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ORION'S BELT
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APRIL 2022
A Catalogue for the End of Humanity
Tim Hickson
Rumpelstiltskin, If
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Cover art and design: Joshua Fagan
Interior design: Joshua Fagan

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# Rumpelstiltskin, If

by Lora Gray

I only look at it when he is sleeping:
the straw-spun thread,
golden,
trailing from my index finger
to the back of his delicate hand.
When I shift, I feel the tug,
bone deep,
and imagine his tender pulse
in the quiver
of that single
bartered strand.

I tell myself I am not a monster.

Real monsters behead girls for riches
and want of a spinning wheel.
They slug infants against lonely tower walls.
They don't miracle straw to gold,
not for necklaces,
or rings,
or firstborn sons.

I cradle him,
and stroke his belly,
the softness of his arms,
his tiny body so perfectly fragile
and unlike my own.
I whisper songs of foolish young mothers
and gentle imps.
I coil our thread like a coin in my palm
so that, when I kiss him awake,
he will not see
the secret between us.

So that he will never
ever
think to guess
my name.

# In Praise of Difficult Literature

by Joshua Fagan

No one has ever convinced a friend to read a book by talking about how difficult it is. Check the fiction bestseller list and you'll find cozy mysteries, spy thrillers, and sweet romances. We talk of "beach reads" or "airport novels," books that exist to fulfill a specific function, rather than being valuable for their artistic quality. These books are not so brainless as to provide no mental stimulation, but they are books our minds easily process. Actions lead to reactions, the plot develops, and the novel eventually culminates in an ending that may not be altogether happy but is still satisfying.

Literature considered "difficult" has largely disappeared from the popular consciousness, at least in the English-speaking world. There were of course past equivalents to beach reads, but writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were in their era prominent cultural figures. The average well-informed citizen was familiar with their work. This disappearance is unfortunate, as difficult literature serves an important function. It shocks us from our complacency and forces us to reckon with murky ambiguity that refuses to fit into our existing worldviews. Difficult literature rejects our attempts to reduce it to a simplistic series of messages and morals. It is a desperately needed antidote to the increasing prominence of online echo chambers that merely reaffirm what we already believe.

The typical reader these days only encounters difficult literature as a section of the literary canon we "have to read" for school. Even that phrase, "have to read," implies a kind of obligation, as though muddling through *Ulysses* were no different from taking out the garbage or filing taxes. Say that you genuinely enjoy navigating through "The Waste Land," and the responses you will receive will range from disbelief to a strange flavor of resentment, as though by

announcing your preference for T.S. Eliot, you are implicitly scorning fans of Sally Rooney.

The tension between literature that seeks to entertain and delight and literature that at least attempts to make the reader stop and question the decisions made by authors is nothing new. When nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization led to the development of mass-market commercial literature, a gap developed between those who wrote popular, if superficial, books and those who wrote serious, challenging literature for a smaller, sophisticated audience. The former group called the latter snobs, and the latter called the former hacks. Both groups were arguably right. The innate value of reading difficult works, books that were either formally daring or refused to provide tidy emotional resolutions, thus faded to the background, where it has remained.

Reading difficult books is not an assertion of cultural or intellectual superiority, though both detractors and supporters of it have viewed it as such. The truth is quite the opposite: delving into difficult literature requires no small amount of humility. These books do not offer easy reassurance about love overcoming all or noble heroes banding together to vanquish villainy. They do not provide moralistic lessons or endorse a clear set of values.

The likes of *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contain oceanic depths, but they can be simplified to basic ideas and messages. We can describe these novels in several sentences and believe by doing this, we've captured what the novels are about. Confidently, we can discuss these books with others and say that we "get it." By "getting it," we feel a rush of delight and satisfaction. Ambiguity disappears, replaced with clarity. We can return to our daily routines, assured that we've understood the lessons of the book.

There is nothing innately wrong with taking this perspective, but it reduces novels to lectures we must study or puzzles we must solve. What makes difficult novels important is that they make this kind of

viewpoint impossible. This is not merely to say "The Waste Land" is more confusing than a Percy Shelley poem, though that's true, but that the refusal to be reduced down to a few clear messages is part of the ethos of "difficult literature." It is not incidentally difficult, but purposefully difficult. The author could have written the same story in a more straightforward way, but they chose to revel in ambiguity because of the obstacles it provides to dogmatic, superficial interpretations.

Wallace Stevens, in his "Man Carrying Thing," argues that poetry "should resist the intelligence almost successfully." Flannery O'Connor excoriates in her landmark essay "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" those who view fiction as a series of symbols to be unlocked in order to attain "an elaborate sense of satisfaction" and the feeling that they have 'understood' the story."

What both writers objected to is the privileging of ease and comfort in writing. They lamented a literary milieu in which both writers and readers believed literature should provide clear, direct answers. Instead, they wrote difficult poems and stories. Defiant modernists, they cared as much about form as content, as much about how they told their stories as what their stories were about. They favored fractured narratives and ambiguity over precision and clarity. They refused to make narratives that could be reduced to a list of plot points and broadly defined themes that could be easily taught to a high-school English class.

Why would they do this? Postmodern critics like Raymond Williams, echoing the mass-market writers of the nineteenth-century, argued modernists prized difficulty because they wanted to insulate themselves from democratic mass society. There is partial truth to this sentiment. T.S. Eliot was an unrepentant elitist, and even Virginia Woolf received enough accusations of snobbery that she wrote an essay for her Bloomsbury friends playfully titled "Am I a Snob?" Yet to constrain discussions of difficulty to the binary of "elitist snobs versus commercialist hacks" ignores that the likes of Stevens and

O'Connor chose to write difficult work because they sought to prevent interpretations of their art that simplify it to a few pretty ideas to which no reasonable person would object.

These writers forced readers to become uncomfortable and question themselves, to engage with the nuances of the work itself, to wrestle with the murky, even contradictory viewpoints contained within. When we lose difficult books, we lose that stirring rejoinder to complacency.

*The Waves* is not necessarily a better novel than *Pride and Prejudice*, but it demands more comprehensive engagement. It requires us to question ourselves as we question what we read. It makes us reconsider our pre-existing beliefs, or at least think about them differently. We could all use more of that.

# A Catalog for the End of Humanity

by Tim Hickson

Emmeline was allowed to pick from three "archetype" versions of herself, much like how she might have chosen a home-droid from a catalog. The ones best representing her were projected up onto the platform—her whole life and fears and experiences filtered down to ones and zeroes, color-coded and bullet-pointed with all the best features of each. She wondered how they'd calculated something like that.

The first version of her was skipping, the kind of thing she'd only done before the wars, before the Cold. Back then, she didn't care if other people thought it was childish. Her curls and smile betrayed her naivete—hardships were losing friends and failing classes. That version also encompassed a simple joy Emmeline envied. Before her first love with all the hope of finding her.

Everything was so much brighter back then, even the colors. As if someone had turned up the saturation to unnatural levels, but the years, or time, or her outlook had blunted the blues and greens and mixed them in with grey.

"Do I lose it all? Everything that's not in these files?" she asked Dr. Orlean.

The freckled woman clearly hated the question and pushed up her glasses with a grimace that briefly hardened the crow's feet by her eyes. Maybe she had answered it too many times or was afraid the answer might push people away.

"Yes," she admitted, "but that's the upload price. The system hasn't been perfected yet—we haven't had the time. Meaning we can only store archetypes. Imperfect copies."

"But it'll still be me."

Dr. Orlean jabbed a few buttons on the monitor. Emmeline's first version halted and dug through her bag, the one she'd made herself and covered in pins. It had burned along with everything else. Her archetype had pulled out a camera to snap a few shots of a crow that had landed nearby.

"God, I still have that camera, you know? I thought I'd pawn it away for food. I haven't photographed anything since…."

"You, yes?" Dr. Orlean said.

Emmeline nodded, first loosely, then firmly.

Her second version was clad in frontline armor, boots deep in the mud that she remembered felt like quicksand. Her cloak spoke to the Cold, and the fresh wound on her forehead spoke of how close she'd come to death. The Indestructible Orbital Fortifications had fallen—"Unsinkable too, I reckon," she'd said at the time. Her people were fleeing, and they were coming.

The Cold wasn't something around her; it was a part of her, bleeding into her fingers and eyes and drawing out the last gasps of life she had in her lungs. She desperately fought to kindle a fire, but the flames gave up over and over and over—till she did too.

The cliff-face. A fall. Darkness.

Emmeline didn't know who had saved her.

Nothing had changed her more than those days in the Cold, and amongst the terror and pain and scars, she had also come to know herself better. She missed the days when taking a good photo of a crow was her only concern, but there was more to her now. More meat. More thought. More cynicism. She had saved people and been saved and felt the pain that reminded her to live. Emmeline marveled at how the projection captured it all in the depths of her eyes, or maybe it was a Rorschach test, and she was seeing what she needed to.

It was hell, but she couldn't crawl through hell and pretend she hadn't.

"I wish I could take some parts, leave others behind. Pick and choose."

"Afraid that's not possible. We tried storing fully digitized constructs, lifetime memories and all, and mixed constructs, but they fractured. It likes whole, completed consciousnesses with a specific environmental backdrop. Narratives it can organize everything into."

Emmeline pursed her lips, understanding. "But people change."

"Exactly, and for the moment, it doesn't understand that."

There was a cruel irony to it. The universe had molded her into a different person time and again, and now it was making her choose which would be the real Emmeline.

The third version of her was like looking into a warped mirror: it was her, but with something uncanny and bent out of shape. Maybe she didn't recognize herself or didn't want to and still imagined herself as young and beautiful, or middle-aged and grizzled. The wound from the second version had healed into a crescent, motley scar. Her one good eye sagged with memory, searching for someone that could look back at her. Not with a naïve, ignorant love like in the first projection, but one that understood her.

All of her.

She had found someone like that in Milanka. They met in the decrepit ruins of Koper during the worst of it. A fight for the last scraps of food. Milanka won but shared the stale loaf of bread and half a moldy potato with her anyway. They'd traveled together for years and wouldn't have made it half as far without the other. They'd made a life, or what life they could, and lived it together till Milanka couldn't anymore, and Emmeline endured the remnants of what was left.

If the Cold was the curse of her second life, Loneliness was the curse of her third.

It was a deeper, more wretched kind of pain, and one, in her private thoughts, she sometimes wished she could live without.

"How long do I have?"

Dr. Orlean didn't check her watch. "They're coming."

"Uh-huh." She stepped back from the three versions.

"You were picked for several reasons, but this might be the only thing that survives out in the cosmos."

"Half-baked digits of a handful of us?" She could only scoff.

"We tried our best."

"I'm sorry."

Dr. Orlean waved her off. "I'll prep the digitization chamber, and if you'd like, you can decide privately. It is, after all, a medical decision. We sometimes forget that."

Emmeline gave her thanks and was left alone in the small industrial room. No time for the usual beautification of a place like that.

It would be so nice to return to a simple, gentle life, but she couldn't forget the Cold or the Loneliness. Or perhaps she could. She had been many people across her life, but she could have been a thousand other people too—if not for the wars, if not for others, if the cards had dealt her a kinder hand.

"It might be good to try again." Her voice curved with childish inquisitiveness.

With a heavy finger, she chose the new life she would return to.