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eBooks



# Reality Hunger

A MANIFESTO

DAVID SHIELDS

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—Patricia Hampl

“I love this book and am amused to see some of the hysterical reactions it’s provoked—proof, I think, of its radical truthfulness. Shields is utterly uninterested in providing intellectual comfort; he bravely, uncompromisingly delivers the news.”

—Walter Kirn



David Shields

reality  
hunger

David Shields is the author of nine previous books, including *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead*, a *New York Times* bestseller; *Black Planet*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; and *Remote*, winner of the PEN/Revson Award. His work has been translated into fifteen languages.

[www.davidshields.com](http://www.davidshields.com)

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# reality hunger

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David Shields



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N genre

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O contradiction

P doubt

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R autobio

S persona

T ds

U alone

V it is much more important to be oneself than anything else

W risk

X let me tell you what your book is about

Y manifesto

Z coda

*Appendix*

All great works of literature  
either dissolve a genre or invent one.

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—WALTER BENJAMIN

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Art is theft.

—PICASSO

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When we are not sure, we are alive.

—GRAHAM GREENE

## 1

Every artistic movement from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art. Zola: “Every proper artist is more or less a realist according to his own eyes.” Braque’s goal: “To get as close as could to reality.” E.g., Chekhov’s diaries, E. M. Forster’s *Commonplace Book*, Fitzgerald’s *The Crack-Up* (much his best book), Cheever’s posthumously published journals (same), Edward Hoagland’s journals, Alan Bennett’s *Writing Home*. So, too, every artistic movement at every moment needs a credo: Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie*, André Breton’s “Surrealist Manifesto,” Dogme 95’s “Vow of Chastity.” My intent is to write the *ars poetica* for a burgeoning group of interrelated but unconnected artists in a multitude of forms and media—lyric essay, prose poem, collage novel, visual art, film, television, radio, performance art, rap, stand-up comedy, graffiti—who are breaking larger and larger chunks of “reality” into their work. (*Reality*, as Nabokov never got tired of reminding us, is the only word that is meaningless without quotation marks.)

## 2

Jeff Crouse’s plug-in *Delete City*. The quasi-home movie *Open Water*. *Borat: Cultural Learning of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. Joe Frank’s radio show *In the Dark*. The depilation scene in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. Lynn Shelton’s unscripted film *Humpday* (“All the writing takes place in the editing room”). Nicholas Barker’s “real-life feature” *Unmade Beds*, in which actors speak from a script based on interviews they conducted with Barker; the structure is that of a documentary, but a small percentage of the material is made up. Todd Haynes’s *Superstar*: a biopic of Karen Carpenter that uses Barbie dolls as the principal actors. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which—characteristic of this genre, this ungenre, this antigenre—relies on viewer awareness of the creator’s self-conscious, wobbly manipulation of the gap between person and persona. *The Eminem Show*, in which Marshall Mathers struggles to metabolize his fame and work through “family of origin” issues (life and/or art?). The Museum of (fictional) Jurassic Technology, which actually exists in Culver City. The (completely fictional) International Necronautical Society’s (utterly serious) “Declaration of Inauthenticity.” So, too, public-access TV, karaoke nights, VH1’s *Behind the Music* series, “behind-the-scenes” interviews running parallel to the “real” action on reality television shows, rap artists taking a slice of an existing song and building an entirely new song on top of it, DVDs of feature films that inevitably include a documentary on the “making of the movie.” *The Bachelor* tells us more about the state of unions than any romantic comedy could dream of telling us. The appeal of Billy Collins is that compared with the frequent hieroglyphic obscurantism of his colleagues, his poems sound like they were tossed off in a couple of hours while he drank scotch and listened to jazz late at night (they weren’t; this

an illusion). *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* was full of the same self-conscious apparatus that had bored everyone silly until it got tethered to what felt like someone's "real life" (even if the author constantly reminded us how fictionalized that life was). At once desperate for authenticity and in love with artifice, I know all the moments are "moments staged and theatrical, shaped and thematized. I find I can listen to talk radio in a way that can't abide the network news—the sound of human voices waking before they drown.

### 3

An artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one, is forming. What are its key components? A deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional. (What, in the last half century, has been more influential than Abraham Zapruder's 8mm film of the Kennedy assassination?) Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity; reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture; plasticity of form, pointillism; criticism as autobiography; self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real.

### 4

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.

### 5

It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel (minus the novel).

### 6

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

# b

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## mimesis

7

Writing began around 3200 b.c.

8

The earliest uses of writing were list-making and account-keeping.

9

In 450 b.c., Bacchylides wrote, “One author pilfers the best of another and calls it tradition.”

10

In the second century b.c., Terence said, “There’s nothing to say that hasn’t been said before.”

11

Storytelling can be traced back to Hindu sacred writings, known as the Vedas, from around 1400 b.c.

12

Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, c. 800 b.c., are epics told in verse—not novels but nonetheless stories.

13

The aphorism is one of the earliest literary forms—the residue of complex thoughts filtered down to a single metaphor. By the second millennium b.c., in Sumer, aphorisms appeared together in anthologies, collections of sayings that were copied for noblemen, priests, and kings. These lists were then catalogued by theme: “Honesty,” “Friendship,” “Death.” When read together, these collections of sayings could be said to make a general argument on the common themes, or at least shed some light somewhere, or maybe simply obsess about a topic until a little dent has been made in the huge idea they all pondered. “Love.” Via editing and collage, the form germinated into longer, more complex, more sustained, and more sophisticated essayings. The Hebrew wisdom of Ecclesiastes is essentially a collection of aphorisms, as are Confucius’s religious musings and Heraclitus’s fragments. These extended aphorisms eventually crossed the border into essay: the diaries of Sei Shônagon, Anne

14

The earliest manuscript of the Old Testament dates to 150 b.c. Parts of the Bible incorporate “real things” into the text. The laws that have come to make up Mosaic Law, for instance, were undoubtedly real laws before they became canonical. There are bits of song and folk poetry scattered throughout the Old Testament that seem to have had a life independent of scripture. The Samson stories were probably folktales that the Judges storyteller worked into his thesis.

15

It is out of the madness of God, in the Old Testament, that there emerges what we, now, would recognize as the “real”; his perceived insanity is its very precondition.

16

The New Testament renders, sometimes artistically and often from competing points of view, events that supposedly really happened. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written 40 to 110 years after the events in question.

17

In his preface to *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides acknowledges that he “found it impossible to remember the exact wording of speeches. Hence I have made each orator speak as, in my opinion, he would have done in the circumstances, but keeping as close as I could to the train of thought that guided his actual speech.”

18

Plutarch sometimes bulleted his essays with as many as a hundred numbered sections, eschewing narrative completely and simply listing. His essay “Sayings by Spartan Women” itemizes quotations from unknown Spartan mothers, wives, daughters, and widows on a variety of topics without any transitional exposition or interpretation, or any suggestion whatsoever as to how we might read the text or even, for that matter, why.

19

In antiquity, the most common Latin term for the essay was *experior*, meaning “to try, test, experience, prove.”

20

The etymology of *fiction* is from  *fingere* (participle *fictum*), meaning “to shape, fashion, form, or mold.” Any verbal account is a fashioning and shaping of events.



Ancient novels were either fantastic—Lucian’s *The Golden Ass* tells of a man who turns into a donkey and back into a man—or implausible romantic adventures, such as Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*.

St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, written in the fourth century, tells his life through the prism of his newfound faith, reflecting on his sins, begging forgiveness from God. For centuries, the memoir was, by definition, *apologia pro vita sua*: prayerful entreaty and inventory of sins. (During the Renaissance, a hybrid memoir—with a more nuanced relation to the divine—emerged: Montaigne’s *Essays*. Memoir wasn’t anymore necessarily what one should know but what one could know. Pascal’s *Pensées*. Rousseau’s *Confessions*. With the posthumous publication in 1908 of Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, God was gone for good.)

*The Tale of Genji*: an eleventh-century Japanese text about court life.

In the thirteenth century, French troubadours wrote prose poems about thwarted love.

In seventeenth-century France, Madeleine de Scudéry (in *Artamène*) and Madame de La Fayette (in *La Princesse de Clèves*) wrote about the romantic intrigues of aristocrats.

Before the Industrial Revolution, culture was mostly local; niches were geographic. The economy was agrarian, which distributed populations as broadly as the land. Distance divided people, giving rise to regional accents, and the lack of rapid transportation limited the mixing of cultures and the propagation of ideas and trends. There was a reason the church was the main cultural unifier in Western Europe: it had the best distribution network and the most mass-produced item—the Bible.

When they were published, the books that now form the canon of Western literature (the *Iliad*, the Bible) were understood to be true accounts of actual events. In 1572, when Montaigne set himself the task of naming the “new” brand of writing he was doing in his journals—which later became his books—he came upon the Middle French word *essai*, meaning “trial,” “attempt,” “experiment.” (All of life is an experiment. I love fooling around; I’m always making them.) Many of the most important writers in the Renaissance—Montaigne; Francis Bacon, who imported the essay into English; John Donne

whose sermons mattered much more than his poems—were writers of nonfiction. So secure was the preference for truth that Sir Philip Sidney had to fight, in *Defence of Poesie* (published after his death in 1595), for the right to “lie” in literature at all.

28

In his retirement, walking the streets of Bordeaux, Montaigne wore a pewter medallion inscribed with the words *Que sais-je?* (“What do I know?”)—thereby forming a tradition: Lucretius to La Rochefoucauld to Cioran.

29

Once upon a time, history concerned itself only with what it considered important: the contrivers of significant events, on the one hand, and the forces that such happenings enlisted or expressed, on the other. Historians had difficulty deciding whether history was the result of the remarkable actions of remarkable men or the significant consequences of powerful forces, of climate, custom, and economic consequence, or of social structures, diet, geography, but whatever was the boss, the boss was big, massive, all-powerful, and hogged the center of the stage; however, as machines began to replicate objects, little people began to multiply faster than wars or famines could reduce their numbers, democracy arrived to flatter the multitude and tell them they ruled, commerce flourished, sales grew, money became the risen god, numbers replaced significant individuals, the trivial assumed the throne, and history looked about for gossip, not for laws, preferring lies about secret lives to the intentions of fate. As these changes took place, especially in the eighteenth century, the novel arrived to amuse mainly ladies of the middle and upper classes and provide them a sense of importance: their manners, their concerns, their daily rounds, their aspirations, their dreams of romance. The novel feasted on the unimportant, mimicking reality. Moll Flanders and Clarissa Harlowe replaced Medea and Antigone. Instead of actual adventures, made-up ones were fashionable; instead of perilous voyages, Crusoe carried us through his day; instead of biographies of ministers and lords, we got bundles of fake letters recounting seductions and betrayals: the extraordinary drama of lied-about ordinary life. Historians soon had at hand all the devices of exploitation. Amusing anecdote, salacious gossip would now fill their pages, too. History was human, personal, full of concrete detail, and had all the suspense of a magazine serial. The techniques of fiction infected history; the materials of history were fed the novelist's greed. Nowhere was this blended better than in autobiography. The novel sprang from the letter, the diary, the report of a journey; it fed itself alive in the form of every record of private life. Subjectivity was soon everybody's subject.

30

The origin of the novel lies in its pretense of actuality.

31

Early novelists felt the need to foreground their work with a false realistic front. Defoe tried

to pass off *Journal of a Plague Year* as an actual journal. Fielding presented *Jonathan Wild* as a “real” account. As the novel evolved, it left these techniques behind.

32

The word *novel*, when it entered the languages of Europe, had the vaguest of meanings; it meant the form of writing that was formless, that had no rules, that made up its own rules as it went along.

33

In the eighteenth century, Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding overthrew the aristocratic romance by writing fiction about a thief, a bed-hopper, and a hypocrite—novels featuring verisimilitude, the unfolding of individual experience over time, causality, and character development.

34

As recently as the late eighteenth century, landscape paintings were commonly thought of as a species of journalism. Real art meant pictures of allegorical or biblical subjects. A landscape was a mere record or report. As such, it couldn't be judged for its imaginative vision, its capacity to create and embody a world of complex meanings; instead, it was measured on the rack of its “accuracy,” its dumb fidelity to the geography on which it was based. Which was ridiculous, as Turner proved, and as nineteenth-century French painting went on to vindicate. Realist painting focused on landscapes and “real” people rather than royalty.

35

The novel has always been a mixed form; that's why it was called *novel* in the first place. A great deal of realistic documentary, some history, some topographical writing, some barefaced disguised autobiography have always been part of the novel, from Defoe through Flaubert and Dickens. It was Henry James (especially in his correspondence with H. G. Wells) who tried to assert that the novel, as an “art form,” must be the work of the imagination alone, and who was responsible for much of the modernist purifying of the novel's mongrel tradition. I see writers like Naipaul and Sebald making a necessary post-modernist return to the roots of the novel as an essentially Creole form, in which “nonfiction” material is ordered, shaped, and imagined as “fiction.” Books like these restore the novelty of the novel with its ambiguous straddling of verifiable and imaginary facts, and restore the sense of readerly danger that one enjoys in reading *Moll Flanders* or *Clarissa* or *Tom Jones* or *Vanity Fair*—that tightrope walk along the margin between the newspaper report and the poet's vision. Some Graham Greene novel has the disclaimer, “This is a work of fiction. No person in it bears any resemblance to any actual person living or dead, etc., etc. London does not exist.”

36

When Thomas De Quincey wrote *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, he led his readers to believe that his addiction was behind him; he was taking opium when he wrote the book and continued to take it for the next thirty years. Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, written when Gosse was fifty-seven, recounts conversations that purportedly took place when he was eight; people who had known the Gosses protested that Edmund made up these conversations, which of course he had. Orwell's "Such, Such Were the Joys" was denounced for its inaccuracies by people who had been his classmates.

37

In the early nineteenth century, modern industry and the growth of the railroad system led to a wave of urbanization and the rise of Europe's great cities. These new hubs of commerce and transportation mixed people as never before, creating a powerful engine of new culture. The industrial age brought technologies of mass production. Suddenly, the cost of duplication was lower than the cost of appropriation. It was now cheaper to print thousands of exact copies of a manuscript than to alter one by hand. Copy makers could profit more than creators, which led to the establishment of copyright, bestowing upon the creator of a work a temporary monopoly over any copies, encouraging artists and authors to create more works that could be cheaply copied. Authors and publishers, including eventually publishers of music and film, relied on cheap, mass-produced copies protected from counterfeits and pirates by a strong law based on the dominance of copies and on a public educated to respect the sanctity of a copy. This model produced, in the twentieth century, the greatest flowering of human achievement the world had ever seen. Protected physical copies enabled millions of people to earn a living directly from the sale of their art to the audience.

38

In 1830, Emerson was frustrated with sermons, with their "cold, mechanical preparations for a delivery most decorous—fine things, pretty things, wise things—but no arrows, no axes, no nectar, no growling." He wanted to find what he called "a new literature." A German composer and artist, Johann Maelzel, visited America with a "panharmonicon," an organ without keys. He would crank its heavy silver lever three times and step off to the side, and the machine would spit out an entire orchestra's worth of sound: flutes, drums, trumpets, cymbals, trombones, a triangle, clarinets, violins. After seeing Maelzel's machine perform, Emerson called the new literature he'd been looking for "a panharmonicon. Here everything is admissible—philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, fun, mimicry, anecdotes, jokes, ventriloquism—all the breadth and versatility of the most liberal conversation, highest and lowest personal topics: all are permitted, and all may be combined into one speech."

39

In the first half of the nineteenth century, which remains for many a paradise lost of the novel, certain important certainties were in circulation: in particular the confidence in a logic of things that was just and universal. All the technical elements of narrative—the systematic use of the past tense and the third person, the unconditional adoption of chronologic

development, linear plots, the regular trajectory of the passions, the impulse of each episode toward a conclusion, etc.—tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe. To have a name was important, all the more so for being the weapon in a hand-to-hand struggle, the hope of a success, the exercise of domination. It was something to have a face in a universe in which personality represented both the means and the end of all exploration. The novel of characters, though, belongs entirely to the past; it describes a period: the apogee of the individual. The world's destiny has ceased, for us, to be identified with the rise or fall of certain men, of certain families. The world itself is no longer our private property, hereditary and convertible into cash. Two hundred years later, the whole system is no more than a memory; it's to that memory, to the dead system, that some seek with all their might to keep the novel fettered.

40

“The author has not given his effort here the benefit of knowing whether it is history, autobiography, gazetteer, or fantasy,” said the *New York Globe* in 1851 about *Moby-Dick*.

41

In 1859, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which sold out the first day it was published, threatened to undermine the Bible's legitimacy, to explain the unexplainable. The Dewey decimal system was invented in 1876, although adopted slowly at first. A. E. Houseman said, “The aim of science is the discovery of truth, while the aim of literature is the production of pleasure.” Knowledge was exciting, but it threatened to quash imagination and mythology. In 1910, the General Convention of the Presbyterian Church adopted the Five Fundamentals, a doctrine of five principles underlying Christian faith, a list of dogmas requiring of the faithful adherence to the inerrancy and literal truth of scripture. If we must be governed by the two-dimensional world of fact/fiction, then steps must be taken to ensure that our sacred texts land on the side of fact, that scripture not end up in the fictional cul-de-sac. We must be able to believe.

42

In the second half of the nineteenth century, several technologies emerged. Commercial printing technology dramatically improved, the new “wet plate” technique made photography popular, and Edison invented the phonograph. The first great wave of popular culture included newspapers, magazines, novels, printed sheet music, records, children's books. Not only did authors and artists benefit from this model but the audience did, too: for the first time, tens of millions of ordinary people were able to come in regular contact with a great work. In Mozart's day, few people heard one of his symphonies more than once; with the advent of cheap audio recordings, a barber in Java could listen to them all day long. By 1915 the motion picture had given actors a way to reach a much wider audience, effectively linking people across time and space, synchronizing society. For the first time, not only do your neighbors read the same news you read in the morning, and know the same music and movies, but people across the country did, too. Broadcast media—first radio, then television—homogenized culture even more. TV defined the mainstream. The power of electromagnetism

waves is that they spread in all directions, essentially for free.

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43

Plot itself ceased to constitute the armature of narrative. The demands of the anecdote were doubtless less constraining for Proust than for Flaubert, for Faulkner than for Proust, for Beckett than for Faulkner. To tell a story became strictly impossible. The books of Proust and Faulkner are crammed with stories, but in the former, they dissolve in order to be recomposed to the advantage of a mental architecture of time, whereas in the latter, the development of themes and their many associations overwhelms all chronology to the point of seeming to bury again in the course of the novel what the narrative has just revealed. Even in Beckett, there's no lack of events, but they're constantly in the process of contesting themselves: the same sentence may contain an observation and its immediate negation. It is now not the anecdote that's lacking—only its character of certainty, its tranquility, its innocence.

44

Collage, the art of reassembling fragments of preexisting images in such a way as to form a new image, was the most important innovation in the art of the twentieth century.

45

After Freud, after Einstein, the novel retreated from narrative, poetry retreated from rhyme, and art retreated from the representational into the abstract.

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## books for people who find television too slow

46

Abstract expressionism: the manipulation of reality through its technique of spontaneous creation on the canvas.

47

I listened to a tour guide at the National Gallery ask his group what made Rothko great. Someone said, “The colors are beautiful.” Someone else mentioned how many books and articles had been written about him. A third person pointed out how much people had paid for his paintings. The tour guide said, “Rothko is great because he forced artists who came after him to change how they thought about painting.” This is the single most useful definition of artistic greatness I’ve ever encountered.

48

In 1987, Cynthia Ozick said, “I recently did a review of William Gaddis and talked about his ambition—his coming on the scene when it was already too late to be ambitious in that huge way with a vast modernist novel.” She reviewed *Carpenter’s Gothic*. The “vast modernist novel” to which she was referring was *The Recognitions*. It’s difficult to overemphasize how misguided her heroic (antiheroic) way of thinking is.

49

The American writer has his hands full, trying to understand and then describe and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.

50

The creators of characters, in the traditional sense, no longer manage to offer us anything more than puppets in which they themselves have ceased to believe. The present period is one of administrative numbers.

51

The life span of a fact is shrinking. I don’t think there’s time to save it. It used to be that

fact would last as long as its people, as long as kingdoms stood or legacies lived or myths endured their skeptics. But now facts have begun to dwindle to the length of a generation, to the life spans and memories of wars and plagues and depressions. Once the earth was flat, but now we say it's round. Once we thought we could sail west to the Indies; now we know that a New World is there. Once we were the center of a vast but known universe; now we're just a speck in a vast and chaotic jumble.

52

Modernism ran its course, emptying out narrative. Novels became all voice, anchored neither in plot nor circumstance, driving the storytelling impulse underground. The sound of voice alone grew less compelling; the longing for narration rose up again, asserting the oldest claim on the reading heart: the tale. What could be more literal than *The Story of My Life* now being told by *Everywoman and Everyman*?

53

Suddenly everyone's tale is tellable, which seems to me a good thing, even if not everyone's story turns out to be fascinating or well told.

54

Plot is a way to stage and dramatize reality, but when the presentation is too obvious, formulaic, as it so often is, the reality is perceived as false. Skeptical of the desperation of the modernist embrace of art as the only solution, and hyperaware of all artifices of genre and form, we nevertheless seek new means of creating the real.

55

Barbara Kruger was a painter, but her day job was photo editor at *Glamour*. One day she could no longer tolerate the divide between the two activities, and her artwork became the captioning of photos.

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Painting isn't dead. The novel isn't dead. They just aren't as central to the culture as they once were.

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In 1963, Marguerite Yourcenar said, "In our time, the novel devours all other forms; one is almost forced to use it as a medium of expression." No more. Increasingly, the novel goes hand in hand with a straitjacketing of the material's expressive potential. One gets so wearied watching writers' sensations and thoughts get set into the concrete of fiction that perhaps it is best to avoid the form as a medium of expression.



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