American Literature Readings in the 21st Century

THE *ULYSSES* DELUSION

Rethinking Standards of Literary Merit

Cecilia Konchar Farr

American Literature Readings in the 21st Century

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The Ulysses *Delusion: Rethinking Standards of Literary Merit*
By Cecilia Konchar Farr

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The *Ulysses* Delusion

Rethinking Standards of Literary Merit

Cecilia Konchar Farr

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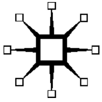

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For Katherine Fishburn, poet and professor, whose attentive mentoring, passionate creativity, and committed scholarship shaped my intellectual life.

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Preface: Ransoming a Reading Nation

It was early July 2009, but it could have been any time—1999, 2015, 1950. It's almost always summer, often nearing the end of a decade, when someone feels compelled to offer America a reading list. This time it was *Newsweek Magazine* with a booklist cover: "What to Read Now."

There, at the beginning of a severe economic recession, between laments at the loss of Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett, were 50 books "that make sense of our time"; it was an eclectic collection of fiction and nonfiction, mostly contemporary, "a highly subjective stab" at suggested summer reading from a group of smart editors and writers at a struggling newsmagazine. And it's a great idea, really. Being an English professor, I have to believe that reading fiction to make sense of things is important even when GM is bankrupt. You go, *Newsweek*.

But why the self-important, protesting-too-much second list, the inevitable, over-reaching meta-list of the "Top 100 Books of All Time"? Of All Time. Seriously?

I tried not to be put off by the audacity of such a project; after all, the *Newsweek* editors pooled a variety of source lists, from Oprah, Wikipedia, and readers' choices, in an effort to be more democratic than these lists tend to be. They constructed a program, crunched the numbers. They assured us that it was all mathematical. Then I tried not to be surprised when, in the end, their 100-book list looked pretty much like every book list before it and the many that have come after. It had only 25 spaces for non-white and non-male writers combined, and fewer still for the genres readers love most—mystery, crime, romance, fantasy, and science fiction.

Finally, I tried, I really did, not to be angry that the list assumed a shared sense of literary value without ever defining what constitutes value, what makes these books "good," or "best."

But there in the teaser ("Here's the first three books. Go to our website for the whole list!") lay the despoiler of my self-control, the demise of my intellectual distance—*Ulysses*. (Remember the way Seinfeld used to say "Newman"? Say it like that.) *Ulysses*: my Emperor's New Book. It shows up on every list, most notably number one on the Modern Library's "Best 100 Novels of the Twentieth Century." It's on both Harold and Allan Bloom's influential lists, many colleges' core reading lists, and everywhere you find "Masterpieces of Literature" or the "Great Books of the Western Canon." It's probably even on *your* must-read-before-I-die list.

Chances are that's where it will stay. Because, truth be told, *Ulysses* is likely the least read Most Important Book of the twentieth century. When I assigned it to my senior seminar students a few years ago, I challenged them to read it in public places. All semester we laughed over stories of strangers in bars and coffee shops admiring our reading choice. They all went something like this:

Stranger: "Wow, good book."
Ulysses reader: "Oh, you've read it?"
Stranger: "No, but . . ."

Novels, especially modern novels, have been the focus of my research for the 25 years I have been a professor. In all those years, I can still almost count on my fingers the number of people I know who have read *Ulysses* cover to cover. If I include my (compelled) senior seminar students, I may have to add a few toes.[1] And yet, I would need a crowd fully equipped with fingers and toes to count the number of readers and critics who will tell you it's the best novel ever written. Why is that?

How can we agree so enthusiastically, so universally, on something so few of us have read?

This is what I call the *Ulysses* delusion, and it is a sign of a serious reading problem undercutting literate US culture. This book argues that the literary establishment is, in effect, holding the novel for ransom, circumscribing this popular form with the language and concerns of the Academy. But the joke is on the professors because instead of paying the required respect to a high art version of the novel, American readers are walking away, settling for less exclusive facsimiles. The more scholars talk about experimentation and narrative strategies, deconstruction and existential stoicism, innovation and linguistic complexity, the more readers take their favorite characters and exciting plots and exit the conversation. Oh, they listen still, but the teenaged son listened for the highlights ("Did she say 'food' or 'money'?").

Americans love novels. We buy them and read them voraciously—when they're by George R. R. Martin, E. L. James, or Lee Child. We read them indiscriminately, for reasons quirky and predictable. We read them enough that, over the course of a little more than a century, we have created a successful capitalist enterprise out of an art form. What Americans do not read on a regular basis, though, are Good Books. In fact, we tend to avoid most of the literary novels we "ought to" read. We put them on our lists, on our shelves, among our best intentions, and then we keep right on reading Nicholas Sparks. It's surprising to me that many passionate readers I know can so easily identify—and shrug off—what they should be reading. That's why, when asked, they will tell you *Ulysses* is good, really good, even though they have never read it.

Well, how do they know?

This is where the ransom comes in. Since the invention of the novel about 300 years ago, relatively recently for a literary genre, readers have been warned against its tantalizing power.[2] It is a dangerous thing, the novel. It draws you into alternate worlds, connects you with characters you would never meet on the streets of your town, invites you to imagine things, feel things, think. And all of this without proper training. Kids pick these things up!

Someone had to do something. So critics, teachers, publishers, professors, even preachers started sorting through novels, categorizing, celebrating, condemning and codifying them.[3] When we began teaching the novel in earnest in the middle of the twentieth century the ransom plot began to unfold. Here in the universities, we laid out our terms. We professors will let you readers know which of all the stories generated in our novel-loving nation are worthwhile, and we will guard these novels, because, we promise, there aren't many of them, and they may not be safe in your indiscriminate hands. It will take years of training to work with them, so you will pay us to do it (Did someone say "money"?). When you come to us, we will share our secrets, so you, too, will learn to love the novels we love—or at least to know which ones you're supposed to love.

Training in literature teaches us that good novels are difficult. Here, for example, is how one critic admiringly describes Joyce's style:

> Immensely complex in his writing, endlessly fertile in his use of language, full of wit, puns, tricks, intentional errors, numerological devices, classical, scientific, medical, military, sexual, psychological allusions . . . he left a trail of dilemmas, paradoxes, questions behind him which armies of scholars have wrestled with for seventy years. He intended this. He claimed that he had put so many enigmas and puzzles into the book that they would keep the professors arguing over *Ulysses* for centuries. He regarded this as a way of insuring his immortality. (Arnold xiii)

You see how the ransom, then, generates its own longevity. Visit the Joyce section of your local university library (in the PR6000s) and see how far those shelves stretch. To keep this system working, the best novels will always be ones, like *Ulysses*, that require interpretation; they make sense only with wise professorial intercession.[4]

But while we professors busied ourselves keeping good novels safe for properly educated people, Americans kept reading what they liked. Bestseller lists and bookstores sprouted up across the twentieth century, and after a while, most people lost track of

those ransomed novels and the standards that supported them, except for a twinge of recognition in a college humanities class—or when someone walks into a bar carrying *Ulysses*. Readers today wander merrily off on their own, accepting a crazy mélange of recommendations from Amazon, book blogs, and friends, and most are at a loss to explain why some novels are critically acclaimed (Jonathan Franzen's, for example) and others invariably panned (Jodi Picoult's).[5] Literary professionals, for their part, talk mostly to one another, and in a language even avid readers don't follow.

Would you be surprised to learn that it took professors years to come to a consensus on the centrality of *Ulysses*? Though it was an immediate sensation in expatriate Paris of the twenties, *Ulysses* was a bit too experimental and profane for many critics and most readers. Other modernist writers, though, loved Joyce (except Gertrude Stein, who was sure she deserved the attention he was getting). They treated him with deference and respect—a few years older, a little more published, and armed with a certainty of his own superiority that was apparently quite convincing, despite his scuffed sneakers and introvert's life. American Sylvia Beach jeopardized her own livelihood, her Shakespeare and Company Bookstore, to see Joyce's novel into print. Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot lauded it in every venue they could access. Still, it wasn't until some important critics at important universities started heralding it in Great Britain and the United States in the 1950s that it began to take its place at the center of the developing Modernist canon. In the last years of the twentieth century, when theoretical approaches to novels were our professorial preoccupation, *Ulysses* settled right in and, unchallenged, staked its claim at number one.

My own history with *Ulysses* is complicated. I have a nearly monogamous, long-term relationship with novels, dating back to elementary school. Poetry and drama, short stories, memoir and theory have tried to win me over; I could be courted, but not swayed. When I began to study twentieth-century novels intensively in graduate school, it soon became clear that Joyce and I would have to come to terms. I negotiated my way through the short stories of *Dubliners*, engaged with Joyce's first published

novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and then came to a screeching halt somewhere before page forty-five of *Ulysses*. This, I said, is not a novel.[6] Novels have characters I care about—like Edith Wharton's Lily Bart or Ann Petry's Lutie Johnson. They tell stories that haunt me, like Jay Gatsby's or Ántonia Shimerda's. Their writers savor language the way Zora Neale Hurston does, for the secrets it exposes, not for what it can obscure; they love words the way Ernest Hemingway does, for the fierceness of their harnessed power, not for their raucous excesses (though I do like a little raucous excess now and then, thank you, Dorothy Richardson). Good novels challenge me the way William Faulkner or Virginia Woolf can, to revelation, not distraction.[7] Something about this novel was all wrong. It kept pulling me in and leading me nowhere. I was disgusted and bored. There, I said it. My name is Cecilia. I'm a modernist, and I don't like *Ulysses*.

I understand why other critics love it. Sure, I get a kick out of how Joyce challenges the basic assumptions of novel-writing. I chuckle over the puns, the often musical language and the clever wordplay—the metempsychosis and usurpation. I revel in the defiant modernist aesthetic, the bad boy rule-breaking and the experimentation for its own sake. One or two of the characters come alive for me here and there, as Stephen does when he talks about Shakespeare. And if you wash it down with a Guinness and good conversation, as my senior seminar did, the narrative trajectory (let's not call it a plot), propped up by a concordance or a bookmark on SparkNotes, is ultimately decipherable. But the women are wooden—or perhaps blow-up plastic. The allusions, plentiful and erudite, are also overeager, overwrought and too often obscure. We get it, James; you read a lot. You know your classics. Just because you're Irish doesn't mean you're not as smart as the other Brits.

Of all the brilliant modernist novels out there, why this one, *Newsweek*? This one has come to represent all that is wrong with the way the novel lives among us. Consider this passage from David Gilmour's bestselling memoir *The Film Club*, where a concerned

father is choosing the movies he will watch with his troubled teen-aged son:

> What I wasn't prepared to be was impervious to his pleasure, to his appetite to be entertained. You have to start somewhere; if you want to excite someone about literature, you don't start by giving him *Ulysses*—although, to be candid, a life without *Ulysses* seems like a fine idea to me. (40)

Here and elsewhere *Ulysses* has become the epitome of high art at its worst, removed from life and indifferent to its audience.[8] That's the death of any art form, but for the novel, whose roots are democratic and popular, it's a crime.

The Ulysses Delusion is my call to end a century-long standoff, to settle this ransom thing once and for all by getting professors and readers together in genuine conversations about novels. I don't have a secret plan to transform every enthusiastic reader into an English major or to force-feed the professionals *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I just want us to start talking, authentically, realistically. For example, before we can decide which novels are good, we should discuss, together, what they are good *for*. Should they change our minds, change the world, pass the time, pass on values, entertain, enlighten, inspire? Why do readers read them? Why has this form of writing, this messy, imaginative, and often conservative genre, so dominated literature for more than two hundred years?

It may be that I watched a few too many *Columbo* reruns in my formative years, so I think I'll schlump in with my rumpled overcoat and sort this thing out, an everywoman reader and a professor, a book-clubber and a critic. Just like that, at the end of an hour (or the end of this book) with an incisive "one more thing," we will end this standoff that keeps literary professionals from engaging reading Americans more consistently and that prevents US culture from acknowledging its deep reading roots. Then literate Americans and book lovers, *Newsweek* editors and Yale professors will put down their lists, set aside their very different novels and

start to listen to one another. We will join forces and develop clear standards of excellence for both readers and critics, flexible standards that suit a wider range of books, useful standards responsive to what novels do uniquely well. Then (this is where the soundtrack swells and the credits roll) the novel will be ransomed back to us, set free from the strictures of insular academic discourse and high modernism. Watch as it steps back from the pressure toward immediate gratification and the aesthetics of reality TV! Undaunted and ever popular, the American novel will resume its educating, enthralling, democratizing, conversation-generating, artistic, and consumer-driven work.