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Loose Canons: Reader, Authors and Consumption in Helen Simpson's "The Festival of the Immortals"

Ailsa Cox

1 In her story "The Festival of the Immortals,"[1] Helen Simpson peoples a literary festival with figures from the English literary canon. Charlotte Brontë reads from *Villette*; Katherine Mansfield and Samuel Coleridge run a joint workshop on keeping a writer's notebook. The story satirizes the phenomenon of the author event which has now become obligatory for any published writer. In the UK alone there are at least a hundred literary festivals taking place every year,[2] the best known of these being the Hay festival, called "the Woodstock of the mind" by ex-President Bill Clinton. W[3]hile government spending cuts may reduce some of the smaller festivals, it seems unlikely that this trend will ever be reversed, given the success of such events as a marketing tool. 200,000 tickets were sold at the 2010 Hay festival, an increase of 20% on the previous year, and the festival's annual report details the large amount of media coverage generated for the publishing industry by the British festival alone; the Hay brand has been exported to sister festivals across Europe, South America, Africa and Asia.

2 Perhaps it was during one of these international festivals that the Irish short story writer and novelist, Anne Enright, wrote a diary piece for the *London Review of Books*, in which she described "this book-selling business" as an "endless round of taxi-plane-taxi-interview-interview-gig-hotel" (31). Although her article is entitled "A Writer's Life," there is no mention of the compositional process or the act of writing. The reader may infer that the defining purpose of the "writer's life" has been left at home, along with Enright's neglected family and abandoned housework.

3 The Hay festival is sponsored now by the *Daily Telegraph*, but previously by the *Guardian* newspaper, in which Simpson's story first appeared in December 2006. A symbiosis has arisen between newspapers, publishers, festivals and other means of generating much-needed publicity, such as prizes. For instance, the £30,000 *Sunday Times* EFG Private

Bank Short Story Award is bestowed on the winning author at the *Sunday Times* Oxford Literary Festival, the prestige of a high-profile literary event enhancing the newspaper's association with high culture, good taste and other bourgeois values. In *Consuming Fictions*, Richard Todd traces the rise of the Booker Prize, since the 1980s, as an arbiter of British literary culture, and the subsequent proliferation of similar prizes, generating the phenomenon of the literary blockbuster. His analysis of how "contemporary literary canon-formation is subject to powerful, rapidly changing market forces affecting and influencing the consumer" (9) describes the complex interaction of prizes, TV and radio coverage, screen adaptations and bookstore promotions in widening the readership for serious fiction, and–as he sees it–generating a "golden age" for the postmodern novel, exemplified by the success of A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990).

4 Todd's book, published in 1996, does not consider public readings, festivals or other live events; Todd's research was carried out before the growth of the Internet and online book sales, developments which confirm the pace of change within the market forces shaping "canon-formation." Since 1996, the tactics used to promote novels have been extended to the short story. The *Sunday Times* Award (first awarded in 2010), is one of several major prizes inaugurated in the UK and Ireland since 2000, notably the BBC National Short Story Prize (2006), the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award (2005) and the Edge Hill Prize (2007). Todd's central thesis, that "novelists [...] have worked in an increasingly intensified atmosphere, one in which both the promotion and the reception of serious literary fiction have become steadily more consumer-oriented" (128), includes the proposition that–consciously or unconsciously–fiction-writers are making aesthetic decisions as part of this nexus of production, promotion and consumption.

5 While it lies outside the scope of this article, a parallel study to Todd's, considering the formation of a contemporary short story canon in Britain, would certainly include the work of Helen Simpson, who is the only short story writer to have won the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award (in 1991, for her first collection, *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*). Since then she has published another four collections, all well received. Her work is frequently anthologized and broadcast on BBC radio. As previously noted, "The Festival of the Immortals" was first published as a commission for the *Guardian*. The story is metafictional, in that it draws attention to its status as an artifact, destined to be performed "live" by its author; and, it may even be regarded as a custom-made advertisement for its own performance.

6 Simpson's account of the festival is highly ambivalent. It is revealed as celebrity-driven and voyeuristic, with Fanny Burney giving a talk about her mastectomy and Jane Austen sniping at questions about being fed by a wet nurse: "because of course that was what people were interested in now, that sort of detail, there was no getting away from it" (111). However, these satirical elements are tempered by an affectionate portrait of two elderly festival-goers, Phyllis and Viv, for whom the cult of the author represents an emotional investment in the habit of reading. Phyllis and Viv served in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) during the Second World War:

> "The first time I saw you, we were in the canteen," said Phyllis. "You were reading *The Waves* and I thought, Ah, a kindred spirit. I was carrying a steamed treacle pudding and I sat down beside you." (108)

7 The juxtaposition of Virginia Woolf with steamed pudding sets up a comic incongruity, continued by Viv's subsequent comment: "I still do dip into *The Waves* every so often [...] it's as good as having a house by the sea, don't you think?" (108). Here, as elsewhere in the story, the reader is presented as consumer, the heterogeneous and irreducible text substituting for material acquisition–"having a house by the sea." Not only is the text commodified and appropriated but also the figure of the biographical author: "Viv knew many writers intimately thanks to modern biographers, but she was really only on first-name terms with members of the Bloomsbury Group" (108).

8 Bakhtin's concept of "parodic-travestying discourse" (59)[4] may help us to theorize Simpson's comic subversions. Bakhtin argues that the Greek satyr plays which provided parallel comic renditions of serious dramatic subjects were a necessary corrective to elevated and monologic forms of discourse. Far from negating national myths, parody permitted the intrusion of a reality that is "too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre" (55). The parodic-travestying discourse of "The Festival of the Immortals" ridicules the mythologized narratives attached to the biographical figure of the author, without entirely negating their value to their reader. It would be all too easy to simply sneer at the shallow mind-sets of the ordinary festival-goer. But a devotion to reading is not necessarily invalidated by its consumerist aspects, or by an emphasis on emotional affect. Viv and Phyllis are not intellectuals or academics. They belong to the generation before Simpson's own, who did not benefit from widened access to higher education, and have spent most of their lives confined to the home, taking care of the family. For them, reading has been one of the few chances to please themselves:

> "[...] You know, thinking about it, the only time I stopped reading altogether was when they were babies. Three under five. I couldn't do that again."
> "I did keep reading," said Viv, "but there were quite a few accidents." (113)

9 Speaking of an earlier collection, *Hey Yeah, Right, Get a Life* (in the US, *Getting a Life*), Michael Greaney has said: "The stories are explorations of that interior, secretive pleasure, of the rare opportunities for hedonistic self-absorption enjoyed by those who are expected to minister ceaselessly, selflessly and wholeheartedly to the needs of others" (40). He makes particular reference to "Wurstigkeit," which features lunchtime visits to an almost magical boutique which can only be accessed through a secret password; but his discussion extends this notion of interior, sensory pleasure to less tangible forms of consumption. Greaney suggests that Simpson's "sampling" of high cultural references, drawing not only on the English literary canon, but also opera and myth, "position her stories, and her heroines, at the interface between the sublime and the humdrum, from which vantage point it becomes possible to appreciate that suburbia has its own poetry" (40). Public events such as author events and the recent phenomenon of the reading group or book club enables such private pleasures to be shared in a social space.

10 Seen from this perspective, the consumption of high culture may be aligned with other sources of "hedonistic self-absorption," such as shopping for luxury items. Simpson's work often explores the joys and pitfalls of retail therapy. Her first published story, "The Bed," begins: "Let me tell you how a piece of furniture changed my life" (*Four Bare Legs in a Bed*, 45). In this story, the impoverished narrator buys a luxurious bed on impulse, her boyfriend's furious reaction soon mellowing into grateful acceptance after they make love on the new mattress. Both the boyfriend and the narrator have been

seduced, but the long-term effect of sensual pleasure is to make her indolent and self-indulgent, "an odalisque" (51). The note of "ecstatic complacence" at the story's end (53) expresses a tension between the heightened, even hallucinatory, sensations induced by consumerist pleasure and resistance to the passivity induced by this state. Paradoxically, the narrator becomes less conscientious at work, declaring "I shall never do more for money than I have to again" (52). This is because the connections between work, wages and consumption have been simplified, by-passing less tangible forms of satisfaction, such as pride in the job. The final passages in "The Bed" use images of the Christ child and the sleeping boyfriend to suggest a connection between the narrator's dreamy state and, quite possibly, conception and pregnancy, especially if read in the context of Simpson's subsequent stories about maternity in *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*. Reading across Simpson's oeuvre, comparing her female characters at different stages in their lives, we can trace an ambivalence towards these various forms of consumption which may be related to the parodic travesty of "The Festival of the Immortals." The mysterious boutique in "Wurstigkeit" offers "an experience of weightlessness" (*Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*, 144) which is liberating yet implies absence and erasure; "it subtracted your centre of gravity" (144). For Viv and Phyllis, the excitement of the literary festival, and of reading in general, induces the kind of jouissance experienced by the two working mothers in "Wurstigkeit."

11 In his book *The Singularity of Literature*, the critic Derek Attridge examines the complex relationship between the literary text, its readers and its authors. He uses the term "idioculture" to refer to:

> [...] the way an individual's grasp on the world is mediated by a changing array of interlocking, overlapping, and often contradictory cultural systems absorbed in the course of his or her previous experience, a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually, emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living. (21)

12 Attridge's list is exhaustive because he is at pains to emphasize heterogeneity, change and fluidity. He theorizes the interplay of the physical, emotional and cognitive within the individual psyche, uniquely constituted at a specific point in the space-time continuum, and the subjective engagement with the production and reading of literary texts. According to Attridge, the value of literature lies in its engagement with 'otherness', and each reading of a literary work is more than a single, definitive act. It constitutes an ongoing event or performance. Thus, there is no right or correct way to read. He says that:

> We may want to exclude as illegitimate the author's intentions, or facts of his or her biography, or our own beliefs as readers, or the quality of the paper on which the text is printed, but the reality is that any of these factors, and dozens more, may enter into a reading that does justice to the alterity and singularity of the work. (81)

13 One of these factors is an imaginary relationship with the biographical author, examined more closely by Andrew Bennett, in his study, *The Author*. Bennett makes the obvious distinction between Thomas Hardy, the historical individual whose name is on the cover of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; and the notional figure of the author constructed by the text itself:

> It is for this reason, perhaps, that if you do get in your car and drive to Dorchester in order to visit the museum there, with its prize exhibit, Hardy's study, or if you drive out to Higher Bockhampton nearby, to view the carefully preserved house in

> which Hardy was born, or even if you look around Max Gate, the house in which he lived for the last forty years of his life and in which he died, there will be something hollow in the experience. (120)

14 Yet the breathless syntax of Bennett's lengthy sentence, tipping over into bathos at its disappointing conclusion, implies that Bennett himself cannot entirely disavow this futile pilgrimage. Through a discussion of authors who name or depict themselves within the text, he decides that: "the strange, the uncanny appearance of the author's name in a work might help to account for the difficulty we have in accounting for authors of literary texts more generally, as well as for our fascination with those figures" (123). For Bennett, the figure of the author is a contested and indecipherable entity, shifting inside and outside the text. Attridge's concept of an "idioculture" provides a framework for understanding a sense of communion with the imagined figure of the author as an entirely legitimate aspect of reading their texts.

15 However, the relationship between the female reader and the literary canon remains fundamentally one-sided. Elderly middle class women make up a considerable proportion of the fiction-reading public, and yet, Simpson suggests, their lives are barely represented by the literary canon:

> "It's not in the books we've read, is it, how things have been for us," said Viv. "There's only Mrs. Ramsay [...] and she's hardly typical." (113)

16 Simpson's own fiction addresses the marginalizing of domestic, and especially maternal, experience, something she has spoken about in interview, especially a 2007 interview with the American writer Amanda Eyre Ward. The enthusiastic critical reception for her work in the UK has sometimes been tempered by a uniquely British anxiety around writing which is perceived as domestic, "the mumsy doing the mumsy stuff".[5] Writers who address the deficiency identified in Viv's remarks–"there's only Mrs Ramsay [...] and she's hardly typical"–jeopardize their literary status. Simpson's intertextual allusions to high cultural values, as noted by Michael Greaney, expose her characters' partial exclusion from that culture. But they also affirm the author's cultural credentials, compensating, perhaps unconsciously, for the low values accruing to her subject matter.

17 This intertextual dialogue also expresses her characters' yearning for transcendence, a drive which is fuelled by responses to texts and their authors. This may be best illustrated by comparing "The Festival of the Immortals" with another story from *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*. In "Lentils and Lilies" (known as "Golden Apples" in the US), a teenage girl, Jade Beaumont, is studying the English Romantic poets for an exam. Reading Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth is to some extent a means to an end, her eventual escape from the schoolroom and a suburban lifestyle; but the poems also stand for emotional liberation–for spontaneity, passion and a heightening of the senses. Jade is at that stage in her life when everything seems possible, and she makes herself the heroine of every text she encounters:

> She was the focus of every film she saw, every novel she read. She was about to start careering round like a lustrous loose cannon. (2)

18 (Or even perhaps a "loose canon"?) In his essay "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" Bakhtin argues that we all "author" ourselves–that the subject is constructed in dialogue with a putative other. Following Attridge, it would seem that one important way in which that "otherness" is accessed is through the engagement with literature,

and the "performance" of reading. Like so many of Simpson's stories, "Lentils and Lilies" is punctuated by small epiphanies and vivid sense impressions:

> She was transported by the light and the trees, and just as her child self had once played the miniature warrior heroine down green alleys, so she saw her self now floating in this soft sunshine, moving like a panther into the long jewelled narrative which was her future. (4)

19 While this passage does not seem to refer to a specific literary text, this imaginative self-transformation, eliding the boundaries between the interior self and external world, the human subject and the animal kingdom, is redolent of the romantic poets that Jade has been reading.

20 Jay McInerney has commented on the positioning of "Lentils and Lilies" as a preface to the collection in which it appears. His *New York Times* review of *Getting a Life* argues that the evocation of Atalanta, the virgin huntress who, in Greek mythology, was tricked into marriage, "suggests that her fate may eventually resemble those of the older women in the following stories." In citing "Lentils and Lilies," I am proposing further connections, not just between the teenager Jade and the disillusioned mothers in *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*, but between those characters and Phyllis and Viv, whose commitment to reading endures throughout their lives. Phyllis has three children, just like the recurring character, Dorrie, in *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*.

21 Writers are also readers, and indeed, for many, the fiction-making impulse is a natural consequence of intensive reading. Simpson studied English literature at Oxford–an experience she speaks of with great enthusiasm–and has spoken and written about a range of writers whose work is important to her, including Katherine Mansfield, Alice Munro, Colette, Angela Carter and Virginia Woolf, the writer who first brought Phyllis and Viv together. Simpson chose Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* for a newspaper series, "Book of a Lifetime." Remembering first reading the book at fifteen, Simpson writes : "Things read early on can become part of your fibre and sinew."[6] Her choice of metaphor is revealing, suggesting that reading matter can be incorporated into the vital fabric of the self. While Woolf is presented as a parodic figure in "The Festival of the Immortals," she is nonetheless central to Simpson's interrogation of female authorship.

22 In "The Festival of the Immortals," Phyllis has joined a creative writing class, but has made little headway with authoring her memoirs. This is partly because she is uncertain how to represent herself on the page: "just as you didn't talk about yourself in the same way you talked about others, so you couldn't write about yourself from the outside either" (113). As an experienced reader, Phyllis shows insight into the role of displacement in the fiction-making process; but, as an inexperienced writer, she has not yet found a strategy for detaching the living self from the autobiographical subject. As Margaret Atwood says, "all writers are double [...] one half does the living, the other the writing" (37).

23 Phyllis's lack of progress also, significantly, stems from her reluctance to record memories which seem fragmented and inconsequential. This apparent shortage of worthwhile material recalls a quotation from *A Room of One's Own* cited in Simpson's tribute:

> In one passage she [Woolf] gestures towards a landscape of untouched subject matter when she imagines questioning an old woman about her life–but "she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups are washed; the children sent to school and gone out

> into the world. Nothing remains of it at all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie."

24 Yet Phyllis does have stories to tell–the story about seeing Viv with the steamed pudding; the narratives she exchanges with her old friend as they catch up on their lives since the war; and the anecdotes about all the authors she has encountered at the Festival–including Virginia herself.

25 For many readers and writers–and not only Simpson–the figure of Woolf embodies the female author. In Toby Litt's comic novel, *Finding Myself* (2003), the chick lit author Victoria About self-consciously models herself on Virginia Woolf, as she sets about her magnum opus, *From the Lighthouse*. "Right this moment Virginia is very important to me" (210) she says, temporarily exchanging her laptop for a writing pad and fountain pen, which seem "more fitting to the spirit of Virginia" (209). Helen Wussow, in an article on "Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image," refers to the contradictory versions of Woolf perpetuated by her biographers, often with the help of specific photographs–for instance the well-known 1902 studio portrait, which presents her as wistful, enigmatic, other-worldly. In "The Festival of the Immortals", Simpson subverts this received image of the literary saint with a Virginia capable of keeping "the whole marquee in stitches–spellbound–rocking with laughter" (109). In debunking the highbrow "spirit of Virginia," Simpson is demystifying the figure of the author and authorship itself. In her closing lines, she literally cuts the author down to size, as Viv spots Charlotte Brontë: "See, I was right! She is short" (115).

26 Readers and writers are ordinary people. An exchange between Viv the reader and Phyllis, the would-be writer, suggests that the only difference between these two positions lies in attitudes towards posterity:

> "I'm more than what's happened to me or where I've been," said Viv. "I know that and I don't care what other people think. I can't be read like a book. And I'm not dead yet, so I can't be summed up or sum myself up. Things might change."
> "Goodness," said Phyllis, amazed. (114)

27 Viv's suggestion that the living subject "can't be summed up" echoes the difficulties Phyllis has had writing her memoir. In order to produce a conventional text, it is necessary to somehow suspend the flow of lived experience. Woolf's own solution, and that of other modernist authors, was to develop a new aesthetic, which addressed the insufficiency of language; and this modernist aesthetic has influenced Simpson's characteristic use of sense impressions and lush natural imagery to evoke shifting states of consciousness. This is the style of "The Bed," "Lentils and Lilies" and "Wurstigkeit," and of many of the stories in *In-flight Entertainment*.

28 "The Festival of the Immortals" uses a more restrained style, with less descriptive detail. This stylistic simplicity can be seen as a logical strategy, in a story that is predicated on a flight of fancy, and flouts the laws of time and space. The relatively plain and detached style anchors the fantastic elements within everyday reality. It also draws attention to the mundane aspects of literary production. Simpson seems to suggest that, despite their celebrity, the authors appearing at the festival do not belong to another order of beings. They are not so different to their readers. They are as ordinary, and as everyday, as the steamed treacle pudding in the ATS canteen.

29 The many ambiguities in "The Festival of the Immortals" are not resolved by its conclusion. The demands made on writers to actively promote their own work through public activities which are at variance with the essentially solitary nature of literary composition remain problematic. But Simpson does also use the story to celebrate the inter-relationship between reading and writing, including its emotional, libidinal dimensions. She has also produced a story which clearly demonstrates the impact of the marketplace on literary production, authorship and the text itself.

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NOTES

1. First publication in the *Guardian,* 23 December 2006. Republished in Helen Simpson, *In-Flight Entertainment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010), 107-115.
2. See http://www.literaryfestivals.co.uk/.
3. https://www.hayfestival.com/portal/documents/HayFestival2010Report.pdf.
4. M.M. Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", in M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.
5. Amanda Eyre Ward, "Helen Simpson", *The Believer*, 72.
6. Helen Simpson, "Book of a Lifetime: *A Room of One's Own,* By Virginia Woolf".

ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle « The Festival of the Immortals » de Helen Simpson propose une représentation satirique du phénomène anglais actuel de l'événement littéraire. Cette nouvelle met en scène un festival littéraire où des auteurs canoniques reviennent de l'au-delà pour parler de leurs écrits. L'ironie de Simpson se trouve néanmoins atténuée par le portrait touchant de deux femmes âgées qui sont des adeptes de ce genre d'événement culturel. En effet, ces femmes adhèrent au culte de l'auteur et expriment une affection particulière pour l'acte de lecture. Cet article met la théorie de Bakhtine au service d'une étude de l'ambivalence que démontre Simpson envers les formes publiques de consommation littéraire, un thème récurrent dans l'œuvre de Simpson. Dans cette nouvelle et ailleurs, Simpson aborde la question de la marginalisation de l'expérience féminine et la difficulté des femmes à faire entendre leur voix. Le concept d'«idioculture» emprunté à Derek Attridge permettra de comprendre comment le lien étroit entre lecture et écriture permet d'aborder l'altérité, et justifiera la légitimité d'une lecture des textes à travers le prisme d'un auteur imaginé par le lecteur.

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Ailsa Cox is Reader in English and Writing at Edge Hill University, UK. Her books include *Alice Munro* (Northcote House), *Writing Short Stories* (Routledge) and *The Real Louise and Other Stories* (Headland Press). She has also published essays and chapters on short story writers including Alice Munro, Nancy Lee and Elizabeth Bowen. She is the editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice* (Intellect Press).