# Twenty-first Century Novel Discourse. Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down*

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**Abstract**

*The identitary, social and political dimensions seem to govern most contemporary writing and Nick Hornby's is no exception. Exceptional, however, is the way in which he manages to build on traditional narrative practices, applying them to present-day philosophies of life – dictated by the current global social imaginary. The novel considered for analysis is A Long Way Down (2005).*

**Key words:** *identity, society, politics, novel discourse*

## Introductory lines

The novel is inescapably the product of historical experience, whose traces it carries despite established modernist claims of fleeing from it (by revolutionary denial), or more recent postmodernist assertions of avenging it (by interventionist re-writing). Having witnessed the full circle in the metamorphosis of literary modes of writing (from realism to metafiction) and being generated against a background of demented world unrest, the contemporary novel returns to more stable, personal accounts of meditating on and interacting with others, in an attempt at counteracting levelling forces, the volatility of global events and the threats thus posed to personal identity. This policy not only redefines the itinerary and features of twenty-first century novel discourse, but also matches the readers' expectations. As has been pointed out, "the need to restore a comprehensible human dimension to historical experience is perhaps the chief reason for the phenomenal popularity of old-fashioned, highly individualized accounts of moments of extreme crisis." (Mengham 1999: 2)

Particularly since it mostly highlights individuals, the novel today also foregrounds the external and internal forces impacting destinies, with the former being developed by the society people are trapped within, and the latter resulting from the shared representations of the broader stage of life at the turn of the millennium. On the one hand, the presentation and ensuing criticism of acute social realities places new writing within the

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(almost) three century long tradition of the novel in English, with its manifest love- hate relationship with reality, whether it be that of the spirit, of the material world beyond the covers of the book, or of the book itself. On the other hand, the fact that the new generation of novelists carefully exploits the social imaginary or "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2004: 23) brings this genre into contemporaneity and anchors it into pervasive philosophies of life.

The novel addresses identitary, social and political issues pertaining to the new environment, capitalising on its popularity to make pertinent statements. In the context of concepts like 'society' becoming ambivalent or "stretched between two imaginaries: the national and the global" (James and Steger 2010: xviii), the English contemporary novel opens up to an international readership and becomes an effective instrument for discussing universal human values and for mediating across cultures.

**Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down***

One of the writers who are read and appreciated worldwide for the reasons mentioned above is Nicholas Peter John Hornby. His success as a writer is especially due to the seven novels published to date – *High Fidelity* (1995), *About a Boy* (1998), *How to Be Good* (2001), *A Long Way Down* (2005), *Slam* (2007), *Juliet, Naked* (2009) and *Funny Girl* (2014) –, three of which have further developed into film adaptations – *High Fidelity* (2000), *About a Boy* (film, 2002; television series, 2013) and *A Long Way Down* (2014).

Focusing on individuals in impasse, who attempt to establish impossible relationships, or on recluse cases who avoid interaction with others altogether, the novelist approaches the contemporary situation while practically tackling the human condition via metonymical characters who resemble people we know. Rob Fleming's fear of commitment (in *High Fidelity*), Will Freeman's late maturing (*About a Boy*), Katie Carr's explorations of the morality crisis (in *How to Be Good*), Martin Sharp's, Maureen's, Jess Crichton's and JJ's weighing the pluses and minuses of life and death (in *A Long Way Down*), Sam Jones's precocious entry into parenthood (in *Slam*), Annie's sterile internet-facilitated interactions (in *Juliet, Naked*) and Barbara Parker's meandering path to stardom (in *Funny Girl*) are generated by and support the recurrent central themes which situate Hornby's novels between the tragic and the comic, the reasonable

and the absurd, the natural and the artificial defining the present day societal milieu.

The particular instance of *A Long Way Down* subversively deals with the fantasy of inclusion, multiplies the mould of the social outcast, and reiterates the notion of opposition to mainstream dominant structures. Its four protagonists paradoxically act out an absurdist play to escape the blandness of their lives. On New Year's Eve, they all contemplate suicide and meet on top of a tower building in London known as Topper's House (how else?). From then on, their life stories converge; postponing death and deciding on a common list of New Year's Resolutions, the four unlikely friends live intensely for three months, in charge of their new destinies, empowered by the freedom to reschedule the final step.

The novel's tripartite architecture at once hints at the consubstantiality of divinity and deconstructs it. Perfection is beyond reach and omniscience is relativised. The three-part narrative is clipped, forwarded by the four characters taking turns, in no apparent order, at introducing themselves and their beliefs, and at scrutinizing the other three. These "constructed and imagined narratives, experiences and relationships [...] offer important alternatives and corrective perspectives on the dominant schemas of globalization." (Connell and Marsh 2011: 154)

The first person used throughout, complemented by the third person limited point of view, is deliberately ambiguous, despite the fact that each sub-section is attributed to Martin, Maureen, Jess or JJ. Essentially different, their lives only resemble one another in that they are in shambles, while their accounts add important missing pieces to the overall gloomy puzzle which is gradually assembled, although it is deemed to remain incomplete (see the open ending provided).

The technical control exercised by the novelist in contrastively outlining the four main characters and collectively engaging them in furthering the story contributes, on the one hand, to revealing the relational nature of identity, "referring to the system of differences through which individuality is constructed" and, on the other hand, to its conventionally discursive formation, "according to the formal principles of narrative." (Currie 1998: 17)

The language characters use does not function as a classical means of character drawing. It does not necessarily reflect on their age, gender, or class, but sooner shows "the speakers' self-monitoring – hence their ability to avoid stigma." Their shift in style and concentration on particular topics

"[accommodate them] to their audience – primarily their addressee." (Eckert 2011: 299)

Hornby's craft of devising verisimilar language patterns, as well as that of manipulating point of view, create the illusion of reality and induce the anticipated, politically engaged reader response to the flaws of social ethics – valuing the welfare of society over the interests of the individual and, more broadly, the pre-eminence of globality over locality.

Middle aged celebrity TV presenter, Martin, loses his well-paid job on a high ranking national programme and his status of happily married man with two children on account of sleeping with an underage girl. After having served a three-month prison sentence, he is currently employed at FeetUpTV!, a low rated TV channel, has an affair with his former partner and feels he has wasted his life. He is introduced to the reader abruptly, as are all the narrators shaping the novel discourse.

> Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block? Of course I can explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block. I'm not a bloody idiot. I can explain it because it wasn't inexplicable: it was a logical decision, the product of proper thought. [...] You might sit down with a bit of paper and draw up a list of pros and cons. You know:
>
> *CONS – aged parents, friends, golf club.*
>
> *PROS – more money, better quality of life (house with pool, barbecue, etc.), sea, sunshine, no left-wing councils banning 'Baa-Baa Black Sheep', no EEC directives banning British sausages, etc.* (2006: 3)

Martin's tone is ironical, and his language sharp (to match his name). As for the 'respectable', globally resounding economic and political pros and cons, they are not actually his, with the personal dimension overriding the public one.

> There simply weren't enough regrets, and lots and lots of reasons to jump. The only thing in my 'cons' list were the kids, but I couldn't imagine Cindy letting me see them again anyway. I haven't got any parents, and I don't play golf. (2006: 3-4)

With 51 year-old Maureen, single mother of disabled Matty, life is resumed to daily home health care and to Sunday church going, to scraping by to make ends meet. Although she loves her son immensely, she cannot but be conscience-stricken due to repressed dreams of going on an impossible holiday. Her decision of committing suicide is preceded by another sin – that of telling a lie – to someone who is unaware of semantics.

> I told him I was going to a New Year's Eve party. I told him in October. I don't know whether people send out invitations to New Year's Eve parties in October or not. Probably not. [...] But I couldn't wait any longer. I'd been thinking about it since May or June, and I was itching to tell him. Stupid, really. He doesn't understand, I'm sure he doesn't. They tell me to keep talking to him, but you can see that nothing goes in. And what a thing to be itching about anyway! It just goes to show what I had to look forward to, doesn't it? (2006: 4)

Unlike Martin, Maureen's focus is not on material things. Her preoccupations are with moral issues and with religious teachings, which she nevertheless questions, sinfully.

> If you spend the day looking after a sick child, there's little room for sin, and I hadn't done anything worth confessing for donkey's years. And I went from that to sinning so terribly that I couldn't even talk to the priest, because I was going to go on sinning and sinning until the day I died, when I would commit the biggest sin of all. (And why is it the biggest sin of all? All your life you're told that you'll be going to this marvellous place when you pass on. And the one thing you can do to get there a bit quicker is something that stops you getting there at all. [...]) (2006: 4-5)

Her worries do not interfere with her acquired passivity and general acceptance of the world order, but she is overwhelmed by perpetual guilt, which prevents her from enjoying what little life has to offer.

Maureen's exact opposite is Jess, the middle class eighteen year old brought up in a family who offers her everything except the things that matter: love, attention, implication. Her father, a politician, is always absent, while her mother has not yet recovered from her older daughter's, Jen's, running away from home and supposedly having committed suicide (that Jess blames herself for). On top of everything, she has recently been abandoned by her boyfriend Chas, which unleashes acute anger, extreme behaviour and foul language.

> I was feeling sorry for myself. How can you be eighteen and not have anywhere to go on New Year's Eve, apart from some shit party in some shit squat where you don't know anybody? Well, I managed it. I seem to manage it every year. I make friends easily enough, but then I piss them off, I know that much, even if I'm not sure why or how. And so people and parties disappear.
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> I pissed Jen off, I'm sure. She disappeared, like everyone else. (2006: 7)

Adolescence is Jess's only excuse for finding a way out (or down!), and is ridiculous in itself to everyone except her. The young woman refuses

to glimpse at her future; instead, she seeks the status of heroine which has been snatched from her by her sister.

> I could feel the weight of everything then – the weight of loneliness, of everything that had gone wrong. I felt heroic, going up those last few flights to the top of the building, dragging that weight along with me. Jumping felt like the only way to get rid of it, the only way to make it work for me instead of against me; I felt so heavy that I knew I'd hit the street in no time. I'd beat the world record for falling off a tower-block. (2006: 12)

Jess's teenage rebellion finds a deeper version in JJ – the American would-be famous rocker, who now delivers pizzas in London after his band "Big Yellow" breaks up and his girlfriend Lizzie leaves him. His Europeanised American dream gone wrong, JJ is trying to cope with the circumstances, but remains baffled by inertia and existential complacency.

> I told a couple of people about that night, and the weird thing is that they get the suicide part, but they don't get the pizza part. [...] So, anyway, I tell people the story of that New Year's Eve, and none of them are like, 'Whaaaaat? You were gonna kill yourself?' It's more, you know, 'Oh, OK [...] Sure, I can see why you were up there.' But then like the very next second, they want to know what a guy like me was doing delivering fucking *pizzas*. (2006: 22)

JJ is portrayed both directly, through the things he says, and indirectly, through the references to the books he reads – crafty metafictional, intertextual insertions which also define the novel itself.

> Ok, you don't know me, so you'll have to take my word for it that I am not stupid. I read the fuck out of every book I can get my hands on. I like Faulkner and Dickens and Vonnegut and Brendan Behan and Dylan Thomas. Earlier that week – Christmas Day, to be precise – I'd finished *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates, which is a totally awesome novel. (2006: 22)

Worth retaining – besides the socially-oriented literary experimentalism of Faulkner, Vonnegut, Dickens, Behan and Thomas – is Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, with its avowed main theme, "that most human beings are inescapably alone, and therein lies their tragedy" (in O'Nan 1999, online).

Like the other members of "Toppers' House Four", JJ is angry with himself, people and society, and his anger is a covert means of carrying out the critique of dehumanisation and of economic globalisation, as obvious in his presentation of injustice and false hierarchy.

> Anyway, the point is, people jump to the conclusion that anyone driving around North London on a shitty little moped on New Year's Eve for the minimum wage is clearly a loser, and almost one stagione short of the full Quatro. Well, OK, we are losers by definition, because delivering pizzas is a job for losers. But we're not all dumb assholes. In fact, even with the Faulkner and Dickens, I was probably the dumbest out of all the guys at work, or at least the worst educated. We got African doctors, Albanian lawyers, Iraqi chemists... I was the only one who didn't have a college degree. (2006: 23)

In flight from this entire predicament, Martin, Maureen, Jess and JJ adopt the next best strategy, propelled by Maureen's dream, Martin's money and Jess's and JJ's remaining youthful enthusiasm. After fighting the newspapers and their version of the group's suicidal attempt, fictionalising the event further to get back at the reader avid for gossip, they go on a trip to Tenerife, enjoying an implausible holiday like an untimely happy ending.

The story is then taken up once again within domestic boundaries, with the three adults having found something to do (Martin is now a teacher, Maureen is employed at a newsagent's and JJ plays his music in the streets) and with Jess having made peace with her mother.

At home, every now and then they meet at or around Topper's House – where decisions for reintegration are made and clearer perspectives are offered. Significant is the extended 'family reunion' organised by Jess with relatives of all four – which goes wrong, but counts as a sign of the return to 'social normality'. Memorable also is the silhouette of the London Eye projected against the sky in the distance – which appears on the last page of the novel – offering the protagonists food for thought on the wheel of life and the passing of time, and underlining the perennial quality of the dire situation that forms the core of the plot in Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down*.

**Concluding lines**

The common practice in novel writing today is frequently said to be giving pre-eminence to formal technicality, to the apparent disadvantage of ideational content. However, the judgements on the various hypostases of the private and the public self which are inevitably woven into the novel discourse emerge from underneath the transparent fabric of the rhetoric of narrative and the underpinning scaffolding of narrative control, reaching and potentially manipulating audiences. "It is part of the referential illusion

of fictional narrative [...] that we make inferences about fictional characters no different from the inferences we make about real people"(Currie 1998: 17). And writers know it all too well.

In Nick Hornby's case, the deliberate verbalisation and/or representation of collectively recognisable identitary, social and political concerns at the heart of his otherwise intricate narrative patterning serves a twofold purpose: it uses familiar subject matter and character typology to soften the blow of structural defamiliarisation; it formulates a critique of moral decline, social devaluation and political impotence.

Hornby's 2006 book, *A Long Way Down*, is representative for his novel discourse, reinforcing the diction and style of previous artistic accomplishments, and announcing future thematic and architectural literary ventures. Its trademark is the subversive approach to present day social imaginaries, inscribed within the broader frame of contemporary writing, yet exercised less through formal experiments, and more through direct characterisation. Free to express themselves, his protagonists spotlight the overshadowing spectrality, confront taboos, and advance prescriptions for their treatment. Their personal accounts "defy and complicate the powerful abstractions of globalization [...], bring[ing] back into discourse the sexed, gendered and racial bodies of its actors." (Connell and Marsh 2011: 154)

Placing individual lives (and deaths) under the lens, the novel humanises the arid norms of social cohabitation and economic integration which are in place today. It assumes an angry attitude and adopts a sarcastic tone, resorting to the corrective function of the black comic for instructive purposes. In so doing, it teaches without preaching and makes for truly entertaining reading.

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