
Opening Extract from...

Faulks on Fiction

Written by Sebastian Faulks

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FAULKS ON FICTION

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GREAT BRITISH CHARACTERS AND THE SECRET LIFE OF THE NOVEL

SEBASTIAN FAULKS

BBC BOOKS

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'L'homme n'est rien, l'oeuvre tout.'

'The author's life is nothing; it's the work that matters.'

Gustave Flaubert in a letter to George Sand, December 1875.

INTRODUCTION

The way people think and write about books is always changing. I was raised on the 'New Criticism' (though it was pretty old by the time I got to it), which insisted that a work of literature is a self-contained entity and discouraged the student from trying to make connections between the text and the real world – particularly with any personal details of the author's life. You just wrote about the poem or the book, and how it achieved what it did. Although, like all schools of criticism, it was eventually pushed too far, it offered an essentially sound way of approaching a novel. It was replaced in the 1970s and 80s by critical theories that drew on other disciplines, notably Marxism and psychoanalysis. The most fruitful of these were those based on linguistics; they at least had a basis in neuroscience, and it was a scientific rigour that many literary critics felt ashamed of lacking. Few if any of these critical theories, however, made an impact on the reading public. This was partly because in the world of 'theory', returns diminish rapidly; the ratio of insight to verbiage is discouraging after a page or two.

INTRODUCTION

The broader movement of criticism over the last twenty years has been biographical. Far from being banned from comment, the author's life and its bearing on the work became the major field of discussion. The advantage of this new emphasis was that it re-humanised the way that people looked at books: it made novels appear once again to be about people and experience, not structural linguistics. The bad news was that it opened the door to speculation and gossip. By assuming that all works of art are an expression of their authors' personality, the biographical critics reduced the act of creation to a sideshow. It has now reached such a pass that the only topic some literary journalists seem able to approach with confidence is the question of whom or what people and events in novels are 'based on'. Biographical criticism may have begun as a healthy reaction to extremes of New Criticism with its 'closed systems' and puritanical exclusion of facts; but it may now have reached its own terminal stage.

When I went round the country doing readings after my fourth novel *Birdsong* came out in 1993, most people could not conceal their disappointment. They had expected me to be 105 years old, French and – in some odd way – female. One man asked me how I knew what it was like to fight at the Battle of the Somme. I told him I'd read a lot of documents, visited the site, then made it up. 'You made it up?!' he almost spat at me. He didn't believe me, and neither did anyone else there. They thought I'd found a pile of old papers and passed them off as mine. When the politician Vince Cable recommended *Birdsong* in a magazine, he assured readers that I had based it on letters of my grandfather that I'd found in an attic. But there were no letters and no attic.

A subsequent novel, *Human Traces*, was concerned with the early days of psychiatry. When I spoke to a lunchtime gathering as part of the promotion for the book it seemed to me that the people present found it

impossible to grasp the concept of fiction. They assumed that everything in a novel is based on personal experience, which is then lightly, or perhaps not at all, rewritten. In trying to persuade them otherwise, I despairingly recounted the story of the *Birdsong* sceptic and concluded with a heavy jest: 'So now I've given up and just admit that yes, I'm really a 105-year-old French woman, that I was parachuted into France for SOE in 1942 to write *Charlotte Gray* and wrote *Human Traces* only because my great-aunt was in a lunatic asylum in 1895.'

There was some sympathetic laughter; but when I was leaving, a woman stopped me, all concern, and asked: 'Which asylum was your aunt in?'

How did we come to this? It's not, after all, the natural state of affairs. A child first marvels at the invention of a story; he doesn't ask who Rumpelstiltskin was modelled on; he just loves it that a wishing chair can fly or animals can talk. In adult fiction, the element of wonder has somehow been lost; some readers seem to find it frightening to think a writer can conjure people, scenes and feelings from a void. Yet to me that is a novelist's single saleable skill, his USP.

Many novelists, I concede, haven't helped themselves. In the 1960s and 70s there was a movement in fiction against invention and towards semi-autobiographical writing (I go into this in more detail in the section on *The Golden Notebook*). And the separation between fact and fiction is not as clear-cut as purists, including me, would like it to be. Unless a novelist is psychotic, inhabiting a delusional universe, the fictional characters he creates and the thoughts he attributes to them are doubly connected to reality, first by his locating them in a recognisable world and, second, by the fact that they have passed, several times, through his own mind, which

itself has been formed by millions of experiences in reality. I can honestly say that all the characters in all my novels are un-autobiographical in conception; none of them 'is' me; but at certain moments I am sure that details have been drawn from things that I have seen or felt and then – after double-checking their aptness – allowed to be attached to an imagined character as his own. The sensation of a hot bath, for instance, or of driving rain on the skin – many such small things have doubtless been experienced by my characters in a way so similar to that in which I experienced them as to be indistinguishable. But they are only details; and I take the line that, whatever the eighteenth-century philosophers may have argued, there are common human experiences of the phenomenal world. When Mike Engleby feels happy to be released from the hell of carsickness even into a place that resembles Broadmoor, it was not my experience of nausea that was being invoked, but yours.

While it is inevitable that parts of reality will thus seep through into fiction in more or less unchanged form, that does not alter the fact that most parts of most of the best novels ever written are either just invented, torn from a void, or represent aspects of reality so radically reshaped and recombined that they in essence become something new: not mixtures, but compounds with their own living properties. To me, this is the line beyond which there can be no more concessions to biographical reductionism.

Gore Vidal summed up the wearying nature of 'based on' critics in an essay on Ford Madox Ford: 'I must confess to a lifelong boredom with the main purpose of literary biography: the Life as opposed to the Work, which is, after all, all. I have also never had the slightest interest in knowing on whom a writer has based the character of Jeff, say; and should Jeff's affair

with Jane be just like a real-life one with Gladys, I feel gravity tugging at the volume in my hand … It is not the sort of game that an English teacher ought to encourage his students to play. It is enough that they learn how to read and understand fiction *tout court*; to perceive what it is on the page that makes, as the Master said with unusual hard preciseness, *Interest*.'

And here is perhaps a major reason for the predicament we are now in. Just as in the 1980s British novelists, many of them graduates of the University of East Anglia creative writing course, were admirably turning their backs on the semi-autobiographical fictions of the 1960s and 70s and reasserting the novelist's ability to invent, so at the same time a large industry in literary biography had grown up, attracting some of the most gifted writers of that generation. Clearly it is legitimate for a scholarly biographer to mention *in passing* in the course of a full critical consideration of, say, *Vanity Fair*, that Thackeray had so much admired a young dragoon's side whiskers that he gave some similar ones to his imagined character, George Osborne; not interesting, admittedly, but legitimate. And while there is far more to the best of such biographies than merely identifying sources for this or that character, it may be that some of the lustre these distinguished biographers brought to the genre legitimised the efforts of less gifted Jeff-and-Gladys merchants. It's not then so hard to understand why a journalist reading an admiring review of a biography that revealed that X was 'based on' Y would feel he had been given the go-ahead to indulge exactly that sort of speculation in his own reviews or reporting. And if you think I am being unfair to the great biographers of the generation above mine, consider the words of one of the best, Sir Michael Holroyd: 'Biography is at the shallow end of history … The essential truth is simple. Flaubert was born. Flaubert wrote his novel. Flaubert died. It is his work which is unique, that matters, not the ordinary experience he shared with so many others.'

From the best biographers, however, via lesser ones, sideways into newspapers and out into the real world, 'based on' has become the default mode in which many readers now approach a novel. There are monthly book groups that meet to discuss a novel but end up talking about only two things: the extent to which the contents are drawn from the author's life and the extent to which these in turn tally with the readers' own experience of such matters. The 'success' or otherwise of the novel is calculated by how close a fit the author has managed between his or her presumably autobiographical narrative and the reader's own experience of similar events. It is difficult to explain how dispiriting such conversations would appear if overheard by a novelist who has tried, by invention, to reshape reality into something new, and more satisfying.

This book does not purport to be a work of literary criticism, still less of scholarship; it began life, after all, as a companion to a television series. I have looked at all these characters as though they were real people and tried to understand what makes them work without reference to their authors' lives. This is undoubtedly, and deliberately, an unfashionable approach, but I hope it might prove to be a touch on the brake of the runaway truck of biographical reductionism and an encouragement to others to think on these lines. If some of those so persuaded were sixth-formers, so much the better.

The choice of characters was restricted to books that the viewing public might reasonably have been expected to have heard of, if not actually read. It seemed a good idea to group them into the four character types that British novelists have returned to most often and, in addition to looking at the individual examples, to ask why these four have been so useful. These

are not necessarily my all-time favourite writers or characters (though many are); they are ones that worked for television purposes.

However, as this book went along, it did seem to gather an identity of its own. It's meant to be a book of enthusiasm; it tries to celebrate the ability of novelists to create – from nothing, or from the imagination. Following Gore Vidal's advice, I have tried to read and understand twenty-eight works of fiction *tout court*; to perceive what it is on the page that makes, as Henry James said with unusual hard preciseness, *Interest*. Without the stimulus of this book, I would probably never again have opened *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or *Great Expectations*, believing that I had 'done' them in my student days. Of the twenty-eight books here, twenty-three were re-reads; and of these my enjoyment was greater the second time in most cases. As to why I had never actually read the Raj Quartet or *The Woman in White* before, I can't imagine, but I can only say how happy I am to have done so.

Occasionally the pleasure of my reading was touched by sadness, and that was when it was necessary to think about 'posterity', or the chances of these novels still being read a hundred years from now. A university lecturer I talked to while writing this book laughed when I asked if *Vanity Fair* was popular with her students. She told me that *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch* will never again be read by undergraduates because they are 'too long'. One or two brave souls will tackle bantamweight *Silas Marner*, but most will go no further, she said, than a single photocopied chapter. Evidence from this world is inconsistent, however. Two graduate researchers who worked on the programme wrote excellent background notes on the characters' historical reception that showed every indication that they had read most of the books in question; and *Middlemarch* is a set book at A level for one exam board at least in 2011.

However, the idea that the intrinsic value of a book will 'keep it alive' seems absurd, when the thrust of tertiary education for the last fifty years

has been to do away with the idea that there is any such thing as one book being 'better' than another. Part of the collateral damage of the 'theory' years of criticism in the 1970s and 80s was that in their search for a new scientific rigour many English literature teachers accepted that they could not 'prove' that *Middlemarch* was 'better' than the *Beano*, because 'better' was too imprecise and unscientific a word. This is logically true; but pundits proceeded to push logic beyond reason: I remember, with intense embarrassment, hearing people with the rare privilege of a good education arguing on Radio Four that you could never suppose that the *Divina Commedia* was *in any way* superior to the lyrics of Girls Aloud …

So there will probably be no posterity of achievement, no survival for the fittest, because the culture can no longer accept that such things as 'fitness' exist; the sociopolitical damage of admitting that some things are better than others has become unendurable.[1] But that is too sad a thought to end on. The characters who appear in the following pages are still alive to me and to thousands, probably millions, of other readers. It's too much to imagine my enthusiasm for them and for the books they appear in will have any effect on their viability, but I hope that what follows can at least be read as a prolonged and heartfelt thank-you letter from a reader for all that he has learned from living people created in the minds of others.

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[1] But publishers abhor a vacuum. While the academic world declared nothing was better than anything else, the consumer sector decided the exact opposite. Every coffee bar, hedge fund or mobile-phone group that sponsors a literary prize issues a list of books they have chosen or rejected; an indiscreet judge usually reveals which of the finalists 'really' came second or third. Literature festivals and newspapers pour out tables and rankings; in 2010, several published the order of precedence that novels published forty years earlier might have finished in, *had there been a prize* that year for them to enter… In *The Big Read* programme in 2003, BBC television invited viewers to list their favourite novels from any period, and ranked them in order from one to a hundred.