



Books I Go to the archives

Barbara Finkelstein: In Defense of Long Books



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Category: Fiction

"I don't get it," JK recently wrote. "Who has the time to read a 400-600 page novel?"

In the immortal words of 30 Rock's Liz Lemon, "What the what?"

I read lots of them. In fact, when I found out that The Great IT Company I work for renewed my contract for 2011, I went ka-razy. I jumped on Amazon and ordered:

Lion Feuchtwanger's *The Oppermanns* (410 pp).

Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (430 pp).

Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (496 pp).

Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* (544 pp).

And — I'm glad you're sitting down for this — Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1,488 pp).

I'm going to read every one of them after I finish A.J. Jacobs' *The Year of Living Biblically* (416 pp). Jacobs is a laugh riot, but if you got a thang for short, how are you ever going to know?

Now, if it was just my son dissing long books, I would understand.

Max has been on winter break since December 23 and he's still wading through Sloane Crosley's *I Was Told There'd Be Cake* (240 pp).

At his age, I was reading Wilhelm Reich's *Listen, Little Man* (144 pp.) and John Fowles' *The Magus* (656 pp). Of course I was a daughter of immigrants and always felt at some kind of cultural disadvantage. Reading clued me in to what eddicated people knew. Max has nothing to prove except for how many movies he can stream from Netflix in a month.

Fine. He's a (22-year-old) kid and I expect him to tell me I'm out of step with the times. But et tu, JK? The very influential people — I'm talking about you — who ought to be defending big smart books are throwing in their lot with a babyish digital culture that is spamming our minds with games and sound bites and what The Onion louchely calls the 24-second news cycle.

And while we're on the subject of sound bites, NPR reported this week that the "length of political soundbites shrank from 43 seconds in 1968 all the way down to nine seconds in 1988." Apparently, nine seconds represents the threshold below which we won't pay attention to anything longer than the philosophy of Sponge Bob Square Pants. Is this what we intelligent readers want to emulate — a sound bite? It looks as if a long anything has become an endangered minority. (A note to the ladies: You had better stop taking so long to you know what, or your man's gonna find a chick who gets there faster than you!)

In the interest of full disclosure, I'm online most of the day — an occupational hazard that comes from working at The Great IT Company. And if the truth be told, I waste my fair share of time watching Patti Smith on YouTube and the homeless radio announcer in that video that went viral last week. And don't think I didn't check my Gmail fifty times since I started writing this screed. The Internet has made me just as frenzied and distracted as anybody else. That's one reason I shut my computer down every Saturday for 24 hours. And that's why I have time to read long books.

I owe a debt of gratitude to long books, the ones written by Dostoevsky, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and all the rest who laid down the neural pathways in my brain so that I could be a literate, employable person. But I don't want you to think that I read because it helps me keep my job. (It probably doesn't.) Some of my sweetest relationships have been with the *Emmas* and *Jane Eyres* of the fictional world, and some of my most feral with the Raskolnikovs. Sometimes even your best friend can't give you what your make-believe kindred spirits can.

I'm not alone in my love for long books. For four years, I ran the Rutgers Book Club of New York City, a reading group with a revolving membership of some forty alumni. The jewelry designer, nurse, IT network administrator, psychobiologist, financial advisor, unemployed secretary and lawyer who were among the regulars ended up reading several super-long books with me: Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (432 pp); Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (425 pp); Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (624 pp); Philip Lopate's *Waterfront* (448 pp), and *Daughter of Persia* by Sattareh Farman Farmaian and Dona Munker (432 pp). A pretty ambitious reading list for a bunch of Ivy League wannabes from the State University of New Jersey. And all of us had plenty going on in our lives, everything from tango lessons to a boyfriend in London.

Come on, people! You gotta fight the power cord!

I'm getting the vibe that I haven't persuaded you to put down James Salter's *Dusk* (160 pp) for the Vikram Seth behemoth. You leave me no choice but to play the Martin Niemöller guilt card. Here goes.

They came for *Middlemarch* (904 pp), but I didn't speak up for it because I wasn't a Victorian. Then they came for *The Adventures of Augie March* (608 pp), and I didn't speak up for it because I heard it was bad for the Jews. Then they came for *Ulysses* (556 pp), but I didn't speak up for it because I was still pissed off about having to read *Finnegans Wake* (672 pp) in school. Then they came for *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, which at 288 pages was suddenly too long, but by then nobody gave a what the what about books at all.

So, even if you're going to spend your Saturday whizzed out on World of Warcraft, please be kind to the long book that has been a great friend to me my whole life.

Gotta run. Just got another Amazon delivery: Gal Beckerman's *When They Come For Us, We'll Be Gone* (608 pp) and Elif Batuman's *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (304 pp). Hey, shorty, how'd you get in here?

— Guest Butler Barbara Finkelstein is the author of *Summer Long-a-coming* (Harper & Row, 308 pp)

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