



The Pleasures of the Difficult

[Jonathan Baumbach](#)

Something like ten years ago, Robert Coover, an occasionally difficult writer, hosted a conference/party at Brown University to celebrate a group of sometimes difficult writers who have been characterized (some of them, some of the time) as postmodernists. The occasion was the retirement from teaching of the novelist John Hawkes. The postmodernists panel, the main event of the conference, which included William Gass, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, Stanley Elkin and John Hawkes, was moderated by the critic Leslie Fiedler. In his concluding remarks Fiedler announced that in his view there was a popular writer whose work would outlive the distinguished writers on the panel and that writer was (pause for dramatic effect) Stephen King. In making his outrageous pronouncement, Fiedler was probably expressing more than his own populist position. Accessibility is and was having its own celebration in American letters. The prevailing view in certain establishment quarters is that if a novel can't be read by virtually everyone, it hardly has a reason to be read by anyone.

In the distorting light of immediate impression, one's own period tends to seem more extreme than any other, our deficiencies more egregious. This literary moment's persuasive illusion is that fewer works that challenge the reader's skills are being read. The reasons may be beside the point, though they are everywhere apparent. Impatience seems high on the list. We want immediate payoffs for our commitments of time and concentration. Fiction, suggests the evidence, tends to be used more and more as a licit form of drug abuse.

The difficult in fiction has a variety of faces. There are opaque surfaces, obscure diction, work that is challenging conceptually. There are also fictions that appear simple that are deceptively elusive. Difficult fiction is not, as has been assumed, less emotionally compelling than readily accessible work. The fiction I'm talking about tends to resist easy manipulation, does not wear its emotional life on its sleeve. It's arguable, of course, but I'm not alone in thinking that the most original fiction in America of the last three decades comes by and large from the difficult writers on the postmodernists panel at Brown ten years ago.

Originality tends to generate difficulty in that it breaks faith with expectation, undermines the prevailing verities of last season's fashion. Originality, by definition, takes us by surprise. Surprise is one of the touchstones of art. Literary art is always difficult during our first unescorted encounter with it. It often arrives without fanfare and without self-defining context.

It's probably fair to say that art sells only when it becomes an identifiable commodity. Commercial publishing tends to court literary work that is a thinly disguised variation on the recognizably artful — last year's award winner tricked out to seem at once new and safely familiar. We are continually offered the illusion that there is nothing new by people who believe that the new is really just the same old thing shrewdly disguised in this year's marketing strategy.

It is easy to blame television for corrupting our habits, which is one of those partial truths in general currency. Liking television doesn't preclude liking to read. Television is our national tranquilizer, the drug that talks back and has no calculable effect on our bodily chemistry. It is a hard act for written fiction to follow. Even the simplest books require the translation of language into thought and image.

Reading itself, reading anything, is an ambitious act in an age dominated by visual media. Still, what's the point of reading work that is like television when television itself is tastier and more digestible, and less time-consuming. If one reads at all, doesn't it make sense to go for an experience in which language (the medium itself) is central, something one can't get from television or movies or anything else?

My concern is with the onerous tendency toward greater accessibility in literary fiction at the expense of mystery. The system of course has its own self-referring logic. Books brought out by small presses with little or no publicity budget, which is to say little or no public identification, have virtually no hope of selling fast enough to earn shelf space in the stop-and-shop bookstores. Review media unwittingly collaborate with the chain of circumstances that discriminates against difficult fiction. Media give extensive review space by and large to books publishers announce as important through, among other signifiers, commitment of advertising budget. Even writers of major established reputations who are not perceived to have large audiences pay the price.

For example, in the August 7, 1988, *New York Times Book Review*, John Hawkes, one of our great

originals, was reviewed on page 11. The reviewer, Patrick McGrath, ends his mostly admiring review with, "It [*Whistlejacket*] is nonetheless an intricate and tantalizing book, quite strong enough to maintain John Hawkes's position as the most consistently interesting writer, in terms of formal inventiveness, intelligence and sheer grace of prose, at work in the U.S. today." Good to see John Hawkes given his due on page 11, but if fashion allowed, if the difficult were not in disrepute, we might see a new novel by the most consistently interesting writer in the U.S. today acknowledged on page 1.

Now I come with some trepidation to the argument hitherto implicit in the title of this piece. What's fun about reading fiction that yields itself grudgingly? Ah, fun! Still, I think it reasonable to say that the more active we are as readers the greater the potential satisfaction in the reading experience. The more we give to a text the more the text yields in return. It's a bit like love. But isn't everything?

The reader who is interested in the music of a sentence (that reader all writers imagine for themselves) is willing to brave the difficult in pursuit of discovery. It is not the resolution of difficulty he is after, but the nature of the mysterious, mysteriousness itself.

Take for example a favorite passage of mine from John Hawkes's *The Lime Twig* :

Alone with the tar doors dripping and the petrol and horsewater drifting down the gutters, the boy would waggle the animal's fat head, hide its slow shocked eyes in his hands, flop it upright and listen to its heart. His fingers were always feeling the black gums or the soft wormy little legs or quickly freeing and pulling open the eyes so that he, the thin boy, could stare into them. No fields, sunlight, larks — only the stoned alley like a footpath or a quay down which a black ship might come sailing if the wind held, and down beneath the mists coming off the dead steeple-cocks the boy with the poor dog in his arms and loving his close scrutiny of the nicks in its ears, tiny channels over the dog's brain, pictures he could find on its purple tongue, pearls he could discover between the claws. Love is a long close scrutiny like that. I loved mother in the same way.

To my eye, this passage itself makes an unassailable case for the difficult. And maybe, in the long run, the difficult is not really so difficult. Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, has lost much of its vaunted difficulty with time because of our increasing familiarity with its once radical-seeming conventions; its techniques have been afloat in the literary air for years. What remains undiminished, as with the Hawkes passage, is the surprise of its language.

If one goes to the trouble of reading, maybe one ought to read books that are as treacherous as whitewater rafting, books that throw one's whole way of seeing into question. Difficult fiction is probably dangerous; it undermines more preconceptions than we are often ready to yield. At its best, as in the novels of John Hawkes, it gives one the exhilaration of having survived the ineffably perilous. As a consequence of such reckoning, we are as readers, for the moment at least, new born.

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DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Hawkes, John. *The Lime Twig, Second Skin, Travesty*. Penguin USA, 1996. Paperback, 352 pgs., \$14.95.

ALSO OF INTEREST (Recent Publications)

Barthelme, Donald. *Sixty Stories*. E P Dutton, 1995. Paperback, \$14.95.

Barthelme, Donald. *Snow White*. Scribner, 1996. Paperback, 186 pgs., \$11.00.

Coover, Robert. *Briar Rose*. Grove Press, 1998. Paperback, 96 pgs., \$11.00.

Coover, Robert. *Ghost Town*. Grove Press, 2000. Paperback, 160 pgs., \$12.00.

Coover, Robert. *A Night at the Movies Or, You Must Remember This*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1997. Paperback, 197 pgs., \$11.95.

Coover, Robert. *Pinocchio in Venice*. Grove Press, 1997. Paperback, 336 pgs., \$12.00.

Coover, Robert. *Pricksongs & Descants: Fictions*. Grove Press, 2000. Paperback, 256 pgs., \$12.00.

Elkin, Stanley. *Boswell: A Modern Comedy*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1999. Paperback, 372 pgs., \$13.95.

Elkin, Stanley. *Criers & Kibitzers, Kibitzers & Criers*. Dalkey Archive Press, 2000. Paperback, 272 pgs., \$12.95.

Elkin, Stanley. *The MacGuffin*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1999. Paperback, 283 pgs., \$12.95.

Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1998. Paperback, 512 pgs., \$16.95.

Gaddis, William. *Carpenter's Gothic*. Penguin USA, 1999. Paperback, 272 pgs., \$13.95.

Gaddis, William. *JR*. Penguin USA, 1993. Paperback, 725 pgs., \$18.95.

Gaddis, William. *The Recognitions*. Penguin USA, 1993. Paperback, \$21.95.

Gass, William. *Cartesian Sonata: And Other Novellas*. Basic Books, 2000. Paperback, 304 pgs., \$15.00.

Gass, William. *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country & Other Stories*. David R. Godine, 1984. Paperback, \$12.95.

Gass, William. *Omensetter's Luck: A Novel*. Penguin USA, 1997. Paperback, 320 pgs., \$12.95.

Gass, William. *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1999. Paperback, 64 pgs., \$11.95.

Hawkes, John. *The Frog*. Penguin USA, 1997. Paperback, 208 pgs., \$11.95.

Hawkes, John. *An Irish Eye*. Penguin USA, 1998. Paperback, 176 pgs., \$12.95.

Hawkes, John. *The Owl and the Goose on the Grave/Two Short Novels*. Sun & Moon Press, 1995. Paperback, 217 pgs., \$12.95.

Hawkes, John. *Whistlejacket : A Novel*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1997. Paperback, 208 pgs., \$12.95.

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