A Spectre Haunts Bad Novels

Eyal Amiran
University of California, Irvine

The problem with bad books is to find, as Friedrich Nietzsche counsels, worthy enemies. A bad book has to be interesting, or we wouldn’t care. Strong schmaltz is an option, like Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang (1961): many of my peers, Ben Marcus, Kate Winslet, Kurt Vonnegut, Time Magazine. I suspect Laura Bush and Joe Biden, as well. Of it Richard Yates told Ploughshares: I meant it more as an indictment of American life in the 1950s. Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs—a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security...a great many Americans were deeply disturbed by all that.... Good literature inspires emotion that is transferred beyond simple admiration (“magic seems neat”) into reality (“Having read this novel, I must weep”). This emotion can be internal or external. It can be anything: moral outrage, jaded humor, deep sorrow, a reassurance that one is not alone, etc. Better literature inspires emotions we haven’t admitted we possess; it awakens us to the deep complexity we—as works, then, that illuminate the (our) human spirit. Revolutionary Road tells me:

1) 1950s suburban America had limited outlets for the creatively inclined.
2) Conformity was then rampant.
3) People who lie to themselves are unhappy.
4) People who feel superior to their surroundings are frustrated.

By this, I am as illuminated as I am by a college essay decrying drunk driving. (And yet my peers, and Vonnegut, and Marcus...) Why is it bad? Because it’s tricked so many into thinking it’s good.

Top 40 Bad Books

Introduction to Focus: Top 40 Bad Books

Richard Ford once said that it takes as much effort to produce a bad book as a good book.

And as disheartening as that sounds, what Ford’s assertion might raise, and what most everyone who has attempted the task of a book-length work already knows, is the notion that effort alone does not ensure a book’s success, and that there are probably more ways for a good book to be overlooked than a bad book to never make it into print.

That said, what constitutes a bad book? Is it an overrated “good” book? Can an otherwise good author produce a “bad” book? Is the badness in style, in execution? Or is it in theme or outlook? Or is the notion of a “bad” book even comprehensible in the age of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and cultural studies?

Calling the question of “bad books” to the fore elicited—as might be expected—an overwhelming response. The forty responses below were selected to demonstrate the sheer variety of responses to what at face value seems a simple question. But as with most literary matters, nothing is as simple as it appears—not even the question of what constitutes a bad book.

From Eyal Amiran’s comments on the badness of Bond to Zahi Zalloua’s asking whether the state of bad books is hopeless, you’ll find that there’s a lot to think about when it comes to the question of bad books. Some of the comments you’ll find agreeable; others disagreeable. Regardless, after reading them we think that you’ll at least agree that there is just as much to say about bad books as there is to say about good ones.
The Effort of Bad Writing
Michael Bérubé
Pennsylvania State University

Women in Love (1920) by D. H. Lawrence. As the great W. Y. Tindall once wrote,
Gudrun dances, for no reason, before cows. They understand. Even Hermione,
that intellectual, has her moments. In voluptuous con summation with violence,
she hits Birkin on the head with her paperweight. He goes off to lie among the flowers and, on returning to full con-
sciousness, approves of her momentary triumph over repression.

Or as Andy Bienen, my grad-school colleague turned screenwriter, more pithily put it, “It’s like someone
put a gun to Nietzsche’s head and made him write a Harlequin romance.” No question, it took a lot of effort to produce a book that bad.

A Failed Hit Job
Marc Bousquet
Santa Clara University

One-Party Classroom (2009) by David Horowitz and Jacob Laksin. What’s worse than the kind of right-wing drivel that gives yellow journalism a
full text available online and searchable (mangle the
numbers of typos and lax fact checking—this is at
least selfish, since it condemns the rest of us to end
ries are the only ones most of the mighty Brahmins
know how to make even the worst books productive.
Making them productive won’t make them better. It
will just take the whole category of good vs. bad off the seminar table, on which are stacked confident piles of Their Eyes.

The Bad Staggers On
John Domini
Drake University

A handful of parody responses occur to me, such as a Euclidean proof of why one of my own
books is bad. But to play it straight, we should ask, why isn’t “bad” in the eye of the beholder? Why
should a reader go with anything other than his or
her gut? What’s the use of a critic? The challenge is
whether from the point of view of feminism or
African American culture, Their Eyes is a damn good
academia. Bad novels, like unhappy families, are bad
in their own ways. What else to say?

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academic writing. The Horowitz staffers tasked with compiling this stinker simply trolled online campus catalogs to yield course descriptions using such democracy-
undermining terms as “justice,” “inequality,” “race,” and “feminism,” then wrote lame descriptions characterizing the syllabi as part of a plot to deprive William Gates and Dick Cheney of their hard-earned profits. Once I got the concept, I briefly held the flickering hope that I could read it ironically—as in, “hey, what a bunch of good classes I wish I’d been able to take in college.” Wrong. The relentless, narrow-minded prose thoroughly poisoned any hope of snarky thoughtcrime. Even if you were one of the twins sympathetic to the political angle of this failed hit job, the concrete brutalism of its formal properties would crush your spirit in a few pages—like read-
ing a year’s worth of your daily horoscopes straight through, or a cookbook cover to cover.

Academic Standards
Nicholas Brown
University of Illinois at Chicago

Most academic books are bad. Nearly all of them. I doubt that the situation is particularly worse than at any other time. But there is something else I view as troubling: good books with bad proof-
reading and useless indexes. With a bad book, bad proofreading doesn’t matter particularly, and a bad index doesn’t matter at all. But what troubles me is that editors are publishing good books, books that will be cited for years and decades, as though they will be read once and left on the train. With a new author, perhaps the time investment isn’t worth do-
ing things right, though this indicates a telling lack of confidence in the material. But books by estab-
ishled authorities continue to emerge with distracting numbers of typos and lax fact checking—this is at least selfish, since it condemns the rest of us to endless [sic]—and pointless onomastic indexes. As to that index, this is the digital age. I imagine an editor objecting, who needs it? To which I reply: make your full text available online and searchable (mangle the text any way you like, just give me the page number!) and I withdraw the complaint.

A Bad Book
Terry Caesar
San Antonio, Texas

Bad novels, like unhappy families, are bad in their own ways. Take Herman Melville’s Pierre (1852)—so extravagantly mannered as to be barely readable, and yet so exquisitely conceived, so archly comical that you can emerge from its pages at last and think that the whole assemblage is pretty good; somehow the fact that the book is bad becomes either
irrelevant or else important in a whole new way.

Or consider Theodore Dreiser’s The Goddess (1915). I taught it once, and recalled to the class T.S.
 Eliot’s great judgment of Henry James: “a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. We might venture, had a mind so crude any idea could violate it. And yet who could not somehow honor his wooden conacites as well as lumpish sentences? Not H. L. Mencken, who both loved them and loved to lambast them. Not even my students (though all were relieved to move on with the syllabus).

Of course, off and on as well as on the syllabus, most novels are bad. Bad, that is, in the words of the cele-
brated adage of the science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon, “ninety percent of everything is crap.”

Their characters are dull, their themes hack-
neyed, their narratives derivative. They’re scarcely bad in their own ways. What else to say?

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bad name? A ghost-authored sequel, padded with
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nose to nose with right-wing drivel that gives yellow journalism a

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American Book Review
Page 4
Very Baad Books
David B. Downing
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Let’s face it: we all know that when you add the extra vowel, baad is the ultimate term of endearment. All hipster, counter-culture, soul searchers love baad stuff, perhaps ever since Melvin Van Peebles’ 1971 movie Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song. That’s because it does the right stuff: it refuses conformity to the powers that be; it refuses to take seriously all the high-falutin’ ideals and pretenses; it gets down with the real folks, whoever they might be. And it’s a pretty rigorous taxonomy, best used, of course, for the contemporary, the latest baad stuff. But you could take it back a bit, using the same criteria and say that, for instance, Madame Bovary (1857) is baad — so is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpa-
pet,” Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899), D. H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover (1928), Henry Miller’s Sexus (1949) and Nexus (1960), Samuel Beckett’s Murphy (1938), Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes’s Mule Bone (1930), Amiri Bara-
ka’s Dutchman (1964), Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), and so on — you get the point, there’s a lot of baad stuff there that’s really good.

But can a book be baad and bad at the same time given this taxonomy? The answer has to be: of course. The book can be hip, cool, revolutionary, code breaking on many levels, but just plain crappy. Examples will have to work here, and so I’m going to nominate for dual honors Bob Dylan’s 1966 classic baad book, Tarantula. If this isn’t baad and bad at the same time, I give up. So I’m just going to end with the first, well, let’s call it “sentence” of the book:

aretha/ crystal jukebox queen of hymn & him diffused in drunk transfusion wound would heed sweet soundwave crippled & cry salute to oh great particular el dorado reel & ye battered personal god but she cannot she the leader of whom when ye follow, she cannot has no back she cannot…

If you love that, you know you’re baad, no matter that the book itself is bad.

Dildo Cay
Jonathan P. Eburne
Pennsylvania State University

“They’re not flamingoes, Adrian thought; there wouldn’t be flamingoes on Dildo Cay in September.” It is through this keen eye for regional detail that we encounter the opening lines of Nelson Hayes’s 1940 novel, Dildo Cay, a very real book whose title is so outlandish as to have provoked an incredulous review (as well as a single star rating) on Amazon.com. The review, entitled “Elaborate hoax,” reads:

I’m sorry to report that this book does not actually exist… What’s next? A bogus listing for “Goodnight Mooninite” to shill the Cartoon Network?

It is unfortunate that some people seem to think that Amazon is some sort of amusement park, like a literary Astroland, here for nothing more than their moronic brand of hedonism.

The book does, in fact, exist. Yet Dildo Cay — a salt-plantation melodrama set on a fictionalized island in the Turks and Caicos — warrants skepticism nonetheless. For starters, one questions the presumption that even the most sober war-era reader would leap to associate the titular islet with the tall Caribbean cactuses that populate it, rather than, say, with artificial phalluses. All the same, there is already something impressive about a novel whose very dust jacket can prompt an Amazon.com browser to doubt its existence.

Yet Dildo Cay is bad in ways that surpass its title. The product less of an unsteady hand than of a resoundingly tin ear, the novel’s prose is so categorically graceless as to supersede camp and plunge straight into ontological confusion. Herein, I’d like to suggest, is the triumph of an exquisitely bad book such as Dildo Cay: it is so earnestly bad as to call its own existence into question. In many ways, of course, the novel parades the typically forgettable qualities of other undistinguished midcentury fiction: tawdry displays of local color, liberal deployments of racism and misogyny, textbook Oedipal conflicts, and the hypertrophic use of italics. But Dildo Cay boasts countless passages that far exceed these indistinctions:

“Father, I want to talk with you!”

Adrian had been watching his father walk the dike unsteadily, and suddenly he had seen himself at the age of sixty walking the dike unsteadily, and on top of his restlessness it was too much for him.

“How strong do you think that pickle is?” his father asked, ignoring the tone of Adrian’s voice.

If ever the family romance has so forcefully raised its pickle, I know few other novels so susceptible to redundant (?) allegory. We all walk the dike unsteadily.

It has become a minor ambition of mine to become a connoisseur, or at least a collector, of books as marvelously bad as Dildo Cay. Consider the Borgesian possibilities of such a library, especially given that one is spared from inventing its contents. The titles, the authors, and the prose are all less fic-
tional for being real, historical artifacts. Such books are not to be confused, however, with ephemera, whose material existence may once have been transitory, but which have instead been preserved against the ravages of time. Rather, the status of a bad book like Dildo Cay represents something akin to an eclipse: these are books whose material form raises the same doubts, the same ques-
tions about their existence, as their outlandish titles. My gradually increasingly library of such bad books now boasts titles such as Mary Wood-Allen’s What a Young Woman Ought to Know (1898), Frances Neuman’s The Hard-Boiled Virgin (1926), Virginia Elliott’s post-Prohibition Quiet Drinking (1933), and Isaac Cronin’s The International Squid Cookbook (1981). What’s next? To quote the novel’s closing line: “Keep your jib full… our course is for Dildo Cay.”

Tipping Point of Badness
Amy J. Elias
University of Tennessee

Badness in the historical novel is particularly discomfiting because the novelist makes an implicit contract with the reader for verisimilitude of his
torical context, character, or idea, and then the form itself guarantees that she can never fully deliver. By design, historical fictions always embed a thesis about history, and their badness becomes a matter of tipping point rather than failure. Badness enters the nonparodic historical novel when an author overtly uses historically situated people, places, and cultures as mirrors, and denies their difference. It is easy to fool readers who don’t know history about how historical a novel is, and literary studies has made us believe that verisimilitude is a politically disingenuous ideal anyway, so one feels retrograde saying that in the historical novel, the tipping point of badness is a failure of dialogue, a moment when a thesis about history becomes cocksure. But there it is: it is the tipping point when an author transcribes only his own desire echoing from the past. It happens in very good novels by very good novelists. It happens in Toni Morrison’s A Mercy (2008) when Morrison refuses fully to open her mind to seventeenth-century religious life, in The March (2005) when E. L. Doctorow rewrites historical fact to such little purpose that his thesis goes banal. It happens in Saturday (2005), an oddly historical novel of the present, when Jan McEwan implies that a good poem read well can turn the hearts of men from violence to fraternity, a wishful thesis about terror in our time. These moments of badness are moments of authorial ego when dialogue fails. But they also are slippages that instruct about our own moment: an author’s desire, the reader’s own face in the glass.

A Species of Sorryness
Dagoberto Gilb
University of Houston-Victoria

Like bad girlfriends (and boyfriends, too), there are so many categories of bad books that it’d be gruesome and pathetic to categorize the various species of that sorryness. Setting aside the intrinsically aggravating that the very coquetish author is actually stupid, or the editor who chose the manuscript is too dumb or lame or dazed, or that the system which perpetuates both of them is as flawed as a university paying for a Glenn Beck lecture series, and omitting the writers who are really salespeople, as are their duped or explicit publishers hyping their so pretty product as though…. Wait a minute, that may be what I think is also a major bad book or line of them even. As admirable as any delusion which fuels grandeur, this kind of writing — more about the writer than the writing — not only fulfills that mirror, mirror on the wall writer, but, like political demagoguery, pumps mass appeal in (talking only literature here) skewed and depressing ways.

A Taste for Quarantine
Gerald Graff
University of Illinois at Chicago

It has always seemed strange to me that bad books aren’t a prominent part of our school and college literature curriculum. How do we expect...
students to learn to tell the difference between good and bad books unless we assign some bad ones for comparison? Don’t you need badness in order to know goodness?

I can only conclude that those who have determined the literature curriculum have been more interested in protecting the good or great books from contamination—that is, in feeling virtuous about their own tastes—than they are in helping students understand what they read. There is also the view, though, that reading good books is itself sufficient—no reason to read bad ones for comparison, especially since some students might think some of the bad ones are good and vice-versa, or might catch on to the fact that which books are good or bad is often alarmingly debatable.

The best thing I’ve ever read on the question of literary value, by the way, is a chapter entitled “Evaluation” in Making Sense of Literature (1977) by the late John Reichter. This book deserves greater prominence.

**Romance for Men**

Christine Granados

Texas A&M University

I believe that the novel is a blueprint into a writer’s soul. Anyone who has ever attempted to write one knows how much of the author’s essence is poured into its sentences and structure. When I read what I consider to be a bad book, I notice that it is usually written by an arrogant person.

 Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) comes immediately to mind. I think of it as a romance novel for men, his trilogy included. Like all good romance novel writers, McCarthy uses clichés and derivative characters to sell millions of copies.

He gives me a romanticized view of manliness. McCarthy wraps his characters in half-truths and idealized anecdotes, much like Jackie Collins does, only his are about the Lone Star State, the border, and its cowboy myths. His strong, silent, and very American John Grady Cole is a main character that can only come from reading Louis L’Amour pulp fiction and watching John Wayne and Clint Eastwood Westerns.

McCarthy, originally from Tennessee by way of Rhode Island, adds his superiority complex into the tale when he has Cole and his two companions traverse the border into the wilds of Mexico where adventure awaits. Cole beds the “Felina” of McCarthys imagination (only in this tale when he has Cole and his two companions is Alejandra, and she is rich) and holds his own in McCarthy’s imagination (only in this tale when he has Cole and his two companions has McCarthy used clichés written by an arrogant person).

Before she killed herself, Lewis wrote one more novel, *The Second Suspect* (1998). This book was published and reviewed during her lifetime. It was bought, and it was read.

*The Second Suspect* is a terrible book. But it’s not just a bad book; it’s so much more. It’s a bad book riffing off the author’s masterpiece. *The Second Suspect* is a rewriting of Notice, but minus everything that makes Notice literary. *The Second Suspect* takes plot, characters, and themes from Notice and reduces them to formulaic drivel.

*The Second Suspect* is the work of an author who understood that her masterpiece had been censored, tossed aside, misunderstood. So she sat down and rewrote it. She made it bad, deliberately bad. And the public loved it.

**Buckets of Peanut Butter**

Kim Herzinger

University of Houston-Victoria

We don’t know the really bad books. The really bad books, most of them were never published. They’re out there, though, hundreds of thousands of them, in drawers, in a box in the garage, in publishing house dumpsters worldwide. Some of them, perhaps, are buried deep in the dumpsters of vanity press publishing houses. Perhaps there are books so unreclaimably bad that even the money the author was willing to put out for publication just wasn’t enough. Perhaps, once, even a vanity press house turned in shame, refunded the money, and banded the words “it’s just not for us” around the room. Perhaps.

Perhaps the people who are writing us emails from Nigeria, telling us we are heirs to 2.35 million number, please)—perhaps they are writing books, too. What would they be like? They would, I believe, be bad. Really bad.

But of course what we are talking about here, I think, are the bad books that have been published. Better yet, we are talking about the bad books that have—at one time or another—been thought by a significant number of people to be good. These buckets of peanut butter—Donald Barthelmé’s phrase for bad books—sit sadly on the shelves of every used bookstore in the world, hundreds and hundreds of bad books, wretched books, books once produced by gleeful publishers and bought by hopeful readers, books which await new company from the buckets of peanut butter now sprightly lining the shelves at Barnes & Noble and Borders.

But what we are really talking about are bad books which have been seriously acclaimed as good books, even great ones. Or, at least, bad books written by writers who have been acclaimed as good, even great. With this we enter into a more joyful world, a world of laughter and tears. *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), *Grimus* (1975), *The End of the Affair* (1951), half of John Updike, the bad William Wordsworth, the bad Percy Bysshe Shelley. And now, big danger: *Pamela* (1740), the poems of James Joyce, *Frankenstein* (1818).

I am in trouble now, so I will get it out of *Frankenstein* is a book made great by its badness. We cannot do without it. Nor can we do without one more book, the greatest bad book in the English language. It is not great in the way that *Frankenstein* is great, of course. It is great because it cannot but deeply entertain us with its earnest vigor, its invincible belief in its own genius, its merciless craft, its transcendent obliviousness. I give you this, if you have not already heard: *Poetic Gems* by William McGonagall, poet and tragedian.

**Failed Expectations**

Walter R. Jacobs

University of Minnesota

I liked *Sag Harbor*, but did not love it or really like it as I do [Colson Whitehead’s] other books (especially *The Intuitionist*).

I can’t put my finger on exactly why. Perhaps it’s that the other books have either a slightly unreal aspect (e.g., Elevator Inspectors intuitions elevating function), or are larger than life (the subject of *John Henry Days*). Whatever the reason, it’s still worth a read, but I don’t think that this is the best work of Colson Whitehead.

The above is my July 2009 review of Colson Whitehead’s coming-of-age novel *Sag Harbor* (2009) on the social networking site Goodreads. The “Bad Books” project is helping me complete my thoughts. *Sag Harbor* is bad because it fails to live up to high expectations (*The Intuitionist* [2000] is on my Top 10 favorite books list). I’d now add that it’s bad because it’s hypelemated: many reviews (on Goodreads and elsewhere) note that *Sag Harbor* is “semi-autobiographical”; the “semi” should have been deleted! As a privileged African American with experiences similar to those of the main character, a memoir would have really activated serious personal reflection. Instead, in many places I found myself stuck on questions like “Did that happen to the real Colson?” and “This passage is definitely false.” instead of “I’m reminded of the time when...” or “I should have been...” So, in sum, *Sag Harbor* is a “bad book” because it fails to fully open multiple new worlds for me, as do Whitehead’s other efforts.
Heartbreaking
Judith Kitchen
Pacific Lutheran University

I love almost everything Colum McCann has written, so I was surprised at my frustration with Let the Great World Spin (2009). How do I not love thee? Let me count the ways:

1) It does not live up to McCann’s own standards—does not have the inherent empathy of Everything in This Country Must (2001) or the inventive vitality of Dancer (2003).
2) Its romanticized two-dimensional, cutout characters (troubled priest, cheerful prostitute, wealthy matron, ineffectual judge, single black mother) strut and fret their hour on an unconvincing stage.
3) Its “plot” is overtly manipulated; its almanac details—pull rings on Coke cans, dimes in the jokebox, A line dresses—seem meant to provide what W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan called “merely corroborative detail.” One should not want to play “gotcha” with a novel, but instead willingly enter its spinning world.
4) Its “message” remains obscure. Eight years after 9/11, it’s impossible to read the opening image—the figure of a man modeled on Philippe Petit walking a tightrope between the unfinished Twin Towers—without thinking surely this stunt/spectacle will comment indirectly on post-9/11 America.

McCann claims to “be more interested in those…walking the tightrope on the ground,” but by juxtaposing Petit’s deliberate risk taking with lives lost in Vietnam, he belabors a flimsy point. The book knows neither the New York City of 1974 nor the underlying nature of our national grief: our loss of innocence.

5) And then, there’s the poetry! The book crackles like a literary scavenger hunt as McCann drops line after increasingly annoying quoted line. Despite reviews that hail the novel as a “heartbreaking symphony,” my heart only breaks because it falls apart; the center cannot hold.

Gatsby
Tom LeClair
The University of Cincinnati

If badness is related to perceived greatness, then I offer The Great Gatsby (1925) as the worst novel in American literature. I haven’t read it for many years, since the only time I used it in a Modern American Fiction class, but I remember it as incredibly smug about its relationship to the traditional realistic novel. While Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and others were taking chances, F. Scott Fitzgerald was manipulating conventions to create a book that would be “charming.” One could blame Nick the narrator, but I think Fitzgerald is responsible. I turned to Tender Is the Night (1934), usually considered a bad book, to give students a Fitzgerald that reduced human beings to chattel. But, in almost every class, I teach a bad book, an awful, poorly written, sometimes sexist, racist, reactionary book.

I do this for a few reasons. First of all, I do it to see if my students notice. I taught a selection of stories by Isabel Allende in a course on Latin American women writers while teaching in Peru. The day I walked in to teach the students were all mumbling under the breath, casting semi-hostile looks at me. They had hated it. Thought it was really bad. Thought they couldn’t write, thought their stories were sexist and...
derivative of masters like Gabriel García Márquez. But they assumed that I had to like it or I wouldn’t have put it on the syllabus. When they found out I hated it too, we had a great time in class trash ing it critically and learning a lot in the process.

So now you know that other reason I like to teach bad books. I like to trash them. I like to teach my students that they can trash bad books. Too much reverence for the literary can float around graduate programs in literature. We feel besieged as our programs shrink and our students dwindle, and the result can be an odd, misplaced aura of the book. That is no good. All literature is not good. Some is really bad, and we need to learn how to talk about why it is bad. And we need to have some fun doing it. Without the recognition and railing about the bad book, there can be no real pleasure in the good one.

I just finished my graduate syllabus for this term. I have a really, really bad one there. I wonder if the students will notice.

Realistic Exhaustion

John McGowan
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

What I ask for from a novel is easily stated—and very difficult to accomplish. The storyteller, whether distanced from the events narrated or a character implicated in them, must come across as a “man speaking to men” (to use William Wordsworth’s formula). I must believe the storyteller is a person talking to me about matters of real concern and in a voice a real person would use in earnest conversation with another. Basic, boring realistic aesthetics, you might say—and it is true that I read “serious fiction” compulsively while having no taste for fantasy, science fiction, mystery, or other “genre” novels, and a limited tolerance for avant-garde writers like Kathy Acker, Thomas Bernhard, or even David Foster Wallace. And so, yes, within my chosen world of realistic fiction, bad writing fails to provide an interesting angle, an arresting take, on the world of realistic fiction, bad writing fails to provide a real supporting evidence and offer specious or circular argumentation in favor of their grandiose claims. They are almost always books by well-known senior academics, people with a decided taste is bad, where mine (of course) is refined; their politics or piety or the prestige of big names, whereas I’m immune to all that, etc., etc. This seems, well, invidious; anyway, I don’t think I really want to go there. Let a thousand flowers bloom. Let readers read as they please, and what they please.

Classic Bad Books

Paul Allen Miller
University of South Carolina

Bad books in my field, classics and comparative literature, come in two primary varieties. The first is the easiest to spot. These books are generally dull peddling affairs in which a hobbyhorse is ridden into the ground over several hundred pages. They often include long lists and tables but very little real analysis or probing argument. The prose is wooden and the documentation laborious. Many of these are unrivised dissertations. They are often published by what are uncharitably termed vanity presses: for profit companies which will take the objective of manuscripts (e.g., some allow you to pick your own referees). These presses often demand hefty subscriptions, print only very small runs, and expect the authors to do almost all the editorial work. They profit off the need of academics to publish books for tenure and promotion. They take advantage of the naïve who believe that getting something between hard covers will be their ticket to professional success or at least survival, when often all it means is that either the authors or their institutions will be out several thousand dollars.

The second variety of bad books represents the mirror image of the first. These books make audacious claims, profess to shift the reigning paradigms in their field, and are often written with a decided rhetorical panache. They feature little in the way of real supporting evidence and offer specious or circular argumentation in favor of their grandiose claims. They are almost always books by well-known senior figures in their fields and published with well-respected academic and commercial presses. They have been nominally refereed, but because of the prestige of their authors and the relatively large potential sales anticipated by the press, these books are allowed to get by with a degree of argumentative and evidentiary sloppiness that would never be tolerated in the work of more junior colleagues. Such books allow unsupported claims to become current in their respective academic disciplines, and it is only the prospect of rigorous and critical reviews in major journals that serve as a break on their pernicious effects.

An Idiomatic Inferno

Christian Moraru
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

In Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1944 play Huis clos (No Exit), a character, Garcin, famously declares, “Hell is others.” What does that mean, many have asked themselves. Some have said that the pronouncement conveys the uneasiness the writer and modernity overall typically experience before “alterity.” Yet Sartre insisted that he had been “misunderstood.” What his character meant, he explained, was not that our relations with others are “infernial” by definition, but that if these relations are distorted, “then the other can...
be to us nothing else than hell” because “the others are the most important thing within ourselves that we can draw from to know who we are.” “When we think of our selves, when we try to find out who we are,” Pynchon’s character famously puts it. Bad books may and in that do not “project” one either, as Thomas simplistically formulaic, their horizon is exceedingly fathom, by me at least. Exercises in navel-gazing and in a sort of stultifying self-centeredness hard to write with and ultimately for others. Writing is move...
my taxi gets the Hutu in me dancing,” and soon he is imagining himself “on all fours eating grass / So I can throw up because I like the feeling. / I crouch over a carcass and practice my eating.” Is this a daring revelation of one’s inner demons? I suppose so, but when we note that the poet who has these fleeting thoughts is comfortably inside his taxi, most often on the Upper East Side where he lives so well, the admission seems merely tasteless. If you like the tell-all nastiness encountered here, you may well chide along with these images of Seidell’s frayed nerve ends. To me, these oh-so-witty and painful psychodramas feel like a throwback to the worst of John Berryman and Robert Lowell in the 1950s. In 2010, who needs it?

Engaged Literature

John D. Pizer
Louisiana State University

Two of the leading theorists of the second half of the twentieth century, Roland Barthes and Hans-Georg Gadamer, give us models of reception theory, that, when considered in tandem, provide one avenue for defining a bad work of imaginative literature. Barthes proposed the idea that there are two kinds of literary works, readerly and writerly. Readerly works do the work of the reader, guiding him or her in one clear path that allows no interpretive deviation, providing all the information, dotting all the i’s and crossing all the t’s, while a writerly work forces the reader to actively engage with the text, only suggesting models—multiple models—of exegesis. Gadamer focused on the hermeneutics of reception, how a genuine work of literature forces the reader to reach across the ages, across cultural and linguistic barriers, to meet the author half way. Worthwhile literary works force the reader’s active participation and inspire him or her to engage in the hard work of hermeneutic dialogue. Bad books do not do this. Of course, a bad book written in a past age and/or anchored in an unfamiliar linguistic or cultural milieu might force a contemporary reader to do the sort of bridgework called for by Gadamer, but once that bridge is crossed, one finds exactly what one expected. Bad books are not inevitably polemical, and good books can be polemical. Otherwise, all imaginative texts categorized as “engaged literature” would have to be categorized as bad books. However, even good engaged literature will force you to question your presuppositions and make you do some mental writing, will prompt you to engage in hermeneutical dialogue, will challenge you to exercise your brain! Bad books issue no such challenge. Their authors know their readers have preconceived ideas, stereotypes about people and paradigms, and employ them to satisfy their readers’ expectations. Formulaic detective fiction and pornography are examples. Bad books do not challenge readers to think, while good books do.

Partial Badness

James Phelan
The Ohio State University

It’s good that ABR wants to promote the discussion of the bad—another sign that it’s once again safe to talk about better and worse when we talk about literature. There will, I’m sure, be no consensus about what constitutes badness or whether it belongs to the book, the reader, the situation of reading, all of the above, or none of the above. But that’s okay. Even bad ideas about badness can at this stage help advance the discussion. (Even if what I say here is bad, it’s good.)

Books are not just objects but also rhetorical actions in which authors try to do things to their readers. Consequently, books can own their own badness. And they can be bad in three ways: 1) the things they try to do—their goals—can be bad; 2) their goals can be good but their efforts to achieve those goals can be bad; 3) both their goals and their efforts to achieve them can be bad. Good things authors try to do include giving us new ideas and new ways of thinking, engaging and sharpening our ethical values, offering us enriching aesthetic experiences. But sometimes the new way of thinking turns out to be incoherent, the ethical values we engage with are abhorrent, and/or the vision of aesthetic bliss is riddled with clichés. Sometimes the goals can be good, but the gap between those goals and the ability to achieve them—at the level of style, characterization, plotting, etc.—is as wide as the Pacific Ocean. Other times the goals can be deficient and the efforts to achieve them embarrassingly weak. In these cases, the only interesting question about this third phenomenon is whether the double deficiency multiplies or mitigates the badness.

I submit that the most interesting badness in books is partial badness. It’s easy to dismiss the thoroughly bad, but the mixture of the bad and the good is compelling. If Mark Twain had nailed the ending of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), would the novel be so widely discussed? If Twain had written a less brilliant first two-thirds of his novel, would his ending have as many defenders as it does? If that first two-thirds were not so brilliant, would the ending be as bad as it is? No, no, and no.

Of course it’s bad to ask such tendentious questions and answer them with unsupported blanket assertions. But providing the support would be worse, since it would entail an ethical—and aesthetic—breach of the conventions of this forum. So, I end my rhetorical action with a reminder that even if it’s bad, it’s good.

Zombie Mayhem

Liedeke Plate
Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen

With time as perhaps our scarcest good, isn’t a bad book one we might define as “not worthwhile,” that is, as too unimportant, uninteresting, or unrewarding to justify spending time, money, or effort on it? Arthur Schopenhauer once quipped, “One can never read too little of bad, or too much of good books.” Therefore, he maintains in his essay “On Reading and Books,” “In order to read what is good one must make it a condition never to read what is bad; for life is short, and both time and strength limited.”

Following this precept—time management and all that—I am the lucky reader of very few “bad books.” This is cause for self-congratulation: my rhetorical action with a reminder that even if it’s bad, it’s good.

The Temptation of Saint Anthony

Martin Riker
Dalkey Archive Press

One mark of a great writer must be the willingness to write a bad book. It makes sense that writers who push themselves and their projects to the limits of the feasible would occasionally overstep in one direction or another. In this category, I think the greatest bad books must belong to Gustave Flaubert, a writer so wary of writing the same novel twice that instead he took each book as an opportunity to reinvent the entire genre. Madame Bovary (1857) is, obviously, a great book, and Three Tales (1877) and Sentimental Education (1869). Bouvard and Pecuchet (1881) is to my mind the greatest of them all—but not all of them are great. Salammbo (1862) is not great, although the idea of it is great. But The Temptation of Saint Anthony (1874)—that’s my pick for a bad book. His friends told him to hide it away, not to publish it, and while it’s tempting to romanticize any negative reception of a great artist, in this case I think they were right. It just isn’t a good book.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Kyle Schlesinger
University of Houston-Victoria

No true Western philosopher could forget the stunning conclusion of Sergio Leone’s masterpiece: the bad dies, the ugly survives, and the good rides off into the sunset weighted down with gold. Books have met other fates. You can’t judge a book by its cover; vigilant readers know that the back, spine, margins, typography, paratexts, paper, binding, printing, illustrations, and yes, sometimes even the content, should be taken into account.

When I was in Portland recently, I had the pleasure of visiting David Abel’s exceptionally well-curated Passages Bookshop. I bought a copy of poet Brian Patten and painter Pip Benveniste’s When You Wake Tomorrow (1971) published by Turret Books. The edition is limited to 125 numbered and boxed copies signed by the poet and artist. My typographic hero Asa Benveniste printed this sumptuous, oversized portfolio. The poems aren’t exactly my speed (“I met her early in the evening / the cars were going home / I was twenty four and dreaming”), but there’s much to be learned from Asa’s impeccable design, and Pip’s images hold their own. Although content always comes first in my appreciation of a book, I do pick up things from time to time because I value them as works of art (or craft, if you prefer).
preface, Whalen states, “I write everything with a fountain pen that must be coaxed and warmed before it will work properly. The following pages were written more for the pen’s benefit and instrumentality than they were for mine or for that of the public.” In this oversized facsimile edition published by Coyote Books, I observe Whalen’s poems and doodles as direct expressions of his thought in a verbal/visual continuum. Witty half-truths and playful elegance characterize this work. Although the book is lovely (rasty staples and all), it is its transparency that I value most.

At Powell’s Books, I found So Long (1993) by my favorite contemporary fiction writer, Lucia Berlin, and tore through it over a couple shots of espresso one rainy morning. Books published by Black Sparrow Books are fairly formulaic, especially in their later years, and those designed by Graham Mackintosh (this one wasn’t) are brilliant, though unausing. Aside from the grotesque cover designed by Barbara Martin and the clunky use of ornaments by a typesetter named “Words Worth” (!), I was so infatuated with her subdued stories that the physical fact of the language I was holding became immaterial. I wonder if Berlin was thinking of one of the characters in Leone’s film when she wrote the last couple lines of her short story (included in this collection) entitled “Good and Bad”: “There was nobody to speak to. To say I was sorry.” As to which is which, invariably, only the reader can decide (or prefer not to).

The Uniqueness of Badness

Davis Schneiderman
Lake Forest College

Good books are all alike; every bad book is bad in its own way. Take The Secret (2006) by Rhonda Byrne. That’s a very bad book, even though it has made me filthy rich by unlocking the great chain of material world. Good books make us smile or think or scream or cry or wheeze ad infinitum. Yes, we are thrilled. We rave about the precious little tomes to friends and colleagues and neighbors and parents and online rating services.

These books wrap us in each other. Other bad books sit on our shelves and never get read—despite the signatures of our many writer friends—or they migrate to the underside of the couch, substituting for the missing leg. Our butts, to read, should be level.

Or maybe the books we never read are in fact the good books; they can’t then reaffirm the way we live the way we think the way we love the way we forgot the way everything happens to us rather than us happening to anything. Books we read happen to us. Take George Orwell’s minor work Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936), a book about books and bookstores, where the protagonist, Gordon Comstock, puts his ear to the pregnant belly of his new wife—on the final page—and hears the rush of his own blood in his ears.

Oh shit, more of me in the world.

Put another way, there are maybe as many bad books as there are books—hanging onto their hard copy bodies the way a fish might bring its aquarium onto dry land for commerce with the mammals. Tak- ing up space, killing trees, requiring vast resources to print and ship and sell and store and rot and pulp.

Don’t get too excited about e-books either: think of the carbon footprint of the technological-microprocessing complex. Maybe good books need to run green—all in our heads.

The Witches’ Hammer

James J. Sosnosi
University of Illinois at Chicago

I have disliked numerous books liked by other readers—at the least, their publishers. Reluctant to construe “what constitutes a bad book” as an invitation to discuss those that fall below my expectations, I was perplexed.

The question suggests that “badness” can be an intrinsic quality of a book. But, unlike fruit which can go bad, or bad luck, or computers that won’t boot up, books cannot rot, gamble, or fail to start. Granting that a manual that fails to describe how to use a computer might be judged bad, it is difficult to adjudicate the matter—most customers who look for bargains at Best Buy would find incomprehensible manuals techie joy.

The intrinsic badness of books is a baffling idea. Imagine a book without words. You open it up and the pages are blank. Is this a bad book or a good diary? Imagine a book filled with sentences such as “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” Would this be a bad book or a good joke about Noam Chomsky?

In the face of such conundrums, I construed a “bad” book as a harmful one. The Maleus Maleficarum (The Witches’ Hammer) (1487) by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger came immediately to mind.

For those who do not have Maleus Maleficarum in their libraries, here is a review of it:

For nearly three centuries Maleus Maleficarum was the professional manual for witch hunters…by two of the most famous Inquisitors. Under the Bull of Pope Innocent VIII, [they wrote a treatise in 1484 on]…how and why women roost their first-born male child…how witches deprive men of their vital member…when to use the trial by the red hot iron…and many other [topics].

The Novel That Doesn’t Know

Robyn Warhol-Down
The Ohio State University

As a narrative theorist, I can find something interesting in any piece of prose fiction, and as a feminist, I am wary of pronouncing books “good” or “bad.” I always ask, who’s it for—whose interests does it serve? However, I acknowledge one kind of truly bad book: the Novel That Doesn’t Know (NDK). The NDK is a work of realistic fiction that makes foolish mistakes in its representation of the material world.

Novels set on college campuses, for example, are almost universally ignorant of the tenure process. Candidates for promotion are forever getting or losing tenure, but the average reader doesn’t know that tenure battle is anything but a career maker. The NDK has no idea how people actually progress toward tenure—presumably it’s too arcane to matter. Sometimes academic novels don’t know information that’s much less obscure. The protagonist of Chasing Shakespeare (2003), a twenty-first-century Harvard graduate student in English, got his BA at the University of Vermont, where he played football. That’s just dumb: UVM hasn’t had a football team since the 1970s. How hard would it have been to check?

The NDKs that irritate me the most, though, are novels whose protagonists’ tribulations can be attributed to their active alcoholism, but the novel has no idea. As I remember Divine Secrets of the Y-Y Sisterhood (1996), one of the protagonists has some drinks, then has a fight with her boyfriend, then has a few more, then argues with her mother. The novel asks you to take the substance of the fights seriously. My reaction: “Get sober and then tell me about it!”

Shades of The Sun Also Rises (1926), another book dangerously verging on being a NDK.

MALLEUS MALEFICARVM, MALEFICARVM,
MALEFICARUM, & carum
pharoma potestis
contenten

Posthumous Juvenilia

Regina Weinreich
School of Visual Arts

And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks, a 1945 collaborative effort by the young Jack Kerouac and his friend, the somewhat older William S. Burroughs, to render a fiction of the true-life story of the murder of Dave Kammerer by the boy he was stalking, Lucien Carr, is considered a bad book: 1) it was not published until last year, and so, not having found a publisher early on, when it was first sent out, it must be bad; and 2) it is thought to be a lesser work for these iconic writers, and why publish a bad book by otherwise good writers, especially posthumously and after much lauded careers. Alternating chapters in the hardboiled detective genre, the two authors reveal an interesting moment in early Beat history and the beginnings of their own crafts. Is it ever good to publish a serious writer’s post-juvenilia? Perhaps challenged by this material, Kerouac went on to write a new version in the realistic style he was developing even before The Town and the City (1950), his first published novel. That version, a gem called Wish I Were You, remains in fragment, and is the finest example of Kerouac’s pre-spontaneous bop prosody. As to Hippos, well, the book provided a glimpse into the lives of young people in postwar New York City, and even if Kerouac/Burroughs’s best writing is not fully displayed, still fascinates. In fact, if not exactly good, it’s not half bad either.
To Rescue Bad Books
Zahi Zalloua
Whitman College

Bad books deliver on their promise. They lend themselves too easily to pedagogical use; they are saturated with purpose, conforming all too well to their readers’ expectations. They don’t take a risk; they don’t interrupt the numbing flow of knowledge and commentary. They are devoted (read exhaustingly) and discarded by an insatiable reading public. Is the state of bad books hopeless? Can they be “rescued”? Can they be reminded of their so-called literariness?

But is anything as bad as Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code (2003)? This formulaic knock-off of the Middle Ages as a distant mirror of our own times is weird and warped and entirely without sympathy for its subject. At first, I thought its wild popularity had touched a nerve with the reading public. Then I found out how its publisher flooded the preview/review market with thousands of free copies. Yet for many of my students, it is the book that brought them into the English major. For others, it is the only book they’ve ever enjoyed reading. Is it possible that even a Bad Book can do Good?

Medieval Marketing
Bonnie Wheeler
Southern Methodist University

Years ago, I singled out Barbara Tuchman’s 1978 A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century as a really bad book. This study of the Middle Ages as a distant mirror of our own times is weird and warped and entirely without sympathy for its subject. At first, I thought its wild popularity had touched a nerve with the reading public. Then I found out how its publisher flooded the preview/review market with so many free copies that the book was bound to get lots of coverage in those pre-web days. It wasn’t just that the book was bad; it was that its “new marketing strategy” was corrosive. So much for the “free market.”

But is anything as bad as Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code (2003)? This formulaic knock-off of fascistic conspiracy theories is a trite study for a reader who asks uncreative questions of a work. Or maybe bad books are really at their worst when they’re paired with such bad readers.

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