

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Words at 10 Paces

**THE SOURCE:** “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction” by Ben Marcus, in *Harper’s*, Oct. 2005.

to see premieres, so filmmakers seeking exposure at Cannes, Sundance, and Toronto are often out of luck. And the smaller, regional festivals willing to show a movie already screened elsewhere just don’t draw crowds. “Distribution is a harsh mistress who cares neither about your artistic integrity nor your ingenuity in pinching a production penny,” he notes.

Independent film success stories only prove that rule. Jonathan Caouette reportedly made his autobiographical film *Tarnation* (2003) for \$218, editing it with home computer software. But it took hundreds of thousands of dollars to acquire the legal rights to the music and film clips he employed. And a distribution company had to spend a lot more before *Tarnation* could come to a theater near you.

In this Darwinian environment, “coolness and savviness” are “the new path to indie legendhood.” Independent filmmakers are labeled “successful” when they manage to marry their visions to the market’s desires. Indie darling Gus Van Sant bear-hugged the commercial world with *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and *Finding Forrester* (2000), but has recently put out a trilogy of “idiosyncratic, contemplative” movies: *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last Days* (2005).

“There is nothing wrong with the cinematic art form that the dismantlement of capitalism wouldn’t fix,” concludes Bujalski. “Until that time, miracles will continue to occur; being miracles, they will be defined by their scarcity. Though perhaps they will not all be divinely inspired.” Faust was last seen panhandling outside UCLA’s film school.

EFFORT IS THE LAST THING that’s supposed to be required of a reader of fiction these days, Ben Marcus observes, with considerable dismay: “Language is meant to flow predigested, like liquid down a feeding tube.” So fiction of the sort he writes (he’s the author of the short-story collection *The Age of Wire and String* and the novel *Notable American Women*), work that may appeal to the head before it appeals to the heart, and that tries to extend the boundaries of language and form, runs headlong into the wall of reigning critical orthodoxy: Fiction should be traditional, realistic, entertaining. It should not be a chore for readers, or it will alienate them. And if readers are put off, the market for literary fiction will collapse. Thus, the orthodoxy is a defense against an imagined doomsday scenario.

Marcus has nothing against literary realism, “a mode I relish for its ordered, pictorial approach to consciousness, its vivid choreography of settings and selves.” But he deplores the dogma that makes realism the only approved mode of fiction writing. Fiction, he argues, has to be open to experimentation—to the likes of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, William Gaddis, and their heirs—or it will atrophy. Marcus believes that “new arrangements are

possible, new styles, new concoctions of language that might set off a series of delicious mental explosions.” But to act on that belief, he says, now gets you marked as “an elitist,” the enemy of “good old-fashioned novels,” someone out to wrinkle readers’ brows.

Marcus takes particular exception to the publicly expressed views of the novelist Jonathan Franzen, “if not the best novelist of his generation, then certainly the most anxious—eager for fame, but hostile to the people who confer it.” Franzen, who went mainstream in

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2001 with his critically acclaimed third novel, *The Corrections*, and suffered the lucrative indignity of great popular success when Oprah Winfrey chose the book for her book club, contends that “unapproachable literature” is being forced upon readers and is putting at risk the commercial prospects of the literary publishing industry. He’s especially harsh on Gaddis, whom he accuses of “writing obtusely just because he can, and secretly hating his own work.”

But Marcus dismisses as absurd the notion that writers who don’t produce realist narratives are actually doing harm, as he does the

notion that difficult writers are breaking a bond with their audiences. “Franzen decides that because he can’t enjoy Gaddis then no one can, and his conclusions all revolve around a bizarre belief that he is somehow the ideal reader for complex, difficult writing, when clearly he is not.”

The writing that Marcus himself

considers “difficult”—“horribly so”—is the characterless stuff that could have been written by anyone. He prefers to work with language “as a painter might with color, as a composer might with sound, as a dancer might with movement, to make something come to life inside our heads: experience, thought, action, feeling.” And he will not concede

that allegiance to the undiscovered possibilities of language and form makes him or other writers who share a similar commitment a threat to the survival of literature: “Maybe literature is fighting for its very life because its powerful pundits have declared a halt to all artistic progress, declaring it pretentious, alienating, bad for business.”

## OTHER NATIONS

# Being Australian

**THE SOURCE:** “John Howard’s Australia” by Rupert Darwall, in *Policy Review*, Aug.–Sept. 2005.

**AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTER** John Howard’s decision to have his country’s troops join in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought him nothing like the amount of political trouble his British counterpart, Tony Blair, has had to endure. One reason Howard escaped a lot of criticism is that he made Australia’s national interest in being allied with America the centerpiece of his public rationale for the decision. That’s something he wouldn’t have been able to do, argues Rupert Darwall, a consultant director of the London-based think tank Reform, if he hadn’t won a political debate in the 1990s about Australia’s national identity and place in the world.

The Labor Party’s Paul Keating began the debate soon after he became prime minister in 1991. He attacked the Australian attitude that “still cannot separate our interests,

our history, or our future from the interests of Britain,” and he urged his compatriots to embrace Australia’s “destiny as a nation in Asia and the Pacific.”

Well before the 1990s, notes Darwall, Australians had begun to update their sense of who they were. “The collapse of British power in the Pacific following the surrender of Singapore to Japan during the Second World War meant that from then on, American power was to be the cornerstone of Australia’s defense.” Although Robert Menzies, the country’s longest-serving prime minister (1939–41, 1949–66), described himself as “British to his bootstraps,” Australians began in the 1960s to edge away from

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their country’s British roots—without rejecting them. But Keating went much further, ridiculing Menzies’s premiership for having “sunk a generation of Australians in Anglophilia and torpor.”

Howard, a member of the conservative Liberal Party, argued that Australia should build upon its political and cultural inheritance from Britain, not try to exorcise it. He “appropriated for the Liberal Party the working man’s sense of nationalism, which previously had been the preserve of Labor,” writes Darwall. “It is tied to Australia’s war experiences and values such as mateship, . . . a concept based on trust and selflessness and absolute interdependence.”

Keating’s pitch that Australia is an Asian country was a hard sell to most Australians. Even prominent Asians see the country as *in* but not *of* Asia. Nonetheless, many of Australia’s cultural and intellectual leaders applauded Keating. “For them, Canberra’s most important bilateral relationship should be with Jakarta or Beijing rather than Washington,” Darwall says. China’s economic power is growing, after all, while America’s, in Keating’s view, is likely to become less important.

In response, Howard argued that