Q. & A.

Having Difficulty with Difficulty

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This week in the magazine, Jonathan Franzen writes about the career of William Gaddis, one of the most imposing modern novelists, and considers the question of whether a novel's difficulty is related to its quality as literature. Here Franzen talks with the *New Yorker* editor Ben Greenman.

BEN GREENMAN: Who started the idea that great literature had to be difficult? The academy? Authors who weren't doing well with a mass audience but wanted the ego gratification?

JONATHAN FRANZEN: I think it's kind of a natural idea. As a student, you're handed Milton or Shakespeare, you're told that it's great literature, and you find it difficult to read —at least, at first. Or you're in gym class, trying to pole vault, and the bar keeps getting raised, and you learn that the more difficult the jump the better it is. If you think of a novel as a contract between the reader and the writer, an agreement to entertain and be entertained, difficulty doesn't make much sense. But, as soon as you have "important literature," books with some sort of cultural status, the notion of difficulty sets in.

Was the notion imported from other arts, like painting and music? Does it function differently there?

The obvious difference between reading a novel and looking at a painting or listening to a symphony is that reading requires sustained, active effort. Maybe it's more useful to compare a difficult book with a difficult person. Some of us are attracted to people who seem demanding, or reticent, or prickly, on first meeting; we're attracted to the challenge of breaking down resistance; we have the feeling that a person who's so well defended has something valuable to defend.

Joyce seems like a central figure in this debate, since he went from the "Dubliners"

stories, which are, at the level of language, perfectly transparent to average readers, to "Ulysses" and beyond. How much are other writers still affected by his example?

Once you bring in "Ulysses," you invite a discussion like one you might find in some endless thread online—people sounding off angrily on one side and the other, everybody losing their head. I'm personally not a great fan of "Ulysses"—to me, the book feels like some big, chilly Old World cathedral stuffed with iconography, with tourists walking through it quickly, and devotees consulting with the priestly critics who comprehend its Mysteries, and the whole edifice certified by the state and by scholars as Great Art. But the problem is not so much the difficulty of the book itself as the particular status the book has acquired. I mean, it's now our leading model of a work of great literature. It's the iconic modern text; it routinely tops lists of the best novels of the twentieth century—which sends this message to the common reader: Literature is horribly hard to read. And this message to the aspiring young writer: Extreme difficulty is the way to earn respect. This is fucked up. It's particularly fucked up in an era when the printed word is fighting other media for its very life. If somebody is thinking of investing fifteen or twenty hours in reading a book of mine—fifteen or twenty hours that could be spent at the movies, or online, or in an extreme-sports environment—the last thing I want to do is punish them with needless difficulty.

People love to rank the top novelists, but what about the most difficult? Is Gaddis the best example of an author whose degree of difficulty forcibly ejects readers from his works? Who else comes close? Hawkes?

Hawkes at least wrote shorter books. But the problem with ranking novelists by difficulty is that there are a lot of incredibly hard avant-garde novels out there, much harder than Gaddis, which most of us have never heard of. The thing to keep in mind about Gaddis is that he wasn't just hard; he was also brilliant and, in many places, fun to read. If he was only difficult, we wouldn't be talking about him. The same goes for Joyce.

In your piece, you draw a difference between Status authors, who believe that the difficulty of their work is proof of their intellectual abilities, and Contract authors, who believe that connecting with a readership is the primary goal of writing. What about books that are bought but not necessarily read: "Foucault's Pendulum," by Umberto Eco, "Infinite Jest," by David Foster Wallace, etc.? These are Status

books, but they acquire a certain Contract mentality (for starters, they're read in many book clubs), if only as a result of the numbers sold.

I don't know about the Eco. But Wallace is very much a Contract writer, very much about entertaining us. If readers are daunted by "Infinite Jest," it's not because it's not entertaining; it's because it's so big. At the risk of belaboring the Status/Contract trope, I'd say that "Infinite Jest" is a Contract novel page by page and a Status novel in its thickness.

One of the loudest shots in this debate—at least, recently—came in Dale Peck's review of Rick Moody's memoir, "The Black Veil." It's a long quote, but worth quoting for its rhetorical excess. Peck said that Moody is an heir to "the highest of high canonical postmodernism . . . a bankrupt tradition . . . that began with the diarrhetic flow of words that is 'Ulysses'; continued on through the incomprehensible ramblings of late Faulkner and the sterile inventions of Nabokov; and then burst into full, foul life in the ridiculous dithering of Barth and Hawkes and Gaddis, and the reductive cardboard constructions of Barthelme, and the word-by-word wasting of a talent as formidable as Pynchon's; and finally broke apart like a cracked sidewalk beneath the weight of the stupid—just plain stupid—tomes of DeLillo." Do you think that Peck speaks for a substantial number of readers?

I read the Peck piece as a kind of perverse love letter to Moody. I think it's important to keep in mind that what Peck was objecting to was not the difficult novels themselves—nobody's forcing him to read them—but their canonical status and the hold they have on the imaginations of a lot of young writers. I certainly agree with him that the canon could use some revision. On the other hand, it's not like our culture is in the grip of some fever of Barthelme or Hawkes worship. And I think Peck undervalues the excitement and potential of some of that modern and postmodern formal experimentation. The shtick that bores me in Joyce transports me in Faulkner. A lot of Nabokov's inventions were sterile, sure, but a lot of them were unforgettable. And to dismiss DeLillo as just plain stupid is just plain stupid.

You mention that you haven't finished "Moby-Dick," or, for that matter, a number of other important novels. Do you think you will eventually?

I'll probably read more of "Moby-Dick" someday. But three volumes of Proust may have to suffice.

Do books have to be finished by readers? For that matter, does any work of art? If we don't finish, does that mean the works have failed us, or that we have failed them, or is there still some value to be gained from partial digestion?

Digestion? Partial? Not my favorite topic for contemplation after a heavy meal. But being a finicky eater, having a taste of this, a taste of that, not forcing yourself when you've lost all appetite—this makes sense to me. Proust changed my life with Volumes I, II, and III. Reading four hundred pages of Musil got me through a miserably hot August in Boston. I'll never forget it, and I'll never read the rest. ✦

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