On James Frey (& Other Beautiful Liars)

“In literature, beauty must not be fabricated.”

-Joseph Joubert

The novel is dead, some prognosticators and cultural haruspices are insisting, finished, kaput. As useless and out of date as your old VCR. The Betamax, no less.

Wait a minute. Not so fast. After all, we’re talking about an art form that’s been around, in one form or another, four hundred years (and still counting). It might be looking a bit long in the tooth but any talk of its impending demise seems just a tad premature, don’t you think?

Ah, but the problem is nowadays the line between fact and fiction is blurring as reality catches up with our wildest dreams. Witness: a former superstar running back kills his wife and some poor shlep who stopped by to return a pair of sunglasses, leaves tons of evidence…and gets away with it. A pop icon builds and maintains a perpetual fantasy land in his back yard, complete with ferris wheel, cotton candy, laughing, unchaperoned children and, er, petting zoo. Paris Hilton. Reality TV. The Da Vinci Code. Scientology. Dr. Phil. Machines that out-think chessmasters. Machines that eat meat. We live in a Phil Dickian universe.

Make that multiverse. Twenty-four hour news. Hundreds of different sports, movie and specialty channels. There is a continual demand for product, new stories and
ideas. And the novel is *still* the best source material for films, particularly since many authors today, as Jonathan Coe has pointed out, were raised on movies and TV. That’s why contemporary books are so cinematic, often reading like novelizations of movies yet to be made.

The novel dead? Not while the richest woman in England happens to write mega-bestselling kids’ books. Not when there’s such (for instance) excellent historical fiction being produced. This is the Golden Age of that particular genre and if you don’t believe me, check out the work of Stephen Pressfield and Conn Iggulden. And how about sci fi? Charles Stross and Tony Daniel and our own Peter Watts are producing ground-breaking, mind-expanding stuff, imagineering thrilling and demented futurescapes...

So as far as I’m concerned the novel is doing fine, thank you. And it will continue to thrive as long as there are still people around whose hearts beat a little faster at the mere mention of a new book by Pynchon or LeCarre or Robert Stone.

If publishers are noticing a slump in their fiction sales, perhaps it’s simply because (*gasp*) they aren’t putting out books people want to read. Folks are leading busy lives nowadays, there’s plenty of competition for those lucrative leisure-time hours. Too many books have let them down of late, nothing they’ve read has held their interest thematically or stylistically…

Take note, Canadian editors and publishers: readers want more emphasis on story and less on place. And *stop trying to dictate taste*, especially if you don’t have any. Don’t shy away from genre fiction—it’s time to bring CanLit into the 21st century (and beyond). Quit looking for the next Margaret Laurence and *start* casting about for the next J.K. Potter, Stephen King or, yes, James Frey.
Mr. Frey’s defenders have insisted all along that the authenticity of his bogus memoir isn’t the point. It’s a great tale, they say, and well told, that’s what’s important. It’s a completely wrong-headed position to take, morally and aesthetically reprehensible. Sadly, based on the sales Frey is racking up, the sheer buzz he’s generated in media circles usually indifferent to the literary world, it would seem they’re exactly right.

End

Cliff Burns has spent the last three years working on a novel. He sincerely hopes it wasn’t a complete waste of his time.

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