

Fantasy Gone Awry

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When I was in the 4th grade, I enrolled in a program for ambitious readers—known at the time as “Junior Great Books”—which required extra reading (primarily of classics). This was done to supplement the nominal reading curriculum. I remained in the program for three years (until Junior High). For my age, the reading was somewhat challenging. My aptitude may have been slightly above average; but it was not extremely advanced. Consequently, the supplementary curriculum forced me to push the boundaries of my capabilities. Though I initially protested, this was one of the best decisions I—and my parents—ever made.

Upon completing 8th grade, I enrolled in an advanced studies program offered by the local (public) high school. Its curriculum required “summer reading” (four novels from the standard literary canon were assigned). This preliminary syllabus was to be completed over the course of the summer. In other words: PRIOR TO the first day of school, a rather hefty assignment was given. Participants in the program were expected to do all the reading, and—if possible—meet with the teacher twice over the summer to discuss the material.

To reiterate: This was just after having finished the 8th grade (i.e. BEFORE the Freshman school-year even began). While those of us in the program whined a bit (as any adolescent would when confronted with HOMEWORK, during summer vacation, mind you), those in the program eventually embraced this (unorthodox) academic obligation. Each of us rose to the occasion; and—in the process—learned something about self-discipline. The teacher was a stickler for proper grammar, adept use of vocabulary, and reading comprehension. This experience was a true blessing, as it bolstered my reading comprehension, my critical thinking skills, as well as my appreciation for great writing. It also ignited my imagination.

Times have changed—most notably, with regard to our standards and expectations. Students at even the most “elite” universities are now baffled by the appearance of numerous books on a syllabus. “We need to read the ENTIRE BOOK?” is a typical response of undergrads as they recoil in bewilderment. “And EACH WEEK?” (Here, an unprecedented sense of entitlement is palpable.) This bizarre development is rather astonishing. Even in college, many youth are dumbfounded by what used to be the most rudimentary expectation (not only of the AMOUNT of reading in any given semester, but of the level of reading COMPREHENSION). What’s going on here?

A mentally docile populace is predisposed to consume content that caters to their mental docility. And an inordinate amount of mental docility is what we now have.

Lo and behold: In an illiterate culture, bad writing tends to propagate. Case in point is a predilection for a rather deranged form of exhibitionism—and attendant voyeurism—in modern media. When it comes to books, this is epitomized by such travesties as *A Little Life*, *Annie Bot*, and *Haunting Adeline*. In such works, horrific occurrences are presented as just another part of life. We are left with the impression that any incidence of malign pathology—and the reprobate behavior that stems from it—is something with which we should all just come to terms. This peculiar kind of exhibitionist content (one might call it “dysfunction-porn” or “trauma-porn”) has been around since Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (a rather dubious take on the plight of a miserable female in a patriarchal world). Such material—effectively a kind of

discursive masochism—typically involves an over-the-top depiction of (severe) dysfunction, in which there is a lack of any noble message. This is primarily done for shock value; and is (almost always) utterly pointless.

The gimmick, then, is to offer titivation in lieu of edification; then to pass the former off as the latter. (Hollywood has made forays into dysfunction-porn as well—as with the series, *Euphoria*.) It’s difficult to ascertain how concerned we level-headed people should be that so many millions enjoy such disturbing content...which is jarring for the sake of being jarring.

There are good and bad ways to handle dysfunction; just as there are good and bad ways to deal with trauma. Presenting dunderheaded approaches—simply for dramatic effect—is irresponsible. Yet many have been snookered into thinking that the mere exhibition of dysfunction is synonymous with insightful commentary on dysfunction. According to such blinkered thinking, disturbing is equated with deep; and scurrilous is equated with profound.

Dysfunction has always been a key element of great literature. However, gone are the days when literary masters offered a brilliant portrayal of dysfunction—as with, say:

- Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*
- Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*
- Updike’s masterful “Rabbit” quartet
- Roth’s *American Pastoral*
- Franzen’s *The Corrections*
- Johnson’s *Train Dreams*
- Makkai’s *The Great Believers*
- Mirza’s *A Place For Us*
- Kingsolver’s *Demon Copperhead*
- Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

There are also some fantasy novels that are adept at addressing human foibles—as with, say, Solomon’s *Sorrowland*. While such great works offer a window into trauma and dysfunction, we are now often asked to become submerged in it; and even to be tantalized by it. At the end of this recreational “struggle session”, we are not expected to really learn anything important. Rather, we are invited to repine in the wake of the manufactured ordeal; then marvel at how incredibly fucked-up it all was. (Memo: Anyone who enjoyed reading *A Little Life* should probably seek psychiatric help.) The entire process is as deleterious as it is frivolous. One might call this literary symphorophilia—a kind of voyeurism whereby one derives some sort of morbid gratification from having been exposed to something worse than what one is experiencing in one’s own life. Existential turmoil is an important topic to investigate, but there are productive ways to do it and counterproductive ways. Knowing the difference is half the battle.

There is nothing illuminating about showcasing dysfunction as if it were a shiny trinket worthy of a corinthian pedestal. Great literature does not melodramatize moral depravity; great literature addresses it. Even as a well-woven yarn tracks the follies of humanity, it avoids coming off as some sort of endorsement of those follies. Rather than superciliously exhibit abusive relationships, great literature **CRITIQUES** them. When great writers grapple with difficult topics, the reader is better off for having gotten their take.

Want literature that addresses dysfunctional (romantic) relationships? Consider Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. Instead, though, we now get material that romanticizes abuse. The most recent case-in-point is Senlin Yu’s *Alchemised*: a publication that is best-described as depravity-porn. The book is both very poorly written and utterly deranged; yet it was an instant smash hit. Wherefore? Herein lay a puzzle that is

as exasperating as it is confounding. One wonders what sort of psychological state one must be in to enjoy such unabashedly misogynistic material...which, incidentally, has no problem lionizing sadism just for kicks.

Again, it must be asked: What's going on here? The appeal of trauma-porn seems to lie in our tendency to take solace in the fact that our misery isn't quite as bad as [insert tragic character here]; and to thus juxtapose our own misfortune against the greater misfortune of another. (Also note the gratuitous grotesque of Matt Shaw.) This is lazy writing that is designed simply to shock for the sake of shock. When it comes to existential despondency, there are far better ways to use a compelling narrative to put things in perspective. (Consider Dostoyevsky's *Notes From The Underground*, Hesse's *Demian*, Salinger's *The Catcher In The Rye*, Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work Of Staggering Genius*, and Robinson's *Gilead*.) Great literature inspires. Languishing in one's doldrums is probably not the best way to deal with an existentially moribund life.

To reiterate: A book festooned with gratuitous dysfunction does little to help the reader better understand dysfunction; as the dysfunction on display is—more often than not—merely being used as a (contrived) plot device. There's a difference between exploring a weighty issue like trauma...and merely presenting trauma as an excuse for the characters to indulge in histrionics. It's one thing to elicit emotive responses in the reader; it's quite another to catalyze critical reflection.

Alas. In today's YA [Young Adult] publishing industry, the point is book-sales, not luminosity. A survey of this new media landscape reveals that much of the fare on offer is formulaic, callow, and faddish. A prime illustration of this is the YA dystopia. This genre was pioneered by Collins' "The Hunger Games" series (itself a revamping of Takami's *Battle Royal*). This popular saga was nothing groundbreaking. In film, the cinematic rendering of that series had been preceded by films like *Gattaca*, *Equilibrium*, *The Island*, and *In Time*; so the genre was already well-established in American pop culture. Collins' blockbuster soon spawned "me too" series like Roth's "Divergent", Dashner's "Maze Runner", Brown's "Red Rising", Aveyard's "Red Queen", and Lu's "Legend". There was *Wool*, *The Giver*, *The Host*, *The Selection*, and *The 5th Wave*. Predictably, all this soon led to further dystopian future films like *Elysium*, *Snow-piercer*, *Uglies*, etc.

Regurgitation of market-tested formulae became the publishing industry's modus operandi. Yarros' daft "Empyrean" series was a derivative of a derivative: essentially a revamping of "Divergent" that incorporated bawdry scenes...while lionizing horrible men. (Think Ender's Game except with dastardly faeries, graphic sex, and shoddy writing.) Pursuant to the exaltation of commercial interests (over public education), such second-order derivative-ness became rampant: "Equal" was a half-baked regurgitation of "Equilibrium". And "Never Let Me Go"—while written by a very talented author—was a rather senseless variation on "The Island". (We're expected to believe that everyone just went along with the organ-harvesting program?!?) The highly-popular girl-in-a-competition motif (which often incorporates an enemies-to-lovers trope) has been recycled ad nauseam—as with, say, Greenlaw's "Ordeals" series. Broadbent's "Crowns Of Nyaxia" and Boleyn's "Bloodwing Academy" are essentially "Hunger Games" with vampires. Tuli's "Artefacts Of Ouranos" is essentially "Hunger Games" with faeries. (The current narrative gimmick is for the competition to be set within some sort of magic academy, à la Hogwarts—as with, say, Crawford's popular "Fae Academy For Spies" series.)

What is the explanation for the prevalence of this trend? (One might also ask: From whence came this longing to be shagged by a jacked demon with beautiful blue eyes?) When a formula proves to be marketable, industry leaders are encouraged to recycle it 'til kingdom come; and gleefully cash in on the frenzy (see the Addendum for a zany example). The more we become accustomed to AI slop, the less adept we will be at discerning what is (not) high-quality writing. This does not bode well for societal literacy.

For illustrative purposes, the present essay will focus primarily on one genre: YA fantasy; as it has become such a mind-boggling bonanza for book-sellers across the Occidental world (including the Philippines). It is now a cash-cow for publication houses looking to maximize profits...even if it means churning out candy-flavored tripe.

AUTHOR'S NOTE 1: My experience with fantasy is ample, yet limited; as my affinities are more for science fiction. In my youth, I was immersed in Madeleine L'Engle's "Time" pentalogy, Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, O'Dell's *Island Of The Blue Dolphins*, and Lewis' Chronicles Of Narnia. I soon moved on to McKinley's *The Hero And The Crown* and Tolkien's Hobbit / Lord Of The Rings. However, I soon segued into sci-fi (via Douglas Adams' hilarious "Hitchhiker" pentalogy); and ended up spending my teen years reading Philip K. Dick, Robert Heinlein, Kurt Vonnegut, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Stephen Baxter...with forays into cyberpunk (from William Gibson to Neal Stephenson) during college. When it comes to one of my favorite authors, Stephen R. Donaldson, I prefer the "Gap Cycle" to the "Thomas Covenant" series. Even so, I have always had a place in my heart for well-crafted fantasy; as I am entranced by brilliant world-building. (I even dabbled a bit with D&D in middle school.) The longing to be enchanted is one of the most human things about us; and it should be encouraged—and accommodated—at every turn. That said, hackneyed fantasy is, in my view, an insult to those who have produced masterpieces—the material to which we should be directing our reverence.

The proliferation of low-brow writing in the YA "romantasy" genre is particularly disconcerting—especially for those of us who even pretend to value literature. The inferior caliber of writing that currently dominates this burgeoning niche is an indication of the precipitous deterioration in the quality of popular literature. Said deterioration seems to have begun around the same time social media came to prominence c. 2008. A harbinger of said decline was astounding success of the "Twilight" and "Fifty Shades" series. With the Harry Potter craze, there was a drastic increase in readership amongst youth—a salutary development for sure. But this surge in reading was soon followed by a drastic diminution in literary standards.

Pursuant to the ascendancy of social media, the degeneration of intellectual activity has accelerated. Platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram not only CATER TO short attention spans and shallow thinking; they REINFORCE short attention spans and shallow thinking. Those who use social media the most tend to feel more socially isolated, suffer from increased insecurity / neurosis, and are less capable of interacting with—and forging genuine bonds with—other humans. We now find ourselves living in a society with a surfeit of smart phones, but a dearth of smart people. Nescience reigns supreme. It is no wonder, then, that trash-pulp is such a big hit.

Social media platforms sometimes provide worthwhile information; yet they also give idiots the chance to advertise their idiocy to the world...all the while, gathering a fanbase, earning lots of money, and further diminishing the caliber of public discourse. Those who hold intellectual activity in abeyance insist that there is something laudable about all of this; but the downsides seem to significantly outweigh the upsides. Back when people read full articles (when it came to serious journalism) and complete books (when it came to serious scholarship), shitty content was more difficult to come by; and echo-chambers were more difficult to construct. Now, much of the online ecosystem has become a orgy of charlatanry.

When it comes to publications, supply meets demand. For a mentally torpid audience (which grows by the day), insipid narrative gimmickry and easily-digestible prose are all an author needs to generate monumental sales. For publishers and audiences alike, literary excellence is typically not on the radar; as it has become somewhat of a moot point.

When assaying such popular content, we discover that solid character development, underlying motivations, internal conflict, fascinating backstory, and plausible world-building are (almost) non-existent. In the vast majority of YA content, the insightful social commentary that has always been characteristic of well-crafted narratives is now nowhere to be found. A trenchant examination of human nature? Nope. An adept use of metaphor? Nope. Thought-provoking critiques of society? Nope. As a result, our minds have been numbed to the didactic power of parable. (How many right-wing readers of “The Hunger Games” series recognized it as a scathing indictment of fascism?)

For most readers today, deeper meanings and profound messages are anathema. The idea is to be entertained...with minimal cognitive effort. In the majority of YA “romantasy” offerings, characters speak like ditzy teenagers: fussy, feckless, mercurial, and horny. What explains this? All that teens are now looking for is cheap gratification. Anything providing THAT will tend to fly off the shelves. (This phenomenon is not limited to teen girls. We might also ask: What are male adolescents reading these days? So-called “Lit RPG” seems to be gaining in popularity for this particular target audience; as it emulates the video-game experience: a first-person romp against dastardly foes that is such a big hit with teens—as with Dinniman’s *Dungeon Crawler Carl*.)

Transfixed by the unrelenting cascade of online content, adolescents now gobble up every snippet of twaddle, day in and day out...as if drug-addicts clamoring for their next quick fix. They crave the relentless bombardment of online content—much of it gilded poppycock—as they frenetically scroll through the latest posts. The typical young adult finds him/herself anxiously navigating the virtual world with an over-active limbic system and idle pre-frontal cortex. A predictable result of this: Good literature almost never appears on bestseller lists; while the agora is flooded with mephitic slop.

The most striking illustration of the diminution in literary standards is (what turns out to be) the most successful YA “romantasy” novels. This genre emerged within the zesty nexus of “Twilight” and “Fifty Shades”; so it was bound to yield a cavalcade of blockbusters amongst those who care little for quality writing. When such low-grade material becomes the publishing industry’s loadstar, we shouldn’t be surprised that standards for what’s considered a “good read” have significantly declined.

Today, the publishing industry profits most when catering to the lowest common denominator. How does this work? Simply avail oneself of this or that market-tested formula, throw in some graphic sexual content (and perhaps a bit of magic), and presto! A bestseller in the making. So we get soul-less schlock like Maas’ *A Court Of Thorns And Roses* (or the “Acotar” series more broadly) and Yarros’ *Fourth Wing* (or the “Empyrean” series more broadly).

Travesties range from the “Fallen” and “Caraval” series to “The Wrath And The Dawn” and “Witchlands” series. There’s the “Duskwalker Brides” series and the “Shepherd King” series; the “Throne Of Glass” series and the “Blood And Ash” series. * There’s the “Nevernight Chronicle” and the “Crimson Moth” duology. There’s Stark’s “Kingdom Of Lies”, Black’s “Dark Lords”, Armentrout’s “From Blood And Ash”, Woods’ “Of Flesh And Bone”, Bardugo’s “Shadow And Bone”, Derosa’s “Courts Of Aetheria”, and Jensen’s “Saga Of The Un-Fated”. All of it really bad.

Ten more (infamous) examples of horrendous writing:

- The Night And Its Moon / The Sun And Its Shade
- Silver Elite / Broken Dove
- Heartless Hunter / Rebel Witch
- Gothikana / Enigma
- Phantasma / Enchantra

- Quicksilver / Brimstone
- Lightlark / Nightbane / Skyshade
- Powerless / Reckless / Fearless
- When The Moon Hatched
- Nocticadia

In a better world, such material would be un-publishable. **

Most of the above publications are essentially just smut set within a fantasy backdrop. The quality of the writing ranges from poor to abysmal. That any of these books were accepted by a publishing house is rather astonishing...until we realize that they were all published for a single reason: money. As it turns out, the aforementioned books were tremendously lucrative for those who peddled them. This is a stark reminder that the sine qua non of any corporation—whether publisher, food vendor, or military contractor—is profit-maximization. Integrity has nothing to do with it. The idea, then, is to drum up demand for whatever is being hawked; the common good be damned.

Frankly, the fact that I have even heard of some of the above-listed publications is embarrassing. (I was only made aware of such things upon doing research for this essay.) These authors have not vision; they simply produce the material for a pay-check.

The popularity of such material is indicative of the woeful state of literacy in America. What might we conclude from this lamentable trend? Discerning readership is going extinct. The fact is that the majority of Americans no longer care about high-quality writing...or, for that matter, anything that has the faint whiff of intellectual heft. Many people inclined to open a book are perfectly content to indulge in trash-pulp—that is: anything that offers maudlin set-pieces and recycled tropes. To gain an audience, it suffices to construct a ramshackle narrative framework around a few cardboard characters; and to then provide some contrived predicaments (as well as some solutions based on *deus ex machinae*) to keep the plot going. This soon devolves into a orgy of clichés.

The current “romantasy” formula is quite simple: A female protagonist falls in love with an awful man...who, though reprobate, is super-duper handsome. So the whole charade is, well, kinda hot. The provocative “dangerous is sexy” trope is, of course, as old as literature; and has been moistening labia since time immemorial. But one needn’t be tawdry to make judicious use of it in a literary context; and it is definitely not necessary to engage in terrible writing when doing so. Fetching debauchery only goes so far before it becomes boorish. Yet in the current marketplace, we wind up with the above-listed poppycock flying off the shelves.

Ancillary note: YA dreck is not limited to fantasy. Shoddy writing transcends genres. There are the hackneyed thrillers of Frieda McFadden (of “The Housemaid” fame), the trashy “dark romance” of Penelope Douglas (a procurer of plural pronouns), and the doltish pontifications of Sally Rooney (a devout Catholic who thinks religion is a prerequisite for morality). Each year now, we are treated to an endless supply of slop...pumped out to eager readers who are craving their next dopamine hit. Hence blockbusters like *The Last Thing He Told Me*, *We Were Liars*, *Beautiful World Where Are You*, *The Love Hypothesis*, etc. What might explain such a regrettable trend? The dumbing-down of American society is concomitant with the ascension of social media. This is no coincidence.

Also consider dim-witted (non-fantasy) romance novels like *The Spanish Love Deception*, *Icebreaker*, and *Happy Place*; as well as the “Royals” and “Selection” series. Such cloying fare thrives in a climate of intellectual blight. That so many people rave about these dubious publications is testament to the dearth of literacy in our post-post-modern American society. If one is anything less than bubble-headed, one will not

be able to enjoy such fare. That so many readers DO enjoy such fare is nothing to celebrate.

The new equivalent of Nicholas Sparks (who filled a specific niche a generation ago) seems to be Emily Henry, Ali Hazelwood, and/or Abby Jimenez...who are a noticeable step down in quality (while a step up in histrionics and stilted dialogue). In the present climate of intellectual blight, these new authors are often treated as some sort of gold standard rather than as light-and-fluffy “beach reads”—a sign that the barometer for good writing is a bit out-of-wack.

Again: This is a sign of the times.

To make matters worse, NON-intellectualism often morphs into ANTI-intellectualism. How so? Insofar as people exalt material with dubious—if any—moral or literary value, the public square is rendered a cultural wasteland. This opens the way for skewed impressions about anything that involves intellectual heft. (More on that later.) So why all the fuss? To the extent that the rank and file limits itself to fare with nil philosophical or artistic value, the commonweal suffers.

Worse than just soul-less schlock, much of the YA canon normalizes toxicity. The so-called “shadow-daddy” trope typically involves the lionization of handsome jerks. (The “he may be abusive, but he’s so good-looking” motif is more odious than it is bedazzling.) There is nothing innovative about this. In the bodice-rippers of yore, the men were flawed-yet-gallant. They were REDEEMABLE bad-boys...usually muscular, always charming. In the newfangled asshole-to-lover narratives, chivalry has been transplanted by misogyny. The love-interest is no longer a dashing man with a chiseled jawline; he’s a douchebag with elf-ears. Redeeming character qualities: zero. Important lessons learned over the course of the story: zero. Insight into how healthy relationships might actually work: zero. (Even the otherwise estimable Holly Black got in on the action with “The Folk Of The Air”.)

A little dab of debauchery never hurt anyone. We strive, then, to find a happy medium between prudery and prurience. The problem with much of the new content is that it is licentious AND vacuous, prompting audiences to conflate prurience and profundity. (It’s scandalous, so it must be worth reading!)

The difference between low-brow content and a well-written tryst is analogous to the difference between mind-blowing sex with one’s beloved on a moonlit veranda and humping an inflatable doll in a dank basement. (Oh, how far we’ve strayed from *Artemis Fowl*.) This is not to say that young women need to stick with *Anne Of Green Gables*; it is simply to say that—for teen readers—there are far better alternatives to the latest “shadow-daddy” incarnation of the male love-interest.

Make no mistake: This phenomenon is not unique to adolescent girls; there is plenty of analogous content toward which many an adolescent boy gravitates; hence the existence of hentai, eroge, and Grand Theft Auto. The rough equivalent of the material encountered in YA “romantacy” might include a cum-guzzling, medieval tavern wench (preferably with heaving bosoms) eagerly awaiting coitus with an unsuspecting nebbish.

Much of this tawdry nonsense is—while ridiculous—usually quite harmless. The problem arises when it represents the literary standard to which we find ourselves aspiring. (Memo: Lewd verbiage is easy to produce for anyone with rudimentary writing skills; so none of it should really impress us very much.)

It’s one thing to be rakish; it’s quite another to be lecherous. The devolution of the age-old “bad boy” motif into the latter is nothing to take lightly.

Juxtaposition helps to illustrate these deficiencies. Let’s look at some masterpieces that did these sorts of things well. A magic academy in a dystopian future? Herman Hesse’s magisterial *The Glass Bead Game*.

A novel that explores the effects of religion on society—and the ramifications of socio-economic injustice—in a dystopian future? Octavia Butler’s *Parable Of The Sower*. Even YA novels about dragons can be done well—as with, say, Rosaria Munda’s “Aurelian Cycle”. Fantasy with great character development is there for those who care to look—as with the works of Mervyn Peake, Joe Abercrombie, John Gwynne, and Ken Liu. Fantasy that contains thought-provoking metaphor also exists—as with the works of Terry Pratchett and Piers Anthony. Fantasy with worthwhile social commentary exists as well—as with the works of Ursula K. Le Guin and M.L. Wang. We should also note the lyrical prose of Gene Wolfe, Janny Wurts, Patrick Rothfuss, Robin Hobb, Guy Gavriel Kay, Steven Erikson, Christopher Ruocchio, Evan Winter, Amal El-Mohtar, and Robert Paul Holdstock: extremely talented writers who give us a reasonable benchmark for literary merit.

Granted, such literature is often directed toward an adult audience, as it is slightly more sophisticated (compared to, say, the works of, say, Madeleine L’Engle). Yet this should not pose a problem, as ambitious teens are fully capable of reading such fare. For young readers who want to improve their literacy, there’s not only *A Wrinkle In Time*, there’s Rushdie’s *Harun And The Sea Of Stories*. For a bildungsroman in a fantasy setting, there’s Okorafor’s “Nsibidi Scripts” trilogy. Want dragons? There’s McKinley’s *The Hero And The Crown*—a classic about which many have forgotten. For those seeking slightly more advanced prose, there’s Jimenez’s *The Spear Cuts Through Water*.

Some material is worth exploring primarily for its cultural background—notably *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang (Chinese) and *The Sword Of Kaigen* by M.L. Wang (Chinese and Japanese). 25 more examples:

- The “Gael Song” trilogy by Shauna Lawless (Gaelic)
- *Spinning Silver* by Naomi Novik (Germanic)
- *The Valkyrie* by Kate Heartfield (Nordic)
- The “Bloodsworn Saga” by John Gwynn (Nordic)
- *Uprooted* by Naomi Novik (Slavic)
- *Vita Nostra* by Marina and Sergey Dyachenko (Ukrainian)
- The “Abeni’s Song” series by P. Djèlí Clark (West African)
- The “Raybearer” duology by Jordan Ifueko (West African)
- *Shigidi And The Brass Head Of Obalufon* by Wole Talabi (West African)
- *The Rage Of Dragons* by Evan Winter (Zambian)
- The “Alamaza” duology by Hadeer Elsbai (Arab)
- The “Books Of Ambha” series by Tasha Suri (Mughal)
- *The Jasmine Throne* by Tasha Suri (Hindu)
- *The Saint Of Bright Doors* by Vajra Chandrasekera (Hindu)
- *Her Soul For A Crown* by Alysha Rameera (Sinhalese)
- The “Dandelion Dynasty” by Ken Liu (Chinese)
- *Under Heaven* by Guy Gavriel Kay (Chinese)
- *Shadow Of The Fox* by Julie Kagawa (Japanese)
- The “Chronicles of Gensokai” by Virginia McClain (Japanese)
- *Empress Of All Seasons* by Emiko Jean (Japanese)
- The “Fates Thread” and “Talons” series by Sophie Kim (Korean)
- *Saints Of Storm And Sorrow* by Gabriella Buba (Filipino)
- *Black Water Sister* by Zen Cho (Malay)
- The “Crown Of Feathers” series by Nicki Paul Preto (Native American)
- *Gods Of Jade And Shadow* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia (Mayan)

For those looking for something new and transporting, there’s no shortage of fare.

Plenty of fantasy offers tremendously insightful social commentary—as with, say, Adeyemi’s *Children Of Blood And Bone* and Harrow’s *Starling House*. (Islington’s “Hierarchy” series is also worth checking out.) There’s even imaginative geo-politics—as with Richard Swan’s “Empire Of The Wolf” series, Joe Abercrombie’s “The First Law” series, Patrick Rothfuss’ “The Kingkiller Chronicle”, Daniel Abraham’s “The Dagger And The Coin” series, and Ken Liu’s “Dandelion Dynasty” (or, in science-fiction, Asimov’s “Foundation” and Corey’s “Expanse” series). Prefer your geo-politics with dragons? Go with Martin’s “A Song Of Ice And Fire” or Ford’s “Age Of Uprising” series. Prefer grimdark? Go with Abercrombie’s “Age Of Madness” trilogy. Want a tale in beautifully imagined environs? There’s Shauna Lawless’ “Gael Song” trilogy. Want a thought-provoking commentary on the human condition...set in a fantasy world? There’s V. E. Schwab’s *The Invisible Life Of Addie LaRue*. Such works behoove the reader to engage in an iota of contemplation. Is reading this kind of material too much to expect from teens? For those who are looking for mere amusement, the answer is—unfortunately—yes. But why is this so?

Low standards are contagious; and often become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Adolescents tend to rise to the occasion when given a nudge. They will tend to modulate their aspirations based on expectations. But the initiative to push the envelop cannot be conjured from the aether; it must be instilled. This doesn’t mean we should expect all teens to read *Anna Karenina* or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; but cracking open *The Little Prince* or even *Sophie’s World* shouldn’t be too much to ask.

The problem is that many readers don’t EVER want to engage in ANY contemplation; they only want to be amused; and then move on to their next source of stimulation. So far as “beach reads” go, their entire world is treated as a beach. At a point in life when training one’s mind to engage in critical reflection is paramount, this protracted reticence guarantees a hobbled development. That deficiency is no laughing matter; it has far-reaching (dire) societal consequences.

When it comes to female empowerment, there is plenty of great literature—the pinnacle of which is Stephen R. Donaldson’s science-fiction epic: the Gap Cycle. In the fantasy genre, well-crafted female protagonists can be found in Samantha Shannon’s *The Priory Of The Orange Tree*. (Shannon later penned two sequels: *A Day Of Fallen Night* and *Among The Burning Flowers*, completing the “Roots Of Chaos” trilogy.) When looking for a strong female protagonist in the fantasy genre, there are plenty of gems if one cares to look. A dozen other notable examples:

- N.K. Jemisin’s “Broken Earth” trilogy
- N.K. Jemisin’s “The Inheritance” trilogy
- Mark Lawrence’s “Book Of The Ancestor” trilogy
- Robert Jackson Bennett’s “Divine Cities” trilogy
- S.A. Chakraborty’s “Daevabad” trilogy
- S.A. Chakraborty’s *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*
- Tricia Levenseller’s “Wrath And Fury” series
- Arkady Martine’s “Teixcalaan” duology
- Adrian Tchaikovsky’s *Guns Of The Dawn*
- R. F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War*
- Emily Tesh’s *The Incandescent*
- Antonia Hodgson’s *The Raven Scholar*

For a more science-oriented tale, there’s Sagan’s *Contact* and MacInnes’ *In Ascension*. In the steampunk genre, consider P. Djèlí Clark’s *A Master of Djinn*. In the sci-fi genre, consider Ann Leckie’s “Imperial Radch” trilogy. For YA fiction with an indigenous female protagonist, there’s Scott O’Dell’s classic, *Island Of The Blue Dolphins*...as well as the more recent *Fire-Keeper’s Daughter* by Angeline Boulley. Want to read about a woman rising up in defiance of an imperial, patriarchal / theocratic regime? There’s

Suri's "Burning Kingdoms" series, M.L. Wang's *Blood Over Bright Haven*, and Okorafor's *Noor*. Arthurian legend from a female perspective? Consider Bradley's *The Mists Of Avalon*. A woman contending with a dystopian future? There's Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and Okorafor's *Binti*. For a novel that investigates what it means to be a woman, see Jacqueline Harpman's dystopian tale, *I Who Have Never Known Men*. There is no shortage of adeptly-wrought fantasy about women overcoming adversity. Even in the present climate, it is not difficult to find material in the vein of, say, Lloyd Alexander's heroine, Vesper Holly. (Something as simple as *Heidi* would be a step up from most of today's popular YA fare.)

For heroines, the trick is to refrain from creating a "Mary Sue" character...which is sure to cause more eye-rolls than inspiration. Being able to identify quality material requires a certain aptitude for discernment...which can only be cultivated by being exposed to lots of high-quality writing. Regrettably, since the turn of the millennium, the ability—or even the will—to bolster one's reading comprehension has dissipated into the ether. Consider, again, the romance novel. Two generations ago, when one read "The Savage" or "Alluring Adversary" or "Gentle Rogue" or "Sweet Enemy Of Mine" or "Lord Of Scoundrels" (all actual titles), one was not under any illusions that one was reading a literary masterpiece. Indeed, even the most avid readers of bodice-rippers acknowledged that they were not reading high-quality literature. Such books were a buffet of escapism. Their whimsicality was their charm. The far-fetched plot was the entire point; and that's all the audience was looking for. Stories were about provocative things like "The Dark Side Of Passion" or "Dangerous Obsession" or "Forbidden Paradise" or "Rapture's Gamble" or "Devil's Embrace" (also actual titles). When indulging in such fare, readers were aware of the middling caliber of the purple prose that they so enjoyed. Back then, things were different. For the male love interest, the "dangerous is sexy" trope was salacious yet innocuous. After all, stories were primarily about flouting traditional mores for (ostensibly) admirable reasons.

So WHAT OF the "bad-boy" motif in love stories? This is, of course, nothing new. The enemies-to-lovers trope is a riff off of the ancient "forbidden love" theme—something that dates back to Paris and Helen in *Greek* mythology. It's no surprise, then, that it appeared the world over. Consider:

- Layla and Majnun in *Persian* literature
- Pyramus and Thisbe in *Roman* literature
- Tristan and Isolde in *English / Irish* literature
- Romeo And Juliet in *Italian*—then *Elizabethan*—literature
- Anna and Vronsky in *Russian* literature

In contemporary times, there were Miss Kenton and Stevens in *The Remains Of The Day*; Maria and Tony in *West Side Story*; Rose and Jack in *Titanic*; etc.

The hallowed legacy of this trope explains why the "you drive me nuts; yet I'm actually falling in love with you" is the theme in most romantic comedies—from *The Cutting Edge* to *You've Got Mail*. Virtually every Hallmark movie is based on precisely this formula. The "catch" is that the male lead invariably finds his inner humanity. The crucial narrative twist: the "bad-boy" turned out to be a good person—as with Johnny in *Dirty Dancing*, Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons*, and Maverick in *Top Gun*. The "falling for the wrong guy" trope seems to never get old; yet even as we watch the fair maiden succumb to temptation, we discover that maybe the wrong guy was really the right guy after all.

In today's publishing world, this trope has proven to be a cash cow—as has been demonstrated by series like Jensen's "Bridge Kingdom", Mays' "Vines And Venom", and Selene's "Fair Folk". There's Ward's "Black Dagger Brotherhood" series and Peñaranda's "Nytefall" trilogy (forbidden love with vampires); Grey's "Fated To Darkness" and Golden's "Sacred Stones" trilogies (forbidden love with faeries); Sorensen's *Dire Bound*, Moon's *Fated To The Wolf Prince*, and Hale's *Crescent Kingdom* (forbidden love

with werewolves); Hamm's *Whispers Of The Deep* (forbidden love with mermen); and Ross' *Wild Reverence* (forbidden love with celestial beings). Pick your poison. ***

As one might expect, there's something for all sensibilities—be it forbidden love in an aquatic setting (Mallis' "Drowned Empire" series) or forbidden love in an arctic setting (Madison's *Fated To The Frost King*). To paraphrase Dr. Seuss: there's forbidden love on a boat, forbidden love on a goat; forbidden love on a train, forbidden love in the rain. For those who prefer the "bad-boy" motif without fantasy, there's the "Twisted..." series by Ana Huang: trashy romance for those looking for very simple writing and oodles of hokey set-pieces.

There will always be demand for the (irresistible) guy from the wrong side of the tracks; and it will still have its appeal centuries hence.

How are we to think of a woman who is falling for the hot "bad-boy"? When one used to read about a "Rebel Vixen" or "Prisoner Of Desire" (other actual titles from days of yore), things were rather different than they are in contemporary YA fare. Even as the old cliché was front-and-center (physical submission to an alpha-male; giving into carnal passions in the heat of the moment), there was still an element of female empowerment. In the thralls of each "I know this is wrong but it feels so right" entanglement, toxicity was never VARNISHED. Insofar as dysfunction existed, it was OVERCOME.

In sum: "bad-boys" weren't actually bad people; they were on a learning curve.

Granted, there were often hints of misogyny in traditional "romance" novels (e.g. the insinuation that submission to a man went beyond coitus). Amidst the steamy encounters, conventional gender roles were reified; and most of the tales incorporated some variation of the "damsel in distress" theme. The dashing man swooped in to save the day. These stories gave PROPER women permission to succumb to their primal urges...even if vicariously. The female lead found herself surrendering to her carnal desires with reckless abandon; but ABUSE was never lionized. Even in the throes of passion, earning a man's affections was not the female protagonist's sole raison d'être; as there was usually some sort of higher aspiration in the works. To reiterate: the "bad-boy" was eventually revealed to be a good person; and that was the payoff at the end of the story. Lessons were learned.

The bottom line: In traditional romance, even the lowest-brow material conveyed some sort of laudable message...irrespective of how trite the narrative vehicle may have been. But...what are we to learn from Huang's "Kings Of Sin" series? Nobody knows. What insights into romantic love might we expect to glean from Erriu's *Heavenly Bodies*? I'm stumped. Such material is design for a brief dopamine rush.

When we shop around for romance involving the hot guy from the wrong side of the tracks, it helps to be discerning. There is, after all, enemies-to-lovers done relatively well (as with, say, Vasti's Sapphic *Ladies In Hating*); and not so well (as with, say, Levenseller's *Shadows Between Us*). Internal alarms should go off, though, when the female protagonist is bullied by the male protagonist, and her reaction to such treatment is...LUST. (Helpful tip: If her aspiration is to be drilled by a tall, handsome jerk, she may not be as heroic as we might want to believe.)

The point: We don't have to resort to low-grade erotica to experience a captivating love story. Indeed, romance fraught with adversity is something that can be done well—as was demonstrated by Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far From The Madding Crowd*, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, as well as Jane Austen's *Pride And Prejudice*. And there even exists good FANTASY romance—as with, say, Sanderson's *Yumi And The Nightmare Painter* and Suri's *The Isle In The Silver Sea*.

NONE of this requires that we sensationalize dysfunction. Alas. In their fumbling attempt to create erotic tension, contemporary YA writers simply recycle the “enemies to lovers” trope in ham-handed ways: contrived, mawkish, and silly. The “you’re such an asshole; yet I kinda want you to ravage me” trope always held appeal; but it was never seen as the high watermark of literary prowess. So we encounter the familiar narrative gimmicks, yet are afforded no important insight. There’s no redemption, no lessons learned (see, for instance, Renée Ahdieh’s utterly pointless “The Wrath And The Dawn” duology). This material is consumed like cotton candy. For many consumers, it’s all just for fleeting titillation. In the process, depravity is given a free pass...so long as the customers keep buying.

The use of formulaic plots is now ubiquitous. Why? Profitability invariably means catering to a gormless consumer base that expects instant satisfaction with minimal cognitive effort. Algorithms don’t recognize original ideas; and often penalize innovation. Trendiness is rewarded; heterodox thinking is punished. So to maximize sales, marketable tropes are milked to death. “He repulses me; but for some reason I want him to pummel my tender cervix with his throbbing phallus”: copy and paste.

When it comes to many YA bestsellers, there is no depth to the story-telling. Writers need only re-fashion a previously-wrought plot, then [insert male love-interest here; typically a buff faerie with dark, penetrating eyes and a chip on his shoulder]. Such narrative gimmicks involve part of a paint-by-numbers approach to writing. (Gee-wiz. ANOTHER young girl entering ANOTHER magic academy where she falls for ANOTHER “shadow-daddy”).

Publishing houses saw the Harry Potter thematics spread like gangbusters; so they recycled it ad nauseam...adding some so-called “spice” (graphic sex) to further entice a target audience yearning for some lascivious content. So queue the factions...engaged in some sort of competition to see who comes out on top...all while thwarting the diabolical plans of [insert cartoonish villain here] to keep everyone else subjugated. The problem is that many young readers confuse their amusement for fulfillment; and many FEMALE readers confuse enjoyment for empowerment.

“I hate you, now fuck me” moments are as tired as they are moronic; yet such exploits seem to scratch an itch that many young women have. So we often encounter plot-lines that boil down to: “Our world is on the verge of devolving into a nightmarish hellscape, but I need to decide which of these cute boys I want to smooch!” (Yes, the story-telling really is that puerile in most YA fare.) We don’t necessarily need something as wholesome as “The Pixie Chronicles”; but is it really necessary to be raunchy just for the sake of fleeting titivation? (When immersing ourselves in a fantastical world, is one looking for wonder...or just for tingling loins?) Knowing where to draw the line doesn’t entail being hindered by puritanical sensibilities.

Much of YA “romantasy” is unabashed about its use of market-tested tropes—explicitly advertising itself as, say: “An enemies to lovers saga...with faeries!” (blurb on the front cover). Publishing houses now conduct business as follows: You want tropes? We’ve got ‘em in spades. The result of this approach is an endless supply of pre-fab narratives in which lead characters are little more than stock characters: fungible and one dimensional. (Think Nancy Drew...but with more cleavage, puckered lips, and an exposed garter belt.) While surveying the current tableau of YA publications, one imagines an assembly-line in a factory, churning out the latest twist on this or that popular consumer product.

The format is easy to replicate (enemies-to-lovers; magic academy; unfulfilled prophecy). All one has to do is tweak the details: a dashing demon warrior rather than a brooding fae king; a mysterious, underground layer in a dreary, urban setting rather than a magnificent castle nestled in rolling hills of a bucolic landscape. Upon surveying the “romantasy” best-seller lists, we find that one story is simply a carbon copy of another.

As with Hallmark movies, the formulaic plot is a feature, not a bug. Find a trope, then recycle it ad nauseam.

As one might expect, the “romantasy” marketplace has become oversaturated with authors scrambling to cash in on the mania. Consequently, display tables at most bookstores are overflowing with countless variations of the same thing. What’s the problem with this? Steamy encounters and personal triumphs don’t involve high enough stakes...even when failure means death. For a story to have weight, there needs to be something beyond the characters’ own (narrow) interests. The predicament needs to be more profound than “Will she or won’t she get the hot guy?” or “Will she or won’t she win the competition?”

What about the public’s perception of all this? Regrettably, content is often assessed in bone-headed ways. The sad reality is that the vast majority of online commentary is flummery. For the mercurial bystander—obtuse, impulsive, and easily-amused—appraisals are based on whatever fanciful impression has gripped them since the last full moon. (A mere glance at the Goodreads Choice Awards on any given year is enough to lose one’s faith in humanity.) Whim has transplanted reflection as the primary criterion for approbation.

So here we are: subsisting in online echo-chambers. Our hearts palpitate as we behold this maelstrom of burnished degeneracy.

In evaluating the vast array of publications over the course of the last half-century or so, the degradation in the quality of exposition IN THE AVERAGE BOOK is breathtaking to behold. Yet the most disheartening thing is that so many readers wouldn’t know horrible writing if it were labeled with a flashing neon sign. (How many ADULTS think that Sarah J. Maas or Colleen Hoover or any of the other bad writers are...GOOD writers? Whatever the answer is, it is surely tremendously disconcerting.) As swooning fans lap up each serving off this scrumptious bilge, they chortle about how “great” such publications are.

Let’s be clear: Not all YA fantasy is bad. Most of it is just okay.** There’s plenty of mediocrity in this burgeoning genre; and there’s nothing wrong with reading books that are less than literary masterpieces.

This is a more a question of expectations, and—on the societal level—of norms. Readers don’t always need peek eloquence when seeking a “good read”. We are well aware that not every book is going to give us the level of prose of a Dickens or Emerson. That said, it makes sense to STILL HAVE STANDARDS. Just because we’re not going to be reading something on par with Oscar Wilde every day doesn’t mean we need to degrade ourselves by reading the trash-pulp mentioned in the present essay. Put another way: Don’t always expect the quality of Molière, but at least RECOGNIZE it.

This brings us back to the problem of shallow thinking and short attention spans. Even when a few readers delve into quality literature, they—oftentimes—STILL fail to glean anything from the deeper themes. (I wonder how many people read Wang’s *Blood Over Bright Haven* and missed the obvious parallels with the treatment of the Palestinians by the genocidal, theocratic ethno-State, Israel.) Today, many young readers prefer idle amusement to...well...content with something meaningful to say. In other words, they look for in a BOOK what they get from SOCIAL MEDIA. Their brains are stuck in one gear; and there’s little will to change.

When we talk of the dumbing-down of the audience, we are not talking about Brandon Sanderson’s “Mistborn” (which, incidentally, is another example of an epic with a strong female protagonist); we are talking about the proliferation of trash-pulp in the YA section of the local bookstore—much of it fantasy, much of it romance, some of it both. The fact of the matter is: cheap gratification is a booming business; so there is little incentive for this state of affairs to change anytime soon.

And so it goes: Appealability, not creativity, is now the over-riding imperative when deciding what to publish. As easily-swindled consumers voraciously guzzle the latest twaddle, the rest of us are left to witness the degradation of literary culture...and decide whether to slap our foreheads in exasperation or roll our eyes in dismay.

To recapitulate: There was always a place for low-brow writing, but it was never seen as the ultimate standard. Until now. In this new attention economy, our powers of discernment have gone to the wayside; and in their place is now an insatiable craving for spectacle. For the impresarios of today's pop culture, the maximization of views—not the facilitation of widespread erudition—has become the primary directive. We end up with a proliferation of trash-pulp...where even the lowest caliber writing turns into the industry's biggest blockbuster hits. So we get the likes of Rebecca Yarros, Sarah J. Maas, Stephanie Garber, Penelope Douglas, Colleen Hoover, et. al. Only those who have questionable literacy could possibly find any of this tolerable.

In the midst of all this hullabaloo, reading becomes a theatrical exploit. What is effectively performative reading treats the mere act of reading as some sort of pageant. Participants have no literary standards, and no genuine appreciation for good literature; let alone any grasp of what might actually constitute good literature. This peculiar social phenomenon is precisely the sort of thing that occurs in an intellectually desolate society: all consumption, no comprehension.

AUTHOR'S NOTE 2: The emphasis on female authors / readership in the present essay is not due to gender bias. "Romantasy" is created primarily by women, and deliberately made for a certain audience: young women. Unsurprisingly, this mania has been seized upon by MORE female writers, whose pulp is directed toward an audience of their peers. There is, of course, a comparable portion of MALE air-heads in the general populace. The difference is that intellectually-stunted men simply don't read ANY books. Be that as it may, it is worth noting that there are some really good books written by men for men...and some not-so-good books written by men for men (Kristoff's *Empire Of The Vampire*). Some male authors are even adept when it comes to writing female characters (O'Dell's *Island Of The Blue Dolphins* for a YA audience; Donaldson's "Gap Cycle" if one prefers literary sci-fi). Just in case it isn't crystal clear: This essay is not an indictment of female writers—as is made plain by the raft of female authors I hold in high esteem (starting with Mary Shelley, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, and the Brontë sisters). My love for reading started with Judy Blume, and—when it came to fantasy—proceeded with Madeleine L'Engle. Some of the best short stories I've read were by Jhumpa Lahiri, Annie Proulx, and Claire Keegan. The best feminist essayists? Mary Wollstonecraft, Barbara Ehrenreich, Naomi Klein, and Arundhati Roy. Older novelists? Virginia Woolf and Zora Neale Hurston. Modern novelists? Toni Morrison and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In sci-fi, there's C.J. Cherryh and Melanie Rawn. As far as contemporary fantasy goes, there's Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Margaret Atwood...as well as current female authors like Fonda Lee, N.K. Jemisin, Robin Hobb, Nnedi Okorafor, Laini Taylor, Naomi Novik, Victoria Goddard, Andrea Stewart, Tasha Suri, and M.L. Wang. All of them great. (Other amazing female writers today include Louise Erdrich, Yaa Gyasi, and Jesmyn Ward.) My grievance is not with female authors; it's with authors who are bad at what they do. When it comes to YA and romance, the majority of those authors happen to be female...because the majority of YA authors are female. It is not UN-feminist to point this out. Feminism doesn't require us to sugar-coat reality; nor does it require us to lower our standards for women. (One does women no favors by patronizing them.) Want to be a feminist? Support GREAT women. In the meantime, reading a Colleen Hoover book arguably makes one LESS of a feminist.

For YA publishers, the normalization of toxicity is now a business model—as attested by the aforementioned "shadow daddy" trope. This seems to be occurring in a social milieu in which the garish exhibition of dysfunction has become an industry staple. From Patel's *I'm A Fan* to Knight's *Den Of Vipers* to

Hoover's *It Ends With Us*, we are fed a steady diet of trash-pulp that romanticizes abusive relationships. It is not hyperbolic to say that those who publish such dreck are contributing to the deterioration of literacy; and—dare I say—perpetrating a sort of didactic harm upon readers. And in the midst of the dysfunction engendered by over-usage of social media, many find themselves gravitating to trauma-porn (as with, say, *The Southern Book Club's Guide To Slaying Vampires*). One book is even titled “Beautiful Torment”...a marketing ploy design to attract those wanting to stew rather than to soar.

As we become increasingly inured to cerebral languor, inanity starts to pass for profundity...on a regular basis. In today's public square, mental lethargy is encouraged; while intellectual prowess is openly MOCKED as the hallmark of “out of touch elites who don't ‘get’ the regular Joe”. The consequences of this are detrimental to the weal of society.

It is worth repeating: Students at even the most “elite” universities are now flabbergasted when they see FULL BOOKS listed on their syllabi; as they find the prospect of reading several complete works in a single semester to be a daunting task. This is occurring at the COLLEGE level, mind you. (Think of it this way: If students hem and haw about reading *The Great Gatsby*, the chances that they'll be cracking open Kant's *Groundwork For The Metaphysic Of Morals* anytime soon are quite slim.) While disconcerting, this pandemic of indolence is symptomatic of the scourge of anti-intellectualism that now plagues society. It's not just that so many people are non-intellectual; it's that they are GLEEFULLY, RAPACIOUSLY non-intellectual.

A sign of the drastic erosion of literacy—and of the increasing anti-intellectualism—afflicting society is the emergence of online communities that are little more than cesspools of imbecility. The epitome of this is BookTok: a forum on the social media platform, TikTok in which almost nothing but trash-pulp is discussed / recommended. (Picture the teen version of Oprah's Book Club; yet even more insipid.) On such platforms, discussion of “books” amounts to an inexorable maelstrom of mind-numbing blather. Each cringe-inducing post reminds us that online prominence is often inversely proportional to how credible a commentator actually is.

The stark truth is: No serious reader has ever for a moment thought of visiting Booktok (or Bookstagram, or Wattpad, or any of the other online forums wherein airheads commiserate to find validation for their fatuous asseverations). Diffidence transplants intellectual curiosity; and anything that might spur edification is blithely shunted aside. This is testament to the intellectually bankrupt society in which we now find ourselves. It should come as no surprise, then, that BookTok is an engine for the perpetuation of mindless consumption.

BookTok is there for one reason: corporate publishing agendas—which prioritize revenue over all else. So long as there's money to be made, all other concerns will be summarily shunted aside—which, incidentally, explains why publishing houses have no qualms with pumping out highly-profitable dreck. What do THEY care about the intellectual pursuits of their customer-base? They have share-holders to placate.

I refrain here from making any sweeping statements about BookTube (commentators who have YouTube channels); as BookTubers are a mixed bag. A small handful are pretty good; others are halfway descent; and—unfortunately—many are nincompoops. We can only hope that things improve going forward.

In the meantime, we are forced to endure the latest posting of [insert any knucklehead with a massive online following], holding forth on how marvelous the latest trashy romance is. They're minds have a limited capacity, so they are averse to anything more than very light reading. (Were they forced to try getting through something like *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Ulysses*, they'd almost certainly have an aneurism.) Meanwhile, they ridicule anything that aspires to intellectualism. Not only are they averse to intellectual

activity, they cast aspersions at anyone who dares try it.

To reiterate: This is not a matter of aligning—or not—with this or that person’s taste; it is a matter of assaying the caliber of the commentary. (Does it recommend high-quality material? Is it insightful?) Agreeing—or not—with any given commentator’s opinions has (almost) nothing to do with it.

So who should we take seriously? Here’s a rule of thumb: With very few exceptions, if someone who has a full-time job (and who is not either a professor or a college student) is reading three or more books per week, he/she is probably a serious reader. Rather, such a person is whizzing through lots of fluff in order to show off a tall stack of books (that they have blitzed through since the last full moon). The chances that, after a full year, such a person has read even a single page of quality prose is virtually nil. Serious readers will typically read a book or two each week. Given the depth of the prose, they will find it difficult to read more than two books—week in and week out—in perpetuity. (More substantial tomes will often take a fortnight (or two)—bringing an avid reader to two books in a month.) Some BookTubers boast about having read over 150 publications in a year. This is a sign that they are doing something that is fundamentally different from what a serious reader might do. (There’s a Japanese term for buying more books than one actually reads: “tsun-doku”.) Arthur Schopenhauer once quipped: “It would be good to buy books if one could also buy the time to read them.” No such luck. Many of us barely have time to do the laundry and prepare dinner; so our “TBR” docket is often far longer than “will actually get around to reading” docket.

Schopenhauer added: “One usually confuses the purchase of books with the acquisition of their contents.” HAVING books and apprehending their contents are, of course, different things. On BookTok, people seem to be more concerned with exhibition than with digestion. (One might say that performative reading is to literature what pie-eating contests are to nutrition.) Think of it this way: Were one to read even brief pieces like Paine’s *Common Sense* or Mills’ *On Liberty* on a quasi-regular basis, would one be more apt to be enraptured by online spectacle or to engage in critical reflection on any given day? (By contrast, were one to spend all one’s time watching TikTok videos and posting quips on social media channels, would one—at any given juncture—be more apt to pay attention to the latest viral meme or to engage in quiet contemplation?) Just as thought influences behavior, how we behave molds how we think. So there you have it: short attention spans, shallow thinking, low self-esteem, chronic anxiety, and all the rest.

In an ideal world, peacocking would occur when one deigned to showcase the wisdom that one has gleaned from reading. In doing so, the hope would (presumably) be that one might spread awareness, and thereby contribute something to the public discourse. Instead, we live in a world where peacocking is primarily a matter of broadcasting to the world that one might be associated with some cool stuff—so as to burnish one’s image in the public eye. (One then anxiously awaits validation for whatever one has posted online; as one’s self-esteem becomes inextricably tied to approbation.) Our criteria for accruing clout have gone tragically off the rails.

To treat reading as a sport is to entirely miss the point of reading. As with all things, theatrics is often used to compensate for some sort of deficiency. (Flaunting a massive “book haul” to demonstrate that one is a “reader” is like waving a big flag and supposing that doing so makes one patriotic.) One devalues reading by making it a spectacle. There’s nothing wrong with fanfare, but when it transplants substance, we lose site of what’s truly important.

And when consumption is prioritized over reflection, problems arise.

There is nothing PERFORMATIVE about the process of reading—an activity that is nominally done in solitude, with sustained focus. It is a personal experience from which wisdom might be gleaned..and then,

as the occasion arises, shared with others (in seminars, symposia, colloquia, conventions, book-clubs, or with a loved one over a hot cup of cocoa...while seat in front of a warm hearth on a stormy winter night.) Meanwhile, in the world of Book-stagram or BookTube—as in the world of BookTok—being branded a “reader” often has very little to do with actually reading anything worthwhile; and is more about ostentation. For many of the commentators online, a genuine appreciation for literary excellence plays almost no role in the touting of their TBRs. They’d much prefer to preen. The mere ACT OF reading is prioritized; and is little more than hokey stagecraft.

Serious readers don’t read because it is glamorous; they read because it is edifying. They recognize that quality matters much more than quantity; so are judicious with their reading selections. They prefer a mental challenge to a “book haul”; and treat discussions as a colloquium rather than as a pageant.

BookTok operates by catering to trend-humpers; a process that includes exploiting those who treat book-reading as theater. The platform thus serves as a caldron of effervescent inanity; as users end up flailing in a roiling stew of online “buzz”, fleeting impressions, hot-takes, and emotive ejaculation. The popularity of this or that item is based entirely on manufactured hype. Behold a microcosm in which every bozo with an opinion is allowed to rise to prominence...if, that is, his/her ideas are sufficiently provocative. Substantive discourse has almost nothing to do with it. (If one is waiting for an online commentator to cite Voltaire—or to reference *King Lear*—one will be waiting for quite some time.)

And so it goes: On Booktok, commentary occurs within a terrarium of fatuity. The rare exception to the rule—*Circe* and *The Song Of Achilles*, for example—buck the platform’s overwhelming trend. Social media propels mediocrity like rocket-fuel; and treats celebrity as an end in itself. (It’s a feedback loop: people are famous for being famous.) Popularity transplants merit as the primary criterion for notoriety. In due course, stature is built entirely on marketability.

It is worth noting that Booktok is not unique in this regard. Goodreads ratings are also worse than useless. This is no accident. Such platforms cater to a particular audience—namely: those who are cognitively inert...and proud of it.

AUTHOR’S NOTE 3: On platforms that purport to review content, there are two ways that idiocy can be exposed. ONE: Very low ratings of great literary works. TWO: Very high ratings of garbage. I have found that the best way to ascertain whether a work—whether fiction or non-fiction—is phenomenal (or awful) is to look at the lowest ratings. For excellent works, the numbskulls will predominate; and their reviews will be comprised of cockamamie commentary—from boneheaded argumentation to juvenile invective—inadvertently revealing the reasons to admire the work. For trash-pulp, those who are more sagacious will predominate, offering dependable critiques (and providing solid reasons for their take-down). (All we get from the highest ratings are rationalizations from eager fans, which often tells us little. For an honest appraisal, acolytes are rarely helpful.) Not all commentary is equal: Some of it is stellar; some of it is worthless; much of it is somewhere in between. The key is to marshal our powers of discernment; and—after careful reflection—prune the detritus. This isn’t about “good taste”, it is about objective merit. As we’ve seen, this fundamental distinction is now routinely elided. (Relativists even refute the existence of objectivity.) In fantasy, there are (of course) many middle-of-the-road authors—be it the epic fare of Robert Jordan or the oft-pedantic fare of R.F. Kuang. The present essay has little to say about such material. My thesis is buttressed by juxtaposing the very worst against the very best writing...with the understanding that there is lots in between.** Not everyone is equipped to offer sound judgement; as critical thinking skills are in short supply these days. So before the next TikTok sensation does us the honor of regaling us with his/her scintillating literary insights, we might take pause, and consider that—while there is a rare gem to be found here and there—the vast majority of online media is over-run by numbskulls.

The predominance of BookTok—and of commentary on TikTok, Twitter / X, and Instagram more widely—is a reminder that we live in a world where reprobate material is all the rage. It’s no wonder, then, that shoddy writing is considered spectacular by some people; and, consequently, sells like hotcakes. I lament that we now live in a universe where *That Time I Got Drunk And Saved A Demon* is gobbled up by bubble-headed teens while *The Amazing Adventures Of Kavalier And Clay* collects dust on a forgotten bookshelf.

In sum: BookTok is used by insufferable half-wits who pretend—in vain—to be anything other than insufferable half-wits. Unsurprisingly, in the midst of today’s intellectual squalor, the platform has become a huge hit. Its intellectual bankruptcy is a feature, not a bug. Users find themselves swimming in a syrupy swale percolating with glamorized inauthenticity, chortling about their latest discovery. Everyone involved is worse off for having participated. (BookTok may not be quite the debacle that was the burning of the library of Alexandria; but, in my estimation, it’s not far behind.) As publishers pump out trash-pulp, everyone revels their nescience. People adopt others’ opinions rather than form their own. “Reading” is rendered a means of cheap gratification...rather than a source of edification.

We now find ourselves in a society where billionaire imbeciles are lauded as super-geniuses; and a platform like BookTok is extremely influential amongst self-proclaimed “readers”...who’s literary standards are vanishingly low. This is what occurs in a climate of rampant anti-intellectualism. We end up with celebrity dipshits and a mentally-handicapped narcissist in the White House. (Donald Trump is a dumbed-down panjandrum for a dumbed-down world.) In other words: The devastating effects of anti-intellectualism go far beyond the orbit of “book culture”; the fallout reaches politics. It starts with BookTok; and is eventually made manifest in the halls of power.

Carping about what TEENS happen to be reading may seem petty. Why, then, did I bother with this diatribe? This seemingly anodyne social phenomenon serves as a barometer for the state of public discourse. Therefore a critical scrutiny of the sort of content being consumed by America’s youth is warranted.

Some may deem this harsh indictment to be overblown. Yet they fail to grasp that this is symptomatic of a much wider—and deeper—societal trend. We SHOULD be judgmental of the kinds of things that dominate the time and attention of our youth. We SHOULD have universal standards. This is not to say that subjectivity isn’t salient when it comes to reading preferences. Personal taste invariably plays a significant role when it comes to any given consumer’s choices. But it does not follow that some writing isn’t objectively better / worse than certain other writing. Literary excellence is not simply a function of this or that bystander’s “taste”. Sarah J. Maas isn’t magically on par with Ralph Waldo Emerson simply by having mass market appeal. (Garbage is still garbage even if it has been coated in a delicious glaze.)

We homo sapiens are creatures who want to be amused. To reiterate the problem: We often misconstrue amusement as empowerment; so end up being captivated by a carnival of distractions. In our eagerness to be titivated, we forget that a fantasy novel needn’t have an erotic element in order to be worthwhile. (Imagine complaining that *A Wrinkle In Time* didn’t have enough “spice”.) The marriage of sci-fi / fantasy and erotica is nothing new; the issue NOW is the age to which that sort of thing is being targeted; and the esteem it warrants. Is it seen as the benchmark for good writing, or is it simply recognized for what it is (delicious fluff)? Again: titillation is often confused for edification; so many readers fixate on the former, and are left with the impression that it is synonymous with the latter.

We find ourselves sifting through a sea of trash-pulp—waiting for our souls to be stirred by an alluvion of majestic banality. Online “influencers” are then quick to broadcast their thoughts on popular novels to the world: snippets of blather that will capture the attention of their fawning audience...for the next two minutes...before everyone moves on to the next shiny thing.

When seeking to ameliorate existential despondency, to interrupt the mundanity of everyday life, many opt for limbic stimulation rather than intellectual stimulation. The incessant flow of manufactured spectacle renders us desensitized...even as our pre-frontal cortices are deactivated.

In a world of short attention spans and lazy minds, everything is rushed and nothing is mentally challenging. Readers are in a hurry to learn nothing. (Queue the next “romantasy” offering.) So we wind up with a publication mill rapaciously churning out content for consumers.*** One wonders how, say, Oscar Wilde would have fared in such an environment. In the ambit of fantasy, would such a commercial mechanism have given us *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? *Dune*? *A Canticle For Leibowitz*? *Job: A Comedy Of Justice*? Would it have ever allowed for ANYTHING groundbreaking? Probably not.

It seems not to occur to many that reading should be more than just frivolity. Each page should be seen as an opportunity.

Lost in all the hubbub is an elementary fact: There is a difference between indulging in some trashy fare once in a while (in between high-quality material)...and trashy fare being all that one reads. To be clear: There’s nothing wrong with a dollop of schmaltz every now and then. And there’s certainly not anything wrong with intermittent escapism. (I, for one, enjoy an ultra-cheesy, overtly-formulaic romantic comedy from time to time.) The point is that such things need to be recognized AS SUCH; and—like junk food—consumed in moderation. In other words: Rather than defining the horizon for expectations, heedless indulgences—be it a bodice-ripper or a bag of Doritos—should be the exception to the rule.

We all need a guilty pleasure here and there; but prudence entails moderation. In a hyper-consumerist (hyper-commercialized) milieu, though, moderation is out of the question. Many now ingest ultra-tangy gruel on a daily basis; and—because it’s so darned tasty—misconstrue it as nourishment. Here, the dietary analogy is apt: Certain snacks are luring to the taste buds, but there are no nutrients. Such fare wreaks havoc on one’s health (insofar as it is a major part of one’s diet); yet those focused solely how ENJOYABLE it is often lose sight of this fact. The point here should be uncontroversial: There isn’t anything objectionable about snacking on SOME junk-food SOMETIMES...that is, so long as one realizes it’s junk food.

Indulgence demands temperance. (Sure, read some fluff every so often; but—for the love of god—read Steinbeck’s *East Of Eden* at least once in your life.) It’s worth bearing in mind that reading great books isn’t just about kindling our imagination; it’s about mental fitness—to wit: furnishing us with the conceptual tools we need to understand ourselves and others; and to make sense of the world we live in. More than even the best non-fiction, a compelling narrative serves as a vehicle for vital insights. We can learn as much from an amazing story as we do from a dozen textbooks. Even better, the former can stoke our curiosity far more than the turgid prose of a non-fiction tomb. We are all suckers for a good story; so the best way to convey a point is through a captivating narrative. Hence the utility of parable and satire for making a point—poignant, relatable, and—in the best cases—ethralling. (Want clever satire in a fantastical setting? Consider Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* and Pike’s *Orconomics*.) Whether fiction or non-fiction, good writing is good writing; and intellectual stimulation (vs. intellectual desolation) is largely about where we now set the bar.

What, then, are the signs of the times of which we might take heed? Consider the high number of influential figures who insist that superficiality be applauded; and that shallow thinking is ALWAYS adequate. As far as they’re concerned, crude exposition suffices—whether in quotidian text-messaging or in formal exposition. As a result of such thinking, literary standards have become virtually non-existent. This doesn’t mean we should expect everyone to enthusiastically embrace something as turgid and prolix as Dickens’ *Bleak House* or as dry and dense as Hawthorne’s *The House Of Seven Gables*; it simply means

that reading, say, Chopin's *Awakening* shouldn't be seen as a monumental undertaking.

Granted, we shouldn't expect most tweens to immediately delve into Erikson's entire "Malazan Book Of The Fallen" or Tad Williams' entire "Shadowmarch" series; but they might at least attempt something like Le Guin's "Earthsea" or Pullman's "His Dark Materials"...and then graduate to, say, Hobbs' "Farseer" trilogy or Ruocchio's "Sun Eater"...before venturing into, say, Ken Liu's "Dandelion Dynasty" or Kay's "Fionavar Tapestry". For those looking for a more bite-sized sample, they might try Coelho's *Alchemist* or Clarke's *Piranesi*. Meanwhile, those who are highly committed to the genre might tackle something like Sanderson's gargantuan "Stormlight Archive". There's something for everyone.

Much of this boils down to how we think about guilty pleasures. Are they the occasional departure from the norm OR do they represent the high watermark? It's worth noting a generational shift in perspective; as fashion changes in pulp as much as it does in clothing, music, or anything else. A retrospective is worth a brief digression. Sixty years ago, so-called "beach reads" were Harlequin romances for women. For the few men who liked to read, it was pulp westerns and comic books. Forty-plus years ago, it was Danielle Steele, Debbie Macomber, Judith McNaught, Nora Roberts, Amanda Quick, Catherine Coulter, Sydney Sheldon, and Jackie Collins (mostly for women)...and, frankly, not much for men. Twenty years ago, it was Terry McMillan, Nicholas Sparks, and Jennifer Weiner (mostly for women); and Tom Clancy (mostly for men)...as well as Sue Grafton, Lee Child, Daniel Silva, Michael Connelly, Clive Cussler, James Patterson, Dan Brown, Dean Koontz, Michael Crichton, and David Baldacci for anyone looking for an edge-of-your-seat page-turner. Such "pulp fiction" was fluff that was openly recognized as fluff. (Note: Slightly higher-caliber material could be found—as with Frederick Forsyth, Helen MacInnes, Robert Ludlum, John Grisham, and Stephen King.) These "mass market" publications populated the shelves of airport kiosks the world over; and suited the demands of a wide readership. All of this was hunky-dory. Readers of said material were not under any illusions that they were reading high literature. Virtually everyone acknowledged—unabashedly—that such fare was designed for casual enjoyment; and no one had any qualms with that characterization.

Therein lies the rub: **In days of yore, even the most ardent fans of "beach reads" (alt. "popcorn reads") were not taken with the misapprehension that it was the ultimate standard to which all literature should be held.**

Times have changed. Now "beach reads" dominate the publishing industry; and—for the masses—serve as the benchmark for great writing. We now conflate how much we happen to fancy something for how edifying the experience might be. As a result, standards have diminished quite drastically. Mindless amusement has become the ceiling rather than the floor. Hence the proliferation of Colleen Hoover books, TikTok stars, Facebook rants, and an endless supply of moronic Tweets. Tween girls used to read *Sweet Valley High*; now they read "romantasy". The former was openly recognized as low-brow material; the latter is now often presumed to be of high quality. (Tween boys used to read the Hardy Boys and Encyclopedia Brown; now they read Percy Jackson. While not high literature, such fare was perfectly suited for the target audience.)

Three decades ago, we (rightfully) thought Cosmo magazine was absurd. We had no idea how worse popular fodder might get. In the pre-social media era, artificially-flavored hogwash was disseminated on a weekly basis. Today, things are much, much different. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok posts are every minute. The result is both STUNTED attention spans and of FRAGMENTED attention allotment. (The problem with social media is that it has wrought havoc on our attentions—both in terms of duration and allocation.) This has a direct bearing on PRIORITIZATION—that is: a tendency to focus on some things rather than others; which, in turn, is a reflection of what we most care about.

But never mind the plummeting standards. It is our PERCEPTION OF standards that is even more concerning; as we are far less apt to even acknowledge the existence of standards at all. It's not that mention of low standards is met with disagreement; it's that it is met with deafening insouciance.

In some ways, apathy is more concerning than cluelessness; as ignorance is at least compatible with a desire to learn ("I may not know, but I care about knowing"). Here's the rub: The kind of intellectual impoverishment that has come to afflict American youth has little to do with recreancy; it is primarily a matter of delinquency. This has dire repercussions. The all-consuming dross of a chronically-online culture enables people with otherwise functioning brains to completely misread the world around them (see MAGA). Consequently, we construe morons as geniuses (see right-wing tech billionaires) and trash-pulp as really good literature.

To reiterate: In an anti-intellectual ecosystem, low standards are CELEBRATED by customers, who rant and rave about the latest vapid release as they bask in their own stupor. Their perceptions of merit are illusory; and their impression of excellence is based on dubious criteria (often equating socio-economic status with objective merit). Therein lies the difference between mere NON-intellectualism and ANTI-intellectualism.

It bears worth repeating: When it comes to literacy, things were not always this dismal. For generations, most people were able to tell the difference between, say, Dickens and purple prose. People recognized great literature AS SUCH; and trash-pulp AS SUCH. No longer. Why not? Incisive commentary (on the human condition, on society as a whole) is no longer a key ingredient in an ostensibly "good book". It's just not something anyone cares about anymore. Even as adults, they'd much rather read *Twilight* than, say, *Crime And Punishment*. Again, we shouldn't expect twelve-year-old girls to be devouring Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*; but it isn't unreasonable to hope that they not be interminably bogged down in Maas' "Throne Of Glass".

To the (woefully limited) degree that some readers might be open to a modicum of edification, they are often oblivious to the fact that it is absent when it isn't there. In fact, they often relish its absence; as there is little hunger for intellectual stimulation. Insofar as this attitude dominates the marketplace, we should not be surprised that—eventually—supply meets demand. Predictably, the majority of bestsellers offer witless characters written by witless authors for witless readers. So the question must be asked: Why is critical reflection going extinct?

In a word: social media. Due to the proliferation of incentivized self-absorption, many of today's youth are utterly heedless of the world around them—musing about cockamamie scenarios as visions of shadow-daddies dance in their heads. This prompts a stand-off-ish orientation toward a life of the mind. An integral part of this lassitude is a seething contempt for intellectual activity; and open scorn for genuine intellectuals.

What are we to make of this?

Anti-intellectuals have an aversion to anything that involves critical reflection. They deride anything that is philosophically profound, and are repelled by anything that requires lots of mental exertion. This goes beyond merely NOT HAVING erudition as an ideal. Anti-intellectuals are apt to berate those who ARE intellectual—as with the ubiquitous "snooty for having standards" schtick.

At root, anti-intellectuals are impelled by resentment. We thus find ourselves in a world where people are begrudged for having an even remotely intellectual bearing. Consider the horrifying "un-schooling" trend (which—surprise surprise—is vociferously promoted on TikTok). This is a reminder of how quotidian NON-intellectualism often becomes seething ANTI-intellectualism. Not only are people sanguine about

education; they are decidedly AGAINST education. Critical thinking is out of the question.

Why all the antipathy? It is, after all, irrational. Those who characterize intellectualism as a kind of elitism conflate sapience with snobbery. (This may sometimes have to do with envy; but not necessarily.) What such people don't seem to grasp is that intellectual curiosity is based on humility, not on conceit. (Put another way: Erudition is not born of hubris.) Anti-intellectualism, on the other hand, is based on contempt—for scholarship, for serious deliberation, for a life of the mind. This (unfortunate) psychical posture engenders an abiding animus toward anyone who is cultured, worldly, or highly educated. For such people, cosmopolitanism is out of the question.

Anti—intellectualism, then, is not merely a matter of apathy regarding intellectualism; it verges on hostility. The irony is that intellectuals are often accused of scoffing at the rank and file...when it is, more often than not, yokels who scoff at the intellectuals. (The animosity is directed primarily from the provincial to the cosmopolitan; not vice versa.) What many fail to realize is that most intellectuals are not smug elitists perched in ivory towers, looking down their noses at the unwashed masses; they are—far more often than not—unprepossessing geeks struggling to pay the rent in their dilapidated studio apartments. There is nothing POSH about a life of the mind.

This benighted mindset is born of—and breeds—chronic resentment. As such, anti-intellectuals disdain at those who value erudition. They denigrate intellectual curiosity; and belittle those who have the gall to be intellectually curious. They are contemptuous of genuine knowledge (typically embracing dogmatism instead). They then chastise anyone who doesn't play along. If they see you reading Yarros' *Fourth Wing*, then you must be one of them. But heaven forbid they catch you reading Hesse's *Steppenwolf*; for then you must be one of those pretentious egg-heads who thinks they're better than everyone else.

Here's the thing. Having standards isn't arrogant; it is a sign of integrity. Those who are intellectually curious are—by dint of that fact—more estimable than those who aren't...in the same way that those who are ethical are more estimable than those who aren't. (Just as erudition is not born of hubris, neither is probity.) The parallels here are instructive. To justify their moral depravity, those who flout moral principles equate rectitude with arrogance. In other words, they rationalize their own dereliction by disparaging those who prize rectitude. They then construe this as a mark of valor. As a result, elevated discourse is seen as pompous.

In assessing this state of affairs, we mustn't confuse faux intellectualism for genuine intellectualism. Unlike the real thing, it is the former that is ostentatious. (The real thing has little need for pageantry.) Faux intellectualism has nothing to do with a life of the mind; and everything to do with optics; so it depends on the ability of poseurs to maintain a dazzling facade. It is somewhat ironic that—in the midst of their inflated self-regard—pseudo-intellectuals harbor a seething disdain for ACTUAL intellectuals; as any juxtaposition with the latter risks exposing their feint. Anti-intellectualism reminds us that conceit and contempt are often two sides of the same coin.

Ersatz profundity involves trying really really really hard to be philosophically profound, but failing miserably. Such material is not only vacuous, but atrocious. When it comes to film, this phenomenon was exemplified by the painfully inane *The Tree Of Life*. (In fiction, see *The Celestine Prophecy*, *House Of Leaves*, *The Shack*, and *Orbital*; in non-fiction, see anything by Deepak Chopra.) Fans of such material confuse elaborate incoherence for philosophical depth; inanity for profundity. So they ingest all this prepossessing drivel, and think they're somehow being exposed to something “deep”. (For those of us who've devoted decades to studying actual philosophy, this is all quite cringe-inducing. I challenge anyone to read both volumes of Schopenhauer's *The World As Will And Representation*...then go back to any of the aforementioned publications and conclude it is anything other than frothy swill.)

A biddable audience feeds into the ruse; so is treated to a sumptuous feast of pedantic fatuity—heedless of the daffy artifice to which they have fallen victim. They (mis)construe their beguilement as enlightenment. The pseudo-intellectual can thus masquerade as an intellectual with impunity; and the bar for what passes for quality content is lowered for everyone else. Charlatans are oftentimes seen as fonts of wisdom...which leads to the widespread ingestion of the aforementioned rubbish: ultra-flavorful, yet with no nutritional value.

Those who are inured to the intellectual decay of modern society are inclined to scoff at those holding content-creators to certain standards. To belittle those who DO have standards is—in effect—to advertise one's own obsequiousness. Even in NON-fiction, we see trash-pulp indiscriminately peddled to eager consumers...who are hankering for validation and/or the next bout of cheap gratification. Only in an intellectually desolate wasteland can this sort of behavior be seen as worthwhile.

This vicious cycle of inanity creates a positive (read: disastrous) feedback loop: people are accustomed to it, so they come to want it. As mental habits become ingrained, expectations solidify. Participants in this charade peacock for their “followers” as they soak in a warm bath of unreason and myopia. At every opportunity, users scroll through the latest content—earnestly searching for their next dopamine rush. Soon, non-intellectualism transmogrifies into ANTI-intellectualism; as the absence of cognitive exertion eventually morphs into an aversion to all things intellectual.

Ironically, anti-intellectuals don't hide their ignorance, they flaunt it. As they rollick in their sciolism, they deride intellectual pursuit as the province of “literary snobs”. Hence the existence of BookTok.

Vibrant culture requires self-criticism; self-criticism requires critical reflection; and THAT requires self-awareness. It also requires a respect for intellectual prowess. (A dab of common sense wouldn't hurt either.) Life is short; time is limited. With so much great writing out there, why in heaven's name would one want to squander so many hundreds / thousands of hours on shitty material? Even during the course of a lifetime, most of us will never get around to reading many of the masterpieces from around the world. We owe it to ourselves to try to expose our minds to as much great literature as we can.

Conclusion:

Great literature reveals what we might otherwise not have seen. Shakespeare exposed the depredations of racism in *Othello*, of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice*, of avarice in *Macbeth*, of perfidy in *Coriolanus*, of vainglory (and lack of integrity) in *King Lear*, and of a fixation on family bloodlines in *Romeo And Juliet*. One wonders what wisdom we are supposed to glean from something like, say, *The People We Meet On Vacation*.

I get it. When they decide to read, some people want simple prose. They want it to be an entirely leisurely affair, so cognitive exertion is not part of the plan. So they've come to expect a certain caliber of writing. (Should they be forced to read *Finnegan's Wake*, their heads would explode.) The gauging of realistic expectations has shifted dramatically over the last generation or two. Granted, we shouldn't expect teens to tackle something as harrowing as *Moby Dick* every month; but we might expect a tad bit more substantial than the latest Sarah J. Maas / Colleen Hoover detritus.

Our deteriorating standards is not without repercussions; as it is a bell-weather for the degradation of overall public discourse. As online commentator, Neida Teresa put it: “I can draw a direct line from the popularity of the ‘Acotar’ series and the rise of Donald Trump.” The downstream effects of our diminished literacy can be seen in all sectors of society—from politics to commerce to social norms.

How does the present thesis hold up? Consider the objection: “Hey! At least people are **READING**. Reading **SOMETHING** is better than not reading **ANYTHING**.” Well...yes and no. An analogy to diet should make the point. Eating junk-food is bad. Not eating at all leads to starvation. So...eating nothing but junk-food is better than simply not eating. Right?

Well...eating junk-food is, indeed, less awful; yet it is still highly problematic. The rationalization, “It’s not as bad as starving to death” is not a green light to disregard the nutritional value of the food that one eats. (Imagine the purveyor of Twinkies making the plea: “Hey, at least we’re getting people to eat!”) The analogy only goes so far. The difference, of course, is that the vast majority of people would likely be eating no matter what; whereas many consumers of trash-pulp would otherwise not be reading anything at all. But where shall we place the blame for this lamentable fact? (Hint: Abysmally low standards in American schools; coupled with the preponderance of social-media usage in those schools.)

The fact that so many bestsellers—in fantasy and in virtually any other genre—tend to be of such low caliber is a canary in an increasingly dreary coal-mine. When people are intellectually sedentary for long enough, intellectual paralysis is soon to follow; and tens of millions of working-class blokes are hoodwinked into joining something like MAGA. Genuine scholarship is no longer respected, serious journalism is no longer valued, great literature is no longer appreciated (or even recognized), and many people today wouldn’t know high-quality content if it was labeled with flashing neon lights. In due course, wisdom is displaced by the asseverations of self-absorbed “influencers”.

As the hoi polloi languish in a vast miasma of hyper-stimulation and fatuity, they while their time away on social media, transfixed by the latest sensationalized bunk. The intellectual blight with which America is now afflicted does not bode well for deliberative democracy. The good news: None of this is preordained. We have it within us to do better.

* Funny enough, even titles have come to follow the same template: **X of Y and Z**. So, in addition to Maas’ “Crescent City” and “A Court Of...” series, there’s Andrews’ *A Court Of Ice And Ash*. This goes for kingdoms too. There’s *A Kingdom Of Blood And Betrayal* ...and *A Kingdom Of Flesh And Fire*. Have a thing for crowns? Well, then, there’s *Crown Of Light And Shadows* ...and *Crown Of Coral And Pearl*. How about houses? There’s *A House Of Salt And Sorrows* ...and *House Of Bane And Blood*. And as for blood, there’s *A Blade Of Blood And Shadow*, *Days Of Blood And Starlight*, and *The Primal Of Blood And Bone*...as well as *A Soul Of Ash And Blood*. Prefer smoke? There’s *Bargain Of Smoke And Vines* ...and *Daughter Of Smoke And Bone*. If you’re a fan of curses, there’s *A Curse Of Blood And Stone* ...and *Curse Of Shadows And Thorns*. Does a more bleak motif tickle your fancy? There’s *A Fate Of Wrath And Flame* ...and *A Prince Of Death And Night*. Want a Native American theme? There’s Mariely Lares’ *Sun Of Blood And Ruin* and *Dawn Of Fate And Fire*. The pattern is almost comical. Marion Blackwood went ahead and titled each installment in her “Flame And Thorns” series in this way; as did M. Guida with her “French Quarter Vampire Enforcer” series and J.L. Madore with her “Diamond Dagger Mafia” duology. I.J. Andrews and K.F. Breene titled ALL their books using this single template. Such replication is a reminder that it’s all about savvy branding. (Variations on this format can also be found on the bestseller bookshelves. After *A King Of Battle And Blood* and *A Queen of Myth And Monsters*, Scarlett St. Clair opted for “A Touch Of...” and “A Game Of...” for her titles.) This catchy titular pattern has proven to be market gold; so it’s not going away anytime soon. In the meantime, one might try snacking on a sandwich of ham and cheese.

** Here, I list the worst of the worst. The question arises: Is there any (YA) “romantasy” that’s a notch up in quality? Answer: some. For the enemies-to-lovers trope, I’ve heard that Thea Guanzon’s *Hurricane*

Wars was done well. I've also heard that Broadbent's "Nightborn" and "Shadowborn" duologies aren't so bad; though a far cry from great. Gabaldon's "Outlander" series is fine. For strong female protagonists, Sarah Kozloff's "Nine Realms" tetralogy and Leigh Bardugo's "Six Of Crows" duology are (supposedly) pretty good. A lot is lackluster...yet still worth reading. (Becky Chambers, Saba Tahir, Hannah Kaner, and V.E. Schwab have written some decent books.) Pierce Brown's "Red Rising" trilogy and R.F. Kuang's **Babel** are said to be relatively well-crafted tales about the challenges of socio-economic stratification: highly-concentrated power, top-down control, and the systematic exploitation of the rabble that is indicative of such societies. Meanwhile, some very high quality "beach reads" do exist (Pat Conroy comes to mind). A question remains: What of GOOD SPICE? To wit: Is there good sci-fi / fantasy smut for adults? Yep. Take, for instance, Ruby Dixon's imaginative "Barbarians" series. If that's your thing, then go nuts. Enjoy. But don't pretend that—as you indulge in such fare—you're expanding your literary horizons. As much as we love eating Oreo cookies, those with level heads realize that it is not the nutrition that makes each bite so delicious.

*** Jen L. Grey penned "Twisted Fate" and "Rejected Fate" trilogies: "dark romances" that involve wolves. If you prefer faeries AND wolves, Grey's got that too. (Next up: A love triangle between a vampire, a faery, and a werewolf...each of whom is looking to fulfill a prophecy. Preferably at a magic academy. And with lots 'n lots of sex.) While most of this is low-brow writing, it attests to brilliant marketing. Make no mistake: Such fare is meeting a demand that exists; and it is growing in intriguing ways (see Addendum).

Addendum:

The penchant for tales about bestial trysts seems to be more common than we might expect. Hence a marketplace where teens are opting for **The Gargoyle And The Spinster** instead of **James And The Giant Peach**. Gargoyle, you say? Yes, indeed. Evidently, some female readers are pining for **A Wolf In My Tavern**...which explains the emergence of a peculiar new genre—best described as monster-smut.

As it turns out, the "shadow-daddy" trope is only the tip of a much larger iceberg. A desire for the affections of a handsome elf is one thing; a yearning to be reamed by the enormous shaft of an actual bull is quite another. Over the past decade (or two), a non-trivial portion of adolescent girls have been venturing further along the Barbot scale. As a consequence, tens of thousands of American women are now reading **Morning Glory Milking Farm**. In light of this, it may be time to take stock; and assess.

I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with spooage-harvesting. I don't even have anything against jerking off minotaurs. Bumbling frat-boys can be boring; so some female readers prefer to imagine something a bit more extraordinary: being shagged by a non-human stud. We've come a long way from **Sweet Valley High**. Upon considering this intriguing narrative twist, it is worth asking: What does this popular new genre say about current trends in reading—specifically amongst young adults?

The point of such fare, it seems, is to eschew the archetype of the submissive, doting housewife (i.e. hewing to the gender roles to which women have traditionally been assigned). Such mores have been constraining half the world's population for thousands of years. Progressive story-telling flouts such antiquated conventions. Bravo. Yet this particular genus of story-telling leads us down a rather bizarre road...often ending in monster gang-bangs. So instead of **Beauty And The Beast**, we get **The Widow And The Orcs**. (Yes, that's "orcs": plural. Goodness gracious.) Welcome to the exciting new world of monster-smut: a sub-genre of "dark romance"—itself a common element of "dark fantasy". It is, in essence, "romantasy" with lots of weird stuff going on. This new style of romance is not the wholesome fare of a Disney animated feature. Rather, it involves a gamine's long-repressed craving for a hunky Casanova with big

horns and—god willing—an even bigger scrotum.

There's no denying that such a jolting narrative has some appeal. Each reader is invited to live vicariously through the salacious hijinks of a young lass who is—shall we say—exploring her naughty side. This is all fine and dandy. Yet one crucial element is lacking: ACTUAL female empowerment. (Buyer beware: Don't let the bestiality distract you from the vacuity.) By the final page of these heterodox novels, the protagonist finds herself with a humanoid inamorato, stained bedsheets, and a bruised vulva. It's not exactly Ralph Waldo Emerson; but it's SOMETHING.

What might explain the resounding success of this literary phenomenon? I offer a hypothesis. For many women, there is a two-fold longing: TO BE CONQUERED BY and TO TAME the beast. The former is primal; the latter is romantic. This explains the depiction of—well—lots of sex with ACTUAL beasts in a surprising number of recently-published books.

Amidst this rather eccentric plot device, a question arises: Is the penchant for (vicarious) bestiality just another manifestation of the aforementioned female fantasy; or is there something else is going on here?

We have only so much time to read; so our selection of books reveals a hierarchy of priorities. What motivates us? What inspires us? This plays a role in what sort of material draws us in. What makes a narrative compelling? Satisfying? It is no longer adequate to be wooed by a good-looking gentleman with promising career prospects; female readers want to immerse themselves in a scandalous tale about a swain with quivering loins who—as fate would have it—finds herself being courted by a hybrid species with rippling abs and a gigantic schlong.

Splendid.

But what else does such fare hold in store for the hapless reader? Titillating banality. Minimal mental effort; quick and easy pay-off; another hit of dopamine. My point: Once we get past all the frothy drool and jiz-battered uvulas, it might be nice to explore more thoughtful themes—be it how to overcome the ennui of an exasperatingly mundane life or contend with the depredations of late-stage capitalism. One can't help but wonder: Is reading about a maiden chugging bull semen an effective way to deal with existential despondency? Might there be alternatives?

Most young adults are worried about paying bloated student loans, securing a dependable job, and keeping up with next month's rent. It makes sense, then, that a little bit of escapism might offer a temporary reprieve from life's tribulations. Fantasy is an effective way to do this. But we must pose the question: Is monster-smut the optimal route to take? The jury is out. Many female readers find themselves asking: If the goal is ONLY titillation, then why not indulge in some erotica...even if the trysts don't always involve homo sapiens?

Caveat: It is possible that—if one really really tries—one can find some didactic value to *Morning Glory Milking Farm*—perhaps a metaphor for the exploitation of labor (the commodification—and thus dehumanization—of workers) endemic to a hyper-capitalist society. But this is somewhat of a stretch...requiring lots of eisegesis. The depredations of the gig-economy have little to do with harvesting spooze from mythical creatures. (Receiving minimum wage for thankless jobs is more about being a cog in a merciless, profit-maximizing corporate machine than it is about having a torrid love-affair with a sympathetic brute with dreamy, brown eyes and a massive cock.) After all is said and done, there's nothing especially groundbreaking here. Erotic anime cornered the market for industrialized masturbation four decades ago. And monetizing kink dates back to the dawn of human civilization.

So WHAT OF monster-smut? It is quite telling that the love-interest works as a monster only insofar as he is imbued with humanity. In most cases, we find that the appeal of the love-interest is not just his hulking anatomy, but his capacity to be loyal, empathetic, and affectionate. Given this distinctive narrative pattern, it is worth exploring the underlying psychological mechanisms at play. The attraction of the (oft-cartoonish) characters in these stories reminds us of the different carnal proclivities of men and women. The former are primarily aroused VISUALLY (hence the preponderance of porn-watching); the latter are primarily aroused EMOTIONALLY (hence a preference for captivating narratives). But it's safe to say that associating pleasure with monsters is not exactly...well...ideal; be it for girls or for boys. (Lest we forget, men have been drooling over non-human seductresses for thousands of years—from buxom succubi to busty sprites. The difference is that the appeal of these humanoid vixens is strictly AESTHETIC.)

Exoticism has always had an allure. I dare say, though, that preferring intimacy with monsters over humans is not the most salubrious disposition...for either men or women. (It is just as dubious when men expect their beau to be a servile pixie with a tiny waste and oversized bust. There must be no double standards in our assessment.) The concern, then, is the channeling of libidinal impulses in anti-social ways. Disaffected, lonely men aren't scrambling for customizable A.I. porn because they're looking for a deep, meaningful human connection. Likewise, women aren't swooning over debonair centaurs because they already have a fulfilling relationship with a real-life beau. Authenticity is entirely beside the point; it's the efficacy of the emulation that counts.

In assaying this beguiling literary trend, it's important to be charitable; as it reflects a very real social phenomenon that is to be understood rather than mocked. Given the aforementioned psychological realities, the predilection for monster-sex ALMOST makes sense. Heck; if a book spurs imagination, then everything should be hunky-dory. Right? Well, I guess. I just take pause when I catch wind of a teen girl speculating about a man-bison pumping her virginal cooch full of his copious load as he yanks on her pig-tails. (Clean-up on aisle 5.) I suspect that there are more salutary sexual fantasies on offer—those that are more in keeping with healthy sexual encounters between consenting (human) adults. Does my skepticism here stem from a puritanical mindset? Hardly. Indeed, a critical response to this new reading trend isn't so much a matter of pearl-clutching as it is a concern for the susceptibilities—and follies—of adolescence.

So here we are: We've gone from the maiden wanting to be saved from the dragon to the maiden wanting to get fucked by the dragon. This may be a sort of transference—that is: transference of secretly-desired toxic masculinity onto an object-of-affection that, in not being human, ameliorates the cognitive dissonance that invariably ensues after having (rightly) DENOUNCED toxic masculinity...even as the arousal persists. This audacious narrative twist amounts to a free pass for guilt-free enjoyment of machismo, which has been shorn of the moral concerns germane to HUMANS. To wit: One needn't abandon one's feminism in order to have a dalliance with NON-homo sapiens.

And so it goes: With monster-smut, any hint of pseudo-feminist hypocrisy is magically erased. (After all, no woman has ever been betrayed by a centaur. So hey! Why not give it a whirl?) To recapitulate: The “shadow-daddy” trope has its appeal in that it offers an alluringly mysterious love-interest with glistening muscles, towering virility, and piercing eyes. Behold a stud-muffin who, while slightly dangerous (yummy!), actually CARES (hallelujah!) These character traits emulate the sexy “bad-boy” motif that has been operative in love stories since the Bronze Age. So what's the problem?

Well...as we venture further along the Barbot scale, the humanity of the love-interest is sacrificed on the altar of kink. That's not necessarily a good thing. Be that as it may, it is not nearly as bad as seeing teen girls reading some of the dreck mentioned earlier in this essay. (The trash-pulp of Sarah J. Maas makes reading monster-smut seem like reading Charles Dickens by comparison.) Is the partiality for non-human characters a natural progression from the use of animals children's lit (e.g. *The Wind In The Willows*,

Charlotte's Web, and *The Cricket In Time's Square*)? It's no secret that many outgrow the (jejeune) taste for talking animals that made so much sense during childhood. There comes a point in our lives when it's time to move on.

How much of this boils down to personal taste? Admittedly, some reading is an acquired taste (consider the limited appeal of, say, *The Sound And The Fury* or *Infinite Jest*). While we mustn't disparage genres that we happen not to OURSELVES enjoy (grimdark, cyberpunk, and magical realism aren't for everyone), there is still room for objective analysis...when it comes to literature qua literature. It is in this vain that I express some compunctions about monster-smut.

So what of "spice"? Even some libertines might balk at "dark romances" that feature a vaguely humanoid entity as the paramour. One doesn't have to be a priggish schoolmarm to suppose that there are better alternatives to this particular literary fetish—alternatives that push all the right buttons without having to resort to bestial escapades. In most YA material, "spice" is entirely gratuitous; and even incommensurate with the narrative. (It makes sense that Susan Pevensie didn't want to hump Aslan behind the hedges when nobody was looking.) Erotica has its place; but that place isn't everywhere.

While we all loved non-human characters in our youth (Winnie-the-Pooh, Black Beauty, Stuart Little, etc.), I venture to say that it might be somewhat of a misstep to mix eroticism with anthropomorphism. (Gosh-golly, what else was George "curious" about?) The prospect of sexual congress with a charming demon may be intriguing; but—in the grand scheme of things—it has limited purchase.

The inclusion of monster-smut doesn't suddenly become prudent simply because readers have reached adolescence. There are better ways we weave a captivating yarn, even when putting our lascivious predispositions on full display—as the Marquis de Sade demonstrated with *Juliette* over two centuries ago. Talking animals are always a nice touch. Note to authors: sex is all-the-more poignant when it isn't over-done. In the rare instance it DOES occur in the story, it's a pleasant surprise (see Simmons' *Hyperion*). Otherwise, it becomes tedious (see Suzanne Wright's "The Phoenix Pack" series). A promiscuous use of erotic content dilutes the impact of the scene. This makes what should be titillating tedious instead. (The same goes for violence: When over-done, it becomes banal; see McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.) So go ahead and feature non-human characters in your fantastical tale, but leave Baloo's dick out of it. (The bear necessities can only go so far.)

When done well, erotica tends to involve homo sapiens; and that's a good thing. It seems unlikely that monster-smut would be the next phase in literary evolution from Peter Rabbit. Prudence isn't always about being prudish. One can introduce poignancy into one's narrative without a profusion of "spice".

To conclude: It is worth inquiring: How much sense does it make to retain the puerility of talking animals when we graduate to adult content? I suspect there are better and worse ways to go about said evolution. Alas. Gone are the days of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. We've entered a brave new world of philandering Fae overlords, gallant werewolves, and suave vampires...with a "spice" level surpassing that of habaneros. Where does this leave us? Time will tell. Is this a passing fad, or a harbinger of things to come? That's anyone's guess. One thing we can say for certain: Monster-smut is more a gimmick than a serious exploration of romantic love. And it comes with a panoply of potential drawbacks.

Prevailing trends are a reflection of the public psyche; so we should always take note of the latest fads, and see what impels them. This requires critical reflection more than alarmism.

When it comes to this particular fad, we might wonder what is attracting so much attention. To reiterate: Even many teen girls are drawn to this popular new genre. So they find themselves opting for *Kiss Of A Demon King* rather than *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man*. Okey-dokey. But...even as we

remain open-minded, we should ask ourselves: To what extent is this kind of content transplanting good literature...about HUMANS? There's only so much time to read; and how we allocate that time tells us a lot about our priorities.