FICTION

The rise of creative nonfiction—which began in the late 1960s with the New Journalism and became a seemingly unstoppable force in the 1990s—threatens to preempt fiction as the sexiest—that is, the most marketable—literary genre. Yet fiction remains the backbone of the creative writing industry. While the popularity of other genres waxes and wanes, fiction is the economic engine that keeps the business running, and for that reason in this entry we will look at the financial aspect of creative writing, which receives scant attention elsewhere in this volume. Of all the creative writers, fiction writers appear to have the most legitimate chance of achieving fame and fortune. No publisher believes that a book of poetry will become a best-seller, but even the most erudite publisher of small-press fiction secretly hopes that one of the novels on this year's list will manage to break through to a large audience. And those lucky books that are translated into films will garner rewards most creative writers only dream of.

As all creative writing program administrators know, fiction continues to draw the highest percentage of students, young women and men who envision themselves hobnobbing with celebrities and pitching their latest novels on talk shows. Every semester they come in droves, the Great American Novel just out of reach of their fingertips. And it isn't just the hope of material rewards that brings these students in. If undergraduates typically consider poetry abstruse and difficult, and scriptwriting for television and film is a largely invisible and undertaught art, every budding writer has a favorite novel that has nursed him through hard times as an adolescent. Fiction offers students an opportunity not just to tell their (life) stories, but to embellish them as well.

The first disjunction for many new fiction writers begins the moment they enter the classroom. More often than not, undergraduates arrive in introductory courses enamored of genre fiction. In their apprentice stories, robot vampires battle for supreme control of Mars. Plucky ingénues woo tongue-tied but good-hearted hunks. Drug-dealing cops exchange gunfire with wisecracking CIA agents. Clever gnomes outsmart lusty witches in a land that time forgot. But if genre fiction draws students into class, their teachers are usually unsympathetic readers of this work. New creative writing teachers are particularly appalled. Veteran teachers like Jerome Stern get over it by writing books like *Making Shapely Fiction*, which takes a perverse joy in making fun of bad undergraduate fiction. Stephen Minot's admonishment in his widely used textbook *Three Genres* is typical of the hardened instructor's attitude toward "popular" fiction: "Like fast food, formula writing serves a wide market and often earns top dollars, but it usually sacrifices subtlety and insight" (2003, 155).

Clearly, the struggle to define "fiction" is always at the center of the fiction writing course. What constitutes a "legitimate" story or novel in class? Outside the classroom? And obviously, any attempt to definitively identify fiction per se (as opposed to what?) will necessarily exclude other definitions. So: a couple of pertinent questions and a few provisional answers. What is fiction and who decides what receives that name? Who, and what, is fiction for?

WHAT IS FICTION AND WHO DECIDES?

At the beginning of *The Art of Fiction*, his classic meditation on the subject for aspiring writers, John Gardner warns against constructing too rigid a set of principles for telling stories: "What the beginning writer ordinarily wants is a set of rules on what to and not to do in fiction. . . . but on the

whole the search for aesthetic absolutes is a misapplication of the writer's energy. When one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done in fiction, and certain other things must always be done, one has entered the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends up in pedantic rigidity and the atrophy of intuition" (1984, 3).

George Garrett similarly hesitates to make ultimate pronouncements about what fiction is. He writes, "Say anything you want about 'the creative process,' but what is clear and certain is that we don't really understand it. It breaks all the rules as fast as we can make them. Every generalization turns out to be at best incomplete or inadequate" (1999, 2).

All relativism about what constitutes a work of fiction aside, we have already seen how flippant writing teachers can be about nonliterary fiction. (Both Gardner and Garrett would likely agree with Minot's dismissal of it as a subject for serious study.) In part this snobbery may stem from a realistic assessment of the place of literary fiction in the economic order of things. Saul Bellow believed that "[t]he literary masterpieces of the 20th-century were for the most part the work of novelists who had no large public in mind. The novels of Proust and Joyce were not intended to be read under the blaze and dazzle of popularity" ("Writers on Writing" 2004, 7). Out of necessity, most creative writing teachers would endorse this view that serious fiction ought not to be read *too* widely. Barry Gifford says, "It's clear that the general public in the United States doesn't read literary fiction. There may be more books being sold now than ever, but what are the books? They're mysteries, romances, cookbooks, how-to books. There's very little commerce when it comes to literary fiction, and this is just a fact. The evisceration of the independent bookstores has guaranteed this kind of awful future, and I can't help but feel any other way" (Petracca 1999, 492).

Like Gifford, the majority of fiction writing teachers have made their reputations—and therefore earned their place in the academy—as novelists. Therefore, for them the novel is the ne plus ultra of fictional writing. However, because of the time constraints of the quarter or semester, in most creative writing classes fiction comes to mean the short story. This makes for yet another unexpected twist in students' educations. They've come to class wanting to write the next *Lord of the Rings*, yet their instructors want them to write "The Lady with the Dog" instead. And they soon learn that most instructors are unwilling to spend the many additional— and *unpaid*—hours required to read and comment upon a student-written novel. As a result, conscientious students eventually begin writing literary

short fiction. Regrettably, as beginning writers learn when they visit the fiction sections of libraries and bookstores, there are always plenty of novels for sale or on loan, but far fewer collections of short stories. Consequently, students find themselves writing the least profitable form of fiction: their transformation from Stephen King to Stephen Dixon is complete.

Indeed, despite, or—to follow the illogic of the creative writing industry—*because* of their lack of marketability, shorter fictional forms have become increasingly popular in creative writing classes over the last fifteen years. Of course short tales have been around for millennia; and throughout the twentieth century—Borges's *Ficciones* is just one example—master writers have produced expert work in the very short form. Recently, however, there has been an explosion of short-short stories, works of fiction one to five pages in length. Grace Paley writes, "A short story is closer to the poem than to the novel . . . and when it's very short . . . should be read like a poem" (Shapard and Thomas 1986, 253). This close attention to the words on the page is a boon for writers, but, alas, microfiction is currently about as marketable as poetry among book buyers.

With the popularity of computer-generated media, one might reasonably assume that computer-based fiction would thrive also. And if the narratives constructed by computer gamers count as stories—voyages through outer space, shoot-'em-ups, popular movies reconstituted as games—that has, in fact, turned out to be the case. However, if one's definition of fiction continues to be text-based, the future of fiction doesn't look as bright. Granted, hypertext—a story or novel written and read on a computer that proceeds via links from screen to screen—had a brief period of popularity in the 1990s, and publishers invested some time and money into promoting downloadable e-books, but the pleasures of reading an actual book appear to have triumphed over the chore of reading text on a computer screen (see "Electronic Literature").

WHAT IS IT FOR?

Peter Rabinowitz points out in "Canons and Close Readings" that *how* we read a text determines the sort of fiction we value. Rabinowitz notes, "Once you give priority to close reading, you implicitly favor figurative writing over realistic writing, indirect expression over direct expression, deep meaning over surface meaning, form over content, and the elite over the popular." Rabinowitz compares Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* with Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* and demonstrates that while James's focus on psychology and symbolism makes his novel more palatable to contemporary

critical tastes, "the racist brutality endured by Ms. Wilson's heroine is arguably more important for our culture—and thus more deserving for our consideration—than the affluent sexual merry-go-round that dizzies Maisie" (1988, 219) (see "Reading").

Alberto Rios says, "Fiction's cruel burden is that it must be more believable than real life" (1999, 261), and in many quarters this belief that literary fiction should strive for mimesis continues unabated. Tobias Wolff makes a similar claim in his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories*: "It is this quality, above all, that puts . . . writers on common ground—the ability to breathe into their work distinct living presences beyond their own: imagined others fashioned from words, who somehow take on flesh and blood and moral nature" (1994, xvi).

We saw earlier that escape from reality is a common goal of student writers, but many writers of serious fiction also have escapist tendencies. Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction, for example, often leaves this world and time to deal with issues of the day. And Marcela Christine Lucero-Trujillo locates an escapist vein in Latino literature that returns obsessively to the past: "Some Chicanas' literature has been a vehicle whereby they could escape into another temporal scene of our folklore, our legends and modus vivendi; of that particular past which seemed a safer and saner word, the world as it ought to be, albeit a very traditional romantic view" (1980, 621).

Of course, modernist novelists like Woolf, Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner, and postmodernist novelists like Barthleme, Barth, and Pynchon have, for almost a century, been working actively *against* the traditions of mimetic and escapist fiction. If Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is in some ways a Bildungsroman about Oedipas Maas, it is even more a complex literary game in which the real subject is the shifting and usually invisible structures that undergird our society. This type of fiction responds to the uncertainty of postwar American life as described by Ruland and Bradbury: "Mathematics examined the fiction of numbers, linguists described the slippage of words, architects learned the vast simultaneity of all styles and the certainty of none, as codes gave way to decodes" (1991, 371) (see "Postmodernism").

Mimetic and escapist fiction tends to have a clear moral center, while, as the editors of *Postmodern American Fiction* note, "If any one common thread unites the diverse artistic and intellectual movements that constitute postmodernism, it is the questioning of any belief system that claims universality or transcendence" (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy, 1998, xx).

Indeed, African American critics such as Valerie Smith have pointed out that "feminists and Afro-Americanists alike have considered the extent to which they may betray the origins of their respective modes of inquiry when they seek to employ the discourse of contemporary theory" (1989, 675). And yet despite the anti-Foundationalist gestures made by postmodernists, fiction writers keep returning to the idea that fiction has a moral purpose. Wayne Booth writes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: "When human actions are formed to make an art work, the form that is made can never be divorced from the human meanings, including the moral judgments, that are implicit whenever human beings act. And nothing the writer does can be finally understood in isolation from his effort to make it all accessible to someone else—his peers, himself as imagined reader, his audience. The novel comes into existence *as* something communicable, and the means of communication are not shameful intrusions unless they are made with shameful ineptitude" (1961, 397).

Booth is writing in 1961, but Charles Baxter has something similar to say in 1997. He uses the adjective "dysfunctional" "to describe a structural unit (like the banking system, or the family, or narrative) whose outward appearance is intact but whose structural integrity has been compromised or collapsed." "No one is answerable from within it," Baxter claims. "Every event, every calamity is unanswerable, from the S&L collapse to the Exxon Valdez oil spill" (11–12). Baxter goes on to remark: "In the absence of any clear moral vision, we get moralizing instead" (18). Even writers like Joyce Carol Oates, who believe the purpose of fiction is to test (and sometimes violate) established moral codes, nevertheless implicitly acknowledge the importance of those codes: "To write is to invade another's space, if only to memorialize it. . . . Art is by its nature a transgressive act, and artists must accept being punished for it. The more original and unsettling their art, the more devastating the punishment" ("Writers on Writing" 2004, 19).

Oates hints here at the political nature of fiction writing, its ability to persuade readers to change their minds about an issue, to work effectively for social justice (see "Identity Politics"). In America, the politicizing of fiction is often looked at suspiciously, especially by those on the right, who argue that one must inevitably sacrifice art for partisan ardor. Yet Richard Powers sees this either/or stipulation as false: "Aesetheticize politics or politicize art: the old, iron-clad dichotomy bewilders me. I don't mean I'm bewildered by having to make the choice. I'm bewildered by those who think we can. We've reified these two terms of creative engagement and made them out to be incommensurable. Should fiction be con-

cerned with beauty or morality? It's a little like asking whether humans ought rather to eat or to breathe, or whether sentences ought really to consist of nouns or verbs" (Powers and Morrow 2000, 177).

Ultimately, then, even the greatest and most experienced writers return to the recurring question of purpose and audience, which so vexes beginning creative writing students. We write stories for ourselves, certainly, but once we take the step to show our fiction to other readers we can be sure that it will be met with a complex and conflicting set of responses, many of which are out of the writer's control.