
Is literature the new politics?

May 2012

John Siddique , Angelica Michelis and Ian Betts will introduce a discussion about the role the novel plays in shaping conversations about politics



Despite a widespread desire for politicians to resolve problems in society, paradoxically there's also a widespread sense that politics is failing to take society forward. So where does all that desire to discuss important ideas and moral issues find an outlet? The popularity of devices like the Kindle comes from more than the ease of using the technology to read, but is based on a broad and sustained market for reading across all ages in society. It is argued by many that the renaissance for reading novels, from the university of the third age discussion groups to the buoyant popularity of child focussed books, is reinvigorating a broader discussion about society's values in a way politics maybe used to fulfil.



Since its inception in the early Eighteenth Century the novel came to replace other forms of literature, such as the epic, the romance and poetry, as the most popular. Maybe its attraction lay, not in the high ideals or the universal, but in the fact that it spoke about real people in believable situations, becoming increasingly popular during Victorian times as it expanded to include characters and stories about the middle and working classes. Many writers have since experimented with shifting the focus further inward to examine human consciousness either through stream of consciousness, as shown by the early Modernists, or collective consciousness as can be found in the 'Experimental' novels of Emile Zola. The most enduring, however, are the existential writers such as Sartre and Camus, whose concern was that of the

individual isolation within the collective.



Something began to change during the 1990s and since, particularly noticeable in teen-lit, with the rise of the Social Issues Novel, which dealt with such things as bullying, racism, sexism. The novels did not require their young audience to engage in a creative dialogue but attempted to provide an insight into the issues. In one sense we can see these novels as replacing parental advice, and that of other adult authority and whilst the root of such an approach could be found in the 'realism' approach to literature, the reader was expected to learn through empathy. This approach began to creep into adult literature and events of 9/11 brought this to wider attention.



This rise of emotionalism is evident across politics - from policy through to the language used when discussing events like the hurt and alienation rioters in the summer of 2011 were

supposedly expressing at the cuts the government spending budgets. Back in 2001 Nobel prize-winning author Mario Vargas Llosa argued that a society without literature is “condemned to become spiritually barbaric, and even to jeopardize its freedom.” There are clearly some new trends emerging in politics and literature, but to what extent is either area of thinking affecting the other? Indeed, some argue that recent riots are telling evidence of such ‘spiritual barbarism’ in our midst.

Indeed, Llosa’s remarks challenge us to engage with each other through critical thought and debate, arguing that a democratic society must be founded on the mutual understanding and freedom of expression that literature provides; should we then infer that it is only through literature and creative engagement with these issues that we can overcome them? Is he right to say “In today’s world, this totalizing and living knowledge of a human being may be found only in literature. Not even the other branches of the humanities not philosophy, history, or the arts, and certainly not the social sciences have been able to preserve this integrating vision, this universalizing discourse”, or is that going too far? Whilst he may well be correct when he suggests that the universal discourse politics used to offer is not currently up to the job of explaining the world around us, what role can writers play in developing such viewpoints?

Listen again (variable quality)...

Speaker intros and some of discussion (variable quality) - click on the Play button: {mp3}literature-politics{/mp3}

Some background readings

[Why I Write](#) by George Orwell

[Mario Vargas Llosa, The Art of Fiction No. 120](#) , Interview by Susannah Hunnewell, Ricardo Augusto Setti, The Paris Review No. 116, Fall 1990

[The premature obituary of the book. Why Literature?](#) by Mario Vargas Llosa, The New Republic, Issue Date 14 May 2001

[Why Don't Novelists Care about Katrina? The shameful literary response to the hurricane](#) , by Chloe Schama, The New Republic, 10 Sept 2010

[The Art of the Kvetch: Jewish Humor as Secularism](#) , Discussion at The New School 27 April 2011

[Why this novel has rattled the literary elite](#) , by Neil Davenport spiked review of books April 2011

[The New Atheism](#) , by James Wood, Guardian Books, 26 August 2011

[How 9/11 changed fiction: After the unthinkable](#) , by R.B, The Economist 02 Sep 2011

[Reading the riots: ask the reason why](#) , Editorial, Guardian 08 December 2011

[The New International? Literature in an age of 'globish'](#) , Battle of Ideas 2011 session for additional readings

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