

**DEAD OR ALIVE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMIC
DEBATE ABOUT THE STATE OF THE NOVEL**

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Information

Title: Dead or Alive: an analysis of the academic debate about the state of the novel

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Dedication

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Abstract

This research aims to answer the following question: “What are the various arguments raised by professional readers within the academic debate about the state of the novel and how do they compare to the book consumption and online engagement with literature of non-professional readers?”. It will do so by first explicating the academic debate about the state of the novel in chapter one. Chapter two will examine data provided by the NEA, Pew Research Centre, and The Bookseller concerning the book consumption of non-professional readers in the US and the UK, as well as their online engagement with literature on websites such as *fanfiction.net* and *archiveofourown.org*. Moreover, the chapter will also examine the influence that The Man Booker Prize has on the literary market and how it possibly provides a link between professional and non-professional readers. The research will be placed a theoretical framework based on Bourdieu’s field theory, thus providing a socio-economic analysis of the interaction between the debate about the state of the novel and the book consumption of non-professional readers, and how literary prizes such as the Man Booker Prize influence this dynamic. It is anticipated that there is a discrepancy between the number of novels that are written, sold, and read, and the way that professional readers depict the state of the novel within the debate. This research analyses the most important arguments made within the debate about the state of the novel and, for the first time, compares them to hard data concerning the reading and buying habits of non-professional readers.

Keywords: *Academic debate, death of the novel, non-professional readers, Bourdieu, The Man Booker Prize*

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	p. 6 - 11
II. Chapter 1: The academic debate about the state of the novel	p. 12 - 22
III. Chapter 2: The literary consumption of non-professional readers	p. 23 - 29
IV. Conclusion	p. 30 - 31
V. Works cited	

Introduction

“There was a comfortable, good-humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding”

Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”

The academic debate about the state of the novel may appear to be a contemporary phenomenon at first sight, but writers and critics have debated the novel from the very start. The nineteenth century saw a transition from the romance to the novel, which caused great uproar in the literary field. Many writers preferred the traditional romance, brushing the modern novel aside by stating it was merely “transitory”(Saintsbury, 397)¹, and too involved with form instead of moral messages. The state of the novel remains a basis for discussion today, with professional readers (writers, literary critics) commenting on it in newspaper columns, essays, and blogs. This research will examine the academic debate about the state of the novel and compare it to the reading and buying habits of non-professional readers by answering the following question: “What are the various arguments raised by professional readers within the academic debate about the state of the novel and how do they compare to the book consumption and online engagement with literature of non-professional readers?”

The introductory chapter will be followed by chapter one which will explicate the debate about the state of the novel by examining and organizing various arguments made by professional readers for the novel being dead or alive. The methodology used in this chapter will be close reading of literary criticism. The aim of the chapter is to provide the reader with an overview of the debate and a clear understanding of the various arguments raised by professional readers.

Chapter two will examine the debate from the viewpoint of non-professional readers by collecting and analyzing quantitative data concerning the reading habits, book consumption, and online engagement with literature of non-professional readers. The chapter will first focus on research conducted by the National Endowments for the Arts (a U.S. institution funded by the U.S. government) which monitored the reading habits of U.S. citizens between 1982 and 2012. The second section will examine research involving book sale figures conducted by Pew Research Centre, The Bookseller, and Forbes. The third section will investigate the online engagement with literature of non-professional readers. The

¹ All quotes have been spell-checked and altered according to MLA regulations. No content has been changed.

popularity of websites such as *fanfiction.net* and *archiveofourown.org* has increased, offering a platform for readers to engage in creating literature themselves. The final section of chapter 2 will explore the role that the Man Booker Prize plays in the consumption of novels by non-professional readers by using Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and data from Nielsen Bookscan. Literary prizes appear, in some way, to bridge the gap between professional and non-professional readers. Professional readers such as literary critics, editors, and authors determine which novels are nominated and win, and non-professional readers consume these same novels due to the fact that they are either nominated for or win a literary prize. This section will analyze how awards such as The Man Booker Prize influence sales and compare sales figures of Man Booker Prize winners, focusing on how much they sold before and after their nominations. By placing my research in a theoretical framework based on Bourdieu's field theory, this research will provide a socio-economic analysis of the interaction between the debate about the state of the novel and the book consumption of non-professional readers, and how literary prizes such as the Man Booker Prize influence this dynamic.

Before exploring the debate about the state of the novel, and all the various arguments raised to corroborate the claims that the novel is either dead or alive, it is important to establish a definition of 'the novel' that will be the starting point as well as reference point for this research. Initial and superficial enquiries into the definition lead to sources such as the *Cambridge Dictionary* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The *Cambridge Dictionary* merely states that a novel is "a long printed story about imaginary characters and events" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). Thus, the official definition of the novel provides no defined indication about content or subject matter. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s definition is somewhat broader and more well-defined, stating that a novel is "an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience, usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting". The clear difference between this definition and that stated in the *Cambridge Dictionary* is the addition of the *human experience*. This focus on the human aspect implies that the novel needs to represent a realistic picture of life. Moreover, it also provides the reader with a type of value judgement concerning the novel:

It is to be noted that, despite the high example of novelists of the most profound seriousness, such as Tolstoy, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf, the term novel still, in some quarters, carries overtones of lightness and frivolity.

And it is possible to descry a tendency to triviality in the form itself. The ode or symphony seems to possess an inner mechanism that protects it from aesthetic or moral corruption, but the novel can descend to shameful commercial depths of sentimentality or pornography.

(Encyclopaedia Britannica)

This ‘tendency to triviality’ that the novel may contain is something which is was also discussed during the nineteenth century, when the literary form was transitioning from the romance to the novel in the form that is now familiar to us. George Saintsbury states the following in his 1887 essay “The Present State of the Novel”:

Nevertheless, I do not think, much as I respect many of its individual practitioners, that the English novel of the day in its average form is a work of art which ranks very high. To begin with, though it is has for many years almost wholly devoted itself to character, how many characters has it produced that will live, that will accompany in the memories of posterity the characters of the masters of the past? Very few, I think.

(395)

Saintsbury comments on the tendency of novels to pay more, and in his opinion futile, attention to characterization than on anything else. Further on he claims that “the novel has nothing to do with any beliefs, with any convictions, with any thoughts in the strict sense, except as mere garnishings. Its substance must always be life not thought, conduct not belief, the passions not the intellect, manners and morals not creeds and theories” (397). This claim is similar to what was described earlier when the Encyclopaedia Britannica spoke of lightness and frivolity.

In his essay “The Art of Fiction”, Henry James counters criticisms such as those by Saintsbury – the essay is a clear defence of the then up and coming “modern English novel” (394). In it he states the following:

Only a short time ago it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call *discutable*. It had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it – of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison [...] but within a year or two,

for some reason or other, there have been signs of returning animation.
(376)

James comments that “the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (378). James suggests that, like an historian, a writer illustrates the past and man’s conduct in society in a realistic manner (380). He seems to suggest that nineteenth century society was weary of the art form of the novel because it represents life to such an extent that it may also include immoralities that are not easily identified as such, and “there is a danger of its hurting you before you know it” (381). This innate need of the novel to represent real life has not changed over the century and is something that is still discernible in the contemporary novel. In his 2015 book *The Value of the Novel*, Peter Boxall discusses the role that the novel plays today. He states that that:

[T]he novel, more than any other art form or mode of representation, has provided, since its emergence in its modern form in the eighteenth century, the forms with which we have fashioned our cultural communities. However ‘preposterous’ it might seem, to Lurie, to suggest that literature might have some kind of social function – might help us to ‘communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other’ – it is the novel that has allowed us to narrate to ourselves the passage of modern democracy, the novel that has given us the closest and most intimate access to the minds of others, so that we might build collective life-worlds. As Nancy Armstrong has recently put it, ‘the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same.’
(22)

It appears that the definition of the novel is far more complicated than those found in dictionaries. The role and function of the novel have been sources for heavy debate over the past two centuries. It seems, however, that most sources agree on one thing: the novel represents real life. Whether the story is based on real life events or is complete fiction, it has to be realistic. Where the romance novel can include knights in shining armour and damsels in distress, the novel’s strength lies in its ability to represent every aspect of real life, and allowing the reader to gain insights from that. This innate quality of the novel to very realistically portray life has been one of the main reasons why the novel itself has never been

uncontested. It has remained a source of debate from its inception and has always raised a level of controversy in society.

In order to understand the role that the Man Booker Prize plays in the discussion of the novel, and particularly in influencing the popularity of certain novels, it is important to understand Bourdieu's theory of cultural production, as it provides us with a system that makes sense of power structures and social relations in the literary field and our roles as individuals within those structures.

In his essay "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed", Bourdieu illustrates his vision on the structure of society. Bourdieu presents society as a multi-dimensional space which consists of different fields. These fields can be similar to what could be identified as physical institutions such as universities, but they can also refer to bigger structures such as the literary field. Fields are interactive and ranked according to their importance in society, with many being subordinate to larger fields such as class relations and power (318-319). Every field comprises of agents and when these agents enter a particular field, they bring with them their habitus. Habitus refers to what Bourdieu describes as "systems of dispositions" (352), and can be interpreted as all the personal tastes, predispositions, insecurities, and ideals a person (agent) has. Habitus can also be explained as being a combination of all the capital an agents possesses. There are different types of capital, namely economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Taking the example of a prominent politician such as the president of the U.S., it can be said he or she possesses economic capital because they have command over a large amount of economic sources, he or she has social capital because they are very influential, and he or she has cultural capital because they are knowledgeable and well educated and therefore aware of specific cultural codes. Agents are awarded a place in the field, according to how well the habitus that the agent, often implicitly, brings into the field fits the rules (Bourdieu labels these rules doxa) of the field, and when their habitus is transported into the field they want to enter, their capital is converted to symbolic capital, which involves the amount of prestige an agent/person has. This concept of having symbolic capital can be applied to literary prizes such as The Man Booker Prize as well. The jury of The Man Booker Prize often comprises of individuals who have cultural, economic, and social capital and therefore give symbolic capital, prestige, to the award itself. Applying Bourdieu's theory of cultural production to literary prizes and the field

of literary criticism allows for a better understanding of the way that literary prizes and the debate about the state of the novel relate to each other.

Chapter 1: The academic debate about the state of the novel

In her study *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf*, Parsons states the following:

The early twentieth century marks a significant moment in the history of the English novel, its status and future becoming a matter of constant literary debate as both writers and reviewers questioned how the form and subject matter of modern fiction should respond to the shape and experience of modern life.

(Parsons,1)

The vast amount of cultural and social capital that the agents in this debate possess allows for the debate to be as influential as it is and it is therefore able to continue on today with literary critics, writers, and academics declaring the novel dead or alive at every turn.

This chapter will explore the debate by taking the 1902 article “Will the Novel Disappear” as a starting point. The article consists of various short essays written by the influential literary critics and novelist James Lane Allen, William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Hamilton W. Mabie, and John Kendrick Bangs and is one of the earliest examples of the academic debate about the state of the novel on paper. The essays are all direct responses to an interview with novelist Jules Verne in which he predicts the novel will be dead in fifty years. Verne categorises his arguments into three different strands: arguments about the changing attitude of the readership, arguments about the quality of the novel itself, and arguments related to new media. This article will function as a reference point for the chapter as it provides a clear structure for the arguments raised in the debate in general. After discussing the 1902 article by Allen et al., the chapter will elaborate on other, more contemporary arguments raised by novelists and critics, demonstrating that these contemporary arguments are of the same type as those made by Verne, and Allen and his co-authors.

In 1902 novelist Jules Verne gave an interview with *The Daily Mail* in which he stated that he believes the novel is dying. In their 1902 article “Will The Novel Disappear?”, Allen et al. respond to this interview and express their own individual opinions on the notion that the novel is dying, making it one of the earliest examples of the academic debate about the state of the novel on paper. Their responses make use of arguments concerning the ‘new’

media (the newspaper), the changing mind-set of people, and the way in which the novel itself has changed. James Allen summarizes Verne's argument as follows:

M. Jules Verne is reported as thinking that the novel will disappear in fifty or a hundred years. He bares his reasons. Novels will not be needed; hence, there will be no novels. Novels are declining in merit; hence, there will be no novels. In future, there will be newspapers, and the world will file them as its historic records for posterity; hence, there will be no novels.

(Allen et al., 290)

Allen et al. respond to all three of Verne's points. James Allen first addresses the issue of the need for the novel. He suggests that similar predictions had been made a century ago but appear not to have come true. Allen thus implies that Verne's argument is redundant. Allen states that "such stories are needed, always have been needed, always will be needed, for many reasons – one of these being that they add to the innocent and noble pleasures of life" (290). He goes on to point out that the human mind will not change so easily in this respect in the future. William Dean Howells holds a similar position, as he addresses Verne directly when he says the following: "No, dear M. Jules Verne, there never was a person more widely astray in his premises or farther from the truth in his conclusions than you, either as to the novel in general or the psychological novel in particular" (294). He states that:

It is imperishable. Wherever two human beings, or twenty, meet, it springs up and flourishes from their talk. It hangs its orchid blossoms from stems rooted in the viewless air, and yet this divine miracle is as common as the grass under our feet. Listen to the gossips over their afternoon tea, or when they meet with their milk-pails in the lane at twilight, and as soon as they begin the old, eternal question of their neighbours, and their affairs, and their motives, you have the psychological novel, which shall never die.

(Allen et al., 294)

Howells, like Allen, indicates that humans have an innate interest to know about the lives of others. He suggests that novels provide us a necessary glimpse into the world of others, whether fictitious or not, and it has become such a normality to us that it is impossible to reverse. John Kendrick Bangs addresses this human need to escape into the world of stories as well. He states that he agrees with Verne that the novel will disappear, but that the need for stories will remain:

I quite agree with M. Jules Verne in his prophecy that the novel is passing, and that in a hundred years from now there will be no such form of literature, or at least not as we know it. [...] Nevertheless, the same thirst for the story of love and life which is inherent in our weak human nature will be as strong as ever, and it will be satisfied by the genius of the future.
(Allen et al., 297-298)

Bangs seems to believe that modern and future technology will develop a way in which people may consume fiction without having to read a novel. He suggests this will be done in the form of pills which, when taken before sleeping, will let the person ‘dream’ the novel or poem (298). Bangs exact prophecy has not been fulfilled, but films and audiobooks have ensured that the ‘reader’ no longer has to actively read.

Verne also addresses the quality of the novel by saying that the novel is declining in merit. James Allen responds to this suggestion by stating that the novel is ever-changing:

[...] there is room for difference of opinion as to whether or not the novel is at present declining in all the countries that produce it. [...] The history of no art is a long dead level or a long dead gain. It consists of movements, of periods of renascence and decadence. If the novel were now declining in merit throughout the world, in such a fact would lie the simple presumption that in the future it will be revived.
(Allen et al., 291)

The notion of merit is also addressed by Hamilton W. Mabie, who states that “the novel has not only gained immensely in all the qualities of good workmanship, but it has sunk its roots into the depths of modern life” (296-297). Mabie seems to suggest that not only is the novel alive, but it is also improving, and here to stay.

The third and final point that Verne raises, the negative influence of the new media (in this case the newspaper), is contested by all of the contributors to the article. James Allen implies that the rise of the newspaper need not be competition for the novel. Verne states that he believes the newspaper will be more popular than the novel because it provides a better way of documenting events for future generations than novels do (289). Allen claims that this assumption is sophistic because neither the novel nor the newspaper are produced merely for the benefit of future generations. He states that:

They may thus come into competition when they are dead, but so long as they are alive they no more interfere with each other than eating and drinking. While you eat you cannot drink, while you drink you cannot eat. But most people like to do both. It would be as reasonable to declare that the sounds which constitute noise will hereafter supplant the sounds which constitute music.

(Allen et al., 291)

Hamlin Garland responds to Verne's point concerning posterity by arguing that the newspaper and newspaper reporters focus too much on the "abnormal, the deceased, to be in any sense a true chronicle of our time" (296). According to him, the novel stands for tranquillity and a truthful representation of life. He states that this can never be achieved by newspaper reporters who are chasing after the next sensational news item (296).

The 1902 article by Allen et al. provides three main argument types that remain to be the basis of discussion amongst contemporary actors in the debate about the state of the novel. Some arguments are based on the way that the contemporary mind-set has changed. Other arguments relate to the quality, shape, and/or form of the novel and how that is changing. A third type that can be distinguished is the influence of new media, in Jules Verne's time this meant the rise of the newspaper. In the twenty-first century this refers to the rise of the internet and social media. Arguments of all these types are usually connected and thus combined in the contemporary debate. Verne's interview and Allen et al.'s response to it are over a hundred years old, and yet the debate they are having could easily be transposed to our time and maintain its relevance. Almost all arguments that have been made within the debate since the Verne interview rely on these three subject types.

In his 2013 article "Literature Without Style", Tim Parks puts the blame on the contemporary need for all things to have commercial value, and indicates that this is one of the reasons the novel is in trouble. He suggests that due to the commercialisation and globalisation of literature most writers' style has lost a certain *je ne sais quoi*:

In the past, a work of literature would establish a reputation in its culture of origin, [...] ; only later, sometimes many years later, would it perhaps be translated by those cosmopolitan literati who wished to make it known in another country. Now, on the contrary, everything is immediate [...]. In the long run, whether through a growing awareness of the situation on the part of the writers, or simply by the process of natural selection, it seems inevitable

that style will align with what can be readily translated more or less into multiple languages and cultural settings, or into a readily intelligible international idiom. [...] Perhaps it is this development that has made me weary with so much contemporary fiction. In particular I have started reading poetry again. There indeed things can still happen with the language, and writers are still allowed to produce texts that are untranslatable and for the most part unprofitable.

(Parks, “Literature Without Style”)

In Park’s scenario the novelist represents a craftsman shoemaker who, due to globalisation and commercialisation, has to compete with mass-produced shoes and low-cost country sourcing. The novelist is dying out because consumers and publishers prefer cheaper and easier products. A similar argument was made by Raymond Federman in 1977 when he states that:

The novel is dead, we are told, but not because good novels are not being written – serious novels, innovative novels, experimental novels, or what Richard Kostelanetz calls ‘intelligent writing’ – but because good novels are no longer being read, considered, accepted and published by the so-called ‘big’ commercial publishers. The novel is not dead, it is being assassinated by the big publishers who have turned their business into supermarket activities.

(Federman, 111)

Arguments like these can, however, only be held up to a certain point. James Allen’s claim in response to Jules Verne is applicable here. We cannot eat and drink at the same time, but we still do both. The fact that we buy mass-produced shoes does not mean we do not buy quality products as well. The public can enjoy commercial books alongside more challenging, highbrow novels. Moreover, commercial and challenging are not mutually exclusive. Arguments such as these ones are based on the highly contemporary conviction that there is a sharp divide between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. The contemporary trend to move away from such black and white thinking is resolutely neglected by Parks and Federman. Literary Prizes such as the Man Booker are extremely commercial, but they tend to pride themselves on the fact that they discover, nominate, and award true novel-writing talent (*Themanbookerprize.com*). This is a clear example of commercialisation and artistic competence coming together.

Another article by Parks, “Trapped Inside The Novel”, addresses the contemporary

lifestyle and the influence it has on the style and form of the novel as well. In it, Parks refers to author David Shields and the way he feels about the tradition of the long realistic novel:

I wonder how many people share the experience described by David Shields in *Reality Hunger*, a tackling of some large novel, a work essentially conventional in its structure and brand of realism, that weaves together the lives of its characters over a number of years, and simply feeling that the whole exercise has become largely irrelevant. Shields doesn't present his remarks as a criticism of writers [...] pursuing the tradition of the long realistic novel. Rather, he suggests it is a change in himself, something he believes has been brought about by the utterly changed nature of contemporary life.
(Parks, "Trapped Inside The Novel")

Parks goes on to state that he shares Shields's reaction to traditional novels – they have become too predictable. Nonetheless, to Parks the idea of portraying "fragmented, rapidly intercut chunks of 'reality', however powerfully they may evoke certain aspects of contemporary living" (Parks "Trapped Inside The Novel") does not seem attractive either. Despite his clear criticism on the traditional form of the novel, he nevertheless does not state that he believes the novel is dead or dying. In fact, he argues that even in a society built on iPhones and iPads and constant virtual communication, the novel is still popular:

Otherwise how to explain the vast numbers of readers picking up the work of a Hilary Mantel, a Richard Ford, or, on the more popular side, a Stieg Larsson or an E.L. James? If the form is losing its seduction for some, it is clearly alive and well for many. Indeed, its very distance, in most cases, from the texture of modern life, the impression it can give of shape, continuity, and hence meaning, may be its most reassuring and attractive aspect. [...] despite its enigmas, we know more or less what life is or should be, we can follow its trajectories, we can put the past in relation to the present.
(Parks, "Trapped Inside The Novel")

These two articles by Parks appear to be somewhat contradictory – a fact that has also drawn the attention of Sam Sacks. Sacks's article "Against 'The Death Of The Novel'", published by *The New Yorker* in 2013, responds to Parks's articles by suggesting that Parks's critique on the traditional novel has more to do with his personal feelings rather than an objective observation. Sacks writes:

One of the most genial voices of disillusion is that of the novelist and critic Tim Parks, whose warmly contrarian complaints about the state of writing have been appearing regularly on the *New York Review of Books* blog. His instalment last week [...] is an honest, provocative, and maddeningly wrongheaded meditation about his unhappiness with what he calls ‘traditional novels’. [...] He feels ‘trapped’ within the expected forms of fiction writing, especially those of realistic fiction. [...] their typical trajectory, from ‘inevitable disappointment followed by the much prized (and I suspect overrated) wisdom of maturity’, is oppressive and harmful because its universality enforces a single way of understanding the world – a way that not only leads to the disenchantment that has come upon Parks but which also sustains a ‘destructive cultural pattern’.

(Sacks)

Sacks suggests that Parks has merely been let down by literature itself because the promise of “novelistic wisdom” (Sacks) and maturity has not been upheld. Sacks’s main issue with Parks is made clear a few paragraphs later when he states:

If Parks’s essay were strictly part of a memoir, there would be no cause to object but he is also a critic, and, to a dangerous extent, he is putting forth his disillusion as a judgement on the state of literature. This tendency to project one’s own cynicism onto the books that failed to magically prevent it has become a little too frequent these days, and it needs challenging.

(Sacks)

Sacks points out that personal feelings perhaps do not have a place in the debate about the state of the novel, but that arguments need to be based on objective observations.

In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2009, Alison Flood discusses Philip Roth’s prediction that the novel will be dead within the next twenty-five years. She states Roth blames the contemporary frame of mind, and the incapability to maintain the attention span needed to finish a novel:

[T]he print that’s the problem, it’s the book, the object itself. [...] To read a novel requires a certain amount of concentration, focus, devotion to the reading. If you read a novel I more than two weeks you don’t read the novel really. So I think that kind of concentration and focus and attentiveness is hard

to come by – it’s hard to find huge numbers of people, large numbers of people, significant numbers of people, who have those qualities.

(Philip Roth qtd. in Flood)

Roth goes on to claim that people have lost interest in books due to all the various screens in their lives – the movie screen, TV screen, and the computer screen. He predicts that 25 years from now, the number of book readers will have decreased to such an extent that “it’s going to be cultic” (Roth qtd. in Flood). Roth may have a point here. It is certainly possible that today less people are avid readers than they would have been the case half a century ago. However, sales numbers of contemporary Man Booker Prize winners show a different picture (this will be elaborated on in chapters II and III). Moreover, Roth’s argument is as sophistic as Verne’s is. The fact that perhaps, due to distractions and less leisure time, we take longer to finish a novel does not result in the novel dying. Stating that taking two weeks to read a novel is not truly reading a novel seems almost elitist and far too idealistic, and also irrelevant to the discussion of whether or not decent novels are still being written. When it comes to the argument concerning media such as tablets, phones, TVs and films, Allen’s argument is applicable as well. Reading and enjoying a film are not two mutually exclusive hobbies. If anything, screens have opened up new possibilities for the novel. E-readers make reading, at home and on-the-go, even more accessible. Moreover, film adaptations of novels often result in a renewed interest in certain books, which sometimes even leads to new editions and reissues of novels.

The most influential and downright pessimistic statements of recent years are made by Will Self. His 2014 article “The Novel is Dead (And This Time it’s for Real)” does not debate possible futures for the novel but is painfully clear in its conviction, as Self declares the novel to be dead:

Just because you’re paranoid it doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get you. [...] ours is an age in which omnipresent threats of imminent extinction are also part of the background noise – nuclear annihilation, terrorism, climate change. So we can be blinkered when it comes to tectonic cultural shifts. The omnipresent and deadly threat to the novel has been imminent now for a long time – getting on, I would say, for a century – and so it’s become part of culture. During that century, more books of all kinds have been printed and read by far than in the entire preceding half millennium since the innovation of movable-type printing. If this was death it had a weird, pullulating way of expressing itself.

[...] The saying is that there are no second acts in American lives; the novel, I think, has led a very American sort of life: swaggering, confident, brash even – and ever aware of its world-conquering manifest destiny. But unlike Ernest Hemingway or F Scott Fitzgerald, the novel has also had a second life. The form should have been laid to rest at about the time of *Finnegans Wake*, but in fact it has continued to stalk the corridors of our minds for a further three-quarters of a century. Many fine novels have been written during this period, but I would contend that these were, taking the long view, zombie novels, instances of an undead art form that yet wouldn't lie down. [...] There is one question alone that you must ask yourself in order to establish whether the serious novel will still retain cultural primacy and centrality in another 20 years. This is the question: if you accept that by then the vast majority of text will be read in digital form on devices linked to the web, do you also believe that those readers will voluntarily choose to disable that connectivity? If your answer to this is no, then the death of the novel is sealed out of your own mouth.

(Self)

Self phrases his argument in a very dramatic and intimidating way, making the death of the novel seem almost inevitable. We as readers are almost made to forget that Self is posing a question that has another answer besides 'no'. To say 'yes' instead would mean that a future in which people choose not to be connected to the internet at all times is plausible. One could argue that it is. The constant overload of information and connectivity provides a need for the type of escapism that novels allow. In addition, novels do not merely provide escapism into a different world, but also help us understand our own. This is the argument that Peter Boxall makes in his 2015 study *The Value of the Novel*. In it he provides an explicit response to Will Self:

The novel, I think, is the form that is most able to instruct us, in Melville's words, on how to live in this world, without being of it; how to struggle with and against what we have and what we know, while also gearing ourselves to a future state which is not yet here. As we enter into the space and time of our immediate future, it is of course the case, as Will Self argues, that the space for withdrawal, the few cubic centimetres inside our skull, is likely to be compressed. We are living in the midst of an information revolution, and an

eco-catastrophe, that will surely transform our relation both to the technosphere and to the biosphere. But for us to imagine that these transformations necessarily spell the death of the novel is to fail to see that the novel has always worked at the edge of the culture, in that space between a completely revealed world and a world that is yet to come. The novel is a kind of differential machine that is tuned to find the place, in the most revealed of utopias or in the most saturated and exhausted of cultures, where the thing which is not is concealed or secreted. The novel mines the seams of the latent and the unthought, as they work through the compacted material of the known. Under contemporary conditions, in which we are all summoned into new forms of community that are as potentially democratising as they are potentially tyrannical, it is the novel we need, more than ever, to help us to understand such communities and to live within them. It is the novel that might help us to frame the utopian potential of the world to come, while also preserving forms of withdrawal in which the thing that is not might live on, darkly lighting our way.

(Boxall, 145)

Boxall's remark is an apt way to conclude this chapter about the debate about the state of the novel because his opinion is seemingly the most nuanced, and, as Sacks would prefer, most objective. It may sound more important and impressive to argue that the novel is dead or dying, and it certainly draws the attention of the non-professional reader, but arguments for this assumption should be made carefully. Addressing cultural change and technological innovation is logical, but it is premature to assume that due to the internet or a faster pace of life readers of novels will die out. The same fear for the death of the novel arose when the newspaper became more prominent in daily life, yet it never became any real competition. The debate about the state of the novel appears to have become more about who can make the most impressive case. This need to approach the novel as something difficult and academic is something that Gore Vidal already addressed in 1974 when Gerald Clarke conducted an interview with him for *The Paris Review*. When he was posed the question of how much English courses can teach a student about the novel, Vidal responded:

Novels used to be written simply to be read. It was assumed until recently that there was a direct connection between writer and reader. Now that essential connection is being mediated—bugged?—by English departments. Well, who

needs the mediation? Who needs to be taught how to read a contemporary novel? Either you read it because you want to or you don't. Assuming, of course, that you can read anything at all. But this business of taking novels apart in order to show bored children how they were put together—there's a madness to it. Only a literary critic would benefit, and there are never more than ten good critics in the United States at any given moment. So what is the point to these desultory autopsies performed according to that little set of instructions at the end of each text? Have you seen one? What symbols to look for? What does the author mean by the word "white"? I look at the notes appended to my own pieces in anthologies and know despair.

(Clarke)

Literary critics and academics who concern themselves with this debate render the actual non-professional reader mute by assuming various reasons why these readers would be losing interest in the novel. The debate itself is able to be so influential because the individuals in the debate possess different kinds of capital and are thus very influential themselves.

Professional readers such as writers, academics, and literary critics are classic Bourdieusian agents who all enjoy cultural and social capital, and they, inexplicitly, transfer their collective symbolic capital onto the debate, thus legitimizing it.

The novel has always been a subject of debate, whether it be for its content, its form, or its popularity. The only thing which is certain is that it will continue to raise discussion amongst academics in the future. The following chapter will examine the reading and buying habits of non-professional readers, as well their online engagement with literature, to examine if/how this academic debate about the state of the novel is reflected in the literary consumption of non-professional readers.

Chapter 2: The literary consumption of non-professional readers

“You hear all this whining going on, “Where are our great writers?” The thing I might feel doleful about is: Where are the readers?” (Sager). This question was posed by Gore Vidal in 2008 and he appears to insinuate that the number of serious readers has decreased. Vidal’s sentiment is shared by a large number of academics who not only fear a decline of serious readers but the loss of readers in general as well. This chapter will examine the reading and buying habits as well as the online literary engagement of all types of non-professional readers to observe if and how the academic debate about the state of the novel is reflected in the literary consumption of non-professional readers.

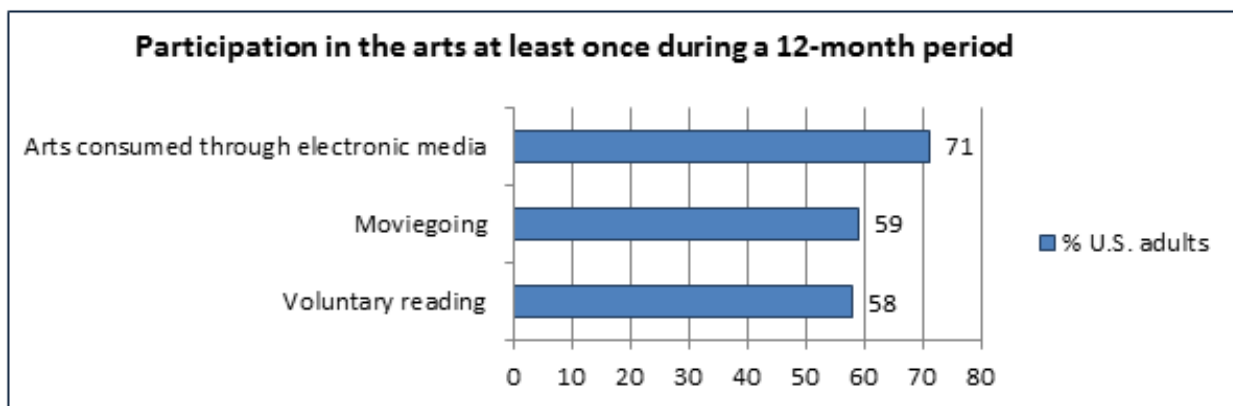


Figure 1 (NEA, 8)

In July 2012 the US government administered a survey concerning the public’s engagement with the arts as a supplement to the US Census Bureau’s *Current Population Survey*. This survey was conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts and provides significant statistics regarding the reading habits of the US population.

The first part of the survey aims to demonstrate the percentage of the adult population that participated at least once in any artistic activity. Voluntary reading holds a strong third place with 58% of the adult US population reading for pleasure at least once in a 12 month period – only 1% less than adults attending the cinema. Moreover, 71% of the adult US population participated in consuming arts through electronic media (figure 1). This 71% also includes the consumption of literature through electronic media, divided between those who used the TV or internet (61%) or mobile and handheld devices (38%). 14% of the people who used TV or the internet to access art used it to obtain information or programmes about visual arts, books or writers. 7 % also used it to access audiobooks (figure 2). Moreover, 16% of the people who

used handheld or mobile devices for artistic purposes used it to access novels, short stories, or plays (figure 3).

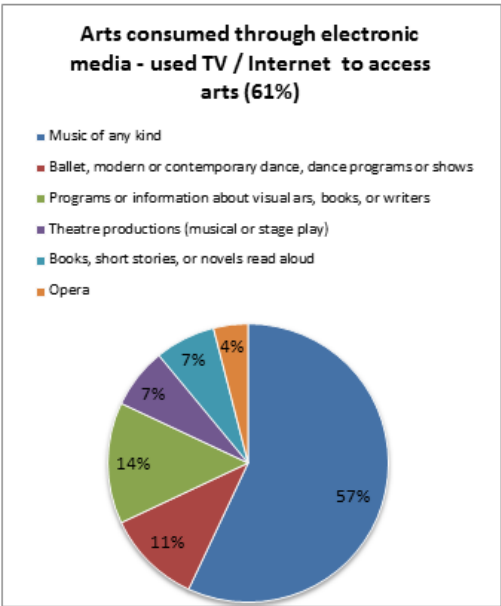


Figure 2 (NEA, 9)

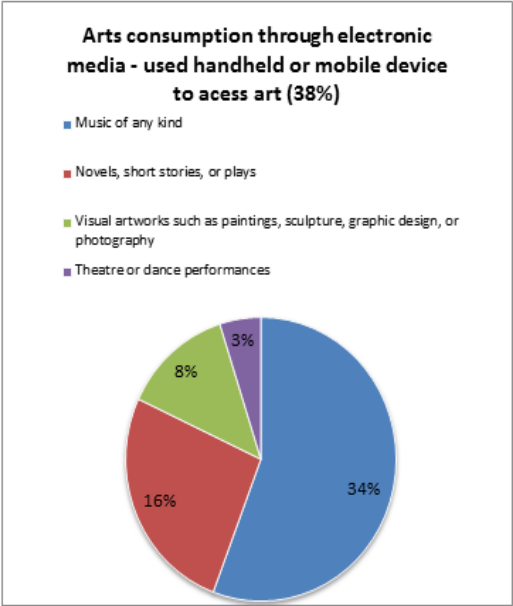


Figure 3 (NEA, 9)

These numbers may seem insignificant compared to for instance the percentage of people who accessed music by means of electronic media, but they do attest to the fact that new media is able to contribute to the literary consumption instead of merely acting as competition to the tradition novel. The survey, combined with data that the NEA acquired previously, also provided a comprehensive picture of the participation in voluntary reading of the adult US population between 1982 and 2012. It shows that the percentage

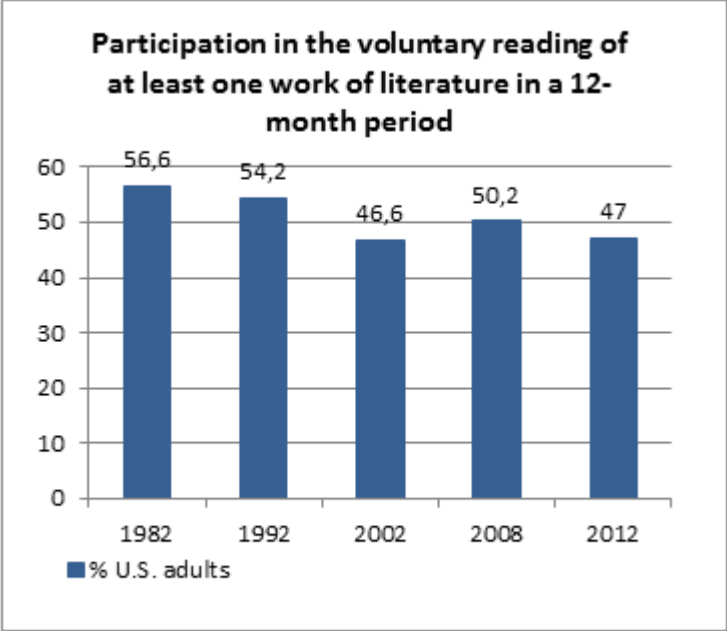


Figure 4 (NEA, 24)

of people who read at least one work of literature in a 12 month period declined from 56,6% in 1982, to 47% in 2012. However, the largest decline occurred in the ten-year gap between 1992 and 2002, decreasing from 54,2% in 1992 to 46,6% in 2002. Since 2002 the number has not changed significantly aside from a slight increase in 2008. The ten-year gap between 2002

and 2012 (which can be viewed as the period in which most technological innovations, which could be seen as competition for the novel, occurred) shows no decline at all, but instead a slight increase (figure 4). When examining which type of literature the US population has in fact been engaging with, it becomes even more clear that the novel has held the same position since 2002. In 2002 45,1% of the adult population had read at least one novel in a twelve-month period. In 2008 this number rose to 47%, and in 2012 it dropped back to 45,2%. This means a slight decrease in percentage since 2008, but still an increase of the 2002 level. This demonstrates that over the last ten years, the percentage of US adults who have read at least one novel in a twelve-month period has not declined (figure 5) but remained stable.

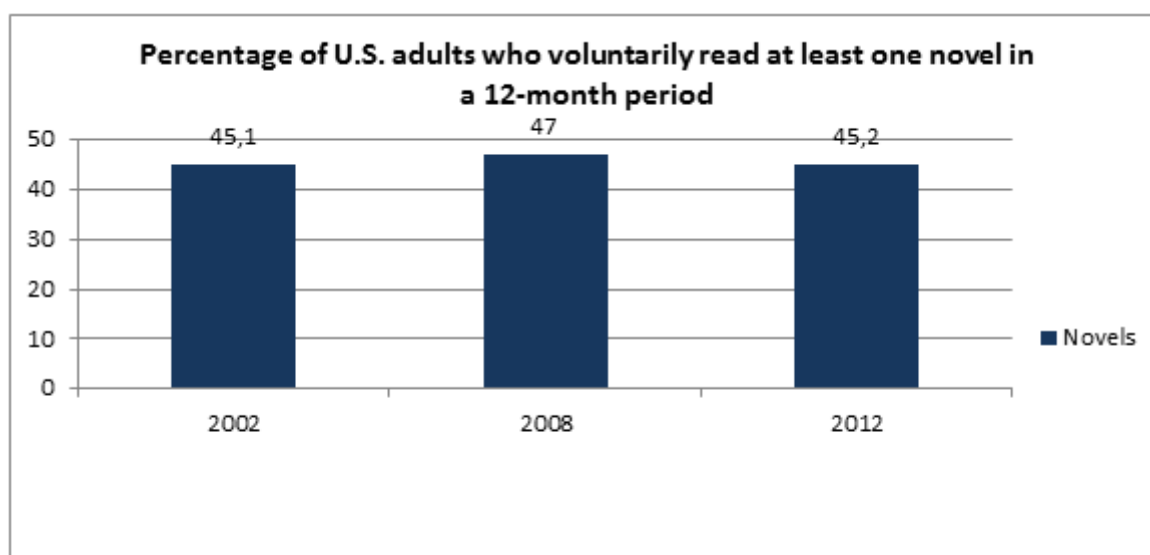


Figure 5 (NEA, 25)

Following this data, the survey concludes that literary reading rates have dropped back to the 2002 level. However, the survey's conclusion also states that senior US citizens are reading books (of any type) at a higher rate than the 2008 rate (NEA, 43). It can be concluded that the overall reading of literature, and by extension novels, has decreased since 1982. However, this decline in number is not significant. In 1982 a small majority had read at least one piece of literature in a 12-month period, and in 2012 still almost half of the adult US population is reported to have done so as well. Even more people engage with literature in other ways, either through the internet, TV, or handheld devices. This research indicates that modern technology can positively contribute to the accessibility of literature, ensuring that both the serious readers as well as the more general readership will continue to thrive.

A similar trend is also reflected in book sale figures. *DigitalBookWorld.com* and *Forbes.com* both reported on sales figures released by the Association of American Publishers

(AAP) which showed that in 2013 both hardcover book sales as well as adult e-book sales were on the rise (Greenfield). According to the AAP, e-book sales increased 4,8% through August to \$647,7 million and hardcover book sales increased an astounding 11,5% to \$778,6 million over the same period (DBW). According to *The Bookseller*, the UK saw a larger increase in e-book sales in 2013 than the US with readers spending £300 billion on 80 billion e-books. However, *The Bookseller* does state that:

[p]rint books were still by far the most popular medium, however, with £2.2bn spent on them in 2013 -4% lower by value and volume (323m) in comparison to 2012, mainly due to the phenomenal sales of the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy in 2012. When the Fifty Shades titles are stripped out, however, volume book buys actually rose 1%.

(Campbell)

These types of data that compare the overall difference between e-book sales figures and print book sales figures indicate that reading is still considered to be a worthwhile pastime by a large part of the US population and that an increase in popularity of e-books does not have to have a detrimental effect on the sales figures of print books.

The US based Pew Research Centre published an article in 2014 which revealed that the overall book readership is stable. The article states that “[d]espite what seems like an ever-growing number of TV (and Netflix) shows, electronic games, smartphone apps and kitten videos jostling for our attention, Americans still find time to read about as many books as ever” (DeSilver). The research also reported that there were no telling differences in overall reading rates between age groups, but that young adults were indeed more likely to have read at least one e-book than other age groups (DeSilver).

Finally, the British newspaper *The Telegraph* published a report in May 2016 concerning research conducted by the Publisher’s Association which asserts that for the first time since the invention of the e-reader, digital book sales numbers are decreasing. The article also suggests that this loss of digital readership is compensated for by a rise in sales numbers for print books. In the article correspondent Hannah Furness states that:

[f]or years, book-lovers have been lamenting the inevitable demise of the printed book in the face of competition from a digital behemoth. But reports of the death of the traditional book have been greatly exaggerated, according to

the definitive annual survey of the industry”
(Furness)

The chief executive of the Publisher’s Association responded to the data by stating that “Those who made predictions about the death of the book may have underestimated just how much people love paper” (Lotinga, qtd in Furness). Although experts quoted in the article by Furness are aware that the increase of physical book sales and decrease of e-book sales are too small to base any predictions for the future on, they do agree that “any suggestion that the physical book is doomed can now definitively be refuted as we trade less neurotically in a more stable, multi-format world” (Prior, qtd in Furness).

E-books and print books are not the only way in which people in the twenty-first century engage with literature. As the NEA research demonstrated, the internet and mobile devices such as mobile phones and tablets have allowed for a new generation of readers who want more information, and who want to engage with the literary world in a much more proactive way. This trend of active readership has led to the rise of websites such as *FanFiction.net*, *Archiveofourown.org*, *Goodreads.com*, and *Tumblr*. Both *FanFiction.net* and *Archiveofourown.org* offer literary enthusiasts the option of writing and uploading their own work, whether it is fan-fiction or original. In his 2010 book *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, Jim Collins describes this phenomenon as follows:

What used to be a thoroughly private experience in which readers engaged in intimate conversation with an author between the pages of a book has become an exuberantly social activity, whether it be in the form of actual book clubs, television book clubs, Internet chat rooms [...]. What used to be an exclusively print-based activity [...] has been transformed into a variety of possible literary experiences.

(Collins, 4)

The website *FanFiction.net* was launched in 1998 and has grown into the world’s largest fan-fiction archive, with more than 2 million users and stories written in over thirty languages (Fanfiction.net). *Archiveofourown.org* holds a strong second place with almost 900,000 users who uploaded more than 2,3 million works to the page (Archiveofourown.org). Websites such as *Tumblr* and *Goodreads.com* offer readers the opportunity to share and discuss their favourite (and not so favourite) literature with their friends, opening a literary discussion that does not require a physical book club or a university lecture hall. This is what Collins refers to

when he states that reading has turned into a social activity. Solitary reading is no longer the only way of enjoying literature. Instead, reading has become a social activity that ends long after the last page has been turned.

The various data that has been presented in this chapter as well as the inquiry into the online engagement of non-professional readers asserts that these non-professional readers are important agents outside of the traditional Bourdieusian literary field. As consumers of literature they influence the literary field to a great extent. Literary prizes such as the Man Booker Prize provide a link between the academic agents and the non-professional agents when viewed from a Bourdieusian perspective as it aims to “increase the reading of quality fiction and to attract ‘the intelligent general audience’” (TheManBookerPrize.com). This aim to bring high-brow fiction into the realm of consumerism and commercialisation is what connects the academic debate with the literary consumption of non-professional readers. Literary prizes, and The Man Booker Prize in particular, are not only able to bridge the gap between the two worlds, but to influence them as well. Agents in the academic debate about the state of the novel are apprehensive about the future of the serious novel. The Man Booker Prize aims to bring this type of novel to the general public, and it seems to be working.

In 2012 Nielsen Bookscan published data concerning sales figures of Man Booker Prize winners before and after having been awarded the prestigious prize. The data shows an obvious correlation between winning the Man Booker Prize and increasing sales figures (figure 6). The 2010 Man Booker Winner *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson was sold 627 times in the week before winning the coveted prize. In the week after the win it sold 12,650 copies – an increase of 1918 %. *The Finkler Question* is not the only novel that profited greatly from the publicity; all winners between 2001 and 2011 saw in an increase in sales numbers of at least 470%.

Year	Winning Author	Title	Sales Week Before Prize	Sales Week After Prize	% Change
2001	Peter Carey	True History of the Kelly Gang	665	3,966	496%
2002	Yann Martel	Life of Pi	587	7,150	1118%
2003	DBC Pierre	Vernon God Little	509	8,627	1595%
2004	Alan Hollinghurst	The Line of Beauty	422	4,390	940%
2005	John Banville	The Sea	601	6,327	953%
2006	Kiran Desai	The Inheritance of Loss	534	4,726	785%
2007	Anne Enright	The Gathering	434	6,001	1283%
2008	Aravind Adiga	The White Tiger	463	8,033	1635%
2009	Hilary Mantel	Wolf Hall	3,146	17,703	463%
2010	Howard Jacobson	The Finkler Question	627	12,650	1918%
2011	Julian Barnes	The Sense of an Ending	2,535	14,534	473%

Figure 6 (Nielsen Bookscan, qtd in *Vibrant*)

To bridge the gap between high and low art appears to be an important goal of the Man Booker Prize, but it has received some serious critique for it. The 1994 Chair of the prize stated that:

[h]ighbrow critics sometimes object that although the Booker is the most prestigious in the world of the English novel, all such prizes tend to commercialise art. I find this rubbish. On the contrary I think that fashion and pretension are the great enemies of all fine art today [...] In looking for good fiction I feel the Booker judges should make no distinction between different kinds of excellence in the genre [...] whatever had real and rare talent in its own line and is not merely modish junk, seeking to show off.

(Peter Kemp, qtd in Todd)

One of the ways in which the Man Booker Prize aims to bridge this gap is by combining actors from the world of publishing and sales with academics and literary critics in the judging panel. The Booker Prize Foundation Advisory Committee is responsible for any changes to the rules as well as the appointment of each year's judges. The committee is made up of important commercial actors in the book industry such as Richard Cable (a publisher at Random House), Maggie Fergusson (writer and Secretary of the Royal Society of Literature), and Peter Kemp (Chief Fiction Reviewer of the *Sunday Times*). The judges usually represent academia as well as university educated celebrities. The 2016 judging panel includes Jon Day (critic and lecturer in English at King's College London), Abdulrazak Gurnah (novelist and Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent) and the actress Olivia Williams who graduated with a degree in English from Cambridge University (TheManBookerPrize.com). Bourdieu's theory of cultural production provides us with a system that makes sense of power structures and social relations in the literary field and our roles as individuals within those structures. This concept of having symbolic capital can be applied to literary prizes such as The Man Booker Prize as well. The inclusion of agents with different types of capital ensures that together they attribute symbolic capital to the award. Agents from the commercial side (The Booker Prize Foundation Advisory Committee) bring economic capital to the award, and the inclusion of academics and cultured celebrities ensure that also social and cultural capital are present. Together they ensure that the Man Booker Prize becomes a prestigious prize for writers to win, but also an influential guide for readers who seek counselling in order to better select their next read.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to answer the question of what the various arguments raised by professional readers within the academic debate about the state of the novel are and how they compare to the book consumption and online engagement with literature of non-professional readers. Chapter one established how the debate has become so influential by viewing it from a Bourdieusian perspective. Professional readers are agents in possession of different types of capital, and together they ensure the relevance and influence of the debate itself by inexplicitly transferring their collective symbolic capital onto the debate. The chapter also demonstrated that the three main arguments raised within the debate to assert that the novel is either dead or dying are that (1) technological advances and new media ensure that no one will be interested in the novel, (2) the contemporary mind-set ensures that no one has the need, concentration, and/or time to read a novel, and that (3) the quality of the novel itself is declining.

Chapter two tested these assumptions by examining the book consumption and online engagement with literature of non-professional readers. The research conducted by the NEA tested the first two arguments made by the professional readers, namely that technological innovations and new media cause a loss of interest in the novel and that the contemporary mind-set does not allow for reading. The data demonstrates that literary reading rates have not decreased drastically over the past thirty years, and that new media and electronic devices are being used to access novels and more general information about literature instead of providing competition for the novel. The chapter also included data from the AAP, Pew Research Centre and the British Publisher's Association which asserted the popularity of literature by concluding that book sales numbers (both e-books and print) are increasing. The May 2016 article by *The Telegraph* even stated that "any suggestion that the physical book is doomed can now definitively be refuted" (Prior, qtd in Furness). This chapter substantiated the idea that the academic debate amongst professional readers and the consumption and engagement with literature of non-professional readers do not align as they paint different pictures of the situation surrounding the state of the novel. Bourdieu's theory of cultural production was used to help explain how the debate can be as authoritative as it is, and to examine the role that The Man Booker Prize plays in the literary market. The Man Booker Prize provides a link between the two groups of agents because it bridges the gap between highbrow literature and mass-production, thus gaining respect from professional readers as well as being accessible to non-professional readers, ensuring its own influence in the literary market. Data from Nielsen

Bookscan provided insight into the authority and symbolic capital of the prize by publishing sales figures of Man Booker Prize winners from before and after they won which demonstrated just how dominant the role of the Man Booker Prize is in bringing highbrow literature to a wider readership.

In conclusion, this research is able to establish that new media and technological advances do not provide any significant threat to the novel, but instead appear to make novels and literature in general more accessible. It also asserts that the literary readership is stable, thus refuting the assumption that people in the twenty-first century do not feel the need to read. It is too early to make any predictions about the future of the novel with absolute certainty but the data that has been included and analysed in this paper does allow for optimism. It appears there are many possible ways in which the novel can adapt and survive and literary prizes such as the Man Booker Prize ensure that highbrow and challenging novels finds its way to a large readership as well, thus fighting for the future of the novel – which, for now, remains to be very much alive.

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