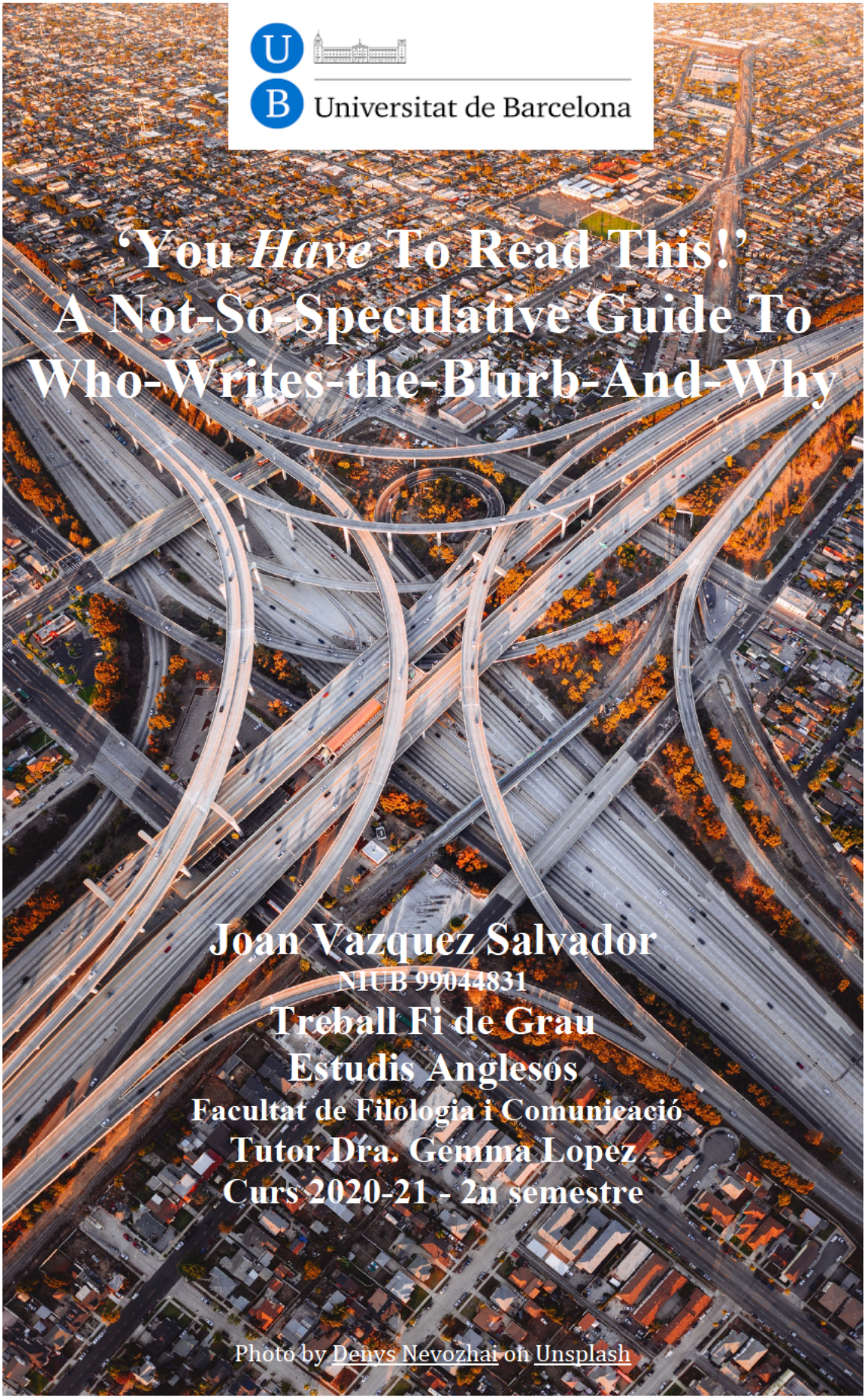

Universitat de Barcelona

‘You *Have* To Read This!’ A Not-So-Speculative Guide To Who-Writes-the-Blurb-And-Why

Joan Vazquez Salvador

NIUB 99044831

Treball Fi de Grau

Estudis Anglesos

Facultat de Filologia i Comunicació

Tutor Dra. Gemma Lopez

Curs 2020-21 - 2n semestre

Photo by Denys Nevozhai on Unsplash

INDEX

1. Introduction. A Hypothetical Netflix Subscriber

> I handed him the manuscript of Fanshawe's big novel. (…) Stuart said that he liked the title, but when he asked me to describe the book, I said that I'd rather not, that I thought it would be better if he found out for himself. He raised an eyebrow in response (a trick he had probably learned during his year at Oxford), as if to imply that I shouldn't play games with him. I wasn't, as far as I could tell. It was just that I didn't want to coerce him. The book could do the work itself, and I saw no reason to deny him the pleasure of entering it cold: with no map, no compass, no one to lead him by the hand. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy 231-232*

This paper begins with a fire. A book burning, to be precise. However, since this is, above all, an academic work, fiction devices must hereby come to a halt. Of all choices possible, chrononormativity will have to be, after all, the most appropriate. I research *therefore* I know. Incendiary as it may sound, what comes first is actually a crucial matter in this paper. But all in moderation. And in due time.

Binge-watching is addictive. And rainy weekends are perfect for falling into its spell. Nowadays, devouring a whole season of *that* amazing show in one single afternoon is not only plausible but provocative. One episode led to another and... The amount of fiction available on platforms such as Netflix or HBO is relentlessly competitive. Algorithms based on previous choices and other untraceable tactics select new titles that flash at subscribers' main menus. Big Brother knows best and time matters: a picture, a catchy title, a very short description or a preview might be held responsible for pressing 'play'. Not to mention those three little tags - 'Action, Adventure, Romance' [such as those introducing this End of Degree Paper] - very efficient and so very much accountable for setting up the mood. And if (just *if*) *that* particular show becomes *your* choice, Netflix has some similar suggestions at the end of the series for your eyes only. Or something even better perhaps: the very same show but with a whole new rebranded image ready to seduce subscribers to devour it again as for the very first time. Or, for the forgetful, like you had never seen it before.

Consider the hypothetical case of a HBO user (a fabricated, fictional subscriber especially formulated for the occasion) on a rainy winter afternoon, devouring season 2 of *The Handmaid's Tale* and having an epiphany with episode number 11, 'Holly'. Offred, the heroine, is in labour in an abandoned mansion surrounded by snow, hiding from her commander to whom she is enslaved, which also happens to be the father of her born-to-be.

Furiously unprepared to deliver on her own, she looks for a way out of the house and barges in the garage to try and ignite the car to no avail. Surrendered, she sits in the snow to find a wolf in front of her.

And there they sit and stare at each other for a while.

Considering this particular HBO subscriber were a *connoisseur* of Margaret Atwood's novel (and inadvertently made an allusion to the article *Running with the Tigers* in which Atwood discusses the roles of master/slave/predator/prey in per-versions of fairy tales)… considering this particular subscriber were as fond of character's insights and emotions as of plot, this sequence (the snow, the wolf, Offred's red cape, labour, the fact that she successfully delivers on her own), this very sequence would encapsulate the whole show very eloquently. Consider then that, at the end of the episode, this hypothetical binge-watcher [due to epiphany exposure, or perhaps just laziness] were too intoxicated to press the 'skip intro' button during next chapter's intro, and consumed the recap of episode 11 before starting episode 12, to find the memorable delivery sequence entirely omitted. Would it be too much to ask '*who edited this?*'

Who edited this?

A recap at the start of an episode is decisive to engage readers. It is helpful for the absent-minded and sets up some parameters for the chronorebellious, who would rather start a show from the middle onwards. But are recaps essential? Could audiences do without them, in the words of the narrator in *City of Glass*, 'with no map, no compass, no one to lead you by the hand'? They are definitely disposable [hence the 'skip intro' button] when binge-watching is involved. Events from former episodes are still fresh in one's memory. And yet, in this particular recap of episode 11 of *THT Season 2,* to the eye of this particular subscriber, relevant events had been omitted. Someone in an editing room must have considered the emotions at that peculiar labour sequence irrelevant to the plot and had only focused on its outcome.

Is synthesis more friends with plot than insight as in 'someone can follow a story if a succession of events is deployed but emotions are dismissible'? Is plot over emotion an issue only due to the amount of space synthesis allows or are there other reasons behind? Would our particular subscriber be offended by the recap editor's choice to focus on the commander's reaction rather than on Offred's quest for matters of gender and identity? Is synthesis enemies with a myriad of perspectives?

In addition to that, if this very same hypothetical now-Netflix-subscriber (for neither HBO nor Netflix have commissioned this paper) *were* an aspirant novelist [a debut

manuscript has been completed after a year's work and the time has come to summarize its contents in an appealing way for agents, editors and publishers]… watching this particular recap would produce some of the following questions, which for empathy reasons demand a switch to the first person singular.

> Is my novel a 'transformational journey' rather than a frantic series of events? Would the phrase dissuade those who only look for the action? My novel has different points of view from different characters. Should I focus on one, a hero that an editor/publisher might easily identify with? How do I include other characters without diluting the focus? One of my characters is a creole and that might somehow be relevant to the story. Is it racist to mention it? Is it inclusive? If my novel is focused on strong female roles does it make it 'wimmies' fiction? One of my characters is gay, what would be more inclusive in this context? To mention it or to omit it?

In this process, the Netflix subscriber's manuscript would cease to be a simple story to become a mercantile object. A book. The author, in the quest of pitching the novel, would be writing another text: a text on a text, with which it would inevitably set up a dialogue in its aim to describe it. A blurb: a synopsis where the novel becomes 'inadvertently' self-referential. The author, by starting to think of selling the story to an audience, by starting to deal with editors, suddenly *becomes* one. However, this is an arduous task. No little extract could possibly contain all that the novel embodies. The narrator of *The New York Trilogy*, pitching his late friend's novel to his editor, claims it a futile exercise: 'It was just that I didn't want to coerce him. The book could do the work itself, and I saw no reason to deny him the pleasure of entering it cold (Auster, 231)'. Indeed, some editors and publishers nowadays, perhaps seduced by authors unwilling to coerce the reader, design covers without blurbs (just a few lines from the text, perhaps). Do they have marketing proof that it actually makes the book more inclusive, more sellable to more people? After all, what drives someone to buy a book? What makes you *want* it? For some it might be a review or a friend's recommendation. Or the praise coming from an erudite: a quote in the flap from a respectable writer or a critic. Ali Smith claiming a novel to be 'breath-taking'. For others, the cover design might happen to be irresistible to the point of buying a new edition of a text already in their possession. Just as a new picture might make some watch a Netflix series again as if it was brand new.

However, there is no way the editor will let Auster's narrator get away with it. It is not going to happen. For *Neverland* to become a book it needs to be accompanied by a piece of text that summarizes it. Just like our Netflix subscriber needs to finish writing a summary for a debut novel.

A blurb.

Which factors intervene in this process?

The following work is a speculation (or not so much) on the reasons behind the writing of blurbs, on the relationship between editors, publishers, authors and readers, and the way blurbs set up a dialogue between main texts and potential consumers - whether including or excluding them - and the strategies that may lie underneath, in an attempt to unveil the secrecy surrounding the publishing industry. *Qui parle* in blurbs? Does multiplicity survive hegemony in the editing chamber? Does multiplicity survive 'the' hegemony of the editing chamber? Do recaps and synopses have enough 'characters' for *pétites hégémonies?*

2. Framing The Blurb

2.1 Previously…on *The Blurb:* Framing Publishers

'I greet you at the beginning of a great career'. Walt Whitman imprinted this praise quote by friend Emerson in his 1856 second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which some claim to be the very first blurb in publishing history (Fawcett). The immediate precursor was what Genette refers to in *Paratexts* as the 'please-insert': 'a short text describing, by means of a summary (…), in a value-enhancing manner, the work to which it refers (Genette 104)'. Two key concepts are introduced here: the praise tone and the 'factual' description (107) [whether 'factual' refers to the notion of veracity or to plot, or to both, we will speculate later on]. These features are already present in a Medieval Romance Prologue such as *Chrétien de Troyes:*

> [A] prologue that also contains a **reference to its source** which is characteristic of the way medieval romance writers vouched for the **authority of their work**: "this story that I wish to relate to you we find written down in my Lord **St Peter's Library in Beauvais,** the tale from which Chrétien fashions this romance was taken from there. The book containing the **true story** is very old, therefore it is all the more **worthy of belief**". (Genette 168)

A quite similar form and functions (authority, veracity, value) are echoed in the 20th century blurb of the Vintage edition of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles [my brackets, my insertions]:

> Of all John Fowles' novels [**reference to its source]**, *TFLW* received the most **universal acclaim,** and today holds **a very special place in the canon of post-war English literature [value, authority]**. From the god-like stance of the 19th century novelist that he both assumes and gently mocks, to the last detail of dress, idiom and manners, his book is **an immaculate recreation of Victorian England [veracity]**.

The 19th century 'please-insert' [as in 'please insert it in a page or a column'] was addressed to newspaper editors 'in the form of a press release meant to announce a work's serial publication (Genette, 104)'. If Netflix had an equivalent in the 19th century, that would be the serial form. Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers* became a huge phenomenon in 1836 and one of the first novels ever to be published in a newspaper. Certain hooking strategies to ensure audiences bought the next instalment were already at play: refreshing references to previous chapters at the beginning of new ones [which predate the Netflix 'previously on…'] or previews such as the following one at the end of *Pickwick*'s chapter 1.

> We have no official statement of the facts which the reader will find recorded in the next chapter, but they have been carefully collated from letters and other MS. authorities, so unquestionably genuine as to justify their narration in a connected form. (Dickens 6)

This device would later develop into the popular cliffhangers [a term made famous by Hardy for a tool Cervantes was already using centuries before, responsible for nowadays binge-watching]: the ending of a chapter in such a state of suspense that leaves readers insatiably roaring for more. Which worked. As stated in the blurb of the Oxford Classics Edition, '[a]t the height of its popularity *The Pickwick Papers* sold 40,000 copies a month and catapulted the 24-year-old Dickens to fame.'

The novel had been on the rise for almost a century. Booksellers were creating an industry for a growing audience. Newspapers not only published novels, they also advertised them. So far, medieval literature, with its mythological/historical themes and stereotypical characters embodying universals (the dame, the knight…), had been transmitted orally and in verse. The new genre asked for new things: prose (writers had to deliver fast due to demanding audiences) and 'realism', an attempt to reject medieval universals by constructing a notion of individuality (Watt 12). *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) had started it all a century ago.

> Robinson Crusoe's seafaring adventures are abruptly ended when he is shipwrecked, the **solitary survivor** on a deserted island. He gradually **creates a life for himself**, building a house, cultivating the land, and **making a companion from** the native whose life he saves. Daniel Defoe's enthralling story-telling and imaginatively detailed descriptions have ensured that his **fiction masquerading as fact** remains one of the most famous stories in English literature. On one level a simple adventure story, the novel also raises **profound questions about moral and spiritual values, society, and man's abiding acquisitiveness.**

The Oxford Classics blurb of the 'first' novel ever written in the English language gathers all the traits of the genre at its inception stages: the daily report of an 'ordinary' individual ('solitary survivor'), the thin line between fact and fiction in the style of a fictionalized autobiography ('fiction masquerading as fact'), the religious/spiritual self-inspection and the 'total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the (…) memoir (Watt 16)'. It seems as if in the origins of the novel, character's insights were not second-rate to a series of plot events.

Last, but not least, Crusoe was a story about 'abiding acquisitiveness'. Novel and capitalism were born hand in hand. The stories portrayed characters in a journey to their own economic progress at the very same time the publishing business was designing the blueprint of an industry.

2.2 The Novel-Blurb Affair: Crazy Little Thing Called Theory

For the poststructuralist, reading a text from a (his)torical point of view equals narrowing the amount of possibilities a text may be read against. A blurb demands at least being read against the novel that it attempts to describe and whose 'presence in the world', whose 'consumption in the form of a book', is trying to ensure (Genette 1). Genette is transparent as to the capitalist aspects of the paratext. The more, the merrier: global better than local, universal better than individual. And to sell, whatever the tactics, involves a seduction. One in which the novel acknowledges being watched.

In her book *Seductions in Narrative,* Dr. Gemma López introduces the process of Lacan's Mirror Stage, in which a child acknowledges his own existence as a coherent entity by seeing his own reflection on a mirror. Equally, a novel – a writer's 'child' - becomes aware of itself when it needs to be 'explained' and 'sold' to the world. Hence, it is by the blurb, a reflection of itself, that the novel becomes self-aware, coherent and thus seductive to the public. Until then, the novel is a text; from then on, the novel is at least two: the source and the explanation of itself. This synthesis, like the child's reflection, grants the novel an identity. However, this projected image, the blurb, is illusionary. Such as the image the child sees is an abstraction [the child is much more many children than the simple capture he has created in his mind as fixed (López, 10)] so is the blurb. With synthesis, some things are inevitably left behind. In other words, the blurb will speak about the novel and will not speak about the novel. Simultaneously.

In addition to that, this game of seduction between novel and the world implies another seduction: a power game between novel and blurb. So far, by following the equation of the blurb being written only to sell the novel, Genette assumes the blurb to be written *after* the novel has been completed, inevitably setting up a cause-and-effect game where 'the paratextual element is always subordinate to "its" text (Genette 12)'. However, if the blurb is nothing but an illusion of a particular novel, how could that novel be the cause of the blurb? In its attempt to sell the novel, the blurb is effecting upon it, turning it into its own reflection, and therefore narrowing the infinite possibilities the novel might embody when discovered without a 'coercion' [to use Auster's phrasing]. Consider for a second a different scenario. In his book *Tragedy,* Terry Eagleton states that Greek tragic drama

> was funded by an individual appointed by the city state (…) The state supervised the proceedings (…) and held the scripts of the performances in its archives. Actors were paid by the *polis*, and the state also provided a fund to pay the entrance fee for citizens too poor to pay it themselves. The judges of the competition were elected by the body of citizens, and would no doubt have brought to bear on the

> dramatic performances the critical acumen they were accostumed to exercising as jurors in the law courts and members of the political assembly. (…) Tragedy then was not only an aesthetic experience or dramatic spectacle. It was also a form of ethico-political education which helped to inculcate civic virtue. *(Eagleton, 2-3)*

In this production memo of an ancient fiction artefact, a power structure ('the city state') – identifying with what Genette calls the *sender* – is the master puppeteer of the story, commissioning a writer to produce a text with a specific *force* or agenda: to 'inculcate civic virtue'. This sort of 'education' was plotted to 'satisfy' all the *polis*, both the authorities and those 'too poor to pay for themselves'. In this scheme, the 'aesthetic' and 'ideological investment' made in the 'paratext' to sell it to the world [in this case, all the elements leading to the performance] would not rely on the writer's intention but on the commissioning state.

> [W]hatever aesthetic or ideological investment **the author makes** in a paratextual element (…) the paratextual element is always subordinate to "its" text, and this functionality determines the essence of its appeal and its existence (Genette 12).

Genette is here assuming the author to be the writer of the blub thus carrying the very own author's ideology. Inspired by the example of drama commissioning, contemplate for a second this plausible scenario: an idea for a novel is incepted in the mind of an editor/bookseller/publisher with a reasonable purpose of 'to-whom-I-want-to-sell-what-and-how' and then hires a writer who has only to pull the thread. The blurb then, the few lines pitching the idea, would be effecting the final product, the novel, which would answer to the requirements firstly introduced by the commissioner. In this case, the one 'subordinate' to its paratext would be the novel and not the opposite.

In the 1726 Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* preface, Captain Gulliver addresses his publisher through a letter complaining inconsistencies in the last draft/first edition of his travels. Things have been omitted or, even worse, inserted without his own 'Power to consent' - up to the extent, he claims - 'that I do hardly know mine own Work (Swift 5)'. The unauthorized editorial changes expose him: they make the Houyhnhnm look imperialist and the Yahoos too submissive. If the publisher's intention was to even social injustice, Gulliver complains, he has not enhanced the situation but the opposite. Another letter follows as an answer to Gulliver's: the publisher addresses the reader to dismiss the author and grant the authority of the following narrative. Leaving aside the political satire, Swift is here unveiling in a playful way the roles of author, editor and publisher while subverting the values and purposes of the emerging publishing industry.

Booksellers in Swift and Defoe's London 'enjoyed social prominence' and were 'turning literature into a mere market commodity (Watt 58)'. Apart from 'controlling all the main channels of opinion', they also controlled and influenced writers. If Greek Drama's *force* was to 'inculcate civic virtue', novels might as well have been carriers of doctrine, by which mass consumers of fiction were educated into the new political system, democracy, and the new economic system, capitalism, while its main driver, the booksellers, attempted at creating an establishment (Hites). By referring to the *ménage* author/editor/publisher as the 'author and its allies', Genette assumes them to be always on the same page - or have the same saying - on the vision of the novel they want to sell to the world. However, to contradict Genette by arguing it is not the novel that effects the blurb but the opposite - and placing the blurb as the cause of a specific reading of a novel - would also reinforce a teleological circle which would restrict a myriad of intertextual readings awaiting to be downloaded.

2.3 Universals and The Elevated Road Junction

That the novel, following the Cartesian *cogito,* claimed the individuality of different characters conveying their own particular view of the world might seem an inclusive idea at first. The very particular conditions of Crusoe as cast away in an island rendered him as 'different', as much as Gulliver, as a traveller, also enjoyed a very particular perspective of the world. However, they both shared something in common: they were not just particular random individuals but ones 'highly enough valued by society to be considered proper for literature (Watt, 66)'. In other words, they were all white, middle-class, heterosexual English men. Their view of the world could not be that subjective. Julia Kristeva uses the Stoic term *oikeiosis* or "conciliation" to approach the concept of 'universalism' by the example of the Greek empire. In this conciliation, the subject is in agreement with himself when it does not suffer from any inconsistencies related to the ruler or the 'majority'. Within this creed, a slave is not different than a master, for the same reason a woman is not different than a man. If all individualities 'negotiate' by the same code, the question is *whose*? This does not integrate different identities but produces an 'autarchy (…) under the common denominator of reason (Kristeva, *Strangers* 57-59)'.

Paradoxically, the genre that aimed at subverting medieval autocracy had resulted promptly in a portrayal and campaign of capitalism. As Eagleton claims, 'most ideology is not conspiratorial' but 'those who propagate it' really believed in it (Eagleton 99). Whether

the Greek state was or not aware of spreading 'civic virtue' through drama or whether 19th century booksellers – in their monopoly of writers and critics - used the novel as a deliberate tool to spread the wonders of emergent capitalism, it does not seem implausible to ascertain that commissioning a work of fiction inevitably reverses the role of the paratextual element as being solely subjected to the main text. However, reading the blurb as a source for the novel would also imply teleology. Consider a speculated *Robinson Crusoe* 's inception. In a meeting, a bookseller and an editor come up with an idea for a story about the ambition to reach an upper station in life and reducing social interactions to mercantilism. This would only effect the final product up to an extent. Even if a presumed commissioned Defoe adhered to this ideology, the novel would be so much more. The blurb also is, actually. The fact that there is no further detail in the blurb about the slave turns *RC* to be the slave's story as much as the master's. If *The Pickwick Papers* blurb claims the novel to be a tapestry of life in England, both blurb and novel also become a story about the England that is not the 'Pickwick' England, the England that could not afford novels by instalments. In the words of Judith Butler, if *Antigone* may be read as a tragedy commissioned by a government to inflict fear upon citizens, it also inevitably carries an example of how to dismantle a government's authority (Butler *Antigone* 28-29).

With Foucault's terms (López 13), if works are commissioned with a certain purpose or *discourse*, it is impossible to prevent and control the appearance of a discourse contrary to the first, which is already imprinted on the text. Both blurb and novel share the same discourses. Speculating on which goes first is irrelevant. Not any of them effects each other and both of them do. Simultaneously. Hence, the dialogue between blurb and novel seems inevitable as much as the amount of writers/readers impacting both texts is multiple. Here, intertextuality, 'the process of moving between texts (Kołoszyc on Kristeva)' does not occur only between two separate texts but between two versions of the 'same text', novel and blurb, and between other blurbs from other novels. In this process, a dialogue is set between the 'writer' of the novel, the 'writer' of the blurb (whether it is author, editor or publisher), the 'readers' of both novel and blurb (author, editor, publisher, audiences), and both 'texts' (blurb and novel). The dialogues of forces between all these entities, between all of them both writers and readers with same/different purposes/directions, form an elevated road junction in which, at sky level, readings - as roads - seam, overlap, intertwine.

3. The Importance of Being Quirky. Deconstructing the Blurb

> 'There are things in the book that should be changed, I think, certain passages that should be cut. It would make the book even stronger.'
> 'That's just editor pride.' I said. 'It's hard for you to see a manuscript and not want to attack it with a red pencil.'
> Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy 231-232*

3.1. Sexing the Blurb. Coming of Age in Inscrutable Ways

Grove Press, an independent New York publishing house renown for supporting civil rights during the 20th century, chooses a quote from a Republican paper, The Chicago Tribune, as praise in their edition of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.*

> A daring, **unconventional** comic novel … by employing **quirky** anecdotes, which are told with romping **humour,** and by splicing various **parables** into the narrative, Winterson allows herself the **dangerous luxury** of writing a novel that refuses to rely on **rousing plot devic**es … a fascinating **debut** … A **penetrating** novel.

References are made to the religious background and the tone of the novel as 'comic' and 'told with romping humour'. Interestingly enough, the word 'quirky' is used along with 'unconventional'. What might at first look like an oxymoron gives way to another question. Quirky how? In the actual blurb, a little bit more light is drawn on Jeanette's story:

> [A]s this budding missionary **comes of age**, and **comes to terms** with her **unorthodox sexuality**, the peculiar balance of her God-fearing household dissolves. Jeanette's insistence on listening to truths of her own heart and mind (…) makes for an **unforgettable chronicle** of an **eccentric,** moving passage into adulthood.

The peculiarities of Jeanette's sexuality make her *coming of age* story, her 'moving passage into adulthood', 'eccentric' and 'unorthodox'. When *Bildungsroman* meets homosexuality, *coming of age* is sometimes baptised as *coming out* story. It is indeed sexuality what makes her passage 'different from'. Ironically, in the extract from the *Tribune,* plot devices are 'rousing' and the novel as a whole is 'penetrating'. These two terms may inevitably arise sexual connotations in the mind of the reader. However, the reasons for Jeanette's quirkiness are unexplored.

The Penguin blurb of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist A Young Man* shares many things in common with *Oranges*: the *coming of age* theme, the rebellion against religion and the sexual awakening.

> Playful and experimental, James Joyce's **autobiographical** *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a vivid portrayal of emotional and intellectual development. (…) The portrayal of Stephen Dedalus's Dublin childhood and youth, his quest for identity through art (…) is an oblique **self-portrait of the young James Joyce** and a **universal testament** to the artist's 'eternal imagination'. Both an insight into Joyce's life and childhood, and a **unique work of modernist fiction**, *APOTAAAYM* is a novel of **sexual awakening**, religious rebellion and the **essential** search for voice and meaning that every nascent artist must face in order to fully come into themselves.

Comparatively, Jeanette's journey is a 'funny' and 'poignant' 'exploration' whereas Stephen's trip is a 'portrayal', not of 'quirkiness', but of 'uniqueness', of 'intellectual development'. Stephen/Joyce's 'quest for identity' upstages Jeanette-Winnet-Perceval/Winterson's because Joyce's emancipation becomes a 'universal testament' rather than just a chronicle of 'unorthodox' 'anecdotes'. In the blurb, Dedalus' story is eloquently 'a novel of sexual awakening'. Here, the topic is not carefully diverted but presented as something 'essential', even fateful. Far from 'eccentric', it is utterly inevitable [is here 'essential' a synonym for heterosexual?]. However, Dedalus' awakening is anything but normative. Furiously repressed [solely apt to perform acts of unconsummated platonic love or of breast-feeding prostitution], rendering Dedalus' passage as essential seems rather exclusive.

In addition to that, Joyce's blurb grants *A Portrait* the possibility to be read as the *Künstlerroman* of a 'nascent artist', whereas Jeanette's inventive journey of becoming a writer remains unnoticed. Which *Oranges* is too, precisely, among other things. *Oranges* succeeds in both providing a rite of passage story that speaks 'universally', and indiscriminately, to all readers regardless of their sexual inclination and a 'politicised', homosexual, *coming out* story (López, 163). From this perspective, Grove's choice could be claimed to be more inclusive. Making specific reference to homosexuality would also reinforce, or even impose, heterosexuality hand in hand with determinism. It would render *Oranges* as different for just exclusively be a 'homosexual' story. Is that the reason why in the Virago blurb of Sarah Water's *Fingersmith* [yes, even in a Virago edition, whose mission is 'to champion women's voices and bring them to the widest possible readership in the world'] there are not any references to same-sex relationships either?

Perhaps another option, a total subversion of heteronormativity - echoing Monique Wittig's motto -, would be to include the word 'lesbian' in the blurb of *Oranges* since the lesbian (as a sovereign entity) may be the only category able to beat heterosexuality (Butler

on Wittig, *Gender Trouble* 165). Could that, however, evade totalitarianism? If, on the contrary, no references to sexuality are made, all the possibilities lie ahead and the multiplicity of stories pervades: the story of a very imaginative and observant child, the tale of the birth of a new teller of tales, the portrait of a mother-daughter relationship.

> An intimate and frighteningly acute exploration of a mother-son relationship… I kept being reminded of Joyce's *Dubliners.* Sandra Newman

Picador - a house that raises voices often not heard - choses a quote by American dystopias writer Sandra Newman as praise for another debut, *Shuggie Bain.* Scottish-American Douglas Stuart's novel, winner for the 2020 Booker Prize, is another *coming of age* [and *coming out*] story. For some reason, Picador has chosen to set up parallels with Joyce. *Shuggie* is the story of the child of a very challenged Glasgow family in the Thatcher era. But the main focus here goes to the 'mother-son relationship'. Other quotes are included by extracts from *The New York Times* and, to balance politics and continents, *The Times*. Both agree on *Shuggie* being a story of the 'hopeless love that children can feel towards broken parents.' Family and children are indeed universals appealing to the widest possible readership in the world. However, sexuality pays a crucial role for the main character in his identity quest. The novel starts with Shuggie as a teenager having homosexual encounters for money in his boarding house. And yet, even though he is the title role, most of the blurb is devoted to Agnes, his mother, while briefly and casually introducing Shuggie at the end as a 'supporting role'.

> 1981. Glasgow. The city is dying. Poverty is on the rise. (…) Agnes Bain has always expected more. (…)As Agnes increasingly turns to alcohol for comfort, her children try their best to save her. (…) It is her son Shuggie who holds out hope the longest. (…) despite all **his efforts to pass as a normal boy**, everyone has started to realize that Shuggie is **'no right'**. (…) Laying bare the ruthlessness of **poverty**, the limits of **love**, and the hollowness of **pride**, *Shuggie Bain* is a **blistering debut** by an exceptional novelist with a powerful and important story to tell.

The story is about 'poverty', 'love', 'pride'. However, Shuggie is introduced as someone who has 'problems of his own despite all his efforts to pass as a normal boy', which unequivocally refers to his 'wronged' sexuality without being specific. The potential buyer in the bookshop is left wondering, or judging, what 'a normal boy' must be. In this case also, not referring to Shuggie's sexuality implies also referring to Shuggie's sexuality, reinforcing the heterosexual narrative and suppressing a voice that might speak to quite an extensive readership in the world.

3.2. That's the Story of My Life! Truth or Dare!

Although Stuart Douglas has not yet claimed *Shuggie* to be autobiographical, the issue was raised on Instagram Live interviews leading to the Booker ceremony. The similarities between author and character are palpable: both were raised in the same city and social sphere.

> 'There's no way to fake the life experience that forms the bedrock of Douglas Stuart's wonderful *Shuggie Bain.* No way to fake the talent either. Shuggie will knock you sideways.' Richard Russo

The choice of this quote is evidently trying to sell the narrative of a fictionalized autobiography. In the post-culture of reality shows, it is common knowledge that reality sells and that it is always manipulated into fiction content. Or, in other words, that everything is a show. Whether Shuggie is or is not 'based on a true story' is irrelevant. The hook is the ambiguity. Winterson is aware of this power in her interviews for *Oranges* (López 166-167), which renders it an un-closeted marketing strategy. Therefore, the publisher's careful choice of Richard Russo for the quote, being not just a democrat but one 'despised' by the pro-Trump republican elite for his depiction of blue-collar America (Conroy), ultimately gives credit to a story dealing with social issues strengthening its ties with 'reality'. By being praised as autobiographical by Russo, a debut such as *Shuggie* is immediately 'authorized', and renders Douglas accredited. A similar identity construct between writer and character grants a writer [or should we say the reader] the credit necessary for a writer to be worthy of a particular topic. Hence, blue-collar Britain is sold to blue-collar America.

In the aforementioned Joyce blurb, the autobiography issue is also introduced, tagging the novel as an 'insight into Joyce's life and childhood'. The reference to *Dubliners* in Newman's *Shuggie* quote might as well be introducing the tone or texture, or even the 'genre', which one assumes it mandatorily to include emotional dissertations to a good extent, as opposed to big narrative plot twists. *A Portrait* could be claimed to be a series of impressions more related to the lyric/poetic than to what the epic/narrative purposely implies, even though it eventually culminates into a whole narrative artefact. Praise for this narrative texture and technique extracted from a conservative paper, *The Times,* is included in the paratext of the Penguin edition.

> 'There is nothing more vivid or beautiful in all Joyce's writing. It has the searing clarity of **truth** ... but is rich with **myth and symbol'** *Sunday Times*

> 'James Joyce was and remains almost **unique** among novelists in that he published nothing but masterpieces' *The Times Literary Supplement*

However, the *Chicago Tribune* aforementioned praise note to Winterson's *Oranges,* instead of 'impressions' chooses 'anecdotes', and, for her, to rely on narrative devices which are not plot-based – mentions the *Tribune* – is a 'dangerous luxury' instead of, for the lack of a better phrase, a brave innovation. Instead, in Joyce's jacket, a prose style richer in insight than in plot is described as 'unique' and as 'vivid and beautiful', as to having 'the clarity of truth'. Here, the formal experimentation is not considered 'dangerous' but a 'masterpiece'. Just before feminist readings of never-ending patriarchy inevitably emerge, the canon comes in handy. *A Portrait* holds a very special place as a canonical piece of 'modernist fiction'. Joyce's experimentation, although it once also was debut material, has assimilated into a grander narrative of exquisiteness and expertise with time. After all, says Winterson, 'Time is a great deadener. People forget (*Oranges* 93). Time will presumably re-read and re-write blurbs of *Oranges* in future editions. And when a novel becomes a classic, the need to justify a great amount of emotional dissertation versus plot twists might expire. Or perhaps this is a feature exclusive to the debut *Bildungsroman*. As of today, the English section in La Central bookshop in Barcelona has a debut shelf. *Shuggie Bain* holds a very special place on it. It has to be a marketing strategy.

> 'Oh, we could expect *this* from an experienced writer but what an achievement he's made with only his first!!!!'
> A Costumer in La Central, verbatim [speculated]

3.3. It Don't Matter If You're Black or White

Real Life is another debut novel, another *coming of age* [and *coming out*] story, this time of a gay, Black PhD student in white Midwestern environment, also claimed to be autobiographical to a certain extent. Brandon Taylor's photo in the inner slip (quite the intellectual type) contrasts the heavily sexualized African-American male calendar face with enormous lips featuring the cover.

> Wallace (…) is four years into a biochemistry degree at a lakeside Midwestern university, a life that's a world away from his childhood in Alabama. (…) For reasons of self-preservation, he has become used to keeping a wary distance even from those closest to him. But, over the course of one blustery end-of-summer weekend, the destruction of his work and a series of intense confrontations force Wallace to grapple with both the trauma of the past, and the question of the future.

Also shortlisted for the 2020 Booker, DB edition of *Real Life* cover provides a democracy of opinions covering both continents and a span of ideologies, from *The New Yorker* to the *Telegraph*, including praise from both *The Times* and *The Guardian*. As in Grove's *Oranges,* the chosen quotes from conservative papers make reference to sex [*The*

Telegraph points out descriptions from tennis matches to sex are 'exquisitely precise'] and the *Sunday Times* praises it as an 'elegant (…) study of race [whatever that maybe], grief and desire'. However precise the sex details in the text, the blurb is extremely cautious with them. In a not so closeted blurb in the Penguin of another campus novel – Maurice, by Forster – 'homosexuality' is contrastively the focus of attention.

> An astonishingly frank and deeply autobiographical account of **homosexual relationships in an era when love between men was not only stigmatised, but also illegal.** (…) Maurice Hall is a young man who grows up confident in his **privileged status** and well aware of his role in society. Modest and generally conformist, he nevertheless finds himself **increasingly attracted to his own sex.** Through Clive, Maurice gradually experiences a profound emotional and **sexual awakening**. In his introduction, David Leavitt explores the significance of the novel **in relation to Forster's own life** and as a founding work of **modern gay literature**.

Although a quote by Forster in the cover of the Norton edition implies *Maurice* was nothing close to an autobiography, the Penguin reinforces the opposite. It authorizes Maurice as a 'memoir' through the use of a quote by openly gay white writer David Leavitt [renown for *The Indian Clerk,* a campus novel dealing with issues of colonialism and sexuality] claiming its autobiographical contents. But perhaps the most interesting topic is that in this white, upper-class environment, homosexuality not only seems to be tolerated but celebrated. Before jumping into the conclusion that this blurb might equally be the carrier of the will for visibility and at the same time a sort of censorship [as in 'do not buy it if you are not gay'] a praise quote in *Real Life* 's cover switches our Netflix subscriber's focus of attention.

> 'A blistering coming of age story … [Taylor] is so deft at portraying the burdens that befall **young queer people of colour** and the forces that often hamper true connection.'
>
> O, the Oprah Magazine

Another praise quote for *Real Life* from *The Observer* ('a brilliant book, worthy of a wide audience'), when read against Oprah's 'young queer people of colour' might turn out to be even offensive. 'Wide audience' inevitably poses 'different' questions. First of all: the need to expand the marketing capabilities of the black homosexual to a white heterosexual audience [but also to a black heterosexual audience]. Secondly, as aforementioned, whether a similar identity construct between writer and character are the credit necessary for a writer to be granted the 'authority' for raising that particular voice. Last but not least, whether that particular voice can be actually called a voice, since its 'difference' is also a construct with origins difficult - if not impossible - to trace. The 2001 Penguin of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* presents the same problems as Taylor's.

A landmark in **gay writing, but its appeal is broader.** James Baldwin caused outrage as a **black author writing about white homosexuals,** yet for him the issues of race, sexuality and personal freedom were eternally intertwined.

Giovanni's Room, claims the blurb, is a homosexual love story written by a black author but, as in Taylor's cover, it is worth of a wider audience, it has a 'broader' appeal. Does this suggest a 'gay story' written by a black author would also please a heterosexual audience? Or a white audience? Or even a black audience since its author is black? Is this the reason for the publisher to pick up a praise quote by the Black Atlantic Caryl Phillips ('Audicious… remarkable … elegant and courageous') as to suggest 'it is a book about whites but I give praise for its blackness'? Why would a black author cause 'outrage writing about white homosexuals'? Is being white a requirement to write about whites? Did not Michael Jackson make a point in the 90s? 'If you're thinking about my baby/ It don't matter if you're black and white.' Back to Oprah's 'young queer people of colour', and entrapped again in the visibility-versus-universalism question, which young queer people of colour would she be referring to? As Judith Butler puts it in *Gender Trouble*, is this 'normative and exclusionary' with other 'queer people of colour' who cannot afford tuition at a Midwestern campus? Or is this also white privilege because 'young queer people of colour worthier of a wider audience' refers only exclusively to 'educated' black people? Are 'multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure' remotely utopic? (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 19)

Perhaps, the 'definitional incompleteness' of the categories at stake (woman, black, homosexual) would have to be enough as a 'normative ideal relieved of coercive force (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 21)'. What if the simple recognition of the tags worked as a simple but flashing sign of awareness? Or perhaps Virginia Woolf already held the key for all this a century ago and, both an author and a publisher, she either wrote the blurbs for her novels herself - making a point on the power of manipulation the extracts may exercise - or decided not to include blurbs at all in the Hogarth Press covers. So she should not have to deal with situations such as finding *To The Lighthouse* to be - in the American blurb - a story 'of a family living in the Hebrides' thus utterly omitting relevant characters such as Lily Briscoe (Barkway).

4. Prêt-à-Porter. Covers, Couture and Simulacra

Perhaps aware of the coerciveness a blurb might impose on the novel, some publishers nowadays might be taking Woolf's road of completely removing them from jackets. In this case, image-predominant covers have taken centre stage. As a sample, in 2009 Penguin created the 'Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition in Couture', a 'luxury' collection of 'exclusive' English classics with covers featuring title, author and French-flapped, rough-front, oil, watercolour illustrations from renowned fashion designer Ruben Toledo. Unmistakably, the Penguin strategy was to consolidate its excellence in book design by associating with a remarkable world-renowned fashion illustrator who publishes in *Vogue*. The tie implied fashion ('Penguin brings the fashion makeover to the literary catwalk', *The New York Times)* but it also implied money. Toledo's luxury reputation turned the English classics into glamorous, exquisite items that made some costumers *want* them [our subscriber bought some albeit owning former editions] and, although they contained the same classic unabridged story, pay three times the plain Penguin. The excuse? These novels had never looked better.

> [T]he worth of an object is not intrinsic to it – it does not have a pre-existing meaning but transcends material value to circulate amongst a host of other elements in a signifying chain. (Toffoletti on Baudrillard 75)

In Baudrillard's signifying chain, Toledo's covers signify fashion and class and the host of elements amongst it circulates are *Prada, The New York Fashion Week* or *Sex and the City,* to mention a few. By buying this edition, costumers would be purchasing the whole 'sign system': a whole lifestyle of luxury and glamour. However profitable, the strategy inevitably awakens a unique dialogue between paratext and text problematizing some key aspects of the novels, while at the same time revealing the power of coerciveness and manipulation cover designs have. In the *Pride and Prejudice* edition, Elizabeth and Darcy are two silhouettes posing in the catwalk and look top-model thin [or even thinner]: their waists, unreal; their proportions, so not the Restoration type. Both characters seem to enjoy the same social position, with no sign of Elizabeth as the focalizer. In Stoker's edition, *Dracula* might as well be Bowie, Iggy Pop or Gaga. And inside, on the French flaps, his vampire assistants look like courtesans of Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*: *haut* and glamorous kinky. So much so for Hawthorne's Hester's (and baby's) hairdo, right out from

an episode of *Desperate Housewives.* Why is Heathcliff's otherness suppressed by making him the white Hollywood guy with the most fashionable contemporary haircut in the most stylish jacket? The most distressing, perhaps, is Wilde's cover. The tone is vaudevillesque: if it were a play, it would be a comedy. Curious that the 'picture' is chosen to be a male figure holding a frame, while the person who is horrified at looking at the picture is a woman or, to be more precise, a woman's dress. It is particularly shocking since Sybil Vane, a critical female character in the text, is always omitted from blurbs. Is this scandalized glamorous woman the penniless actor Sybil? Is she horrified at the portrait or at 'the love that dare not speak its name'? The choice of a woman implies fashion is still a female thing?

Luxury and money carry both a particular social state and the dream of achieving it. 'If the goods matter only as sign of a particular social condition' – claims Italian philosopher Mario Perniola – 'its identity is not fixed (…) but provisional, an image created by the global structure of social signs and mass production' or, in other words, turned into *publicity* '[w]hich ceases to be a description about the qualities of the goods and assumes the task of providing a code for our reading of it. Publicity makes the message of the object explicit and the need of its consumption imperative. (…) The more skilful the publicist, the bigger the gap between the product and the original value originally associated with it (Perniola 175, my translation)'. The distance between these *couture* covers and the stories inside is more than palpable, hence making the marketing strategy emerge crystal clear. However, after conspicuously watching the legendary characters lose their actual (his)toric identities in *prêt-à-porter,* something more obscure even emerges. The unpredictability of fashion these days has also turned it into a simulation too. Take for instance the case of Burberry, which, by aiming at becoming a universal brand, has ceased to be the sign for wealth it used to be and has been 'borrowed' by many other groups (Toffoletti 88-89). If fashion is then also a sign for nothing, the 'couture' covers inevitably become an inclusive mannequin, not a sign for wealth but the projection of a group of people as large and diverse as time and trends decide.

But one more twist is still available. In the adventure we call reading, the identification between character and reader seems crucial to depart on such an introspective journey. Which in this case would necessarily imply buyers to identify with the *couture* drawings or to see in them an attractive projected version of themselves. In Perniola's words, the buyer's impulses 'would no longer concern the image of the object but the image of themselves that publicity provides'. In this equation, the drawings not only fail at representing the original characters from the novels but they also fail at representing

themselves as drawings: they represent the image the consumers project of themselves on them. Therefore, whether the illustration has anything to do with Brontë's Heathcliff, or it is expensive or not anymore, is absolutely irrelevant. It all relies on the consumers' desire to see themselves as potential Cathys and Heathcliffs in the way they are deployed. In other words, the 'couture' edition would be providing a sign which dissimulates nothing but the buyers' identity: both their individual identity but also their identity as belonging to a group, the group that buys the 'fashionable' above the plain. This action of buying a representation - a simulation - and not an actual object, would inevitably - Baudrillard poses - lead consumers to frustration because, when consuming the actual object (the real story inside), their expectations of either attractiveness, style or *trash* [these drawings may become trash anytime following the Burberry case], which is what they actually bought, would not be fulfilled and would keep them asking for more: more luxury, more trash, more fashion (Toffoletii 78). Is this then another marketing strategy inside the strategy?

More strikingly, under the disguise mantle of art and creativity, a few years later, Penguin launched a different strategy that, in a similar way, targeted the potential buyer's narcissism as a publicity campaign. In a 'My penguin' edition - under the subtitle 'Books by the Greats, Covers by You' - Penguin offered the classics with a blank cover for the purposes of engaging the reader into drawing a 'masterpiece' as the cover and submit it for a contest. The novel became inevitably your own novel. And who would not want to be the creator of such a 'masterpiece' as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? Perhaps a contest to write the blurb will follow.

5. The Chick-lit Pandemic

> 'Methinks, wrote Byron to the publisher John Murray, it is a wonderful work for a girl of nineteen – not nineteen, indeed, of that time.' (Winterson, *Frankisstein* 125)

The halo of secrecy involving the editing and publishing of a manuscript is somehow subtly cleared when, less often than not, a juicy literary scandal draws some light on the actual roles of the *ménage* author-editor-publisher, whose reputations would be at stake if the schemes and intricacies related to who-writes-what [and not only the blurb] were suddenly revealed [authors cannot supposedly be seen as puppets, as not-the-absolute Creator; editors and publishers cannot be seen as the master puppeteers manipulating society].

Book packagers have become increasingly influential in the publishing business for the past twenty years. These are companies who develop 'literary' ideas that may be turned into multimedia enterprises: books turned into series or major motion pictures. They work as intermediaries between authors and publishers. Such is the case of Alloy Entertainment, owned by Warner Bros., responsible for media hits such as *Gossip Girls, Pretty Little Liars* or *The Vampire Diaries*.

> Packagers do it all. They search for writers, develop story lines, edit the manuscripts, design the covers, and meet deadlines all in the name of huge financial gain. Rather than having an editor assist and guide a reader through the creative process, book packagers act as a medium between the entities of author and publisher and are involved in many facets of the process, including helping to shape the content to fit the genre's formulaic marketing criteria. (Smydra 10)

The genre of this particular scandal is called *chick-lit* (romantic literature for girls) and it is quite controversial in both the literary industry and academia. The formula follows white teenage and college girls in their quest for adulthood. And just like chick-lit heroines depart in search of the perfect match in an atmosphere of fashion and style, Alloy embarks in search of the perfect writer who will actually put in words an idea previously pitched and approved, whose plot and characters have already been conceived and outlined, in an atmosphere of marketing and money.

In the 2007 lawsuit of *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life,* the parties involved were Alloy (packager), Harvard undergraduate Viswanathan (author) and publishers Little, Brown and Company. The events unfolded as follows: Viswanathan signs a

contract with Little Brown for half a million dollars for her first novel without having even written the first word, the book is released and subsequently the media finds out it contains certain plagiarised extracts from writers including McCafferty and Rushdie. The issue makes front page in national papers: Viswanathan first denies plagiarism but soon after acknowledges it. Attention is then immediately shifted to publishers, editors and packagers: a consultant who had promoted Viswanathan in Harvard by introducing her to agents who intervened in the book deal and the Alloy Editor who had first pitched the idea to publisher Little Brown.

Who wrote the plagiarized passages? Considering the author was an inexperienced undergraduate, a nineteen-year-old, who had to write [at the incredible speed required for a packaged novel] while succeeding at her degree's exams, and that packagers and editors were overviewing a writing process of an idea first conceived by their own, who was to be held responsible for the actual writing? The copyright was both shared by Alloy and the author but the deal was classified: either a ghost writer wrote the book and Alloy gave half the copyright to Viswanathan for promoting the book as her own, or Alloy and the author wrote the book together but Alloy owned half of it for its marketing and promotion (Smydra, 6). In any case, if the young writer did not accept plagiarism on her own terms, both packagers and publishers would unquestionably have been unhappy having to acknowledge the 'crime' as their own. However, if she claimed it, the undergraduate would have faced something even worse perhaps: to see her own future reputation as an author compromised, that she was not really the author but the packagers were (although it carried her name in the cover).

If this scenario looks plausible in the creation of a chick-lit novel, would it be far-fetched to assume it extendable to other genres and other branches of the publishing business? Although there is an ongoing discussion in academia on whether chick-lit is in fact a demeaning genre for women - for its covers featuring 'images of scantily dressed women who are shopping (Smydra)' among other things -, it is becoming increasingly popular among students who read it in their spare time and who raise the question of whether it is actually different from other literary works considered canonical. What is the difference between Bridget Jones and Elizabeth Bennet if both deal with issues of money and love and of coming of age in their own times? And most importantly, what is the difference to publishers if they place chick-lit in bookstores not in the romance section where they should belong but in the general fiction one because they have proof they sell better this way?

Comparing the patterns of the blurbs of Austen and Fielding's novels [even though it could be argued Bridget Jones to be a 're-make' of *Pride and Prejudice*], the similarities are visible.

> As Bridget documents her struggles through the social minefield of her thirties and tries to weigh up the eternal question (Daniel Cleaver or Mark Darcy?), she turns for support to four indispensable friends: Shazzer, Jude, Tom and a bottle of chardonnay. (*Bridget Jones' Diary* blurb)

> When Elizabeth Bennet first meets eligible bachelor Fitzwilliam Darcy, she thinks him arrogant and conceited; he is indifferent to her good looks and lively mind. (…) In the sparkling comedy of manners that follows, Jane Austen shows the folly of judging by first impressions and superbly evokes the friendships, gossip and snobberies of provincial middle-class life. (*Pride and Prejudice* blurb)

Both share the same topics and seem targeted as 'wimmins' fiction from a marketing point of view without making any distinctions. Blurbs for *Gossip Girl*, the Alloy literary phenomenon turned into and HBO series, and Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* also seemed to be framed in the same direction.

> In between piña coladas and topless sunbathing, Blair and Serena plot revenge on super-jerk Chuck Bass. Everyone jets back to NYC for Serena's New Year's party, during which Nate and Blair may or may not finally go all the way . . . and Serena may or may not be discovered to be the secret fling of Hollywood's hottest young leading man. (*Gossip Girl*, novel 3)

> It's New York in the 1940s, where the martinis flow from cocktail hour till breakfast at Tiffany's. And nice girls don't, except, of course, for Holly Golightly: glittering socialite traveller, generally upwards, sometimes sideways and once in a while - down. Pursued by to Salvatore 'Sally' Tomato, the Mafia sugar-daddy doing life in Sing Sing and 'Rusty' Trawler, the blue-chinned, cuff-shooting millionaire man about women about town, Holly is a fragile eyeful of tawny hair and turned-up nose, a heart-breaker, a perplexer, a traveller, a tease. She is irrepressibly 'top banana in the shock deparment', and one of the shining flowers of American fiction. (*Breakfast at Tiffany's* Penguin blurb)

If, as seen in previous chapters, publishers nowadays also stylise covers of classics to make them state-of-the-art fashionable and as sellable as possible to contemporary consumers regardless of the actual story inside, would it be too far-fetched to claim that this marketing pressure and way of functioning might also be an influence in other sorts of genres and publishing houses in fiction? "Are novels conceived or re-designed at the core of corporations with marketing strategies as their main interest or do authors still have something genuine to say, uncorrupted by mainstream ideologies?" shouted the Netflix subscriber after a night of profound revelations. Bear with this penniless writer for the great finale. For it is a fire that started it all, remember?

6. Conclusions. A True Incendiary

> 'Oh, do come out of that jug, and tell me, do you know where they put my shadow?'
> The loveliest tinkle as of golden bells answered him. It is the fairy language. You ordinary children can never hear it, but if you were to hear it you would know that you had heard it once before.'
> J.M Barrie, *Peter Pan, chapter 3, 38*

Who writes the blurb and why?

This is, above all, an academic work. Time matters and the beginning approaches.

Bloomsbury publishing -responsible for the Harry Potter saga- is open on its website about its commissioning process holding no secrecy at all: there is not a standard procedure but options vary from a book usually beginning with an idea on a discussion in a meeting to 'negotiated between author and editor on the basis of a speculative proposal'. Sometimes, they sustain, the author has a clear idea and writes a perfect summary to pitch it. Other times, editing is crucial to convey its 'true' meaning. However, this refers exclusively to the academic branch of the house. When approaching the fiction department, no protocol is disclosed. Just a small note: they are currently not accepting manuscripts.

Are ideas for fiction works also 'raised in discussions' or the product of a sole author contacting the house with a fully developed idea? The case of Alloy and Viswanathan draws some light about book packagers and how they work. The further question then would be, are there other power structures above Alloy, Little Brown or Harvard interested in portraying [maybe financing] white rich America? In other words, if ideology is not conspiratorial against certain 'identities' but just happens to convey the true beliefs of those who propagate it - as Eagleton suggests - are the true beliefs of other structures other than publishers or packagers influencing ideas raised for books on meetings? For instance, if an idea for a novel about Brexit is raised, is there an angle the house wants to preserve when commissioning the novel to a writer? Whose angle is this apart from the publisher's? In the case authors do not sympathize with commissioner's ideologies, is the fact that discourses and counter-discourses include the same narrative a sort of sanctuary for them? Do some authors comply with commissioner's ideologies knowing that their craft will allow them to be subversive and compliant simultaneously? Do they rely on the fact that any story is an indictment as much as it is propaganda?

However, the idea for our HBO subscriber's manuscript was not raised in a meeting but is the product of a sole voice looking for a publisher. The first version of a blurb he wrote

in winter [it is a *he!*, our subscriber is a *he!*, what are endings for if not for revelations!] has changed consistently after months of research. A few versions lay now on the table responding to different criteria. Almost convinced that, in final products, it *has* to be someone else who writes the blurb rather than the author, he now has gathered enough information to approach publishers with a summary that will ring their bells while not selling his soul. After all, he found on the internet the J.K. Rowling first Potter synopses that she accompanied the manuscript with when looking for a publisher and, compared to what *has to be* either the editor's or the publisher's blurb in the printed edition, he found it rather dull even though in the Bloomsbury blurb there are lots of characters omitted.

Perhaps to create an intimate link between reader and one character, à la *Bildungsroman* mode, is an absolutely crucial element for a reader to be hooked by a novel in the moment of buying it (López 233). This might be the reason behind the omission of many female characters in the blurbs of some of our subscriber's favourite novels ['Veronica from Barne's *The Sense Of An Ending*, Lena from Faulkner's *Light In August*'] and he pauses for a moment to reflect on whether the need of a hero may be something inherent to the novel and such omissions nothing but innocuous. After all, if the task of editors and publishers is to make the novel to speak to you and about you, that is to say, to speak to as much readers as possible, the blurb needs to be inclusive. Raising all the possible 'different' genders and identities would result in anything but global. For the reader who needs guidance [as for the driver who needs a GPS] this blurb might appear confusing.

> As Brexit grips Britain, Ry, a young transgender doctor, is falling in love. The object of their misguided affection: the celebrated AI-specialist, Professor Victor Stein. Meanwhile, Ron Lord, just divorced and living with his Mum again, is set to make his fortune with a new generation of sex dolls for lonely men everywhere.
> Ranging from 1816, when nineteen-year-old Mary Shelley pens her radical first novel, to a cryonics facility in present-day Arizona where the dead wait to return to life, *Frankissstein* shows us how much closer we are to the future than we realise.

Did Winterson write this? A myriad of identities is deployed but is it not too much to ask from the potential buyer in a bookshop, at first sight, to infer the names of Byron, Mary Shelley and Frankenstein by joining the characters' names in a kind of seamed literary monster? Is not this so-to-speak 'democratic' blurb preventing the 'docile reader', as Genette puts it, to identify with a character so the novel speaks instantly about himself? Quoting so many characters dilutes it. On the contrary, if the only choice were Ry, the transgender doctor, would that be inclusive or exclusive? Would it broaden the readership making transgender people visible to 'normative' audiences or narrow it by making it appealing exclusively to the transgender public? Are we trans enough to identify with a character of the

'opposite' sex when just reading a blurb? After all, male omissions also take place when blurbs are heroine-focused. Take for instance Vintage's blurb of *The Handmaid's Tale*, where all characters including Nick and the commander are omitted but Offred. Or the Vintage *Mrs Dalloway,* where Septimus is nowhere to be seen. Can heroes become devoid of gender, true sexless templates with which any possible reader in the globe can identify with? Or is sexuality at the core of identity?

Our Netflix subscriber has indeed the ability to cross genders. The 'heroine' of his manuscript is a woman, which might make it less edible to editors. After the research he is now aware that a thin line between fact and fiction sells. And he cares for the wallet. He has not reached this point to not sell. What if he signs the piece with a *nom de plume* that matches the name of his heroine? That would make it more autobiographical. But they would discover he is a man in the long run and then what? Maybe he should change the character into a man so the links between him and the character, even though some are fake, could be visible and sellable to everybody. Otherwise, how would he be accredited as 'authoritative'? Which reminds him, he will have to look for a gay writer who could praise his work [preferably a sexually inviting quote, maybe Guillem Clua] since queerness is rampant in his manuscript and he is certain of the power of these bawdy praise quotes nowadays [particularly coming from conservative papers]. But then should he mention in the blurb that his character is gay?

There is also the question of extension. It cannot be too long. Some sacrifices will have to be made inherent to editing. He will not embark on philosophical dissertations but dive into fact. Actually, the first Rowling synopsis was more detailed in character's insights and that also made it duller than Bloomsbury's, which is in for the action. What is the use of expanding the blurb with character's philosophical journeys if we know plot events sell better, even though his novel is full of first person dissertations? For a second, he remembers a topic in his academic work: most blurbs he read in which insights go unpunished are men's, whereas women's need always justification. Oh, but he will not be angry! He wants to sell; he will not yield to resentment! In an epiphany opposed to his binge-watching moment months ago he identifies with McEwan's little bigot foetus in *Nutshell,* who would not accept the credo 'I'll feel, therefore I'll be'. What has he to become? 'An activist of emotions, a loud, campaigning spirit fighting with tears and sighs to shape institutions about' his 'vulnerable self'? What has he to become? A victim seeking for attention in the cloisters declaiming: 'My identity will be my precious, my only true possession, my access to the only truth' and 'if college does not bless me, validate me and give what I clearly need, I'll press my face into the vice chancellor's lapels and weep then demand his resignation (McEwan

146)'? No! Definitely not! He will not mention his creole female character is gay. After all, that would be placing limits on her as a character and labelling the novel as a sub-genre. Let audiences discover things for themselves without such a coercive blurb. Or better, let someone else write the blurb. That is what will eventually happen if he gets published. 'Seriously, sometimes it feels as if those who wrote the blurb did not even read the novel! It cannot be authors who write them!' said the Netflix subscriber swimming in a lake of frustration, without any (f)actual proof that could release his hypothesis from rampant speculation.

And just like that, in the midst of a hot June afternoon, the loveliest tinkle as of golden bells answered our hypothetical subscriber. A whatsapp the language of fairies. An accomplice to the subscriber's enterprise had found the precious object. A small chunk of text that would set up a new dialogue with the ~~speculative~~ not-so-speculative guide and would start it all on fire. It was the afternoon of 4th June 2021 and Jeanette Winterson had made a new entry on her twitter account:

> Absolutely hated the cosy little domestic blurbs on my new covers. Turned me into wimmins fiction of the worst kind! Nothing playful or strange or the ahead of time stuff that's in there. So I set them on fire @Wintersonworld Jeanette Winterson's twitter account

And so she did. The picture showed copies of the new Vintage editions of her novels reduced to ashes while some were still on fire. This was everything. Probably the first living author in history acknowledging not to be the writer of her own blurbs. And openly disapproving of them. And so this paper would begin again, since now our subscriber would compare Winterson's *Written on the Body*'s new blurb [which ingeniously evades the gender of the narrator by claiming it 'nameless' hence not disclosing a lesbian story] with the blurb of a prototypical contemporary wimmins fiction, *It Ends With Us* by Coleen Hoover, whose similarities would raise the same questions in him, although he now would be a bit more enlightened perhaps. And this is his final conclusion. Which is in fact Winterson's. 'Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently (*Oranges*, 93)'. And there lies the hope. Well, two hopes actually. One, that however coercive the blurb writer might be, wonderful subversive artefacts such as Winterson's will have survived the editing room and will be out there, ablaze, waiting to be burned. And two, that there will always be a curious Netflix subscriber out there ready to start throwing questions in the air. Or to try and impose his own readings. Whichever, it is now all up to you.

Works cited

Austen, J. 1813. *Pride and Prejudice.* London: Penguin Couture, 2009.

Atwood, M. 1986. *The Handmaid's Tale.* London: Vintage, 2016.

Atwood, M. 1994. "Running with the Tigers" in *Flesh and the Mirror* Ed. L. Sage. New York: Virago. 117-35

Auster, P. 1985. *The New York Trilogy.* London: Faber and Faber, 2004.

Barkway, S. 1999. "Virginia Woolf's Blurbs". *Virginia Woolf Bulletin of the Virginia Woolf Society*. p 43.

Baldwin, J. 1956. *Giovanni's Room.* London: Penguin Classics, 2001.

Barrie, J.M. 1911. *Peter Pan.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2018.

Brönte, E. 1847. *Wuthering Heights.* London: Penguin Couture, 2009.

Butler, J. *Antigone's Claim. Kinship between Lie and Death.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble.* New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2006.

Conroy, C. ''I have managed to become one of those elites Trump voters despise. Interview to Richard Russo.'' *The Irish Times*. Feb 2, 2017. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/i-have-managed-to-become-one-of-those-elites-trump-voters-despise-1.2949188

Dickens, C. 1836. *The Pickwick Papers.* Oxford: OUP, 2008.

Defoe, D.M. 1719. *Robinson Crusoe.* London: Penguin Classics, 2001.

Douglas, S. *Shuggie Bain.* London: Picador, 2020.

Eagleton, T. *Tragedy.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020.

Fawcett, K. 2016. "Who Wrote History's First Blurb?". *Mental Floss*. https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/86131/who-wrote-historys-first-blurb

Forster, E.M. 1971 (1914). *Maurice.* London: Penguin, 2005.

Forster, E.M. 1971 (1914).. *Maurice.* New York and London: Norton, 2006.

Fowles, J. 1969. *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* London: Vintage, 2004.

Genette, G. 1987. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation.* (Jane E. Lewin, Trans.) Cambridge: CUP, 1997.

Hawthorne, N. 1850. *The Scarlett Letter.* London: Penguin Couture, 2009.

Hites, M. 2016. "On Monetary and Literary Fictions". *Neohelicon: Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, 4382), 427-443. https://doi-org.sire.ub.edu/10.1007/s11059-016-0354-9

"Holly." *The Handmaid's Tale,* season 2, episode 11, Hulu, 27 Jun. 2018. *HBO,* https://es.hboespana.com/series/the-handmaids-tale/6575c701-6c3d-4b14-9d98-ba67e102dfa1

Kołoszyc, D. (2014). "The Monstrous Crossroads of Kristeva's Textual Practice". *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, *47*(1), 1–26.

Kristeva, J. 1969. *Strangers to Ourselves.* (Leon S. Roudiez, Trans.) New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1991.

Joyce, J. 1916. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin, 2006.

McEwan, I. *Nutshell.* London: Jonathan Cape, 2016.

Leavitt, D. *The Indian Clerk*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007.

López, G. *Seductions in narrative: subjectivity and desire in the works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson*. New York: Cambria Press, 2007.

Perniola, Mario. *La Sociedad de los Simulacros.* Buenos Aires and Madrid: Amorrortru, 2011.

Rowling, J.K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.* London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Smith, D. "Harvard Novelist Says copying Was Unintentional". *The New York Times* April 25, 2006. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/25/books/harvard-novelist-says-copying-was-unintentional.html

Smydra, R. 2007. "Chick Lit's Re-Packaging of Plagiarism: The Debate Over Chick Lit's Influence on Authorship and Publishing". *Plagiary: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Plagiarism, Fabrication, and Falsification,* 40-51.

Sieczkowski, C. "This is the 'Harry Potter' Synopsis publishers rejected over 20 years ago." *Huffpost* Oct 16, 2017.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/harry-potter-synopsis-jkrowling_n_59f1e294e4b043885915a95c

Stoker, B. 1897. *Dracula.* London: Penguin Couture, 2009.

Swift, J. 1726. *Gulliver's Travels.* London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

Taylor, B. *Real Life*. London: Daunt Books, 2020.

Toffoletti, Kim. *Baudrillard Reframed.* London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011

Watt, I. *The Rise of the Novel: studies on Defoe, Richardson and Fielding.* Hardmonsworth: Penguin, 1972.

Wilde, O. 1890. *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* London: Penguin Couture, 2009.

Winterson, J. *Frankisstein.* London: Jonathan Cape, 2019.

Winterson, J. 1985. *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit.* New York: Grove Press.

Woolf, V. 1927. *To the Lighthouse.* London: Penguin Classics, 2019.

Authorship Form

I, JOAN VAZQUEZ SALVADOR, the undersigned author, certify that I have written the final version of this manuscript. The rights or interest in the manuscript have not yet been assigned to any third party.

Barcelona, 16th June 2021