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A Book History of the Novel

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Book historians have long recognized the multiple and unequally motivated players who shape the circulation and legacies of a text, a term, following D. F. McKenzie, that includes all recorded forms, "from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography" (13). In the case of the novel, formatting, design, covers, binding, and size influence readers' encounters with writing, as do cost and media. But in the end, the alchemy of reading—what readers do with texts, and why, and how, and where—is the great understudied topic in novel theory, whose center of gravity remains on texts curated for analysis by scholarly readers. Meanwhile, on the other side are the vast majority of common readers "uncorrupted with literary prejudices," as Samuel Johnson extolled them in 1781 (799). A century and a half later, inspired by reading Johnson, Virginia Woolf dedicated two bestselling essay collections to "the common reader," who, she wrote, "differs from the critic and scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously. He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole" (1). Neither Johnson nor Woolf was blind to common readers' limitations: they are "hasty, inaccurate, and superficial," Woolf conceded (1). Yet they were Johnson's and Woolf's ideal for their say in the final "claim to poetical honours" (Johnson 799). Common readers *make* literature. Despite their being worse educated than the professional critic or scholar, it is their selections that distribute the honors that count—and last.

This essay retrofits prevailing theories of the novel by fundamentally expanding their empirical bases. It emerges from the observation that a small handful of novels, comprising a very small handful of forms, from among an even smaller handful of places, has determined both the history and the theory of the novel even as the novel today enjoys a thriving global presence. Against this set of assumptions, I ask if a different theory of the novel is possible that can incorporate common readers and markets and, on this basis, understand the novel's geographical expansion in the twenty-first century.

The focus on readers, forms, and geography introduces book history's interdisciplinary methods and wide-angled curiosities to ventilating what sometimes seems a scholarly silo situated in a remote NATO outpost from which the novel has been theorized. In expanding the kinds of novels from which scholars develop theories of

Nancy Armstrong's superpower for visualizing an argument in blocks and rearranging prose to reveal it helped me see and show what had long been gestating in this essay. I consider myself in heaven's favor to have received her editorial gifts on this piece. Ian Duncan has read virtually everything I've published and helped make it better. Jed Esty's "Global Lukács" (2009) was my model of craft and argument; his comments on an early draft were immensely generative. My Spring 2024 graduate seminar at Temple University on the social work of the novel was the lab where I beta tested many of my claims: I owe a special thanks to my gifted students for their lively engagement.

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the novel, this essay begins the work of decolonizing novel theory. It includes in its purview forms that enjoy sustained loyalty among common readers, whose tastes and preferences make themselves felt in the economic marketplace where their preferred titles have enjoyed lengthy half-lives typically ignored in what Pascale Casanova calls the "bourse of literary values" (12). Even as Mikhail Bakhtin explained that the novel's vitality rises from "the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" (11), the theories that followed have had limited contact with the present. The "panorama" of what Franco Moretti calls "the first truly planetary form" is curiously provincial in its theoretical and historical practice: the real strangeness in the history of the novel is that its theory has tended to be so *un*panoramic (x, ix).

Georg Lukács, whose 1916 *The Theory of the Novel* inaugurated the field where it remains a touchstone, eventually recognized these shortcomings of novel history and theory. In a 1962 preface to the work published almost half a century after the title first appeared, Lukács enumerates an extensive list of the study's failures. First is the failure of method: "We failed to see that the new method had in fact scarcely succeeded in surmounting positivism, or that its syntheses were without objective foundation." To the damning self-critique, Lukács catalogs additional lapses, notably "the fashion to form general synthetic concepts on the basis of only *a few* characteristics—in most cases only intuitively grasped—of a school, a period, etc., then to proceed by deduction from these generalizations to the analysis of individual phenomena, and in that way to arrive at what we claimed to be a *comprehensive* overall view" ("Preface" 13; emphasis added). In short, Lukács acknowledges that his selections are scant ("of only a few characteristics"), barely understood ("only intuitively grasped"), and offered as comprehensive even when they defied his comprehension.

As his condemnation of the early work continues, so does Lukács's displacement of responsibility onto a disembodied third person on whom he blames the most concrete failures of the work: "[T]he author of the *Theory of the Novel* sticks so obstinately to the schema of *L'Education Sentimentale* . . . [that] novelists such as Defoe, Fielding and Stendhal found no place in this schematic pattern, that the arbitrary 'synthetic' method of the author of *The Theory of the Novel* leads him to a completely upside-down view of Balzac and Flaubert or of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, etc., etc." ("Preface" 14). Remarkably, Lukács's lengthy reflection fundamentally dismisses both the method and case selections of *The Theory of the Novel*. Reframed in current terms, his self-critique faults the selections for being entirely European, entirely male, and entirely of the past. Unmentioned, moreover, is that writing in 1916, he cannot see 1916. Thus, no Proust, whose 1913 *Du côté de chez Swann*, according to his contemporary, Walter Benjamin, "found a genre or dissolve[d] one" (201) —both text and insight apparently oblivious to Lukács. Instead, Lukács's view of the novel is based on nine dead authors from five European countries: Cervantes, Balzac, Henrik Pontoppidan, Flaubert, Jens Jacobsen, Ivan Goncharov, Goethe, and Tolstoy, with a paragraph reserved for Dostoevsky, on whom a study was planned but never completed. The result, Lukács admits, is an "upside-down view" of his core authors and even of the novel. So few novels, Lukács eventually acknowledges, actually fit the theory. And that shortcoming

also became apparent to other theorists such as Bakhtin (who once considered translating *The Theory of the Novel*), who conceded "the utter inadequacy of literary theory . . . when it is forced to deal with the novel. . . . Faced with the problem of the novel, genre theory must submit to a radical re-structuring" (8).

This essay is part of the restructuring. It calls for reframing the bases on which novel theory has rested. It fundamentally reconceives what—beyond Lukács's selections—counts as a novel. In pursuing this question, I examine the titles read and published as novels that have been excluded from novel theory on the grounds they were not considered appropriately literary. These novels, I propose, are the rule to which literary novels are the exception. The present study addresses the novels contemporaneous with novel theory, rather than developing a theory based on novels from the distant past as Lukács and his successors do. To retrofit in this context is "to alter or adjust in order to reflect new developments or requirements," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refreshing both the theory and the history of the novel.

Additionally, the essay is more expansive in geographical scope than many mainstream novel theorists. The story of the novel occurs in many chapters, not all written west of the Urals, east of the Thames, or even largely by European men. The novel's movements in space have renovated the form: different kinds of novels emerge and thrive as the novel travels beyond Europe's borscht-butter-bacon belt.

Readers in the aggregate, as an extensive and anonymous collective, have influenced the novel's longevity, the prosperity of different forms, and its symbolic capital. This essay analyzes the novel's circulation as a commodity among readers in a global marketplace in order to more fully theorize it. It studies a popular, populist Indian novelist, writing far from the metropolis, in forms embraced by readers long ignored by the apparatus of literary high culture. The focus on contemporary global readers affords an entry point to develop a more democratic framework to study the novel.

The essay proceeds in three unequal parts, structured as two blocks joined by a corridor. Part 1 distills my scholarship on the culture of books and reading in India around the contemporary novelist Chetan Bhagat; part 2 elaborates on George Orwell's concept of "good bad books"; and part 3 invokes Antonio Gramsci's research on readers of the popular novel as a counterpoint to Lukács's *Theory*. My purpose is to sketch what a book history of the novel, focused on common readers, might look like.

India, ca. 2004 BC

On or about 2004, the character of Indian publishing changed. That year marks the start of a decade when global publishing's core market dramatically shifted. India is hailed, with a series of superlatives, as the "biggest English language book-buying market in the world" (Burke). Remarkably, what makes this market are not literary novels, but those by bestselling authors "you've never heard of," reported the *Guardian* (Ramesh). One such novelist, Chetan Bhagat, published his first novel (of ten, at the time of writing) in 2004. The literary establishment ignored him; he was sidelined at the Jaipur Literature Festival, dubbed by Tina Brown the "greatest

literary show on earth," yet Bhagat outsold—and continues to outsell—every writer featured there (jaipurliteraturefestival.org/about). Publishers claim Bhagat to be "the biggest-selling English-language novelist in India's history" (Greenlees). One, Gautam Padmanabhan, notes that Indian publishing falls into two periods: "Before Chetan (BC)" and after (qtd. in Kapoor). Before Chetan, print runs for English-language fiction were a sluggish five hundred copies; after Chetan, million-plus print runs prevail. Before Chetan, lifetime sales of ten thousand copies made an English novel a bestseller; after Chetan, a copy of one of his titles sells every seventeen seconds ("God has been good to both of us," remarks his first publisher at the independent press Rupa [qtd. in MacRae]).

In retrospect, 2004 began a tectonic shift in the marketplace of the novel in two fundamental ways. It was no longer possible to make claims about "the novel" without also addressing the novel form as it is produced and circulates in global markets, a point underscored by the superlatives in the *Guardian* and elsewhere. Moreover, when one includes the novel from places such as India, it becomes impossible to base historical or theoretical claims solely on titles classified as "literary." The titles that characterize this fundamental shift are those I've described elsewhere as "anti-literary," which might more neutrally be called popular (Joshi, "Chetan Bhagat" 319–20). George Orwell, whom I'll address shortly, labels them "good bad books." These include titles whose sales and readerships have historically underwritten the publication and prestige of the literary novel. Moreover, in the case of India, the vibrant publishing landscape for the English novel since 2004 comprises titles and forms that are known and circulate largely *in India* with no apparent ambition to travel beyond the "country of a billion sparks" (the title of a Bhagat talk that went viral). Amish Tripathi, a contemporary novelist who routinely tops current bestseller lists, observes: "India is changing, and some people frankly don't care for the kind of books big publishers were coming out with—stories of the British Raj or the struggles of NRIs. After a century, India is rich again, and people want to hear stories about themselves—about our call centre generation" (qtd. in Reddy).

Enter the novels of Chetan Bhagat in an array of new forms such as call center fiction, crick(et) lit, and the regionally specific campus novels about the fabled Indian Institutes of Technology—alongside detective fiction and the marriage-plot novel—all of which have taken off to hitherto unimagined heights in the last decades. The Indian novel celebrated at the landmark Jaipur Literature Festival is quite evidently *many* Indian novels, most of them not especially literary—in the marketing sense of "quality"—as a glance at Bhagat's work might document. He was named part of a generation of "Lo-Cal Literati," a term playing on both his regional origins as well as his apparently lowbrow output (Reddy). Bhagat's novels indicate authorial ambitions quite different from those of novelists typically feted in Jaipur, such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghosh, among others. Bhagat outspokenly claims blockbuster status for his works, a term more typically associated with popular cinema where his titles have been successfully adapted. If the lo-cal literati make it to Jaipur, as Bhagat eventually did, it is because of his industry-transforming sales that make him what one writer called the "Midas of the Bibliosphere" (Sargam) rather than for his literary ambitions or

achievements. Thus, while Bhagat's works are novels, to be sure, they are quite clearly not literary in the present sense of highbrow, nor do they intend to be.

As Bhagat confesses in one of the acknowledgments that preface each novel: "I don't want to be India's most admired writer. I just want to be India's most loved writer. *Admiration passes, love endures*" (*Three Mistakes*; emphasis added). Dismissing the esteem that those on high command, Bhagat instead pursues adulation from those he regards as equals. ("[A]dmiration comes with expectations. Love accepts some flaws," he explains in *Half Girlfriend*, a later novel [vii].) The metaphors of high and low parse the kinds of esteem certain forms command: admiration for the highbrow, love for the popular. Bhagat's writing invokes the passion that popular forms enjoy (they are "most loved") rather than the regard dutifully offered to the highbrow. As he reflects in *Half Girlfriend*: "People sometimes ask me how I would like to be remembered . . . all I tell them is this: I don't want to be remembered, I just want to be missed (vii–viii).

The circulation of fiction in India, as elsewhere, is enabled by a culture that acknowledges its publication in various kinds of reviews and enables its consumption. India boasts supportive publishers, multiple review outlets in both print and screen media, book societies, prizes, serials, and dozens of major book festivals across the country (well beyond Jaipur) that together form a node that publishing historians call a book culture. Conventional understanding is that a thriving book culture inspires publication and cultivates readers and, by extension, encourages an energetic reading culture in a self-reinforcing ecosystem. In sharp contrast, Bhagat's story exposes the gulf between his widespread neglect in India's book culture that largely dismisses him and the robust reading culture he nevertheless enjoys. As India's book culture reaches new heights and global visibility, as new forms of the English novel arrive and prosper in the domestic context, a new landscape is becoming visible for India's English novel. In addition to a book culture focused on production and circulation, and a reading culture centered on consumption, a third culture that I call a writing culture is increasingly evident. It's an untidy mash-up of production and consumption, vaulting print across languages, into the realms of social and visual media where readers, à la Roland Barthes, "write" the texts they want to read. Let me offer three observations on India's writing culture.

First, it's multilingual and circulates beyond the typical spaces of a formal book culture. Bhagat, in marked contrast to India's anglophone literary novelists feted in prestige festivals such as Jaipur, publishes in both the English and Hindi presses (with a popular column in the national Hindi daily *Dainik Bhaskar*). Furthermore, Bhagat's works are distributed outside the metropolitan bookstore circuit in gas stations and traffic stops, convenience stores and sidewalks, at notably low prices (Rs. 95, rather than Rs. 500 or more, for "literary" titles by the likes of Booker Prize winner Salman Rushdie). "We don't have bookshops in every town," explains Bhagat. "We have supermarkets. I want my books next to jeans and bread" (McCrum). The marketing worked. In 2020, an Indian reader tweeted how an auto driver whom he'd hailed for a ride to the Jaipur Literature Festival shared that he, too, read, and that his favorite author was Chetan Bhagat. Dismayed by the exchange, "I came back to Mumbai," groaned the snobbish reader in disgust, while the

driver continued to the Literature Festival at Diggi Palace, presumably alone (Sharma). "This tweet is meant to mock me," replied Bhagat promptly, "but I'm proud to be the one who made auto drivers in India read books. Even more proud of that driver who reads and goes to litfests" ("This tweet").

Second, India's "new" fiction that Bhagat's titles index moves across multiple media platforms, with film adaptation playing a prominent role in the circulation of the novel, and YouTube content a close second. Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* was made into a blockbuster Hindi film (*3 Idiots*, 2010, directed by Rajkumar Hirani) and is better known in that form than as a novel (with adaptations of four other titles following). Bhagat targets his writing to India's twenty- and thirty-something readers who, he argues, prefer a "Bollywood comedy sort of format" in line with what they saw growing up (qtd. in Greenlees). His nonfiction titles such as *What Young India Wants* (2012), *Making India Awesome* (2015), and *India Positive* (2019) convey his canny gift for interpellating youthful readers with catchy titles. Even Bhagat's detractors have to admit that he captures audiences unreached by India's literary fiction in any language.

Bhagat's multilingual, transmedia circulation paradoxically illuminates and possibly explains the cleavage between book culture and reading culture. Precisely because the new novels successfully capture such audiences as the auto driver in Jaipur—readers far outside the precincts of a book culture—they are largely ignored in the formal metrics of India's book culture. The new titles are not typically reviewed in mainstream or prestige outlets; they never win prizes; they aren't subject to book discussions or author interviews in middle- and highbrow cultural outlets. It is not surprising, therefore, that aspirational literati like the auto passenger in Jaipur would rather flee these books than read them. Meanwhile, Bhagat's writing draws long-ignored readers in with his simple English, rendered in short sentences with limited narration and rapid plots. His novels record popular, populist themes, writing the call center generation into public culture. Little wonder that it indexes a trifecta: it is loved, it endures in popular affection, and it is missed when unavailable.

Popular novels by Bhagat and others offer a way to reframe the bases from which the novel is theorized. They urge attention to the different social worlds and priorities captured by book culture, reading culture, and an insurgent and disorganized writing culture. Increasingly, the social work of the novel is best captured by readers themselves rather than by the institutions that produce readers. Bhagat's work indicates texts and titles that actively short-circuit a book culture and indicates a whole world of consumption and circulation in which "reading" is simply a small part, coexisting with viewing, "liking," talking, and posting. I name this hydra-headed phenomenon a writing culture where common readers disrupt the binaries between production and consumption. In a writing culture, the culture of reading and books coexists within broader forms of consumption underwritten by readers. In it, writing and ideas prosper, sometimes beyond the spheres of books and reading.

Chetan Bhagat demonstrates one way in which this works as his ideas circulate beyond print, in film and on Facebook (where at the time of writing he has over eight million followers), Twitter/X (with over twelve million followers), Instagram,

YouTube, TV, and radio, alongside more "traditional" forms of publication. Rather than one medium obliterating the other as some feared, the multiple platforms enhance Bhagat's reach, and even consolidate it. When asked why he pursues "all this other non-book work" in film and newspapers, Bhagat explains: "I write for change. In order to change, I want to first reach as many Indians as possible through entertainment and then influence them with my non-fiction writings and views. For this, I want to be flexible with the medium, be it books, TV, films, stage or the Internet. I do not see myself as an author alone, and my job is to reach and communicate with as many people as possible, using any available means" (chetanbhagat.com; accessed December 2013). Bhagat's claim recalls the moment in the ancient world when teaching went from oral to visual and harnessed the emerging technology of writing to advance its goals. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *literary* emerged to characterize all reading and writing "used in elementary teaching." By the seventeenth century, however, the term was rinsed of explicit references to teaching and learning and instead came to characterize only select works "valued for quality of form." Today, *literary* is used almost exclusively as a marketing qualifier to signal quality. Hence the "literary" novel.

Yet the proliferation of novels by Bhagat, among others, urges contemplation of the other kind of novels from which teaching and learning also occur. These other novels—let's call them popular for now—are economic commodities. Their appeal to readers anchors the global marketplace, where they sell in vastly larger quantities than the literary fiction whose publication they underwrite. Bhagat's million-plus sales keep afloat the lethargic backlist of literary fiction in India, much as James Patterson's and Stephenie Meyer's fiction factories underwrite high prestige titles by David Foster Wallace—all three authors published by the conglomerate Hachette, a topic I'll address in the last section of this essay.

Good Bad Books

George Orwell vividly noted the popularity of certain novels over others in a 1945 essay, "Good Bad Books": "During the last fifty years there has been a whole series of writers—some of them are still writing—whom it is quite impossible to call 'good' by any strictly *literary* standard, but who are natural novelists and who seem to attain sincerity partly because they are not inhibited by good taste," he observed (26–27; emphasis added). His catalog of writers (both "good" and "bad") has aged somewhat even if the broad sentiments haven't. "Sincerity" and "natural[ness]" accrue to some writers, characteristics that seem to fade under the withering eye of "good taste." The good bad book, Orwell continues, has an "indefinable quality, a sort of literary vitamin" that nourishes readers who return to it over and over again (28). The catalog of good bad books Orwell cites includes detective fiction (Arthur Conan Doyle), adventure romance (*King Solomon's Mines*), urban romance (Dickens), and sentimental fiction (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*)—not a single form or title mentioned in Lukács's *Theory*. "There is such a thing as sheer skill, or native grace, which may have more survival value than erudition or intellectual power," Orwell concludes (29), before he throws down his gauntlet: "I would back *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin to outlive the complete works of Virginia Woolf . . . though I know of no strictly literary test which would show where the superiority lies" (30).

Orwell wasn't alone in his affection for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe's was the first American novel to sell over a million copies (Tompkins 124). In Jane Tompkins's compelling explanation, "[i]t is because Stowe is able to combine so many of the culture's central concerns in a narrative that is immediately accessible to the general population that she is able to move so many people so deeply" (134–35). *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she shows, was "spectacularly persuasive in conventional political terms: it helped convince a nation to go to war and to free its slaves" (141). Ignored by the institutions of taste and distinction, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* prevailed in literary history above, beyond, beside, and below the bourse of value that names and consecrates the literary novel. Stowe's novel achieved a historical feat that its sensational form hardly anticipated. It was precisely its alchemy of sentiment and accessibility that enabled *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to reach its wide audience. For Orwell and others sympathetic to this version of literary history, there is a long-standing world literature of good bad books whose "literary vitamin" attracts and sustains readers across decades and geographies and provides all sorts of "learning." These titles are literary in the most literal, classical sense.

A retrofitted theory of the novel foregrounds common readers and the contexts in which the novel circulates. In studying readers' encounters with the novel, it goes beyond analyzing book culture (of publishers, festivals, and prizes, typically foregrounded in the sociology of the novel) to examining the unruly writing culture composed of readers often untouched by book culture, as the auto driver in Jaipur was. In its focus, a book history of the novel substantially expands ongoing research on literary sociology by posing the question of whether if prizes or prestige matter to common readers, who nonetheless leave their marks on a favored title that goes viral in on-demand sites or unexpectedly appears on bestseller lists; who read and reread detective fiction because it is an "escape not from life, but from literature," as Marjorie Hope Nicolson observed in a 1929 essay skewering the professor-critic's myopia (485); who turn to Chetan Bhagat's simple prose to find themselves written into narratives that finally script their long-ignored participation in India's dance with globalization. "He's talking to my generation, we connect to him," explained an eighteen-year-old woman waiting in line for Bhagat's autograph in Jaipur (MacRae).

The long half-life of popular forms—some with clear generic identities, such as detective fiction, romance, sci-fi, others that remain unsettled and unsettling, as much Indian popular fiction still does—extends beyond sales figures and bestseller lists. These texts and forms are influencers to an extent that neither novel theory nor literary history has yet fully reckoned. Book history, however, has started this work.

Observing the gulf between the mass readership of hip-hop urban fiction among African American youth and their Toni Morrison–worshipping elders, the book historian Kinohi Nishikawa recovers the multiple ways contemporary Black literacy operates between what he names "democratizers" and "gatekeepers" (698). Democratizers celebrate the sensational pleasure of reading urban fiction as a marker of Black autonomy; gatekeepers bemoan the decline of serious literary

reading to which their social identity and aspirations are pegged (698). A theory that acknowledges common readers and the novels that sustain them shifts the paradigms of novel theory from gatekeepers to democratizers. Doing so restores history and sociology to novel theory's purview, bedrock practices of book history that Nishikawa's scholarship illuminates. Orwell's good bad books are a reminder that the novel is more than a few selected forms of a highbrow treat, sacralized by institutions of aspiration and social mobility.

Earlier I mentioned Lukács's acknowledging blind spots in his 1916 *The Theory of the Novel*, characterizing its upside-down view of the novel. Over a century later, this upside-down view largely prevails, and its exclusions and inclusions continue to tilt how the novel is theorized. The nine novelists in Lukács's typology in *Theory* convey his literary tastes for what in a later essay he calls "official, serious literature" ("Narrate" 125). Acknowledging that these "modern classics are read partly out of a sense of duty and partly out of an interest in the content," he drops the seeds for a new theory of the novel: "For recreation and pleasure, however, the public turns to detective stories" ("Narrate" 125). In the fragments of his autobiography written in the last months of his life, Lukács recalls his childhood reading, in which Fennimore Cooper and Mark Twain dominated, rather than serious literature. "Read the classics, from time to time. Not without an impact (though: hostile to Schiller), but *no real rapport*" (Lukács, *Record* 146; emphasis added).

A Book History of the Novel

A book history of the novel fundamentally renews novel theory by acknowledging common readers and their rapport with and pleasure in novels beyond the "classics." Lukács's 1916 method based on "intellectual science" that he later dismissed was already being energetically renewed in his lifetime by a vigorous sociology of literature focused on the novel's engagement with modernity. Antonio Gramsci, like his contemporary Lukács, was also contemplating the social work of the novel around the same period. In a 1929 letter, Gramsci queried the proliferation of popular fiction that he kept encountering in his research on the novel: "[W]hy are these books always the most read and the most frequently published? What needs do they satisfy and what aspirations do they fulfill? What emotions and attitudes emerge in this squalid literature, to have such wide appeal?" (letter to Tania Schucht quoted in Gramsci, *Selections* 342). Sharing many of Lukács's political values but few of his cultural biases, Gramsci catalogs the most sought-after novels of the day consecrated by common readers uncorrupted with the prejudices of the critic or scholar. Titles by Maurice Leblanc (of Lupin fame), Ann Radcliffe, Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Eugène Sue, and Arthur Conan Doyle keep appearing ("Various" 359–60). Reviewing the prominence of forms such as detective fiction, gothic, science fiction, historical novels, and the urban mystery, Gramsci concludes that "commercial literature must not be disregarded in the history of culture. Indeed, it has enormous value precisely in this respect because the success of a work of commercial literature indicates (and it is often the only indication available) the 'philosophy of the age,' that is, the mass of feelings and conceptions of the world predominant among the 'silent' majority"

("Interest" 348). Gramsci's focus on the silent majority—on common readers—is unique among narrative theorists of the period. It allows him, again uniquely among theorists, to go beyond official serious literature and contend instead with the good bad books that attract and sustain readers. He urges the necessity to "analyse the *particular illusion* that the serial novel provides the people with and how this illusion changes through historical-political periods" ("André Moufflet" 376).

The publication and English translation of Gramsci's prison notebooks renewed cultural thought, most notably in postcolonial theory, where his concept of the subaltern has had a major impact on historiographical practice spearheaded since 1982 by the Subaltern Studies Group. Under the circumstances, novel theorists' neglect of his considerable cultural writings is striking. In contrast to Gramsci's more capacious views, Lukács's upside-down view has persisted in novel studies for over a century. Admittedly, Gramsci's notebooks and letters hardly provide a unified field theory of the novel as Lukács's many volumes with their novel-based titles do (*The Theory of the Novel*; *The Historical Novel*; *Studies in European Realism*; *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*; *Essays on Realism*; and *Realism in Our Time*, alongside his monographs on Thomas Mann, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Goethe, and others).

Like Lukács, Gramsci, too, identifies the novel as the narrative form that explicates modernity. Like Lukács, Gramsci, too, claims the social work of the novel in synthesizing collective life. But while Lukács remains focused on official serious literature to understand modernity (the repeated attention to "realism" in his titles is a tell), Gramsci embraces the popular as a way to theorize a more varied social and cultural world. Lukács's official serious literature is the product of a singular reader—the critic—whose selections first fabricate and then reinforce the realist novel as the dominant, indeed exclusive, basis of his theory. In contrast, Gramsci's focus on the preferences of the silent majority of readers offers the possibility for capturing the philosophy of the age. His compilation of statistics on sales, serialization, and book fairs inaugurates a study of literary forms and their readers that Lukács's method, with its unshakeable focus on the singular critic-reader, never permits. Where the novel for both is an instrument for understanding history, Gramsci's method places the reader as an essential partner in—and an agent of—historical analysis. Gramsci's focus on the silent majority retrofits the sociology in Lukács's *Theory* with the methods of book history. His focus on readers and markets lays the foundation to develop a theory of the novel that goes beyond a merely expanded history of the form.

Recent scholarship on US fiction illuminates some of the ways common readers shape the production of the contemporary novel—though not quite yet its theory. Two flanks of this scholarship update Gramsci's findings from the past century, each pursuing, somewhat neatly, an element of Orwell's claims about good bad books. One flank, exemplified by Mark McGurl, focuses on the contemporary forces that produce bad books, and the other, exemplified by Dan N. Sinykin, on the institutional production of good books. The common reader is variably acknowledged in both flanks, alongside the algorithm in McGurl's account of the novel in the "Age of Amazon" and by corporate bosses and conglomeration in the case of

Sinykin. This recent scholarship offers promising insights on how and what common readers contribute to novel theory by directing attention to the conditions that produce the contemporary novel.

McGurl's work on contemporary fiction studies the opportunities that Amazon makes available to writers tempted into authorship. Since 2007, the firm's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) arm offers entrepreneurial novelists a speedy, low-cost platform to self-publishing without being thwarted by the gatekeepers of traditional publishing. Absent agents, editors, or marketing review, a writer—any writer—becomes an author with novels flowing from KDP's fourteen imprints, each associated with a distinct genre. Fiction in the House of Amazon is genre fiction, McGurl reports, and authors are service providers to readers, now conceived of as customers, "ready to be pleased again and again within the genres of an implicit contract" (McGurl, "Everything" 460).

McGurl's analysis of Amazon as publisher has much to teach about the firm, but less about its consumers or the unruly underlying conditions that make the firm profitable. McGurl is right to outline the proliferation of genre fiction under KDP, but his study largely ends there with its focus on Adult Baby Diaper Lover and Black Woman White Male Billionaire romances. He offers insights into how the affordances of digital self-publishing dissolve traditional gatekeeping—everybody can be a novelist—but offers little explanation as to why *readers* might seek out KDP's content, or how KDP content compares with other kinds of content readers seek from Amazon or elsewhere. He provides a compelling story about a corner of book publishing, mistaking the part for the whole. If Amazon is in fact selling more fiction in the United States than any other platform, brick-and-mortar or otherwise (a claim that remains to be fully documented), how typical are KDP titles and trends of Amazon's overall commerce in fiction? There's little in McGurl's study about the returns that KDP novels generate to compare with the economic returns of all novels purveyed on Amazon. And while KDP's fourteen imprints tell a story about the proliferation of genre fiction on Amazon, it's not yet clear how this story aligns with, inverts, or transforms the presence of genre fiction in US publishing broadly.

McGurl concedes in a footnote that his account of KDP authors is "reminiscent of an earlier model of literary entrepreneurship stretching from Samuel Richardson to Charles Dickens" ("Everything" 457n7). The reluctance to engage earlier models is his Achilles' heel: his obvious distaste for readers of bad books means that McGurl's purview neglects a finer-grained analysis of contemporary writing culture. Back in 1740, a British job printer named Samuel Richardson leveraged his steady revenue from printing Parliamentary Papers for the House of Commons to publishing a novel. Readers responded enthusiastically to the work; Richardson incorporated their lively feedback across fourteen editions; Pamela was elevated in class and restored to virtue by demands for the same; and the rise of the novel was assured. A century and a half later, when the world's most famous detective died at the Reichenbach Falls, his weary author reluctantly resurrected him after readers' cries to do so. Both realism and detective fiction "rose" with and by common readers who had a major say in the final distribution of poetical honors, pace Samuel Johnson. Can the same be said for the Adult Baby Diaper Lover romance? The form

exists at KDP, but does it thrive beyond the KDP niche? And, Gramsci might ask, is it among the most read and most frequently published?

The implicit contract that McGurl invokes has a storied past with many chapters and actors, among which readers have historically played a prominent role. His study says much about aspiring novelists, but very little about their readers other than marking them as "a *customer* with needs" for what he characterizes as "a program of self-care, of informal bibliotherapy or, leaning hard into the criss-crossing etymology of selling and telling, *retail* therapy" (McGurl, *Everything* 13). McGurl's explanation of why readers turn to books applies to all readers who turn to books, good or bad, on KDP and elsewhere. A more refined reading of Amazon's publishing arm to include its readers would reveal insights into the broader writing culture of the Internet: the zone with low barriers to entry whose participatory, interactive nature invites readers to speedily encounter, engage, improve, or abandon novels. New genres like the zombie romance are incubated here. Amanda Hocking's unlikely mash-up of novels by Bram Stoker and Charlotte Brontë sold two million copies on Wattpad, the public writing platform that calls itself "the world's largest storytelling community" with close to a hundred million unique visitors a month, before St. Martin's signed her. Like KDP, Wattpad (est. 2007, the same year as KDP), also uses Web 2.0's interactive technologies of collaboration and exchange to produce reader-curated fiction, some that migrates from pixel to print as Hocking eventually did. Aarthi Vadde names this widespread contemporary phenomenon of beta testing fiction online as "amateur creativity" and shows how it has come to "exert transformative pressure on august institutions of literature, from the publishing house to professional authorship to reviewing culture" (27). Interviewed about her membership on Wattpad, where drafts of her fiction and poetry receive lively reader input, the two-time Booker Prize–winning novelist Margaret Atwood addresses the history that McGurl ignores: "This is nothing new. [It's] simply being reinvented by the internet. . . . *The Pickwick Papers* was published serially and people would respond to the chapters by letter. That's why Sam Weller became such a big part of the book" (qtd. in Flood). McGurl's study has much to teach us about the production of novels in the digital sphere, but comparatively little about the readers who support KDP or the novel in the Age of Amazon.

A fuller examination of Amazon as global publisher would have yielded compelling insights to illuminate a different story. Like everyone else, the "Everything Store" was receiving press superlatives about India's thriving book market, and it too saw India's business potential, first by purchasing Westland Publications in 2017 as its publishing and distribution arm, then, with considerable fanfare, luring Chetan Bhagat from Rupa, his longtime independent publisher, in a six-book deal. Within five years, the venture collapsed spectacularly. In 2022, Amazon pulled out of Indian publishing altogether, Westland folded, and Bhagat signed with the global conglomerate, HarperCollins, to whom he brought his Amazon titles.

Bhagat's move from local indie press (Rupa) to global indie press (Amazon) to a Big Five conglomerate (HarperCollins) offers an unexpected twist to a familiar story. On one level, this thumbnail of Bhagat's publishers records how even the biggest-selling authors you've never heard of (pace *The Guardian*) are buffeted by the vulnerabilities of contemporary publishing, which absorbs and discards them.

On another level, Bhagat's sales that enriched India's indie publishing and vaulted the popular Indian novel as a Thing were simply illegible to Amazon's publishing arm. The vendor of toothpaste and lightbulbs couldn't fully understand a best-selling novelist it's never heard of. Bhagat, the onetime Goldman Sachs banker, had the savvy to recognize that it was his youthful Indian readers and their access to his works that mattered, not the colophon that claimed him. Amazon's stumble in India and HarperCollins's coup with Bhagat are a very small part of the book history of Bhagat or of the novel. The fuller story, following Gramsci, lies in the global persistence of commercial fiction as an indication of the philosophy of the age. And to understand philosophy, accountants and fund managers are usually of little help.

Yet it's precisely those figures who command outsize attention in studies on the postwar US novel. Dan Sinykin's account of conglomeration in US publishing fills out the story before and beyond Amazon. A string of corporate acquisitions of publishing houses beginning in the 1960s absorbed them into an array of unrelated holdings that included electronics (when RCA acquired Random House) and oil (when Gulf and Western acquired Simon and Schuster), among others. Conglomeration introduced efficiencies to the book business, consolidating marketing, back office, and production. But conglomeration also made demands on the informal practices that produced the American novel, obliging them to conform to the economic logic of the marketplace. As Sinykin explains, "The conglomerates, at different speeds, worked to increase the profitability of publishing by rationalizing it, to the extent that this has been possible" (470). Sinykin's most revealing example is Cormac McCarthy, a largely unknown regional novelist from the 1960s who went from toiling in penury for three decades ("I've never received a royalty check," he once lamented [qtd. in Sinykin 481]) till the demands of conglomeration descended on his publisher, Random House. As Sinykin writes, "[L]iterary fiction needed to make an ever-stronger pitch for its value to Random House" (481). In this context, McCarthy pivoted from writing obscure, difficult novels that barely sold to publishing the Western *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), which won the National Book Award, followed by the Oprah-endorsed bestseller *The Road* (2007).

From this telling case study, Sinykin offers two keen insights: it wasn't the case that the novelist "consciously chose to adopt generic forms to placate his publisher" (482); rather, in a marketplace where genre sells, it was what McCarthy—and other US novelists—increasingly produced. Tracking the US novel's pivot toward genre fiction, Sinykin's work embeds a vibrant if unexamined history of readers who command industry-transforming attention, first from conglomerate-owned publishers who connect readers' calls for genre fiction with bottom lines overseen by accountants and fund managers, then from novelists such as McCarthy who come to oblige by pivoting from literary to genre fiction. Sinykin's is not a study of readers, as such: his focus is on the institutions of US publishing that produce the contemporary literary novel. But what his findings amply indicate is a history of the novel where common readers prevail and where their interests extend far beyond Adult Baby Diaper Lover romances to include other genres and titles that keep publishers, even conglomerates, afloat. Despite the onetime edict that "one title should no longer be allowed to subsidize another" (Schiffrin qtd. in Sinykin 482),

US conglomerate publishing in the very recent decades seems to allow a version of cross subsidies, with prestige titles such as *Infinite Jest* cohabiting at Hachette with crowd-pleasers by Stephenie Meyer and James Patterson lifting the bottom line.

Conclusion

The history of the novel is the history of good, bad, and good bad books. How novels get designated this way, by whom, and why it matters is the stuff of this essay. Reframing novel theory from the perspective of common readers who read for their own pleasure rather than to "impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others," as Woolf observed, offers an expanded textual corpus to understand the novel and to engage the contexts in which it has thrived and continues to thrive globally. Gramsci's injunction to query the wide appeal of popular forms inverts novel theory from the practice of the critic to the preferences of readers, from singular to plural, from focus on the "official" to attention to the subaltern. Gramsci's inversion offers new insights into the novel's continued prosperity: contemporary digital culture staunchly reinforces the novel's work and its global presence, rather than eroding it as feared by scholars such as John Carlos Rowe, who notes that "social media have already displaced the novel and other literary genres as the means of establishing and affiliating identity" (463).

Writing a theory of the novel that foregrounds readers comes with methodological challenges quite different from researching industry consolidation, prize culture, or the workings of a single publisher or author. Historical readers are long dead, as I discovered in researching the disruptive novel trade in colonial India (Joshi, *In Another Country*); living readers can be loquacious and sometimes difficult to interpret, as Janice Radway conveyed in her pioneering ethnography of forty-two readers of romance fiction in the US Midwest. Findings from reader research can appear patchy and partial, sometimes too detailed, other times too general, while the methods for retrieving readers from historical records involves ingenuity quite different from the practices of close and distant reading that are cornerstones in graduate training. But decades of interdisciplinary work by book historians on readers across history and geography reveal a general pattern that Gramsci captured from his prison research in Turi. Extant traces of common readers in publisher, sales, and library circulation archives amply and consistently convey the limited attachment to official serious literature and the extensive appeal of broad categories of genre fiction. A retrofitted theory of the novel proceeds from this fundamental finding and shifts its object of study accordingly, from official to commercial literature, taking a cue from Timothy Bewes's call in the pages of this journal for "sharpening our attention to the literariness of those 'nonliterary' forms" (160).

Refocusing the theory of the novel this way expands the textual corpus that comprises its history and invites contemplation of long-standing exclusions. Addressing novels beyond Euro-America's sites of memory rights Lukács's upside-down view based on nine European novelists. A book history of the novel develops a new archaeology of the present to produce a republic of letters that more fully represents the world. It makes it possible to theorize the novel and its social work uncorrupted with the literary prejudice for which Samuel Johnson praised common

readers. The goal is not, or not only, to advocate for neglected good bad books—Stowe versus Woolf, Bhagat versus Proust—but to develop a theory that includes novels, good, bad, and good bad, and to analyze the practices that produce these designations. The oeuvre of a figure such as Chetan Bhagat, as it calls up the common reader, indicates some of the promise and pleasures of crafting novel theory from below. Above all, a book history of the novel invites us to rethink the many forms of writing that provide instruction and learning—returning "literary" to its origins at a time when all writing was widely valued.

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