

Where is our Zola?

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A novel about working class lives is the exception to the rule in contemporary American publishing, which has tended in the 21st century to find its thematic center of gravity in matters of middle class bewilderment, identity politics and pessimism as the intersecting crises of capitalism have intensified. It is not necessarily the case that no books about working lives are being written, only that they are not eagerly sought by the publishing industry.

There are exceptions. The death of novelist Russell Banks earlier this year was a genuine loss. We wrote recently about John M. Hamilton's 2013 novel *A Hell Called Ohio*. And Tess Gunty's 2022 National Book Award-winning novel *The Rabbit Hutch* follows the life of a young cashier in a moribund Rust Belt city.

Sources vary widely as to how many new books, including fiction and nonfiction, are published annually in the US, but the consensus is that the number is between 500,000 and 1 million, with an additional 1.5 million self-published titles. Despite these seemingly large numbers, only 1 to 2 percent of novels completed in a year are accepted by traditional publishers.

The relative popularity of the different literary genres can be calculated on the basis of sales figures. Here the perennial winners are romance, mystery/thriller and science fiction/fantasy. Also popular are young adult literature (Y/A) and graphic novels. According to a Goodreads.com poll, the least popular genre in the poll was literary fiction, the category that would include socially realistic fiction.

Given the reality of genre popularity, the highly selective nature of publishing and the pressures exerted on publishing by middle class preoccupations, relatively little in the way of serious fiction gets through. What does deals primarily with the crises and interests of the professional set.

On the whole, novels that concern themselves with honestly portraying the day-to-day struggles of workers, assuming that some such novels are being written, encounter considerable hurdles in the quest for publication. First among these hurdles is the search for a literary agent.

Literary gatekeeping

Agents are the gatekeepers of the publishing industry. Writers must find an agent to represent their novel to publishers. Almost no novel is forwarded to a publisher that does not suit the personal taste of an agent. So who are these literary agents?

A quick study of the largest and most prestigious literary agencies' websites reveals a great deal about their agents and the books they choose to represent. Perhaps half of these arbiters of public taste are people in their 20s, recent graduates of English or Comparative Literature programs. Doing the industry's grunt work like people in their 20s everywhere, these agents are inundated with queries (proposals) from writers. The queries that stand the best chance of selection are naturally those that meet with the agents' preferences. And what are these?

Again and again as one looks over these young agents' blurbs—and the blurbs of those not as young—one runs into phrases like “I’m a sucker for good fantasy,” “looking for Y/A,” “especially interested in stories with a strong female protagonist” and “interested in fresh re-imaginings of mythology and fairy tales for adult readers.” Such preferences dominate even among those agents who also solicit “literary/book club” fiction—that is, the supposedly serious material.

Of course, many of these agents are responsive to quality writing and grownup themes, and certainly good work does get published. Nor can they be blamed for trying to make a living—after all, fantasy sells. But apart from the agents as individuals, their tastes represent an upper-middle class approach to literature—among readers *and* writers—that at this critical historical moment tends to seek role-model (“strong”) characters and escape into childhood, magic and a romanticized historical past.

When adult themes and realistic settings are engaged in contemporary fiction, the predominant tendency is to present problems—spousal abuse, alcoholism, sexism, to take a few from the current bestsellers—in order to “overcome” them with a “strong” protagonist. Individual resilience, “grit” (the term of the hour) and personal choices become the focus.

Contrast such an approach to human experience with a novel such as Émile Zola's *Germinal* (1885). Zola's depiction of a coal mining community in northern France is stark, at times brutal, and his characters are no stronger nor weaker than characters in such circumstances have a right to be. Many of Zola's characters exhibit individual determination, but the strength *of the novel*, and the reality of existence under capitalism, lies in the fact that the individual's resolve is no match for class oppression, exhausting labor and dehumanizing poverty.

The US in 2023 has no shortage of such oppression, exploitation and poverty. Today many workers endure 12-hour shifts in dangerous and degrading factories and wages that do not keep up with inflation. Other armies of workers are forced to depend on the paltry income of retail jobs and “gigs” like Uber and DoorDash. As the WSWs has reported, even child labor is returning in a significant manner to contemporary capitalism.

Where, we are entitled to ask, is our Zola? Our Dickens, our Tolstoy, or our contemporary Dreiser, Hemingway, Dos Passos or Steinbeck? That is, where are the authors who, while not necessarily socialists, recognize that society itself is sick and deserving of unsparing criticism and that the lives of the downtrodden are valuable and deserving of examination?

Let alone the authors who recognize, as Zola did to an extent, that potentially the working class is immensely powerful. For a few stirring chapters in *Germinal*, the organized working class is the strongest of protagonists.

The emergence of a Zola, or a Dreiser, was not simply a matter of will or personal sincerity. Historical events and political processes, including the emergence of a mass socialist workers movement, played a critical role. The WSWs has often written about the immense socialist culture that emerged in the last third of the 19th century. The complex but productive interaction between art and socialism was one of the dominant features of cultural life in the decades leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Zola and others benefited from a historical period that saw a heightened class consciousness among workers, mass unrest alternating with savage repression (the Paris Commune of 1871 preceded *Germinal* by only 14 years) and the proliferation of socialist ideas among both workers and the intelligentsia of Europe.

There are many difficulties in the present situation, including the ideological residue of the crimes of Stalinism, but a vast movement of the working class is building up, in response to the relentless attacks of the ruling elite, the horrifying pandemic and the danger of war and dictatorship. This movement will inevitably help dispel the clouds of skepticism and pessimism and drive forward the social knowledge and thinking of socialist-minded artists. We'll have our Zola yet.

Art and identity

Particularly harmful to the artistic and literary culture of our society is the new unofficial dictum that an artist may not choose a subject, depict a world or create a protagonist that differs from the artist in skin color or gender.

This position, taken up by selfish elements of the upper-middle class, ultimately boils down to a scramble for the limited number of dollars that are spent on art, literature and music. "Stay in your lane" is the popularized refrain for this self-serving proscription, and it is cravenly obeyed by a disturbing proportion of otherwise reputable artists.

One writer this reporter recently spoke with humbly boasted he would never write about any group from whose oppression he has benefited. And he was not the CEO of a major corporation! Even if he *has* benefited from anyone else's oppression apart from class oppression, a doubtful proposition in 2023, the logical relationship to his not writing about that oppressed group is difficult to discern.

Art is always an approximation, never fully successful, but when done well, one that embraces the otherness and *the sameness* of writer, reader and subject in an act of inquiry and compassion. To rope off subjects from artists is to deny the nature of art itself and to deny activity that is fundamental to being human.

Émile Zola was not a coal miner. He certainly benefited from the mining of coal. But no one before or since has written more effectively or affectingly about miners and mining. It is worth noting that Zola's funeral procession was joined by coal miners from northern France.

Sensitivity readers

A new form of censorship in publishing has accompanied the rise of identity politics. The new censors are called "sensitivity readers."

Briefly, sensitivity readers function as the "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" inquisitors of the publishing industry, reading manuscripts and hunting for potentially "offensive" or "inaccurate" material.

Sensitivity readers are usually freelancers who promote themselves as having a salable commodity—their skin color, sexual orientation, or some other physical or cultural attribute—that is of use to publishers. Such individuals are generally called in by publishers to vet a manuscript whose author may have strayed from his or her "lane" or in some other way risked being branded as "problematic."

"I'm never directly editing text," sensitivity reader Helen Gould (whose specialties are race and mental health) recently told the *Guardian* in the UK. *Guardian* writer Lucy Knight explains that "When asked to perform

a sensitivity read, [Gould] will read it, annotate sections where she thinks specific changes could be made ... and provide overall feedback." Knight reassures the reader, "Authors and editors can then choose to accept her suggestions and implement changes, ignore them, or ask to discuss them further."

The truth is that no editor today will risk exposing a publisher, their employer, to charges of "insensitivity," and the author—always the lowest rung on this ladder—will be obliged to accept the changes or sacrifice payment for the work of a year or more. Such are the mechanics of art under capitalism.

The *Guardian*, a liberal, "human rights" mouthpiece of British and US imperialism, insists there is nothing to see here, that sensitivity readers are doing nothing new "given that an aspect of book editors' job has always been to think about the way the text will be perceived." This is a superficial and disingenuous argument.

Book editors, ideally, are highly literate people whose first concerns ought to be the artistic quality and social truthfulness of a work. Editors know that narrators are sometimes unreliable, sometimes flawed, sometimes downright despicable. They know that some characters, like all humans, have thoughts that, in the words of Mark Twain, "would shame the devil." Good book editors know that there is much in reality—both in the mind and outside it—that is offensive. Yet the job of the sensitivity reader is to extirpate such material on behalf of the least capable readers, those who are offended by objective reality and do not wish to see it.

The imposition of upper-middle class identity politics upon culture is censorious and philistine. But it is also reactionary. The ultimate targets of identity politics and the language of "offense" and "sensitivity" are the working class and its democratic rights. Concepts like "offense" and "sensitivity" are nebulous abstractions and subject to broad, not to say nefarious, interpretation. While today it may be deemed offensive to call someone "fat," in future we may be told that matters of class, class struggle and socialism are upsetting and offensive. Indeed, in the US and internationally, anti-war statements and meetings are being labeled as "insensitive" to Ukrainian nationalists.

That is, identity politics, in addition to providing a careerist bonanza for elements of the petty bourgeoisie, serves as a tool defending the oppression of the working class.

"Blackout" performances of plays, where non-blacks are not welcome in the theater, such as a 2021 production of a re-imagined *Macbeth* at Harvard, the current right-wing orgy of book banning, and the anti-Russia cancellation of the New York Philharmonic's scheduled performance of Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich's "Leningrad" symphony, all attest to a virulent anti-intellectual and anti-art movement to deny culture and to divide workers along lines of race, nationality and religion.

But workers—all workers—are being pushed by capitalism beyond their endurance and are increasingly engaging in strikes and protests that ignore and erase these artificial lines of division. In a volatile environment of intense reaction and rising militancy, art that grapples with the realities of working class life—of all workers—will not be stifled much longer.



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