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Literary fiction doesn't always have to be downbeat

November 27, 2005

From time to time, Chicago Lit will publish contributions by Chicago-area writers on literary subjects important to them that others may also value. Today's contributor is Marianne Goss, a Joliet native, a former Joliet Herald-News features reporter and a senior editor on Northwestern's university relations staff. She lives in Edgewater with her cat, Silas.

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Midway into Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, winner of the 2005 Pulitzer and Heartland Prizes for fiction, I became conscious that something felt different from the usual literary novel. Was it the letter-to-my-son style of the narrative? The point of view of a small-town preacher?

No, the difference wasn't the book, but my response to it. I felt happy.

That realization suggested an answer to a puzzling question: Why is it that someone who presumably loves to read fiction has been having trouble finding novels she wants to read?

Could it be because literary fiction -- the term used to distinguish serious fiction from the commercial variety -- is often grim? Consider, for instance, the overriding element in some selections of my book group: Suicide in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*. A lonely death in Balzac's *Pere Goriot*. Cynicism in Voltaire's *Candide* and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Brutality in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. Perversion in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Bleak satire in Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*. Alienation in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Even a novel by Barbara Pym -- an author who was my suggestion and whose novels are considered high comedies -- left me feeling sad about the underlying loneliness of her characters.

"Literary fiction," says a Web site I came across as I was searching for some possibly upbeat titles, "rarely has a happy ending." When did this become literary



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dogma?

Maybe it was always so. Shakespeare could be plenty gloomy. But he also wrote comedies.

Great literature and happy endings aren't incompatible in Jane Austen. So I read and reread the six Austen novels, and then I read critical interpretations of them.

When I've exhausted Jane Austen until the next time, I read mysteries, which have the happy ending of sorts -- everything is wrapped up. But, like dessert, mysteries are enjoyable in the consumption but offer little sustenance; I want more character development and wisdom about life than they generally afford. Why can't serious literature have a positive outlook? There is joy in life as well as sorrow, laughter as well as tears, hope as well as despair. I'm not looking for novels without moral dilemmas, loss, struggle, and conflict; I'm looking for novels that leave me feeling that there's reason to go on living.

What a pleasure, then, to read *Gilead*. An indisputably serious novel, *Gilead* has a thoroughly good narrator for whom we want the best. No one is hopeless; even the character with the most questionable past turned out to be more misunderstood than villainous. The book isn't painless; there is an abolitionist grandfather who may have blood on his hands; a prodigal son whose sin is a mystery until the end; an abandoned young mother and her young child who dies; the imminent death of the narrator, which will take him from his much loved and much younger wife and child. But there is transcendence in the goodness of ordinary people and the celebration of everyday life. There is love of spouses, friends, parents, children, and God. There is forgiveness and hope. Change, the book is clear, is possible.

It isn't just personal taste that drives my quest for hopeful fiction. I am prone to depression, along with more than 10 percent of the population, if estimates are accurate. Does it make sense for people like us to take Prozac and struggle to keep a positive attitude, then turn around and read fiction that presents life as even worse than we've feared? Does it make sense to put down Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and pick up Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*?

And so I've been cruising the Web, putting words like "upbeat" + "serious" + "fiction" in the search box. I haven't found a lot yet, except for a list compiled by a North Carolina librarian. (Google on "Positive Literary Fiction" and you'll find it on several sites.) Titles such as *The Kind of Love That Saves You*, by Amy Yurk, *The Ladies of Covington Send Their Love*, by Joan Medlicott, and *The Answer Is Yes*, by Ellen Cohen, certainly sound promising.

The list's recommendation of *Bachelor Brothers' Bed and Breakfast*, by Bill Richardson, a Canadian humorist, was right on the mark; the book is funny, warm, and cleverly written. So I'll keep reading through the few dozen books on that list, even though the names of most of the authors are unfamiliar to me. In other words, these aren't the world's greatest novels. I think that will be OK. They will be good enough -- reading them will feel good and be good for me.

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