or falls on the quality of the written word. There is no Julia Roberts between the sheets, or covers, to lend credence to the improbable dialogue or a Celine Dion to give life to the lifeless prose. And once you lose confidence in the reality of the char-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

acters you naturally lose interest in their lives. Therefore popular literature only works for readers with low expectations, though genre writing – the thriller, for example – can occasionally be enjoyed by discriminating readers for the simple reason that it lays aside any pretence at depicting actual life.

I started reading thrillers in my twenties. I suppose it was because I had pretty much polished off Literature by then and was reading history quite intensively, so I needed something for relaxation. I read the James Bond novels first, discovering them in *Playboy* magazine, where they were occasionally serialized. From there I went on to the quality thriller writers: Eric Ambler, Nicolas Freeling, John Le Carré, and Graham Greene's "entertainments," and of course Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler. Subsequently I became a fan of Ed McBain, Ross Macdonald, and the Martin Beck mysteries, with a little Simenon mixed in too. Along the way I also read whatever else looked promising. I kept this up for around ten years and then pretty much gave up on the genre, feeling, I suppose, that I had exhausted it. It was only around thirty years later that I started reading this kind of book again, looking as always for the best of the lot. The writers I stuck with for a while were Michael Connelly, John Connolly, John Sandford, and Scott Turow. Then I gave up on them too. Recently, however, I saw a TV interview with Harlan Coben, whom I'd never heard of, and decided to give him a try as well.

Thrillers or mysteries are of course read for their stories and nothing else. Occasionally you get the bonus of stylish writing but without the whodunit or suspense element there is nothing really there. Of the earlier writers, Greene and Simenon also gave you a real psychological dimension, but the two of them were the exception, belonging more to literature even in their genre writing. Of the newer lot, in terms of writing, the best, in my view, is Michael Connelly. The turns of phrase are, well, those of a real writer, and one feels that he could conceivably be one, but he has chosen not to. The failings are those of all the others, but most of all, the characters are not alive. They do not act out of any inner necessity but, again, in accordance with the demands of the plot, being typecast to fulfill a function, though they are given a certain individuality and motivation within their single dimension. This is not just true of the minor characters but, as can be seen in a novel like Connelly's *Void Moon*, where we accompany the two antagonists for the space of 450 pages, also of the major characters. In the case of *Void Moon*, they are very promising: a female hotel burglar and a psychopathic security chief. The burglar is given a "back story," she is a wounded creature, she is out for revenge. However, nothing else about her interests Connelly and therefore nothing else about her is represented in its own right. The security chief is a pure one-dimensional psychopath in the tradition of such psychopaths. Nothing else about him interests Connelly either. This is about par for the course. That is why I gave up on the genre.

But if Connelly represents the best, what of the worst, for they too produce bestsellers and laugh all the way to the bank, as Leon Uris used to put it, though admittedly they are bestsellers of the kind that are read by readers who expect a story to tear along at breakneck speed and characters to embody clear and simple virtues and vices. For the literary reader, on the other hand, what is decisive is the correlation between the quality

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

of the writing and the effectiveness of the plot. As long as the story is good enough to override the bad writing, such novels remain readable. When it is not, they are thrown aside impatiently.

The Harlan Coben novel I picked out to read is the fairly recent *Long Lost*. The protagonist, Myron Bolívar, a sports agent, receives a phone call from a woman he had an affair with “nearly a decade ago,” asking him to come to Paris to help her out. To get him there, Coben has to extract Myron from his current affair. This he does in three quick chapters, working in a confrontation with a bullying basketball coach to spice up the action. Then he’s on his way.

These first three chapters reveal Coben at his worst, when his characters “interact” outside the framework of the plot, that is, when they are meant to engage in real human intercourse. He has also endowed his hero, quite unintentionally, I believe, with a simpering manner marked by lame sarcasms that call to mind the worst of sitcom writing. Here is Myron when the bullying coach confronts him and challenges him to a fight:

“Is this the part where I pee in my pants?”

“Tonight at ten. Back parking lot.”

“That’s past my curfew. And I’m not that kind of date. Dinner first. Maybe bring flowers.”

The reason Myron is summoned to Paris by his old flame, Terese, is because her ex-husband has gone missing after calling her and asking to see her on an urgent matter. Myron has been summoned because he is “good at finding people.” But right off, he is picked up by the police, with more “witty” dialogue:

“I want a lawyer.”

“And I want to take a bubble bath with Catherine Deneuve.”

And then:

We stopped in front of a door with a little sign next to it that read GROUPE BERLEAND.

“Your first name is Groupe?”

And later:

Police detective (in a “thick French accent”): “You are a lying sheet.”

Myron: “And you are a lying pillowcase.”

It turns out that Terese’s ex-husband is in the morgue and the police want to know all about Myron’s connection to them, as Terese is suspected of murdering him. And furthermore a strand of blonde hair and some blood have been found at the scene of the crime that DNA testing shows to belong to the ex-husband’s daughter. But Terese and the husband do not have a daughter, or rather they had one who was killed in a car crash just before the divorce ten years ago, and then it turns out that the current wife does not have a daughter either by the ex-husband. The plot thickens, as they say. Myron is released. There follows a shootout at a café, a

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

glimpse of a blonde girl in the getaway van, Myron arrested again, Myron released again, and now Terese missing.

But it is in fact Myron's partner, Win, coming over to Paris to do some investigating on his own, who has taken Terese out of circulation and now sends them off to London in his private plane to question the ex-husband's current wife. From here on in, with the characters seldom required to talk to each other but only to address the plot, they slip into standard disembodied thrillerspeak, which sounds as if it had been generated by a computer:

"How much do you know about her car accident?" [Win] asked.

"Just what I told you now."

"Terese never saw the body. That is rather curious."

"She was unconscious for two weeks. You can't keep a body out of the ground for that long."

"Still. Didn't her now-deceased ex say that whatever he had to tell her would change everything?"

"There has to be some other explanation. Like I said, the DNA tests are preliminary."

And so on and so forth.

Everyone now suspects that the daughter is still alive. Myron, Terese and Win check into a London hotel, where there is some relationship stuff before getting back to serious business with a visit to a pub where the waitresses "were supposed to look like the models in that Robert Palmer 'Addicted to Love' video excerpt ... remade with the cast of *The Golden Girls*" and "He looked like he'd just walked out of a Spandau Ballet video," all of which is pretty bad Dennis Miller, and Dennis Miller at his best is bad enough. In any case, the first half of the novel ends after 200 pages with another big shootout.

The second half of the novel finds Myron back in the States recovering from the gunshot wound he received in the big shootout and with his memory of the shooting and its aftermath pretty much gone. We now get Homeland Security, Arab terrorists, the obligatory Mossad walk-on, cryonics, more relationship stuff, and the bang-up finish.

It is hard for me to imagine what pleasure a writer can get from writing this kind of novel when real life is just a step away. Is Coben pulling his punches to keep it simple, or is this the best he can do? I realize that he has millions of readers and I do not wish to insult them. *Time* magazine, which once heaped not a little scorn on writers of what it called "Irving" books (Irving Stone, Irving Wallace), now solemnly interviews the creators of vampire and werewolf books. It is said that the Harry Potter novels got kids to read again, but I suspect that what they will be reading is precisely these vampire and werewolf books, and then Harlan Coben, and that will be it, for this is where we are at, and it is a remarkable youngster indeed who will pick up Joyce or Proust. In a world where books compete with computer games, only a Harlan Coben can survive, and whereas in the past the Harlan Cobens carried entire publishing houses and enabled them to publish serious writers, today the Harlan Cobens only enable the big publishing houses to publish lesser Harlan Cobens. I am aware that

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

here and there they still publish “prestige” books, but fewer and fewer people are reading them, unless they have somehow caught on through the same kind of hype that sells Harlan Coben’s books and the elevation of their authors to the status of celebrities whose private lives are of more interest to the public and to talk show hosts than their writing

On the evidence of *Long Lost*, Coben is pretty much a run-of-the-mill writer in the thriller line, not quite good enough to engage the attention of a discriminating reader, though given his success it may well be that this is one of his weaker books and that he has produced more “riveting” plots in the past. At any rate I will not be reading him again. I have a novel by Ian McEwan at the top of the pile and I have been rereading the novels and essays of James Baldwin. I would also like to go back to Thomas Hardy. We old-fashioned readers are dying off and I am afraid that Literature is dying too.