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From *High Fidelity* (1995) to *Funny Girl* (2014) or What Makes Nick Hornby's Novels so Popular[1]

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Abstract

The common and perhaps the most fascinating characteristic of all Nick Hornby's novels is that they tackle contemporary problems of ordinary people. As a consequence, the readers will plunge into a world of failed relationships; fear of commitment; depression; lack of emotional stability; teenage anger and imbalance; frustration and obsession; invented maladies, sons or parties; disappointment and self-pity as well as useless single or group therapies. In spite of their dark problematic, Hornby's novels have enjoyed popularity and continue to exert the sort of fascination that only brilliant literary pieces may produce. From such a point of view, this paper will try to solve the puzzle called Nick Hornby constructing and deconstructing the elements that make up his unique writing style.

Keywords: Contemporaneity, Intertextuality, Bleak humour, Mundanity, Stylistic features

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The writing of this article is the logical outcome of two distinct yet interrelated issues: an acknowledged pleasure in reading Nick Hornby's novels and both an inner and pedagogical necessity to identify a common core of contemporary British novels taking into consideration the range and diversity of the current literary productions in the field.

If we accept the idea that writers like Nick Hornby "are not simply successful or acclaimed novelists; they are celebrity novelists" (English & Frow, 2006, p. 39), then we are obliged to tackle a number of impending questions: Is his popularity commensurate with his literary achievement? Has British fiction as a whole been degraded by the culture of celebrity? What shapes the construction of the current British literary canon?

Covering a period of twenty years, Nick Hornby's seven novels ranging from *High Fidelity* (1995) to *Funny Girl* (2014) have been usually associated with the so-called 'New Man' culture and particularly the 'New Lad' phenomenon referring to the middle-class university-educated men of the 1980s and 1990s who "found themselves having to negotiate a range of conflicting discourses of contemporary masculinity" (Bentley, 2008, p. 117). From this perspective, Nick Hornby's novels explore the implications of the changes of the cultural understanding of femininity and masculinity and the attitudes to sexuality and the new power relationships between men and women both publically and privately:

> Typically the main character or characters will be men who attained a degree of adulthood – one is reluctant to say 'reached maturity' – around the end of the 1980s and thereafter find themselves in a social milieu that is, as far as their sex drive is concerned, at once seductive and perplexing. Their female counterparts seem able to match them in terms of confidence, intelligence, social bravado and hedonistic endurance and many authors and characters treat this as a credible license for the behaviour and stylistic traits which have come to characterize the subgenre. (Bradford, 2007, p. 143)

As a consequence, 35-year-old Rob Fleming in *High Fidelity* (1995) whose relationship with Laura begins with his compilation for her of a tape of the 'best' contemporary music and his eventual understanding of why their relationship has ended is

marked by his collateral recognition that he should have thought more about the music she liked instead of his own preferences. Similarly, 39-year-old Annie Platt in *Juliet, Naked* (2009) belatedly realizes that she has wasted the last 15 years in her life in a pointless relationship with the obsessive Duncan who built his life around Tucker Crowe, an American singer, songwriter and guitarist. Moving beyond the concepts of femininity and masculinity, Nick Hornby's novels gained popularity due to the fact that they reflect typical moments in the life of ordinary people who need to learn to accept their limitations and live with their disillusionment.

Bringing together "art, literature, music, style, dress and even attitude", the "conceptual umbrella of subculture" (McRobbie, 1994, p. 13) is melted into that type of postmodernism understood as a multiplicity of fragmented identities. Apparently, "an alliance with popular culture is seen as anti-elitist, anti-hierarchical and dissenting" and it can often look "quite trivial and popular and tacky" (Butler, 2002, p. 64). Nevertheless, the aim is actually to bring literature among the people and to bring the discourse of ordinary people closer to the centre of the literary canon without any false claim to its lack of literary value; this is exactly what Nick Hornby's novels manage to achieve.

In order to catch the readers' attention and to lure them into following the narration, the beginnings follow the same pattern: they are simple, abrupt, shocking and ironical and always in media res. In a truly postmodernist fashion, the first person narrator in *High Fidelity* (1995) starts with a list of his top five most memorable split-ups and relativizes everything by plunging into an imaginary dialogue with a woman called Laura: "Can you see your name 'n that lot, Laura?" (p.1); as the story unfolds, we realize that Laura is the woman he really loves hence his reliability as a narrator is questioned from the very first page.

Even if the story in *About a Boy* (1998) is told by a third person narrator shifting perspectives from Marcus, the oldest 12-year-old on the planet and Will, the immature old hippie, the gripping beginning is similar: "Have you split up now?" "Are you being funny?" (1); it is an exchange of retorts between Marcus and his divorced mother who has just broken up with her latest boyfriend.

Katie Carr, the first-person narrator in *How to be Good* (2001) is also the protagonist of the story as it becomes obvious from the first lines of the novel: "I am in a car park in Leeds when I tell my husband I don't want to be married to him anymore" (p.1); what it is even more striking is that her husband David is not in the car with her at the time, he is at home taking care of their two children.

In *A Long Way Down* (2005), multiperspectivism offers the possibility of four different beginnings, all of the four narrators (Martin, Maureen, Jess and JJ) being actually concerned with the same idea (committing suicide), best rendered by Martin: "Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block?" (p.3).

The narrator's unreliability is again emphasized in *Slam* (2007) in which the 16-year-old Sam Jones asserts that "things were ticking along quite nicely" (p.1) for the readers to soon realize that his story will be about Sam unexpectedly becoming a father at such an early age.

Even more mundane, the beginning in *Juliet Naked* (2009) may tempt critics to include Nick Hornby into the category of mass literature writers without any further hesitation: "They had flown from England to Minneapolis to look at a toilet" (p.1). Actually, Duncan and Annie were there because that place had become a place of pilgrimage for the fans of Tucker Crowe, an American singer, songwriter and guitarist who is said to have given up music in exactly that place. Towards the end of the novel, readers will learn that Tucker had not experienced any epiphany at that moment, he was only disappointed with the quality of his music and he had been told that he would become a father. In the next 20 years, he will move aimlessly from one relationship to another having five children with four distinct mothers and feeling he has uselessly wasted his life.

Last but not least, the debut sentence in *Funny Girl* (2014) focuses upon Barbara Parker who is about to win Miss Blackpool of 1964, but who will refuse the title to go to London and follow her dream of becoming a comedy actress: "She didn't want to be a beauty queen, but as luck would have it, she was about to become one" (p.3).

The function of all these beginnings is to expose one or more dysfunctions in the lives of the protagonists with consequences mainly upon their ability to relate to the others or better said upon their inability to get emotionally attached to somebody or to build strong, ever-lasting relationships.

If modernist literature has been defined as a literature of crisis (Childs, 2008, p. 16) and post-modernist literature as a literature of self-destruction and re-construction (Childs, 2008, p. 2), contemporary literature may be described as a literature of acceptance. Novelists like Nick Hornby portray a wide variety of problems characterizing ordinary people at the turn of the century: failed relationships; fear of commitment; depression; lack of emotional stability; teenage anger and imbalance; frustration and obsession; invented maladies, sons or parties; disappointment and self-pity; suicide or useless single or group therapies. The

message is that since they can hardly do anything to change their lives, they had better accept them as they are.

The characters in Nick Hornby's novels are all involved in one type or another of failed relationships from multiple love fiascos (*High Fidelity* or *Juliet, Naked*) to broken family ties (*About a Boy*, *How to be Good* or *Slam*) or disastrous social relationships (*A Long Way Down*).None of Rob's relationships in *High Fidelity* lasted more than 2 years and during his last relationship with Laura he has been cheating on her while she was pregnant; moreover, not long after her abortion, he told her he was unhappy and he was looking for somebody else. Even after their breakup, he seems to realize that he desperately wants her back, but this does not stop him from having a new affair with a singer called Marie LaSalle who herself has come out of a bad relationship. Likewise, Tucker Crowe in *Juliet Naked* fails to be a proper husband for any of the mothers of his five children, yet he hopes for a late redemption by means of his youngest son Jackson who adores his father and when this breaks up with his mother, he prefers staying with Crowe. 12-year-old Marcus in *About a Boy* becomes lonely and insecure due to the absence of a father figure in his life as his parents divorced when he was eight and he is now living with his mother who is too wrapped up in her own misery to care about her boy's need for affection or protection. In the same way, 16-year-old Sam in *Slam* repeats his mother's mistake and becomes a father when he himself is still a child who loves skateboarding and talks to the poster of Tony Hawk, his favourite skateboarder. The emotional alienation does not affect only love or family relationships, but also social relationships as it happens to Maureen in *A Long Way Down* who has dedicated her entire life to her handicapped son Matty and sees an ordinary trip as the most exciting thing that has ever happened to her in her entire life.

The incapability to act and the impossibility to accept any failure are generated by the characters' fear of commitment (Rob in *High Fidelity*; Will in *About a Boy*; Martin Sharp in *A Long Way Down*; Sam in *Slam*; Duncan in *Juliet, Naked*).In *High Fidelity*, Rob owns a music shop called Championship Vinyl and his "fixation with rock music is partly his means of retreat from more demanding engagements with the real world and partly an index to them" (Bradford, 2007, p. 143). On the same wavelength, Head considers that"it is a fear of mortality that makes men resist monogamy and domestic stability", therefore "the death of Laura's father is the *deus ex machina* that brings them back together, and that eventually elicits from him a fumbling, unromantic proposal, which is appreciated, but not accepted" (2002, p. 251). Paradoxically, Will in *About a Boy*ex ploits women's need for commitment and pretends he is a single father with a two-year-old son just to be accepted by single

mothers. From a different perspective, Martin Sharp's fame as a TV presenter in *A Long Way Down* amplifies his alienation and he blames the people around him rather than acknowledging his own emotional problems. When he first understands that he is going to become a father, the first reaction of the teenager in *Slam* is to run away to Hastings to avoid confronting the reality of his girlfriend Alicia being pregnant; in spite of his later attempts to support her and act maturely and responsibly, he will eventually abandon her again when he realizes that he was not ready to start a family with her and that their relationship was nothing but a fling. If such a behavior is more or less understandable in the case of the teenager in *Slam*, the lack of responsibility and the teenage reactions of Duncan in *Juliet, Naked* become a reflection of an interior trauma unlikely to be healed as he gets involved with his colleague Gina as a frustrated, over exaggerated reaction to his steady girlfriend Annie's negative review of a new release of Tucker Crowe's songs.

Signs of depression are described in detail as it happens in the case of young Marcus in *About a Boy* who becomes an acute observer of all the stages of depression his mother passes through:

> Then his mum started the crying thing again. Just like before, there didn't seem to be any reason for it and just like before, it began slowly, with the odd snuffle after dinner, which one night turned into a long, frightening burst of sobbing, a burst that Marcus could do nothing about, no matter how many questions he asked or hugs he gave her; and then, finally, there was the breakfast crying again, and he knew for sure that things were serious and they were in trouble. (Hornby, 1998, p. 120)

All the protagonists in *A Long Way Down* suffer from depression too and the same happens to Annie in *Juliet, Naked*; aware of her state of mind, she goes to a therapist trying to find a solution to her anxieties. Ironically enough, she is the only client the therapist has and Malcom himself seems to be in need of a therapy.

Lack of emotional stability is at the core of the problems of Rob and Laura in *High Fidelity*, both Fiona and Will in *About a Boy*, David and Katie in *How to be Good* (otherwise they would not resort to extreme solutions for their problems); Maureen, Martin, JJ and Jess in *A Long Way Down*; Sam and Alicia in *Slam* or Duncan in *Juliet, Naked*. Despite their fear of commitment and their difficulty in enduring the monotony of long-lasting relationships, many characters are always in search of a new partner as if this would function as a sort of miraculous cure for the previous failed relationship.

Ellie's eccentric behavior in *About a Boy*, Jess's irrational outbursts in *A Long Way Down* or Sam's getaway to Hastings in *Slam* epitomize the essence of teenage anger and imbalance and move even further to purport the consequences of the dismantling of the traditional family or simply of the parents' lack of interest in the psychological welfare of their own children.

Frustrations and obsessions burden Nick Hornby's characters: Rob in *High Fidelity* is obsessed with Laura's new boyfriend; Marcus in *About a Boy* is always afraid that his mother might try to commit suicide again; David in *How to be Good* is fanatically subjugated by GoodNews and his vision of a better world; Maureen in *A Long Way Down* is continuously worried that something bad may happen to her handicapped son; Sam in *Slam* becomes obsessed with the images of his unborn son.

In order to hide their own insecurities, the characters feel the need to resort to excuses and explanations such as invented maladies, sons or parties. Will in *About a Boy* pretends that he has a 2-year-old son only to be admitted into SPAT, an association for single parents:

> He invents an ex-wife and two-year-old son and sets about persuading the otherwise exclusively female members of the group that he is, like them, sensitive and emotionally scarred, with a view to seducing the more attractive ones (Hornby, 1998, p. 144).

Out of the same fear to disappoint or be perceived as a failure, JJ in *A Long Way Down* is telling the other three protagonists he suffers from an incurable disease to hide his real failures in life whereas Sam in *Slam* invents a cold just to move from Alicia's house and escape the heavy responsibility of being a 16-year-old father.

Disappointment and self-pity impregnate the pages of the novels as well as the protagonists' lives: Rob in *High Fidelity* cannot get over his separation from Laura; Katie from *How to be Good* is disappointed with her husband's behavior and life in general; Sam in *Slam* cannot bear to look into his mother's eyes again and this is why he runs away from home.

Suicide or at least the attempt to commit suicide is perhaps the overarching problem of contemporary society, but Nick Hornby chooses to treat it ironically, sometimes sending things into derisory and diminishing the real degree of complexity or the profoundness of the problem triggering the suicidal gesture. Readers should not expect Nick Hornby's characters to philosophically question a person's decision to take his own life as in Julian Barnes's *Sense of an Ending* (2011) where Adrian Finn's suicide is surrounded by mystery, interpreted in

existentialist terms and initially perceived as an act of courage and a conscious desire of asserting one's freedom to choose and decide.

The irony related to the suicidal act in Nick Hornby's novels is that due to various reasons it always fails; therefore there is no grandeur or tragism normally associated with such a gesture. Fiona in *About a Boy* tries to commit suicide and her son Marcus will never forget the way she looked when he found her making Will remembering why he prefers not getting things too seriously and never getting involved too deeply:

> People like Fiona really ruined it for everyone. It wasn't easy, floating on the surface of everything: it took skill and nerve, and when people told you that they were thinking of taking their own life, you could feel yourself being dragged under with them. Keeping your head above water was what it was all about, Will reckoned (Hornby, 1998, p. 124).

A Long Way Down completely deals with the theme of suicide or more precisely with the four protagonists' struggle to escape the lure of giving up everything and everybody. Acknowledging his failure to become a great musician, JJ also admits that "the Vincent Van Gogh route" is not meant for ordinary people: "A middle-aged woman who looked like someone's cleaning lady, a shrieking adolescent lunatic and a talk-show host with an orange face… It didn't add up. It was invented for people like Virginia Woolf and Nick Drake" (Hornby, 2005, p. 25).

The characters try fashionable methods of dealing with their problems such as single or group therapies, yet their futility is inevitable; this is the case of the trip to Tenerife or the final gathering of all friends and family members in *A Long Way Down* or Annie's secret visits to the therapist in *Juliet, Naked*. Even the intertextual references scattered throughout the texts allude to the superfluousness of seeking a solution to any of the characters' problems: "Oscar Wilde once said: One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead" (Hornby, 2005, p. 40) or "Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative, I said. Wilde again. I couldn't resist" (Hornby, 2005, p. 42).

Symmetrically, there are no endings of Nick Hornby's stories because all we were supposed to see was merely a glimpse of some people's ordinary lives and the problems they struggle against. From time to time, the narrators engage in a dialogic communication with the readers who become aware that all these stories become an illustration of the postmodernist concept of metafiction or "self-conscious fiction" (Waugh, 2001, p. 2): "I am telling you all this as if it's a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end. And it is a story, I suppose, because everyone's life is a story, isn't it? But it's not the sort of story that has an

end. It doesn't have an end yet, anyway" (Hornby, 2007, p. 289). Self-reflexiveness of this type is an additional illustration of the literary value of these texts which exceed the limits imposed by the distinction between 'high' and 'low' literature.

Far from being exhaustive, this brief insight into the common interwoven topics of the novels of a widely read and appreciated contemporary novelist leads to a number of revealing conclusions: Nick Hornby is not merely a celebrity novelist; his novels move beyond a simple reflection of the 'new lad' phenomenon; the variety of narrative techniques shows a constant concern regarding form and narrator credibility with an emphasis upon a permanent dialogue with the readers and more or less direct intertextual references; if beginnings are in media res, Hornby's stories do not have a typical ending either; the dark problematics of Hornby's novels is dealt with in a humorous, ironical or parodical manner and last but not least, the mundanity of his stories and the ordinariness of his characters should not exclude him from the literary canon. Further analysis will most likely facilitate the re-shaping of the contemporary literary canon with the inclusion of texts so far totally excluded or holding a marginal position.

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