

What Writing Survives

Clearing out my office after 25 years of teaching writing at university, I am faced with the dilemma of what books to retain and what books to discard. With non-fiction it is relatively easy: keep those reference books that might prove useful, such as the *Oxford Guide to Philosophy* or *Primates of the World*, but with fiction it is harder to decide.

What lasts, I ask myself, what writing survives? *The Guardian* critic Jonathan Jones bemoaned that a middlebrow cult of the popular was holding literature to ransom. Ivor Indyk in the *Sydney Review of Books* once added that it was in the giving of literary prizes ‘that the cult of the middlebrow seems to have established itself’. These distinctions between highbrow and middlebrow fiction are as old as literature itself. In the eighteenth century, novel-reading was regarded as frivolous and morally suspicious. Real literature was to be found in religious tracts, epic poetry and mannered letters written by the nobility. It was the duty of learned men to uphold literary standards against the rising tide of middle-class tastes. Even Dickens was considered by many of his contemporaries to be too middlebrow to be a serious writer, and Edmund Wilson wrote of Raymond Chandler that he ‘remained a long way below Graham Greene’.

‘Literature is bunk’, Chandler replied, ‘written by ‘fancy boys, clever-clever darlings, stream-of-consciousness ladies and gents and editorial novelists.’

Would I ever read Graham Greene again? Probably not, I decide, all that Catholic angst, but I keep two novels by Raymond Chandler. If we can’t trust our literary academics and critics, to whom, then, should we entrust the judgment of literary quality? The only answer is the passage of time. What is valorized today might not be read in fifty years. *Quintus Servinton*, the first novel published in

Australia, was written by a convict in 1830, but no-one would ever describe it as literature. It survives for its historical value alone.

In a 2002 poll by the Norwegian Nobel Institute, 100 international authors, including Nobel prize-winners, chose *Don Quixote* (1605) as the most important book of all time, ahead of novels by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. (No Australian writer made their list.) And yet *Don Quixote* is neither highbrow nor middlebrow; if anything, it is a satire on literary pretensions, on those genres — the epic and romance of chivalry — that preceded it. Yet for a long time *Don Quixote* was regarded as light literature and not worthy of serious study.

To talk about literature, therefore, we must ask what is Literature? A common response is that Literature is a force for change, or morally instructive, but these vague motherhood statements would exclude Rabelais, Henry Miller or the Marquis de Sade.

In a wonderful essay on the role of the writer, Margaret Atwood says there is only one question to be asked about any work — is it alive, or is it dead? This is a far better measure of a novel or story's worth than whether it is highbrow or lowbrow. The best fiction transcends brows. The playwright David Mamet says the purpose of Literature is to Delight. 'To create or endorse the Scholastic is a craven desire,' he wrote, 'it may yield a low-level self-satisfaction, but how can this compare with our joy at great, generous writing.'

Great, generous writing that is alive. Now we are getting closer to answering the question: What lasts, what writing survives? And what books should I keep?

The only way a text can survive is through its interaction with a reader, 'no matter how far away that reader may be from the writer in time and space,' Atwood wrote. Miguel Cervantes died in 1616, yet his creation Don Quixote de la

Mancha lives on four centuries later, and no-one today reads a pastoral romance.

We all know what dead writing is, for we encounter it every day in managerial speak, in those densely-worded, multi-paged university documents about course intended learning outcomes, quality assurance mechanisms and international benchmarking activities. All around us dead sentences are falling on the ears of the living. But the writing that survives, the great literature, reminds us of our existence in this world, and our connection with other living things.

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was written 150 years ago and yet most of it remains alive and vivid. There is something presumptuous, if not pretentious, about the term 'literary fiction'. One cannot imagine Tolstoy telling Chekhov at his country estate that he was writing 'literary fiction' or 'highbrow literature'. On the contrary, Tolstoy held an aesthetic that required fiction to be morally improving and accessible to the widest public. And yet, it is not the morally improving aspects of Tolstoy's prose that we appreciate today, rather it is passages such as the scene of Konstanin Levin travelling through the Russian countryside: 'the tall grass softly twined around the wheels and the horse's legs, leaving its seeds on the wet spokes and hubs'.

This is what lasts, this is what survives, our joy of discovery at something simple and straightforward that connects us to the world. If the best fiction is a way of dealing with death, then it is also a way of learning about the inter-related nature of life.

This is the fiction worth keeping.

John Dale