

but more difficult to explain how it holds our attention and gives us pleasure for the length of a whole novel. For, make no mistake, it's the style that makes the book interesting. The story it tells is episodic, inconclusive and largely made up of trivial events. Yet the language is, by normal literary criteria, very impoverished. Salinger, the invisible ventriloquist who speaks to us through Holden, must say everything he has to say about life and death and ultimate values within the limitations of a seventeen-year-old New Yorker's argot, eschewing poetic metaphors, periodic cadences, fine writing of any kind.

Part of the answer is certainly the derisive humour created by the application of Holden's "low" language to the polite pretences of social and cultural life as exhibited by Sally and George. The formal incorrectness of his English is also a source of humour - the funniest line in the extract is, "He probably broke every toe in her body", a distortion of "every bone in her body", and another hyperbolic expression. A further reason is that Holden's language implies more than it states. In this extract, for instance, there is clearly an unacknowledged theme of jealousy on Holden's part, towards the rival male figure of George, much as Holden claims to despise his status-conferring Ivy-League clothes and suave manners. The pathos of Holden Caulfield's situation, here and throughout the book, is more effective for not being explicitly spoken.

In the last analysis, though, there's something surprisingly poetic about this prose, a subtle manipulation of the rhythms of colloquial speech which makes it an effortless pleasure to read, and re-read. As jazz musicians say, it swings.

5 The Epistolary Novel

What I can't bear is that for one moment she recognized my claims, acknowledged my rights. What makes me want to hammer my fist on the table . . .

Phone. Ringing. Hold on.

No. Just some student having a breakdown. Yes, what makes me want to howl at the moon is the thought of her scratching away down there in London as if nothing had happened. I'd just like to know that she had lifted her head from her imaginary world for one moment, and said . . .

Another thought has just occurred to me, though. She may not be scratching away as if nothing had happened. She may be putting down some version of the events in the guest room. One of her maddeningly perceptive, odd, crabwise heroines may be scuttering bizarrely sideways at the sight of some bumptious young academic's aubergine underpants. No need for one of your looks, thank you - I have managed to grasp the irony of this unprompted. It's different, though - she's not writing privately to a friend of hers in some comfortingly remote country. She's writing to friends of mine. And enemies of mine. And colleagues of mine. And students of mine . . .

What? Are my underpants aubergine? Of course they're not aubergine! Don't you know anything about my taste at all? But she may be saying they're aubergine! That's what they do, these people. They embroider, they improve on the truth - they tell lies.

MICHAEL FRAYN *The Trick of It* (1989)

NOVELS WRITTEN in the form of letters were hugely popular in the eighteenth century. Samuel Richardson's long, moralistic and psychologically acute epistolary novels of seduction, *Pamela* (1741) and *Clarissa* (1747), were landmarks in the history of European fiction, inspiring many imitators such as Rousseau (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*) and Laclos (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*). Jane Austen's first draft of *Sense and Sensibility* was in letter form, but her second thoughts were prophetic of the decline of the epistolary novel in the nineteenth century. In the age of the telephone it became a very rare species indeed, though, as Michael Frayn's *The Trick of It* recently demonstrated, not altogether extinct, and well worth preserving.

The invention of the fax machine may provoke a revival of the form (the title story of Andrew Davies's *Dirty Faxes*, 1990, being perhaps a straw in the wind) but, generally speaking, the modern epistolary novelist is obliged to separate his correspondents by some considerable distance to make the convention seem plausible. Frayn's hero, or antihero, is a nameless thirtysomething British academic specializing in the work of a contemporary woman novelist of slightly more mature years, referred to in the text by her initials, J.L. He invites her to speak at his University and, much to his surprise, is invited afterwards into her guestroom bed. This event, and the sequel, he describes in a series of letters to an academic friend based in Australia.

He is divided between infatuation and suspicion. On the one hand he glories in his intimate relationship with the woman to the study of whose work he has dedicated his professional career; on the other hand he fears that she will exploit this relationship by turning it into new fictions, both publicizing it and misrepresenting it in the process. He reverses her literary ability, but he also envies it, and in a paradoxical way resents it. He is vexed that in spite of possessing her body (and eventually marrying her) he does not at the same time control her fictive imagination. He ends by vainly attempting to acquire "the trick of it" (i.e. writing fiction) himself. It's a familiar satirical theme – the contrast between the critical and the creative faculties – rendered fresh and amusing by the artfulness of the telling.

The epistolary novel is a type of first-person narrative, but it has certain special features not found in the more familiar autobiographical mode. Whereas the story of an autobiography is known to the narrator before he starts, letters chronicle an ongoing process; or as Richardson put it: "*Much more* lively and affecting . . . must be the style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress, the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty . . . than the dry, narrative unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and danger surmounted can be . . ."

The same effect can of course be obtained by using the form of a journal, but the epistolary novel has two additional advantages. Firstly, you can have more than one correspondent, and thus show the same event from different points of view, with quite different interpretations, as Richardson brilliantly demonstrated in *Clarissa*. (For example, Clarissa writes to her friend Miss Howe about an interview with Lovelace in which he seemed to be showing a genuine disposition to renounce his licentious past; Lovelace reports the same conversation to his friend Belford as a stage in his cunning plot to seduce her.) Secondly, even if you limit yourself, as Frayn does, to one writer, a letter, unlike a journal, is always addressed to a specific addressee, whose anticipated response conditions the discourse, and makes it rhetorically more complex, interesting and obliquely revealing.

Frayn exploits this latter opportunity to particularly good effect. His academic is a comically flawed character, full of vanity, anxiety and paranoia, which he constantly betrays by anticipating or imagining his Australian friend's reactions ("No need for one of your looks, thank you . . ."). Sometimes the letters read like dramatic monologues, in which we overhear one side only of a dialogue, and infer the rest: "What? *Are* my underpants aubergine? Of course they're not aubergine! Don't you know anything about my taste at all?" There, the style approaches *skaz*, the imitation of oral narrative I discussed in the previous section; but it can also comfortably accommodate self-consciously literary writing, like, "One of her maddeningly percipient, odd, crabwise heroines may be scuttering bizarrely sideways at the sight of some bumptious young academic's aubergine underpants." If that sentence seems a

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shade over-written, weighed down with too many adjectives and adverbs, that is all part of Frayn's purpose. The narrator must vividly convey the comedy of his plight, but he cannot be allowed true eloquence, for that would contradict his inability to master the "trick of it".

Writing, strictly speaking, can only faithfully imitate other writing. Its representation of speech, and still more of non-verbal events, is highly artificial. But a fictional letter is indistinguishable from a real letter. A reference to the circumstances in which a novel is being written, in the text itself, would normally draw attention to the existence of the "real" author behind the text, and thus break the fictional illusion of reality, but in the epistolary novel it contributes to the illusion. I do not, for example, incorporate telephone calls from my agent into the text of my novel-in-progress, but the call from the student which interrupts Frayn's academic in mid-sentence is both realistic and character-revealing (he is so self-obsessed that he ignores his pastoral responsibilities).

The pseudo-documentary realism of the epistolary method gave the early novelists an unprecedented power over their audiences, comparable to the spell exerted on modern television audiences by certain soap-operas. While the enormously long *Clarissa* was being published, volume by volume, Richardson was frequently begged by readers not to allow the heroine to die, and many of the first readers of *Pamela* supposed it was an actual correspondence, of which Richardson was merely the editor. Modern readers of literary fiction will not be thus taken in, of course; but it is a neat trick on Frayn's part to make his academic complain of the way novelists turn fact into fiction ("That's what they do, these people. They embroider, they improve on the truth - they tell lies") in a kind of novel originally designed to make fiction look like fact.

6 Point of View

It must not be supposed that her ladyship's intermissions were not qualified by demonstrations of another order - triumphal entries and breathless pauses during which she seemed to take of everything in the room, from the state of the ceiling to that of her daughter's boot-toes, a survey that was rich in intentions. Sometimes she sat down and sometimes she surged about, but her attitude wore equally in either case the grand air of the practical. She found so much to deplore that she left a great deal to expect, and bristled so with calculation that she seemed to scatter remedies and pledges. Her visits were as good as an outfit; her manner, as Mrs Wix once said, as good as a pair of curtains; but she was a person addicted to extremes - sometimes barely speaking to her child and sometimes pressing this tender shoot to a bosom cut, as Mrs Wix had also observed, remarkably low. She was always in a fearful hurry, and the lower the bosom was cut the more it was to be gathered she was wanted elsewhere. She usually broke in alone, but sometimes Sir Claude was with her, and during all the earlier period there was nothing on which these appearances had had so delightful a bearing as on the way her ladyship was, as Mrs Wix expressed it, under the spell. "But *isn't* she under it!" Maisie used in thoughtful but familiar reference to exclaim after Sir Claude had swept mamma away in peals of natural laughter. Not even in the old days of the convulsed ladies had she heard mamma laugh so freely as in these moments of conjugal surrender, to the gaiety of which even a little girl could see she had at last a right - a little girl whose thoughtfulness was now all happy selfish meditation on good omens and future fun.

HENRY JAMES *What Maisie Knew* (1897)