

## The Fiction Factor

In a bookstore in Manhattan in 1998, authors Kurt Vonnegut and Lee Stringer talked about the “utility” of their writing craft in front of a small audience of book lovers. Stringer outlined something of the struggle facing literature:

“I see that today people are very result-oriented. We don’t do anything just because it’s the right thing to do, or for the sake of art, or for the sake of anything else unless we can prove that down the road x, y, or z is going to happen. I guess in that kind of environment it is difficult for what we call literature to exist because a book is not that practical a thing in the short term. It’s probably infinitely practical in the long term. But you’re not going to pick [a fiction book] off the shelf and learn how to scramble eggs tomorrow.”

More than a decade later, with the world in the grip of economic recession, what exactly is the value of literary fiction? In a climate where the monetary value of our undertakings has found a new and seemingly more desperate emphasis, people are still reading for the pure enjoyment of it. We’re not talking about facts here either - none of the sturdy “learning something” attributes of non-fiction, but the flights of fancy found in the world of fiction. In a storm of undulating markets, book sales remain relatively stable the world over. As financially sensible choices become a critical concern for most, novels continue to be published and books keep selling. Is this the last bastion of the decade’s financial frivolity, or is there some other value in a good book? And what is it all really worth for the reader of fiction?

Unlike those measurably useful text books, encyclopedias or instruction manuals (read one minute, operate DVD player the next) reading a work of fiction doesn’t have an immediately practical outcome it seems. Jennifer, a successful, twenty-something sales rep from Sydney explains that this is part of her problem with fiction, “I will only read something I’m learning from; sales books, self-help books, business or financial books ...”. This seems to sum up the view of many over-stretched, time-is-money modern adults. Another sophisticated young Singaporean woman in her early 30s explained, “I just can’t justify reading fiction - it’s a waste of time. I’m a mother and I have a career. I need to be achieving something at all times”. In Australia, the average price of a new release fiction, paper-back is anywhere between AU\$20 and AU\$40 by the way - quite a price when you’re apparently not getting anything for it.

In the U.K. there seems to be a little more optimism that there might be value found in fiction. Kirklees Libraries in West Yorkshire recently hired two new Reading Development Officers as part of their “Bibliotherapy” program. The program promotes the use of reading as an aide to psychological treatments for depressed, isolated and phobic clients. Julie Walker, Kirklees’ leading reading development officer, says “the psychological benefits of reading are huge”. In England a new fiction novel will set you back anything from £7 to £20, so if pedagogy isn’t a factor, what exactly are these benefits?

Therese, a barely-40 year old mother of two is an American studying and living in Canada. She is a busy and vital woman. Therese explains, “Often I don’t have time to read during daylight hours, but I keep a book on my nightstand and read before going to sleep every night”. In fact, of those surveyed across 4 continents, those who read fiction for pleasure almost always responded that they did so before dozing off. James, a successful and social Sydney-sider in his early 30s said, “I read most nights before bed for about 30 minutes, it helps me sleep”. So perhaps this is one value of fiction - a prescription-free sleep aide. That is a value indeed, but is that where it ends?

When I asked Sarah, a thirty-something expatriate Brit living in Singapore what she gets out of reading fiction she explains simply “relaxation!”. But what’s so relaxing in a book? Emerging Australian writer and poet Deborah explained that, with reading a good book “I really feel it takes me some place else. Some place magical.”. So, something akin to a holiday for the cost of your novel? Transportation and relaxation for much less than a plane ticket. Not bad. Anything else though? We are looking for value here after all, and a DVD only costs you a few dollars and a couple of hours.

The bibliotherapist from Kirklees Libraries, Julie Walker, explained the psychological benefits behind the feelings of readers: “What entering the realms of fiction does is enable us to enter another world that not only takes us out of our own experience but also gives us cause for reflection. We can experience pain, suffering and what we may not be able to examine in the real world can be explored at a step removed in the safer world of the novel”. So, for the price of a paperback it seems the reader can gain access to a world that allows the consequence-free exploration and escape that isn’t always possible in “real life”.

Samuel, a darling of the IT industry (and of the ladies) says that he gets “a greater sense of what is human” from his reading ... This, it seems, goes to the beating heart of the fiction reader’s motivation. Again and again surveyed respondents like successful Community Cultural Development CEO, Victoria, articulated “an understanding of other people’s lives and insight into my own”. Now that’s not bad value for the 8 to 20 American dollars you can expect to pay for a new novel. Our fantasy, sci-fi, thriller, romance can offer up the intangible value that one reader described as “a feeling of connectedness to all aspects of humanity, both perfect and diabolical” ... And you don’t need a high-speed download capacity. You don’t even need to switch something on. You can “get connected” without wireless, and without anyone else.

Back in that Manhattan bookstore where Kurt Vonnegut and Lee Stringer sat discussing writing, Kurt (who himself wrote 14 novels, 5 scripts, 4 short story collections and 5 essay collections in the span of his career) put it like this:

"In 1996, with movies and TV doing such a good job of holding the attention of literates and illiterates alike, [...] why bother? Here’s my answer: Many people need desperately to receive this message: “I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people don’t care about them.” Vonnegut said, “You are not alone.”

... And the gathered audience in that little bookstore erupted in wild applause. Apparently Vonnegut was not alone in his thoughts on the subject of fiction’s invaluable reach. A new copy of his last book “Timequake” is going for \$29.90 in Singapore at last check ... Just in case you were wondering.