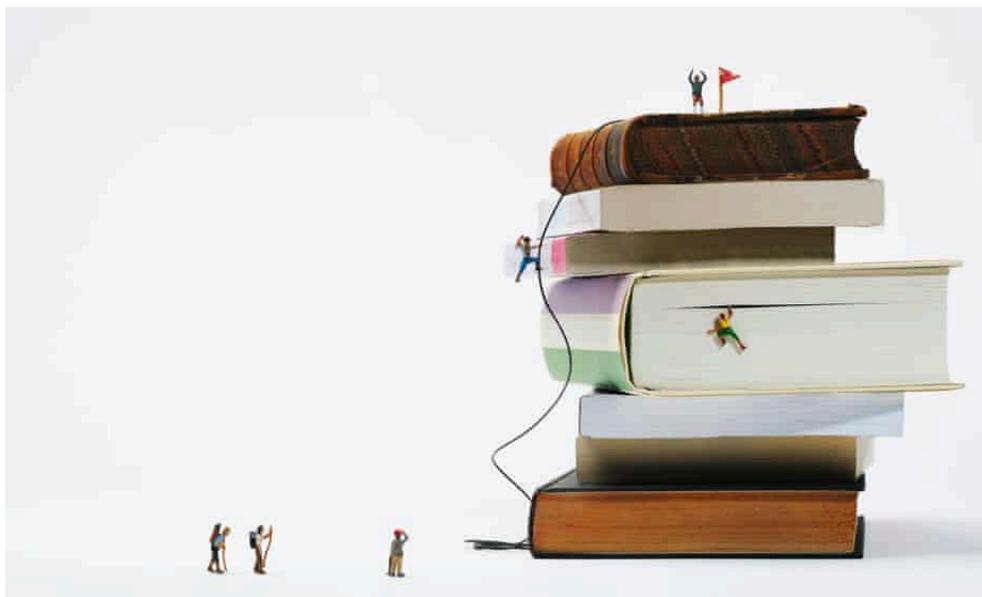


Pretentious, impenetrable, hard work ... better? Why we need difficult books

[Sam Leith](#) Sat 10 Nov 2018 09.00 GMT

This year's Booker-winner *Milkman* has been criticised for being challenging. But are we confusing readability with literary value?



Photograph: Franck Allais

“The fascination of what’s difficult,” wrote WB Yeats, “has dried the sap out of my veins ... ” In the press coverage of this year’s Man Booker prize winner, Anna Burns’s *Milkman*, we’ve read a good many commentators presenting with sapless veins – but a dismaying lack of any sense that what’s difficult might be fascinating.

“Odd”, “impenetrable”, “hard work”, “challenging” and “brain-kneading” have been [some of the epithets chosen](#). They have not been meant, I think, as compliments. The chair of the judges, Kwame Anthony Appiah, perhaps unhelpfully, [humblebragged that](#): “I spend my time reading articles in the *Journal of Philosophy*, so by my standards this is not too hard.” But he added that *Milkman* is “challenging [...] the way a walk up Snowdon is challenging.

It is definitely worth it because the view is terrific when you get to the top.”

That’s at least a useful starting point. Appiah defends the idea – which, nearly a century after modernism really kicked off, probably shouldn’t need defending – that ease of consumption isn’t the main criterion by which literary value should be assessed. We like to see sportsmen and women doing difficult things. We tend to recognise in music, film, television and the plastic arts that good stuff often asks for a bit of work from its audience. And we’re all on board with “difficult” material as long as it’s a literary classic – we read [*The Waste Land*](#) for our A-levels and we scratched our heads as we puzzled it out, and now we recognise that it is like it is because it has to be that way. So why is “difficult” a problem when it comes to new fiction?

Attacking a literary prize for rewarding a book that doesn’t accord with a critic’s ideas about “readability” is simply philistinism. The question is not where the book sits on some notional sliding scale between “challenging” and “page-turner”: it’s how successfully it answers whatever challenge it sets itself. The question isn’t how difficult a book is, but why it’s difficult. What is it doing with its difficulty? What is it asking of the reader? Does that difficulty reward the reader’s investment of time? You’re entitled, as [James Marriott](#) [did](#) in the Times, to conclude that in this case the view from the top of Snowdon wasn’t worth the hike. But complaining about the hike per se is to give up on the idea that there might be any case for art that rewards an investment of energy and attention from its consumer.

And the way Burns talks about *Milkman* makes clear that, whether we like it or not, she is doing something with the “difficulty” of the novel. One of the things that has most vexed its critics is the fact that none of the characters has a name. That wasn’t an arbitrary decision. “The book didn’t work with names,” she has said. “It lost power and atmosphere and turned into a lesser – or perhaps just a different – book. In the early days I tried out names a few times, but the book wouldn’t stand for it. The narrative would become heavy and lifeless and refuse to move on until I took them out again.” In other

words, *it is like it is because it has to be that way.*

The Great Gatsby is easy-difficult: it's no problem to read, but to appreciate its thematic architecture takes attention

Books can be “difficult” in all sorts of different ways. Late Henry James is difficult in a wholly different way than *Finnegans Wake* is difficult, and *Moby-Dick* is difficult in a different way to either of those (mostly because of all that sodding scrimshaw). Sometimes the difficulty is a surface difficulty, to do with vocabulary. *A Clockwork Orange*, for instance, is a challenge to start with – but once you get the hang of [Nadsat](#), it's easy as pie. Sometimes it's a formal difficulty. Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* is written in very clear and easy (though very careful) language; but it jumps in time and point of view so that the reader spends the beginning of each section wondering, for a page or two, where and when and who the hell they are.

Sometimes, as with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, it's a bit of both. Sometimes it's a thematic difficulty: Marilynne Robinson asks her readers to engage with theology as well as psychology; Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* has a literary-theoretical element. *The Great Gatsby* is easy-difficult: it presents the reader with no problem paragraph by paragraph, but to appreciate its thematic architecture takes steady attention.

Nicola Barker, a novelist who is herself from time to time accused of being difficult, says: “I see fiction as being divided into two categories. Work that confirms and celebrates and panders and work that confounds and perplexes and challenges. My work challenges – as I'm sure Anna Burns's does – but this is because we are trying to understand and engage with ideas, emotions and a world that aren't straightforward or coherent or manageable. Sometimes the form or style of a book needs to mirror the complexity of life. Sometimes we need to try and describe the indescribable. Life is hard and

paradoxical. It isn't always easy. Nor should all fiction be."

She adds that, since experimental writers don't make much money and don't attract much glamour, "it's doubly strange that we get so much stick for trying to innovate and challenge and experiment. Experimental fiction is something you write for the love of it. It is rarefied. But it is important because it often forms the foundation of our creative ecosystem. Other artists (musicians, painters, architects etc) higher up the food chain read us and engage with our ideas and translate what we do."

This year, as every year, there have been versions of the old op-ed standby that the Man Booker is succumbing to pretension or political correctness or snobbery or irrelevance. These all make for pleasingly attitudinal headlines but they ignore the glaring point that every single year you get a whole new panel of judges who make a whole new determination from a whole new batch of books. And the complaint that a particular winner "won't sell" – another gripe levelled at Burns, as it was at last year's winner, George Saunders – is also beside the point. Boosting book sales is the happy outcome and, in a way, the purpose of these prizes: but to imply that it's therefore the judges' job to choose the book most likely to get the biggest sales uplift from the prize is to let the tail wag the dog.

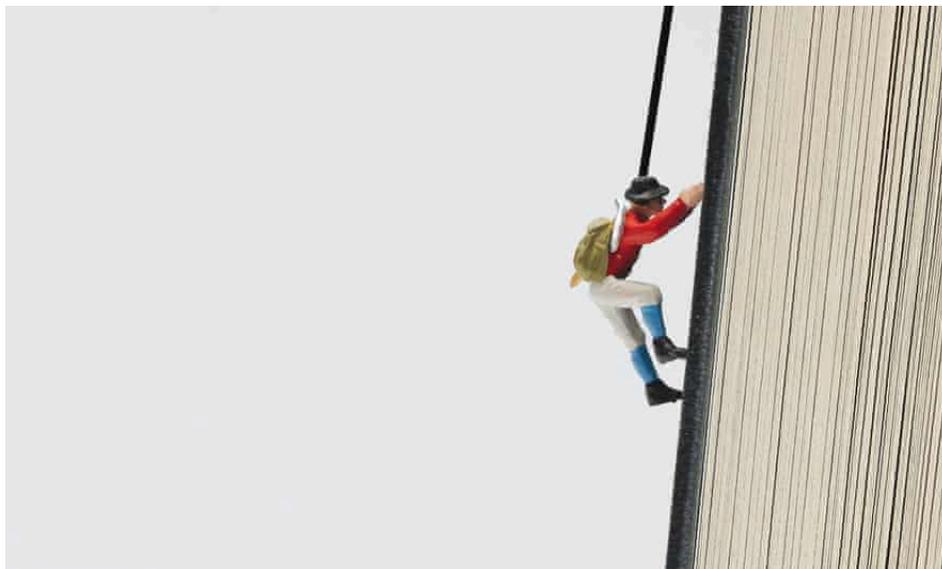
"You want the book to go round the world," says Gaby Wood, the Man Booker's literary director. "You want it to reach people. But you can't work with a patronising idea that normal people won't be able to understand this. I put the question to a previous panel: 'Are you trying to reward the book that pushes literature forward the most; or are you wanting to select the book that you most want to push into the hands of people all round the world?' The difficulty comes when, for a panel, the answers to those questions are different books. That has happened, and it can be agonising. This year though, [Anna Burns](#) was felt to be the answer to both."

Easy good books will, with a bit of luck, find their audiences; easy bad books will do so too, because they are often fun in spite of or because of their

badness. Difficult bad books will tend to die in a ditch; and difficult good books, without a helping hand, are likely to do so too. Think of prizes like the Folio, Man Booker and next week's Goldsmiths as that helping hand. Having a panel of serious and thoughtful critics giving a lot of time to noticing something that might otherwise not be widely noticed can't, surely, be a bad thing. These prizes are set up to reward the best literary fiction. Here, though, something of a definitional abyss opens. What the hell is "literary fiction"?

I've heard it said, and it's an attractive position, that "literary fiction needs to recognise that it's just another genre and get over itself". Fair enough. Let's explore that. I think it's a pious cop-out to declare, as some do: "There aren't literary books and popular books: there are just good books and bad books." If we're going wilfully to retreat from analysis, we may as well fold our tents as critics. There are indeed good and bad books but books also succeed and fail – and are responded to by readers – in relation to the genres they fit into or escape from.

Like it or not, literary fiction is a category that we use. And if it is just another genre and needs to get over itself, fine. Let's work with that. We can identify features of other genres. Aliens and nanobots? SF, more often than not. Guns and hats and dead bodies? Crime. Dossiers and dead drops? Spy novels. So we ought to be able to make some, if necessarily vague, stabs at identifying what the features of "literary fiction" are. Let's leave aside cultural value judgments about "importance" or "seriousness". Literary fiction can, like most fiction, be unimportant. It can also be unserious: some of the best of it is. I'd call Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* literary fiction, but it doesn't strike me as either important or serious. It's a glorious game.



Photograph: Franck Allais

It's sometimes fuzzily said that literary fiction gives you more on rereading, or that it stays with you, or that it's "more profound". That may be true, some of the time – but these things are more likely to be symptoms than necessary features. I'd suggest that the main identifying feature – and in this respect literary writing can and does compass and mingle with any number of other genres – is to do with complexity and depth of attention. That can be moral or psychological complexity – crudely, the goodies and baddies are less clearly delineated – but it can also be, and tends to be in the best work, allied to a greater attention to the form and to the sentence-by-sentence language itself. And where I say that it mingles with other genres, the point I mean to make is that (just like hats, or nanobots) its features can be found in any genre. You could make the case that Iain M Banks's Culture novels are literary SF, that Sarah Waters has written literary historical thrillers, that Joseph Kanon or John le Carré write literary spy novels, that the metafictional quality of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is a literary quality, and so on. The examples are numberless.

A publishing acquaintance suggests an analogy with music: jazz is more complex than blues. It's harder to play and harder to appreciate. That doesn't mean there isn't lots of good blues and lots of bad jazz. It doesn't mean that jazz is an innately superior artform. It simply describes a formal difference

between the two. Likewise, when we talk about a “literary novel” we usually mean something that demands and rewards close attention – though, as ever, there will be exceptions. The quality of that attention isn’t uniform from novel to novel. You don’t, for instance, read the torrential riffings of a Thomas Pynchon or even a Karl Ove Knausgaard the same way as you do the crystalline exactness of Nabokov. And those qualities will, for reasons that should be obvious, sometimes but not always issue in “difficulty”.

Let’s not assume that challenging work is like some sort of joyless high-fibre diet

If plot is the main engine of the reader’s attention, the author will often (but not always) write in a way that’s designed to draw the reader effortlessly from page to page: windowpane prose, clear and quick. If the author is doing something else, or something as well, they may want to slow you down. They may be interested in a voice, or an atmosphere, or (as modernists and postmodernists are) in jiggering with the form of the novel itself. There’s a decent literary-theoretical argument for formal jinxiness, too.

Naturalist fiction presents one account of the world – and it lulls you into the idea that it’s the only one. Marxist critics have made the fair point that a genre frames an account of reality: 19th-century bourgeois realism, say, presents in its very conventions a worldview. It selects – from its subject matter and setting to its forms of narration – a way of seeing things that implicitly normalises them. If the core of your novel is whether the well-off young white people on the plantation fall in love, the social set-up in which they are embedded takes a back seat in the reader’s consideration. Or to take a non-political example, Kurt Vonnegut remarked that he hated to put love stories into his novels because: “If a lover in a story wins his true love, that’s the end of the tale, even if World War III is about to begin, and the sky is black with flying saucers.”

So the form of a narrative is a political (or phenomenological) decision rather

than a natural state of the order of things. The free indirect style, the omniscient narrator, the stream of consciousness, or whatever your means of telling: all are profoundly artificial and historically determined, and a writer is quite within his or her rights to mix that up a bit – to draw attention to its artificiality, or to explore ways of complicating the reader’s engagement with his or her imaginative world. The novelist and critic Gabriel Josipovici, in *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*, tends to argue (if I read him right) that it’s not so much a right as a duty.

But formal self-consciousness or narrative tricksiness aren’t, in themselves, difficult. Some bestselling literary writers – Ian McEwan, for instance – are full of metafictional touches, embedding books within books and playing around with unreliable narrators. Most people would see Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a work of literary SF – and it jumps around wildly but it’s not a difficult book (I don’t think) to read. And David Mitchell – as radio-friendly a unit-shifter as literary fiction now has – is forever playing with structure and voice. *Cloud Atlas*, which was what really put him on the map, is a polyphonic novel of multiple genres structured like a Russian matryoshka doll. Yet as Mitchell says, he feels giving pleasure is part of his contract with the reader – a courtesy if you’re asking them to invest the several hours they will spend reading your book.

So let’s not assume that challenging work is like some sort of joyless high-fibre diet. Many if not most of the great modernists and postmodernists weren’t just formally challenging: they were outright funny. Samuel Beckett, laureate as he was of existential despair, is wildly funny. So is James Joyce. So, in his pinstriped way, is TS Eliot. More recently, David Foster Wallace is almost dementedly prankish, as is Pynchon. AL Kennedy’s Costa-winning *Day*, about bomber pilots in the second world war, is a book of high seriousness and some narrative complexity, but is full of jokes. Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island* contains, for my money, the funniest gag on that year’s Booker shortlist. And it’s notable that many of those who have enjoyed *Milkman* commend it not for being solemn or profound but for being funny.

All this is not to say that some difficult novels are not truly ghastly. If hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, you could say that pretentiousness is the tribute that mediocrity pays to genius. I remember a colleague on a judging panel surveying the gathered novels and saying, with a certain roll of the eyes: “There’s a lot of ... *fine writing* in here.” By this he meant overwrought bad writing. The idea of literary fiction – in particular the idea that it is intrinsically high-status or, worse, “important” – is the rock on which many ambitious second-rate writers bark their shins. It’s what gives us plotless novels choked with portentous metaphors and pseudo-profound ruminations, novels that mistake difficulty for accomplishment or, worse, solemnity for seriousness. It’s what gives us, in parody, the “octuple time scheme and sixteen unreliable narrators” of Richard Tull’s unreadable seventh novel in Martin Amis’s *The Information*. Just because literary fiction doesn’t necessarily tell a story (though it usually at some level does), and frequently spars with its own form, and tends to pay attention to its language, it doesn’t mean that by turning all those things up to 11 you’ve created a worthwhile work of art. And it’s for just that reason that, year by year, we should be grateful rather than indignant that panels of judges on literary prizes labour to bring to our attention those difficult books that really are worth our time.

Ten difficult books worth reading

Lara Feigel

[The Waves](#) by Virginia Woolf

Woolf set out to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind” and *The Waves* is an experiment in doing this without the usual narrative scaffolding. The lives of six characters are told through their revolving thoughts. This can feel hard to navigate, but if you persevere there’s an intense sensory world to be discovered.

[The Golden Bowl](#) by Henry James

James is notorious for his complicatedly meandering sentences and this late

novel takes it to a new level. It's not only the prose that's difficult, the plot itself becomes more about what characters know about each other than what they are actually doing. It's the ultimate novel for people interested in charting every nuance and detail of human relationships.

Beloved by Toni Morrison

The legacies of slavery and their intersections with patriarchy might seem subjects too difficult for scrupulous novelistic treatment. Morrison's book throws the discoveries of high modernist style and the fiery drives of gothic horror at the task and creates something uniquely unsettling and appallingly convincing. *Beloved* makes readers suffer, but our suffering enlarges our world.

The Unconsoled by Kazuo Ishiguro

Ishiguro's Booker prize-winning *The Remains of the Day* exemplified the user friendly literary novel for a generation of readers. He followed it with a book so intricate and sly that it feels like the cleverest revenge he could have wreaked on himself and his readers for that earlier triumph.

Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne

This takes nothing for granted about what a novel is meant to be. Ostensibly the autobiography of the narrator, it piles digression on digression and plays tricks with readers' expectations. But Sterne's love of life and his commitment to his characters' psychic curlicues animate every page. Difficulty has never been so much fun.

Ulysses by James Joyce

Joyce's extravagant cartography of a single day in Dublin makes every possible demand on the reader, from secret mythical references to diffuse exploration of streams of consciousness. *Ulysses* made difficulty central to the modernist aesthetic, but Joyce also delights in the baseness of the flesh and is unsettlingly funny and mischievous.

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing by Eimear McBride

McBride's title tells us not to believe that any way of describing ourselves and our world should be seen as fixed. Her prose takes us inside bodily experience and the inchoate recesses of personal identity in forensic, giddy ways.

The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing

Lessing's epochal feminist novel is deeply ambivalent about feminism, as it is about everything else, including its own structure. But it also shows how rich and revealing ambivalence itself can be. By structuring the novel as five interwoven notebooks, Lessing sends her characters wheeling through endless different attitudes towards their complex identities.

Doctor Faustus by Thomas Mann

Mann's tale of a composer and his pact with the demonic elements convulsing his own talent and modern German history is a fierce gateway into the grand European modernist landscape. It's the complexity of his interpretation of history and culture that makes the novel so compelling.

Outline by Rachel Cusk

Cusk follows in the tradition of *The Waves* in evacuating the novel of what we expect of character and description, instead charting with pin-point coolness the terms of our disconnection from one another. In so doing, the deepest truths that connect people emerge. Cusk's trilogy has shown how many new types of difficulty we still need and enjoy in the 21st century.

• *Lara Feigel is the author of [Free Woman: Life, Liberation and Doris Lessing](#) (Bloomsbury).*

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