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# Why Naipaul and the literary establishment are so, so wrong

Jun 8, 2011

#Chick lit #Jane Austen #LitCrit #Literature #ThatsJustWrong #V. S. Naipaul

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By Kavitha Rao

Last week, the ever-crotchety VS Naipaul was in the news for saying, essentially, that women writers sucked. "They are quite different," huffed Sir Vidia, "I think they are unequal to me." Then he picked on poor old Jane Austen, saying "I can't possibly share her sentimental ambitions, her sentimental sense of the world." Naipaul was greeted with a storm of angry retorts. Much has been said and written about how fabulous women writers really are. But no one's read between the lines of Naipaul's statement.

Here's the real reason why Naipaul dislikes Jane Austen: because she pulled off that difficult feat of being both entertaining and literary, a feat clearly beyond the likes of Naipaul. In the hullabaloo over why women writers are sneered at by literary lions, we seem to have missed out on another important question: Why are writers of popular fiction

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sneered at by practically the entire literary establishment?

When I say popular fiction, I mean pacey, readable books written for a wide audience, or what used to be known as a thumping good yarn. These books and their authors are hugely popular, but are never considered for literary prizes or respect. These are writers such as PD James, Ian Rankin, Nick Hornby, Dick Francis, Ruth Rendell and Helen Fielding (of Bridget Jones fame); men and women who write consistently well and sell even better, but are condescendingly dismissed for writing popular fiction, or even pigeonholed as chick-lit authors, by 'people who matter'.

But hey, as New York Times bestselling author Jennifer Weiner [tweeted](#) defiantly after commenting on the undue attention given to "literary" writers such as Jonathan Franzen, "And now, to go weep into my royalty statement." Weiner currently has 11 million books in print.



Except for the antiquated attitudes of a few male authors such as Naipaul, the real battle within the literary establishment is not between men and women writers, but between popular and literary fiction. As best-selling author Jodi Picoult pointed out recently, "The New York Times Review values literary fiction and disdains commercial fiction-regardless of the race or gender of the author."

So many of the authors we revere now as literary greats wrote popular fiction for the masses, be it Austen, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson or Jack London. Many were genre writers, such as detective novelist Arthur Conan Doyle, sci-fi great HG Wells and horror writer Edgar Allan Poe. But we now have this artificial distinction where if you are popular, you can't be good; and if you are good, you can't be popular. And if you write genre – the horror! – then you certainly can't be a serious author. While some excellent commercial writers, such as Lionel Shriver and Sarah Waters have made it to the Booker shortlist, they always end up losing to boring, worthy novels whom no one ever bothers to read. (Has anyone actually read John Banville's *The Sea*? Or Anne Enright's *The Gathering*? Thought not)

Detective writers PD James and Ian Rankin, whose finely-etched who-dun-its often have more well-rounded characters than most literary novels, both recently argued that genre novels need to be recognised by the literary establishment. "The best crime fiction today is talking about the same things literary novels are talking about, moral questions, ordinary people in extraordinary situations. I think some of the best crime fiction is literature, and some of the best literature is crime fiction," said Rankin, who often personally moves copies of his novels into the literary sections of bookstores. And who can deny that chick-lit epic *Bridget Jones' Diary* or Stieg Larsson's *Lisbeth Salander* trilogy reflect the lives of a whole generation far more accurately and entertainingly than, say, *A House for Mr Biswas*?

While this 'golden rule' is being slowly revised in the West, the literary divide between

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popular and serious fiction is especially pronounced in India. We have plenty of literary writers — the Jhumpa Lahiris, Aravind Adigas and Kiran Desais — but serious Indian fiction is not written for your average reader, apart from a few exceptions such as Vikram Seth and Vikram Chandra. On the other side, we have Chetan Bhagat who knows how to tell a good, pacey story, but writes like he escaped from kindergarten with a crayon.

What we don't have is something in between, i.e. high quality popular fiction. What we don't have is great crime, science-fiction or chick-lit books that are literary and fun. Most of the popular novels that flood the bookstores are mediocre at best, churned out to appeal to the lowest common denominator or to piggyback onto a hot new trend. The more talented Indian writers write to win Bookers or Pulitzers abroad, rather than to entertain their audiences at home. We display *White Tiger* on our bookshelves while secretly reading Sidney Sheldon under the covers.

This lack of high quality genre and popular fiction means that an entire generation of Indians with no patience for literary novels is growing up on poor quality writing. While our parents were raised on RK Narayan and Rabindranath Tagore, the new generation is being weaned on Chetan Bhagat and Shobhaa De, wanna be chick-lit, poor attempts at *desi* detective fiction and a slew of self-help books, for lack of better options.

So many of us continue to choke down indigestible sagas of communal violence, grinding poverty, and weeping women grinding spices in Connecticut while yearning for Calcutta—the literary equivalent of broccoli. We know it's good for us, we know we should be reading it, but boy, do we crave some spicy literary *chaat*.

*Kavitha Rao is a Bangalore based freelance journalist and consulting editor with ELLE. She writes for Time, the New York Times, the Guardian and the Asian Wall Street journal. Her website is at [www.kavitharao.net](http://www.kavitharao.net).*

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