

In Conclusion

How to end a novel

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What is it that is so unsatisfying about the endings of most novels? Think of the last ten novels you've read. Can you even remember the ending? Or did you feel that the ending was unworthy of the story that preceded it—either glib or forced or falsely elegiac or dishonest or simply forgettable? The poet and critic Randall Jarrell famously defined the genre: "The novel is a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it." Usually what's wrong is the ending.

Of course, the ending of what many consider the Great American Novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is criticized for traducing the very values Twain establishes in the first three-fourths of the book, as Huck, who has come to realize Jim's humanity, participates in Tom Sawyer's cruel trick of not telling Jim that he is already a free man. It's hard to reread the novel knowing what Huck is ultimately going to do to his friend. Some have defended the ending of Twain's masterpiece by suggesting it embodied the nation's deeply conflicted attitudes toward race, but it is clear from reading Twain's letters and the tortuous history of the book's composition, that he himself was conflicted about how to end Huck's adventures. And Twain's novel is not alone among the masterpieces whose endings disappoint. Is anyone really satisfied with Raskolnikov's conversion in *Crime and Punishment* or Alex's redemption in the British version of *A Clockwork Orange*? What about Strether, whose commandment to others in *The Ambassadors* is "live all you can"? What to make of his rejection of the romantic advances of Maria Gostrey? Live a little, Strether! It's a mistake not to! Critics will construct formalist and theoretical defenses of these endings, but something continues to gnaw when a given novel doesn't follow its own internal logic to an ending both credible and inevitable.

How *does* one end a story? In genre fiction the very conventions of the form dictate certain endings: A mystery must be solved; a serial killer must be stopped; lovers must be reunited. But for serious

fiction, endings are more problematic. If, as Virginia Woolf claimed, “life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,” how does the writer who attempts to capture the essence of real, lived existence end a story such that it does not seem contrived, unduly neat or sentimentally false? The memorable endings of some great novels offer instructive strategies.

There is the gestural ending—in the modern period often open rather than closed—in which the protagonist echoes the spirit of the foregoing story through some apt behavior or action. Think *Catch 22*. “Yossarian jumped,” and in doing so, misses being stabbed by inches. He wants to get to Sweden or at least out of the absurdity, danger, and chaos of war. Whether he succeeds or not is irrelevant; the action itself is the triumph of the book’s argument. J. M. Coetzee ends *Disgrace* as the former professor David Lurie, after emotional and physical suffering, attains a new level of compassion through action. When he assists a crippled dog in its last agony, we are witnesses to Lurie’s growth. These endings abjure finality yet achieve a fitting closure to the story.

Equally effective is the lyrical ending: The writer’s prose gives way to music or poetry as the novel swells with the grandeur of a great symphony, leaving the reader satisfied and exalted. The classic instance is *The Great Gatsby* whose last page, beginning “Most of the big shore places were closed now,” ends poetically with a vision of contemporary America where the American Dream has been closed down, extinguished. Molly Bloom’s long final aria in *Ulysses* (“O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire . . .”) similarly finds the novelist reaching for musical rhythms in a passionate affirmation of life. Countless novelists after Fitzgerald and Joyce have emulated their method. Few succeed—the lyrical impulse demands a poet’s gifts and, in lesser hands, can undermine the natural structure of narrative.

For centuries what could be called the Grand Life Event ending has provided novelists with a “real,” if conventional, means of con-

cluding a story. Birth, marriage, and, especially, death confer a closure most readers find palatable—after all, at least two of these three milestones inform every human life. And when the event seems particularly apposite to the novelist’s vision, this kind of ending feels less contrived than it otherwise might. What end other than death could await Tess in Hardy’s dark world? What else would one expect from the robust, benign imagination of Fielding than the marriage of Tom Jones and Sophia? The great closed endings of eighteenth and nineteenth century novels often married the Grand Life Event to the “visionary” coda in which the novelist both concludes his story and foretells the fates of all the major and minor characters. While many readers would be disconcerted with such prophecy in a contemporary novel, one of the joys of reading Dickens is watching him dole out final destinies to his characters.

Some novelists dodge the issue of endings entirely, whether out of contempt for the convention or from sheer ambivalence. Dickens revised his unhappy ending to *Great Expectations* at the urging of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, substituting a more optimistic conclusion for Pip and Estella. Satirizing Victorian conventions one hundred years after Dickens, John Fowles presented his readers with two endings in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*—the reader, not the author, can decide the lovers’ fate (students are surprisingly unnerved by Fowles’ tactic, as if his abandonment of the omniscient narrator’s authority is moral rather than aesthetic). And in hyperfiction, readers themselves are encouraged to manipulate all aspects of the work, including alternate endings, to their individual delight.

Whatever means a novelist chooses to end her work, when one encounters the perfect ending it allows the novel to resonate in a final flourish that burns the totality of the book into the mind. Woolf, a writer who was uncomfortable with the pat conventions of her literary predecessors, achieves this in *To the Lighthouse*. Mr. Ramsay and his children are sailing to the lighthouse. They are tack-
ing, a sailing maneuver by which a point is approached indirectly in

a series of zigs and zags. Lily, the artist, is finishing her painting on the shore: “Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did it matter? She asked herself, taking up the brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.” The painter (and the novelist) has created in her art a line, a path to her object, with a directness unavailable to the sailing family. Like other great novels, *To the Light-house* possesses a richness located in its characters, its language, its insights into the human predicament. Not the least of these virtues is the ending, which arrives like a gavel being brought down on a block, sentencing the reader to a lifetime of remembrance.

