

Down with the gratitude-bloat
of authors' endless lists of acknowledgements

dedication is what you need

John Self

A FEW YEARS AGO, I REVIEWED A novel by a debut author which, aside from its other fine qualities, had one which made it stand out like a red rose in a flax field: it carried no dedication, and no acknowledgements. A modern miracle, I noted: he did it all by himself!

That was unusual at the time but now might be a museum piece, a rarity akin to the hotel guest of whom Basil Fawlty said: "A satisfied customer! We should have him stuffed!"

Contra Ezra Pound, who declared that "all dedications are dowdy", the humble book dedication can be a thing of beauty. It stands alone on the page, prominent and high-value, and it is the first thing the reader sees after the title.

A dedication was once an obligation to a patron; now it is more personal, but just as likely to be used to send a public message. The commonest — and therefore the duller — is to the writer's romantic partner. We ignore those, as the romantic partners no doubt do too after a few rounds on the receiving end. ("Another one? Are you hiding something?")

More interesting are the ones that hint at a story potentially more intriguing than the book itself. Paul Christopher's 2010 novel *The Templar Cross* looks like genre swords-and-sandals hokum, but is elevated by its dedication to "John Christopherson, the best family lawyer in Skagit County, Washington." Perhaps the outcome of Mr Christopherson's negotiations explain why the author has had to churn out a further seven books in the series since then.

WHAT WE LIKE BEST, IN OTHER WORDS, is the dedication which artfully shows the human side of its author. Sometimes it may emphasise what we already know: Jessica Mitford, of the bonkers sisterhood, dedicated her memoir *Hons and Rebels* "To Constanca Romilly (the Donk)" — only true aristocracy could name her child thus. While Rose Macaulay showed her suffer-no-fools qualities with her 1926 novel *Crewe Train*: "To the Philistines, the Barbarians, the Unsocialable, and those who do not care to take any trouble."

Sometimes the dedication may reveal the author in a way unintended: Jack Kerouac exhibited delusions of meaning when *Visions of Cody* was "dedicated to America, wherever that is", a Banksy-like level of political insight. Yeah Jack! Stick it to The Man! Elsewhere, a dedication can even give us premonitions: when J.D. Salinger published *Franny and Zooey* in 1961, we might have guessed from his beautifully fluent dedication that all was not well:

"I urge my editor, mentor, and (heaven help him) closest friend, William Shawn, genius domus of the New Yorker, lover of the long shot, protector of the unprolific, defender of the hopelessly flamboyant, most unreasonably modest of born great artist-editors, to accept this pretty skimpy-looking book."

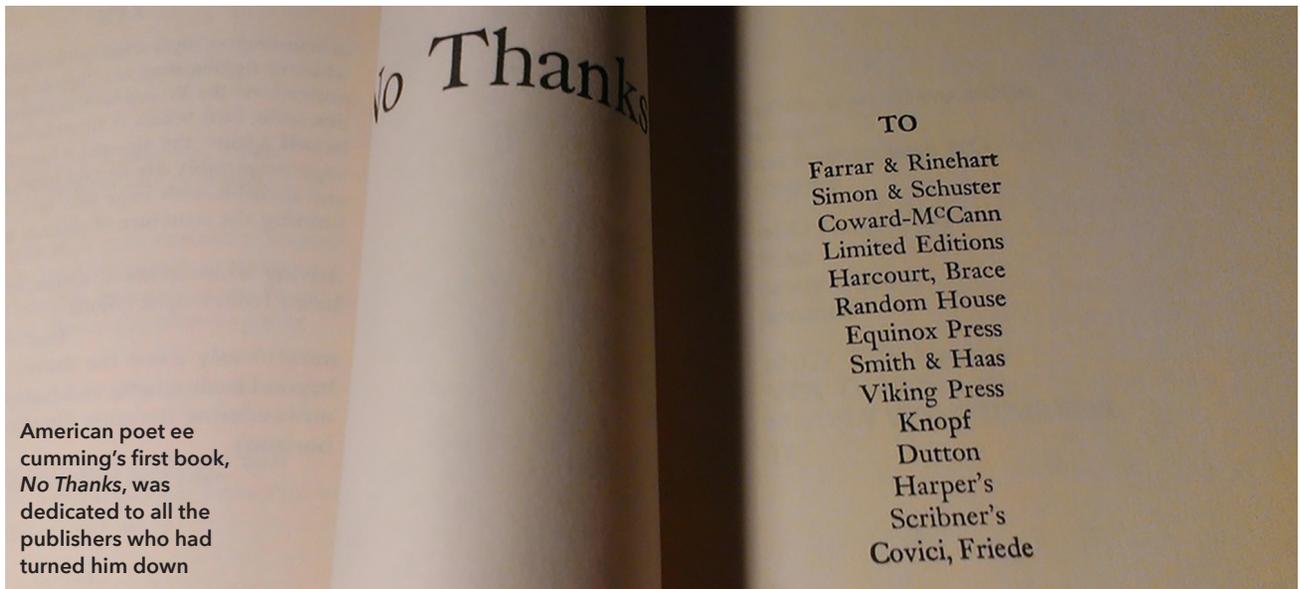
By the time his next book appeared, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters / Seymour: An Introduction*, the dedication told us he was at the end of his tether with the literary-critical publishing complex: "If there is an amateur reader left in the world — or anybody who just reads and runs — I ask him or her, with untellable affection and gratitude, to split the dedication of this book four ways with my wife and children." Salinger never published another book in his remaining 47 years. The most private of writers had bared his soul in his dedications as few writers do.

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BARING YOUR SOUL, OF COURSE, is not the role of the dedication: that's what its mutant cousin the acknowledgements page is for. Acknowledgements are to dedications what the stuffed-crust hamburger pizza is to the filet mignon. Worst of all, whereas the dedication is forgotten by the reader once the pages start turning, ac-

knowledgements come at the end, magnifying their status and positioning themselves as unignorable postscript.

In modern literature — I am talking here of fiction, rather than non-fiction where research will require a cap doffed to the experts — acknowledgements have not only become *de rigueur* but have swollen and metastasized. A brisk nod to a select few names will no longer do; it is not unusual today to have three or four pages of acknowledgements, thanking 100-



American poet ee cumming's first book, *No Thanks*, was dedicated to all the publishers who had turned him down

plus people. Where did this logorrhoea of recognition, this gratitude-bloat, come from?

It is a measure, perhaps, of our modern emotional incontinence. Acknowledgements are a loving gesture, making a human connection and offering praise where the writer feels it's due. That is a delightful thing, up to a point. And readers who like acknowledgements really love them: some read them first, and they are, as one commentator put it, "often the only true thing amid a pack of lies."

But that is one reason why I, as far as acknowledgements are concerned, take the *Bartleby*-like position: I prefer not to. Acknowledgements are not part of the novel; in fact, they break the spell the author has spent 200 or more pages weaving. We should take a book on its merits, knowing as little about the author as possible. As one reader put it to me, "the end of a book is time for thinking about the book, not for an acceptance speech." To paraphrase Victoria Wood's *Kitty*, how you're expected to gather your thoughts to the thud of a falling name-drop, I do not know.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ARE NOW SO FIRMLY established that they have become part of the publishing process. Advance copies of novels leave a page (or four) blank at the end, headed: "Acknowledgements: to come." One novelist I spoke to confirmed that he had, as a matter of course, been asked to submit acknowledgements for all of his novels — and had declined. Like me, he thinks that when a page of thank-yous follows the end of the book, "the bubble's been burst, somehow."

Acknowledgements are like the present tense in fiction: nowhere to be seen for hundreds of years, and suddenly ubiquitous. I look through my twentieth century classics, through my 80s and 90s literary fiction paperbacks, and find only the beautiful silence of eternity after the story ends. It does feel that it would have weakened the effect of closing lines such as "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back cease-

lessly into the past" if they were followed on the next page by a breathless list of Fitz's drinking buddies.

IF RESTRAINT WAS GOOD ENOUGH for those writers, why not today's? One argument goes that it is the exercise merely of decency to acknowledge those who helped you with the book. That is true. But why must this be a public statement?

The American novelist, Ann Patchett, is against acknowledgements because they have, she contends, a performative element. This must be so, particularly when we look at the current trend for elephantiasis of the thankings. Patchett suggests, instead, a discreet personalised thank you, handwritten in a gifted copy of the book.

Anyway, say some, the novelists of old were part of the problem — perpetuating a myth of writer as solitary genius, hander-down of tablets of wisdom — and the new approach helps to reset the balance. But I contend the reader recognises very well that the book does not spring from the womb fully-formed, but wants to believe it anyway. Taking the work as complete and perfect, the writer as infallible, is part of the suspension of disbelief. We want to see the great and powerful Oz, and pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.

This exemplifies the problem with all the support arguments for acknowledgements — in addition to the above, it's argued that being recognised can help a junior publishing employee — which is that they have nothing to do with the crucial relationship in a book, between author and reader.

Acknowledgements create a *ménage à trois* (or *quatre*, or *soixante-frigging-huit*) that leaves no one satisfied, especially if, having begun the naming game, the author leaves someone out. (This can be the only explanation for the grossest example I've seen yet, where an author wrote that the three pages of acknowledgements in the hardback version of their novel were in the process of being extended for the paperback.)

I had better clarify that disdain for acknowledgements is not a form of sour grapes. I appeared in the acknowledgements page of a novel once — a book I had no involvement in — which baffled me. And I once saw my name among the dedicatees in an advance copy of another novel. I politely asked to be removed — and was.

THERE REMAIN SOME HOLDOUTS in the acknowledgements game. The sort of author who tends not to acknowledge, and sometimes not even to dedicate, can be identified as austere, aloof or distant: J. M. Coetzee; Rachel Cusk; Marilynne Robinson; Jonathan Franzen. They of course have

achieved their success, and can afford not to play nice. For the debut author I mentioned at the outset who went commando in the acknowledgements game, I can't help but notice that he has not published anything since.

Let us close on a happier note, with the perfect dedication; one which sweetly combines recognition and revenge. In her *Oxford Book of Oxford*, Jan Morris proved herself the expert's expert at this game. "Dedicated gratefully to the Warden and Fellows of St. Antony's College, Oxford," she wrote, "except one." ●

John Self is the lead fiction reviewer of *The Critic*

The enduring popularity of fantasy and horror fiction proves that we still live in the long, dark shadow of the Gothic novel

the monster that lurks within us

Jeremy Black

IF REASON, POLITENESS AND SENSIBILITY vie for our attention when considering the long eighteenth century, so also should shock, horror and nightmare. This lack of ease was presented not only in the dreams of the protagonists of Gothic fiction, but also in the physicality of sensation and shock. In Charles Maturin's *Fatal Revenge* (1807), one of the most potent and sustained of the dramatic tales of supernatural challenge, the protagonist finds a dark cavity in which he sees "a heap of bloody and decayed garments, pierced with more holes than those of decay," and then:

half smothered by the dust and rubbish, I scrambled through, crushing at every touch the eggs of the little domestic serpents, and displacing the nests of lizards and toads, whose cold slime made me shudder, as I crawled amongst them.

The capacity of woods to be horrific was also captured in *Fatal Revenge* as the protagonist flees pursuit:

how I listened in horror to the wind, and the hollow whistle that ran through the wood, mixed with it; how I thought the whisper of murder was in the underworld, as it hissed in the breeze; and how often I recoiled as the tossing branches of the trees flung a sudden shadow across the way.

The Age of Nightmare is not the usual term for the period from the 1760s to the 1810s, let alone the following century. Yet, in Britain, alongside transformative change toward greater international and economic power, it was an age of anxiety and fear.

This was the case not least among the élite and the growing

middling orders but also more widely. Successive crises hit the national mood: fear in the 1760s about political breakdown; revolution in British North America between 1775 and 1783; the danger that the French Revolution would spread to Britain and then the war with Napoleon; domestic post-war traumas and anxiety about declining religious observance and the consequences of economic and social change.

NOVELS HAD INCLUDED A MELODRAMATIC dimension from the outset, with threats to status, most commonly social or virginal, a key theme. At the same time, the attempt to provide acceptable sentimental novels was to be affected by the development of new forms of imagination, leading towards the Gothic novel.

This development drew on ideas of the sublime. The word was used at the time for George Frederick Handel's music, which indeed sought a religious sublimity, but was defined by Edmund Burke as whatever led to ideas of danger, pain, or terror. He suggested obscurity, vastness, privation, and infinity, the sources of which could be imaginary.

Burke's aesthetic *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1759) underscored the extent to which "the sublime" could transform the reader and spectator, and emphasised that terror was important in creating a sense of the sublime. For him, emotions and potent sensory experiences, rather than reason and dignity, were to the fore. This was a reaction against what had been the standard intellectual approach earlier in the century, one that



Nightmare by Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Fussli; 1741-1825), oil on canvas, c.1781

that of the clergyman. Charles Maturin, a clergyman-novelist, did both, and his most famous novel, *Melmoth, the Wanderer* (1820) provides, in his protagonist's last desperate dream, a warning of retribution that is at once religious and surreal. There is a quality of Dante in his imaginative writing. Having sold his soul for 150 years of life and failed to lead others into taking on his corrupt and corrupting bargain, Melmoth dreams he overlooks a fiery ocean of the damned, before falling into it:

The burning waves boomed over his sinking head, and the clock of eternity rung out its awful chime — "Room for the soul of the Wanderer!" — and the waves of the burning ocean answered, as they lashed the adamantine rock — "There is room for more!"

matched the official approach to Christian exposition.

The disturbing potential of medievalism was taken in a dramatically new direction with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the second edition of which was subtitled *A Gothic Story*. Commonly presented as the originator of the Gothic novel, Walpole (1717-97), assaulted established practices by breaking with the existing conventions of the novel and its emphasis on realism, a theme he was made explicit in his preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*.

Instead, he deliberately emphasised the need to employ "fancy", a form of imagination which included strangeness and uncertainty. Mystery was underlined by manifestations of the supernatural; and the reader, like the protagonist, was repeatedly unclear about what was happening. This was heightened to a nightmarish character by accounts of menace, danger, pursuit, and assault.

GOTHIC FICTION WAS PRODUCED AGAINST the background of a search for stability and understanding in an essentially unstable and inexplicable world. This involved an attempt to reconcile divine justice with human suffering, and to order experience in a way that reflected the hard and apparently arbitrary nature of life. On a longterm pattern, religious world-views provided the most effective explanatory model, the best psychological defences, and an essential note of continuity. Gothic fiction provided an opportunity also to warn about the danger of turning to evil. It was not so much secular morality as religious admonition and entertainment.

Providence delivered many of its lessons through nightmare, with the novelist providing an explanatory role akin to

LIKE THE PAINTINGS OF HENRY FUSELI (1741-1825), whose *Nightmare* attracted great interest when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1782, the plots of Gothic literature tested conventional notions of probability, not least the established patterns of expressing and moulding experience with reference to the interior and natural world.

Gothic fiction reworked many of the images of landscape poetry: monastic stonework and trees became ruined abbeys and sinister woods that both served both as malign settings and a representation of psychological strains. This fiction, in part a Reformation throwback with its echoes of malign and corrupt monks and nuns, was different to the metropolitan settings that had dominated the books of the start of the eighteenth century and the country houses that had followed.

Ann Radcliffe moves in her novels between, on the one hand, a pervasive atmosphere of threat and oppression, notably to women, and, on the other, more commonplace discussions of relations between her principals, most of which relate to the standard tropes of sentimental fiction.

In contrast, Ambrosio, the protagonist of Matthew Lewis's lurid novel *The Monk* (1796), was presented as a victim of his impulses, specifically lustful self-destructive drives, which are, at the end of the novel, unconvincingly attributed to diabolical forces. He was more frightening than the creations of Walpole and Radcliffe, and was a threat to all, notably women.

The arrival of Satan, a potent figure, in *The Monk* very much captured the continuation of a belief in the real presence of Evil, an element of the Enlightenment and the post-Enlightenment it is all too easy to underplay. Gothic fiction was not sim-

ply about this, but saving souls, winning redemption, and achieving salvation were frequent themes.

On a “cold and stormy” night, with the wind roaring round the house, Elinor starts “back with a look of horror” when she sees the “flaring lamps of a carriage” drawn by four horses (instead of two) and therefore moving fast. Jane Austen could certainly do drama, but Elinor Dashwood’s visitor in *Sense and Sensibility* turns out to be far from sinister, in a passage in which the author is clearly having much fun.

The Shelleys were imbued with horror. In *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson* (1810) by Shelley and Thomas Hogg, there was, in “The Spectral Horseman,” an engagement with forms of evil, not least:

a shivering fiend that thirsting for sin,
Seeks murder and guilt when virtue sleeps,
Winged with the power of some
ruthless king.

Shelley’s verse drama *The Cenci*, written and published in 1819, was not, due to its theme of incest, performed in public in England until 1922. Evil Catholic clergy, parental rape, and a justified patricide, all play a role in this powerful tragedy.

Darkness, a frequent theme of Gothic fiction, is brought in with reference to “some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart.” There is also a critique of religion with an attack on “Superstitious horror.” Differentiating it from Protestantism, Shelley explains Italian Catholicism as, “interwoven with the whole fabric of life. It is adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration; not a rule for moral conduct. It has no necessary connection with any one virtue.”

Earlier, in *Zastrozzi* (1810), Shelley had piled on classic features, including family feuds, incarceration, murder, suicide, the Inquisition and revenge on a neglectful father in the shape of helping drive the father’s other son to suicide. Driven by a diabolical intensity, the protagonist denounces religion and morality.

His wife, Mary Shelley, looked in a different direction, not to apocalyptic images from the world of Christian millenarism, but rather to a troubling present, and the problems posed by a quest to control the future.

Widely treated as the first Sensation Novel, as well as the foundation of the British detective story, Wilkie Collins’s highly successful *The Woman in White* (1860) took Gothic plots from the settings of Italian and British abbeys and castles in the past and placed them in the Britain of his times.

Collins had referred in *Basil: a story of Modern Life* (1852) to “the secret theatre of home”. This was melodrama at home, and from novelists who also produced plays, stories acted around the reader, and, as such, different from classic Gothic

fiction. Indeed, the Sensation Novel tended to rely on the metaphorical skeleton in the cupboard, and not the actual one in the castle chapel. This contrast ensured a difference in characters and tone, as well as plot and narrative features.

Thus, in Collins’s *No Name* (1862), there is the usual Gothic theme of dispossession, and again the beneficiary is an uncle, though in this case, the negligent failure of a father to change his will to the benefit of his illegitimate daughters is the major cause. In response, the illegitimate Magdalen Vanstone uses conspiracy and deceit to regain her position. Illegitimacy was an aspect of the uncertainty not only of dynasticism, but also of landownership as a whole, and, more generally, families.

The penny blood serial works of the 1840s-70s were succeeded by the penny dreadfuls of the 1860s-1900s, a genre aimed at young men. The sequential publication of stories in magazines was important because it changed the nature of plots, with repeated cliffhangers introduced in a disciplined way, instead of a more baggy and extended terror.

The locations for Gothic horrors ranged greatly as the nineteenth century drew toward a close, with Gothic themes revived and developed in such works as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), all of which offered different types of the surreal to that in *The Castle of Otranto*.

The most lasting of the surreal horrors of this period in its impact was Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), in which evil is on the attack. In contrast, Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) represented the more conventional type of horror story, with a rational solution to what was a Gothic tale. Evil in that story is human, not supernatural and there was no equivalent to the author’s interest in spiritualism.

Dracula was also reminiscent of the engagement with a mysterious Continent seen in the earlier Gothic novels, in that it began in a distant and exotic part of Europe, one that involved considerable journeying. In this case, Transylvania took the place of the formerly-Catholic Mediterranean.

There is frequent religious imagery in *Dracula*, Stoker giving evil deeds and thoughts names and in *Dracula* a voice. In doing so, he provided both an adventure story and a Christian message, which was the case as a whole, directly or indirectly, of the Gothic revival.

That stance may not conform to many modern understandings, and clearly much else was involved in both writing and reception, not least, in the case of *Dracula*, adventure and pornography. But horror was scarcely separate for a culture that saw Hell as a real presence. The *Westminster Journal* was not alone in 1773-4 in publishing articles on the need, in light of thunder and lightning, to contemplate the Day of Judgment and the Torments of Hell. Such beliefs continued in the nineteenth century, however much social pat-

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terns were disrupted by large-scale urbanization.

And so on with the reiterated success of fantasy in more recent culture, from JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000). The Gothic novel was the historical entry to this literature, one that repurposed conventional Christian accounts in order to provide a new age of nightmare. We are still in its shadows. ●

Jeremy Black has recently published *The Game is Afoot: The Enduring World of Sherlock Holmes and In Fielding's Wake*

Novelists used to attempt ambitious works about "the way we live now" as a matter of course. Why are they no longer in vogue?

declining state of the nation

Francesca Peacock

EVERY SO OFTEN, A WEARY middle-aged writer in his — and it is always his — favourite Soho restaurant will say: "I'm thinking that my next novel is going to be a state-of-the-nation one." His friends nod sympathetically. The book is never written.

This wasn't the case in the nineteenth century, when bestselling writers from Anthony Trollope and Elizabeth Gaskell to Benjamin Disraeli wrote novels on a subject succinctly summarised in one of Trollope's titles, *The Way We Live Now*.

Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) is an emotionally febrile exploration of the horrors of industrial England, as the initially rather naïve and snobbish Margaret Hale is forced to leave the idyllic Helston — a village like "in one of Tennyson's poems" — and move up north. Some bad wallpaper, a naval mutiny and a good deal of mill trouble later, Margaret is morally improved and, perhaps most importantly, engaged.

Disraeli's novel, *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845) is a similar exploration of "the Condition of England": the poverty of those in England's industrial cities is so extreme as to seem to belong to another land. Many of Charles Dickens's works have elements of reportage: *Oliver Twist* (1839), *David Copperfield*

(1850), *Bleak House* (1853) and *Hard Times* (1854) could be described as addressing the "state of the nation".

Then there is *Middlemarch* (1872) — George Eliot's "study of provincial life". Through careful examination of the lives of the inhabitants of a middle-England town, Eliot touches on everything from medical developments to the status

of women. But is it a book about national change and the passing of the 1832 Reform Act (the action is set between 1829 and 1832), or is it an examination of human psychology?

THIS INEVITABLY ARISES when trying to write — or think — about the "state of the nation novel". Is it any book which, as *The Guardian* puts it in its round-up of the 1000 best novels of the genre, "addresses social questions or political changes"? That seems too simple: how can a work of fiction not address social questions? Under that definition, *Middlemarch* is most definitely a state-of-the-nation novel, but then so is Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979).

The novelist Amanda Craig has written a sequence of nine interconnected novels all set in contemporary Britain, including *The Golden Rule*, which was shortlisted for the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction. She sees contemporary state of the nation novels as those which, like *Middlemarch* or Dickens's or Trollope's offerings, "help us get a grasp of the way we live now". She acknowledges a scarceness of modern equivalents to the likes of Gaskell and Disraeli, and attributes it to a widespread feeling of being "bombarded with current affairs".

William Boyd similarly suggests the rapid news cycle represents a challenge. "The basic problem is, it seems to me, that time moves on so much more quickly than in the nineteenth century". There is a risk for novelists that an "on-the-nail, crucial novel will be irrelevant in three years' time".

Boyd uses the example of Justin Cartwright's 1995 novel *In Every Face I Meet*. The "central epiphanic metaphor" is a try scored by Will Carling, back when the Six Nations tournament was still only Five. As Boyd says, "that novel will now require footnotes to make any sense to someone who doesn't remember the occasion".

THIS WAS LESS OF A PROBLEM FOR DICKENS and Trollope whose works were often serialised in magazines which carried news as well as fiction. Rather than writing about the news cycle of politics and issues, they were practically a part of it.

D. J. Taylor identifies another issue that faces the would-be modern Thackeray: in the age Thackeray was writing *Vanity Fair* (1848), "it was possible for a writer to understand his or her society in a way that isn't possible now". They could grasp the political and financial basis of society. Now, "no modern novelist really understands how money works".

At the time of writing, the top three novels in the Waterstones best-seller chart are all historical. Jennifer Saint's *Elektra* is a rewriting of Greek mythology, Douglas Stuart's *Young Mungo* is set in 1990s Glasgow, and Bonnie Garmus's *Lessons in Chemistry* explores late 1950s and early 60s America. Excellent though the works undoubtedly are, our contemporary literary scene seems hidebound to nostalgia.

The lack of literary fiction dealing with contemporary life is not a recent development. Of last year's acclaimed books, it would be hard to identify many which take as their primary subject matter the news cycles of modern life.

Some might make a claim for Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021): Rooney does, after all, mention the pandemic, the gig economy, and an all-pervasive millennial malaise. But it is hard to argue that a novel which places the interiority of its characters above all else is so much a work about the "state of the nation" as it is a "state of one's mind".

There is no shortage of novels dealing with political change, but few of them are set at the time they are written. Douglas Stuart's *Young Mungo* explores working-class life, homophobia and politics, but is set nearly three decades ago. His Booker-winner, *Shuggie Bain*, is similarly rooted in 1980s Glasgow. And Anna Burn's *Milkman* — which won the Booker in 2018 — is an unflinching study of political and social disturbance in Northern Ireland with The Troubles as its backdrop.

Of course, it would be facetious to claim that there have been no blockbuster state of the nation novels in recent years. John Lanchester published *Capital* in 2012 — a chronicle of London life as the 2008 financial crisis shook the world. The lives of the inhabitants of one road in London — from Polish builders to Senegalese footballers and rich bankers — are explored in near-fastidious detail, and Lanchester portrays twenty-first century Britain with near-journalistic accuracy. And Zadie Smith made waves with her 2000 debut *White Teeth*, which spans a quarter-century of London life over its sprawling 480 pages.

More recently, Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) was an attempt to fictionalise Brexit Britain, and sits alongside Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* (published between 2016 and 2020, with *Companion Piece* released this spring). Smith's unconventional, discombobulating style (at one point in *Winter*, the hallucinated disembodied head of a child haunts one of her characters) does not render her works any less engaged in the social and political realities they take as their theme. But these novels are outliers, named and numbered in a few short paragraphs.

Glenn Gould at the piano

THIS RELUCTANCE OF BOTH WRITERS AND READERS TO ENGAGE WITH CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN MIGHT BE BECAUSE WE TREAT THE NOVEL AS ESCAPISM

milieu, they remain wary of left-of-centre moralising. As Craig says, a state of the nation novel "has to be able to hold a mirror up to some of the big social and personal problems of the day and ask readers what they sympathise with", but "a strong moral compass hasn't been fashionable for the past 75 years".

Taylor — whose latest collection of short stories, *Steukey Blues* (2022), is saturated in close observation of social details — argues that without class, "the novel loses its armature". But, today's class distinctions now "function on much more of a micro level". How is one meant to convey the nuances of being "upper-lower-middle class" in fiction?

An alternative reason for the state of the nation novel's decline is more pragmatic: it is risky, and potentially unrewarding, for writers to write about the present. For Boyd, so many novelists — himself included — write about the recent or semi-distant past because "everything is 'fixed' and known". From *Armadillo* (1998) to *The Dreams of Bethany Mellmoth* (2017), Boyd has written contemporary novels and short stories, but he would "defy any reader to determine what year they're set in". He takes "great pains not to make any topical reference (who was evicted from I'm A Celebrity, what was in the charts etc.) so its contemporary feel can last a decade or maybe two".

THIS DIFFERENCE IN OPINION MARKS A subtly different approach to the purpose of contemporary details in fiction. Are they intended to provide a contemporary or a modern backdrop to the action — or are they a part of the story's direction, and the reason for it having been written?

As Boyd notes, it is important to remember that both *Ulysses* (1922) and *Middlemarch* "were written about events and a time 20 to 30 years in the past from the moment when Joyce and Eliot were writing". The publisher Alan Samson makes a similar point. "The high-quality state-of-the-nation novel has rarely existed in the sense of offering direct comment on con-

temporary society”, but rather takes its backdrop — if not its subject — as a period some years or decades before. In Samson’s words, “the reader can infer the social commentary on their own time but it is packaged a little differently”.

Middlemarch is usually taken as Eliot’s state of the nation offering but *Silas Marner* deserves attention. The 1861 work is set earlier in the century, when cloth was still produced by cottage-industry weavers rather than in factories. Eliot’s setting may have been archaic, but her subject — the decline of rural life — was entirely relevant. Perhaps a novel which engages in contemporary issues need not have a contemporary setting. A state of the nation novel does, however, require a greater focus than the relationships of one family, no matter how politically or socially excoriating it is.

The division between a novel’s setting and its political or moral commentary is particularly relevant when discussing a new fiction genre. Sarah Hall’s *Burntcoat* (2021) is, unavoidably, a “pandemic novel”. It takes a virus as its subject, and much of the action takes place in lockdown. But by eschewing contemporary details, it cannot be read as a moralising tirade against perceived political failings — and nor is it an elegy for lives lost. Instead, it exists in a hinterland of contemporary relevance without overt commentary.

A DESIRE FOR NOVELS TO JUDGE modern life may sound

moralising and Victorian, but holding a mirror up to the injustices of society need neither be dull — it is difficult to read *North and South* without smiling — nor unremittingly serious; Craig’s most recent novel has elements of Patricia Highsmith’s crime fiction and ancient fairy tales. Nor must political details be central to the plot. Romance and comedy abound in Trollope, Eliot, and Lanchester. You’d struggle to find a teenage reader of *Middlemarch* who finished the book with coherent thoughts on the Reform Act rather than simply repeating the words “Dorothea, Dorothea, Dorothea”.

Instead, the state of the nation novel marries contemporary issues with a lasting portrait of how humanity responds to them — be they politics, train fares or a once-in-a-generation referendum. It yokes together traditional plot tropes of marriages, births, and deaths with a deeply specific context. This duality — multiplied when novels use the recent past to comment on the present — is essential to the genre.

Nonetheless, the best state of the nation novels are able to unravel and re-weave these different strands into a web of human lots. So, next time a writer announces they are about to start a tremendously relevant magnum opus, friends should withhold a collective sigh, pass the author a copy of *Middlemarch*, and tell them to get on with it. ●

Francesca Peacock is *The Critic’s* deputy online editor

The second-hand book trade has lost much of its romance and charm, not to mention eccentric establishments and their owners

bookshops remaindered

Paul Dean

AT THE OXFORD BOOK FAIR IN APRIL, the presence of a hundred exhibitors from all over Britain suggested that Covid had not killed off the antiquarian book trade. But those who buy antiquarian books are not necessarily interested in reading, any more than those who buy hundreds of cases of rare wines are interested in drinking.

The second-hand market — for immediate consumption rather than laying down — is a different matter, as Oxford itself sadly demonstrates. In the 1970s, Blackwell’s second-hand department occupied the whole of the top floor. By 2000, it occupied most of the third floor. Now it shivers forlornly in a few feet of the first floor.

Will Waterstones, Blackwell’s new owners, bother to keep

it? One second-hand bookshop after another has closed in Oxford, leaving two admittedly excellent Oxfams, St Philip’s Books opposite the cathedral, a new small outlet in the Covered Market, and the ominously named The Last Bookshop in Jericho. Thornton’s and Robin Waterfield are much missed. The former still sells online, but, although I plead guilty to online buying, that is not the same. It is like eating the menu instead of the food.

Oxford is not alone, of course. In Cambridge, Deighton Bell and Galloway & Porter have vanished, and G. David, like many others, mingles remainders with genuine used books; but Heffers has started a promising second-hand section.

In London, Sotherans and the shops in Cecil Court continue to cater to the antiquarian trade, but Charing Cross Road had only two shops at the last count. (Skoob, in the Brunswick,

is a miraculous survivor).

Hay-on-Wye and Wigtown still exist, and there are pockets of resistance such as York and Carlisle; but the immortal Driffield, whose acerbic *Guide* to second-hand bookshops in the UK was the browsers' Baedeker in the 1980s and 1990s, would find few targets for his scorn now. (He had a good rule of thumb when visiting a place for the first time: you should look at the set of Winston Churchill's *History of the Second World War* which, he maintained, every shop had, and if they wanted more than £10 for it you should leave immediately.)

IT WAS NOT EVER THUS. IN MY CHILDHOOD, in Brighton in the 1960s, apart from general junkshops which sold Penguins for sixpence (2½p), or a shilling (5p) if you were flush — a new paperback then cost around half a crown (12½p) — there were a dozen excellent establishments, boasting colourfully eccentric proprietors.

There was Mr Silver, a figure straight out of an Angus Wilson short story, somewhat battered and mildewed like his stock, who shuffled home arm-in-arm with his mother every evening. There were Miss Judith Tee and her brother, of the Theatre Bookshop. He looked like Alastair Sim, and Miss Tee looked like Alastair Sim *en travestie*. They trundled a wheelbarrow, Molly Malone fashion, round all the bring-and-buy sales picking up booty for their tiny Dickensian emporium, where I was often given the key and told to lock up when I had finished browsing.

There was George Sexton (now a café), whose grumpy proprietor hated customers, and took every enquiry as a personal insult. One put up with his lack of bookside manner on account of the chance of a lucky find, but at N. F. Brookes, in Queen's Road, the books themselves were hated. They were actively maltreated, spread on the floor so that you had to trample over them while the assistant sat smoking foul cigarillos and sneering at you and his wares in equal measure.

There was K. J. Bredon, where the till was looked after by a donnish, bespectacled type who sat reading and listening to classical LPs when not serving. There were also specialist shops. Tall Storeys, in Kemp Town, was unrivalled for art books, and S.P.C.K. had a basement full of second-hand theology for those who wished to bone up on early heresies.

ALL THESE MIGHT YIELD THE OCCASIONAL GEM: but the Aladdin's Cave was Holleyman & Treacher of Duke Street, reputedly the largest second-hand bookshop in the south of England — although Howes of Hastings, a Tardis of a shop with a modest frontage but room upon room of books from floor to ceiling, surely surpassed it until it closed in 2008.

Treacher was long gone, but Mr Holleyman, who lived above the shop, was still working when I began to frequent it. Actually, "working" is a euphemism. There were two young

men — one willowy and languid, the other square and swarthy — who did the buying and selling from an office in the middle of the ground floor. What Mr Holleyman did was lend tone.

He stood upright, his hands behind his back, his tall, spare figure quietly but tastefully clad, and inclined his head with a gentle smile as one passed, or murmured a greeting to regular customers. He retired (perhaps that should be receded) in 1983, but the shop continued to yield treasures. Eventually, the willowy and languid young man became an etiolated and weary elderly man, and decided he had had enough.

As so often, no buyer could be found, and I made a pilgrimage to the closing-down sale in 1998. Mr Holleyman should have made a return; he was still alive, and, as an erstwhile archaeologist and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, was obviously an expert on the conservation of ancient objects, since he lived to be 93.

From Brighton I moved to Manchester, where there were good shops such as Shaw's (Police Street) and Gibbs (Charlotte Street), but a less bohemian atmosphere. E. J. Morten, in Didsbury, did not put prices in the books but assessed your gullibility at the till, and thought of a number.

McGill's, near the university, had more character. There was a perpetual suggestion of cabbage soup in the atmosphere, and all the books were wrapped in cellophane to protect the covers — also, perhaps, to keep the cabbage soup at bay. A large dog of indeterminate pedigree slept in front of the counter, and its owner slept behind it. He had courtly manners, however. When you left the shop, whether or not you had bought anything, he would wake up, rise from his chair and say "Goodbye now to you" in wistful tones.

OTHERWISE, IN THE 1970S AND 1980S, the second-hand book business was becoming just that — a business. For a hint of the old world you would have to go, for instance, over the Pennines to George Kelsall's in Littleborough, or a tiny shop in Hawes where the door stood open, there was no-one in charge, and you put what you were prepared to pay for a book into a cloth cap on the chair.

Post-Manchester, my next few years were spent in Portsmouth, which was handy for two well-stocked shops near Chichester station, and for Winchester — where Gilbert's closed long ago, but the Winchester Bookshop survives — and the Petersfield Bookshop (which is also still with us).

Portsmouth itself did not run to literature, but in Southsea I found two agreeably quirky establishments. The Adelphi on Albert Road also sold old waistcoats, which hung from inconvenient places and would flap in one's face, impeding progress generally. The proprietor, a chatty character, heaped his books on the floor as at N. F. Brookes, but did not dislike them. Indeed, he was very fond of them, and in particular of detective fiction, of which he had an encyclopaedic knowledge.

THERE WAS A PERPETUAL SUGGESTION OF CABBAGE SOUP IN THE ATMOSPHERE, AND ALL THE BOOKS WERE WRAPPED IN CELLOPHANE

It was just that he never quite got round to tidying the place up, or perhaps he hoped that a passing film crew would be prompted to use the place as a set for *The Waistcoat Mystery*, or a remake of *The Body in the Library*. The shop is still trading, so he may be lucky yet.

Then, in Fratton, there was Abacus Books, whose owner would be found playing chess, either against himself or against another customer, sitting in front of a bead curtain which failed to conceal the presence in the vicinity of a pungent stew whose ingredients could only be guessed at, although it would probably be wiser not to try. They could probably be found in the same cookbook used by McGill.

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, WORLD OF BOOKS, the UK's largest second-hand retailer, estimated that the market was growing by eight to ten percent each year. One consequence of the enforced isolation during Covid was that many people had the

time to weed out their collections, and when restrictions were lifted, Oxford's Oxfam shops were flooded with so many donations that they had to start an appointment system.

The increase in online buying has meant a reduction in the number of physical outlets, but those that remain have a beadier eye for bargains unsuspected by their owners.

The trade has lost much of its charm and romance, and the number of eccentrics has dwindled. Of course, it is better that there should be second-hand shops run by professionals than none at all, but the ghosts of Mr Silver, Miss Tee, Mr Holleyman and others linger in my memory. Books mattered differently to them, somehow. They were not just running a business, they were conduits of civilisation. ●

Paul Dean is a freelance critic living in Oxford

D.J. TAYLOR'S ARTY TYPES

Fenella Jeavons Sponsorship Facilitator

JUST NOW FENELLA is closeted in a private room at the Tate gallery alongside the marketing partner of messrs Tender & Mainprice, chartered accountants. Before them on the coffee table sit reproductions of three of the dreariest watercolours to which Alfred Sisley ever put his name.

Although her vis-à-vis doesn't know it, Fenella — brisk, elegantly got-up and in her early fifties — is about to move in for the kill. There is talk of "synergies", of the procedural techniques ("innovation", "clear thinking", "salience") that bind together a nineteenth-century painter and a gang of bean counters from Gutter Lane, EC2. Mr Heckinbotham, the marketing partner, is powerless to resist. The plan for next year's exhibition — *Sisley: Impressionist Titan* — is hatched on the spot.

This is not quite the most embarrassing moment of Fenella's long and distinguished career. No indeed, that came five years ago on the day she was bidden to escort the corporate communications partner of an investment bank around the Royal Academy shortly after that gentleman's colleagues had agreed to underwrite *Van Gogh: Tragedy and Triumph*. "And this," she brightly remarked, "is where they stage the annual summer



exhibition." "Oh yes?" her companion replied, a bit less brightly, "What's that?"

STILL, IT WAS ALL IN A day's work, and the commission remitted to Jeavons & Associates a fortnight before the event began was enough to pay Fenella's eldest son's fees at Harrow for the next three terms.

How did she get into the business of milking the Philistines? Naturally, it all began at the Courtauld, where Fenella — a greenery-gallery girl with a passion for Aubrey Beardsley — studied for several years, and continued in the marketing department

of Ernst & Young, who, to give them credit, were one of the first city firms to see the advantages of high-end sponsorship of the arts.

From there it was but a short step to the foundation of Jeavons & Associates (half-a-dozen employees, premises in Jermyn Street) and the staging of their first major exhibition: *Klimt: Dreamhouse and Nightmare* — backed by a willing hedge fund and opened by the Prince of Wales — at the V&A.

ALL THAT WAS A DECADE-and-a-half ago. In its long and lucrative wake, Fenella has transformed herself into the leading light of what is now a rather crowded profession. There are occasional complaints about Jeavons & Associates'

snootiness — and indeed Fenella once declined to entertain the somewhat plebian managing director of an upstart options trading firm on the grounds that she "really couldn't be seen dealing with people like that" — and the odd protest about their stratospherically high fees.

On these occasions Fenella consoles herself with the quote from an old Simon Raven novel that hangs above her desk: "You must not make the businessman's usual and vulgar mistake of expecting cultural services to come cheap." ©