
AT ISSUE

The Breaks

Body-snatching space pods—they resemble squash with a thyroid condition and hormonal imbalance—first invaded the earth in the mid-1950s, so we're coming up on a 40th anniversary. Fall asleep near one of them, and the malevolent pod will suck the life out of you, *become* you, assume your appearance, erase your humanity, and leave your former body an empty husk. The vegetables have settled in nicely, and their presence explains a lot: the capacity of politicians to keep smiling; the diction of the flight attendants who read survival instructions to you before takeoff; the demeanor of TV newscasters who respond the same way to war, the weather, a new movie, school murders, a lost cat, space travel, sports highlights, and the disappearance of shame from society.

I sometimes wonder whether some podlike process is not at work in the larger culture as well, allowing familiar forms to remain but replacing their old animating spirit with something new and alien, as if there had been a break in the chromosome that carried the traditional cultural characteristics. Evidence is abundant but ambiguous, and the temptation is to read for homicide, though the offense may be no more serious than double-parking.

Not many minutes into the television adaptation of Stephen King's *The Stand* that was broadcast this past spring (all spring, it seemed), folks began to go face down into their mashed potatoes. These were cast members for the most part, not viewers, and they were afflicted by a deadly virus that moved a whole lot faster than the show and threatened the end of the world as we know it. A few Camille-like coughs, a little light-headedness, and *wham*, you were on the ground posed artfully against a post, and deader than the wood. As ends of the world go, this one was certainly cheaper to stage than some hot apocalypse, but it was not entirely convincing. They never even showed the virus, unless it appeared

during one of my trips to the refrigerator.

Toward the close of the first episode, a high-ranking military man who held himself responsible for unleashing the pesky bug was moved to recite poetry (a sure sign that death was near). He managed several lines from Yeats's "The Second Coming," just the ones you'd expect under the circumstances ("Things fall apart," etc.) for those who were missing the point of doomsday. And then he told his young associate and the millions of viewers who were his audience that "a man named Yeets wrote those lines." This was by far the most interesting thing that had happened all evening. But was I dozing and had I misheard? No, he was named again, several moments later, this same dour, prophetic "Yeets" fellow. Good lord, I thought, it really is the end of the world, and not with a bang or a bug but a vowel shift.

WQ The most obvious, and chilling, explanation was that neither the actor nor the director nor any one of the many other people making art happen on the set of *The Stand* knew enough to propose going with the traditional "Yates"—just for the heck of it. Or perhaps some did know, and didn't care: It's only television, for goodness' sake, and there won't be a final exam. My stubborn and relentlessly tested faith in the intelligence of those who have undertaken responsibility for the nation's common cultural life invented an explanation of last resort: "Yeets" was actually a subtle bit of characterization, to suggest that the military man was untutored and had only a rough and self-acquired bookish learning; visual, you see, not aural. Alas, the umpteen other hours of *The Stand* stood (but mostly slumped, slouched, and went supine) foursquare against subtlety.

To fret over a matter so slight, to assign it any significance, is probably less high-minded than high-horsed. Give these folks credit—or maybe half-credit—for the attempt, for keeping the cultural shell, even if the shell and the gesture were empty. Charity says ignore the

lapse; constructive derision may keep it from happening again. The film was expensive and wildly popular and wanted to be loved for its ambition (and even, heaven help us, for its theology). It was selling boutique horror, not dime store fright, and at those prices we deserve the tradition in its own body.

"People don't read anymore." Another tradition interred. You hear it said all the time, but what does it mean? On public transportation in Washington, D.C., most riders who have any distance to travel appear to be traveling with books (as they did in New York City, my previous public laboratory). The few bookstores in downtown Washington are crowded enough at lunchtime that the air in the aisles is often sweet with "excuse me's" and "pardons." More airports have bookstores, not merely bookshelves. Terrible movies, which leave you so stricken you lose the will to leave at the end and so are forced to endure the crawl of the terminal credits and learn the names of the leading lady's personal trainer, butcher, and gynecologist, announce finally that they have been made into books and invite the audience to experience them all over again in their altered state. Literate masochists take note.

So the evidence of the senses contradicts the notion that no one reads, as do sales figures for the titles that capture a place on best-seller lists; a small number of titles sell a large number of books. But you suspect the pods have done their worst when you look over people's shoulders at *what* they're reading—counterfeit romances, wan and unedited techno-thrillers, distended biographies in desperate need of a purge, cloudy political gossip, and manuals of every description (*You and Your Aura*, *Eat and Compete*, *The Compleat Gender Bender*, *Living with Liposuction*, *Fast Food/Slow Death*, *Men Run Companies/Women Run Errands*). For printed materials of this sort—"books" sticks in the throat—there is an insatiable audience, indifferent to aesthetics, in thrall not to truth but to information, hell-bent on turning the straw of their self-doubt into the common coin of dudgeon.

I concede the occasional Bible in the hands of those past fashion, and the traditional title that absorbs the dutiful student. But the audience for serious fiction, for literature, has

diminished, as has the inclination of publishers to print it. I am speaking of work that sorts out the confusion and complexity of our human state and conveys, however fleetingly, a true impression of what is essential to being human. Saul Bellow has been an eloquent advocate, as in the Nobel Prize lecture he gave in December 1976: "The value of literature lies in these intermittent 'true impressions.' A novel moves back and forth between the world of objects, of actions, of appearances, and that other world, from which these 'true impressions' come and which moves us to believe that the good we hang on to so tenaciously, in the face of evil, so obstinately—is no illusion."

Serious fiction has a distinctive style and manner and shape, such that you risk being caught up short while reading a sentence or paragraph and moved to read it again, perhaps aloud; to hear the words in the order the author has placed them and to take pleasure in the aptness of the disposition. No manual works this magic.

Not everything needs to be *The Golden Bowl*, and there is a long tradition of respectable popular fiction that doesn't pretend to greatness but is still worth protecting from the sudden summer shower at the beach. In the past, what was popular often coincided with what was meritorious. Bellow's *Herzog*, for example, sat atop best-seller lists for months, which now seems inconceivable. (I have not forgotten that a seagull once perched month after month in the same spot and made life miserable for everyone below him. He should sit forever on a bridge in Madison County.) Marquand, O'Hara, Porter, Cheever, Updike, Mailer, Welty, Percy, and others did all right, too.

Despite the occasional eccentric success of a Cormac McCarthy or an E. Annie Proulx, the fiction that sells today, and that people in great numbers read, is to literature as Fido to White Fang. Of course serious fiction is still published, but it matters to relatively few. Those who continue to write it, against the dicey prospect of critical success and financial reward (by which one no longer means sales in the tens of thousands and a movie option, but simply the rent

money), deserve laurel for their resolve.

You want the human condition? Open your eyes and face the day, and the traffic, and the endless news reports and updates and bulletins, the view from weather satellites, the warnings from those who urge you to watch your wallet and your back, your figure, and your self-esteem. Scan your *People*. Turn on Court TV or *Cops*. This is life mainlined, reality in a rush, even for the inattentive. How can reading compete? It is freeze-frame, the details held steady for review and explanation, in a fast-forward age that barely has time for the gist.

I suppose we should be grateful when a cultural link one assumed forever broken is unexpectedly repaired, even if with KrazyGlue. Such is the case with the newfound popularity of Gregorian chant—plainsong—an art evolved by the papal choir some 14 centuries ago. In exchange for our cultural tokens—burgers and terminators and Madonna—Europe has once again sent monks, not to give us one last shot at civilization but to allow commerce one more shot at us.

Gregorian chant is not new to recorded music. The Benedictines of Solesmes Abbey in France, for example, have been recording for many years, and the irresistible Frenchness of their Latin vowels helps explain Caesar's passion for Gaul. But it was their brother Benedictines, from the abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos in northern Spain, whose recordings of Gregorian plainsong sparked the new interest in introits—in Europe first, and then worldwide.

When it was released in America by Angel (a sign surely), the monks' disk rose on the pure swelling arc of their voices past Gorecki and the rappers and the three ceaseless tenors to the top of the charts, lower than heaven but plenty high enough—double platinum, in fact, in just 17 weeks. All the material is in the public domain, and the monks don't do lunch: That's music-executive heaven. Other recording companies climbed on the bandwagon and into the nave. They plundered their back catalogues for plainsong, blew off the dust, and tarted up covers.

The Spanish friars' competition turned out to be not Snoop or Garth but—other monks!

All these hapless celebrity monks might be better off—royalties apart—and safer at the mercy of old barbarians than in the hands of New Age marketeers. Plainsong is being sold (“plainsong”/“sold,” the juxtaposition marks the giddy alliance) not as an aching stretch for eternity that engages all one's energies but as background noise for breathing exercises and stress reduction, an alternative to birdcalls and whale songs and a flute over surf. We are encouraged to “chill to the chant.” I have heard Italy called many things in my lifetime but not till now—and who expected to live so long?—in a TV commercial hawking two disks by *Italian* friars, “the land where Gregorian chant began.” (The swipe at the Spanish parvenus was clean and telling.) The set carried a money-back guarantee of satisfaction, and it could be bought with a credit card by calling 1-800-55-MONKS.

Did the singers ever dream that the rapt and songful prayer, the holy texts through which they seek to transcend this imperfect world, would be used to numb minds to all the planet's fault lines? Or that their song would have a place in the endless line of slippery enthusiasms we get hold of for a time—hula hoops, pet rocks, one singing nun, oat bran, disco, aerobics, deficit reduction, broccoli, postmodern cool, premillennial angst? What should be cause for celebration—the widely shared rediscovery of one of the glories of the civilization—is clouded by an inquiry into motive. The song's the same, but the meaning has been leached from it: a triumph of space-pod technique. Thus can the New Age instill nostalgia for a Dark Age.

The culture evolves, and dies if it does not. But stable common points of reference are harder to locate, the more so if we take our bearings from the time's deceptive motion. Some say Yeets now, or face life without the mediation of the novelist's art, or whistle plainsong while lacing up the rollerblades. The manuscript is torn through a line, so small a break it should not matter. And yet the absent line makes sense of the page.

—James Morris